

FROM DISTANT TARGET GROUPS TO INVOLVED STAKEHOLDERS: DEVELOPING DIALOGIC SCHOOL COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Knowingly planned communication activities are an essential asset in the performance of organisations, including public schools. In this paper, the core premise is that communication management in general education schools is an important field which currently lacks scholarly attention as well as practical guidance for school management.

Numerous communication management definitions and models have been proposed following different paradigms and perspectives. Still, they all have one aspect in common: the audience to whom the messages are directed. Some theorists suggest that communication does not exist without the recipient, and effectively planned communication should be based on their interests or, moreover, involving them for the institution's success. Thus, it is crucial to map schools' target groups and stakeholders to explain the nature of school communication in general.

In this qualitative study, in-depth interviews were conducted with 19 Estonian school principals to understand their views about the role various target groups and stakeholders have on public elementary and high school communication. By applying a targeted sampling strategy, the most diverse representation of participants was ensured based on the profiles of both schools and school leaders. During the interviews, a projective technique was used enabling the principals to schematically position school's stakeholders in accordance to social circles, importance, and communication intensity.

The results showed that although the stakeholders of the schools are similar, the positioning of the stakeholders may differ even in between similar school types. School principals' assessments of the intensity, importance, or quality of relationships depend on the school's organisational culture, goals, current issues (e.g., school renovation), or sometimes the principal's personal contacts. In addition, communication practices are influenced by the initiative and attitudes of external stakeholders towards the school.

Keywords: *communication management, general education, school communication, school leadership, stakeholders, target groups*

Introduction

Though the term *target group* refers to whom an institution targets their messages, and *stakeholders* should have a “stake” (Bourne, 2016; p. 432), i.e., particular interest or benefit related to the institution or activity, the above terms are often used synonymously or in the same context without any semantic discussion. In this paper, I am not strictly committed to the deeper meaning of the terms due to the lack of a systematic and shared approach to communication management in general schools. Instead, I will use the terms in parallel, following the term usage in referred literature, with the conviction that, generally, while talking about the target groups or stakeholders, the authors mean the group related to or interested in the organisation’s main activities.

Some theorists suggest that communication does not exist without the audience to whom communication is directed, as such groups have become an integral part of different communication models (Köuts-Klemm & Seppel, 2018). This approach is based on the perspective that communication is, by nature, a two-way or dialogic process (Dozier et al., 2013; Köuts-Klemm & Seppel, 2018). At the same time, references to one-way communication can also be found in the literature (Köuts-Klemm & Seppel, 2018), which can be interpreted as information sharing without a need for a direct reaction. Hence, one could argue that stakeholders are more involved in the two-way communication process, while target groups are more passive recipients of one-way communication.

Regardless of how the parties involved in the communication process are named, their interests and expectations should be valued in communication management (Smith, 2009). Moss and DeSanto (2011) have found that every organisation in all different social sectors must define their target groups, work with them towards establishing relations, and organise interaction on a high level. Moreover, they stated that communication strategy development should begin with detecting the interests of target groups (Moss & DeSanto, 2011) and organisation-related stakeholders (Smith, 2009) because involving them is essential for institution’s success (Smith, 2009).

There is no question that the target groups and stakeholders are essential in organisations’ everyday activities, but how to define and involve them? Bourne (2016; p 433) has developed a widely used Stakeholder Circle methodology, which relies on five steps: identification, prioritisation, visualisation, and engagement of stakeholders, and last, the monitoring of the effect of the involvement. The author reminds us that though we are mapping people in groups, “each person constructs a different reality; each brain sees the world according to its own wiring” (Bourne, 2016; p 434). Thus, it is important to acknowledge the possible heterogeneity of each target group or stakeholders and to take such heterogeneity into account while planning professional communication activities.

Target groups and stakeholders of public schools

There is a growing public interest and attention towards schools, and thus the expectations for school leaders are higher than ever (OECD, 2014). The changing paradigm of school leadership states that nowadays, schools’ main task is not only teaching but

ideally also building trustful relations with parents and the community they serve (Porterfield & Carnes, 2012). Bush and Bell (2002) thus argue that cooperation competencies should be seen as a core competence of educational leaders, while many other scholars (Fullan, 2014; Ishaq & Kritsonis, 2009; Skogen & Holmberg, 2004; Wilcox & Cameron, 2012) emphasise that taking care of school's good external relations – including with the general public, regulatory publics, community, taxpayers, and the media (Kowalski, 2011) – is one of the principals' primary tasks. Henry and Woody (2013) claim, similarly to Smith (2009), that effective communication is also essential for overall school success, as only through effective and strategic communication can school principals withhold negative or false perceptions, and institutional stigmas about their institutions. Moreover, Fullan (2014) proposes that a school leader should not be just an institutional leader but should also become an educational leader on the system level capable of explaining education-related processes to their community. Maintaining good relations and managing expectations of various stakeholders e.g., parents, students, teachers, and the general public (Aab, 2015) – has thus become one of the critical activities of school principals (Brundrett, 2012) which requires skilled strategic management. Furthermore, effective school leadership is claimed to be based on shared management and involvement of these target groups (Kukemelk and Ginter, 2016).

