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COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION WITH EDUCATORS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENTS

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COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION WITH EDUCATORS:
THE PERSPECTIVE OF MIDDLE SCHOOL PARENTS

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University of Nebraska, 2000

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This paper presents educational research about the uniqueness of middle school children, the perspectives of parents and teachers regarding communication with one another, and how schools can involve parents in the educational process. The literature reveals a lack of information regarding the perspective of parents of middle school children.

Nine interviews were conducted with parents of middle school children in a small, midwestern community to gain their perspectives on communicating with teachers. Parents were asked to describe experiences with teachers to determine what types of communication were most effective and what conflicts existed. A social constructivist approach was used to analyze the results. The study and its results were based on Vernon E. Cronen's and W. Barnett Pearce's theory of the coordinated management of meaning. Emergent themes were the importance of communication (archetypes, rules, and contracts) and parental concerns with control, comfort/caring and honesty. The results of the study are discussed and implications for future research are presented.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

America's schools are constantly under public scrutiny. To educate youth who can function and succeed as citizens in society, the schools must change to meet public demands. According to Lounsbury (1995), there appears to be a trend for more individual choice and personal freedom in the schools. There are several forces propelling this trend which include,

> 1) a broadened legal interpretation of constitutional rights, (2) a strong thrust for equality of sex and race, (3) a growing affluence which released economic constraints upon choice, (4) rearing practices which focused upon the needs and demands of the growing child, (5) an erosion of family stability, (6) an increased allegiance to individual options as against social obligations, (7) a public mood to experiment, to replace tradition and social custom with personal lifestyle (p.1).

Schools are one of the few public institutions that reflect the shared commitments of the people in our society. It is imperative that educators and parents have meaningful communication so they can provide for the youth that come from various socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds.

As a teacher for the past nine and a half years, I have experienced several situations in which parents and teachers need to reach a mutual understanding and sharing of goals for the success of children. Overall, I have had many successful discussions with parents. However, there have been disagreements and arguments along the way. Also, I have found it very difficult to contact several parents. I know there have been occasions when the school has had to send certified letters because they cannot contact parents at work or at home. We have had principals go to students' homes in search of parents. As an undergraduate education student, I received no training about dealing with parents. Most of what I have learned has been from personal experience, advice from colleagues, and my communication courses that I have taken in pursuit of a masters degree.

As parents and teachers face increased pressures and demands, it is imperative that they find a way to have successful communication. Parents are busy with household duties and careers; teachers are busy with heavy workloads as well as their personal lives. Parents and teachers each have their own perceptions of one another based on past experiences. Therefore, when a meeting does take place, parents and teachers need to be able to express themselves in a way to allow the other party to understand their perspective; they need to be able to compromise and create solutions to problems that will mutually satisfy both parties.

The literature review presents research that provides insight into the perspectives of teachers and parents regarding each other. Members in the field of education have conducted various studies on this topic. Research is also presented that shows why the

perspectives of parents and teachers of middle grade students are especially important and how schools can involve parents in the education of their children. The coordinated management of meaning theory is explained and the research questions for this study are presented.

Review of Literature

The Uniqueness of Middle School Children

Middle school age children are a unique group who deserve more study and attention. Public and private elementary and high schools have served America's youth for centuries. But, in the early part of the twentieth century, 1910-12, junior high schools were created to provide an educational link between elementary and high school. Junior high age students were discovered to be much different from elementary or high school students. Those differences led to a unique school designed for students in the 1960's called middle school. In Nebraska, accreditation standards in Rule 10 define middle grades as any combination of grades from four through nine that are designated by the school system. In Nebraska, middle grades most commonly include grades seven and eight, with configurations of six through eight or seven through nine (Quality, 1997). Middle schools serve adolescents between the ages of 10 and 15. These years are challenging to the kids, their parents, and their teachers because of "the onset of puberty, dissimilar rates of physical and emotional maturation, the expansion of the intellect, and the transition from childhood to early adulthood" (Quality, 1997, p. 2). Therefore, the communication between teachers and parents becomes very important during this time. "The middle grades are the part of the educational journey where a steady course must be

steered, where essential skills are practiced, necessary adjustments are made, and learning extended" (Quality, 1997, p.4). Because of changes during adolescence, the communication surrounding middle-school aged children is especially important to study.

Although the majority of studies on parental involvement seem to be focused on elementary aged children, "parental and family involvement appears to be especially important to students during the middle school years," (Cotton & Mann, 1994, p. 1). But, although parental involvement is important, it seems to be missing in many cases. "It is unfortunate but common in America to see a drastic drop-off in parental involvement from the sixth to the twelfth grade" (Kleinsmith, 1997, p.8). Part of this drop-off is due to the need for children to be more independent and to accept responsibility for their decisions. However, students in this age group need considerable guidance (Brian, 1994). Unsupervised students are at risk for experimenting with inappropriate behaviors. Middle grades educators, in partnership with the community and parents, can provide important leadership and direction in finding or organizing after school activities or recreational programs for middle grades students. But, as most children advance through the schools, parents and teachers alike initiate fewer contacts with each other; "teachers had significantly less contact with parents of average students, and did not desire more contact with parents of average students" (Brian, 1994, p. 7). Both parents and teachers realize the adolescent need for structure as well as independence (Brian, 1994). Due to the recognition of the need for independence, "there is, then, a dramatic decline of parent involvement practices by teachers and participation by parents in learning activities from grade one to five. This trend worsens in the secondary grades" (Epstein, 1987, p. 129).

Thus, there is no bridge to help students in the transition between elementary school and high school.

A study was conducted at Iowa State University to examine the transition from elementary to secondary school on student behaviors. The researchers conducted ethnographic, in-depth interviews with 13 seventh graders and the parents of each of those students. A theme that emerged was the changed relationship of home and school as the students entered seventh grade and the secondary school structure (Erb, 1981). Another emergent theme was an increased number of deviant activities occurring at school. Students reported more bullying and coping tactics, drug users, vandalism and thefts. The researchers stated that "our interviews suggested that something about the institution of the secondary school seemed to be separating the worlds of school and home" (p. 2). This provides evidence that the home/school relationship is important to be studied for the success of students. A way must be found to help parents and teachers support students while simultaneously allowing them individual choices and responsibility.

<u>Education Research on Parent and Teacher Perspectives</u>

Parental Involvement

There is much literature that discusses parental involvement in schools. According to several studies, schools need to discover ways to include parental participation in the education of their children (Cotton and Mann,1994; Epstein, 1987; Kleinsmith, 1997; Karther and Lowden, 1997). It is commonly recognized that schools will be successful only to the degree that they are successful in involving parents in the

educational endeavors of their children (Cotton and Mann, 1994). Most of the literature

finds parental involvement to be a positive experience for everyone involved, and most

research demonstrates that parental involvement is one of the real keys to success in

school (Cotton and Mann, 1994; Epstein, 1987). Generally, school achievement and

motivation increase when parents are more involved. Also, those students of involved

parents have fewer problems with learning and behavior, whereas children whose parents

are not involved are less likely to participate in activities, and are more likely to have

problems in school (Kleinsmith, 1997). Some of the benefits of parental involvement

with schools include not only student advancement, but also increased parent self-

confidence and satisfaction with schools (Karther and Lowden, 1997). Parental

involvement appears to help both the children and their parents. There is evidence that

the more teachers involve parents in their child's learning, the more parents will

recognize the efforts and merits of teachers (Epstein, 1987).

