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A Parental Response to Online Progress Reports

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A PARENTAL RESPONSE TO

ONLINE STUDENT PROGRESS REPORTS

A thesis project submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Masters of Education

By

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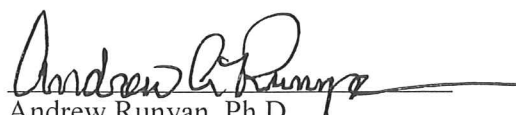
I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED
UNDER MY SUPERVISION BY Jane Elizabeth Miner
ENTITLED A Parental Response to Online Student Progress
Reports BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF Master of Education.

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ABSTRACT

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For years the academic and social progress of the elementary student has been communicated by paper reports. This project examined the parental response to the introduction of online progress reports in an elementary school. The student information system observed was the free Engrade class management system. The investigation was conducted in a small Christian school with parents of students in grades two through six. Parents were asked if the online communication bettered their understanding of their child's development. The literature review shows the value of the communication between school and home. Literature also uncovers the effect of technology on that relationship. The project reveals that parents are pleased with the access to online reporting. It is also discovered that the effectiveness of the system is directly correlated to the usage of it by the teachers. The project concludes by noting the options of the system that can be better used by the school and the parents.

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Chapter One: Introduction of the Study

Introduction to the Investigation

In some ways the elementary school never seems to change. Kindergarteners will probably cry on the first day. Teachers will have a good supply of stickers and treats. Parents will purchase new pencils and crayons and markers. Recess and lunch are always the student's favorite times of the day. More importantly to the atmosphere of the school is the always present communication between parent and teacher. All parties involved must understand the value of good communication. Communication is fundamental to building a sense of community and in meeting the needs that the child, the parent, and the school "share" (Graham-Clay, 2005). In this aspect, the elementary world finds itself in a rapidly changing realm. Technology has opened up new avenues of communication. The elementary teacher is in a unique position, one that allows for a personal level of communication about the physical, emotional and academic growth of the developing child. The meaningful communication of this overall progress is a key to the success of a classroom and eventually of a school (Cruz & Peterson. 2002).

To begin, the parent-teacher relationship needs to be investigated. The value of the connection between home and school should be discovered. Second, the success of technology in other areas of the classroom should be noted. Technology has drastically changed not only the pedagogical approach of education, but the parent's perception of the classroom. Third and more specifically the technology available to communicate student progress should be discussed. The introduction of the computer and the internet

must be considered in relation to the school to home correspondence. Lastly, the specific

systems and tools chosen by a school must be validated. If one system of communication

is chosen reasons for that system should be given.

The parent teacher relationship is extremely complex. Most would agree that the

role parents play in the child's educational experience is important (Price-Mitchell,

2009). Parents contribute to the school day in many ways. Parent-teacher organizations

are active in providing extra tutoring, recess and lunch monitoring, and fundraising.

Recent research shows that the social bond between the teachers and parents is a key

resource for reform (Bryk & Schneider, 2003). In order to make any changes in a school

format both parties must be in sync. The vision and idea of change must be shared to

create a common theme. A specific stated vision will aid in any transformation process.

The process of change is not always easy. Often communication between parents and

teachers falls below the standard expected.

Communication about school programs and student progress is a major aspect of

the parent-teacher relationship. Most parents are uninformed about teacher objectives and

most teachers do not understand parental goals for their children (Epstein, 2001).

Communication can be placed into two major categories; one-way and two-way. One

way communication in the classroom comes in the form of the progress report or a report

card. Here the teacher makes the effort to inform the parent of progress. Two-way

communication, which takes place during the parent-teacher conference, involves both

parties seeking to inform each other about the student's progress (Graham-Clay, 2005).

These communication processes are vital to the development of a successful school year.

Research shows that most parent-teacher relationships tend to place parents in a visitor

role. Only one-way communication takes place. The parent with a desire to be seen and to be heard is not recognized as a person with contributions (Miretzky, 2004). The shift to immediate technology can be an avenue for change of this paradigm.

Education has seen an increase in technology and the use of the computer at all levels (Guha, 2001). Many classrooms, including elementary, have changed due to the introduction of technology. Technology is now an active part of the instruction process in the form of smart boards, interactive computer web sites, and use of the internet for simple reference material. Electronic portfolios are making many inroads into the lives of teachers and young students. Parents have noted their enjoyment at seeing and even hearing their child through this digital aspect of education (McLeod & Vasinda, 2009). Portfolios have advanced significantly to allow the casual computer teacher to design a professional and useful parent communication tool. Families then become the center of a network where goals and services are delivered directly to the home (Englund, 2009).

An important part of the central network is the school web site. This is another area where technology has influenced and aided in parent relations. Most schools now have an attractive website where parents can go to view the monthly calendar, staff profiles, school fundraising events, and even lunch menus. Schools have found that posting homework on the web is an effective way to increase communication. Teachers often post tips for helping children with the homework, as well as updates of the daily lessons (Viadero, 1997). Some schools have designed online courses specifically designed to educate parents, this tends to make parents feel more involved with their child's education. These programs have shown themselves to be very successful in families that speak English as a second language. The computer can be used to teach

English and to help develop word-processing skills. These programs thusly serve a dual purpose by bringing parents into the schools and strengthening relationships with the community (Chen & Dym, 2003).

The benefits of communicating a student's progress via the internet are numerous. Parents can have immediate access to grades, give quick feedback, and ask questions about further assignments. Teachers have the flexibility and space to comment on subjective observed behaviors in narrative form. Professional looking print outs can be made at any time by the parent. This creates a good balance between the parent that desires a paper copy of grades and the one that desires to read information over the computer. Grades have become increasingly more important in the elementary classroom. Entire school systems often receive a grade from the state as to their performance. Individual schools are rated within their cities as to the reading and math ability of their younger children. Research shows that elementary teachers use a variety of factors to grade their students. Academic performance is by far the greatest contributing issue. Yet in differing proportions effort, participation, extra credit, and improvement all add to the final grade (McMillan, Myran, & Workman, 2002). This makes the flexibility of the internet communication crucial for the teacher that desires the parent to gain a complete picture of their child's progress.

There are several contributing factors to communicating the progress of the elementary student. The teacher usually remains with the students for an entire day. This creates a nurturing bond reflected in the practices of grading. The elementary classroom is set up so that the teacher grades all subjects. This situation generates knowledge in the teacher of the overall student's physical, emotional, and academic progress. That

knowledge often allows the teacher to be more lenient on one grade than another. Grades are reflected by the goal of the teacher to protect the self esteem of the child as well as the academic progress (Randall & Englehard, 2009). The combination of varied assessments between teachers and frequent personal input on grades makes the elementary progress and report card unique. Because of the unique and subjective form of grading that governs elementary education, frequent progress reports are vital. For report cards to be effective they need to take a more comprehensive approach than simply being sent to the parent 4 times a year (Cruz & Peterson, 2002). Is technology the answer to this dilemma?

As schools consider specific programs available to communicate progress, they will discover there are many options of systems available (Davis, 2009). It is important that the specific program being used be introduced in a positive manner (Lacina, 2006). The success or failure of any technology program hinges on the knowledge and attitude of those using the program. Research has shown that the personal beliefs of the teacher and the disposition that teacher has for the technology integration will predict the success of the program (Vannatta & Fordham, 2004).

Definition of Terms

CMC: Computer-mediated communication such as e-mail, web-sites and online grading systems (Thompson, 2008).

Engrade: An open-source product capable of maintaining records of grades, attendance, and assignments (Liakos, 2008).

LMS (Learning Management System): A commercial and open source available to implement web-based learning environments, requiring large servers, support staff and an expensive licensing cost (Baker & Rees, 2008).

Parental Involvement: The participation of parents in regular, two-way, and meaningful communication involving student academic learning and other school activities (NCLB, 2004).

Portfolio: A way to assess and document the learning of a student. It provides a voice for the student to choose what they consider important in communicating their own academic progress (McLeod & Vasinda, 2009)

SIS: Student Information Systems. An electronic internet system designed to track student's grades, attendance and transcripts. Systems are offered to school systems and individual teachers via the internet (Anderson, 2003)

Wiki: A wiki is a collaborative web site that provides knowledge in some domain. It is open so that anyone can enter information, or change a comment on anyone else's contributions

WILE (Web-Integrated Learning Environment): A learning management system that uses combination of either free or low-cost services already available on the internet (Baker & Rees, 2008).