Defining the research problem

There are noticeable similarities between the principles of communication management on the generic level and within school context (e.g., Smith and Brundrett, Moss & DeSanto, and Kukemelk & Ginter). Thus, professional approaches and knowledge from general communication management theories and practices seem, at first sight, to be applicable also in schools. However, in my earlier research (Tikerperi, 2016; Tikerperi, 2020), school leaders have claimed that communication management in schools is much more complex because of the sensitivity of information (related to minors), lack of expertise, heavy workload, and the fact that schools' primary purpose is teaching. After all, school staff, including principals and teachers are education specialists for whom communication management is an additional task they have to fulfil without specific knowledge, a standard approach or formalised training. The above is also the reason why school leaders have expressed the need for school-specific support materials that would provide them with critical knowledge about communication management (Tikerperi, 2016).

Different communication models vividly illustrate the crucial role of the audience to whom communication is targeted. The current paper maps Estonian school leaders' views and perceptions about their schools' stakeholder groups and provides an answer to the following research question: how do Estonian school leaders describe the schools' stakeholders' role, position, and importance within school communication? The findings of the study provide important background for developing a model for school-specific communication management.

Methodology

The empirical part of this article relies on the data from qualitative in-depth interviews ($n = 19$) collected at the end of the year 2019 with principals of Estonian municipality-led schools. Although municipality-led schools are the most common school type within the Estonian educational system, the schools that the interviewed principals represent not only come from a variety of geographical locations (both city and rural areas); but also represent both secondary and upper secondary schools with varied student numbers (from under 100 to over 1000).

I decided to apply a purposive sample which enabled me to research out to specific people to illustrate the cases the study is interested in (Silverman, 2013). Such an approach has been deemed useful when the research topic corresponds to a limited number of data sources needed to make sense of the phenomenon (Robinson, 2014).

The data was gathered via semi-structured interviews, as the method has proven to be flexible enough for asking additional questions enabling to discover aspects that are not visible or known while planning the study (Gill et al., 2008). Interviews were combined with a projective technic which provided a good opportunity for the participants for visualising their opinions and enabled them to illustrate the importance each of their envisioned target groups has on school communication. The preliminary list of potential target groups (see Figure 1, sector C) was mainly based on the findings of a previous study among Estonian school principals (Tikerperi, 2016). Relying upon my previous empirical findings and the synthesis of different authors (e.g., Bourne, 2016; Kowalski, 2011), I created two schemas for positioning the stakeholders: in sector A, according to social circles; and in sector B, evaluating the importance of stakeholders and the intensity of communication.

The transcribed interviews were analysed using QCMap software (Mayring, 2014), following the qualitative content analysis steps and combining inductive and deductive coding. In analysing the projective technic task, the social circles (sector A) and the sectors of the two-dimensional chart (sector B) were used as deductive categories, which allowed a creation of two approaches for mapping the stakeholders.

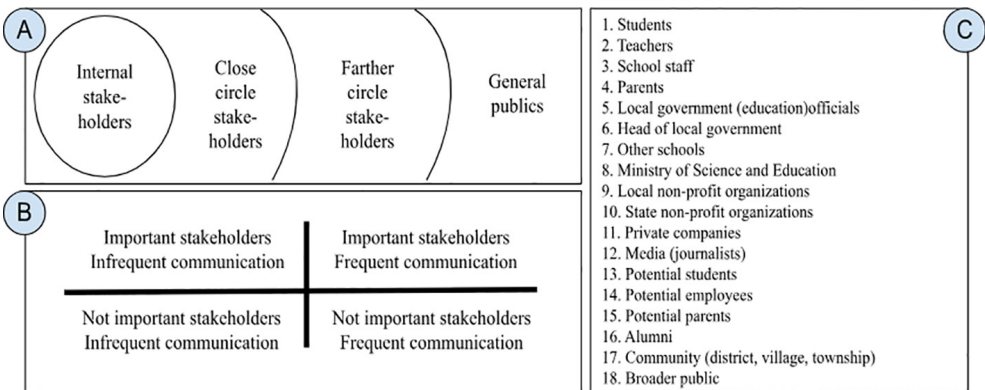


Figure 1. The projective technic task used during the interviews

It is important to acknowledge that these approaches are based upon qualitative data, and thus a quantitative follow-up study is required to provide generalizable results. At the same time, the distribution of the target groups is based on in-depth interviews, which means that the variability and situational nature of practices have been considered together with standardisation.

