



PARENTAL SATISFACTION WITH SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

by


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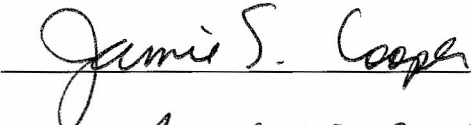
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A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **PARENTAL SATISFACTION WITH SCHOOL COMMUNICATION**

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Educational literature regarding school communication takes a very different approach than the Communication literature. Education scholars employ a view of communication processes that reflect a linear information-transmission conceptualization of communication processes, rather than the contemporary approach of communication scholars, who treat communication processes as nonlinear, relational, and constitutive of meaning. This thesis includes the findings from a study in which 43 parents completed a survey, 19 of whom were also interviewed about their perceptions and satisfaction with school communication. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analyzed for recurring trends and themes. Open-ended communicative experience survey responses were combined with interview quotes to provide one dataset. The surveys and transcripts were thematically analyzed, resulting in 14 themes.

Although parental satisfaction with general school communication registered slightly higher than that with child-specific communication, findings suggest that parental

satisfaction with school communication is heavily dependent on individual teachers. Overall, participants expressed the desire to communicate *with* schools while they feel schools communicate *to* them. Parents also report that they feel school communication is ineffective overall and must be initiated by the parent. It is interesting to note that parents' perception of schools communicating "to" rather than "with" closely reflects the schools literature's treatment of communication. This important finding highlights the need for schools and parents to be aware of parental perceptions of school communication to better meet both parties' needs. Limitations and strengths of the study and recommendations for future research and application are discussed.



## CHAPTER ONE

Effective communication between families and schools is vital not only to a child's academic performance but also for their emotional well-being and social performance (Flynt & Morton, 2008). Although communication between educators and parents is gaining attention (Rimm-Kaufman & Zhang, 2005) as the media focuses on extreme classroom behaviors, such as bullying, parents still report feeling left out of important conversations about classroom observations and events retold by students (Canary & Cantu, 2012).

It is in the best interests of all students if schools and families communicate often and effectively about negative or concerning behaviors (Popoviciu, Popoviciu, Pop, & Sass, 2010). Recipients of negative behavior, such as bullying or teasing, experience higher rates of depression and anxiety, but agitators' academic performance suffers too (Popoviciu et al., 2010). Students who display concerning behaviors are also more likely to become lawbreakers, have fewer friends, poorer relationships, and are more likely to drop out of school compared to children who do not regularly display these behaviors (Flynt & Morton, 2008). It is, therefore, important for parents of both the recipient and agitator of the behavior be in contact with educators in order to remedy the problem quickly. Moreover, disruptive behaviors that do not include bullying or teasing (e.g., distracted or distracting behaviors, clowning, failure to complete work, friendship/social

issues) are still problematic as they disrupt the classroom environment and prevent students from experiencing a productive educational experience (Flynt & Morton, 2008).

Although educators and parents both feel disruptive behaviors such as those described above are problematic, their attitudes about the behavior differ. Many educators feel they are more productive in solving these problems *without* involving parents (Kowalski, 2005) while parents feel they should be made aware of disruptive and problematic behaviors at school (Canary & Cantu, 2012). Perhaps most surprisingly, previous studies fail to identify how parents desire to communicate with schools (Canary & Cantu, 2012).

It is also important to understand that families have different methods and models of communication (Schrodt, 2005). What one set of parents feels is effective communication with school administrators, another set of parents might feel is ineffective communication. These differences are further explained in chapter two.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is grounded in Taylor's actor-network theory (ANT) (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). ANT examines how individuals and organizations are formed through communicative protocols and is often "referred to as the 'sociology of translation' [as it] looks at the ways in which collectives and institutions are built through actual practices and activities" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 299). In other words, ANT explains how processes are created in and through interaction, and in this case, communication is serving as the act of translation and the process being described (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

ANT falls under the CCO (communication constitutes organization) perspective which “looks at how organizational conversations and texts shape organizational reality” (Mumby, 2013, p. 18). Communication and conversations are not seen as simply ways to share information but as processes that form opinions and actions, create relationships, and form and perpetuate organizational practices and structures.

ANT is based in how people communicate about a central focus or concern through a process Taylor calls co-orientation. While in the process of co-orientation, an A-B-X triad is formed in which A refers to one person or party, B refers to the second person or party, and X is the subject or content of the conversation (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Interestingly, Taylor illustrates that sometimes the two people or parties are able to co-orient successfully, and other times they are not, as different individuals hold different perspectives, meanings, and/or opinions (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

There are three goals in the co-orientation process (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). First, an agreement (of meaning, perspective, and/or opinion) on the current situation must be reached; second, an agreement on who will act to change the circumstances and in what way they plan on bringing change must be reached; and third, a plan for future interactions must be made. If these goals are achieved, a positive co-orientation is made and the two individuals or parties perceive each other as partners (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011).

In other words, ANT is interested in understanding how different human and nonhuman entities (such as organizations and institutions, policy documents, conduct handbooks, etc.) come together to form networks that influence behavior, policies, and

changes (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). Fenwick and Edwards (2011) argue that although ANT has limited prior application to educational communicative issues, it nonetheless has tremendous potential to understand these networks and provide new insights.

In the case of communication between schools and parents, educators may serve as A, parents serve as B, and the student serves as the shared concern, or X. The communication process itself may also serve as X. Other important agents include the curriculum, school policies, and the district's code of conduct handbooks (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). Furthermore, even a family's culture or background could serve as important agents in the decision-making process (Saito, 2010).

Standpoint theory, which explains that different perspectives are formed from an individual's circumstances and activities (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011), can shed additional light on the process, as teachers and parents will hold different perspectives based on their standing in the educational hierarchy as well as their relationship to the child (Morrissey, 2008). Similarly, Kim, Shen, and Morfan (2011) explain individuals respond to problems differently based on their perspective, and their perspective dictates how they process and understand behaviors as problematic, indicating that individuals with different roles in relation to the child will approach things differently.

### **Research Queries**

This project examines how families desire to communicate with schools and how relationships are developed between parents and teachers. It focuses on how parents perceive the ways that schools share general information with parents and families, how schools communicate with parents about child-specific concerns, parental satisfaction of

the employed methods of communication, and ways parents would like to change current communication practices. While it is clear that the educational literature employs an understanding of communication that is limited to a linear, information-transmission conceptualization, it remains an empirical question whether schools actually follow in practice that treatment of communication. It is also an empirical question whether either parents or schools employ a relational understanding that more closely mirrors contemporary communication literature. Because there is no empirical evidence to predict how closely the patterns in the literature are seen in real-world practice, the two research questions below were developed.

The A-B-X triad frames the research inquiries. Communication about general school and district information requires little or no co-orientation between parents and educators, yet current literature identifies parental feelings of unhappiness (Gregg, Rugg & Souto-Manning, 2011; Hafizi & Papa, 2012). Because of this, the following research question is posited:

**RQ1:** What are parent perceptions of communication from schools regarding general information?

Since there is a gap in existing literature regarding parental opinions of school communication about child concerns from a communication lens, a conclusion of parental satisfaction regarding this type of communication cannot yet be reached.

Therefore, the following research question is posited:

**RQ2:** What are parent perceptions of child-specific school communication?

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Defining the Organization**

According to Gunbayi (2007), organizations are socially constructed hierarchical establishments in which people interact and communicate in multiple ways. Similarly Yildez (2013) says, “[o]rganizations are established to carry out specific purposes and are successful structures to the extent they reach their aims” (p.264). However, organizational communication scholars define organizations in a much more complicated and conceptually sophisticated way. Taylor and van Every (2011) define the organization as “a social construction built by everyday life interactions, knowledge process and situations. It is . . . created out of interactions, interpretations, mechanisms of power, texts, and discourses” (p. 152).

Many communication scholars define organizations through communication, meaning an organization’s communication defines the organization, an idea referred to communication constitutes organization (CCO) (Mumby, 2013). Given this approach, organizations are not “physical containers within which people communicate; rather organizations exist because people communicate, creating the complex system of meaning we call organizations” (Mumby, 2013, p. 14). Further expanding on CCO, Nicotera and Clinkscales (2003) describe organizations as made up of communicative relationships and define the organization as:

the culturally-suffused, living system of interconnected communicative relationships among a conglomerate of interdependent coalitions, composed themselves of interconnected communicative relations and bound together by their homage to a common mission and dependence on a common resource base, with multiple and often incompatible instrumental and interactive goals and objectives. (p. 8)

Logically then, it makes sense that positive and negative organizational functioning is dependent on the relationships among structures. Positive organizational functioning occurs when human interaction matches the organizational structure, and negative functioning occurs when interaction does not match the structure (Nicotera & Clinkscles. 2003) in a process resembling ANT's co-orientation description.

Given the complicated hierarchy of schools, it is important for educators and educational scholars to recognize the organization (the school) is more than a container in and/or from which communication occurs. Rather, the different forms and processes of communication used create and reinforce the culture and goals of the school, in addition to the institutional practices that comprise the organization itself.