Statement of the Problem

In the elementary classroom the communication between parent and teacher is vital to a successful year. Family involvement is associated with many positive results including greater standardized test scores, higher grades, better attendance and improved social skills (Henderson & Mapp 2002).   Epstien (2001) states, in her theory of parent

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involvement that two of the six major types of interactions are parenting and communicating. A primary controlling factor in that communication is the explanation of a student's progress. It is important to note that the elementary parent is experiencing the grading process, like their child, for the first time. Teachers must define grading rubrics for almost every project, which sometimes adds to miscommunication. The battle to make these events clear and comfortable is ongoing. Often confrontations arise from simple misunderstandings. The solution is not to make the paper report card the first communiqué of the year (Giannetti & Sagarese, 1998). Technology begins to give hope in the communication struggle. Using the internet a teacher can report weekly to the parent. Comments can be made about each subject. The parent can access grades and comments from the comfort of their home. Programs average grades, making record keeping burdens less by eliminating double entry of grades (Davis, 2009). Teacher and parent can "talk" via e-mail about concerns and questions. The following research questions need to be asked: Despite the popularity and success of the internet in many areas of education, does the internet provide a better communication tool for the progress of a student? Do teachers use the systems offered properly and effectively? Do parents feel comfortable in dialoguing using the computer? Without a paper copy to look at, does the elementary parent feel that this avenue of reporting progress is clear? If these questions bring negative answers the school is failing in the attempt to close the communication gap. If positive responses are found, the teachers and the school can continue to work at more effective ways to connect.

Scope of the Study and Delimitations

I am planning on doing an evaluation research with a qualitative design. Johnson & Christensen (2008) states evaluation research involves determining the worth or quality of an educational program. The primary purpose of summative evaluation is to lead the researcher to a judgment about whether a program is effective and whether it should be continued. The goal of my study will be to determine if the Engrade System used by the Northfield Baptist Christian School is effectively advancing the communication of the student's progress to the parent. Engrade is a free online class management tool. The internet program would fall under the broad category of a LMS. Because it is free it would be also be considered a WILE. Yet due to its limitations the Engrade system is better classified as a basic SIS. The student information system only provides the teacher a place to post grades, messages to parents, track attendance and create homework calendars. The system also gives the teacher access to posting quizzes, class discussions and academic flashcards for the students to drill at home as well as providing a place to build individual wikis with students or fellow colleagues. Northfield Baptist Christian School in Northfield, Ohio is an elementary school with approximately 140 students. It has been in existence for 30 years as a ministry of the local church, Northfield Baptist.

This study will be limited in some aspects. First, the comparison of the Engrade system to other systems will not be present. Although this would be valid for further study, the primary goal of this study is to discover the effectiveness of the system the school already has in place. Second, I am a teacher at the school. Due to the closeness of the teachers and parents, every effort will be made to make the interview questions pertain to the internet communication issue and not to the relationship of the parent to the

teacher. Third, the study will report the effectiveness of communication at only one

Christian elementary school. Any generalization concerning the effectiveness of the

Engrade system would require further research.

Significance of the Study

Ramirez (2001) states the improvement in communication will enhance

relationships between home and school. Research shows that more than 85% of teachers

interviewed used computers for record keeping (Keller, 2005). The conclusion seems to

be that teachers should enhance communications by using a simple system to report the

progress of their students. Baker & Rees (2008) report that due to its simplicity and

versatility Engrade is a good option for a grade book. Yet, is this true? In a small

elementary school, will teachers fully utilize the computer system? More importantly,

how will parents respond to the change from paper progress reports to the internet access

of student progress? It is the parent's use of any grading system that allows the system to

be successful. Technology can help support increased parent involvement when it is

carefully designed and parent focused.

The focus of my study will be on the effectiveness of the Engrade system to

communicate. The interviews given will disclose the system for its effectiveness and

ease of use. As the parents express their views and ability to use the system, the validity

of the entire program will be revealed. The information gathered in this study will aid the

school in the continued development of good parent teacher communications. The results

will be shared with teachers to aid them in better use of the system. The study will give

the parents a voice about how they would like to discover the progress of their students.

Methods of Procedure

Research Questions: Does the Engrade System communicate the progress of student effectively? Does the use of the system create better communication between parents and teachers?

The Engrade system is already in place at Northfield, but has only been used for one year. I will begin the study by gaining permission from my principal to evaluate the system. I will also ask that classes using the system no longer use paper progress reports. During the first half of the year I will make myself available for questions and guidance to both parents and teachers. It is crucial that parents be given comprehensive information about the use of the system. It is equally important that teachers understand how to use the system effectively. Using a qualitative style of open-ended interviews, I will speak face to face with participating parents and teachers of the school. A standardized open-ended interview will be constructed where the questions are in a specific order and asked exactly as worded with each person (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). The following constructs and questions will be asked.

A construct of attitude concerning the computer and internet will be used. Thompson (2008) establishes the principle that it is important to learn how often parents and teachers use the internet communications. The following questions will be included:

How often do you use the computer, excluding usage for school?

How often do you use the Engrade site to check the progress of your student?

How do you view security of grades on the internet?

A construct of effectiveness of the Engrade site itself will be employed. The parent must understand the information provided and be able to manipulate through the organization of the site itself (Englund 2009). The following questions will be incorporated:

Share your experiences with logging in and moving around the options offered on Engrade?

What aspects of the web site do you prefer most?

Share any additional thoughts, negative or positive, about the site itself.

Finally a construct of the communication of overall progress will be directly addressed. The following specific questions will be raised:

Has the use of Engrade changed your knowledge of your student's progress?

If given the choice, would you continue to use Engrade?

Would you expand the use of Engrade?

Please comment on your overall Engrade experience.

Thirty to 40 parents will be sought out to be interviewed. The requests will be submitted in the form of a letter and a convenient time will be agreed upon for the interview. The questionnaires will be given in person. A recorder will be used to assure accurate data. Conversations will then be transcribed and analyzed. A narrative description will be written. The final conclusions and data will be placed in a narrative for review. After completion, parents will be given the results, as well as staff members.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The Theory of Parent-Teacher Communication

Intentional Positive Communication.

To approach the task of evaluating a parental response to any educational program one must first consider the theory of parent teacher communication. Valid research has been conducted on many levels from the preschool to the college level concerning how and why parents and teachers do or do not communicate. For the purpose of this study, two theories will be discussed. First, the theory of intentional positive communication set forth by Schumacher & Richards (2008). This is important to mention because it was developed from the study of a smaller private school in mid-west America, matching similar dynamics to the school in this study. A critical piece of the communication puzzle is collaboration according to Schumacher & Richard (2008). The theory is built on collaboration between teacher and parent and seeks to bridge the gap between home and school. This collaborative effort endeavors to combat the issues raised by one-sided attempts to communicate by either party. If collaborative communication is not achieved the theory maintains that accusations, assumptions, avoidance, defensiveness, distrust, gossip, lack of support and misinformation will result. In contrast, when the parties seek to communicate accurate information; confidence, rapport, and mutual support will begin to appear. The theory concludes with its final aspect of teacher initiation. Schumacher & Richard's (2008) argument hinges on the idea that the responsibility must be placed on the school to initiate first contact. This contact must be positive in nature and most

importantly planned. The theory maintains that the parent then has the responsibility to communicate with the teacher.

Schumacher & Richard (2008) tested the theory with an intentional school initiative held at the beginning of the school year. This parent day was held with one purpose in mind; to make initial positive communication. No rules, procedures or policies were discussed. The teachers met with the parents one-on-one in an informal and relaxed setting. Parents were then surveyed one month later concerning their opinions of the initial effort to communicate positively, and their overall rating of the effectiveness of the school. The day proved to be very successful as over 50% of the parents considered the program to be an excellent idea. It is also important to note that 96% of the parents who were pleased with the school rated the communication as either excellent or good. On the other end of the scale five parents rated the school satisfactory and registered a communication rating of poor. This data clearly shows a correlation between parent satisfaction and school communication.

Overlapping Family and School Spheres.

Although conducted at a small private school, the theory of intentional positive communication, stressing collaboration, correlates with the theory of overlapping family and school spheres as posited by Epstein (2011). Epstein's (2011) theory states that there are three spheres of family, school and community controlled by three forces of time, experience of family and experience of school. These spheres overlap to create relationships and communication between parents and teachers. This theory was developed as a result of much research and interaction with large school groups

indicating that past theories, and attitudes of teachers towards parents, were not successful. Some teachers of the past, and some even in the present, hold to the thought that families and schools should be separate. In this mindset the teachers do not communicate with the parents efficiently because they believe education responsibilities to be solely in the hands of the school. They do not hold to the thought that the spheres of family, school and community overlap or even interrelate to develop a student's progress. Research also revealed that some teachers hold to a sequential view of communication. In this frame of mind, the school will communicate more with the younger student's parents and diminishes communication as the student grows and advances in grades. With this mindset a school is only recognizing the spheres of influence to be present in the younger child. There is also the teacher that feels that the parent teacher relationship should be shared. These teachers will ask for help in the classroom and send work home with the child for the parent to aid in completion. It is here that the spheres of family, school and community can begin to be developed and overlap. Surveys that have been validated over time have shown that the model of overlapping the communication burden encourages collaboration and strengthens connections between parents and teacher. It also proved that the teacher is in control of the flow of information. By increasing the flow of information parents respond favorably and also increase in their ability and desire to help their child. This theory also proved as Schumacher & Richard (2008) did that there is correlation between communication and parental favoritism towards teachers. Parents, teachers and students benefit from the overlapping communication efforts of family, school and community. As Epstein's (2011) theoretical model shows this is

especially true when it is understood that there are forces of time and experience also overlapping and contributing to relationships.