However, some of the literature seems to suggest that although parental

involvement has always been important to the educational process, its role has changed

and become even more crucial in the last decade.

> In generations past, schools were set up as extensions of the
>
> family and society; in the past 30 or 40 years we seem to
>
> have lost the close relationship that once existed between
>
> parents and schools, and in many sectors an adversarial
>
> tone seems to have emerged between the school systems
>
> and the general public (Gareau & Sawatzky, 1995, p.163).

The need for more effective parent-teacher partnerships appears to be greater now than ever before. The role of the schools has expanded to include more than the cliché of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Where families used to be responsible for the social and emotional development of their children, schools have assumed more of those responsibilities (Flaxman & Inger, 1992). Examples include such things as character education and sexual education classes. The disintegration of the "traditional family" has broadened the role and responsibilities of the schools to deal with social issues. Now more programs are being developed to encourage parents to become involved in the educational process (Flaxman & Inger, 1992). Our government also realizes the importance of parental involvement in education, and has acknowledged its importance through legislation. In fact, at the federal level, Congress added increased parent involvement in schools to the list of national education goals in 1994.

> When states submit plans under the Goals 2000: Educate
> America Act, they must show how they intend to raise
> levels of parent participation in schools. And as part of the
> Improving America's Schools Act, Title I requires local
> schools and districts to adopt three types of parent-
> involvement strategies (Black, 1998, p. 50).

Gips and Burdin (1983) say that parents benefit from collaborating with professionals. They say that parents enhance their sense of dignity and worth as they work to be guides in the intellectual, moral, and citizenship development of their

children. The researchers developed two inservice programs that taught strategies to promote education in the home and school. They state that encouraging parental participation in schools is productive for many reasons. It applies the democratic idea that those who are affected by decisions should help to make them. The involvement provides ownership for parents to make the system work and it creates unified efforts between home and school to motivate and instruct children. Parents and educators are then communicating using shared thinking and cooperatively developed goals. Gips and Burdin (1983) cite several benefits to parents and teachers by using collaboration.

> Shared efforts to build effective schooling provide citizen
>
> and educator with common experiences, concepts, and
>
> principles. They then communicate with each other in
>
> meaningful terms and move into the subtle world of
>
> concept and generalization, through which they ultimately
>
> create shared efforts based on sophisticated understandings
>
> (p. 4).

Therefore, parent-teacher communication can benefit everyone involved from a collaborative effort.

However, not all parental involvement research results are positive. One middle school principal who was interviewed by Susan Black (1998), an education research consultant in New York and a contributing editor to The American School Board Journal, said,

> I gave up a job teaching science, which I loved, thinking
>
> that, as a principal, I could work closely with kids and
>
> teachers on a daily basis. But, as it's turned out, I spend
>
> most of my time doing the bidding of parent committees
>
> who tell me which teachers I can hire and how I can spend
>
> money. I'm not convinced that this is the way to improve
>
> our school (p. 51).

Black says that the problem may stem from the fact that parents and teachers interpret the

terms "parent involvement" and "parent participation" differently because these terms are

vague and constantly shifting in meaning. Sometimes the terms refer to school-based

activities (attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering at the school, attending

open houses) and sometimes they refer to home-based activities (checking the child's

homework, reading to the child.) According to Black (1998), Ursula Casanova of

Arizona State University at Tempe faults researchers for not including negative types of

parent involvement, which can have disastrous 'anti-democratic consequences' for

children and schools. Casanova says,

> schools need to be especially vigilant when it comes to
>
> groups of parents who look after their personal interests—
>
> such as their own gifted children or their own tax
>
> assessments—without considering others' needs. And, she
>
> says, schools need to watch for parents who become
>
> involved in schools in order to spread their personal beliefs

and biases in areas such as textbook selection, instructional

programs, and school policies regarding holidays and

celebrations (p. 53).

Many schools are finding out that parental involvement sounds ideal in theory, but it is

often less than perfect in practice. It can result in parental interference.

Collaboration, however, is an important element of teacher and parent

communication. Cook and Friend (1991) note that "collaboration is a style for direct

interaction between at least two co-equal parties voluntarily engaged in shared decision-

making as they work toward a common goal" (p. 6). They contend that by referring to

collaboration as a style, it can be considered in many contexts. Some of the

characteristics of collaboration they list are: it is voluntary; individuals who collaborate

share a common goal; it requires parity among participants (participants must believe

they have something valuable to contribute and that this contribution is valued by others);

it includes shared responsibility for decisions; individuals who collaborate share

accountability for outcomes; it includes sharing resources; and it requires trust and the

belief that the time and effort required is worthwhile (p. 7). "The term parent-school

collaboration is a relatively recent one in education, reflecting a general societal trend

toward increased participation of parents in the educational decision-making process"

(Gareau & Sawatzky, 1995, p.162). Gips and Burdin (1983) agree with the concept of

shared responsibility; they say that "sharing responsibility creates a human relations

laboratory wherein professional and lay persons develop trust and confidence in each

other" (p. 3).

In order to develop this trust and confidence in each other, Renihan and Renihan (1995) say that there is a need for a home-school psychological contract between parents and teachers of middle school children. The concept of psychological contract originated with organizational communication and was discussed by Schein,1980 (as cited in Renihan and Renihan, 1995). The idea is that the individual has certain expectations of the organization (safety, fairness) and in turn, the organization has certain expectations of the individual (hard work, commitment). For both sides to be satisfied, their expectations must be understood and met. Similarly, this applies to parents (individual) and teachers (organization). When parents and teachers meet, they both are bringing their expectations to the table. Therefore, Renihan and Renihan (1995) surveyed 230 parents and teachers to find out what their expectations of one another were.

With all of the changes taking place in education and society, what do parents and teachers expect of each other? According to Renihan and Renihan (1995), the school expects from the home: support for school norms and policies, reinforcement of the education activities of the school, consistency in the raising of children, availability of parents when teachers need to talk to them, constructiveness in talking about the school and its professionals, and a home environment consistent with the developmental needs of the child. The home expects of the school: clear and consistent communication, fairness in dealings with children, attention to the individual needs of each child, a safe environment, committed teachers, a welcoming atmosphere for parents, and a school environment and program consistent with the developmental needs of each child. (p. 58). Based on these expectations, Renihan and Renihan (1995) then provide suggestions to

strengthen the psychological contract between home and school. These suggestions include opening the school by breaking down the traditional barriers (invite the community to school functions, recognize parents formally at celebrations), encouraging dialogue about the school, and planning several levels of involvement (p.60).

In a qualitative study in Alberta, Canada, Gareau and Sawatzky (1995) sought to understand how parents and educators describe parent-school collaboration, and to learn how their views on that topic are similar and how they are different. Their study consisted of in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and grounded-theory techniques of analysis. Their participants included a principal, a counselor, a teacher, and two parents of elementary aged children. The opening statement for each interview was, "Tell me about parents and schools working together." They also asked participants how they knew when parent-school collaboration was occurring. They asked participants to describe situations where collaboration had and had not occurred, and to define collaboration. The researchers felt that the question, "Is there anything else that I need to know about you personally in order to really understand your thoughts about this topic?" was a question that yielded significant data.