### **Schools as Organizations**

Following the above definitions, schools are organizations that can be considered successful if student achievements are met. Students, teachers, parents, and administrators occupy distinct roles and behave in various ways in order to accomplish these goals. In educational literature, organizational communication is defined as "the process by which the information is exchanged and understood by two or more people,

usually with the intent to motivate or influence behavior” (Gunbayi, 2007, p. 788). It is important to note here the implicit conceptualization of communication as a linear process of information-transmission. In a broad sense, the education literature describes organizational communication as a way for all organizational members to interact with each other to accomplish goals (Yildez, 2013); however disagreements of these goals often occur between members (Castor, 2007) because organizations are hierarchical and different positions may have different goals. This becomes even more complicated in schools where the common hierarchy is administrator to teacher, and teacher to student (Gunbayi, 2007), as parents are not present in this model. However, as Gunbayi (2007) explains, new teachers do not feel they effectively communicate with families or other educators at their schools. Teachers report that the longer a teacher stays at a school, the more comfortable they feel communicating with school employees, but they still do not feel mastery in regard to communication with parents and families.

Just as communication scholars differ from educational scholars on the definition of organizations, they also present a different viewpoint on organizational communication. Kuhn describes communication “as a process in which contextualized actors use symbols and make interpretations to coordinate, and control both their own and others’ activity and knowledge which are simultaneously mediated by, and productive of texts” (Taylor & Van Every, 2011, p. 91). Similarly, Mumby (2013) defines communication as “the dynamic, ongoing process of creating and negotiating meanings through interactional symbolic verbal and nonverbal practices, including conversation, metaphors, rituals, stories, dress, and space” (p. 14). Mumby (2013) also defines



organizational communication as “the process of creating and negotiating collective, coordinated systems of meaning through symbolic practices oriented toward the achievement of organizational goals” (p. 15). Whereas educational scholars summarize organizational communication as exchanging information in isolated circumstances, communication scholars describe it as a continual meaning process that changes with time, incorporating much more than verbalizations or written words. Furthermore, Littlejohn and Foss (2011) argue that communication plays more of a role than job positions in organizational formation as these communication activities determine the positions and roles needed for organizational functioning, further supporting the conceptual value of CCO theory.

The most common communication model seen in educational literature is what Kowalski (2005) calls a “one-way,” or “directive” exchange (p. 108) that does not allow for meaningful feedback. When teachers follow this model, or when principals follow orders from a superintendent, they often say they are following the “chain of command” (Castor, 2007, p. 122), indicating that they, at times, feel trapped by the current model employed by schools. Interestingly, teachers overall report high levels of effectiveness in internal school communication (Gunbayi, 2007), yet they also say they are more productive in solving problems alone without assistance from other educators (Kowalski, 2005) and rarely discuss problems with each other (Morrissey, 2008). This demonstrates that there is not only a lack of communication with families but that organizational communication within schools can be improved.

## **Importance of Communication**

Researchers agree that communication skills have gotten more important over time for educators, especially administrators (Kowalski, 2005). Morrissey (2008) even argues that fundamental communication and dialogue skills should be at the cornerstone of education programs. In order to meet Yildez's (2013) definition of schools as effective organizations, school administrators must work to improve communication among teachers, between teachers and administration, and embrace parents as part of the school system, in accordance with ANT (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). In regards to school and family communication, a contemporary approach grounded in communication theory would recommend that parents and teachers aim to create a constitutive relationship in which they recognize that rather than being merely "senders and receivers," they are interdependent partners in a mutually supportive socio-emotional relationship, and that while information-exchange and constant mutual feedback are important, they are only part of the process. Additionally, when information is exchanged, messages should be delivered across varying channels, and agents should work together to identify and overcome obstacles that arise. Gunbayi (2007) states that "[c]ommunication has usually six main elements: senders, channels, receivers, change as a result of communication, barriers and feedback" (p. 788), a representation of early, linear models of communication (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). CCO theories, such as ANT, would alternatively define parents and teachers as equally important agents in a process of meaning-creation from which emerges a relationship of successful co-orientation around student success and achievement.

Additionally, Ferguson (2005a) lists five goals school administrators should embrace in order to support student achievement: administrators must understand the different goals for all members involved, including teachers, students, and parents; administrators should also clearly communicate academic standards to students so that they understand their roles and responsibilities within the school structure; administrators should also serve as supports for the goals and expectations of students and teachers; administrators must put procedures in place to measure student achievement and teacher effectiveness; strong relationships with families must be initiated and fostered. However, time is usually devoted to the previous four steps, and family relationships are often seen as the least important (Ferguson, 2005b). If these relationships are established, however, they can make a positive impact on building relationships with parents and impacting students' academic performances (Ferguson, 2005a; Ferguson, 2005b). The educational literature's limited definition of communication, however, cannot encompass the relationship-building skills required for this accomplishment.

**Student behavior.** Logically, the way student behavior is managed by teachers has the potential to impact the classroom positively or negatively (Johansen, Little & Akin-Little, 2011). Students who face multiple disciplinary actions at school are likely to develop bad relationships with teachers, often leading to poor academic achievement (Vo & Sutherland, 2012). However, Johansen et al. (2011) found that nearly all elementary school teachers feel that they did not receive adequate training in managing problems and communicating these concerns with parents. In instances of recurring problem behaviors,

parents can serve as assets to educators as they are more attuned to their child's behavior than the child's teachers (Vo & Sutherland, 2012).

**Communication apprehensions.** Although literature exists explaining the benefits of communicating with other educators and families (Epstein, 2009), teachers have reservations about seeking out communication with other agents in the educational network (Fenwick & Edwards, 2011). One reason is the structure of the school. Teachers report that they rarely ask other teachers or even their administrator for advice about problematic classroom behaviors (Morrissey, 2008). Much of this can be explained through the physical layout of most schools. According to Gunbayi (2007), teachers are often separated from in-school resources because they rarely leave their individual classrooms during the work day. Because of this, teachers may feel alone and unable to ask others for help and advice. Additionally, teachers feel that meeting with other teachers or their administrator will be unproductive, a feeling that matches their attitude on staff and faculty meetings (Epstein, Atkins, Cullinam, Kutash & Weaver, 2008). Epstein et al. (2008) recommend that this can be combated by organizing small-group meetings between teachers of the same grade to discuss classroom behavior. Additionally, it is recommended that schools provide in-service training on managing behavior and increasing family communication (Ferguson, 2005a). Unfortunately though, many teachers feel they are more effective in the classroom working alone without family involvement (Johansen et al., 2011).

### **Importance of Families**

Life-span theory states that the family unit is one of the largest, if not *the* largest, influencer on individuals (Pecchioni, Wright & Nussbaum, 2005), and the effects of negative classroom experiences have a profound effect on the family (Canary & Cantu, 2012). Given this knowledge, educators should embrace parents and families as key players in the educational team. Researchers also found that family involvement is not only recommended, but it is a necessity in correcting behavioral problems in the classroom (Hafizi & Papa, 2012). Of the 168 hours in a week, a child will only spend 35 to 40 hours in school. Because of this, school protocol in correcting problematic behavior should involve parents and families (Epstein et al., 2008) as interventions are not likely to be successful if they are not continued into child's home (Mutch & Collins, 2012). If similar methods of praise and correction are enforced at school and home, a behavior is more likely to be corrected when problematic and repeated when positive (Epstein et al., 2008). The creation of this kind of tightly-connected relational system requires a nonlinear, meaning-centered approach to understanding and organizing parent-teacher communication.

Mutch and Collins (2012) found that student behavior is more effectively corrected when a strong relationship between the school and family exists, and this translates into better academic progress as well. Linear communication models are often described in school handbooks, but this communication can fail as it takes a 'one-size-fits-all-model' (Gregg et al., 2011). Instead, Hafizi and Papa (2012) argue that a more individual approach should be taken and communication with families should be seen as

something that helps students' academic performance in forms in which the family chooses.

**Child Behavior.** Although there is a variance with socioeconomic class and ethnicity, parents overall report more behavioral problems than teachers (Winsler & Wallace, 2002), although this is logical since children spend more time at home than they do at school. Parents often fail to report their child's problematic behavior to the school because they feel it is not the school's business what happens in the home or they are afraid of the school labeling their children as a problem (Davern, 2004). Additionally, different families express different communication climates, meaning that different families create different rules about what is and is not communicated within the family unit and with outsiders (Baxter, Bylund, Imes & Scheive, 2005; Segrin & Flora, 2011).

However, if teachers and educators make themselves more approachable to parents, parents are more likely to disclose their child's habits at home (Epstein et al., 2008). Epstein et al. (2008) also explain that different displays or problems at school warrant different forms of reporting to parents. For example, mild behavior issues, like not following directions, only need to be brought to parents' attention if the action is persistent. However, more extreme behaviors require immediate contact. Similarly, not all home behaviors need to be shared with schools. At the same time, if the behavior impacts the student's education, or if the behavior is similar to ones displayed in the classroom, it should be shared with the child's teacher and school.

One reason that parents are hesitant to share information is the tendency for schools to blame parents and families for a child's behavior (Johansen et al., 2011).