Both of the two theories above, although developed in two completely different settings have similar conclusions. Communication between parents and teachers must begin with the goal of collaboration. The process must also recognize that the teacher is the initiator. The effective teacher will begin the year, proceed throughout and end the year, with a foremost thought of collaboration between home and school. Lastly good communication has a direct correlation to the attitude of the parent towards the teacher and the school.

The Value of Parent-Teacher Communications

Parent-Teacher Responsibilities.

Although theory has established the existence of parent-teacher communication, and has somewhat shown its value, it is important to further investigate. Communication between the school and the home also builds and develops relationships. Even before a child begins school, the parent-teacher relationship exists. It may not be strong or well established but it is also not neutral. A parent comes to the school with pre-conceived notions of the teacher, administrator and the school system as a whole. Yet as they walk through the doors of the building, the school also holds ideas about the parent. As the days of the school year progress, communication is the key to developing that relationship. The ability or inability of the school to faithfully contact and speak to the parent will be the driving factor in the outcome of the relationship with the family. Schools have struggled with this task of communication for years

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Volumes of research exist on the educator's struggle to effectively and purposefully, communicate with the parent, or caregiver, of a student. To begin with, the attitude and beliefs, of the teacher towards themselves and the parent, plays a key role. Studies have shown that attitude towards oneself, or efficacy, does influence how a teacher communicates and collaborates with the home (Barnyak & McNelly, 2009). If a teacher has a healthy sense of professionalism and feels secure in their teaching role they will be more prone to support parent involvement in their school and even in their own classroom. Teachers that are confident in their task of fulfilling objectives and accomplishing learning goals will embrace the idea that the parent can help in this task. Those educators that were found to have good self-efficacy supported programs that involved the parent in learning activities at home, paraprofessional roles at school, and extra-curricular activities outside of school. These teachers were able to develop a healthy parent-teacher relationship, producing improved basic skills, better retention in the summer, and enhanced in-class behavior of the students.

Souto-Manning and Swick (2006) also investigated this concept and found several contributing factors. As in all relationships teachers are influenced by their own context and cultural experiences. The teacher that has a positive parent figure in their own life might project that relationship onto the parent child relationships encountered in the classroom. The opposite will also hold true. An educator with little understanding of a parent leadership role may react with offense at an assertive parent. A teacher without positive partnership roles in their past will struggle with the families of their students. Another factor influencing the attitude of a teacher is the unspoken policy of the school. A school environment that places the parent in a limited function or even in isolation will

dictate how a teacher responds to the parent. Although changing this factor may be out of the control of a teacher, being aware of it will be a healthy start to initiating change. Contributing even more to the belief of a teacher is the assumption that the parent's role is limited to just the educational time with the child. Many teachers exclude the legitimacy of family patterns. How and what a child does in the home in the everyday living experience effects the academic growth of a child. This paradigm is often overlooked when approaching a parent. A parent reading to a child will provide influence; but so will spending time with grandma, or living in a home where another culture is embraced. A teacher that strives to effectively communicate with the home must be aware that their own thoughts and preconceived ideas influence their actions. Good communication begins with recognition that parents already play an important role in the education of their child.

A possible explanation for the struggle to become effective communicators with parents could be found in the idea that teachers are not properly trained. While exploring this concept Fredericks & Rasinski (1990) uncovered principles that teachers should adopt when striving to conference with parents. Teachers need to be careful of an attitude that portrays them in total authority. This often creates defensiveness in the parent or caregiver; where understanding and co-partnership should exist. A relationship between teacher and parent should be one of understanding and openness. If a teacher has made a mistake they should admit their limits and create an environment where the parent will also be honest. Communication to a parent should never be full of education jargon. This only separates the teacher from the parent and causes lack of comprehension in the conference. A good communicator will be careful to make sure that their message

is understood by their audience; in this case: the parent. Perhaps one of the most important factors in communication is the actual words one uses. Teachers need to be careful not to label or to allow personal opinions to flavor their speech. Education of the teacher in basic communication skills is crucial in developing strong parent relations. Hornby and Witte (2010) discovered the same explanation for a lack of parent involvement in inclusive schools. The conclusion was made that there is an absence of training in the college level concerning parent involvement. The training of teachers at the college level is highly concentrated on the development of the learner. This is well needed but must be supplemented with additional training on the topic of parent interaction. As the young teacher leaves the college campus and goes into the classroom they must be aware of the value and importance of their relationship with the parent. They need to be equipped and confident to implement a plan to effectively communicate to the parent or care-giver of each student they encounter.

Educating teachers on how to communicate is crucial, but as one looks closer, it is evident that this communication is only effective if the teacher makes a purposeful effort to establish said communication. As teachers try to build the bridge of communication to the home they must first be involved with the families. Aronson (2002) explores this idea in a study of schools that sought to increase their parent involvement. It was discovered that vital to communication was a shared understanding of what family involvement looked like. Often times a school will claim to have good communication with the school population but it will only include a few key parents. Healthy strategies that dictate a connection to the unsupportive parent are needed. These strategies need to be presented to all parents. Often times this takes a great effort on the staff to produce liaisons to

speak to parents or surveys to be given to every parent. Communities of teachers need to meet and brainstorm ideas of how this task can be accomplished. Accountability of action on those ideas needs to be put in place. Discovering the needs and attitudes of parents will lay a ground work for good communication. Reaching out to those parents who do not usually get involved is a challenge. Sensitivity and cultural awareness should be demonstrated and documented. A school with a plan will have an atmosphere where a good and healthy home-school relationship can exist.

As a school makes a plan to increase parent involvement the obvious must not be overlooked, the parent must be participating in the process. Barriers of beliefs, perceptions and cultural norms can be discovered by including the parent in constructing a plan of communication. Parents must not be approached as if they are inadequate to help in the education process or in the school policies. Many traditional opportunities are in place for parents to interact with teachers. Fund raising, bake sales, lunch monitoring, recess aids and reading to students are just a few. Parents can do more and when asked to do so begin to have more ownership of the school and the education process. Parents can be asked to become involved in school management by running a telephone network to other parents, being a voice to the community for the school, running small groups in the classroom, and assisting in the planning and participation of extracurricular activities surrounding the school year. Educators should provide regular meetings where all parents have a voice. This often does take a great effort to include the low-income and disadvantaged parent. Research has shown that as the parent is involved in the workings of a school day, and in fulfilling of school goals, communication becomes effective (Jesse, 1997)

Benefits of Good Relationships.

There are schools and educational systems that have effectively put into place productive parent involvement practices. These schools have shown that in doing so communication increases; and students advance in the education process. One of the areas where wholesome parent relations have shown the greatest benefit has been in racially diverse and urban schools. As in all schools, the relationship between parent and teacher is primarily based on their perceptions of each other. This is no different in a racially diverse school. Studies have shown that socioeconomic and cultural/ethnic factors do significantly contribute to the lack of quality in the parent-teacher relationship (Nzinga-Johnson, Baker, and Aupperlee, 2009). Racism may play a role in the parent's sense of acceptance, and in their feelings towards the school or teacher, so an extra effort must be made to cross those barriers. Success has been found in these areas when the teacher makes a concentrated effort. The positive parent-teacher relationship has also been noted to reduce absenteeism. The idea that school, family, and community can work together betters the overall school environment; and allows students to be comfortable in class. This increases their desire to attend school. Some parent involvement practices that have worked to bring this about have been: home visits, producing parent contracts to define school attendance, and conducting workshops on how to get children to the school (Sheldon & Epstein, 2004).

Another community of learners helped by good parent relations is the special education students. Studies in this area show that often parent involvement is very small; and plans to improve are often lacking (Hornby & Witte, 2010). The schools that recognize this and address it have shown marked improvement in communication and in

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improved mental health for the students. Some of the activities that demonstrated themselves to be helpful in special needs students are the same activities helping all schools in building family-school communication. The most important of these continues to be collaboration with the teacher and defining a parent involvement policy. It has been shown that if parents are asked to communicate their own vision of the school they will be more involved. This will then translate into better success for the student.

The assumption that success of parent-teacher relations improves communication and student achievement has been tested by researchers for years. In the present day educational world, this collaboration is deemed a success if the test scores improve. Sheldon, Epstein and Galindo (2010) posed this very challenge in their study of math scores. The study was conducted in 41 schools ranging from elementary level to high school. To make the study diverse schools were chosen in both urban and suburban settings. Sheldon, Epstein and Galindo (2010) offered math related involvement activities to parents in an effort to see if these activities would improve both school-home relations and overall math scores. The data showed that with the improvement of parent relations, math scores did increase. This study was conducted to also show that math is often viewed differently at home than at school. Teachers are often not trained in how to involve families in the practice of math outside the classroom. Most schools and classroom teachers place the role of the parent in improving language arts scores. Overall the study showed that schools need improvement in this area of community involvement; specifically in math, and where it was taking place, it was working.