The structure of the results' chapter is based on the social circles' model (sector A), including the most significant aspects from the second approach (sector B).

Results

Interviews with school principals indicate that although the schools had mapped their stakeholders, this was not done in a systematic and targeted manner. Instead, the approach was often situational and quite unconscious, involving only some groups at the time. In fact, some school leaders later confessed that the interview had actually helped them to think for the first time about the parties involved in school's activities and the role they each play.

The preliminary list (Figure 1, sector C) included 18 target groups and stakeholders. Relying upon the practices of each of their respective schools, the interviewed principals added pre-schools, state gymnasiums, non-staff teachers and coaches, universities, former teachers, and other municipalities to the originally proposed list. In fewer occasions, specific organisations or institutions (e.g., theatre, museum) was included in the stakeholder list and one school leader also believed it to be important to consider teachers' family members as a target group.

During the interviews some principals also noted that all the above groups are also quite heterogeneous, and hence activities of a specific inner group or specific individuals may often influence the nature of the relationship. For example, parent's demands, expectations, and interest in involvement can vary widely; the group "other schools" may include interactions with some active partner-schools, while the majority of schools could still be seen as similar institutions from further social circles. Interviews also reveal that principals' views about their alumni is rather varied – while some positioned alumni in the inner circle of schools' stakeholders, others thought of their alumni as part of the general public sector. Sometimes such positioning is dependent upon the individual interests, but principals' views on the matter as well as formation of relationships is also shaped by the overall school culture (e.g., having a council or organisations for alumni) and the existence of informal active groups who are motivated to hold contact with their school.

Internal stakeholders

All the interviewed school leaders agreed that the internal stakeholders of the school were students, teachers, and other school employees.

Larger differences occurred in participants reflections about the school's largest stakeholder group, i.e., parents. All interviewed school leaders considered parents as

an important stakeholder who were primarily positioned as insiders, but sometimes also placed in the close circle. One interviewed principal even believed parents to be even more important stakeholder group than students, claiming that school's identity relies more on parents and their expectations. At the same time, interviews with upper secondary school principals also revealed that in upper secondary schools the role of parents decreases to such an extent that principals positioned parents into the broader public sector.

Interactions with internal stakeholders were undoubtedly considered very important and principals claimed to be in frequent contact with all those groups.

Stakeholders belonging to the close circle

Almost all school leaders see schools as part of the community meaning that the stakeholders belonging to the close circle include regional groups of people, institutions, organisations, and often local media. Pre-schools were also usually positioned to belong to the close circle, especially in smaller regions where pre-schools were directly tied to other stakeholder groups like potential students and parents.

All the principals participating in the study were heads of municipal schools, i.e., they were leaders of schools which were managed by the local government. The latter also helps to explain why the local education officer, or the leader of the municipality were often viewed as stakeholders belonging to the close circle. Still, interactions with those groups were rather infrequent which is why some school leaders viewed them as more distant.

Interviews indicate that although close-circle stakeholders are considered important by the principals the frequency of communication with that circle often depends on current topics and activities. Furthermore, interviews revealed that the nature of relationships with one's close-circle stakeholders was also dependent upon the personality of school leaders. For example, the principals in rural areas described their connection with the officials in local government to be more personal in comparison to the leaders of schools within a larger city.

Stakeholders positioned further away

Stakeholders in this group can be seen to some extent as those the school would often like to get closer to – for example, potential students and parents. Stakeholders with whom school leaders believed to be more in common despite infrequent contacts e.g., other schools, state-level educational organisations and private companies, were also placed here.

Stakeholders with more indirect involvement are thus not that crucially important for the school and the frequency of communication with them largely depends on the specific need or activities. One exception to the above views was still revealed – one participating school leader included the Ministry of Education and Science in this stakeholder group, despite its stated importance and frequent established communication.

General publics

All participating school leaders considered schools to be important institutions in society and believed that daily activities and school-life within educational institutions is of interest to the general public. In this way, some school principals divided the originally proposed interest group “media” into two. While local media organisations were mainly placed within the closer circle, public broadcasting with its intermediary role, remained in the broader public sector. Some principals also included various local- and state-level non-governmental organisations or private companies into the broader public stakeholder group. Such positioning was claimed to be the result of the fact that the schools did not have any ongoing co-operation projects with these stakeholders at the time of the interviews.