Interestingly, teachers who blame child behaviors on the family structure are more likely than other teachers to seek out advice because then they do not blame themselves for the classroom behavior (Johansen et al., 2011). If the behavior is blamed on the family, teachers see corrections as unproductive since nothing will change at home, and even if the behavior is not blamed on the family, teachers still feel that interventions with the family take too much effort and yield too few results (Johansen et al., 2011). In actuality, students' development, including their behavior, is dependent on home and school processes (Popoviciu et al., 2010).

### **Family-School Communication**

Ideally, parents and teachers should work together as equal entities of a team (Mazza, 2013). In fact, the process of communicating should align these two parties (Rimm-Kaufman & Zhang, 2005) during the co-orientation process (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011); however, they often struggle over shared interests (Castor, 2007) yielding negative co-orientation (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011) and poor organizational functioning (Nicotera & Clinkscales, 2003), therefore complicating the problem-solving process. Parents and teachers both agree that parents are not included in decision-making conversation enough (Canary & Cantu, 2012), but each group holds different perspectives on why this is the case.

**School perspective.** Unfortunately, Ferguson (2005b) cites a common belief among school staff that it is best to have as little contact as possible with families. Regardless, researchers agree that the responsibility to begin conversation lies with school staff, especially administrators, rather than the parents (Ferguson 2005b; Mazza,

2013). This is because administrators can set the tone for the rest of school employees. Additionally, it provides teachers with internal support to increase communication with families (Mazza, 2013). Similarly, it is another responsibility of the educator to find out how each family would like to communicate with the school (Davern, 2004).

In order to establish strong relationships with families, Mutch and Collins (2012) lists strategies schools and educators should pursue: leadership; school culture; partnerships; community networks; and communication. If educators lead parents to a relationship, create a strong culture, have a partnership mentality, seek out networks with others in the community, and emphasize communication, parents and families are more likely to be engaged with the school in correcting problematic behaviors.

The most common forms of communication from schools to parents include parent-teacher conferences, quick and informal conversations at the beginning or end of the school day during drop-off or pick-up, back to school night (Rimm-Kaufman & Zhang, 2005), phone calls, report cards, newsletters (Petrakos & Lehrer, 2011), and when applicable, Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings. The most common form of communication is a daily agenda designed in which teachers and parents can write notes to each other about daily performance (Petrakos & Lehrer, 2011). Epstein et al. (2008) argue that these forms of communication should not only take place when bad behavior is displayed but also when positive behavior is displayed. The “sandwich” method could also be used. For example, a teacher could start by pointing out the student’s strengths in the classroom. Then, they could describe the problematic behavior and what is being



done in the classroom to correct the behavior. Finally, they can discuss how similar methods can be used at home for continuity.

School personnel must also not only engage in communication, but create an environment where parents feel like partners with educators in order to meet students' needs (Ferguson, 2005b). Unfortunately though, teachers feel that parents do not want to participate (Ferguson 2005a); however, this can be remedied through consistent communication home about classroom activities and behavior (Epstein et al., 2008). Canary and Cantu (2012) found even when schools involved families, parents were seldom involved in final decisions about classroom behavior.

Researchers cite practices for schools to engage in to increase parental involvement. To begin with, teachers and administrators should ask families their preferred styles of communication (Epstein et al., 2008) as this may vary depending on culture, socioeconomic status, time, and other responsibilities and individual circumstances. Additionally, schools need to understand the other commitments a family may juggle and that a family's limited time does not mean they are uninterested in communicating with their child's school (Davern, 2004). A large barrier to this is that most communication comes from the perspective of the school and often ignores the family's viewpoint, especially for families who speak a primary language that is different from that of school personnel (Ferguson, 2005b) or have a different racial or cultural background (Epstein et al., 2008). One way to bridge this separation is for schools to create a resource center with cultural-specific resources that can help parents who do not feel connected to individuals at the school (Mazza, 2013).

These cultural-specific resources should display Epstein's (2009) framework of six types of parent school involvement. The first type of communication, parenting, can help families with child-rearing skills and child development. This can be especially helpful to use when behavior problems arise in the classroom. The second type, school-to-home and home-to-school communication is primarily used to update families on school programs and student progress. This can also be used to help address problematic behaviors. The third type, volunteering, allows parents to be actively involved in classroom activities. This also gives the opportunity to witness classroom behavior. The fourth type, learning at home, can be used to enforce material being taught at school. The fifth type, decision making, includes parents in school decisions. This can be used through Parent Teacher Organizations, but it is also important to utilize during disciplinary actions. The sixth and final type, collaborating with the community, coordinates services for students and their families. It is important for school members to understand that the manner in which this information is presented and used is just as important, if not more important, than simply having the information available (Mutch & Collins, 2012).

**Family perspective.** Although society now recognizes the importance of parental presence in schools (Kowalski, 2005), the relationship between families and schools has undergone many changes. Before the 1950s, families did not involve themselves with school activities, so the educational experience was solely created by administrators. From 1950 to 1980, a collectivist relationship between parents and educators developed due to the creation of Parent Teacher Organization/Associations (Hafizi & Papa, 2012).

Since then, parents and families have been working toward individual partnerships as “family support is required to solve problems that arise during the education process at school” (Hafizi & Papa, 2012, p. 39).

Both schools and parents agree that parents are excluded from disciplinary decisions or conversations about students being the recipient of negative behaviors (Canary & Cantu, 2012). When parents are notified of such behaviors, the most common method schools use is a note or behavioral journal sent home; however, parents do not see this as beneficial since there are usually entries about recurring events and behaviors, and they would rather be asked for input on how to change the event or behavior (Davern, 2004). Furthermore, parents feel overwhelmed about daily reports about the same types of behaviors (Davern, 2004). Some schools ask parents to make entries for behavioral problems at home, but some parents do not see the need for this if the event is unlikely to occur at school or influence their academic performance (Davern, 2004).

Regardless of how teachers perceive families, parents are interested in developing relationships with their child’s teachers regardless of culture and background (Ferguson, 2005b). Furthermore, parents are capable of communicating with schools (Mazza, 2013) but are unaware of how to start that relationship (Mutch & Collins, 2012). Part of this can be explained by the type of communication a school employs. For example, parents report that they do not receive enough communication from schools in ways they seek (Petrakos & Lehrer, 2011). Overall, as noted above, parents do not like reading daily entries that are formulaic or repetitive and are unaware of what they should write back to their student’s teacher (Davern, 2004). Parents also feel frustrated as they feel that the

school disregards their opinion of their child and that behavioral corrections are not family-centered (Canary & Cantu, 2012). Other times, parents are discouraged by educational jargon, especially parents who speak a different primary language and are unaware how to communicate their opinion (Gregg et al., 2011).

Often parents feel comfortable with fundraising since these activities are organized and structured by the school's PTO but realize this participation does not address classroom behavior; however, they do not know how else to foster a relationship (Mutch & Collins, 2012). Because of this, Ferguson (2005b) recommends that teachers talk to each set of parents and find out what kind of role they deem important and appropriate for themselves. Factors involved include their thoughts in appropriate child rearing, the family's confidence in parenting, and how welcome the family feels at school (Ferguson, 2005b). In order to help families feel more involved, opportunities for participation need to be communicated to families. Additionally, parents' views need to be taken under consideration and cultural awareness should be increased (Mutch & Collins, 2012).

### **Literature Gaps**

Although there is a rich body of literature examining the school as an organization and how communication functions within it, there is a lack of knowledge of parental communication in schools (Petraikos & Lehrer, 2011). However, existing literature that examines school communication fails to understand the complexity of organizations and how communication is in fact the foundation of the school, as seen through CCO. By failing to use a contemporary constitutive approach to communication, the educational

communication literature is limited in its approach. Although recent literature advocates for relationship-building between schools and parents, the general treatment of communication remains linear and transmissive (as evidenced by terminology like “sender” and “receiver”), and little guidance is offered as to how to accomplish the establishment and maintenance of such relationships. In other words, school literature reflects communication as something initiated by the school and sent to parents; whereas, the communication literature conceptualizes communication as a process of meaning-creation, as seen in CCO theory. Additionally, “studies often lack theoretical explanations for what occurs in parental involvement” (Canary & Cantu, 2012, p. 273) and fail to grasp how teacher and parent communication unfolds during co-orientation, the foundation of ANT which can help enlighten schools on how parents perceive school communication.

This study seeks to understand how parents want to communicate with their child(ren)’s teachers, how teachers and schools actually communicate, and parental satisfaction with this communication, and thus will help fill a gap in the existing literature. Examining parental satisfaction of general school information (RQ1: What are parent perceptions of communication from schools regarding general information?) helps to set a benchmark on contentedness of regular communication, and examining how parents want to communicate about child-specific concerns (RQ2: What are parent perceptions of communication from schools regarding concerns about their child(ren)?) sheds light on how parents desire the relationship with their child(ren)’s teachers to

develop. This study can potentially identify communication shortcomings and yield practices to enhance effective communication between schools and families.