The parent and teacher relationship proved to be vital. The researchers discovered that:

> all the participants believed that without communication,
> collaboration was impossible. However, for the parents
> and the teacher, communication was seen mainly in an
> individual, child-related sense...For both parents 'being

informed,' 'feeling listened to,' and 'having a voice' were

among their strongest needs in their relationship with the

school (p. 468).

The researchers found a discrepancy in the way parents and teachers viewed trust. For

parents, trusting the school meant "knowing that the teachers would be able and willing

to look after their children's needs and recognize each child's uniqueness" (p.468)

whereas educators "were referring more to the importance of parents and educators

having a basic belief in each other's good intention" (p. 468). Parents seemed to have

more concern about differences in power; "parents often feel powerless when they

interact with school personnel" (p. 470). The educator's concern regarding power was

about how much ownership parents should have for education.

Gareau and Sawatzky (1995) conclude that one of the problems highlighted by

their research is that of "introducing a collaborative culture into what has traditionally

been a hierarchical organization" (p.470). The researchers end their study by saying, "it

is becoming an increasingly accepted fact that education, like other social services in our

democratic society, is everybody's business; it is especially the business of those parents

who have children in schools" (p. 472).

Conflicts in Episodes

What hinders effective communication between parents and teachers? In the

aforementioned Renihan and Renihan (1995) survey of 230 parents and teachers, the

perceived conflicts in order of severity were: lack of time and opportunity for

involvement; poor, infrequent communication between school and home; fear of conflict

and intimidation experienced by parents and teachers; superficial, inauthentic involvement; uncooperative administration; unclear expectations; student pressure, based upon the feeling that it is "not cool" for their parents to be involved; and lack of informative feedback on student performance (p. 60). Leitch and Tangri (1988) conducted a study about home-school collaboration. They interviewed core (English, reading, math) teaching staff and administrators in two junior high schools, as well as 60 parents (51 mothers, 6 grandmother, 3 custodial parents). All of the 60 families were Black. The families responded by citing themselves as primary barriers. They cited health problems, economic differences between themselves and teachers, and work responsibilities as other key barriers. Teachers cited family responsibilities and workload as their barriers. The majority of teachers said they do not ask parents for help because of lack of follow-through from parents or because of parental employment. "Nearly 50% of teachers attributed barriers to parents" (p. 73). Gettinger and Guetschow (1998) interviewed 558 parents and 142 teachers in six elementary, middle and high schools and found that lack of time and work demands were cited by both parties as the most frequent challenges to parental involvement. Suggestions to alleviate these conflicts included newsletters, recorded telephone messages, special times set aside to reach teachers, child care during conferences, and that school give ideas to parents for activities to be done after working hours. According to Leitch and Tangri (1988), teachers said most of their contact is by phone and usually at their initiative because of problems. In summary, the researchers concluded that "it isn't misperceptions of each other that are the root of home-school problems, it is the lack of specific planning, or, at a more basic level, the

* School-wide plan for communication

lack of knowledge about how each can use the other person more effectively that is a

major barrier" (p. 74).

How To Involve Parents

Although the majority of the studies seem to agree that parent involvement is

important in education, there is not agreement on how they should be involved.

Involving parents "capitalizes on the imagination and energy which can be released as a

variety of persons help to identify and solve problems" (Gips and Burdin, 1983, p. 1).

Parents and teachers need to help each other meet the children's needs, even as the

children age.

> Middle grades students do desire parental support, as it is a
>
> central source of stability in their turbulent lives. Amidst
>
> their peer-mediated struggle for self-identity, however, the
>
> last thing adolescents want is the visible and pervasive
>
> presence in their social context of the symbols of their
>
> dependence. During the middle years parental involvement
>
> must be less visible in the daily life of the school than was
>
> appropriate in the elementary years (Renihan & Renihan, p.
>
> 59).

With uninvolved families, schools may need to initiate the relationship of parent

involvement. A schoolwide plan for parent involvement will increase the likelihood that

more families will participate on an ongoing basis (Karther, 1997). Flaxman and Inger

(1992) offer many suggestions for teachers that include announcing meetings long

⚹ announcing meetings long

enough in advance to allow parents to make arrangements to attend, giving parents

permission to visit the school at any time, making school facilities available to a variety

of community activities, providing before-school child care, conducting evening awards

assemblies, and printing all signs in the school in the language spoken by school families

(p. 17).

> The more teachers involve parents in their teaching practice
>
> in regular, frequent, and organized ways, the more parents
>
> will feel involved in the education of their children and the
>
> more they will recognize the efforts and merits of teachers.
>
> If schools had to choose only one policy to stress, these
>
> results suggest that the most payoff for the most parents
>
> comes from teachers involving parents in helping their
>
> children learn at home (Epstein, 1984, p. 72).

What techniques do teachers use most to involve parents at home? The most

common are having parents read to the child or listen to the child read, asking parents to

take their child to the library, and loaning books and teaching material to parents for use

with children at home (Epstein, 1987). Cotton and Mann (1994) concluded that there is

hope for improving parent involvement at the middle school. They state that "when there

is a person (and a place) at a school where parents can get information about homework

or events, and give some time and effort, many parents will access it regardless of school

size" (p.11).

Cotton and Mann (1994) conducted a study to determine what middle school principals and teachers are doing to increase parental support and participation and how effective those methods are perceived to be. They selected twenty middle schools in California and Texas which included a wide range of socioeconomic levels and ethnic backgrounds. They conducted telephone interviews with someone from each school who was knowledgeable about the parent involvement program, usually either the principal or guidance counselor. The results indicated that 90% of the schools had a parent-teacher organization. Sixty percent of the schools have a School Site Council or School Improvement Board. Through these councils or boards, activities and programs are planned to keep the lines of communication between home and school open. Every principal reported a Back to School Night or Orientation Night that was open to all parents with the purpose being a way for parents to meet their children's teachers, to understand their children's schedule, and to show the school was a safe place. Parent conferences were mentioned by 70% of the principals questioned (p. 6). Most of the schools have direct phone lines into every classroom and 90% have a newsletter that is sent out regularly (p. 7). "About 50% of the principals questioned stated there were classes at a higher level (i.e., the district or county) for parenting, but the school site did not sponsor such classes" (p.8). The school advertised the district sponsored classes in the newsletter. These district-sponsored classes were held away from the local school site from one time to four times a year. Governance dealt with determining if parents were involved in decision-making at the school. Seventy-five percent of the principals stated that parents did have some indirect influence on school governance (p. 8). Ten

percent of the schools reported that parents were involved in teacher and administrator selection committees; 25% had parents serve on library and textbook selection committees; five percent had parents on a restructuring committee; and ten percent had parents on a school climate committee or discipline council (p. 9). One hundred percent of the principals interviewed stated that parents were involved through the school board, the parent-teacher organization, the school site committee or the school improvement committee/board/council (p. 9).

