

SCHOOL-STAKEHOLDERS COMMUNICATION IN INNER AND OUTER CIRCLES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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ABSTRACT. I will discuss in this article the COVID-19 implications on school communication with stakeholders in the inner and outer circles. This article's starting point is that especially in crisis times, school communication is the key to development, maintenance and preservation. The article will refer to the school climate in crisis and teacher-student-parent communication. The first part will deal with crisis implications on school communication, harming communication processes and its new characteristics, as a transition from face-to-face communication to online communication and its implications. The second part will deal with the school climate in crisis and how this climate changes communication. Research shows that the stress resulting from crisis causes many hardships in the school climate and influences the welfare and resilience of those who are involved in the school communication process: students, teaching staff and parents. The third and last part will present communication models taken by schools in crisis and demonstrate the technological and social characteristics and patterns of its implementation, which repeats for schools in crisis. The summary will present general recommendations for effective school communication in crisis when it is recommended to adjust each communicational action plan to the school's unique characteristics.

Keywords: crisis, school communication, online communication, parent-school, communication in crisis.

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I. Introduction

Crises have a direct and negative impact on school climate. Therefore, it harms school communication processes both the students, on an individual level, and at the class and school level, with the community and other external parties [13]. Crises cause much distress in the school sphere and stress that the communication processes, which characterized the school before the crisis, find it difficult to respond in a crisis. These stresses are reflected in mental health [9] and accessibility and providing services [14]. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) report has indicated that over a billion teachers and 575 million students all over the world were influenced by closing all learning institutes as part of the strategy of preventing the COVID-19 pandemic spread in many countries and that closing the institutes had a direct impact on school communication methods with the communities [18].

This article engages with the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis on school – stakeholders’ communication while referring to the school climate during the crisis and the communication expressions on the technological and social levels. The article examines how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced schools’ inner and outer communication circles through an overview of local stories as expressed in articles that reported worldwide occurrences in the first two years of the crisis, and by creating a common denominator that enables an overall and global statement. The starting point of this article is that school communication is the key to developing and maintaining relationships, especially in times of crisis.

II. The COVID-19 crisis implications on school communication

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a global crisis that has affected school communication with parties in the inner and outer circles of school. This impact changed communication processes and created new communicational characteristics, like moving from face-to-face communication to online communication [5].

Examining the crisis implications on school communication demonstrates gaps between the coping of schools that have technological accessibility and schools that do not have infrastructure or communication literacy [15]. Many countries were forced to cope with a lack of adequate and efficient communication infrastructures both in responding to pedagogical needs and student psychological needs due to the crisis. These needs include coping with fear and anxiety, managing the feeling of sociologically and pedagogically “staying behind”, and coping with uncertainty [1].

One of the notable examples in this context is expressed in the Kenya Ministry of Education report [16], by which closing all learning institutes to stick to the international and national instructions of social distancing, lockdown and self-isolation, disrupted learning processes for over 18 million students and threatened their ability to achieve sustainable education. Before the pandemic, the common learning system in public schools, elementary and high schools, in Kenya was based on face-to-face teacher lectures and did not include distance learning platforms. The crisis has disconnected the interpersonal communication between schools and the community and instead, one-way mass communication was established between the students and parents and the government through continuous national broadcasts on radio and television, and online platforms. This harmed marginal communities where most of the parents are computer illiterate and have no access to technology [15].

Having computer infrastructure became crucial during the crisis and its absence interrupted the education processes of the “pandemic children” and caused a significant threat to their life quality in the post-crisis society. In the absence of communication infrastructure, the forecast is that the “lost generation” will be uneducated and will not be able to renew economic, educational, and social processes in the post-crisis world. For this reason, education institutes were required, and still are, to quickly adjust to crisis reality and implement distance learning communication models through computer infrastructure [2].

Depending on infrastructures is only one part of the change in the communication process. The second part is the way the crisis “forced” schools to rely on the families in the communication process with the students, especially in communication with young students in elementary classes. School communication, including staff, teachers, and management, changed from direct and immediate with the students to mediated by the parents or other significant factors in their lives [5]. Adding mediating factors to student-school communication requires consideration of the social and economic background of the families, who were required to join the communication process since there is a gap between teaching times and the educational value received by students from different backgrounds [3]. The lack of continuous and regular communication based on face-to-face interaction between students, parents and teachers had a negative impact on children from low-income families and children with mental health problems. While families of high socio-economic backgrounds tended to invest in their children’s online learning and help their studies [17].