## CHAPTER THREE

This study uses a modified version of the International Communication Association (ICA) Communication Audit survey (Goldhaber & Rogers, 1979). The survey portion of the ICA Communication Audit seeks to measure communication load, but assessing how much communication individuals receive on particular topics and how much communication these individuals need on these topics, as well as satisfaction with communication on pertinent topics and with the use of various communication channels (Goldhaber & Krivonos, 1977). The modification used for this study simply asks parents how satisfied they are with the use of various communication channels and with communication on pertinent topics in two categories: general school issues/events and child-specific issues/concerns. This study also uses the ICA Communication Audit communicative experience form, which is similar to the critical incident technique, asking parents to provide narratives for effective or ineffective communication in each category (school-general and child-specific). Survey and interview items were developed to understand satisfaction levels of different forms of communication in following with the audit's goal to understand "perceptions of communication events, practices, and relationships" (Goldhaber & Krivonos, 1977, p. 43).

## **Survey**

In order to answer the research questions, a web-based survey with closed-ended and open-ended communicative experience questions was created for parents.

Opportunity sampling was conducted by sending a recruitment email to child- and parent-focused listservs. Some snowball sampling also occurred as participants were encouraged to send the study information to others who might be interested in participating. The recruitment email told participants the study aimed to understand school communication with parents and parental satisfaction with this communication. The only inclusion requirement was that participants be parents of school-aged children. In the beginning of the survey, participants were instructed to only answer the survey with one school in mind. They were invited to retake the survey to discuss other schools, but no participant answered the survey multiple times to discuss other schools.

First, the survey asked what type of school (public elementary school, private high school, etc.) the parent referred to in their answers. Next, the survey asked how the child(ren)'s school communicates with the parent about general school-related information. Participants were then asked to rate their satisfaction of this information on a scale from 1 to 10 with 1 representing not at all satisfied and 10 representing extremely satisfied. Next, parents were invited to provide a communicative experience—a narrative describing a typical example of good or bad general school communication. Next, the survey questions shifted to child-focused communication. Participants were asked to identify how schools communicate with them about their child's progress and concerns and to rate their satisfaction on a scale from one to 10. Next, participants were presented



with a list of items ranging from extracurricular activities to disciplinary actions. The study was most interested in learning about areas of concern, but other items were included in the survey to prevent participants feeling off-put or defensive about items targeting negative or concerning behaviors. Next, participants were again asked to provide communicative experiences -- examples of when they felt their child(ren)'s school communicated with them effectively regarding their child and a time when they felt the school communicated with them ineffectively. Questions to obtain demographic information about the participant and the family followed. Finally, participants were asked to put in their name and contact information if they wished to participate in a phone interview about their survey responses. A total of 43 participants completed the online survey; 19 consented to interviews. The full list of survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

### **Interviews**

Semi-structured phone interviews were conducted with all 19 of the survey respondents who consented to an interview. The interviews expanded upon participants' survey answers and examples of communication, and lasted, on average, approximately 39 minutes. During the interview, participants were asked about the communicative experiences they wrote about during the survey and how they responded to the examples they provided. They were also asked other items, including whether or not anyone from a school has asked how they wish to communicate with schools, how they think family-school communication impacts their child and how parent-teacher conferences are conducted. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B.

## Demographics

Participants had between one and five school-age children, with the greatest number of participants ( $n = 21$ ) having children enrolled in a public high school. The majority of participants (43%) were between the ages of 45 and 54. Nearly all of the participants ( $n = 37$ ) identified English as the language spoken at home, and nearly 80% of participants identified themselves as White/Caucasian. Just over 70% of participants identified themselves as female. Participant educational levels were reported high. Fifteen participants (35%) reported having a stay-at-home parent in the household while 22 (51%) reported not having a stay-at-home parent in the household, and six participants (14%) did not disclose that information. Almost all of the participants ( $n = 35$ ) belonged to a two-parent household. The 19 interview participants represent nine localities. Table 1 contains more demographical information. The table separates participants who only completed the survey from participants who completed both the survey and an interview. Since the two groups share similarities in their overall demographics, the data collected from the two sets of participants were combined. However, it is noted that 100% of interview participants were White compared to 63% of survey participants, and 95% of interview participants have a graduate degree compared to 58% of survey participants. These differences may have affected interview data.

*Table 1: Demographics*

Item	# of answers from survey only participants <i>n</i> = 24 freq (%)	# of answers from survey and interview participants <i>n</i> = 19 freq (%)	Total # of answers <i>n</i> = 43 freq (%)
<b>How many schools are your children enrolled in?</b>			
1	14 (58%)	12 (63%)	26 (60%)
2	7 (29%)	7 (37%)	14 (33%)
3	3 (13%)	0 (0%)	3 (6%)
<b>What type of school are you answering this survey about?</b>			
Public High School	12 (50%)	9 (47%)	21 (49%)
Public Elementary School	6 (25%)	8 (42%)	14 (33%)
Public Middle School	2 (8%)	1 (5%)	3 (6%)
Private High School	3 (13%)	0 (0%)	3 (6%)
Private Middle School	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Private Pre-Kindergarten	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	1 (2%)
<b>What language do you mainly speak at home?</b>			
English	19* (79%)	18 (95%)	37 (86%)
Portuguese	0 (0%)	1 (5%)	1 (2%)
Undisclosed	5 (21%)	0 (0%)	5 (12%)
*one participant indicated that German is also spoken at home as a secondary language to English			
<b>What is your gender?</b>			
Female	15 (63%)	16 (84%)	31 (72%)
Male	3 (13%)	3 (16%)	6 (14%)
Undisclosed	6 (25%)	0 (0%)	6 (14%)
<b>What is your age?</b>			
25 to 34	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
34 to 44	3 (13%)	7 (37%)	10 (23%)
45 to 54	10 (42%)	8 (42%)	18 (42%)
55 to 64	4 (17%)	4 (21%)	8 (19%)
Undisclosed	8 (33%)	0 (0%)	8 (19%)
<b>What race/ethnicity best describes you?</b>			
White/Caucasian	15 (63%)	19 (100%)	34 (79%)

Black/African American	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)
Hispanic	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Undisclosed	6 (25%)	0 (0%)	6 (14%)
<b>What is the highest level of education you have completed?</b>			
Post High School Training	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
Some College	1 (4%)	0 (0%)	1 (2%)
College Grad	3 (13%)	1 (5%)	4 (9%)
Postgraduate	14 (58%)	18 (95%)	32 (74%)
Undisclosed	5 (21%)	0 (0%)	5 (11%)
<b>Is there a stay-at-home parent in your household?</b>			
No	14 (58%)	8 (42%)	22 (51%)
Yes	5 (21%)	10 (52%)	15 (35%)
Undisclosed	5 (21%)	1 (5%)	6 (14%)
<b>What best describes your family?*</b>			
Shared custody	2 (8%)	0 (0%)	2 (5%)
Single-parent household	3 (13%)	2 (11%)	5 (11%)
Two-parent household	18 (75%)	17 (89%)	35 (81%)
Undisclosed	5 (21%)	5 (26%)	10 (23%)
*participants could select more than one answer			
<b>What state is your school district in?*</b>			
Maryland		9 (47%)	
Virginia		3 (16%)	
California		1 (5%)	
Colorado		2 (5%)	
District of Columbia		3 (5%)	
Massachusetts		4 (5%)	
Montana		5 (5%)	
New York		6 (5%)	
Texas		7 (5%)	
*No survey question asked about participant location. Rather, all interview participants mentioned their district without prompting.			

## **Process**

The open-ended communicative experience data from the surveys were combined with interview data to create one dataset. Data were unitized by analytical chunks as follows. For the survey data, each communicative experience response comprised one unit. For the interview data, responses were unitized by topic shift. This resulted in 608 individual units, each of which was printed on a card. Thematic analysis was conducted, resulting in 14 themes. During the categorization process, cards were individually examined. The first card became the first item in the first category. The next card was contrasted against the first card and either became the second item in the first category or became the first card in the second category, and so on, as laid out by Lincoln and Guba (1985). Items that did not fit into categories of other cards were placed to the side and examined after all cards were sorted. They then were reexamined to see into which categories they fit. As cards were sorted, the number of categories grew. Upon completion of sorting all cards into categories, similar categories were collapsed to form one new category with smaller sub-categories, as applicable. Descriptions of these categories were then composed to generate themes.