Blendinger and Snipes (1993) found that parent involvement research has minimum impact on teacher practice and there are many parents who resist becoming involved due to time constraints or negative experiences with schooling. Therefore, they have proposed a framework which calls for the principal to take an active leadership role in developing and implementing a comprehensive parent involvement program. They state that although research in the area of parent involvement has significantly increased, little work has been done in the development of theory to guide administrative practice. They contend that the traditional ways parents have been involved (bake sales, carnivals, attending activities, signing progress reports), do not foster the type of collaboration that is needed to improve behavior and academic success. Comprehensive parent involvement programs that account for diverse family needs must be developed and utilized. They state that unless the principal gives it high priority status, parental involvement in education may be a much discussed but never actualized subject. Therefore, Blendinger and Snipes offer the following framework to guide practice and direction for future research:

Student academic achievement and behavior is more apt to

improve through school-home collaboration when the

school administrator takes the lead in planning and

implementing parent involvement strategies and activities

in three major categories: school-home communication, at-

home learning, and at-school participation (p.7).

Epstein (1987) also sees the importance of administrative involvement. She concluded that "research findings support theories of organizational effectiveness that assert that connections and shared responsibilities are important between social institutions," (p.134) such as schools and families, and the findings also support "theories of teaching effectiveness that assume that teachers and parents share responsibility for instructing and socializing students" (p. 134). Therefore, this study will examine how these two parties can reach a mutual understanding to ultimately help students.

Coordinated Management of Meaning Theory

The theory of the coordinated management of meaning was developed in the 1970's by W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon Cronen. It is based on the premise that every person has developed their own internal set of rules for interacting with others. People draw on their past experiences to assess the situation and find mutual understanding with others. The problem with communication is that two individuals do not enter a conversation knowing what rules the other individual will use and find salient. For two parties to find rules that allow for mutual understanding and satisfying discourse is

coordination. It is, in essence, a theory of how people mesh their rules. The management of conversations is indirectly the management of relationships.

The theory is based on a hierarchy consisting of the content level (the message itself), speech acts (intentions of messages e.g. threat, promise, insult, compliment), contracts (defined requirements of the relationship), episodes (a sequence of speech acts which constitute a unit of action), life-scripts (sets of episodes taken by an individual to be consistent with self-concept), and archetypes (accepted images of how things are) (Littlejohn, 1983, p. 67). Contracts are the creation of the participants and only apply to a particular relationship. They also include rules. Contracts serve several functions; they "provide expectations for one's own and the other's behavior" and "formalize relationships between individuals" (Pearce, 1973, p. 166). Episodes include social institutions, marriage, rites of passage and "ritualized ways of dealing with particular situations such as greeting rituals, patterns of social deference, and treatments of humor or sarcasm" (Pearce, 1976, p. 21).

The concept of constitutive and regulative rules is borrowed by Pearce and Cronen from speech act theory. Constitutive rules define what a given act should be taken to "count as" whereas regulative rules refer to how one should behave within a given context (Littlejohn, 1983 p. 67). When considering the rules for the coordinated management of meaning, there are three keys principles of rules and logic. They are: rules are humanly constructed; logic is produced by the interlocking of various persons (therefore the responsibility for good and bad communication is transactive); and rules differ in structure (Cronen, Pearce and Harris, 1979, p. 36). "Each individual must use

his or her rules to guide interpretation of and response to the actions of others, but within a short time a new interpersonal system must develop so that the interactions are coordinated" (Littlejohn, 1983, p.69).

The success of any episode of communication can be assessed according to three variables of the coordination of management theory. They are coherence, control, and valence. Coherence is participants making sense of the sequence of the interaction; they both feel they know what is going on. Control is participants feeling free to make choices that affect the interaction. Valence is the degree of happiness with the interaction (Littlejohn, 1983, p.70).

There are many applications for the coordinated management of meaning theory. "One claim for the value of the theory rests on the judgement that its assumptions are better: they admit the diversity of human actions and they stress the importance of actors' meanings" (Miller, 1976, p.32). Therefore, this theory can prove to be a useful guide for the perceptions of parents when communicating with educators.

Research Questions

As shown previously, the majority of the literature about parent-teacher communication is written from the educational perspective. As in the aforementioned studies, the literature is aimed at finding ways school administrators or educators can improve parent involvement. The studies are mostly concerned with ways that teacher education can better prepare educators to deal with parents. Some of the studies even based their data on inservices or seminars. What needs to be answered is: how do the parents of middle school children perceive their communication with educators?

Especially important is the perspective of the parent who has a child with problems or a parent who rarely communicates with the school. It is the parent who feels powerless or uncomfortable who can provide the most new insight. Parents whose children are doing well in school are generally the ones who attend parent-teacher conferences and extra-curricular activities because they always get positive feedback about their child. Parents whose children do not do as well in school may avoid parent-teacher conferences because they have already had negative experiences with the school and want to avoid further ones. Other questions that also need to be answered include: how do parents define successful communication with teachers? How can the two parties reach mutual understanding? Why do parents sometimes feel uncomfortable talking with teachers? And finally, what forms of communication are most effective for both parties to reach shared meaning? There is a gap that can be filled by studying this relationship from an interpersonal communication perspective.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

In this chapter, I provide the following: the procedure for the study including information about the school that was used, the questions that were asked of each participant, the role of the researcher, and the outline for data analysis. Then I identify the participants and provide a description of each.

The purpose of this study is to bridge a gap in the literature as mentioned previously; and specifically, to understand how parents of middle school children in Noname, Nebraska perceive parent/teacher communication, and to learn how they perceive educators in regards to this topic (the name of the community has been changed to protect the anonymity of the participants). The study focuses on parents who have children who are not extremely successful academically. The reason for this is based on my personal experience as well as research. "A common comment of teachers is that the parents they most want to see (those with lower achieving children) seldom enter the school door" (Karther & Lowden, p.41). During my years of teaching experience, I have found that these parents are less likely to contact the school and are generally harder to contact. According to Gettinger and Guetschow (1998), parental involvement has been associated with increases in children's achievement test scores and grades; higher school attendance and lower dropout rates; as well as improvement in student motivation, attitudes, classroom behavior, and self-esteem (p. 38). Also, according to Brian (1994), "teachers had significantly less contact with parents of average students" (p. 7). The students whose parents were interviewed are all below average according to their grades.

How these parents define successful communication and what makes them comfortable or uncomfortable when meeting with educators are two of the key questions that need to be answered by the study.

<div align="center">Procedure</div>

Noname Public Schools was chosen for this study for two reasons. First, I am employed there and therefore have easier access to those parents than I would to parents at another educational institution. Second, Noname Public Schools are currently undergoing a transition. The school has about 350 students enrolled in grades K-12 and all of those students are housed in one building. As part of the reaccreditation process, a committee comprised of administrators, teachers, and parents identified improving the transition of middle school students as one of their goals. To achieve this, several changes are being made which include physically separating middle schoolers from high school students, reassigning teacher duties, modifying the curriculum, and forming a middle school committee. To do this, the needs of middle school students are being examined. By looking at the way parents communicate with and perceive educators, this study could provide pertinent and practical information in the transitional process.

