PARENTAL NEEDS AND EXPECTATIONS OF SCHOOL-HOME COMMUNICATION IN A CHILD’S PREPARATORY YEAR OF SCHOOL

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Abstract

Parental involvement has been consistently recognised as an influential factor in a child’s education. Communication between school and home has become an important component in facilitating positive relationships between schools and families. While there has been significant research on the expectations of parents in this area prior to and during school transition, there is a lack of research into parental expectations of communication following the commencement of school.

This study investigated the needs and expectations of 21 parents of preparatory students, about school-home communication. Data were collected using questionnaires and interviews and descriptive analyses were used to explore parental views about the methods used by the school to communicate with parents. Parents more frequently accessed school diaries, newsletters, written reports and parent-teacher interviews. The informal methods of communication were less frequently accessed. The frequency of access to different methods of communication did not necessarily reflect parent perceptions of their usefulness: the format of both written reports and parent-teacher interviews were challenged.

The results demonstrate the diversity of parental needs and expectations of school-home communication. It is recommended that schools provide a wide variety of communication methods, and that these methods are regularly reviewed in consultation with the school community.

Introducing the Study

"To encourage teamwork between teachers and parents, it is important for faculty to understand what families want to hear, the forms of interaction they prefer and the caliber of collaboration they desire" (Freytag, 2001, p.3).

It has been widely acknowledged that parental involvement can play a significant role in the success of children at school. Benefits include increased academic results (Fabian, 2002; Wolfendale, 1992), more regular completion of homework, more positive attitudes towards school (Freytag, 2001), increased socio-emotional development (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), 1997), and wider benefits such as increased social responsibility and democracy (Johansson, 2001; Spaggiari 1998).

Parental involvement is particularly important as children commence school. One of the major challenges children face in their early years is the transition from preschool to primary school (Johansson, 2002, Margetts, 2000). At this time the children
make important conclusions about school and themselves as learners (Bailey, 1999). Parents are the one constant element in this important time of change and their involvement can lead to children making faster progress (Fabian, 2002). In fact, a child’s transition is largely influenced by the nature of adult participation (Dockett & Perry, 1999). Successful communication has been described as a key component of effective collaboration between parents and schools as children begin school (Dockett & Perry, 2001; Fabian, 2002).

Effective collaboration is important during the transition to school, but must also continue as a child progresses through their first year of schooling. If communication is introduced in a positive way in the preparatory year then parents may continue to have significant relationships as their children progress through school (Fleet, Patterson & Garret, 2001). Allen et al. went as far as to suggest that communication was so important ‘...parents evaluated teachers on the basis of their communication practices...' (Allen, Thompson, Hoadley & Engelking, 1997, p.30). Despite the wealth of research about both school transition and communication practices between home and school, communication specific to the preparatory year remains barely addressed in the literature. In response, this paper presents information about a study that investigated the needs and expectations of a group of parents about communication from their child’s school during the preparatory year. While reciprocal communication is an important component of successful parent-teacher relationships (Hughes & MacNaughton, 1999a and 1999b), this study will concentrate on one component of this two-way process: communication from school to home.

The Study

In order to identify parental needs and expectations of communication during a child’s first year of school, the following research questions were identified:

- How frequently do parents access the different methods of communication employed by the school?
- How useful do parents find these methods of communication?

Participants were parents of children who were completing their third term of the first year at a Victorian, metropolitan, co-educational, independent school. The target school had recently implemented initiatives designed to improve school-home communication that included a new online reporting system to allow parents regular updates on their child’s progress, increased documentation on display around the school, and parent forum evenings. Despite these initiatives, an independent survey in 2000 found that communication remained a priority issue for parents in the school.