## CHAPTER FOUR

This chapter will address the research questions using both descriptive and qualitative analyses. The thematic analysis of the narrative data resulted in 14 themes. Table 2 lists these themes ranked by prevalence. Although certain survey and interview items were directed at understanding parental satisfaction of general communication (RQ1) while others were focused on child-specific communication (RQ2), it is apparent that many of the themes bridge between these two areas. In other words, satisfaction with general school communication is at times connected to child-specific communication, and vice versa. Table 2 lists the themes found and examples labeled by research question:

***Table 2: Communication Themes***

Theme	RQ 1 Example (addressing general school communication)	RQ 2 Example (addressing child-specific communication)	# of incidents <i>n</i> = 608 freq (%)
Parents perceive that schools do not understand the importance of communication.		I don't think schools understand the parent side. Schools are constantly complaining that parents don't want to be involved, but I think parents do want to be involved but don't know how. If you told people what is going on, they would be more involved. It's a chicken and egg situation. (interview, White female,	91 (15%)

		age 45-54, elementary age child)	
Parents perceive a lack of communication	I think they think if they wait long enough you'll just go away (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child	Information is never voluntarily shared. (interview, White male, age 55-64, high school age child)	80 (13%)
Parents have to initiate communication		I have to initiate everything. It's so frustrating. And I go to a good school! I can't imagine how parents in bad schools find anything out. (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child)	79 (13%)
Parents perceive that communication is ineffective	More than anything, it seems like they were trying to hide issues and didn't address them appropriately. (interview, White female, age 45-54, high school age child)	It's ineffective, and it's one-sided. Usually if I push I can get the information I want, but I don't think that should have to happen. I want a dialogue, and I shouldn't always have to be the one to start it. More email isn't the answer. It's the dialogue that's missing. (interview, White female, age 45-54, high school age child)	65 (11%)
Parents perceive the school avoids communication	After Newton, I was very active and very comfortable. I asked a lot of safety questions, and I felt that were very uncommunicative with me and their responses and blew me off. I never got the information I wanted from them. (interview, White female, elementary age child)	My daughter had this out of character thing on her report card. I emailed the teacher asking about it and didn't get a response. I happened to be at school volunteering that week and asked the teacher about it. She pulled me aside and explained, but I was kind of irritated because I should have been contacted sooner. She should have called me earlier and told me. (interview, White female, elementary age child)	62 (10%)

Parents feel that communication varies by teacher.	Well it's been so different each year. I've never had a newsletter quite like this year's. It's a very young, enthusiastic teacher (interview, White female, age 35-44, elementary age child)	there is no consistency from year to year of how information is shared. It sort of drives me crazy. You never know what's going on (survey, White female, age 45-54, high school age child)	50 (8%)
The relationships between the school and the family should be a partnership	It's always just a general school address with no reply function. I never know where to go with questions. (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child)	I think it does so much. When the teacher and the parent are both on it. I think it's easier for the child when they know that all adults involved are there for them and want them to do well. It's just as important as their two parents communicating effectively. It's very important. (interview, White female, age 35-44, elementary age child)	36 (6%)
Parents like frequent and scheduled communication about general school communication	When my kids were in preschool we got a calendar of what was going on over the month, but after first grade, it stopped. But that seems like such an easy way to tell us what's going on. (interview, White female, age 45-54, high school age child)		30 (5%)
Communication is robotic and impersonal.	I hate the "robocalls" about events not applicable to my child. It's literally a robot talking to me. Are we really at the point where we think computers can communicate better than people? (survey, White female, age 45-54, high school age child)		24 (4%)



<p>Communication about general school information is contradictory</p>	<p>I wish the website was more updated. Instead of having to go back to my email. We have two websites. One is a school website run by [district] that enables us to have a tab. Then the PTA has a website and either of those could be updated more frequently with the information because a lot of times emails can get lost with so many coming in. And depending on when the stuff was sent out or posted, different dates are presented. It can get really confusing trying to keep track of the most recent version. (interview, White female, age 45-54, high school age child)</p>		<p>22 (4%)</p>
<p>Parental presence in the classroom impacts communication</p>	<p>I volunteer more at school because otherwise I would have no idea of what is going on. My work schedule allows, I'm a consultant, so I'm able to do that. I do worry very much about people don't have that flexibility. And I'm fairly well connected. Like I know all of the teachers, so if I need information, I kind of know where to go. I really feel for the parents who don't. (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child)</p>	<p>She tells me more because I'm there. She seems me when I'm there and tells me that he's not paying attention or that he's talking too much. I'm not sure I'd know about this if I wasn't there. So, the less urgent information, I get more of it. It's kind of a partnership but only because I'm there (interview, White female, age 35-44, elementary age child).</p>	<p>21 (3%)</p>
<p>Parents feel schools do not ask parental preference about communication</p>	<p>They assume that you want an email blast and a phone call and all these papers sent home. There's a better way than this. They are wasting too much time giving everyone this stuff three different ways. It would take</p>	<p>I've never been asked how I want to communicate. Wow, that would be nice if they did that. (interview, White male, age 55-64, high school age child)</p>	<p>18 (3%)</p>

	them less time and energy to actually find out what we want and do more of an individual approach. (interview, White female, 45-54, high school age child)		
Parents perceive that parent-teacher conferences are not held regularly enough and are often too short or not private enough.		We have one a year. It's five minutes. It's just a check in that happens the end of October or early November. Your kid is settling in well in school and goodbye. (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child)	18 (3%)
Parents worry about retaliation on their child if the parent forces communication		A parent lives in this fear of retaliation kind of thing. One of my children was I believe retaliated against by a teacher who affected her grade because she didn't like that I asked her about grading criteria. (interview, White female, age 45-54, high school age child)	12 (2%)

The remainder of this chapter will address the research questions, using both the participant's responses to closed-ended questions and the themes derived from thematic analysis.

**RQ1: What are parent perceptions of communication from schools regarding general information?**

All participants indicated that schools and teachers use email to share general information. School websites and automated phone calls are also used often to

disseminate information. Table 3 shows communication methods parents report receiving relating to general school happenings and the frequency of each of these methods.

**Table 3: How does your child’s school give you information about school-related issues and events?**

Method of Communication	# of all participants ( <i>n</i> = 43) freq (%)
Email	43 (100%)
School Website	33 (77%)
Phone Call	29 (67%)
Mail	23 (53%)
Fliers	17 (40%)
Face-to-Face	12 (28)
Note Home	11 (26%)
Other	9 (21%)
Text Message	6 (14%)

Participant satisfaction with general school communication averaged 7.32 on a 10-point scale with 10 representing extremely satisfied. As mentioned above, overall parents report an adequate level of satisfaction regarding general information from the school and teachers. In interviews, parents reported a preference for email for general school communication, and parents also reported email as the most frequent communication avenue for this type of information-sharing, which parents feel is very positive. However, participants still reported a desire to have more frequent communication to serve as reminders for events. For example, one parent said, *“I would find it even more helpful when there’s something specific coming up if there’s a reminder. For example, there was*

*a PTA meeting this week and attendance was low and an email reminder might have helped”* (interview, White female, age 34-44, middle school age child). Another parent feels that emails should be scheduled to go out on a certain basis but should also be sent out as situations arise that parents should know about. For example, they said, *“I would call them random emails just about the things, glitches, maybe that are happening on a random basis. We don’t generally get that, and I think that we should”* (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child).

Many participants elaborated on the different communication methods schools use to disseminate communication and how different methods are used to share different types of information or even show contradictory information from other methods, which parents found very frustrating. One parent said the intention behind this is good, but it isn’t carried out well:

*That’s the thing. There’s a vast basket. I think the schools need to do a combination of all different kinds of things because different people receive information differently. Basically, all of the different communication tools we have, they should attempt to do. The effort to do this just isn’t there though.*

(interview, White male, age, age 45-54, high school age child)

Another parent said, *“The school uses a variety of methods to inform parents about events, however, the school is not consistent with using all avenues available. Additionally, some of the most important information is not communicated to parents properly”* (survey, Black or African American female, age 25-34, middle school age child). Other parents cite school websites not being updated frequently enough and

having to sort through too many listservs to find the information they need or being inundated with information irrelevant to them, such as parking. Another complaint is the episodic nature of communication and the lack of room for parent feedback. All interview participants cited at least one example in which they felt parents should be more involved in the communication process.

Although results indicate a moderate level of satisfaction of general school communication, several participants report ineffective general communication. *“I think it’s a big debacle”* (interview, White female, age 35-44, middle school age child), said one parent while another one said, *“There has been no effective communication”* (survey, White female, age 55-64, elementary age child). Yet another participant said in an interview, *“school communication is completely overlooked. I don’t think any of it is done particularly well”* (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child).

Interestingly, one parent noted in an interview that effective communication about general school and classroom happenings reduces parent uncertainty and might lessen the number of child-specific questions they would have otherwise:

*Good weekly emails, not even child-specific one, just ones that say next week we’ll be covering this. This is what’s coming up. These are some general issues that have happened, and here’s how we’re handling X, Y and Z. If you have any questions, call me. 90% of people won’t even call because this will answer their questions.* (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child)

**RQ2: What are parent perceptions of child-specific school communication?**

As for general school communication, email is also the most frequently used channel when communicating about child-specific concerns; however, there is more variance in communication methods used for child-specific concerns with just over half of participants indicating the use of email for these concerns ( $n = 26$ ). Face-to-face communication and mail are the second and third most reported channels respectively. Table 4 shows the use of different communication channels parents report receiving about child-specific concerns and the frequency of each.