Twenty participants were chosen randomly from students on the Concern and Failing List. I used the list from the week of November 26, 1999 that included the names of 23 seventh and eighth graders. This list is compiled and distributed weekly to all teachers of students in grades 7-12; it includes the name and course grades of all students who have averages of 75% or lower in one or more classes. A letter is sent home to the parents of the children whose names appear on the list. Any student who is failing (below 70%)

two or more subjects is ineligible to participate in extra-curricular activities for one week. Also, middle school students who appear on the list are required to attend the Middle School Academy for that week. The Academy is a required, supervised study hall held in the middle school library daily from 3:30 to 4:00 p.m.

During the 1999-2000 school year, there were 38 students in the seventh grade and 39 in the eighth grade for a total of 77 students in junior high. I conducted nine interviews. Therefore, at least one parent of eleven percent of the middle school students were interviewed. The number of names that appear on the Weekly Concern and Failing List varies weekly. The response rate for this study would be 39% since nine interviews were scheduled out of twenty-three contacts.

The participants were notified via mail; they received a letter explaining the study and a *Rights of Research Subjects* information sheet. Five to seven days later they were contacted by phone to recruit their participation. Of the first twenty mailings, eight interviews were confirmed and took place between February 23, 2000 and March 17, 2000. Three more names were selected and were similarly contacted via mail and phone. Of those three mailings, one interview was arranged. It took place on May 8, 2000.

To determine how parents perceive teachers, this study examines the parental perspective by using a social constructionist approach to interpersonal communication. According to Leeds-Hurwitz (1992) "three main threads connect all social approaches to communication: the assumption that reality is a social construction, the resulting significance of reflexivity, and the centrality of understanding culture" (p. 133). Social constructionism includes the assumptions that communication action is voluntary;

knowledge is a social product; knowledge is contextual; theories create worlds; and scholarship is value laden (Knapp & Miller, 1994). Social constructionism is primarily concerned with clarifying the processes by which people explain, describe or otherwise account for the world; "it attempts to vivify common forms of understanding as they now exist" (Gergen, 1985, p. 3). Both parents and teachers bring biases and presumptions into the discourse when they meet; this study and social constructionism are each concerned with how two parties arrive at a shared meaning and understanding. The "terms of understanding are the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of a person in a relationship" (Gergen, 1985, p.5), in this case, the parent/teacher relationship.

The methodology for this study is adapted from the Gareau and Sawatzky (1995) design. They chose a qualitative, human science research approach "because of its congruence with the topic and our personal beliefs about how we can best learn about another person's perspectives" (p.466). I felt that a qualitative approach would best serve my study for several reasons. Qualitative analysis is emergent; that is, the interviewer seeks meanings and perceptions by entering the participants' world and attempting to reconstruct their realities and meanings; it is context bound. This fit my goal of studying the perceptions of parents at Noname Public Schools. Although other parents from other schools may have similar perceptions, the results printed here are Noname schools. Each participant was asked to share information specifically about their personal experiences with this school. Qualitative analysis allows the researcher to use probing questions to determine the perspective of each individual interviewed. Other reasons for using a qualitative design can be found in Creswell (1994). Creswell states that qualitative

researchers are interested in meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, qualitative research involves fieldwork, and the process is inductive (p. 145). I wanted to know how these parents made sense of their experiences with teachers. The physical setting for the interviews was the school where the majority of the experiences had taken place. Also, my results and the theory I apply were built from the details of the interviews and interactions with the interviewees.

The role of the researcher in this study was that of an interviewer and observer. I am currently in my eighth year as an English and Spanish instructor at Noname Public Schools. I taught for a year and a half prior in Iowa. I sponsor Drama Club, Foreign Language Club, and the Junior High and High School Quiz Bowl teams. I serve as a member of the Middle School Committee and as a member and former president of the Noname Education Association. I have been a classroom teacher for all of the participants' children at some time during the past year prior to data collection.

The data for this study consists of nine audio-taped interviews, the written transcription of all but two (cassettes were lost in the mail en route to the transcriptionist), and notes taken during the interviews and the replaying of the tapes. There were eleven participants in nine interviews because two couples chose to be interviewed together rather than choosing an individual parent to answer questions. All of the participants are Caucasian and currently have children enrolled in Noname Public Schools.

Interviewer notes and tape transcriptions were analyzed. I looked for perceptions that the parents had in common with each other and with past research. I also looked for new or unique perceptions. I then grouped these perceptions into themes. The

discovered themes were then compared to those discussed in the Gareau and Sawatzky (1995) study.

Individual semi-structured interviews were used to obtain data. An interview guide was followed, but participants were encouraged to digress and expand on their thoughts. Probing questions were used to elicit greater depth of responses. The questions that I asked each participant can be found in the Appendix.

Participants

Each of the participants in this study has direct experience as a parent of a Noname middle school student. A brief description of each subject follows. Names have been changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

Lois is a mother of four children including an eighth grade girl. She has lived in the community for fourteen years and is 39 years old. She is divorced and has a lesbian life partner who is residing with Lois and her four children. Lois completed one semester of college and the combined income at home is between $15,000 and $25,000 annually. I found Lois to be very outgoing. I had visited with her on several occasions prior to the interview. She wanted to participate because she feels it is very important for teachers and parents to "keep the lines open." I thought Lois could provide a lot of insight because she has children who are successful in school as well as some who are not. I had seen Lois in the school building several times. She visits more often than most parents and can be very assertive. I would have liked to ask her more questions about how her alternative lifestyle has affected, or been affected by, the educational institution, but I was

afraid of offending her and delving into such a sensitive area. I know that the community as a whole is not very accepting of alternative lifestyles or minorities.

Madeline has three children including a seventh grade girl, a son who graduated in May of 2000, and a son who dropped out of high school during the tenth grade. Madeline has a high school diploma, but I know several of her relatives in the community have not completed their high school education. She has lived in the community for six years, is 37 years old, and works as an office employee. All of her children still live at home and the combined annual income of the primary breadwinners is $26,000 to $39,000. Madeline was very concerned about the school notifying her promptly of problems with her children. I was the most uncomfortable interviewing Madeline because I knew she had had many difficulties with her children in school. However, I did not realize how much negativity she felt she had received from the school. I was surprised to discover that I was one of the teachers she associated with a very negative experience; I was involved in one difficult meeting a few years ago involving her two sons and I had forgotten about the incident. In fact, I had interpreted the meeting in an entirely different way. During the meeting regarding her two oldest sons, the boys refused to talk. One teacher walked out saying there was no point for the meeting. The teacher running the meeting nodded at me indicating that I, too, could leave. Madeline interpreted my leaving as indication that I did not care and I was not willing to participate; I only left because I was prompted to do so. I was actually surprised she agreed to be interviewed. I do know that after some of the difficulties with her sons, she

enrolled in a parenting class offered in the evenings at the school that was taught by the Family and Consumer Science teacher and the guidance counselor.

Lynn has three children and has lived in the community for the past four years. She is in her mid to late thirties and did not provide information about her income or educational background. I had never met Lynn in person prior to the interview, but had spoken to her on the phone once regarding a discipline matter with her child. During the interview she was fairly open, but I felt she held back at times. I had heard complaints from teachers that she always sided with her children when there were problems so I was interested by the fact that she described all of her experiences with educators as positive.

