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Effective Means of Communication in Rural Schools

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EFFECTIVE MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

IN RURAL SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the research was to identify the preference of parents regarding the type of communication they receive from schools. Communication of general, negative, and positive information was considered in this study. Participants were parents of school-age children from a rural school district with a pre-kindergarten through high school level program. The quantitative research was designed using a survey with a Likert scale. The parents had the opportunity to participate in a parent and teacher conference event, which provided the best chance for input from most parents. The results were shared with district and building level administrators to help make future best practice decisions.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

Educational responsibilities increased dramatically in recent years. Accountability measures outlined by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (NCLB) required additional gathering and analysis of data on multiple levels. Emphasis on readiness, social and emotional learning, and post-secondary success created shifts in program design, differing from the traditional role of schools. These required intensive training and planning for successful implementation. Teachers had to identify children with at-risk indicators and implement research-based strategies to help them achieve at grade level while providing enrichment for those students performing at high academia. New curriculum and database programs to monitor student learning was a must, but also necessitated training and practice. Schools added responsibilities but had not been able to increase staff, requiring them to do more. With such workloads, the need for effective communication was paramount. All stakeholders must commit to the communication strategies (Plevyak & Heaston, 2001).

Technological advancements have increased capabilities and reach. Report cards used to be sent home with students for parents to sign and acknowledge awareness of academic progress. These were returned to the school, filed, and reused for every grading period that year. Grades are now available in real-time via student management systems, capable of housing and communicating individual assignments and projects at the push of a button. Parent and teacher communication occurred via letters through the mail, telephone, and by chance, the local grocery store. Real-time conversations now happen via email, online chats, social media, and texting on cell phones. Some systems are capable of sending the same message to thousands of individuals at the same time,

eliminating the need for repetitive communication. Because time was a factor, the delivery of information must be considered, deciding how to communicate effectively with all stakeholders.

The need for efficiency was a direct result of increased demands placed on educators. There are many responsibilities so educators must rely on tools to accomplish their tasks. Some communication tools are inappropriate in certain situations when discretion is necessary. Personal preference and access can also play a role, eliminating the use of specific tools. Regardless of what is used and why there are still breakdowns in communication for a variety of reasons. Failure to use methods available to all stakeholders (Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013), differing preference between parents and teachers (Thompson, Mazer, & Grady, 2015), and failure to initiate the conversation (Jayanthi, Nelson, Sawyer, Bursuck, & Epstein, 1995) contributed to communication problems. It was important to study the tools to determine what works and how to improve upon current practice.

Background and Statement of the Problem

A former Kansas State University professor identified 139 public relations suggestions to improve building level communication through various studies (Stewart, 2016). Included in the list were principal newsletters, school calendars, weekly bulletins, phone calls home, and school television broadcasts. The strategies were accomplished using paper, copy machines, landline telephones, and VHS camcorders. Computers and mobile devices are the primary tools now in use.

Smartphones and computers have vast capabilities, far exceeding the technology used to put the first man into space. Producing videos and uploading to YouTube,

sending or receiving email, engaging in text conversations, and digital notifications are present communication strategies for educators through the use of mobile devices and computers. Teachers utilize management systems to track student progress and provide feedback to students and parents. Parents and students can use the same system to pay fees, add money to student lunch accounts, view a wide range of information from the school, and communicate directly with staff. While new methods have evolved, personal conferences and phone calls with staff remain important because of the nature of the conversations.

While there are many communication devices, they do not have the same purpose. If a teacher wants to talk about student progress, personalized phone calls, emails, or face to face conversations should be utilized. These bi-directional strategies allowed for dialogue, of sometimes sensitive nature that does not need to be shared with others. Bi-directional communication has been found to foster additional conversations with parents when initiated by staff (Bennett-Conroy, 2012). Teachers reported a higher response rate from parents they intentionally approached when compared to the control group that did not receive personal notification. If the purpose is to inform large groups of people of general information, mono-directive communication, such as newsletters or mass emails, is a better option. When individual conversations are necessary, there are differences of opinion on using technology.

There are barriers to communication that need to be considered. Digital strategies require appropriate technology. Those without the tools will not receive the information making this an ineffective approach. A recent poll indicated that 12 percent of individuals surveyed do not have access to the internet for personal use or work (Gallup,

Inc., 2013). Some parents only have access at their workplace, which might be hampered by job demands or supervisors. Digital access is widespread, but not available to everyone. If staff are not adequately trained, messages will be disrupted, resulting in a communication breakdown. Personal preference can also be a barrier. Some teachers and parents preferred to talk on the telephone or in person, while others utilized email or texting. If there was a difference in opinion between the two methods, communication might not occur at all. While it may not be possible to overcome all obstacles, it is imperative to find tools that support parent wants and needs and minimize teacher time while maximizing results.

Communication is vital in education. Students of parents in regular contact with the school displayed fewer negative behaviors, higher self-efficacy, higher attendance, and a more positive outlook for education (Mapp, 1997; Shirvani, 2007). There are many different methods, which also means there are numerous preferences and opinions. Parents preferred traditional methods of communication, including face-to-face, but also wanted solutions that matched their individual needs including technological means (Heath, Maghrabi, & Carr, 2015). Time can significantly restrict the options, but it should not be the only factor considered. Care should be given to the breadth of what is being conveyed, who needs to receive the information, and ease of use. While it may be a challenge to study all factors before making a change, measuring effectiveness is imperative in maintaining a collaborative environment. Communication does not always happen between stakeholders, and it is essential to determine where and why the gap occurred.

Theoretical Foundation

Multiple social information processing theories have come about from technological advancement in the realm of electronic interaction. Among these social information processing theories are those regarding face-to-face (FTF) communication and computer-mediated communication (CMC). Understanding the historical shift between CMC and FTF and identifying how conversations have changed is essential when determining their inherent value in communication.

Research in the early 1990s investigated the differences between (CMC) and (FTF) communication (Walther, 1992). Traditionally, educational stakeholders relied primarily on FTF communication before digital tools. While individuals might differ, the elements of FTF communication are similar. Body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice played a significant role in the perception of the conversation. Changing to CMC eliminated FTF communication elements created uncertainty to the nature of the communication because of a loss of physical information.

Technically, emails, text messages, and the use of social media are considered CMC, but one could argue they are gaining elements of FTF communication. One can express emotion through CMC if universal symbols are utilized or thoroughly explained. Since the onset of digital communications, feelings and responses have evolved into emoticons, special symbols, and emoji. However, it is still possible to misinterpret messages using these digital emotion tools. Even with this challenge, teachers, parents, and students confirmed that the use of technology and CMC could improve communication between school and home (Strom & Strom, 2002).

It has been found that CMC generated impressions, minus nonverbal cues, and results in stable, long-term relationships given sufficient exchange of messages (Walther, 1992). Walther (1992) noted that FTF conversations tended to be more time consuming than CMC, which possibly explained the impersonal nature of electronic communication. Additionally, recent research indicated that parents were comfortable with CMC communication and enjoyed the timely passing of information because it gave them the perception of increased access to teachers (Olmstead, 2013). Some parents were able to express themselves through email and felt they have the undivided attention of the teacher (Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013). Relationships can be fostered with CMC if it contains FTF attributes (Walther, 1992).

Communication types were primarily chosen for their efficiency and convenience (Eden & Veksler, 2016). It is essential to consider to what extent technology has changed communication between CMC and FTF, especially when considering verbal and nonverbal context in the education setting in determining effective communication strategies. Using social information processing theory, strategies can be explored to improve communication among educational stakeholders.