Notably, potential employees were seen as part of the general public, and some interviewed school leaders also placed the Ministry of Education and Science into this circle. Most school leaders evaluated the stakeholders in this section as unimportant for the school and they had only some occasional contact with them.

Discussion

Even though it was sometimes hard to distinguish between the terms “target group” and “stakeholder” during the interviews, it was evident that all interviewed school principals understood that such terms are used to refer to the audience towards who schools’ communication related activities are directed to. Thus, the interviews relied upon the presumption that school communication is mainly two-way or dialogic in its nature (Dozier et al., 2013; Kõuts-Klemm & Seppel, 2018).

Although several authors point out that communication planning begins with defining stakeholder groups (Bourne, 2016; Moss & DeSanto, 2011; Smith, 2009), the results of the current study indicate that school leaders’ thoughts about their stakeholders are rather superficial and situation-based. It was apparent that the participating school leaders were not accustomed to systematically define and prioritise their target groups or visualise their nature, as Bourne (2016) recommended.

Similar to my previous research (Tikerperi, 2016) which indicated that Estonian school leaders do not have any common approaches or understandings related to school communication, the current study revealed similar trends. Surely, it is debatable to what extent each school should develop and maintain its own characteristics and individual practices. At the same time, as schools are also representatives of the education system too different approaches can also confuse the wider society (also one identified target group). For instance, one could envision a situation when a student attends a new school whose communication culture is entirely different to their previous experiences, which might lead to not only confusion but overall dissatisfaction. The latter might also occur when the new school positions parents noticeably further away from its inner circle of stakeholders, so that parents’ interests might not be met.

However, as Bourne (2016) explained, it is common for stakeholder groups to consist of people with different worldviews and expectations. Several school leaders in my sample recognised the same idea, and some initial stakeholders (alumni, organisations, the media) were, as sub-groups, divided into different social circles. Even though it makes communication planning more complicated, it is a characterising fact that cannot be ignored. In fact, within the school context, this is one of the essential aspects in which educational specialists may need support and know-how in communication management.

Schools are no different from other organisations regarding defining target groups, though their stakeholders' amount and inner heterogeneity are significant. Specifically, according to different authors, schools' stakeholders include parents (Aab, 2015; Porterfield & Carnes, 2012), the community (Fullan, 2014; Kowalski, 2011; Porterfield & Carnes, 2012), the general public (Kowalski, 2011) and the media.

In the current study, school leaders were provided with a list with 18 potential stakeholder groups and interviewees were asked to reflect upon the list with the stakeholders of their own school in mind. Interviews indicate that school leaders' analysis was mainly based on their own professional experience, and thus several new stakeholder groups were added to the original list of some groups were divided in between different sectors. Available research literature does not surely provide an exhaustive list of possible stakeholders for the schools. Hence, it is difficult for school leaders to consider all the potential variability from the surface of their knowledge when planning communication work.

In summary, schools, school leaders and stakeholders can all be grouped based on similar characteristics and developed into a model that is as universal as possible. At the same time, as was evident from the study here, in addition to the heterogeneity of stakeholders (Bourne, 2016), there are also significant differences in the beliefs and perceptions of school leaders related to school communication.

Conclusions

School communication management is undoubtedly an increasingly essential and developing field, which is currently heavily relying upon the theories and practices of general communication management.

Still, school communication is a complex field due to the variety and heterogeneous nature of target groups and stakeholders. Managing them and planning communication according to their conflicting demands would be challenging even for a communication professional, not to mention members of the school staff who are educational specialists. Thus, school communication needs a separate, consciously school-specific and practical approach. Findings of the current study indicate that school's stakeholder mapping can provide some general guidance for the school leaders but finding a universal approach to explain all stakeholders' involvement practices is more complicated. Some unique approaches or personal relationships will always shape the school's communication. Thus, future research should involve the officials of the educational system so as to distinguish the standard expectations of the system and the unique features of each school.

In case of dialogic communication, it is not only essential to know the target groups and be guided by their interests but also to choose channels and methods of communication that enable dialogic communication. At the same time, it is impossible to cultivate personal dialogic communication with hundreds of parents, which further emphasises the specific nature of school communication. Thus, future research is needed to deepen our current understanding of school communication. Furthermore, additional knowledge is needed also to develop functional practical guidance for the school leaders. At the same time, on the practical level, it is essential that communication experts also understand the unique features of schools when developing these training and instructional materials.

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