Another aspect of the crisis impact on school communication is the impact on the school staff, especially the teachers. With no regular communication, teachers had difficulty implementing their professional role in teaching and supporting their students [17]. With no infrastructures and teaching programs

suitable for a crisis in alternative communication means, teachers were forced to engage in professional development in order to succeed in the transition to distance learning, both in the content, and the accessibility and quality of communication [6].

This perception requires long-term communicational thinking since these characteristics are not unique to the COVID-19 pandemic. Humanitarian, economic and health crises tend to be long, complex and have a long-term impact on welfare and education [11]. Although school closing during the pandemic was on an unprecedented scale, crises are usually not like that. Reviewing historical situations in which schools were closed and the communication routine was disrupted shows how this caused enormous losses in learning disruption unequal access to learning and social isolation. For these reasons, planning the response and immediately establishing alternative communication in the medium to long term is essential [8].

III. School climate in the COVID-19 crisis and its implications on school communication

School climate changes in crisis and influences school communication. The stress resulting from the crisis affects the welfare and resilience of all the parties involved in school communication and coping with the crisis should refer to the students, parents and school staff [13].

This framework should consider implications on the cognition level of students whose learning processes were influenced by being exposed to stressful and traumatic situations; implications on student social-emotional development and academic ability; and implications on social-emotional level, while the common reaction is emotional and social isolation as a result of trauma that may include avoidance or over-arousal behaviors. All these

implicate the school climate. With regard to teachers, two sets of stresses should be considered. One is the teacher coping with the challenges the whole public faces, simultaneously managing work and family in crisis, for example. The other is their professional functioning which requires them to support their students' coping. These tensions also seep into the school climate in times of crisis [17].

School climate was significantly influenced during the COVID-19 crisis by moving learning to home and as a result, transferring the authority and supervision of learning to the parents. The Technology Acceptance model demonstrates that the degree to which the individual uses technology is directly correlated with the degree to which the individual accepts the technology. Therefore, parents' decision to use distance learning technology will directly influence their children's learning and academic success [7]. In the current crisis, many parents did not have the tools for learning skills through online communication and without direct communication with the teachers, or their support, parents complained about incompetence to help and guide their children in using the technology and learning [15]. Additional barriers were parent reports of pedagogic difficulties, as not knowing teaching strategies or how to motivate for learning, as well as new difficulties in their relations with their children, as struggling with them when they do not want to learn or coping with children's different behavior in the learning space comparing to their regular behavior at home [5]. In crisis reality, learning became inconsistent and discontinuous. Most of the parents did not communicate with the teachers during the distance learning period and those who did communicate regularly were part of private institutes that have anyway offered Zoom meetings and technical support. In this sense, the experiences of parents whose children studied in private schools and kept in communication with their teachers were more positive [15].

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The teachers, on their behalf, were required to have adapted training for communication with parents in crisis. For example, in Indiana, in the United States, teachers have created unique communication strategies with parents in cases where student learning gaps were identified. A school survey indicated that in these cases, parents were not aware of the assignments or how to check them, so the school concluded it should help teachers communicate with the families, support and provide dedicated professional development. This professional and proactive development of school-parent communication supported the increase of opportunities for positive teacher-student-family communication [6]. Accordingly, in cases where continuous communication was maintained, positive findings were found. For example, in a school that based communication on Maslow's needs model to maintain a positive school climate, a sense of security was established by creating parental involvement and preserving the school culture, community pride and a sense of self-esteem of the parties [10].

IV. School communication models during the COVID-19 crisis

In crises, schools use alternative models of communication with factors in their inner and outer circles, which reflect the technological and social characteristics of the communication process. An optional framework for school communication in crisis relies on the life circle of Grissom & Condon [12], which proposes five stages for coping: (a) mitigation/prevention (b) preparedness (c) reaction (d) recovery (e) learning. In the pre-crisis period, crisis management requires mitigation and prevention strategies and preparedness strategies. An immediate and accurate reaction to the crisis allows the model to move to the recovery stage and to learning for the next crisis. Successful navigation between the crisis stages requires effective use of communication systems.