Statement of the Purpose

There are gaps in communication, and it is crucial to determine the reason they occur. If the information is lacking due to the nature of the conversation, it is important to identify if it was a direct result of the type of communication used. Research completed by members of the Pew Research Center indicated that rural Americans had less access to various kinds of digital tools when compared to their urban counterparts (Perrin, 2017). Access was an important aspect of this study when determining if CMC

was as useful as FTF communication in rural schools. The depersonalization of CMC might be a barrier to practical usage. Perhaps the issue lay in the lack of universal CMC because of personal preference. Understanding the nature of the subject was important in providing resolution to the problem.

The purpose of this study was to explore parent preference when receiving communication from the school. Neutral, negative, and positive communication was considered for both CMC and FTF strategies. Parent perception of the different tools currently used by the district was investigated. The data ultimately helped determine which strategies were preferred, and thus most effective, for communicating in the various situations. Research regarding communication in rural educational contexts was sparse; this study will contribute additional information as to parental preference in rural settings.

Research Questions

The following research questions guide the study:

1. Which communication strategies do parents prefer for receiving general information from the school?

2. Which communication strategies do parents prefer for receiving negative information specific to their child from the school?

3. Which communication strategies do parents prefer for receiving positive information specific to their child from the school?

4. To what extent do parents prefer CMC to FTF strategies?

Significance of the Study

As schools continued to evolve, the demands place on educators increased. The constant upheaval, coupled with everyday interactions, accentuated the need to streamline processes and free valuable time. Communication, an important responsibility of school staff, offered itself to flexibility as long as the desired results were met. While it may be impossible to meet all needs of every stakeholder, this study provided insight into what rural patrons valued and wanted in communication. This feedback was added to previous studies on communication strategies while providing more focus on rural schools.

The research literature tended to focus on urban education settings. A recent study focused on the purpose of e-mail correspondence in a large urban district (Thompson, 2008). The district effectively used this CMC to communicate with parents. Another study determined that digital communication enhanced the quality of interaction between the school and parents in a large Israeli district (Blau & Presser, 2013). In both studies, digital communication was embraced by their participants. The significance of this research was to identify strategies that were preferred by parents in rural communities, which would inform educators on how to maximize communication efforts.

Summary

The design of this particular research provided answers to rural schools as to the effectiveness of their current communication strategies. As they attempt to find technology to ease responsibilities, the administration must take into account what their patrons preferred. Failure to recognize and address preferences will result in continued malcontent and possible patron withdrawal from the education system. Frustration is detrimental in rural communities where the school is most likely the primary focus of

social interactions. Communication is an essential component, yet there are gaps.

Identifying the reason behind the loss is critical for establishing effective strategies. With

ever-changing technology, it is imperative to continue research in this area.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of school to parent communication is to ensure information concerning a child's academic progress, behavior, and activities is distributed. With the onset of greater use of CMC come levels of depersonalization previously only possible with FTF communication. As regularly occurring conversations continue using a different media, parents have to decipher the full meaning of discussions with sometimes an incomplete sense of the message. Multiple strategies give parents the opportunity to choose their preference, sometimes abandoning those that are less desirable. Availability of resources also dramatically influences parent choice. If a district concentrates on one particular strategy, it can result in a communication gap.

Differences of opinion can occur in any setting, regardless of the number of people. Perceptions can also change for an individual depending on the situation. School leaders must be cognizant of these preferences and work closely with staff to keep parents and teachers working together. Using a non-preferred strategy can be detrimental when working with parents on an individual student issue or passing along general information. Understanding the research from using CMC and FTF communication can guide effective use.

Face to Face Communication

Face to face communication incorporates many types of identified strategies with the most prominent being telephone calls and personal visits (Braley, Slate, & Cavazos, 2008). The most basic is direct contact with a physical meeting. Parents find these are effective and help set the tone if held at the beginning of the school year (Stetson, Stetson, Sinclair, & Nix, 2012; Schumacher, 2008). Personal contact can initiate

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relationship building between parents and teachers. Teachers also convey that they are available and willing to meet with parents to talk about their kids.

Opening the door to parents is essential for promoting effective FTF communication. Many schools advertise that parents can directly contact teachers to set up appointments (Hornby & White, 2010). The open door policy encourages parents to communicate with staff whenever necessary, which requires teachers to be accessible during planning periods, before school, or after school. Barnyak and McNelly (2009) found that teachers and principals feel they make themselves available to parents any time during the day. Parents value having access to staff and continue to engage them in writing notes, phone calls and personal contact (Yuen, 2007).

Advantages of Face to Face Communication. Research indicates several major advantages regarding the use of FTF communication over CMC. Participants from multiple studies point to the non-verbal aspects that help convey the message. Parents pay close attention to facial expressions, eye contact, body language, and tone of voice when speaking with teachers (Blau & Presser, 2013; Thompson, et al., 2015; Yamat, 2013). These cues help participants gain full meaning of the communication and help identify any misunderstandings (Mays, 2016; Baralt & Gurzynski-Weiss, 2011). The use of FTF communication provides the richer medium with the multiple variables it includes, i.e., voice inflection, hand and body gestures, and body language (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). While non-verbal cues play a significant role in FTF communication, there are additional advantages of this type of connection.

The opportunity for resolving miscommunication, immediate response, and the ability for natural language also make FTF communication a good strategy. Missing,

misinterpreted, or inaccurate information contributes to poor communication (Thompson, et al., 2015; Olmstead, 2013). Yamat (2013) sees FTF communication as an opportunity to have dynamic interaction allowing for clarification. Additionally, participants appreciate that they do not have to wait for answers to questions as they do with email and other CMC strategies. Prompt replies encourage nature language and flowing conversation resulting in deeper discussions (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Coupled with non-verbal cues, these elements facilitate increased interaction between parents and teachers (Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2012).

  Preferences for Face to Face Communication. Following the verbal and non-verbal aspects of communication, research indicates multiple reasons that FTF communication is preferred over CMC. Access to phone or internet is not guaranteed as not everyone subscribes to these services. Those without access may see FTF communication as more personal because that is how they primarily communicate with others (Knopf & Swick, 2008). This does not mean that all parents prefer a physical meeting. One study showed that all the parents who participated were willing to have a telephone conversation with staff (Bennett-Conroy, 2012). This only works when parents notify the school of changes to their contact information. Teachers regularly experience trouble connecting with some parents by phone, but studies show they are willing to attempt to make contact this way (Bennett-Conroy, 2012; Smith, 2015; Ouimette, Feldman, & Tung, 2006). While phone conversations do not allow for all non-verbal

cues, it is still considered an FTF communication strategy that many teachers and parents utilize.

There are some differences in perception between parents and teachers in some situations. In a study of Estonia, researchers found that parents preferred to meet in person while teachers preferred to used email (Palts & Kalmus, 2015). The same research with participants from another school indicated that teachers believed parents would rather receive written communication, while the parents believed teachers did not use electronic means because they did not like the tool. Another school in the study indicated that participants preferred to be called by the school while the teachers wanted to use email. An additional study showed that electronic correspondence ranked lower than personal contact (Kosaretskii & Chernyshova, 2013). Teachers should know the preference of the parents to initiate constructive conversations.