This descriptive study used a mixed method approach, employing both questionnaires and interviews to gather information. In the use of the mixed method approach, this study used ‘methodological triangulation’ which validates interview and conversational data by the use of more than one collection method (Flick, 1998; Hitchcock & Hughes, 1995). All parents whose children were completing the preparatory year were invited to participate. The 21 respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire requesting feedback on the methods of communication they found most useful. Questionnaires were employed in this study to offer a ‘...reliably consistent presentation of items’ (Cates, 1985, p.97), affording all parents the opportunity to respond to exactly the same questions. Participants were given the option of anonymity but were invited to make themselves identifiable to the researcher if they were willing to also participate in a focus group interview. Due to the small number of respondents, individual interviews were conducted with all six volunteers to enrich the data provided in questionnaires (Miles & Huberman, 1994).
Presentation and Discussion of Results

In questionnaires, parents were asked to indicate how frequently they accessed each method of communication used by the school ('frequently', 'sometimes' or 'never') and how useful they found each of the methods of communication currently in place ('useful', 'not useful' or 'don't know'). Results from these questionnaires are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - Communication methods accessed by parents and their usefulness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Usefulness</th>
<th>Frequency of Access</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Useful</td>
<td>Not Useful</td>
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<td></td>
<td>n</td>
<td>%</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Diary</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal conversations</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom displays</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Written reports</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Newsletter</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent-Teacher Interviews</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information nights</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Discussion forums</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone conversations</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email to/from staff</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College intranet</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>57</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online reporting</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>48</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prep Web Page</td>
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*Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Verbal Communication

Verbal methods of communication, including parent-teacher interviews, informal conversation, information nights and discussion forums were rated as useful by 71-100% of parents, but were attended frequently by as few as 19%.

All 21 questionnaire respondents rated opportunities for informal conversations with staff as 'useful.' Primary school parents are more likely to have 'classroom door' conversations with teachers than in secondary schools (Cutts & Stokes, 2000), however only 13 parents indicated in the questionnaire that they frequently engaged in informal conversations with staff. During interviews, the use of informal parent teacher conversations emerged as the most preferred method of communication. Parents explained that conversation provided superior information to written communication:

"Written reports give you a certain amount of information but you can't beat personal conversation and I wonder how people who aren't in regularly feel about the information they've got."
"Reading notes in the diaries and school communication and stuff...I skim and then I miss things. I try to find things out verbally."

One parent explained that this was because teachers were more ‘open’ during informal conversations than any other method of communication:

"...I think that’s the pinnacle of communication, frankly. You always find out the most interesting and informative stuff in informal conversation... because people are less guarded."

Interestingly, Cuttance & Stokes also found that parents believed informal conversations with teachers provided more truthful feedback than written reports. Parents felt teachers were cautious about what they recorded in writing, preferring to discuss in person those things that were considered difficult or contentious (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000).

Some parents expressed uncertainty about informal conversation, with one parent explaining that she was not sure when to approach the teacher:

"... it’s so hard to fit in. I don’t know what your schedules are, you guys are always so busy..."

Similarly, other parents requested more access to informal conversations with teachers:

"I would love to have more of an ‘every month’, maybe even if we are allocated ten minutes for the week."

Parent-teacher interviews are the other avenue for one-on-one conversation between parents and teachers. They were attended frequently by a larger percentage of parents (81%), and were described as useful by 90%. During interviews, one parent suggested that they were a good introduction at the beginning of the year, and on an ongoing basis if the child was experiencing difficulties:

"I love the interviews. I think they’re a great opportunity, especially at the beginning of the year and if there’s any problems."

More common, however, was dissatisfaction with parent teacher interviews amongst interviewees. Concerns were repeatedly expressed about the brevity of interviews, a finding very common throughout the literature worldwide (Allen et al., 1997; Cuttance & Stokes, 2000; Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000; Weiss et al., 1998)

"They’re not long enough... you feel like you’re almost intruding on the teacher as soon as you walk in because she’s doing the catch-up."

"Look, I must admit, I always found that they’re too short. I know it’s hard because you’ve got so many parents to see..."

Parents spoke about their frustrations at not getting what they wanted during the brief periods allocated:

"What is happening at the moment is a real let down...I didn’t hear what I wanted to hear, I didn’t ask what I wanted to ask..."
"...the parent has so much to ask but you just feel so pressured that you forget!"