Government Contribution.

The increased presence of standardized tests in education is a result of the government effort to improve overall education in America. From the outset it was recognized that the role of the parent was crucial. This is why in the 2003 No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) an entire section is dedicated to parent involvement. The installation of this law also came with funds to those schools that adhere to the standards set by the act. So with the motivation of money, schools are now scrambling to put into place parent involvement policies that can be proven with data. Section 1118 of the law recognizes four principles essential for parent involvement. When these principles are enacted communication with the home and school does improve. The first is that is most important relationship requires multilevel leadership. States, districts, school and teachers must be working together to develop policies and programs that reach out to the parent. The second is that the parental involvement should be component of school and classroom organization. This is the law's way of recognizing the importance, and significance, of a parent's connection to the school. The law goes on to state that the success of learning is the responsibility of both the school and the parent. This alone changes the attitude of some schools, which would prefer to operate isolated from the community. Lastly, the law emphasizes the equity of the task. It states that all families need to be included in the policies, not just the easy to reach parents. This supports the research mentioned above. Cultural boundaries must be crossed and socioeconomic barriers traversed.

As Epstein (2005) reviews this law the conclusion is made that it is possible to fulfill the letter of the law. Yet no law is perfect and this one is no exception. Lacking in the language of the law is the mention of teams or teamwork. Schools often try to implement

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parent policies with only one person in charge. NCLB also states that school-parent

compacts should be drawn up, but is ambiguous on how this should be done. Since

signing a pact that may or may not be kept is easier that actually carrying out a plan,

many schools have reverted to simply giving their parents a paper to sign indicating they

will be involved. This does not truly reflect the intent of the law. NCLB is a good

beginning and motivator for schools to develop excellent communication through healthy

and strong parent-school relations.

It is clear that the parent-teacher relationship is vital to communication of any school

program. Whether it is preconceived ideas, training, new policies, social and academic

programs, or the government mandates the growth and development of the program is

fundamental. As one combines the knowledge of theory and the practical understanding

of the parent teacher communication, one must recognize that the development of today's

technology and its effect on the overall classroom must be investigated.

Technology Influences Parent-Teacher Communication

   Television Influences.

The development of the parent teacher communication can be traced closely to the

development of technology. At the outset communication in schools was limited to oral

conversation or written notes. Face to face discussion with a parent concerning a student

was, and still is, a necessary form of communication. It has shown to promote positive

partnerships and often improve student's classroom performance (Fredericks & Rasinski,

1990). The dreaded note home has been in place in the schools for years. As the

industrial age appeared and many homes, businesses, and schools, began to change so did

the communication tools of the classroom teacher. The telephone became an avenue used by many educators to interact with the home of a student. As the world moved from the industrial age to the age of technology, so did the school. The computer found its way into the classroom and the home. The internet arrived and began to provide another tool of exchange. The progression of changes in uses of communication has not changed the value of the basic parent-teacher relationship.

The first major technology of the 20th century to influence the classroom was the television. It often changed the written curriculum by offering courses that included television watching or the producing of commercials. Yet, another big change that it brought about was its influence on the mindset of American parents and students. Television brought a portrayal of the teacher, the student, and the family into the home that often reflected in the relationship and communication of these entities. Ryan & Townsend (2010) conducted a study of film and television images that explored this very concept. In the 1950's television shows portrayed the teacher in control and in complete authority. This repeated image forming in the mind of parents and teachers created the attitude of separation of school and family to which Epstein (2011) refers. Initial television teachers were conveyed as compassionate and with a desire to understand the students. Inquiry of any topic occurred on the teacher's terms. Learning was not student centered, but totally teacher directed. This only created more separation between the parent and teacher. The average parent felt there was no need to communicate with the school, as education was perceived to be solely the responsibility of the teacher. This divide has begun to slowly change over time. Educators and theorists have discovered successful education comes from student-centered objectives and goals. Television, once

again, has played a role in communicating this perception by portraying this change of education in shows and movies. The power of the television to influence attitude has not changed. Educators of today are beginning to recognize this phenomenon. In 2007, Pohan and Mathison studied and concluded that television was more responsible for the attitude of students and parents towards multicultural diversity than was the educational setting alone. The study revealed that television sends many culture-bound mixed and confusing messages. Depictions of race, ethnicity and social class create perceptions in the minds of students, parents, teachers, and administrators. This has a direct influence on the level of communication as mentioned above. Some educators are recognizing this trend and are using the television and its messages in the classroom curriculum. Williams (2003) presents the pedagogical idea that television influence can be used as an important element in writing instruction. He challenges teachers to instruct their students to "read" the images they see on the television. By teaching students to question who, what, where and why of a show he develops critical thinking in his students. The engagement of students in analytical viewing of popular electronic media will empower them to control the influence of that media. Giving students the task of writing their responses brings them to a level of application and evaluation. This method of approach to the television could be an agent for change of the relationship of home to school. If a student and then eventually the parent begins to evaluate the teacher and the school with a critical thought process, communication can and will be more accurate and collaborative. Moyer-Gose and Nabi (2010) took this idea one step further and suggested that the television itself be used to influence and persuade perceptions of the student.   By using narrative television viewing they were able to establish that the majority of students were influenced by the

association with the characters on the screen. This could be highly effective in the struggle to build parent teacher relationships. The study concluded that to increase perceived attitudes designers of electronic productions should focus on features that facilitate empathy and positive role models.

Computer Influences.

The television is a medium that will continue to be influential in attitudes of teachers and students. As the 20th century developed, so did technology. The computer appeared on the scene and has played even a bigger role in perceptions and communication of the school and the home. As the advancement of technology continued, the classroom also changed in looks and the teacher changed pedagogy. This is most reflected in the response of both state and federal government. As academic standards became the norm, technology was included. The state of Ohio listed seven standards varying from the nature of technology to the design of it. Two of these standards deal directly with communication and technology; and apply directly to this investigation of communication within schools. The Ohio Department of Education (http://www.ode.state.us) names standard two as the interaction between technology and society. In meeting this standard the students will recognize the interactions among society. It includes the consideration of the ethics of technology in this exchange. Standard four is listed as technology and communication applications. Here the student will use technology to communicate. The placement of these standards in the classroom has greatly expanded the use of technology, specifically the computer and the internet.

Much research has been done to validate the benefits of expanded computer usage in the classroom and its role in the life of a student, teacher, and the parent. In investigating this challenge Means and Olson (1994) discovered there was a direct link between authentic learning and technology. They posited and validated that if the computer was used for an authentic, challenging task it was a starting point for genuine learning. They also noted other benefits of the use of technology in the classroom. When using the computer students were challenged to practice advanced skills and to work in collaborative groups. They also noted that the role of the teacher changed from director to coach. This discovery also demonstrated the influence of technology to support the change in education towards student directed learning. Through technology students began to own their learning and were better able to retain knowledge. Student interaction with technology allows them to be challenged in a critical thinking and questioning format.

Tondeur, van Braak, and Valcke (2007) also studied the validity of technology in the classroom. Their purpose was to develop an instrument that could be used to evaluate the benefits. They concluded that computer usage falls into two separate categories. The first is class use of computers; where the computer is used for teaching purposes. The second is supportive use of computers, where the computer is being used for preparing work, lesson preparation, and the recording of grades and assessments. Both of these uses of computers will affect the parent teacher relationship and are valid for this study. As the teacher uses the computer as a tool with the student he, or she, must be able to report to the parent what has taken place in the classroom. As the teacher uses the computer for a supportive role in his or her job, the parent must also be taken into consideration.

Whatever mode the teacher uses must be transferrable to the parent and understandable so that collaboration and community effort in the life of the student can take place.

A further look at the computer in the classroom as a teaching tool is in order. One of the first computer influences in the classroom has come in the form of games. Often teachers would load educational games onto the computer for students to use during centers or extra time. Games on the computer have always been a motivating factor for students. Often when a student is motivated to experiment with a subject in the form of a game, they will find success in the written curriculum of that same subject. This fact alone is a bridge to connect with parents that worry about a struggling student. Several studies have been done concerning the validity of games in the classroom. Kerbritchi (2009) did such a study, using a math centered game designed to teach algebra. He found that the games were motivating but also helped the student in learning styles, mastery of skills, and decision-making expertise. He also concluded that teachers would choose games that were specific to the content they wanted their students to know. Affirming that the objectives and goals of a unit are being covered in a variety of ways is an excellent motivator for teacher self-efficacy. This quality in a teacher has already been established as a key to communicating with a parent about what takes place in the classroom.

Another approach to using the computer gaming world is to use the off the shelf games in the classroom context. This takes great effort on the teacher's part, but connecting the outside world that the student lives in with the inside world of the classroom has great validity. Students can gain learning tools by playing games without even knowing they are attaining them. Teachers can link classroom activities to in-game

activities as hook to explore the knowledge needed in a new subject area. Studies have

shown that gaming by itself will increase reflexes and hand-eye co-ordination. The

student undertaking a game will use repeated practice, achieve goals, learn new

strategies, and answer critical thinking questions. All of these aspects gaming are

learning tools needed for student success (Wiklund & Ekenberg, 2009).