Computer-Mediated Communication

There are numerous CMC strategies to consider. Some of the more common strategies include district message services, student management systems, websites, electronic mail, text messages and social media (Heath, et al., 2015). It was found that those with internet access typically utilize CMC (Heath, et al., 2015). Parents who work outside of the home typically have the resources available for these strategies and tend to use them to communicate with staff (Campbell, Dalley-Trim, & Cordukes, 2016). Interestingly, most current data gathering devices require technology, so those without access are typically not represented in surveys (Zieger & Tan, 2012). The use of these media is believed to create greater parent involvement as shown in recent studies (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009).

Digital CMC has significantly changed in the past ten years. Parents and teachers indicate that wide variety of CMC tools have helped with communication efforts (Olmstead, 2013). Most educators have access to a majority of the tools, but there are school policies that limit their use. There is a minimal difference regarding CMC use when considering social economic status (Sheppard, 2017). Those with access tend to utilize digital tools. Those without access need alternative forms of communication and tend to use more FTF communication strategies (Diliberto & Staples, 2010). Participants in a recent study identified email, text messages, web pages, and Facebook pages as the more popular choices (Campbell, et al., 2016). There are discrepancies regarding the use of learning management systems though, mostly with lack of knowledge of how to use it. Ferrara (2009) found a large number of parents were not instructed on how to access the system, which decreased its effectiveness. Proper training will support the vetting process of strategies and help stakeholders see the advantages.

Advantages of Computer-Mediated Communication. There are several elements to consider when identifying the benefits of CMC. Parents might not be readily available to meet with teachers in person for a variety of reasons. Having the option to email allows for communication that otherwise might not be possible as voiced by multiple participants in a 2011 study (Williams & Sanchez, 2011). Some concerns arise because FTF communication interaction allows for the possibility of higher aggression. The practical use of CMC has been shown to lessen confrontation between parties (Yamat, 2013). This can be accentuated when people are uncomfortable voicing their opinions and concerns on the spot (Baralt & Gurzynski-Weiss, 2011). Having to respond immediately in FTF communication can lead to rash comments and decisions resulting in

more significant frustration. Taking time to formulate a response with less emotion and more objectivity can be a great advantage when working toward a resolution.

Accessibility is another advantage to consider with CMC. With the increasing availability of smartphones and improving technology, parents have greater access to email (Thompson, et al., 2015). Most teachers have direct access to email throughout the day enabling more opportunities for communication with parents. Technology has also increased the ease of finding email addresses to send direct messages (Thompson, 2008). There are also tools that allow for teachers to reach a large number of parents through the same message. These come in the form of phone calls, text messages, and emails. When parents receive these messages, they tend to listen or read it because they want to be informed (Olmstead, 2013). There are varying opinions with large-scale messages, partly due to parents receiving too many notifications and becoming desensitized (Parker III & Sparkman, 2008). Because of these advantages, there are several reasons that CMC is preferred over FTF communication.

Preferences for Computer-Mediated Communication. Email is the most widely used form of CMC according to data from multiple studies when parents and teachers engage in personal details about specific situations (Heath, et al., 2015; Thompson, et al., 2015; Zieger & Tan, 2012). In one study, parents prefer email five times as much as any other mode (Thompson, et al., 2015). Parents appreciate the use of email for several reasons. Many parents identified the speed and flexibility of email as a benefit as they did not have to physically wait for a reply from the teacher (Zieger & Tan, 2012). Parents can send a message, go about their day as normal, and receive information from staff with minimal disruption. Also, parents and teachers appreciate

being able to engage in ongoing communication without needing to physically meet
(Halsey, 2005). Another form of bi-directional communication that is rising in popularity
is the use of text messaging by phone. Some parents prefer this digital method when
speed is necessary as the message comes directly to their phone (Eden & Veksler, 2016).
Parents can communicate quickly with the teacher regarding the situation because of the
rapid notification abilities of the text message system. Parents identify other forms of
CMC they prefer when receiving generic information from the school.

There is a digital tool for nearly every type of communication that occurs in
education. Many districts utilize systems that enable mass communication of general
information to all students and parents. Multiple parents note the efficiency of this tool
for receiving news about upcoming events and weekly bulletins (Heath, et al., 2015; Can,
2016). In recent studies, parents who were automatically enrolled at the beginning of the
year into this type of system decided to continue receiving the notifications for the
remainder of the year (Can, 2016; Bergman & Rogers, 2016). While student
management systems are not a direct communication tool, it is important to discuss their
use and importance in providing information.

Parents are utilizing the various components of student management systems,
including digital grade books and attendance reports. While directly tied to internet and
resource accessibility, products like PowerSchool, Infinite Campus, and Skyward, to
name a few, are popular with some parents (Parker III & Sparkman, 2008). Parents can
find various information regarding student attendance, feedback on assignments, and
overall grade reports. If parents see something requiring additional information, they can
utilize FTF communication or CMC to begin the conversation with the teacher

(Campbell, et al., 2016). Parents who are taught how to use the system begin to understand the capabilities and how it can help them in tracking their child's progress. Because this information is regularly updated, parents can receive real-time information without having to initially consult with school personnel.

Blending Face to Face Communication and Computer-Mediated Communication

While the use of digital communication increases, FTF communication still has a place in education. In fact, several studies conclude that it is imperative to maintain use of multiple modes of communication to effectively reach as many stakeholders as possible (Meier & Lemmer, 2015; Eden & Veksler, 2016; Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Whether the reason is accessibility or personal preference, schools should not wholly abandon methods of communication without first identifying their effectiveness and overall use. Because of numerous barriers that are different for each, reaching 100% communication with everybody may not be possible. It was found that with using only telephones, teachers were able to have conversations with 54.1% of parents (Kraft & Rogers, 2014). While the other modes might not reach the remaining parents, teachers must make attempts with text messages or emails to reach as many as possible. To meet diverse needs, schools are utilizing a variety of tools from FTF communication and CMC, as well as continuing paper copy strategies to communicate with parents (Hornby & White, 2010; Meier & Lemmer, 2015).

Schools must keep attuned to the wants and needs of their parents. Research indicates that parents are not against new technology, but some prefer traditional methods (Campbell, et al., 2016). Some parents see a combination of FTF communication and email as an effective method. Email can be used to initiate the conversation followed by

a physical meeting for verbal and nonverbal cues and dialogue for closure to the situation (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Another benefit of using both is the ability to continue conversations when FTF communication is not possible, expanding communication as long as necessary (Eden & Veksler, 2016). This might include the use of text messages, online chatting tools, or email coupled with a telephone call before or after. Depending on the situation, there are a variety of options and reasons for their use.

Reasons for Communication

Three primary reasons for communication have been identified for this study. The first reason is information that is not tied to a personal issue with an individual student, including weekly announcements, upcoming events, or questions regarding an assignment. Multiple studies show that parents who utilize student management systems are not able to get some of this information, thus requiring additional contact from the teacher in the form of a phone call or email (Parker III & Sparkman, 2008; Thompson, et al., 2015; Thompson & Mazer, 2012). Further dialogue between parents and teachers via FTF communication or CMC can clarify these types of questions. Written communication has proven useful for information exchanges when message adaptation for individuals is not necessary (Thompson & Mazer, 2012), used for updates or nonemergency situations, or for items that need a simple yes or no answer (Olmstead, 2013). When looking at emailing general information, parents rate newsletters as the least effective of email when compared to late assignments, attendance, discipline matters, and good news (Parker III & Sparkman, 2008). Another study identifies an email as the primary tool of choice when compared to FTF communication, written communication or phone calls (Thompson & Mazer, 2012). CMC is primarily seen as an

adequate strategy for sharing nonspecific information. Communication of negative situations has a more definitive preference with parents.