***Table 4: How does your child’s school give you information about child specific concerns?***

Method of Communication	# of all participants ( $n = 43$ ) freq (%)
Email	26 (60%)
Face-to-Face	14 (33%)
Mail	12 (28%)
Note Home	10 (23%)
Other	10 (23%)
Phone Call	10 (23%)
School Website	6 (14%)
Fliers	2 (5%)
Text Message	1 (2%)

Accelerated classes and/or enrichment programs and extracurricular activities were the most commonly cited child-focused issues that schools communicated about

with participants, which is likely related to the high education levels of the parents participating in this study. Information about meetings with a child’s teacher and a child’s ability to focus on school work were also reported high. Table 5 shows 16 child-focused issues that schools and parents communicate about, with reported frequency from participants. As mentioned in previous chapters, this study was mostly concerned with child behavior; however, other items were included so as not to appear abrasive to participants.

**Table 5: What child-focused issues does your child(ren)’s school or teacher communicate about?**

Topic of Conversation	# of all participants ( <i>n</i> = 43) freq (%)
Accelerated classes and/or enrichment programs	26 (60%)
Extracurricular activities	26 (60%)
Meetings with my child's teacher or other educators	21 (49%)
My child's ability to focus on work	20 (47%)
Individual Education Programs	17 (40%)
My child's homework performance	17 (40%)
My child's behavior around peers	16 (37%)
Physical, mental or emotional concerns that affect my child's classroom performance	16 (37%)
My child's attitude toward school	13 (30%)
Overall classroom environment	10 (23%)
My child's work ethic	8 (19%)

Other students' behaviors that affect my child's performance	7 (16%)
Skipping a grade	5 (17%)
Suspension, detention or other disciplinary actions	5 (17%)
Repeating a grade	2 (5%)
Other	2 (5%)

Satisfaction with school communication regarding child concerns was more polarized than satisfaction with general school communication. Although satisfaction of child-specific communication averaged 7 on a 10-point scale and is very close to the average for general school communication, participants ranked child-specific very low or very high, leading to the average of 7. Two popular themes tied to this are that communication varies by teacher and that parents have to initiate communication. Further analysis of themes follows below.

Different participants reported different preferences for receiving communication specific to their child(ren); however, all participants reported a face-to-face meeting, phone call, or email as the most effective method for this type of communication. One participant explained their preference for email by the documentation it offers:

*I think email is the best for my personal preference because it gives me a chance to digest the information and it keeps a running record that I can turn back to while if it's just a phone conversation, I might try to remember, and if I didn't take good notes, I might not remember what the teacher said or remember all of the information discussed. (interview, White female, age 35-44, middle school age child)*



Others prefer phone calls or meetings:

*I think being able to see my face and me to see hers says something about the level of concern . . . there was one time when I received an email and became more concerned that I should have been. I appreciated the heads up, but I really missed the nonverbal or even a phone call because you can hear the intonation.*

(interview White female, age 35-44, elementary age child)

Despite the participants showing different opinions on their preferred methods of communication, only one participant said that she was asked how she prefers to be contacted and did not feel that her opinion really mattered. She said, *“There was this slip of paper you get at the beginning of the school year that asks if it’s okay to email you, but I don’t think anyone ever looks at it. It’s more of a formality (interview, White female, age 35-44, elementary age child).”*

Effective communication examples all highlighted either email or notes home about positive behaviors. Parents said they appreciate being notified about positive behaviors and that the notification helps to build the relationship between the parent and the teacher.

**Parent-teacher conferences.** Although many parents prefer face-to-face communication, regular parent-teacher conferences are rare. Parents report one parent-teacher conference in the fall, generally after the first marking period. Parents reported the conferences lasting between 5 and 30 minutes dependent upon school and location. The average length of the meeting was 15 minutes. The only participant who felt the meeting was an appropriate amount of time was the parent who reported a 30 minute

conference. None of the middle school or high school participants held formal, individual conferences. For these schools, participants said there was a designated time when all of the teachers would be in one place, generally a gymnasium, and parents could line up to speak with individual teachers for three to five minutes. One participant described the set-up as “*arena-style conferences*” (interview, White female, age 45-54, high school age child), while another participant likened it to “*speed dating with your child’s teachers*” (interview, White female, age 35-44, middle school age child). The only benefit to this style of conference participants saw was to ask one specific question or use it as a time to set up an additional meeting.

**Communication varies by teacher.** Although the average level of parental satisfaction of child-specific communication was ranked as a 7 as established by parents on a 10-point scale, individual participants reported very low levels of satisfaction or moderate to high levels of satisfaction illustrated by 10 participants who ranked child-specific communication as a 10 and 13 participants ranked it as 4 or lower. Additionally, all interview participants reported an awareness that communication varies by teacher. Even participants who reported communication satisfaction said they have not always been satisfied or that they know of other parents in the same school with low levels of satisfaction because the teacher is not as engaged in communication. One participant explained, “*There is no consistency from year to year of how information is disseminated. It sort of drives me crazy. You never know what you’re going to get*” (survey, White female, age 45-54, high school age child). Another participant agreed that some teachers are more effective communicators by saying, “*I feel like we are very lucky with our*

*teacher this year, but I know there are people out there with much worse experiences. I know some people feel jerked around”* (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child).

**Lack of communication.** Participants reported a lack of communication to be just as problematic as ineffective or poor communication from schools and teachers. One participant said, *“I just don’t get any communication. Luckily my kids haven’t had any huge problems at least ones that I know about”* (survey, White female, age 45-54, high school age child). In interviews, participants reported instances that they felt they should have been notified about. These instances ranged from a child not turning in their homework to a gun being on a child’s bus. Another example involved a mentally disabled child being labeled by a mother of another student, and it was the first time the student had heard the label about herself. The mentally disabled child’s mother found out about the event because the other parent posted about it on Facebook. The mother of the disabled child said the teacher communicated effectively with her but only after she initiated communication about it with the teacher (survey and interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child).

**Parents initiate communication.** As in the example above, parents overwhelmingly reported that they must initiate communication with a teacher. One participant said, *“The teachers do not proactively communicate with parents about possible issues about their particular child. They do reactively respond to questions and inquiries but don’t take the initiative to flag the concerns themselves”* (survey, White female, age 35-44, middle school age child) and another participant said, *“It’s much more*

*on the parent to bring up concerns even if the concern is pretty objectively obvious”*

(survey, White male, age 55-64, high school age child). Some parents said they volunteer in the classroom in order to get more information from the teacher, a method they described as effective. One participant said:

*I think if they know you're involved and you're on their side and want the best for your child and willing to make the teacher's life easier and they don't have to do grunt work, it improves the relationship. You get better feedback and know what the hell is going on.* (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child)

Some participants reported hesitation in initiating too much communication for fear of negative consequences. Two participants reported that teachers embarrassed their children by announcing to the class that parents were complaining or concerned about a particular situation. Another participant felt that after she reported grading concerns to her child's teacher, the teacher was unfairly harsh in grading her child's work. Yet another participant reported feeling a sense of blame from educators. The participant said:

*The counselor and the teacher had the attitude that this is my fault. I wanted to talk to them about my concerns. They didn't want the meeting, and although it was somewhat productive, I don't understand why the blame has to be there.*

(interview, White female, age 45-54, high school age child)

In these occurrences, parents reported settling for less information in order not to create more problems.

**Communication avoidance.** Participants said at times the problem is more than a lack of school communication but rather the intentional avoidance of communication engagement. One participant said, *“They will do anything to avoid you. When you send them an e-mail message, they will respond just after your third attempt”* (survey, White male, age 45-54, high school age child), and another participant said, *“I think they think if they wait long enough, you’ll just go away”* (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child). In four cases, participants said this problem was never resolved and they stopped trying to contact the teacher or the school.

**Desire for partnership.** Regardless of whether they rated their satisfaction level with school communication as high or low, all participants wanted a partnership type of relationship with their child’s teacher. *“It’s as important as two parents communicating effectively. It’s very important”* (interview, White female, age 35-44, elementary age child), said one participant. Another described the positive relationship with their child’s teacher by saying, *“We support each other in the classroom and at home”* (interview, White female, age 45-54, elementary age child).

All participants also indicated that school communication impacts a child’s academic performance. One participant said:

*[Communication] is hugely important. When things are going well, it makes the child more engaged. It makes the family and child feel more involved and invested in the success. And when things are going poorly, it’s absolutely essential. If the parent doesn’t know something’s wrong, what starts off as a small problem*

*becomes much larger to deal with” (interview, White female, age 55-64, high school age child)*

**Schools do not understand the importance of communication.** Among 11 (58%) interview participants citing poor school communication, all explained that they feel schools and teachers are unaware how they should communicate with parents and they fail to understand the importance of communication. One participant said, *“There is very little to any intersection between the home and schools when in reality it is all connected, and the communication should reflect that”* (interview, White female, age 45-54, high school age child) and another participant explained, *“They are just not prepared to deal with [communication] . . . I think they really do not have a clue in how to communicate with parents”* (interview, White female, age 35-44, elementary age child).