Another area where computers aid teachers in communicating with parents is in

dealing with special needs students. This could be in the area of physical or academic

disabilities. Anderson-Inman (1999) conducted such a study with struggling middle

school students. The study focused on secondary students with learning disabilities and

revealed that using technology can have a great impact. It was noted that student with

learning difficulties at this age often have low self-confidence due to repeated years of

low achievement. The computers in this study were used to focus on the process of

learning, not on the specific content itself. Students were given tutors to help them learn

word processing and study skills on the computer and with the internet. When teachers

combined computer training with content, students were found to study and produce

better results. In the world of physical disabilities the computer can be a great asset to a

special education teacher. Any tool brought into the classroom, or learning environment,

that helps the student succeed is always a great tool of communication to a parent or care-

giver. An example of this would be using a computer aided note taking device for a

hearing impaired child. These devices can be purchased at a low cost along with a laptop

keyboard and can bring immediate academic achievement to a hearing impaired student

(Stover & Pendegraft, 2005).

As shown, the computer in the classroom can provide the teacher with the means to communicate to the parent. Computers can also be used as an avenue to bring parents into the school building. By providing them with the offer of computer training, the school can enable the parent to better communicate with the teacher and their own child. In 2003, Bessell, Sinagub, Lee, and Schumn did a study to confirm the premise that computers can engage the family and unite the school and home. The study revealed that parent training gave parents opportunities to learn skills that their own children already knew; and that they needed at home. It also made the parent more aware of the content the students were learning and they were able to be more involved in homework. Surveys after the study revealed that computer knowledge expanded the communication to the home in the form of online e-mail.

Internet Influences.

By far the biggest technological advancement aiding the struggle of communication between home and school is the internet. This entity has brought with it multiple advances and problems in the education world. The growth of internet information and availability of internet access has been a blessing and a great responsibility to the educator. The first issue any school must address is the issue of ethical use of the internet. This has to be decided and clarified to all the parties from the student to teacher to the parent at home. The appropriate use of the internet, students plagiarizing, using chat rooms, and the accessible pornography and overall security are only some of the issues that must be addressed. Schools will often debate and constantly change the rules concerning these issues. It is important that teachers and administrators use wise judgment in establishing rules and guidelines. Teachers need training in what they can

do and not do in the class. They also need counsel on how to judge the maturity of students at all grade levels. All the parties involved need to understand the ethical issues of the internet and behave accordingly (Kafai, Nixon, Burnam, 2007).

Once the ethical issues of the internet have been established teachers and parents can begin to enjoy the advantages that this technology brings. The internet and the world wide web opens up to the classroom a vast storage of educational tools and knowledge. This marketplace of new information can create a barrier to parents that do not have access, but that fact alone can also open a whole area of communication. Volunteer projects can be created to donate computers to those that do not have them. Libraries and school areas can be made available for free access to the internet. For those families that need to get to these services a network of transportation and even childcare can be set in place. The potential problem can be turned into an avenue for further relationship building (Boult, 2006).

The internet can be enjoyed by the youngest of children. With the beginning of a student's school experience web sites can be utilized to aid in learning and introducing new concepts. Librenjak, Vučković and Dovedan (2010) conducted a study to gain understanding about the perceptions of young students about the web and internet usage. It was discovered that this age group of children had extensive knowledge of the internet and as they grew that knowledge continued to increase. Their greatest interest was found in games and music. These tools as mentioned above can be great motivators of education. At this age the parent has great influence in their lives and also a great desire to communicate with the teacher about education. The games and music on the web can be that avenue to begin a conversation.

Another avenue utilizing the internet is building on the desire for friendship and social growth of the students. By using the internet to give students pen pals many educational objectives can be met. A student can be exposed to different cultures and family dynamics. It can be a great motivator for improving the written text if a student desires to communicate effectively. Skills required in language standards such as grammar usage and revising can be practiced. The pen pal program can also increase problem solving issues as they converse with someone that is not like themselves. Collaborative learning takes place when a student must build a friendship with an individual that they have never met, except through text. Critical thinking takes place when a student must decide what to reveal in an internet message and what is not appropriate. Motivation and excitement that can be generated by using the internet pen pal program with all age levels of students (Charron, 2007).

Most of the internet usage will be found in the older grades in the classroom. A high school in the Los Angeles, California area embraced the idea of using the internet to communicate with the parent and found it to be a great success. They used the internet in collaboration with cell phones to create a parent notification system. This system went farther than simply notifying the parent of absences and informed the parent of classroom behavior, attendance, and homework. The more a parent understands where their child is and what they are doing, the more the parent stays involved in the education process. This new way of communication has proven itself to be very successful. Students involved in the notification systems are more likely to attend classes, have better social interaction with peers and teachers and even earn higher grades. It has also been studied and proven that students whose parents are frequently communicating by internet and cell

phone systems are more likely to continue on to post-secondary education (Villano, 2008). Other schools are using internet devices like personal digital assistants or PDS's to inform parents of student progress. These devices can send a pager message to the parents concerning their child and can deliver positive and negative information concerning the student's day in class. Strom and Strom (2003) studied these devices and found that the usage of them was successful to increase parent involvement. The benefit of this avenue was that positive and negative messages could be sent. Educators were able to reach parent immediately with student behavior and this increased the relationship between the parent and the teacher.

Technology by itself will never improve teacher-parent communication. The combination of teacher initiation and parent involvement using the technology as a tool will bring the collaboration necessary to build excellent relationships. The final aspect of technology that needs to be addressed is online progress reporting. This study specifically addresses this topic and before reviewing the results it is important to investigate what an online progress report is, what it looks like and how it varies from source to source.

Online Progress Reports in Parent-Teacher Communication

What it is.

The latest and newest use of the internet to build communication to parents is in the form of online progress reports. As established earlier, the student whose parent is involved in their education will be the student that succeeds. All teachers know that part of their task as an educator is to evaluate the student and to assign that evaluation a grade. Like it or not, this means that the teacher will have large amounts of data that must be

placed in records and some sense of organization. For years this administrative

management task took precious time away from the teacher's instructional planning. The

computer has helped in this task. Initially those records were kept on huge mainframes

operated by programmers with highly skilled abilities. Many schools could not afford his

luxury, so the appearance of the minicomputer was a welcome entity. Even though the

computer was now available to the individual, systems were not flexible or easy to use.

In recognition of this dilemma the government passed the Telecommunications Act of

1996 funding schools for internet access. This act in combination with the No Child Left

Behind Act of 2001, requiring establishment of plans to keep parents involved, spurred

the expansion of what we now recognize as student information systems (Darby &

Hyghes, 2005).

These web-based systems designed to store and report student information work on

four basic technology internet driven platforms. E-mail is probably the most common.

Many school districts have automated group e-mails that are triggered by some school

special event. They are used to inform parents of emergency days or of other events that

would happen only one time. Similar to e-mails is the telephony platform. The telephony

system is a system of communicating via the telephone. This auto-dial technology allows

schools to notify parents or care-givers of student absences, upcoming school closings, to

watch for report cards, or reminds them of upcoming voting opportunities. Some of these

systems are interactive allowing the parent to use a touch tone phone to respond,

notifying the school that the message has been received. Portals are the third platform of

internet technology. These are secure avenues that usually require a password from the

parent or student. On the portals parents can view a myriad of information concerning

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their student. This can vary from a grade given about a specific assignment to a calendar

of homework. Portals are open 24/7 so parents can log on at any time and view

information. Some school systems are linking the portals to the availability to pay school

fees and purchase school merchandise. Groupware is the fourth platform involved in the

student information systems. This technology allows groups of individuals to work

together collectively while located remotely from each other. It opens up the opportunity

for parents to communicate both with teacher and administration via messages, videos

and sometimes shared whiteboards. These four platforms placed in a school district,

alone or working together, make up the terminology of student information systems or

SIS (Weinstein, 2005).

What it looks like.

Putting in place any SIS will be beneficial to the relationship and growth of

communication between the school and the home. This is especially true when used to

specifically report the academic, emotional and physical progress of a student. When

discussing assessment reporting to parents, Cruz and Petersen (2002) state: "In order for

parents to genuinely understand and appreciate the content of a report card, no matter

how descriptive it is, they need additional types of information throughout the school

year" (p.23). These additional types of information will allow a parent to feel like they

are a part of their child's educational process. According to Bird (2006) this

communication can reap multiple benefits. The freedom of a parent to track a student's

progress is at the top of the list. The days of a parent placing a call into the school and

waiting for the teacher to respond are over. The parent can log in from any internet

terminal, use their password, and discover in real time the grades assigned to their child.