When concerns arise in areas of negative student behavior and poor academic performance, parents and teachers desire bi-directional communication, which can occur through FTF communication and CMC (Olmstead, 2013). The need to engage in dialogue is necessary for helping the student move forward. Most parents want to have FTF communication in the form of physical meetings to discuss major concerns to fully interpret the severity of the problem (Thompson, et al., 2015; Thompson & Mazer, 2012; Yuen, 2007; Jacobs & Kritsonis, 2007). Other parents work through email or telephone in less severe situations and are comfortable with the quality of communication they receive in resolving the issue (Ferrara, 2009; Olmstead, 2013; Thompson, 2008; Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). When dealing with negative behaviors, there is a need for dialogue, and depending on the nature of the issue, this can be accomplished with various modes. Bi-directional communication has been shown to have an impact regarding negative situations (Bennett-Conroy, 2012).

The final reason for parent and teacher communication is to report on positive occurrences in the classroom. There is minimal research on the preferred methods of communicating positive behavior to parents, with a majority of studies focusing on negative behaviors. One study indicates that approximately half of the participating parents view email as an effective mode of communicating positive news (Parker III & Sparkman, 2008). A smaller percentage of parents agree that the school contacts them regarding positive academic performance (Meier & Lemmer, 2015). Another study illustrates minimal parent contact with the school, mostly communicating with teachers

when their child is in trouble or failing classes with even fewer conversations regarding

positive news (Ferrara, 2009). The reasons will guide the mode of communication, but

there are discrepancies between the perceptions of the parents and teachers regarding

their use.

Differences in Perception

There are two major differences between parents and teachers regarding modes of

communication. The first revolves around what they perceive the other individual to

prefer. Some parents prefer text messages and believe teachers are willing to use it

because of the technology enhancement and other advantages; some teachers hesitate to

give out their phone numbers, preferring to use professional means, such as school email

and telephones (Olmstead, 2013). In some schools, teachers use written forms with

parents because they believe that is the preference, while the parents do not include that

mode in their preference list (Palts & Kalmus, 2015). In other situations, teachers utilize

email when parents prefer the use of more traditional ways (Zieger & Tan, 2012). It is

also worth noting that teachers may use a particular method because they believe it is

more appropriate for the situation, but the parent has a definite preference for another

approach (Eden & Veksler, 2016). Identifying the purpose and preference is essential

with engaging parents and teachers in meaningful conversation. Even after

accomplishing this, it is imperative to communicate with parents.

A major complaint of parents is the lack of communication they receive from

their children's teachers. Parents report that some tools are used sparingly by teachers

and some who never communicate at all (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). In some cases,

teachers believe they communicate thoroughly using appropriate platforms, but parents

feel the communication they receive is inadequate (Cankar, Deutsch, & Sentocnik, 2012).

Bridging the communication gap is difficult if one party feels they are effective in their

methods and the individuals they are attempting to communicate with are feeling left out.

Email and telephone communication is also a challenge with unreturned messages, thus

nullifying the attempt at initiating dialogue (McKenna & Millen, 2013; Yuen, 2007;

Parker III & Sparkman, 2008). While there are a number of reasons this occurs, as

discussed in a previous section, educators must be conscientious of the practice of not

returning phone calls or emails and the negative perception it creates with parents. Focus

also needs to be given to the size of the school and if the primary participants were

teachers or parents.

Communication in Rural School Districts

Rural districts have multiple challenges that can limit parent and teacher

communication. A recent study indicates a significant difference between rural and

urban areas when it comes to availability of broadband Internet access. Urban areas

typically have two times greater access to lower download and upload speeds, which

balloons to ten times greater access with higher speeds (Beede & Neville, 2015).

Lessened access to high-speed broadband limits some CMC in rural areas. Access is not

limited only to computers. A recent Pew Survey shows that parents in rural areas use

their phones far less than their urban counterparts to text, access Internet, use mobile

email, download apps, and video chat (Duggan, 2013). It is important to determine who

has access to the tools and the impact that has on parental preference when it comes to

the different strategies (Diliberto & Staples, 2010). Improvements in technology are

increasing access across the nation, so it is important to study this dynamic of communication over time.

There are several factors relevant to rural areas that must also be considered. In a small community school, parents note that FTF communication is not possible with the challenges and extreme distances they must travel to get to the school; they must rely on CMC strategies (Palts & Kalmus, 2015). Parents from small communities often are employed in larger cities requiring them to commute. These parents are hard-pressed to physically visit the school during regular school hours because of their work schedule, requiring early or late meetings with staff (Thompson, et al., 2015). The dynamics of rural communities offer unique challenges that cannot be ignored when discussing communication. The participants of the study must also be taken into account when considering preferences and challenges.

Perspective of Parent or Teacher

Communication studies focus either on the teacher perspective or the parent perspective. There are many studies from the perspective of the teacher, as well as a large number from the parent perspective. Multiple studies reveal staff perspectives of parent and teacher communication strategies; these are typically a positive outlook of strategies currently in use (Palts & Kalmus, 2015; Hornby & White, 2010; Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). On the other hand, studies indicate parental desire or malcontent for the strategies that are or are not used, and a longing for the school to utilize methods the parents prefer (Heath, et al., 2015; Williams & Sanchez, 2011; Thompson & Mazer, 2012; Blau & Presser, 2013; Sheppard, 2017). Schools must take the time to find out what parents what from the schools regarding types of communication, putting aside

unfounded beliefs about what is or is not presently working in the school. Failure to do so could result in communication gaps and ultimately, parent frustration.

Summary

Understanding the modes of communication and their importance in education is vital in engaging parents with teachers. Identifying the purpose of the conversation will help both parties in determining the appropriate strategy. Research indicates that teachers and parents prefer specific modes for specific situations, mostly because of the advantages and disadvantages of FTF communication and CMC. Schools need to learn the preferences of parents and prepare teachers how to communicate effectively. Research should continue in this area, explicitly providing more data regarding communication in rural schools. Additional insight into the perception of parents should also be sought to increase effective communication between teachers and parents. This research will add to previous studies to give a current look at communication in rural schools.

METHODOLOGY

The literature on educational communication indicated several areas that swayed the parental opinion of specific communication strategies. Understanding the dynamics of rural districts and the availability of resources was important when it came to identifying parental preference of communication. While a parent may prefer a specific method, it might not be feasible because of physical or schedule limitations. Parents could also lack the appropriate technology needed for a method. School staff needed to work with parents as much as possible to utilize their preferred methods, even going so far as to create opportunities that were not previously available. While this study did not identify the actual barriers, it gave insight as to what parents preferred and guided staff to use those specific methods. Schools also should listen to their patrons, and make decisions with the parent perspective in mind.

Past research had been conducted on both the parents and the teachers. Studying the preference of all stakeholders was important as effective communication was achieved when both parties were informed. Teachers typically had the tools available to use all types of communication strategies, but they still showed preference to specific methods. Gathering this information from the parents was equally important as they played an essential role in communication.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

This study identified the preferences of rural parents regarding methods of communication from the school. The nature of the conversation was considered to ascertain if FTF communication or CMC were preferred when receiving general, negative, or positive information. Questions in the survey referenced current tools in use

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by the district. The data determined which of the tools were preferred by the parents with specific scenarios and answered the following research questions:

1. Which communication strategies do parents prefer for receiving general information from the school?

2. Which communication strategies do parents prefer for receiving negative information specific to their child from the school?

3. Which communication strategies do parents prefer for receiving positive information specific to their child from the school?