Some participants said that more communication is not the solution, but rather, more effective and thorough communication that allows for parent participation is a better fix. *“More email isn’t the answer,”* one participant said, *“the thing that’s missing here is dialogue”* (interview, White female, age 55-64, high school age child). Although parents want to create partnerships with teachers, they perceive teachers as not wanting to view parents as members of the educational team. Another participant saw parent participation and school communication as part of the same cycle:

*I don’t think schools understand the parent side. Schools are constantly complaining that parents don’t want to be involved, but I think parents do want to be involved but don’t know how. If you told people what is going on, they would be more involved. It’s a chicken and egg situation. I think it is so easy to get*

*information out to everybody now. They would get more involvement which means better relationships and better communication”* (interview, White female, age 45-54, high school age child)

These feelings indicate that communication that initiates dialogue and partnerships with parents is a more effective method of communication than solely increasing the frequency of communication.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The data indicate that parents perceive that schools and teachers perform episodic acts of communication, while parents desire communication that continues over time as a relational process. Overall, schools and teachers seem to be presenting to parents a linear information-transmission model of communication that resembles what is described in the educational literature; whereas, parents expect a nonlinear relational, constitutive model closer to what communication scholars describe. Individual teachers are the difference in the communication discrepancy. This chapter provides commentary on the data, suggests implications and future applications, and identifies strengths and limitations of the study.

### **Episodic Viewpoint of Communication**

Participants' responses indicate they perceive school communication to be episodic and task-minded. This current method of communication follows the conduit model in which a sender transmits a message to a receiver, and there is no path for feedback. Because of this, the model fails to address "the potential ambiguity of meaning in all communication acts, the communication by speakers of unintentional meanings, the role of receivers creating the meaning of any communication act, and the need for redundancy in making sure messages are understood by others" (Mumby, 2013, p. 18). Furthermore, this model presents communication as a simple act, often making it seem



less important than it is for organizational functioning (Mumby, 2013). Although some educational literature addresses the importance of communication (Davern, 2004; Epstein, 2009; Ferguson, 2005a; Hafizi & Papa, 2012), oversimplified models of communication are presented as exemplars which fail to meet the communicative needs of parents or to provide insight on how to forge productive mutually supportive relationships between parents and teachers.

This oversimplified view of communication can be looked at through coordinated management of meaning theory, which states that “[m]eanings affect action, and action affects meaning” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 211). In other words, if an educator feels communication is simple and treats it as just another task to complete, they will treat it as such and fail to engage with parents in ways parents want, recreating an organizational pattern in which communication is seen as a series of discrete acts rather than as a relational process.

General school communication directed to parents can also be seen as a form of mass communication as schools transmit pieces of information to an audience simultaneously (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 333). Just as different forms of news media attract different types of audiences, different parents prefer different methods of receiving general information. However, parents reported a lack of consistency between different channels. For example, the school’s website might contain different information about an event than an email about the same event, which parents found frustrating as this model does not invite feedback. Parents also found it frustrating that it was not a common practice for an educator to ask them individually how they wish to communicate.

## **Relational Process of Communication**

It is evident that parents view communication differently than how they perceive educators view communication. While parents feel that schools communicate *to* parents, they want schools to communicate *with* parents, indicating a desire to develop a relationship with their child's teachers. Parents appear to feel that there is a shortcoming in creating such relationships. This observation also indicates that schools model the educational literature while parents want more organic dialogue that mirrors the communication literature.

A number of communication theories might be applied to create more insight into these findings. Expectancy violations theory (EVT) might allow better understanding of parent attitudes as it explains the relational result of unmet or violated expectations. EVT might explain how parents' gratifications from teacher and school communication is determined by parents' attitudes toward the school and/or teacher and parents' evaluation of the communication (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). When parents are pleased or satisfied with the communication, they not only view the communication positively, but view the school or the teacher more positively. Likewise, when parents are not pleased or unsatisfied with communication, they view the communication negatively and view the school or the teacher more negatively (Davern, 2004). Although EVT is not a CCO theory, its relational insight supports a CCO approach to school communication.

The parents in this study feel that school communication varies by teacher and academic year, reinforcing the interpretation that individual teachers are the difference in the two approaches of communication. While some teachers follow linear sender-message-receiver models of communication, others understand that communication is relational and constitutive. An additional application of CMM might provide insight. As explained previously, meanings and actions affect each other, and “[w]hen an individual enters an interaction, the person can never be certain what rules other participants will be using” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 13). Since methods of school communication are not standardized, parents repeatedly face orientation to new communication styles. Additionally, CMM states that the “primary task in all communication . . . is to achieve and sustain some form of coordination” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 213), another strong connection to ANT. This study demonstrates that communication itself often serves as the ‘X’, or shared concern in the ANT model; however, co-orientation will not be possible if parents hold one approach to communication while perceiving that educators hold another approach.

ANT stresses that the basic building block of organizations is the communicative links between people (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011, p. 304). The question at hand here then is where parents fit in this model. Parents view themselves as important members in the school organization, but 30 (70%) participants reported feeling that schools hold a different opinion and present an attitude that parents are not part of the school. Similarly, Nicotera and Clinkscales (2003) explain that communication is a socially constructed process. In communicating with schools, the parents in this study do not feel they are

treated as part of this social construction, reinforcing their cast role as mute receivers of information rather than relational partners mutually constituting a meaningful relationship.

### **General School Communication**

There was an overall consensus that general school communication is more effective than child-specific communication. However, participants want a higher frequency of this form of communication. Additionally, they feel that the information presented should be more concise, more consistent, and more relevant. Although most participants felt that general communication was generally adequate, there were still some parents who said they do not receive any communication from schools or teachers. Schools need to learn why these parents are not receiving this information and create new methods of communication to reach this population of parents. Informative and effective general information dissemination helps parents be more aware of school happenings and can even relieve some child-specific concerns. This means that if general information is presented well, teachers will spend less time answering child-specific questions which can be a lengthy process. Additionally, parents cited that methods of general communication reflected school and teacher attitudes about child-specific relationship resulting in an overlap of findings between the two research questions.

### **Child-Specific Communication**

Individual parents reported different preferences for communication; however they also reported that either they were not asked about their preference (95%) or if they

were asked, it was more of a formality and their answers were irrelevant (5%). Schools and teachers should make an effort to ask parents their communicative preferences, should attempt to match them when feasible and applicable, and to clearly inform parents when such a match is not possible.

Participants cited the benefits of face-to-face conversations, yet reported dissatisfaction for the employed model of parent teacher conferences. With the exception of one parent who reported a 30-minute conference, participants felt the conference time was insufficient to discuss all of their concerns. Additionally, when there was a concern, meeting only once a year was not enough to solve the problem. Finally, parents dislike group or arena conferences as they feel even more pressured for time and feel the setting is not private enough. Teachers should contact parents throughout the year to determine if a parent wants to set a conference and what duration of time will be appropriate.

Individual teachers have the greatest impact on communication satisfaction, compounded by the fact that the parents participating in this study were unaware of any school policies on child-specific communication, which were likely nonexistent. Parents reported levels of frustration at having to adapt to new communication methods each year or having an individual teacher who fails to engage in conversation. Policies should be established to standardize the level of communication across the school or even the school district. This is already done to a degree for general information, so the structure is already in place for this to happen – it just needs to be expanded upon.

Nearly 70% of participants ( $n = 30$ ) felt that schools and teachers fail to understand the importance of child-specific communication and how communicating

with parents can have a positive impact on a child's academic performance. Stronger policies regarding communication could help show that communication is in fact valued. Additionally, continuing education training and in-services can help skeptical teachers see the importance of communication as well as show them effective methods of communication and relationship-building that are not laborious or time-intensive.

Unfortunately, parents seem to feel that co-orientation, the foundation of ANT, is not often possible as teachers usually fail to recognize and understand the parent perspective. In keeping with the CCO approach, this failure to communicate relationally impacts the effectiveness of the organization, which in this case is the school, meaning that parents see the school's communication and the school itself as less effective entities. Regardless of their current levels of communication satisfaction, parents want a more mutually supportive relationship with their child(ren)'s teachers. When this does happen, however, a positive co-orientation is achieved, and the organization is perceived as more effective. Unfortunately, parents' fear of possible repercussions, such as embarrassment for their child or feelings of blame, keeps them from being too assertive about their concerns. Since organizations, including schools, are created from communication, all of these behaviors impact the school's running and efficiency even if it is not directly seen as a connection.

### **Limitations, Strengths, and Recommendations**

**Limitations.** There are several limitations to this study, such as the relatively small sample size. Another limitation is the blindness of the location, meaning individual school districts were not analyzed as the study was already fairly limited in size, and

there was not enough content to critically assess location. Additionally, ignoring individual district was another way to ensure participant privacy. Moreover, female participants greatly outnumbered male participants, however this was anticipated since traditionally mothers interact with schools and teachers more than fathers (Rimm-Kaufman & Zhang, 2005)). The majority of participants self-identified as being White/Caucasian, belonging to a two-parent household and having a postgraduate degree, indicating these parents might expect higher levels of parental involvement with the school. All of the interview participants reported as being White/Caucasian and 95% have a postgraduate degree which could have also influenced responses. Additionally, over half of the participants (65%) responded about a middle or high school student. Secondary school teachers have many more students than elementary school teachers, and given time their time constraints, the same format of communication in elementary schools may not be realistic in a secondary school setting. Additionally, since the study found parents dislike impersonal and a “one-size-fits-all” approach to communication, different methods and communication skills are needed at different school levels as classroom sizes become larger and students become more independent.