For example, using several communication modes to reach different parties with targeted messages and create reassuring, clear and transparent content that places the problem in the community context. There should be two-way communication to collect information from the field and send it back to the field. The information transfer should be frequent and constant. Emotional intelligence should be developed. Regulation and emotional self-management and managing others to cope with the stress and trauma created by the crisis. For this, one must actively listen, accept criticism, and develop authentic relationships with the students and staff.

The economic and social status of the school and the community has great significance in implementing a communication model in a crisis. As seen in the research of Bonal & González [3], who have examined school closing influence on learning gaps of children from different social backgrounds in Spain, found that middle-class families have managed to keep higher standards of education quality whereas children from socially weakened families had fewer learning opportunities. The gaps had some reasons, including learning conditions at home and social and technological differences. The learning condition at home changes according to the physical space at home, the accessibility to the internet and access to technological devices. In addition, the unequal impact of the crisis on parental employment, for example, dismissal, change the social and psychological conditions that guarantee adequate learning processes. Examining the learning opportunities and homework working space found that the public schools did not develop school communication or assignments and waited for new instructions from the Ministry of Education, while subsidized and independent schools did not stop their teaching activity. One of the possible explanations for this difference is the economic dependence of private schools on parent payments and they have required to continue and serve the families despite the unusual circumstances.

A. Review Stage Technological patterns and characteristics of school communication during a crisis

Having technological, accessible and software infrastructures are crucial for school communication in a crisis. Work models should be coordinated with the dominant communication means both technologically and in its content.

One of the models developed in this field is the model of Bojović, Bojović, Vujošević & Šuh [2], which allows a fast move from the traditional learning model to the distance learning model in a crisis. The assumption is that distance learning has to be student-focused, and teachers should know students' characteristics to identify potential barriers to learning. The acquaintance will create a strategy that reduces barriers and increase motivation to distance learning. Therefore, two methodologies should be adopted: (a) activity-oriented teaching, for example, active learning; flipped classroom; project-based learning. (b) technology-oriented teaching, for example, online courses, teaching through social media, and game-based learning.

The model implementation has five stages: (a) preparation that includes practices as redefining the course objectives; effective support for student needs, for example, technological need, costs of geographical constraints; establishing technical abilities like virtual class and access to infrastructure with organized learning materials; establishing administrative structures compatible with distance learning and organized technical support. (b) planning that includes checking teacher knowledge in preparing teaching materials; selecting an online platform that matches the institute budget; guiding students in using the selected platform. (c) updating the infrastructure to support a stable internet connection. (d) an implementation that includes resource allocation, for example, creating virtual classes, distance laboratories, or social networks; making high-quality presentations, recorded lectures, and electronic books; monitoring learning and technology use. (e) evaluation that includes content

and technical feedback; the online platform performance evaluation; testing of student knowledge [2].

The most important technical aspect is accessibility, equipment and technical support must be provided to children from weakened backgrounds. Along with accessibility, technology-adapted content must be taken care of. Distance learning methods should include effective teaching and consider the mapping subjects that are expected to be affected by not having face-to-face communication [17]. In adapting learning contents to technology, a distinction must be made between online learning and emergency distance training. during the pandemic, many teachers decided that the best way to communicate with the students in laboratory classes is through synchronic lectures and keep the students involved by (a) adjusting lecture guiding materials to distance teaching needs. (b) developing new methods to involve students like using Instagram or making an online portfolio as an alternative to research work as a final evaluation. (c) creating a digital internship for developing scientific thinking skills and creating scientific literacy exercises for use in distance classrooms. In addition, distance laboratories and online research experiences have been established, for example using home laboratory kits [4].

Teacher training for online teaching required professional development. In Indiana, preparatory work was done that included vacation days to prepare the courses; building an alternative schedule of 3-4 lessons a day; the technology department created user accounts and encouraged them to use Google Suite for Education, especially Google Hangouts and Meet; teachers created "How to" videos: developed methods for sending emails to students from the grade books, formulated tips and tricks for using Zoom classes; and finally, the technology department developed a call forwarding feature from the school phone so that teachers could call from personal cell phones while keeping their numbers private. Schools operated from the assumption that

relationships have to be built to help the school identify the needs of students and parents as well as create opportunities for community involvement through communication technologies [6].