4. To what extent do parents prefer CMC to FTF communication strategies?

Research Design

A quantitative approach was used in this study to provide numerical data regarding communication tools. This design provided an opportunity to gather input from all parents in a short amount of time. The larger the participant base, the greater the representative sample of the district, which was important when making generalizations of preference in a community (Creswell, 2014). The purpose of the design was to learn more about the population, focusing solely on the trends of communication (Creswell, 2014).

The survey design was a Likert scale to collect preference data. The survey questions were designed for parents to determine if they strongly agreed, agreed, were undecided, disagreed or strongly disagreed with nine methods of communication. The communication methods included in the survey were written notes, teacher and school websites, physical meeting, telephone call, text message, student management system, email, social media, and automated phone or email system. Participants rated the nine

methods of communication for six different scenarios. The scenarios were designed to obtain perceptions directly related to each of the research questions.

Participants and Research Environment

The participants in the study were parents of students in a rural district. The setting was a Midwestern rural community with a school population of approximately 670 students, pre-school thru grade twelve. The community population, including the rural patronage, was estimated around 4300 and located in an agriculture area (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The vast majority of the citizens were Caucasian with the next highest percentage being American Indian according to an American Community Survey 5-Year estimate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). A high percentage of the citizens identified as not Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015).

The median household income was $47000 with a poverty rate slightly lower than the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Less than a quarter of the patrons had completed a post-secondary degree, with only 17.5% earning a bachelor's degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). There were some local businesses in the community which employed almost half of the working-age patrons, with most commuting more than fifteen minutes to their place of employment (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). The small community was approximately 35 miles away from the closest city, with the nearest town located 10 miles away.

The community itself was considered rural and is an ideal location for this study. The technology was available with the regional Internet and telephone providers. Mobile cellular coverage was adequate with a variety of companies and plans available. The community was actively involved with school programs, and classes were small enough

for teachers and parents to get to know each other. Many opportunities existed for regular interaction between teachers and parents in local businesses, churches, and community events. The study determined if this type of familiarity and closeness within a community had an impact on the mode of communication.

District leaders from the research district encouraged communication between teachers and parents and provided multiple methods and strategies. Building leaders required dialogue between parents and teachers through two scheduled physical meetings each year. Parents had access to a student management system for student academic progress, which was also tied to CMC methods. Staff had email access and were given contact information of the parents. During the enrollment process, parents were asked to submit their current address, phone numbers, and emails. The schools regularly emphasized the importance of communication with teachers and parents.

Teachers administered the surveys at the scheduled spring parent and teacher conference. The purpose of using this time was to reach as many parents as possible to achieve an all-encompassing view of parent perception, which was possible as conference participation was very high. The high participation rate in conferences itself was indicative of the communication tendencies between parents and teachers. While some meetings might have had elements of confrontation, the surveys themselves were approached as a separate component and not tied to the individual teachers. Results were not identifiable, affording parents the opportunity to be open about their communication preferences.

Data Collection Procedures and Analysis

Teachers and building leaders played a pivotal role in collecting the data. To ensure consistent communication with parents, staff were informed as to the purpose and method of the research. Training on use of the survey also occurred to ensure proper completion of the tool for accurate data collection. Also, staff was notified of how the information would be disseminated to the district.

Data collection occurred via a paper and pencil survey or Google Forms. Surveys were given to parents during the parent and teacher conferences event. The teachers were given written instructions, along with training to equip them to answer any parent questions. Computers were set up in the buildings as the primary option of completing the survey. Parents who had students in both buildings were encouraged to complete a survey for each building to represent their preferences for communication at both levels. Parents who did not attend their conferences had the opportunity to complete a paper survey. Parents left paper surveys with the building administration, which was delivered to the researcher. Paper surveys were then entered into the Google Form by the researcher for data analysis.

Participation was voluntary, and surveys were anonymous. Teachers and administrators encouraged the completion of the survey but parents did have the opportunity not to participate. The survey included verbiage indicating that completion indicated participant consent to contribute to the research. Parents provided an answer to all components of the Google Form; submission could not occur if any parts were left unanswered. If a parent wanted to leave the study, they could exit the form, and it would not be submitted. The same could be done with the paper surveys.

Data analysis was performed on all communication methods for each of the questions. Each level of the Likert scale was assigned a numerical value; i.e., strongly agree was a one, agree, was a two, undecided was a three, disagree was a four, and strongly disagree was a five. The average value of each communication method was calculated. The lowest average value of the methods for each question indicated the preferred method of communication for each question. For example, a value of 1.25 showed a higher preference than a value of 2.25. The methods were analyzed by comparing the averages of each method across the six questions. Preferences for the method could change depending on the nature of the communication. This was evident if the average values for a method changed with each question.

Summary

The data indicated the preference of parents about communication methods. The Likert scale allowed the participants to identify how they preferred the school to contact them with general, negative, and positive information. Focusing this study in a community provided insight as to the tools the parents in the region wished to use. District leaders used the data from this research to inform staff of the popular methods to greater improve parent and teacher communication.

FINDINGS

The surveys of communication preferences were administered at the scheduled spring parent and teacher conference. A total of 188 surveys were completed by parents from the high school and elementary/middle school buildings. A majority of the questionnaires completed by the Kindergarten thru 8th-grade level parents were entered directly into the Google Form, while a majority of parents at the high school filled out the paper surveys. Additional paper copies were mailed to parents who did not take the survey during conferences, but there was minimal response. The paper copies were entered into the Google Form to compile the data.

The kindergarten thru 8th-grade teachers helped collect 112 surveys out of 227 households, acquiring feedback from 49% of the parents. Out of the 182 families at the high school, 76 surveys were submitted, resulting in a 40% completion rate. Data analysis was completed using tables and calculations in Microsoft Excel.

Data from both buildings were considered to show the preference for the different age groups. The research data showed some preference for all nine of the communication strategies, but some methods were preferred over others when taking into consideration the purpose of the communication. What follows are the result tables and written explanations indicating the number of participants and their preference for each strategy in the six scenarios. Findings are organized according to the purpose of the communication, general information, negative feedback, and positive feedback.

Communicating General Information

The first two scenarios represented communication that was general in nature. This included, but was not limited to, news about upcoming events, classroom or building

activities, and information about projects or assignments for all students. The

information would not be specific to any individual students, however could be time

sensitive. The results showed some similarities between the different grade levels.

When parents were asked, "When the school communicates with me about

upcoming school events, classroom news, etc., I wish to receive information via...", they

mainly wanted direct communication. As seen in Table 1, the K-8 parents identified a

text message as their top choice with a mean score of 1.72, with email and a mean of 1.87

a close second. Phone calls, both from teachers and the automated calling system, were

acknowledged as the third and fourth choices, with a written note from the teacher as the

fifth option. A physical meeting and social media were the least favored methods for this

group of parents. The mean values could range from 1.00 to 5.00, with 1.00 being a more

favorable method.

Table 1

Summary of Parent Communication Preferences for General Information

Communication Format	Grades K-8 (n = 112) M	Grades 9-12 (n = 76) M
A written note	2.16	2.93
Teacher/school website	2.63	2.75
Physical meeting	3.03	3.08
Telephone call	2.12	2.16
Text message	1.72	1.76
Skyward	2.68	2.72
Email	1.87	1.71
Social media	3.10	3.09
Automated call/email	2.12	1.82

The preferences of the high school parents were similar. As indicated in Table 1, these parents desired to receive a text message with a mean of 1.76, but overall wanted the information through an email with a mean of 1.71. The automated phone call scored a mean of 1.82, while a telephone call came in fourth with a mean of 2.16. While some parents wanted social media notification or a physical meeting, these two methods were last on the list with averages of 3.09 and 3.08, respectively.