While brevity was a major limitation of parent-teacher interviews, a second issue raised was a perceived lack of structure. Previous research has identified time limitations as one reason the interview did not provide the necessary components for both parents and teachers (Atkin & Bastiani, 1998; Wolfendale, 1992), a problem consistent in the current study, but parents also raised a lack of teacher skill as facilitators as a significant issue:

"It's like any meeting... You've got some good facilitators and you have some really shitty ones ..."

"...they're not structured in any way, shape or form. There is no set way of doing a parent-teacher interview..."

Parents made a number of suggestions about how to improve parent-teacher interviews. The most common request was for a longer duration:

"...I would appreciate a bit more time..."

"It's that ten minutes. It's probably better a little bit longer. If you're able to do that I don't know."

They were sensitive to demands on the teacher's time and increased flexibility with regard to the time allocated for interviews was recommended. One parent suggested that the duration of the interviews should vary, depending on the amount of discussion required:

"...I know that time constraints are a factor but I would like them to be longer. If need be. Not always, but if need be."

The importance of holding parent-teacher interviews at all for parents who had other opportunities to speak with their child's teacher was also questioned:

"...for a lot of people that's their only chance to have one on one conversation with their kid's teacher so I guess they have to continue them...I can see, for working parents, they'd still want their interviews, but for me..."

"...I don't think they provide anything that I don't already have when I come to an interview and if it wasn't for (child's father) wanting to come, I probably wouldn't even make a time."

While conversations and interviews provided an opportunity for parents to speak individually with their child's teacher, information nights and discussion forums catered for groups of parents and teachers. During information nights teachers explained matters specific to class groups, whereas forums encouraged a non-hierarchical discussion about current events and issues. While 71-90% of parents described these methods as useful, they were generally not well attended. Parents appreciated information nights that were held at the beginning of the year because it gave them a chance to meet with parents who shared similar anxieties:
"Yes, they're quite useful because sometimes it's just nice to think that other parents are feeling the same way as yourself..."

"The very beginning ones were excellent because it's when people have the bulk of their questions, concerns, issues."

Parents felt that the value of information nights and forums depended on the relevance of the topic and time of the year:

"Things like information nights and discussion forums are very dependent on the topics and stage of year in terms of how much value they have."

"...unfortunately discussion forums tend to be about negative issues but they are a good process for dealing with an issue that involves a whole year level or a whole class."

"...they didn't benefit me because I didn't have an issue with anything. I didn't have a question...I thought it was a waste of time."

It was also difficult for some parents to attend information nights during the week due to already busy home and work schedules:

"I must admit, after work the last thing I want to do is go to an information night. I'm so tired and I've got to go home and get everything ready for the next day."

Perhaps a re-visioning of meetings may also include a more flexible process, offering longer timeslots to fewer families during formal parent-teacher interviews and offering informal conversations more frequently to those parents who requested this method throughout the term. Informal conversations were one of only three methods considered 'useful' by all parents in this study, yet they were accessed frequently by only 62%. There are suggestions in the literature (Baker, 1996; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000) that informal conversations are an important component of the open dialogue that supports partnerships between parents and teachers in the preparatory year. For some parents, more frequent informal conversations with their child's teacher may negate the need for formal parent-teacher interviews altogether. Information nights and forums may then continue to supplement these meetings for conversation about more general issues.

Written Communication

Written methods of communication, including the school diary, newsletter, classroom displays and written reports, were described as useful by a high percentage (90-100%) of parents in this study.

Organisational communication devices such as school diaries and newsletters have been reviewed favourably as a two-way information exchange in schools (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000; Freytag, 2001; Wolfendale, 1992) and in pre-schools (Fleet et al., 2001; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Interview responses suggested that diaries and newsletters were favoured largely because they were convenient to use and explicit:

"The diary's good for quick communications if you want to scrawl something before you go off if you haven't had a chance to get on the computer."
“For me, the school newsletter’s very helpful just with anything happening within the school. I tend to revert back to that and jot things down in my diary for the week coming or the month ahead.”