Roger and *Rita* chose to be interviewed together which did not surprise me because they generally attend all school functions as a couple. They have two children, including an eighth grade daughter and a grown son. They have lived in the community all their lives; in fact, they were high school sweethearts. Roger is 48 and Rita is 47 years old. They both completed high school and Roger works as a supervisor at a local plant and Rita is a C.N.A. I have spoken with them on several previous occasions.

Abigail has four children, including a seventh grade daughter, and is in the process of getting divorced. She has lived in the community for twenty years and works as a daycare provider earning $15,000 to $25,000 per year. She has a G.E.D and is 36 years old. I had never met her before the interview. I found Abigail to be very outspoken and opinionated. All of her answers came rapidly and with conviction.

Renae has five children, including an eighth grade son, and has lived in the community for thirteen years. Two of her children still live at home. She is a teacher's

aide in another school district and is 44 years old. She also received her G.E.D. and the combined income at home is $40,000 to $59,000 annually. I had never met Renae prior to the interview.

Nina has four children, including a seventh grade son, and has lived in the community for three years. Two of the children reside at home. She is 42 years old and also received her G.E.D. She said, "I left school to work full-time to pay for an apartment and bills. I went back for a G.E.D. a few years later for a better job. I now take college classes." She is employed as an analyst writing new code for old computer programs. The combined annual income at home is $40,000 to $59,000. I had never met her before the interview. She did not elaborate much on her answers despite my probing questions.

Sheryl has three children including her seventh grade son and two grown sons. She has lived in the community for 21 years and is 41 years old. Sheryl received her G.E.D. and has since taken some business-related college courses. I had seen her at school events but had never spoken to her previously. I felt that she held back some during the interview. She seems very protective of her sons and I know she had several negative experiences with her middle child. I thought her responses might be more negative.

Barbara and *Robert* chose to be interviewed together. They have lived in the community all of their lives and have two children including a seventh grade son. Robert is 38 years old and works as an engineer. The annual household income is over $80,000.

I have no recollection of ever meeting them before the interview. They had very brief

responses to questions and most probing questions failed to elicit more information.

CHAPTER 3

Results

Communication

From the analysis of the interviews, four main themes emerged. They were

communication, control, honesty, and comfort/caring. The first theme, communication,

can be broken down into three parts. The first part of communication involved the

parents' perception of the importance of their contact with teachers (archetypes) and the

second part involved what forms of communication were most effective. The third part

was how the communication rules and contracts differed between parents and teachers;

this aspect included how communication pertained to middle school aged children.

Communication

Archetypes

The first area of communication that emerged from the study concerns parents'

perceptions of the importance of communicating with teachers. According to the theory

of coordinated management of meaning, archetypes are images of how things are, a

person's basic logic of the universe (Littlejohn, 1983). All of the participants felt that

communication was crucial between parents and teachers. They each had a common

archetype: that parents and teachers need to have open lines of communication for

children to be successful. They all felt it was important for parents to attend parent-

teacher conferences and for parents to be involved in their child's education. However,

opinions were split when asked if there was enough communication between parents and

teachers. All of the parents had received weekly grade reports which they felt were

helpful, although some felt more comments should be added instead of teachers just

sending a number grade with no additional information. Abigail said, "I feel there would be no communication except parent-teacher conferences had it not been for my initiating it." On the other hand, Nina said, "Parents don't tell teachers everything they should know. I feel sorry for teachers." One parent mentioned that being in middle school meant her child needed to be more responsible, so there shouldn't need to be more communication. On the other hand, Sheryl pointed out that her child was trying to take more control and have more responsibility, so she didn't hear about anything; and Madeline stated that her children never brought home notes that teachers sent. The other parents felt that there was enough communication; they felt that the weekly reports gave them enough information for them to make sure their child's grade improved.

Forms of communication

The second part of communication that emerged from the study involves how teachers contact parents. What forms of communication are utilized is important to parents. Many felt that for them, the weekly grade reports in the mail were enough. However, if something more serious such as behavior were involved, they would prefer meeting with teachers face to face, or at the very least, receive a phone call. Most agreed that face to face communication was beneficial because they get immediate feedback, and gestures and facial expressions are important to the discussion. For most situations, the participants felt the phone can be beneficial because it saves time; they don't have to take off work to come in. Most would prefer a phone call instead of a face to face discussion unless the situation could not be resolved that easily, or several teachers were involved which warranted a meeting. They felt that a phone discussion usually took care of the

problem. The general consensus was that face to face meetings are needed only for serious problems that cannot efficiently be handled via mail or phone. Only one parent had used email to contact teachers and she felt it was very useful because of the expediency and the detailed comments she received.

Rules and contracts

The third part of communication that emerged from the study involves how shared meaning and mutual understanding are achieved between parents and teachers. According to the coordinated management of meaning theory, rules are what a given act should count as and how one should behave with a given context. Contracts are the defined requirements of the relationship (Littlejohn, 1983). For parents and teachers to feel that their communication was successful (meaning is shared; coordination occurs), they must be able to negotiate so that both parties can accept one another's required outcomes.

The participants shared their views on what caused communication with educators to be successful or unsuccessful, and they described both kinds of situations. Although Madeline felt she had never had a successful communication with a teacher, four parents described successful meetings during parent-teacher conferences. Three of the parents felt their successful communication pertained to meetings about problems with grades or behavior, and one parent's successful situation was about a child's medical needs. When asked what they did to make the meeting successful, the parents mentioned they asked questions, they were honest and straightforward, they told the teachers they supported them, they asked for opinions and suggestions, and they listened to what the teachers had

to say. Two participants mentioned that they also felt the meeting was successful because their child knew their parent was meeting with their teacher. When asked what the teachers did to make the meeting successful, the participants said they were willing to help, they gave insight into the school atmosphere, they gave input and kept in contact afterwards, they were well-prepared for the meeting, they were open-minded, and they listened and shared concerns.

When asked to describe an unsuccessful discussion with a teacher, two participants said they had never had an unsatisfactory meeting. The others described unsuccessful situations that involved meetings about grades or behavior problems. The parents felt that the things they may have done or said to make the discussion unsuccessful were not asking enough questions and not giving enough input; perhaps they simply mirrored the teacher's ideas instead of negotiating what they really desired as the outcome. However, several examples were mentioned as to what teachers did to make the meeting unsuccessful; they included stereotyping the child, finishing the parent's sentences, not being good listeners, walking out of the meeting before it was over, lying and/or saying what they thought the parent wanted to hear, rushing the parents, not following through with suggestions or not following up on student progress, and having an attitude that they were not willing to help.

The participants noted several conflicts in their communication with educators. The most common conflict was time. Most of the participants had full-time jobs, although they all said they would make time to come to the school when necessary. Other conflicts included the teachers being busy, and the fact that their child had more

than one teacher. It was noted that in elementary school children had one main classroom teacher, whereas in middle school they may have six to eight different teachers, and it can be difficult to contact so many instructors. One participant also stated that most of the teachers lived out of town and leave at four o'clock which made meeting with them challenging. Additionally, one parent said that "difficult teachers" were a conflict. When asked to explain what she meant by difficult teachers, she said, "They have their own way of doing things and don't want to do it my way." In other words, they have different expectations and do not seem willing to negotiate outcomes.