The results for the second question were similar to the first scenario results. The second question focused on communication from individual teachers that was still not individual specific. Parents responded to the question, "When a teacher wants to communicate about general information like field trips, deadlines for projects/work, etc. that is not academic specific to my child, I wish to receive the information via…" and all methods to some extent were preferred as indicated in Table 2. For the K-8 parents, emails were the most preferred method with a mean of 1.81 and text messages were the next popular with a 1.91 average. Written notes from the teacher finished third with a 2.06 mean. The least preferred methods were social media, a physical meeting, and the website.

Table 2

Summary of Parent Communication Preferences for General Information such as Field

Trips and Deadlines for Projects/Work

Communication Format	Grades K-8 (n = 112) M	Grades 9-12 (n = 76) M
A written note	2.06	2.83
Teacher/school website	2.85	2.96
Physical meeting	3.27	3.21
Telephone call	2.46	2.38
Text message	1.91	1.95
Skyward	2.88	2.87
Email	1.81	1.72
Social media	3.28	3.24
Automated call/email	2.12	1.82

Similarly, high school parents preferred emails and text messages with respective averages of 1.72 and 1.95. These parents also chose social media, physical meetings, and websites as least preferred methods of communication. Data from the general questions showed a preference for several strategies.

The first research question asked which communication strategies parents preferred for receiving general information from the school. According to the data, parents at both levels favored the use of text messages and emails. Some parents of K-8 students also wanted direct notes from the school, while high school parents did not show interest in this method. All parents also viewed the automated calling and email system favorably in this scenario. The results of the third and fourth scenarios varied from the first two scenarios.

Communication of Negative Information

The third and fourth scenarios depicted situations in which the teacher needed to share information with the parent regarding poor academic work or negative student behavior. Information could be adequately shared in any of the scenarios, but the data indicated several highly favored methods. The third question prompted parents to consider preferences when receiving feedback on academic progress.

When asked, "When a teacher wants to communicate negative information about my child's school work, I wish to receive the information via…", parents again indicated similar preferences in Table 3. With a mean of 1.79, parents of K-8 students preferred the teachers speak with them over the phone. A physical meeting and email also had low mean values of 2.04 and 2.05 and came in second and third respectively. The least preferred methods were social media (M=3.90), teacher websites (M=3.58), and the student management system (M=3.29).

Table 3

Summary of Parent Communication Preferences for Poor Academic Performance

Communication Format	Grades K-8 (n = 112) M	Grades 9-12 (n = 76) M
A written note	2.38	2.79
Teacher/school website	3.58	3.55
Physical meeting	2.04	2.03
Telephone call	1.79	2.05
Text message	2.43	2.41
Skyward	3.29	3.28
Email	2.05	1.95
Social media	3.90	4.00
Automated call/email	3.22	3.24

High school parents desired to receive an email, with a mean of 1.95, for poor academic performance, but it was closely followed by a physical meeting (M=2.03) and a phone call (M=2.05). This group also did not want to hear about poor academic performance through social media (M=4.00) or the teacher website (M=3.55). Preferred methods for communicating negative student behaviors were similar.

Parents indicated the desire to speak directly with the teacher when it came to matters of student behavior as shown in Table 4. When asked about the teacher communicating their child's negative behavior in school, K-8 parents wished to receive the information via a telephone call or physical meeting. Averages for the two methods were 1.78 and 1.89, respectively. Emails (M=2.13) and a written note (M=2.25) were the third and fourth most favored methods. The least preferred strategies for this scenario were social media (M=3.91), teacher websites (M=3.58), and Skyward (M=3.45).

Table 4

Summary of Parent Communication Preferences for Negative Student Behavior

Communication Format	Grades K-8 (n = 112) M	Grades 9-12 (n = 76) M
A written note	2.25	2.72
Teacher/school website	3.58	3.57
Physical meeting	1.89	1.78
Telephone call	1.78	1.83
Text message	2.53	2.39
Skyward	3.45	3.42
Email	2.13	2.14
Social media	3.91	4.11
Automated call/email	3.32	3.36

High school parents also wanted a telephone call from the teacher (M=1.83) but were more in favor of physical meetings (M=1.78). An email was a distant third with a mean of 2.14 with text messages ranked fourth favored (M=2.39). Just as with negative academic conversations, parents did not want information through social media (M=4.11), websites (M=3.57), or the student management system (M=3.42). Parents mostly desired methods that allowed bi-directional communication.

The second research question focused on parents most preferred strategies when they received negative information about their child. The two groups identified a telephone call or email as two of the top strategies in both scenarios, but they also desired physical meetings as well. These strategies provided the opportunity for in-depth conversations regarding the issue. The last scenarios focused on the communication of positive news.

Communication of Positive Information

The final scenarios centered on the sharing of quality academic work and positive student behaviors. Conversations might include high scores on a test, a well-organized project, going above and beyond classroom expectations, witnessed empathy toward peers, or kindness and respect shown to others. Parents preferred similar methods for this type of communication.

When K-8 parents were questioned on their preferred methods for teacher communication regarding positive feedback about their child's specific academic work, four strategies were highly favored as indicated in Table 5. The most favored was a written note from the teacher, which had a mean of 1.89. Emails, telephone calls, and text messages followed close behind with means of 2.01, 2.06, and 2.07 respectively.

Social media (M=3.45), Skyward (M=3.17), and websites (M=3.00) were again ranked as the least liked methods.

Table 5

Summary of Parent Communication Preferences for Positive Feedback on Student Work

Communication Format	Grades K-8 (n = 112) M	Grades 9-12 (n = 76) M
A written note	1.89	2.37
Teacher/school website	3.00	3.30
Physical meeting	2.53	2.68
Telephone call	2.06	2.16
Text message	2.07	2.07
Skyward	3.17	3.20
Email	2.01	1.88
Social media	3.45	3.68
Automated call/email	3.17	3.05

High school parents largely preferred email (M=1.88) over text messages (M=2.07) and telephone calls (M=2.16). Some parents indicated interest in receiving written notes from teachers for news about positive work (M=2.33). Social media (M=3.68), website (M=3.30), and Skyward (M=3.20) were the least favored strategies. Results were similar for both groups with the final question.

When asked about notification of positive student behaviors, parents wanted direct lines of communication as indicated in Table 6. With a mean of 1.93, written notes were the most favored, followed by email (M=2.00), text message (M=2.04), and a phone call (M=2.10), as chosen by the K-8 parents. Social media (M=3.39), Skyward (M=3.14), and website (M=3.12) were once again the least preferred.

Table 6

Summary of Parent Communication Preferences for Positive Student Behavior

Communication Format	Grades K-8 (n = 112) M	Grades 9-12 (n = 76) M
A written note	1.93	2.33
Teacher/school website	3.12	3.32
Physical meeting	2.56	2.64
Telephone call	2.10	2.09
Text message	2.04	2.09
Skyward	3.14	3.26
Email	2.00	1.80
Social media	3.39	3.62
Automated call/email	3.09	3.04

The high school parents chose email as the most preferred (M=1.80) with a text message and telephone call second preferred, both with means of 2.09. Social media was least preferred with a mean of 3.62, preceded by websites (M=3.32) and Skyward (M=3.26).