“I loved the notes in the diary and if there was anything I thought needed further action or further attention I could speak to (class teacher) or arrange to see her and that was great.”

Other parents spoke about the limitations of using diaries and newsletters for communicating detailed, specific and confidential information:

“You can’t write how he’s going today, what he’s learnt today; so that, I feel, is a bit difficult.”

“The newsletter is only helpful to find out the things that are going on in the (whole) school.”

“Sometimes I write things in the school diary and I think ‘That’s a bit sensitive, maybe I shouldn’t write it there’...he might start reading things that I don’t really want him to share in...”

Displays of student work were also described as ‘useful’ by a high percentage of parents (95%). These displays are common in classrooms throughout Victorian schools. The literature regarding displays that document not only the finished product but also the child’s learning journey is overwhelmingly positive: Rinaldi argued that it ‘... provides an extraordinary opportunity for parents, as it gives them the possibility to know not only what their child is doing, but also how and why, to see not only the products but also the processes’ (Rinaldi, 1998, p.122).

Although displays were intended to provide insight into the learning process, interview data suggested that parents in this study valued them predominantly as a way of viewing their child’s completed pieces of work:

“Classroom displays are important to see all the kids work.”

“The classroom displays are great. I love coming in and looking... and I should do that more often because I think they’re great. They’re a wonderful display of the children’s personalities.”

Despite the perceived usefulness of classroom displays, only 12 parents reported that they were able to access them on a frequent basis. One parent who regularly viewed classroom displays mentioned their limitations for those parents who were not available during school hours:

“The classroom displays and open days are great: for people who are able to be here. So you’re always going to miss an element of your population.”

In order to engage parents in displays, it is important to ensure that the parents who do not visit the school during the day have some way of accessing them, for example, electronic form or by sending home relevant compilations, such as portfolios of student work, to share the learning experience with parents.
While organisational communications and displays are common, written reports are the most dominant style of interaction between schools and families and the most long-standing of all communicative methods (Freytag, 2001, p.6). Parents in this study expressed a desire for written reports, with 95% identifying them as ‘useful’. Interviewees disagreed, however, on the ideal format of these reports, a trend that has been evident in a multitude of previous studies (Anderson and Bachor, 1993; Cullingford, 1996; Cuttance & Stokes, 2000; Diffily, 1994; Deschamp, 1996; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; OECD, 1997). There remains a clear division between those parents who wanted narrative reporting and those who preferred objective grades or marks.

I was more looking at the comment because I think the comment sort of reflects the child..."

"What happened to the good old As and Bs and Ds? I just think that was a little bit easier than this consolidating, established..."

Interviews suggested that while parents appreciated receiving a written report, these reports were not useful to all parents in their current format. Interestingly, one parent raised the question of whether written reports were necessary at all:

"Written reports is more a cultural thing more than a thing of necessity, I find."

In exploring the ‘delivery’ of written reports, ie in printed form or online, 20 questionnaire respondents described written reports as useful while only 10 indicated that online reports were useful. One parent in the interviews was ambivalent about whether reports were presented in printed form or online:

"Whether the kid’s reports came home online or written wouldn’t really bother me."

More common in interviews, however, was a preference for hard copy/printed reports. Two parents explained that this was due to personal preference and difficulty accessing electronic versions:

"It’s similar to the move from normal photography to digital photography. You just miss something in the translation of it."

"I did get in after huge problems with passwords and access and going down so that’s always a problem where as you know with a written report you can get it..."

These responses raise the question of whether the longstanding tradition of written reports will continue to be necessary to all parents, as alternative methods of communication become available, and as these methods become increasingly reliable.
Electronic Communication

Electronic communication is a relatively recent innovation and one that schools are embracing with different levels of haste and enthusiasm. Electronic media in the target school includes the use of email, online reporting, intranet (internal school website) and a class web page. While between 48% and 76% of parents reported accessing these 'frequently' or 'sometimes' and generally finding these methods 'useful', between 24% and 52% of parents had 'never' used these methods.