They often can also read comments or suggestions given by the teacher. Another advantage of the SIS is that the parent can now be informed of academic content. Through the SIS a parent can see homework assignments, view summaries of units and sometimes view a lesson, review or quiz. The final value to the SIS that Bird (2006) notes is the preparedness of the parent at the teacher-parent conference. A parent or care-given can be aware of issues, whether positive or negative, before coming to speak to the teacher. This gives the teacher much more time to discuss intervention with the parent. Conferencing can now be a productive collaborative effort concerning student success.

It should be noted that research has been done on the success of the SIS in regards to the teacher. Although it has been established that communication does increase and parents are much more involved, the teacher must be active in using and promoting the systems. Migliorino & Maiden (2004) conducted a study on this. They understood that effective technology can be blocked by human factors. They also recognized that most parents prefer to receive a standardized computer generated progress report that assures accuracy. Yet the study sought to find out if the teacher's attitude would affect the ability to integrate electronic software completely into a system of schools. The results of Migliorino & Maiden's (2004) study can be helpful to any school seeking to use a new information system. The teachers must first be well trained. This means that the training must not only be available but it must also be accessible and interesting in order to connect with all the staff. Administrators must also be supportive of the systems. It was discovered that a direct correlation existed between the administrator and the staff in attitude. Administrative support can be accomplished by the implementation of the system being a major priority in the district. Lastly, it was discovered that it is important

to analyze a teacher's methods of grading before a system is chosen. This allows an administration to seek out a system that will match as closely as possible to what the classroom teacher is already doing in their own record keeping and data recording.

When administrators, teachers and parents are properly informed and trained information systems can produce validated success stories. The accounts initiate from different locations and varied school systems. Elhers (2001) reports success of a SIS in a unique school system in South Dakota. Although this system is small it is spread out over a wide area of the state. Communication between the home and school was very difficult due to the fact that families were physically located far away from each other and the school. The system first secured funds to purchase desktop computers for each student in the district. As they put their information system in place parents could access it at any time. The parents could gain information about grades, attendance, and receive special acknowledgments for high achievement. Parents could in turn post notes about family events affecting the student or absences due to illness. The system removed the distance separation issues the school had faced in the past. Teachers felt less isolated from the community; and parents felt more involved. The provision of a tool to express concerns created the collaboration so crucial to good communication.

A completely different case where a student information system worked to enhance parent communication took place with one on one tutors in a college setting. Instead of using a district wide setting, college students were assigned as tutors to those struggling in reading skills. Students in grades one through eight were chosen to receive a reading tutor. The college tutors used an information system to report progress to the parents. In the system tutors were able to post live videos of the students reading. They also posted

up to date reports on the achievement of goals in the program. By posting on a regular basis, the tutors were able to record data on a consistent basis instead of waiting to culminate it at the end. Parents were excited about the progress they saw in their child and remained active in the learning throughout the process (Merkley, Schmidt, Dirksen, & Fulher, 2006).

As in all technology, changes are being made to the student information systems. Companies constantly are updating and new software is being produced to aid the educational community. One of the areas needing the most attention is the ability for systems to share data among different web browsers. Special education is one academic division that will profit from the development of interoperability. As the SISs came into place the needs of special education teachers to record unique data was left out. These teachers must approach progress of a student from a different platform. They often need to record a process requiring much more than inputting simple data. Most of this process must be recorded and documented to the local and state boards. Much is being done to address this issue. The positive changes will be a welcome aid to teachers of special need students (Waters, 2008).

A look at Engrade.

As the educator seeks to find a system that will best fit the needs of their school district he or she will be overwhelmed with the choices that exist. The goal of this study was to evaluate only one system in context of its effectiveness to communicate to parents. That system Engrade is a free SIS advertised as an electronic gradebook (http://www.engrade.com). The system was founded in 2003 by a group of internet

entrepreneurs who were seeking to contribute to the world by offering their talents. They

chose the education world and developed Engrade to help teachers improve the lives of

students worldwide. Due to the success of these individuals they are able to offer their

services free. This includes using their talents to continually update the site and helps to

those using the system. All the expenses come from the entrepreneurs themselves.

Engrade assures its costumers of complete security. The web-based system claims to

have over two million members and to be in over 150 countries.

In order to better understand the system of Engrade it is important to investigate it

in relation to other systems that are available. Comparing it with another free system and

with a system that cost the educator funds is valid. A look at ProgressBook

(http://www.software-answers.com), a purchased system used by the public school

system in Northfield, Ohio will give an excellent comparison. To then place those

comparisons with Thinkwave (http://www.thinkwave.com), a common system advertised

as free to users.   It is essential to note that Thinkwave also offers a premium package for

a fee. For the sake of this report, only the free offerings will be considered.   All three

systems offer the basic management of student data. They provide places for entering

class lists, grades and attendance homework calendars. A teacher can have multiple

classes and move class lists around to different pages. The SIS's allow schools to give

the students a password and parents access. They also allow a teacher to determine a

grading scale and to weight grades if appropriate. All three systems also allow an

educator to upload data into the system in the form of document files or portable

document files. Lastly, all three systems offer a place for students to upload homework to

send back to the teacher. This is the point at which the Thinkwave system transfers to

their purchased programs. Engrade does continue to offer some other features. On both ProgressBook and Engrade a teacher can load flashcards, quizzes, review lessons, and provide discussion with fellow students and teachers. Administrators can set up school groups and view the progress of the entire school. Both of these systems enable parents to message the teacher. The only feature that is offered by Engrade but is not by ProgressBook is the availability of a wiki. ProgressBook, on the other hand, offers much more than the free system of Engrade. The system offered by the company Software Answers offers options to demonstrate reinforcement of state standards. It tracks these standard requirements through a page designed for the construction of lesson plans. This system also produces a printed report card to give to students, or to mail it to the parent. The report cards are standard based and are offered in three different styles. ProgressBook also offers to the districts education documents for special education. It gives the user the capability to collaborate with other educators and share plans within the district. It is clear by these comparisons that Engrade is a competitive system compared with the other free systems being offered. Engrade is lacking in its offerings when compared to a system that can be purchased. The questions considered in this study will be: Is this free system efficient enough for the small private school? Does it do its job in communicating effectively to the parent? Does this internet avenue of communication validate the theory of communication previously established? Does this information system confirm the value of the parent-teacher relationship? A close look at these questions will be considered.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction to the Method

In seeking to find the most accurate parental response to any program it is important to choose the correct method. The method that will be used in this project will fall under the basic category of evaluation research. As stated in the introduction, evaluation research specifically involves determining the worth or quality of a program (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 11). As the Engrade program was introduced into the school, it was important to determine if it was doing the job of communicating progress effectively. This type of research will allow a conclusion to be made concerning whether the teacher is implementing the program correctly and whether the parent is gaining the information they desire. Evaluation research also looks at the cost effectiveness of a program. In the case of this project, where Engrade is a free program, the question then becomes: is the free program sufficient to do the job? Should a purchasable program be considered for the school? Lastly, this research will allow a decision to be made regarding overall impact on the school. Issues will then be addressed regarding further use of the system including how the school can take advantage of the additional options available. Under the heading of evaluation research many methods of data collection can be used. In this project the goal will be to hear the voice of the parent and teacher. It is only appropriate that those parties be directly spoken to and be allowed to speak freely. The introduction of this project stated that qualitative interviewing approach will be used.

Rational for the Method

It is important in any study to not only choose a method but to secure the validity of the method. Evaluation research will be chosen as a broad research type due to the nature of the research question in this study. This platform of research was chosen by Kokoszka (2009) as he conducted a study to determine the worth and quality of another online progress system; Edline. The use of this method in previous research helps to validate this study. Collecting qualitative data from the subjects by the use of open-ended questions is also a platform used in many studies. Since questions in this study will be asked to both parents and teachers, studies of that nature need to be addressed. Malsch, Green, and Kothari (2011) used open-ended questions in their search to gain a parents perspective on the transition of their children from home to kindergarten. They wanted a parent's voice to be heard in this educational step. Their questions to the parents focused on the understanding of the nature of activities taking place. In this study it will be important to discover if the parents understood the nature of why an online system was being used to communicate to them. Open-ended questions have also been used when seeking a teacher's perspective. Kebritchi (2008) conducted a study with teachers on their adoption of educational computer games. The goal of Kebritchi's (2008) study was to identify any factors that were influencing the adoption and use of the computer technology. Open-ended qualitative interviews were conducted with the teachers to give them freedom to express their evaluations. The interviews focused on advantages, compatibility, and complexity. These same issues are a concern in this study, so the open ended qualitative question approach will be used.

Population of the Study

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This study project will be done completely within the boundaries of the Northfield

Baptist Christian School. The school is an established elementary school in the

Cleveland, Ohio area offering preschool through the sixth grade. It is a ministry of, and

located in the facilities of, Northfield Baptist Church. The school has one principal, one

secretary, and eleven teachers. The enrollment of the school varies from year to year. The

average attendance anticipated for this study will be around 120 students. The parents

come from middle class homes and all pay tuition to have their children in the school. In

the school, only the second through sixth grade presently use the Engrade system. All the

families will be approached to participate in the study. The five teachers using the

system will also be interviewed.