The third research question dealt with FTF communication versus CMC methods in regards to positive news. Parents at the lower grade levels preferred a written note, which is not direct FTF communication. It was, however, not a CMC method as it did not require the use of technology. The high school parents picked email as the top strategy, which was a CMC method. CMC strategies, such as social media, student management systems, websites, and automated calling and emailing systems, were the least preferred methods. Parents viewed bi-directional communication strategies, telephone calls and text messages, favorably. A large number of parents agreed with receiving the

information in a physical meeting, but they liked it less than other methods. Parents

chose a mixture of FTF communication and CMC when receiving positive news.

Computer-Mediated Communication Versus Face to Face Communication

Parents from both buildings regularly favored CMC to FTF communication in

most situations. When parents and teachers needed to communicate about negative

issues, parents preferred to use the more traditional FTF communications, telephone calls

and physical meetings. In all other scenarios, physical meetings were not near as favored

as the other methods. Telephone calls, which allowed for many FTF communication

cues, were consistently at the top of the lists for both groups. Written notes, considered

an FTF communication, were identified as a desired method in the lower grade levels for

communicating positive behaviors and academic work, as well as general information for

all students. Face to face communication was preferred in a couple of scenarios. Some

CMC methods were heavily favored, while others were regularly ranked toward the

bottom of the list.

Although there are limits to CMC communication methods, email was selected by

parents of all ages as a highly preferred method of communication for all six scenarios.

Text messages, with the exception of negative situations, were also viewed as a highly

favorable strategy in both groups. On the other hand, parents regularly ranked social

media toward the bottom of the list of methods along with teacher and school websites

and the student management system. The automated calling and emailing system were

seen as a beneficial strategy when communicating general information for all students,

but not for any other scenarios. All things considered, parents regularly chose email and

texting, both CMC strategies, as preferred methods for communicating with teachers.

Summary

Participants chose specific strategies depending on the situation and the purpose of communication. For negatively toned conversations, the data indicated a desire for FTF communication over CMC, commensurate with other studies (Thompson, et al., 2015; Thompson & Mazer, 2012; Yuen, 2007; Jacobs & Kritsonis, 2007). Some parents viewed CMC strategies as beneficial in this situation, but only to the extent of those having bi-directional capabilities, such as email and text messages. Several CMC strategies were viewed favorably in all conditions, but most were favored in some cases but not others. While parents had clear favorites, there was not 100% consensus on any one method. It is also important to note that at least one participant identified they strongly agreed or agreed with every method for all scenarios.

CONCLUSIONS

The study of parental preference toward the different communication methods revealed a need to continue using multiple strategies to satisfy parent need. Depending on the scenario, parents favored CMC strategies in some situations and wanted FTF communication in others. While some methods were more desired than others, none of the methods lacked a supporter. Therefore, it should be stated that none of the methods could be completely removed as options because at least one participant wanted to receive the information using that method.

Summary of the Findings

Effective communication required engaged parties to actively participate in the process. There were many different means of communicating, and it was important for teachers to employ methods that parents supported. This quantitative study allowed parents to select their preference of all methods, not just identify their top choice. It was found that there is a wide range of decisions made on what to use and when. Ultimately, the reason for the communication played a major role in what the parents chose.

The strategy used was dependent upon the purpose of the communication, as became apparent in the study. Text messages, telephone calls, and emails were identified as preferred choices for general, negative, and positive informational purposes, but physical meetings and handwritten notes were also highly favored with negative scenarios. Parents indicated CMC strategies, such as automated calling and emailing systems, was desirable for general information situations, but not for the other scenarios. After analyzing the data and reviewing previous research, there were distinct patterns to the preferences.

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Interpretations and Implications

Parents provided important feedback that staff and administration should consider when working to enhance communication. While the results showed highly preferred choices, they indicated there were no unanimous decisions in which some strategies should never be used. If schools want to have effective communication with all parents, they must analyze the situation and utilize the strategies identified in the study as the most conducive. Even then, staff may have to occasionally use less preferred strategies to ensure that everyone receives the message. School administrators should also be cognizant of the results and not demand an inordinate amount of time be spent on strategies favored by the fewest parents.

General Communication. When receiving general information, parents identified multiple methods they wanted to see used. The data showed the use of CMC was sufficient for quite a few parents. Prior studies found that parents had questions and were unable to get clarification when they received an automated telephone call (Parker III & Sparkman, 2008; Thompson, et al., 2015; Thompson & Mazer, 2012). While it was not the top choice, the low average indicated there were a large number of parents at both levels who recognized the usefulness of the tool. Therefore, teachers who used this method have successfully shared information and should continue to utilize the method with future opportunities. Email dominated the strategies in this section.

Parents preferred an email to the convenience of most of the other strategies. In this setting, email was available for all teachers and must have been regularly used given the results of the survey. Previous research found that parents preferred email because it was flexible and dialogue could answer any questions (Thompson, et al., 2015; Zieger &

Tan, 2012). This survey showed a similar interest. Text messages offered similar capabilities but encompassed additional challenges.

While text messages were preferred by the parents, school cell phones were not an option in this setting. While some teachers used this method, it was not known to what extent. Even though parents wanted this method, teachers had to use their cell phones which required them to put their private lives at the mercy of the general public. Teachers could quickly communicate with parents and have some convenience similar to mass communication with group texts, which was also viewed favorably in other studies (Eden & Veksler, 2016). While the building administrators could require teachers to communicate, they could not force them to use their personal property. That would be a choice of the employee unless the school found the means to supply teachers with a business cell phone. Even though this method had a low average, the data indicated some parental disagreement to using a text message. The study did not determine the extent of cell phone availability to parents so these could be because they lack the resource. If this was the case, this could not be the sole method used for these first two scenarios. Attention should also be given to the use of social media and school websites.

While the overall preference was lower for communication through teacher websites, some parents still favored their use. The district made websites available and trained staff in setting them up for public and student use. Given everyday demands, this use of this tool could be subject to teacher time and preference as to how often it was updated. Parents did indicate interest in using websites, but it was not a popular choice which begs the question of how efficient websites are when looking at the amount of time it took for upkeep. The focus changed with the negative situations.

Negative Communication. When faced with negative circumstances, parents preferred more FTF communication. The top choice was a phone call for the lower grade parents and a physical meeting or call for the high school parents. Earlier research indicated that parents appreciated the opportunity to engage in dialogue about the situation without having to wait for answers through CMC (Yamat, 2013). A phone conversation, which was the most preferred for K-8 parents in both negative scenarios and the high school parents for negative work discussions, confirmed prior studies in their level of importance. The high school parents chose a physical meeting in negative behavior situations, which also followed previous studies that claimed FTF communication allowed participants to understand the severity of the problem and not have any misunderstandings (Mays, 2016; Baralt & Gurzynski-Weiss, 2011). There were some parents who did not want a telephone call, according to the survey results. The teachers only had access to phones in the office in both schools, which hampered the use of this method. Given the averages of phone preference, the administration should look into making phones available for all staff. Emails were a widely accepted method in the negative scenarios.

While emails were not the top choice in these scenarios, their averages implied that a large number of parents agreed with its use. Used for initiating conversations (Thompson & Mazer, 2012) or because a physical meeting is not an immediate possibility (Eden & Veksler, 2016), emails satisfied parents of both groups. There were still pockets of parents at both levels who did agree with the use of email for this type of communication. Several methods had higher averages because they were not preferred by parents.

Social media and websites were again the least preferred methods. The public nature of these methods did not allow for specific conversations without the use of other methods, which made the sharing of sensitive information difficult. There were still parents who did agree with using these methods, but if used would need to conform with privacy laws to protect individuals. Because there was some parental approval for all methods, teachers must take time to determine individual preference to ensure productive communication with all parents. Preferred methods for positive conversations centered on emails and written notes.