**Strengths.** Although the study presents a small sample size, participants represented different areas across the United States, indicating that satisfaction of school communication is not tied to location. Communication does not appear from these data to be perceived as better or worse at a particular school level. Additionally, this study provides compelling evidence that the failure of existing literature to critically assess

educational views of communication through a communication lens may be creating ineffective procedures at the individual school level.

**Recommended Applications and Future Research.** As most existing literature looks at how schools and teachers view parent engagement, this study limited itself to parent satisfaction and opinions. However, findings from this study have implications for further research and application for follow up with teachers in order to determine the feasibility of the recommendations presented here. These findings should also be shared with school personnel and educators to help them understand a more contemporary and useful approach to communication, inform them of current parent perceptions of school communication and provide insight into how communication (and relationships) with parents, might be improved. A study might be conducted where such a constitutive approach to communication is applied with specific practices in a set of schools, comparing the schools using such a system to schools that do not.

Given that teachers are the bridge between parent and school communication, attention on individual communication skills is the best intervention to improve parental satisfaction of school communication. A study might be pursued conducting interviews with both parents and teachers in matched pairs, comparing the communication practices of teachers with whom parents feel a mutually supportive relationship with those of teachers whose students' parents do not, to identify differences between the two sets of teachers. For practical application, professional development workshops should be held focusing on relationship building, relationship management, how to engage in meaningful



dialogue, perspective taking, cultural sensitivity, and rhetorical sensitivity as these are all items that indicate interpersonal communication competence (Graham & Mazer, 2011).

Additionally, the communication approaches of parents should be examined, comparing satisfied to dissatisfied parents to see if there are systematic differences in the ways that parents approach teachers and schools. Practically, parents should be trained as initiators of deeper communicative connections. Just as Graham and Mazer (2011) indicate that some people need to become more assertive communicators while others need to become less aggressive communicators, some parents need to learn skills to make them more assertive while others need to learn to become less aggressive. For example, one interview participant said she wants her child's teacher to call her daily (interview, White female, age 35-44, elementary age child). Other parents recognized that daily updates were too time intensive for teachers and weekly or biweekly updates, as long as there were no immediate issues of concern, are satisfactory. Workshops through PTA/PTOs could focus on communication competence skills and how to develop mutual trust, support, and respect (Graham & Mazer, 2011) with teachers. Additionally, these training exercises should stress that teachers have specific goals they wish to accomplish and parent-initiated communication should reinforce these goals. Finally, there should be recognition that communication will vary by school level as teachers become responsible for more students and there is a greater emphasis on helping older students assert their independence.

Because this difference in school level exists, future research should target specific grade levels. In other words, communication satisfaction should be measured

separately at the elementary and secondary school levels. Additionally, it is important to better understand teachers' communication perspectives and attitudes, so a study targeting educators should be conducted in order to better design and implement practices that lead to productive change.

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## APPENDIX A

### Recruitment Email

Hello, my name is Frances Womble, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Communication at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia. For my master's thesis, I am interested in researching how schools communicate with parents and parental satisfaction of this communication.

To accomplish this, I am surveying and speaking with parents of school-aged children. Your participation ideally will help schools and parents communicate more effectively. Previous research shows that good communication between schools and families influences student achievement, and your participation will help us understand how this might be accomplished.

If you're interested in participating, you can complete the survey found at this link:

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/CommWithSchool>.

It should take you no more than 20 minutes to complete.

At the end of the survey, you can indicate whether or not you would like to participate in a short phone interview.

Please feel free to forward this information on to any parents with school-age children or to school or neighborhood email lists.

If you would like to participate, please complete the survey by March 24.

Thank you for your participation. If you have questions, I may be reached at [fwomble@gmu.edu](mailto:fwomble@gmu.edu).

## **Informed Consent**

### **RESEARCH PROCEDURES**

This research is being conducted to learn about parental satisfaction of school communication. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete questions the different ways schools communicate with you about events and your children. It should take about 15 minutes to complete the survey.

### **RISKS**

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

### **BENEFITS**

There are no benefits to you as a participant other than to further research in understanding school and parent communication.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

The data in this study will be confidential. You will not be asked to provide any information that will identify you. Names and other identifiers will not be included on your surveys. While it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts have been made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission.

### **PARTICIPATION**

Your consent is voluntary, and you may withdraw your consent at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to consent or if you withdraw consent later, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

### **CONTACT**

This research is being conducted by Frances Womble and Anne Nicotera at George Mason University. They may be reached at 540.220.8290 (FW) or 703.993.8296 (AN) for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Integrity & Assurance at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures governing your participation in this research.

### **CONSENT**

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

If you choose to participate, click: I agree



If you choose not to participate, just close this browser window.

- If you have children in more than one school, please answer questions about only one school. You may enter the survey again to provide answers for another school. Please indicate here how many different schools your children are enrolled in.
  - 1
  - 2
  - 3
- What kind of school are you answering about?
  - Public Elementary School
  - Private Elementary School
  - Public Middle School
  - Private Middle School
  - Public High School
  - Private High School
- How does your child(ren)'s school give you information about school-related issues and events? Select all that apply.
  - Email
  - Phone call
  - Text message
  - Fliers
  - Mail
  - Note home
  - School website
  - Face-to-face
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
- How satisfied are you with this communication (1 = not satisfied at all; 10 = extremely satisfied)?
  - 1
  - 2
  - 3
  - 4
  - 5
  - 6
  - 7
  - 8
  - 9
  - 10
- If you would like to tell us about a time this was done very well or very poorly, you can do so here.
  - [open-ended response]

- How does your child's school give you information about your child's progress or concerns about your child? Check all that apply.
  - Email
  - Phone call
  - Text message
  - Fliers
  - Mail
  - Note home
  - School website
  - Face-to-face
  - Other \_\_\_\_\_
- How satisfied are you with this communication (1 = not satisfied at all; 10 = extremely satisfied)?
  - 1
  - 2
  - 3
  - 4
  - 5
  - 6
  - 7
  - 8
  - 9
  - 10
- Below you will find child-focused issues that schools and parents often communicate about. Please indicate all those that apply to you.
  - Accelerated classes and/or enrichment programs
  - Physical, mental or emotional concerns that affect my child's classroom performance
  - Individualized Education Programs(IEP)
  - Extracurricular activities
  - Meetings with my child's teacher or other members of the educational team
  - Skipping a grade
  - Repeating a grade
  - My child's behavior around peers
  - My child's attitude towards school
  - My child's homework performance
  - Suspension, detention or other disciplinary actions
  - My child's work ethic
  - My child's ability to focus on work
  - Overall classroom environment

- Other students' behavior that affects my child's performance
  - Other\_\_\_\_\_
- Please tell us about a time a school communicated with you effectively regarding your child's progress and/or concerns about your child.
  - [open-ended response]
- Please tell us about a time a school communicated with you ineffectively regarding your child's progress and/or concerns about your child.
  - [open-ended response]
- What language do you mainly speak at home?
  - English
  - Other (please specify)
- What is your gender?
  - Male
  - Female
- What is your age?
  - 25-34
  - 35-44
  - 45-54
  - 55-64
- Which race/ethnicity best describes you? (Please choose only one.)
  - Asian
  - Black or African American
  - Hispanic
  - White/Caucasian
  - Other (please specify)
- What is the highest level of education you have completed?
  - High School
  - Post High School Training
  - Some College
  - College Grad
  - Postgraduate
- Is there a stay-at-home parent in your household?
  - Yes
  - No
- What best describes your family? (You may choose more than one item)
  - Two-parent household
  - Single-parent household
  - Shared custody
  - If checking more than one, please briefly explain.
- Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about your family?
- May we contact you for a phone interview?
  - Yes
  - No

- If yes:
  - Name [open response]
  - Email Address [open response]
  - Phone Number [open response]

## APPENDIX B

### Survey Script

- Refer back to informed consent points.
- How many school-age children do you have? What grades are they in?
- What is your preferred method of communication that schools could use when informing you about your child's progress and/or concerns about your child?
- What are the three most commonly used methods your child's school uses to communicate with you about your child's progress or concerns about your child?
- How often do you receive communication about general information from the school or teacher?
- What do you think of this frequency?
- How often do you receive communication about child-specific concerns or issues?
- What do you think of this frequency?
- Has your child's school ever asked you how you would like to be contacted? Has school communication changed to reflect your preferences?
- Does your child's school/teacher(s) hold parent-teacher conferences? What are these like?
- [refer back to positive communicative experience responses from survey] Can you tell me a little more about your examples? [what led up to the example, how did it play out]
- What was your response with these examples?
- [refer back to negative communicative experience responses from survey] Can you tell me a little more about your examples? [what led up to the example, how did it play out]
- What was your response with these examples?
- How do you think communication with your child's school impacts their school performance?
- What does ideal school communication mean to you?

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Frances E. Womble graduated from Courtland High School, Spotsylvania, Virginia, in 2008. She received her Bachelor of Arts in Journalism from the University of Mary Washington in 2012. She will begin working for D.C. Public Schools in June 2014.