Procedure

Instrument Validity.

It is very important to develop a set of questions that will ascertain data to answer

the research question. In this search for applicable questions, I referred to Kokoszka

(2009) and his study to determine the perceptions of another online information system;

Edline. Kokoszka's (2009) study was done at a small religion based school, similar to

Northfield Baptist. Although the school in that study was a high school, the questions

were valid from which to base my questions. Questions will be developed from

Kokoszka's (2009) research and also from discussions with my principal as to issues that

concerned my school. According to Johnson and Christensen (2008) in a qualitative

interview it is important to establish trust with the interviewee. The goal of my interviews

will be to find out the parent's true thoughts on the Engrade system. I will number each

of the questionnaires and assure the parents that their names will not be used in the results. The questions will be broken into four major categories. Basic information will give me the number and grade level of students the parent have in the school. Computer use in general will be questioned to give me a perspective on the parent's use of the internet, for and excluding school information. I also desire to know if internet security is an issue. I will then ask about the site of Engrade itself. In these questions, I am looking for problems with logging in and the options offered. Lastly, I will ask about the purpose of Engrade and if the communication of student progress was clear and beneficial. It will be under this category that the parent will be encouraged to share their view on how the school could improve or change. Interviews will be recorded digitally for accuracy and will be used later to conclude results. (See Appendix A)

Setting up the study.

In setting up the study, I will submit an institutional review board form to the university. (See Appendix B) After gaining approval of my questions and procedure plan, I will meet with my principal to secure permission for parents to leave their children in the before or after care program at no cost to them. I am aware that if parents are free to come to the school, either before or after school, they will be more willing to talk to me. I will compose a letter to be sent out to all the families where Engrade was being offered in their home. (See Appendix C) This letter will give them the option to choose a time best suited for them to meet with me. It will give them a place to fill in and send back to me, via their child. After receiving the letter back, I intend to send a confirmation time and an initial thank you for their participation. I will purchase a digital recorder and make

sure my room is set up in a way that the interviews will be conducted in a comfortable environment.

Method of Data Collection.

All the data in this study will be collected via open-ended interviews. The interviews will take place in my classroom either before or after school. I will allow parents to bring younger siblings into the room, but will encourage them to take advantage of the before and after care program available to them. I will interview the parents sitting across from them, without a desk between us. I feel this is important to create an atmosphere of comfort and openness. I will place the digital recorder on a desk close by and assure them that their name will not be used in any data results. I plan for the interviews to take about 30 minutes to complete. I will stay on topic by having my questions written out and placed in front of me. Parents will know I have a guide and that I will not take too much of their time. I will record notes as they answer and make other notes when they add discussion to the questions. After all the interviews are completed, I will tally first the basic information. I will then go through and record in script form the answers given to the questions. I will note repeat answers and unique responses. From these notes I will compose the results of the study.

Chapter Four: Results & Analysis

Introduction

As in any study the results are the end goal. Evaluation research being conducted with an open-ended question interview accomplished the goal in this study which was to hear the voice of the parent in response to online progress reports. The results of this study were tallied for the specific purpose of evaluating the effectiveness of the free Engrade online information system. The effectiveness of Engrade was only studied in the small private school of Northfield Baptist Christian. As the interviews took place, it became evident that the standardized approach to interview was too rigid. Elementary parents are very informal. Younger siblings were often present at the interviews. Comments made by the parents often took the interview in different directions. This was allowed because the ultimate goal of the research was to gain the parents voice. So the interview guide approach was used, where the questions were still used, but not always in the same order (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 208). The open-ended interviews were recorded, and information was tallied. Patton's (1990) list of the major characteristics of qualitative research states "inductive analysis includes immersion in the details and specifics of the data to discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008 p. 393). This was the goal of analyzing the data. The discovery of repeated answers, patterns in the responses of the parents, and overall themes in the data would be used to encourage further use of the system.

Overview of Responses

Basic Information.

Northfield Baptist Christian School uses the Engrade system to report the progress of students in the second through sixth grade. The year that the study was conducted there were 115 students enrolled in the school. Within the student population forty-four families had the Engrade progress report system offered to them. All of these families received an invitation letter. Some parents did not return the letter; I then contacted them in person to try to set up a time for a conference. I was unable to connect with some parents and that is why I did not have 100% participation in my study. Thirty-one families agreed to participate in the study or 70% of the population. Nine of those families had two children in different grades or 29% of the study. Of the 13 families not participating in the study, 11 of them had children in the fourth through sixth grade. This was in direct correlation to teacher usage. The teachers in the fifth and sixth grade used the system and its options much less than those in grades two through four.   Of the parents that were interviewed only two were dads, the rest were moms. Eleven of the families had two or more students on the system and were involved with two different teachers. This was helpful in revealing the different successes of the options of the system. Six of the parents were also using other systems with other siblings at different school systems. This was a great perspective to the effectiveness of the Engrade system for our school. If the population of parents interviewed was placed on grade level the following data would be concluded: 92% of second grade parents participated, 100% of third grade parents, 69% of fourth grade parents, 64% of fifth grade parents, and 70% of sixth grade parents.

The homes of all the participating parents had internet access. Twenty-eight, or 90% of the parents, stated that they used the internet daily. This usage included checking family e-mail, using social networks, paying personal bills, or work and professional management. Eighteen of the parents, or 58%, indicated that they checked Engrade at least once a week. The others varied greatly in their frequency of checking the site. Some of the parents checked once a quarter, but a few said they had only looked once in the school year. When asked why they were not more frequent in checking the site the most common answer was because the teacher sent home the papers on a regular basis. The parents seemed to think that seeing the papers and the comments, marks or grades was sufficient to keep them up to date on the progress of their child. A few of the parents had lost the student access code given to them by the teacher and had been embarrassed to ask for another from the teacher. Only one parent noted that the site was not necessary because they felt that the child was responsible for their own grades and progress.

All of the parents interviewed were completely comfortable with the security of the Engrade site. None of the parents interviewed expressed concern that their child's name, grades or comments would be placed on the internet. They all were confident in the password and log-in system set up by the Engrade company.

Site overview.

Eight-one percent of the parents interviewed found the Engrade site to be user friendly. They were pleased with its simplicity. Those parents that did have difficulties differed in their answers. Some commented on the fact that the site changed frequently throughout the school year. This was true because the Engrade company was making

upgrades, trying to improve the site and offer more options. Others commented that because they had two students often the student's information was placed together. Discussion amongst the parents had taken place about this very issue. It was determined that a separate user name and password for each student had to be used. Another concern was that comments by the teacher were often difficult to find. To find a teacher comment, a parent has to open the main page, click on a subject, and then click on the comment bar within that subject to read the comment. It was discovered that a parent is not informed by any indication on the main page that the comment exists. When the teachers were interviewed none of them were aware of this aspect of the site. Lastly, there were only two parents that commented that, for them, it was easier to read grades and comments on paper than on computer.

When asked which aspect of the site the parent used most, over 80% of the parents checked the grades and assignments only; not using the other features of the site. This correlated with the teachers responses of how much of the site they utilized. Of the five teachers actively using the system, only one uses the site for assigning homework and allowing students to use the discussion pages. This teacher also used the site exclusively for communicating to the parent about classroom news. These were the parents that used the system's options the most. Two of the teachers had used the site to place flashcards for review, but only in one subject and only for a period of one quarter. Fifty percent of the parents used the site to message the teacher. They felt it was a good way to communicate and were pleased with the option to contact the teacher late at night or even during the day. Four of the five teachers also like this option and used it frequently.

Communication of Progress.

Seventy-seven percent of the parents interviewed stated that the use of Engrade has changed their knowledge and perceptions of their child's progress. Once again the negative answers varied in response. Four of the parents said they just preferred seeing a paper copy of the progress and that the paper helped them to understand progress better. One parent said they felt it was more personal to put something down on paper. Three of the parents admitted that the knowledge of their child's progress did not change because they were always checking the graded papers that came home. Those that did answer in the positive commented that they liked the weekly and sometimes daily updates. Parents who checked the site often were pleased to be able to catch a learning problem early and to help their child improve in an area that they had struggled. Those parents that had two students in different grades did comment that it was confusing because teachers entered grades at different times. This correlated with the teacher interviews. The five teachers varied greatly on when they entered grades. Two teachers entered grades daily, two weekly and one was not consistent.

When asked if the school should continue to use this system of progress by the internet, only one parent stated that they would be pleased if the school did not continue. Even the parents that were struggling with the site admitted that this is the mode of sending information in today's world and that the school needs to stay current in its usage of technology. When asked if the free system of Engrade should be the school's choice, only two parents thought that the school should upgrade to a more complex system. All other parents were pleased and felt the free system was sufficient for use at the elementary level. This also was directly associated with the results from the teachers.