Positive Communication. For the positive scenarios lower grade level parents wanted teachers to share information through written notes, a common practice in this building. While written notes did not allow for dialogue, a response is not typically expected with positive news. The personal nature of a note showed parents that the teacher appreciated the work or behavior of the student enough to share it. Although they take time, the surveys showed that teachers should make the extra effort to write positive notes to students and parents. Similar to writing notes, email was the preference for the high school parents.

The mean difference between emails and text messages or phone calls was rather significant with high school parents in this scenario, even taking into account the number of parents who disagreed. The data from this study followed similar research that showed email as the most popular method of CMC (Heath, et al., 2015; Thompson, et al., 2015; Zieger & Tan, 2012). The school provided teachers with this resource and encouraged parent use by collecting parent email addresses and updated them throughout

the year. Text messages and phone calls were also encouraged and should be utilized as well.

The use of phones for calls and text messages proved to be a popular choice for parents and communicating positive news. Again, the lack of this technology created challenges for teachers who chose not to use personal phones, which were more convenient. Although they were not the top choice in all scenarios, these methods were consistently preferred and should be considered for all types of conversations. As in the other scenarios, there was not a method not favored by all parents so care should be taken to utilize as many methods as possible.

The parents indicated a preference for both FTF communication and CMC depending on the scenario. While some methods were more favored than others, any plans to discontinue use could result in some parents not receiving information according to their preference. If this were the case, staff must work with parents to educate them on methods other teachers found useful. Administrators determined to add additional communication tools should only entertain those that are capable of successfully replacing current tools to lessen teacher choice.

Limitations of the Study

The lack of information from the participants limited the ability to generalize reasons for parental preference. For example, parents without resources might have preferred CMC methods but indicated otherwise. If parents were questioned about the availability and knowledge of the different methods, replies could have been separated accordingly for a clearer picture of why specific methods were preferred. Also, the study did not identify if parents understood the true capabilities of the methods, thus making a

decision not knowing how it could be used. That information would have allowed additional separation of the data and greater analysis. Another limitation was the knowledge of parent availability for FTF communication.

According to community demographics, a large number of parents worked outside of the community (Gallup, Inc., 2013). Parents not in the community during the day were unable to go to the building for FTF communication and thus relied on CMC strategies. The research did not indicate if parents choose what they currently used or preferred. If parents were able to leave comments, the researcher could have used that information to provide insight as to their choices. Because the study focused solely on quantitative data, generalizations were difficult to pinpoint.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study revealed the need for educators to maintain a variety of communication methods. Additional research should include data on parent understanding and access to the different strategies. Once those limits are realized, attention should be given as to how to overcome them and make communication more effective and efficient. Reoccurring training might be needed for teachers and parents, as well as knowledge of potential tool sources for those without the proper technologies. This was not possible through this study's design, but it was determined there was not an overreaching method for all types of communication.

The diversity of communication methods is equivalent to the multitude of reasons teachers and parents need to engage in conversations. As seen in this study, parental preference changed with the scenario because of the need of better FTF communication cues or the convenience of CMC. While there may never be methods that fully satisfy

both types, it would be helpful for the development of methods that allow for increased

blending of FTF communication and CMC to meet all preferences. Future research

should focus on elements that make some methods more desirable than others and

concentrate on fulfilling those needs with fewer strategies.

Concluding Remarks

While this research did not completely answer the question as to which type of

communication was preferred, it allowed parents to give their feedback on current

practice. Because parents showed preference toward all of the methods throughout the

survey, the district should not abandon any methods without making sure parents are

educated on other options. Likewise, teachers should be trained on which strategies

should and should not be used for different scenarios. There are no right or wrong times

to use certain methods, but teachers should utilize those identified in this study as highly

preferred to increase the probability of successful communication. In the end, effective

communication occurs when parents are informed. If direct contact is not made to

ascertain individual preference, utilizing this study will help staff in choosing the

appropriate communication method.

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APPENDICES

Appendix

A   Instructions for Data Collection

B   School Communication Survey

C   IRB Informed Consent Approval

APPENDIX A

Instructions for Data Collection

The purpose of this survey is to identify your personal preference for the different

methods of school communication. Please follow these steps to complete the survey.

1. Check the box if you give your consent to take part in the study. This is a

   required task, and your survey cannot be submitted without it.

2. For each question, there are nine methods that must be answered. Each

   method requires an answer.

3. Indicate whether you strongly agree, agree, are neutral, disagree, or strongly

   disagree with each of the methods.

4. There are six questions in all.

5. When finished, click the submit button located at the bottom of the survey.

APPENDIX B

School Communication Survey

Choose the response that best matches your feelings toward each of the communication methods for the following questions.

☐ By checking this box, I consent to take part in this research. I understand that my participation is voluntary and my answers will be anonymous.

1. When the school communicates with me about upcoming school events, classroom news, etc., I wish to receive information via...					
A written note	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teacher/school website	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Physical meeting	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Telephone call	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Text message	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Skyward	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Automated call/email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

2. When a teacher wants to communicate about general information like field trips, deadlines for projects/work, etc. that is not academic specific to my child, I wish to receive the information via...					
A written note	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teacher/school website	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Physical meeting	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Telephone Call	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Text message	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Skyward	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Automated call/email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

3. When a teacher wants to communicate negative information about my child's school work, I wish to receive the information via ...					
A written note	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teacher/school website	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Physical meeting	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Telephone call	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Text message	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Skyward	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Automated call/email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

4. When a teacher wants to communicate about my child's negative behavior in school, I wish to receive the information via...					
A written note	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teacher/school website	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Physical meeting	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Telephone call	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Text message	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Skyward	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Automated call/email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

5. When a teacher wants to communicate positive feedback about my child's specific academic school work, I want to receive the information via...					
A written note	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teacher/school website	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Physical meeting	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Telephone call	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Text message	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Skyward	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Automated call/email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

6. When the teacher wants to communicate about my child's positive behavior in school, I wish to receive the information via...					
A written note	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Teacher/school website	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Physical meeting	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Telephone call	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

Text message	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Skyward	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Social media	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Automated call/email	Strongly Agree	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

APPENDIX C

IRB Informed Consent Approval

FORT HAYS STATE UNIVERSITY

Forward thinking. World ready.

OFFICE OF SCHOLARSHIP AND SPONSORED PROJECTS

DATE: December 14, 2017

TO: Andrew Albright, EdS
FROM: Fort Hays State University IRB

STUDY TITLE: [1167429-1] Effective Means of Communication in
Rural Schools
IRB REFERENCE #:   18-063
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS
DECISION DATE: December 14, 2017

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category # 2

Thank you for your submission of New Project materials for this research study. The departmental human subjects research committee and/or the Fort Hays State University IRB/IRB Administrator has determined that this project is EXEMPT FROM IRB REVIEW according to federal regulations.

Please note that any changes to this study may result in a change in exempt status. Any changes must be submitted to the IRB for review prior to implementation. In the event of a change, please follow the Instructions for Revisions at http://www.fhsu.edu/academic/gradschl/irb/.

The IRB administrator should be notified of adverse events or circumstances that meet the definition of unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects. See http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/policy/AdvEvntGuid.htm.

We will put a copy of this correspondence on file in our office. Exempt studies are

not subject to continuing review.

If you have any questions, please contact Leslie Paige at lpaige@fhsu.edu or 785-628-4349. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.