When asked what changes needed to be made to improve the communication with educators and to achieve coordination, suggestions included: parents need to be more involved in their child's education, parents are only called when there are problems, more parent-teacher conferences are needed, there is not enough follow-up on situations after talking with teachers, and there is not enough input on weekly reports and report cards. Only three participants said that they had ever received positive notes or comments from teachers other than at the regularly scheduled conferences.

Another aspect of communication that was addressed was how often contact was made between parents and teachers and when the contact should be initiated. Most parents said they contact teachers rarely or never, and Roger and Rita said, "We try not to contact teachers at all." A couple parents said they initiate contact once a month and only one parent said she contacts teachers once a week, but she added that was because her child was having lots of academic problems. When asked how often teachers contacted them, over half said rarely besides the Weekly Concern and Failing List via the mail.

The majority of the parents felt that they need to contact teachers when their child's grades go down. Other times mentioned were when there are family problems, when their child has a health problem, when their child is being treated unfairly, when their child is having problems with other kids, and when their child is not bringing home any homework. Parents felt they need to be notified by teachers when grades drop, when their child is not paying attention in class, and when there is a change in attitude or behavioral problems. Parents felt that teachers expect to be notified when there is trouble. Lois said, "Teachers don't expect to hear thanks or you're doing a good job." Most of the parents felt that they were contacted more often by teachers when their child was in elementary school, or that the amount of communication had not changed from elementary to middle school. The couple of parents who felt they were having more contact said it was because their child was having more problems in middle school. All of the participants agreed that parents and teachers need to contact each other immediately whenever there is a change in behavior or attitude. They said both sides are at fault when they do not contact one another promptly and let a situation get out of hand.

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Control

Control was the second major theme that emerged during several of the interviews. Control means that there is a negotiation struggle and coordination is not achieved; one of the parties does not compromise or is not open to the other's suggestions. One party does not try to understand the other's rules and archetypes. As cited earlier, Littlejohn (1983) says, "control is participants feeling free to make choices that affect the interaction" (p. 70). A problem occurs when either the teacher or the

parent does not feel that their participation will make a difference and they have no choice but to give in to the other's demands.

To parents in this study, control meant that the teacher was making choices they didn't agree with or that the teacher wasn't following the parents' wishes. For example, Abigail said, "My idea of a barrier would be teachers have the education behind them and we are just a parent." When asked to clarify this statement she added, "The teacher has the education of how to teach the child. Parents are the parent. The teacher feels they have gone to school so they know the better way of doing it. They know what they think is in the best interest of the child where sometimes we lose control as a parent because the teacher tries to take the control away from us." Also, when describing a time she met with a teacher about her daughter's health affecting schoolwork she said, "I was very straight-forward and got to my point of what I wanted done. I didn't hem-haw. I just kept control of the conversation. I felt if I gave up control, I was giving up control of my daughter's life. I'm the parent. Her health is very important and I don't think the teacher needs to have the control over her health." Other parents felt that they had lost control when they were not notified of problems promptly and when they were rushed during meetings. Renae said, "Sometimes you can't do it in five or ten minutes. You have to take some time to set out a plan of what needs to be done or how I feel things should be and then maybe get some input from the teacher. They might not feel it needs to be done the way I feel it should be done."

<u>Comfort/Caring</u>

The third major theme that emerged from the study is comfort/caring. Coordinated management of meaning involves shared meanings and expectations. In this study, parents felt that comfort and caring are an important part of this coordination. These two aspects seem to be especially important in the parent/teacher relationship.

It appears that a parent is more comfortable with a teacher when they feel the teacher cares about their child and their child's situation about which they are meeting. When asked directly if they felt comfortable with their child's teachers, eight of the participants said yes, although several of their comments seem to contradict their affirmative responses. Lois said she feels comfortable with teachers but, "with the newer ones, it is a little more difficult just because it is a stranger...I don't feel threatened in any way. If I do, it is just for a second. It's that old thing coming back and I go okay, you're going to be strong for your kids and you need to do this. It is your responsibility so it kind of pushes you forward." Lois said her alternative lifestyle has proven to be a problem with some teachers. She said, "That has created some problems because I have run into a few teachers who are very leery, taken aback, kind of standoffish, and that makes it hard to communicate." However, she added that most teachers are more welcoming after they get to know her better; she thinks they appreciate the insight she gives them about her children. Madeline said she never felt uncomfortable, but she was overwhelmed at times. She said all of her meetings with teachers have been negative and they have involved negative situations. She described one meeting with several teachers where two of them walked out before it was over when her son refused to talk. This

bothered her because she felt those teachers didn't care about the situation. Renae said she sometimes feels uncomfortable, depending on the situation. She tends to feel more uncomfortable when the discussion involves a disciplinary problem. In reference to her son she said, "I don't know why he does what he does or why he said what he did and that kind of makes me uncomfortable." She thinks most teachers care and appreciate her input but, "then again, there are some that kind of think that their way of doing it is the way it should be done so they really don't [listen]. What you want or the input you put in kind of blows by. You can see it kind of going over their head." Renae also addressed the theme of caring. She felt that teachers sometimes made her feel rushed. "Sometimes they like to just get down to the routine of just talking, saying what's wrong. Maybe they don't present themselves well enough...Sometimes I come in to talk to the teacher and the teacher might be in a bad mood or he acts like he is pushed for time. Let's get it over with." Nina feels comfortable with teachers, but feels that sometimes they are not very receptive to what she has to say. She described a situation when her son was new at the school and the teacher told her that her son was not happy and was having problems. She said the teacher was not nice about it, had a negative attitude, and had stereotyped her child as being a problem. Sheryl said she felt comfortable talking with teachers but upon analysis of her transcribed interview, it was noted that she said she generally "had no reason to bother [teachers]" and that "teachers had enough to do without dealing with parents on top of it." These comments seem to imply some discomfort in meeting with teachers. She also mentioned that she had not been a good student and that she realized it was important for her children that she changed her attitude towards education.

Honesty

Honesty is the fourth major emergent theme from the study that is an important part of the parent/teacher relationship. Most parents feel that teachers are honest with them about situations involving their children. Overall, parents feel that teachers listen to what they have to say and value parental input, but not all the time. Many of them had at least one or more experiences where they felt the teacher didn't listen to or care about what the parent had to say. Lynn said, "I just found before that when I have tried to speak on behalf of my son, then the teacher almost didn't believe it. You know, try to support what he's saying and believe what he's saying, but yet I just a couple of times got a vibe that they didn't believe me." Roger said, "We try to be as honest...try to let the teachers know exactly what we feel is on her mind, as well as ours." He and his wife described one situation where they sought information regarding their child's eligibility for extra-curricular activities and were lied to. Roger said, "I believe we were lied to and we were rushed...I know the man had an appointment, he had someplace he wanted to go...I think we were told what we wanted to hear just to get us out of the office...We thought the decision had been made. We got one answer and then later, it was totally different."

CHAPTER 4

Conclusion

In this chapter, the results of the study are discussed. Recommendations are made for teachers and administrators. The limitations of the research are presented and implications for further research are provided.

Discussion

The results of this study support some of the past research and also add to the current body of literature. Like the results of the Leitch and Tangri (1988) study, this research found that a lot of communication is by phone, and that teachers generally initiate contact with parents due to problems. Like the Renihan and Renihan (1995) study, this study found that time is one of the biggest problems with communication between parents and teachers along with lack of feedback on student performance.