Interviewees suggested email was useful because it gave them time to clarify thoughts and provided a permanent record of communication:

"I think email is really good because you can sit down and consider what you're thinking and it doesn't matter what time of the night it is."

"...it gives you the time to ... think about it in a more logical, rational way, and then put that in writing as opposed to on the phone and going off your nana!!"

"...if something is important enough, I think it needs to be recorded in some way, so if I email then you've actually got a copy of whatever the situation is..."

Email was also considered time-effective, particularly at times when parents found it difficult to physically locate teachers:

"I use that a lot...I can never find her so I find that's the easiest way."

"Sometimes it's just quicker and easier for me."

"...The staff email availability...is fantastic and I think staff have developed routines that means that is ... very prompt..."

While most interviewees either used email or saw it as potentially useful, another parent explained that email was not a convenient part of her daily routine:

"I don't always get to the emails. I probably get to the emails on the weekends more than during the week so it's probably not as...immediate."

The college intranet is an internal website with information concerning the entire school such as curriculum, events and policies. It is supplemented by a specific class web page. These methods drew a mixed response from interview respondents. One parent was particularly comfortable with the intranet as a source of information, while another found its usefulness limited:

"I'm on the college intranet constantly... That's the first place I go to if I want to know anything."

"The prep web page, I can't honestly say that i've been on it all that often...it's the same information so I guess once you've read it once, the curriculum's the same."

Other parents were not comfortable with the increased use of computer-based communication methods to the extent that some were unsure of how to access them at all:
"I know I should do it more often and I read the notes about how everything's going to become more computer oriented and I think 'I'm not going to cope with this.'"

"The prep web page I don't... do I have access to that only by the intranet or internet?"

A very interesting area for further exploration is that of electronic communication. Significant research in the area is sparse, a phenomenon which is perhaps not surprising due to its more recent introduction. Only 14% of parents in this study chose to access email on a frequent basis and a literature review could uncover little more than anecdotal evidence of parents preferring electronic mail as either a current or potential form of communication (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000; Kasprowicz, 2000). There was, however, a significant discrepancy between the small number of parents who frequently accessed email in this study and the larger number who rated it as a useful method of communication (57%) and literature does suggest that email is potentially valuable as a communicative tool (Fleet et al., 2001; Freytag, 2001; Hughes & MacNaughton, 2000). Perhaps, then, some parents may see the potential of email as a way of providing the information they require but have not yet begun to access it on a regular basis.

A similar trend is possible concerning the usage of intranets and websites. Freytag (2001) found that only 5.2% of parents of children in middle school preferred to be contacted via the class website. Cuttance & Stokes reported a 'small number of parents' who mentioned websites as a potential source of information but also noted that these parents '...did not view them at present as being a substitute for printed publications or meetings with teachers' (Cuttance & Stokes, 2000, p.62). It will be interesting to monitor any change in parent perception of these methods as society becomes increasingly dependent upon electronic forms of data use. Certainly, for schools, electronic communication may act as a way of recording communication in a format that is easily stored and retrieved for purposes of review.

**Conclusion**

It is important to remember that parents have different circumstances, expectations, needs and perceptions. Parents in this study ranged from those who preferred to access frequent conversations with teachers on campus to those who found it difficult to attend even out of hours; from those who appreciated narrative written reports on their child to those who wanted objective As and Bs; from those who were frequently online to those who were reluctant to use a computer at all. As a result, it is recommended that mixed modes of communication be employed in schools. It is also recommended that schools continually monitor and review the effectiveness of methods of communication in place. Our society is in an era of unprecedented change and schools must not remain stagnant. As new methods of communication are introduced, too must existing methods be continually reviewed and updated to suit the needs of our constantly changing community.

If effective methods of communication are to be developed between schools and families, then schools and families must both play a part in the review process. It is hoped that future research will continue to delve into the expectations of parents in the critical year as children commence school, and as communication processes in schools continue to evolve and change. There is a variety of families in any school, all with different requirements, and the needs of each of these families must be taken into account. It is a difficult task to cater for all parents in any school community. It is also a necessity.
Bibliography