B. Patterns and social characteristics of school communication in a crisis

Social aspects of school communication in crisis are aimed to provide for the social welfare needs of the students, the parents, and the teachers, even when there is no traditional and ordered learning in school due to the crisis.

Community involvement is a significant parameter in establishing school communication in a crisis. The Finn church aid [11] working model has proposed the following activities: when the emergency allows, start explanation activities that aimed to bring the children back to school; harnessing existing mechanisms and key stakeholders to lead explanation; involve the community in identifying children who remain out of school; using language and media accessible for children. The communication must emphasize improving student welfare: paying attention to lonely students; giving space for personal and emotional expression; paying attention to interests; positive encouragement for achievements; creating welfare teams; creating a routine that allows a sense of normality and security. In addition, the communication process should distinguish learning by using various methods of collection: interest, ability, and often switching groups, as well as peer learning.

Communication with school in a crisis influences also social aspects related to the students' home sphere. Research on coping with distance learning in Mindanao, Philippines, found that parents became more involved in their children's education and replaced the teacher role. Accordingly, it was found that they tended to lower their expectations of learning results, and focused

on the positive fact that their child even studies during the crisis [5]. This support involved more the mother than the father and in younger children. In addition to the technological accessibility aspect, families with lower parental education have fewer resources and knowledge to help their children with school tasks. These limitations became more acute as support from the school was reduced and demands for autonomous work by students increased [3].

An effective communication model in crisis will make the crisis characteristics into learning and development opportunities. This strategy application is shown in Balica's [1] research, which deals with coping with fear and anxiety in crisis by making the brain look for knowledge and solutions for action and adjustment. For example, worry may trigger curiosity to know more about the virus or how the body functions. A communication strategy that enables this would be the establishment of social networks where students and adults positively interact about their feelings and share knowledge. In this context, the research of Dryden-Peterson [8], which deals with the importance of hope and providing a perspective for a positive future, should be mentioned. Children need belonging relations and sense of purpose, even if they are not at school. In other words, communication is required to establish a school climate even outside the physical school. Belonging relationships are the basis for learning, and in times of uncertainty, it is even more important. Diaries of children isolated in their homes revealed similar patterns. They missed communication with their friends and teachers, laughter and everyday conversations. Despite the tendency of individuals in crisis to focus on "one day at a time" with the uncertainty created by the crisis, families and teachers must help children continue to see long-term goals, piece together their current situation and plan for the future. Children need a horizon to feel safe and plan the future. This requires communication that will create a school routine that allows predicting and thinking beyond the present moment and a sense of hope about the future.

V. Summary

The basic assumption of this article was that communication in crisis is the key to success in coping with the crisis. The more the infrastructures, contents and communicational strategies development focus on how schools use technological communication means to build bridges with families and find out what are the parties' needs, the more help the teachers can get to develop strategies that support student distance learning. Researches show that communication is an important and significant parameter in establishing a stable routine, transferring positive messages, and providing emotional and technological support and social, scholastic and professional framework for all parties in the communicational process.

In crises when a school closing strategy is taken, the importance of supporting parents in monitoring their children's welfare along with providing technical support in coping with distance learning tools should be considered. Social values and emotional content should be combined in the communication process and the opportunities for conversation, ventilation, normalization, and resilience building in the online curriculum, should be increased. Stable and consistent communication that includes positive communication content that produces an inclusive atmosphere that promotes self-regulation should be established. Teachers and school staff should be guided and trained both on the technological aspect of operating alternative communication systems and the emotional aspect to support the students.

The recommendation is to map the unique characteristics of the school, its surrounding community, the teacher and staff needs, locate families with special needs, and integrate these findings in the process of building a communicational action plan. School's unique characteristics must be considered when adapting the communication process to action during a crisis so that the

latter will suit the accessibility to technology, the socio-economic status and education of the parents and students, the abilities and skills of the staff and how the crisis has specifically affected the school area.

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