The results support many of the themes discussed in the Gareau and Sawatzky (1995) study. For instance, Gareau and Sawatzky highlighted communication, trust/openness/honesty, positive/caring attitudes, and power/conflict/roles as important characteristics of parent/teacher collaboration. Like this study, theirs found that trust meant that the school would keep parents informed about what was going on. Their study also discussed the importance of parents and teachers working together toward the same goals for the children. Conflicts and feelings of powerlessness occurred when there were disagreements over decision-making. Also, both studies dealt with the importance of educators and parents being positive and supportive toward one another. Both studies also address the issue of comfort, although the Gareau and Sawatzky (1995) study only

mentions it briefly under the category of power/conflict/roles. They said, "Although everyone in this study recognized that conflict is inevitable, not everyone is comfortable in its presence" (p. 470).

Based on the results of this study, teachers and administrators need to know that communication is perceived as a vital component of their relationship with parents. Parents expect to be notified of any change regarding their child's attitude, behavior, or class performance; they expect to be notified expediently. They also want to receive positive news regarding their child. Therefore, teachers should make it a point to contact every parent at least once with praise about their child.

This point has caused me to reevaluate my own teaching and to make some changes. For example, in the past I would send home an occasional note saying that a child did well on a test or that their grade improved. However, I did it only for a small percentage of the students I taught, and usually for the average and above students. In all honesty, it is easier to say something positive about students with good grades and behavior. Since the study, I have made a conscious effort to send home positive notes to all of my students at least once during the first semester of school. I make sure each student receives a note about their grades, behavior, attitude, involvement in extra-curricular activities, or good deeds toward another person.

Educators should know that what form of communication they use to reach parents is not as important as the contact itself. However, most parents find that for more serious matters, the telephone and face to face meetings are the most satisfying. When

meeting with parents, teachers should make every effort to be prepared, to be good listeners, and to offer suggestions and comments and to follow through on them.

Teachers also need to understand what control means to parents. Parents feel that they should have an equal voice in what happens with their child's education. They want to share in the educational process. They want teachers to be available for discussion and to not only give advice, but to take it as well. Teachers who approach parents with an attitude that they have all the answers will not find much success in communicating with parents.

Teachers should also know that attitudes of comfort/caring and honesty are also important to parents. Parents want to be welcomed at the school. They want to know that the teacher cares about their child's well-being. They want teachers to be patient during meetings and to share some of their time. They also do not want teachers just to say what they think parents want to hear. Parents respect and appreciate honesty.

This study has had a profound impact on me personally and professionally. Whenever I need to contact a parent, I sit and think about the situation from their point of view. I am more careful in how I word letters and how I welcome parents into my classroom. I think I am a better listener and I always offer suggestions for difficult situations. I also try to follow up on discussions through snail mail or e-mail.

During the interviews, I found that many times my perspective as an educator was different from that of the parents. Sometimes this was disconcerting and uncomfortable. As mentioned previously, the most difficult and eye-opening interview for me was with Madeline. I knew Madeline had several negative experiences with the school, but I did

not realize I was involved in one of the worst for her. I did not even remember the experience until she mentioned it. I thought I had done my job by attending the meeting, providing information about my class, and leaving when signaled to. However, she interpreted my leaving as being uncaring and unwilling to help. Upon reflection, I understood her viewpoint. She had taken the time to come to the school to help her children, and I and other teachers left before the problems had been solved. That was certainly not collaboration on my part.

The results of this study are certainly applicable to the coordinated management of meaning theory of communication. To reach understanding, two parties must have an active and cooperative relationship. If parents and teachers come together thinking they want things handled their way, without listening or offering valid input, they will never reach agreement and resolve conflict. Vital elements to this relationship are honest, caring attitudes; also both sides must be willing to compromise.

Limitations

As with all studies, there are limitations in this one. One limitation is the small participant sample. Due to time constraints and willingness to be interviewed, only nine participants were interviewed. To get a true picture of the parent/educator relationship at Noname, one would need to speak with the majority of parents and educators involved with students in grades 7-8. Second, this study speaks only to the Noname school district. Although there would be similarities, one could not necessarily generalize the results to other school districts. Third, a limitation could be that I have taught all of the participants' children. This could be seen as an advantage if they feel more inclined to

speak to me because they know me; or it could be a limitation because they are afraid I could use information against them or their child. Finally, a limitation could be the setting for the interviews. All of the interviews took place at the school. Because the study involved being comfortable/uncomfortable communicating with teachers, the setting could have been intimidating to some participants. They may have been more open with their responses in a different environment.

Further Research

It has been assumed by society that parents and teachers have equal roles in the education of children. Although this is the ideal situation, it does not happen in every case. There are conflicts of ideas and miscommunications occurring frequently. According to the results of this study, parents do think they should have an active role in their child's education and they feel their communication with teachers is important. However, they are not having successful or positive experiences in every case. According to the parental perspective, there are many conflicts to overcome, especially finding time to talk to or meet with teachers. Their main areas of concern are losing control of their child's education, feeling comfortable in dealing with educators, and working with teachers who care about their children and who are honest with their input and actions.

More research is certainly needed and warranted in the area of parent and teacher communication. More studies need to focus on parents of middle school children. More data is needed about how parents and teachers reach shared meaning. Further research needs to examine how conflicts in episodes can be avoided or resolved. It is important to

discover if the perceptions of parents at Noname are similar to those of the parents in other school districts. If so, more needs to be done in teacher education programs to help educators better communicate with parents. They need more information about how parents perceive them. Educators also need more tools to enhance their communication skills. If the communication between parents and teachers can be improved at the middle school level, students will have a more successful experience at that age and throughout high school.

APPENDIX

Parent-teacher communication and collaboration interview protocol

Date of interview _____

Time _____

<u>Personal experiences/opinions</u>:

Please describe a time when you had successful communication with a teacher.

What did you do as a parent to make the discussion satisfactory? What did the teacher do

to make it a satisfactory discussion?

Please describe a time when you had an unsuccessful discussion with a teacher.

What did you do/not do as a parent to make the discussion unsatisfactory? What did the

teacher do/not do to make it an unsatisfactory discussion?

What good things are happening at Louisville to promote parent/teacher communication?

What changes do you think need to be made to improve parent/ teacher communication?

When do you think you need to notify your child's teachers?

When do teachers need to notify you?

When do you think teachers expect to be notified?

How often do you contact educators? How often do they contact you?

Is there enough communication? Under what circumstances do you contact each other?

What types of communication occur (phone, fact to face, letters, email, etc)

Which types of communication are most effective?

Identify barriers to communication.

Do you feel comfortable communicating with your child's teachers?

Have you ever felt intimidated or powerless?

Has your communication with teachers dropped off since your child entered middle

school? Why?

Is there anything else I need to know about you personally in order to really understand

your thoughts about this topic?

Background information:

Name of participant

Age of participant

Participant's number of children

Ages/grade levels of children

Number of people living at home: adults _____ children _____

Years resided in the community

Participant's level of education: g.e.d., h.s. diploma, two year college, four year college,

masters, other

Combined income of adults residing in the home

Personal observations:

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