Only one teacher felt the school should upgrade and give the teachers and parents more options.

The parents were asked in the open-ended questions to share any other comments as to how the school could better communicate with them concerning their child's progress. Two overwhelming answers emerged. The first was that they would like the system to be used as an assignment calendar, or a back-up to the assignment notebook, already in place in the classroom. Most of the teachers were using the system to only post grades after an assignment was completed. Parents were hoping to see previous knowledge of major assignments that were due. Another repeated comment from parents centered on behavior. The parents wanted to see more frequent comments on the behavior of their child in the classroom. They felt that although some positive behavior comments were coming home a consistent pattern of comments would give them a better picture of what was taking place in the classroom. Other suggestions were made relating to better use of the system. It was suggested that a link to Engrade be added to the school web site. It was also suggested that a hands-on tutorial session in the beginning of the year would be helpful. Although a detailed paper note was sent home, and all commented that it was clear, some parents still felt a class held in the computer lab would be helpful.

Conclusion

All of the above data is informative and helpful to the school. It gave the school a true picture of the parent's perspective of the Engrade system. It also helped the teachers to begin to process of better using the system. This data was given in a shortened form to my principal. She, in turn, asked me to share my results with the staff at a closing

teacher's meeting at the end of the school year. At that time discussion amongst the staff

took place concerning the data. Teachers were asked by the principal to reevaluate their

use of the system and come back after the summer with suggestions of further use. Only

when data is used to promote discussion and eventual evaluation does it become valuable.

Chapter Five: Discussion & Implications

Introduction

It is crucial that the data in any study be used to cause change. It not only makes the study valid, but gives worth to the time and energy put into the study by the participants. Such is the case in this study. Parents have given their thoughts on the Engrade system and they will expect a response. In her article on school communication Miretzky (2004) states that parents who feel valued are more willing to contribute to the school's success. A significant indicator of school improvement is the relationships formed between home and school. The data in this study can be used to form a better relationship between parent and teacher. It can be used to improve the communication of the student's progress in the classroom.

Interpretations and Applications

Several very important interpretations of the study's data can be made to improve the overall communication of student progress at Northfield Baptist Christian School. The first comes by looking at the overall basic information. Of the thirteen parents not participating in this study, eleven of them were from the fourth grade through sixth grade. This is a great indicator that the parents of younger students are more involved in the progress of their children. Teachers reported that the parents of the older students often did not even log on at all to the system. This may be an indicator that, due to the fact that

younger classrooms have parents involved in many projects; those parents feel more of a responsibility to the progress of the students. This is a great challenge for the older classroom teacher. They need to find ways to incorporate more parent participation. Although those students often can function on their own, completing homework and doing regular assignments, the teachers need to find ways to connect to the parents.

The second key issue noted in the data comes when evaluating why parents did not log on more often. It was stated that parents felt they could keep progress of their students because papers were sent home on a regular basis. This is a very true statement, but does it mean the system should not be used regularly? I think that is the wrong conclusion. The percentage of parents using this as a reason was very small. The system places all the grades next to each other so that a progression of progress can be seen. I think the proper response would be to use the system in more ways in order to motivate the parent to log on. This was seen in the teacher's class that used the system for more ways than just grades. Parents and students utilized the system for other reasons and therefore they continued to see the progress of their child.

Some parents also stated that they would prefer the paper copies of progress reports to internet communication. This is a much more difficult issue to address. We are functioning in a society of internet communication. It is changing the way most people communicate in all avenues of life. In response to this comment I would suggest that teachers need to guide the parent into a comfort zone. It is the responsibility of the teacher to help the parent to see the value of the information that is placed on the system. The suggestion of having a hands-on training session for Engrade could be used in this

situation. Actually showing the parent how to use the system and all that it offers will enable parents to use the system more efficiently. The school has a computer lab and it would be a great idea to offer a class on Engrade at the beginning of the school year. This could be done at meet your teacher night. A training session of this sort would also be a way for teachers and staff to establish a relationship with parents. The individual running the lab could then be a contact person for the parent if they ever experienced problems with the system. If a parent has already met the individual, and spoke with them, they will be much more willing to ask questions at a later time. This set up would also eliminate some of the other problems mentioned. If the web site changes due to updates the parent will know who to come to for questions. If a parent loses their student's ID code they will have a place to go for information.

There were other issues raised in the data that have great significance for the teacher desiring to improve communications with the parents of their students. It is interesting to note that the teachers did not know that comments made by them were not highlighted to the parents. When this information was discovered, it was also noted that if a teacher sent a message to the parent, that was highlighted. The parent also receives an e-mail informing them that a message is waiting for them. This means that first of all, parents need to be informed as to where to look for comments concerning the progress of the student. Secondly, if the teacher has an important message about the progress they should send it through the message tab not the comment tab. It would also be a valuable activity to produce a "fake" student that the teacher could access as if they were a parent. This way, the teacher can view the site from a parent perspective. This would allow the

teacher to know exactly what the parent must go through to gain all the information on the site.

The suggestions for further use of the system are more difficult to put into place, but still must be considered. Parents of multiple students repeatedly asked for consistency of grades appearing on the site. This is a difficult task due to the fact that each teacher often has their own system of entering and averaging grades. I think that it would be too difficult to ask all teachers to enter grades at the same time each week or even every two weeks. I do think that it is important for the individual teacher to be consistent and honest with parents. If a parent is told when to look for the grades or comments, and those grades always show up when they are supposed to, then I think the parent would feel comfortable. It is only reality to recognize that there will be times when the teacher is postponed from doing their job. Personal life issues do arise, but they should be few. The key is to inform the parent of these times and to remain open and consistent with the parents.

Adding the assignment notebook to the web was another suggestion made by the parents. This can be easily done through the web site by placing the assignment in the class and clicking the 'add to calendar' feature. The teachers expressed concern about this task due to the fact that their schedules often change and the dates of assignments fluctuate. They shared that in the past parents have been upset at the change in dates of a test or assignment. The answer to this seems to be to place on the web only what students put in their assignment notebook. The parents want to be able to check the paper copy of what their child is doing in class with what the teacher has put on the web. A simple

message home to all parents concerning any changes could also be sent. This will take time and effort by the teacher to place these items on the site. For some of the teachers it means using the site more often than they have in the past. The data in this study indicates that a large percentage of parents are aided by the information they gain on the site. Their knowledge of their child was improved. Teachers must capitalize on this and use this tool to better their relationship with both students and parents. This is an issue that must be dealt with in order to show that the school is making an effort to be in good communication with parents concerning all that is taking place with their child.

The last suggestion made by parents will be more difficult to implement. Adding behavior comments to the site will take creative thinking and a time investment by the teachers. The site is set up for placing specific grades attached to assignments given. It is possible to set up a teacher's own grading scale. This could be done under a class labeled behavior. A teacher would have to name a specific behavior and then place a "grade" under the category. I think this could be done by adding a general behavior grade each week. The teacher could name it specifically, for example: desk neatness. This could be the area the class worked on that week and then each child could receive a grade. The grades could be placed on a scale from outstanding to needs improvement. Another option for the behavior grades is to utilize an observed or not observed scale. Teachers were not very receptive to this idea. It was suggested by the principal that I create such a class and demonstrate it to the staff in the fall. This is being planned, along with other demonstration ideas. I will show them how to clean up old grades from past years. I will show them how to add documents to the site and how to create flashcards and quizzes for review of class materials.

The data of this study is clear, Engrade is communicating well to the parents of Northfield. It is also clear that there is potential for better communication and more effective use of the system. As parents realize that their voice has been heard and the school makes changes, it will only deepen the relationship of home to school.

A Biblical Perspective

It is the challenge of any Christian teacher to approach the profession with a Biblical perspective. As the school year unfolds the Christian teacher must ask how to reveal God's truth in an effective way so that each child learns. The responsibility of the teacher to honor God with words and actions does not stop at the end of a class period. It must continue throughout the rest of the day and will especially be present as the teacher communicates with the parent. First of all, God's Word is clear on how a teacher is to communicate. Ephesians 4:29 (New International Version) states "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." This principle of Biblical communication should be a guide for all Christian teachers wherever they teach. When speaking to a parent the words a teacher utters must always be to the benefit of the parent. Delivering news pertaining to a poor grade or unacceptable behavior of a student should be worded in such a manner as to help the parent fulfill their responsibility. The goal in any communication should be to encourage the other person to a greater relationship with God. In relation to this study, this is especially true. When communicating via the internet a teacher must guard the words and seek to be reassuring. The internet programs available should be viewed as a means to edify communication.

The scripture also states that a teacher will be held accountable for those words. James 3:1 states "Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers; because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." In this passage James is talking about the effects the use of the tongue can have on others. He begins the strict warnings by directing his admonitions first to the teacher. The passage clearly establishes the tongue and the communication from it as a dangerous and serious issue. Yet, it closes in verse 17 speaking of the benefits of a tongue that speaks with wisdom. James 3:17 "But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere." If a teacher can use these wise guidelines for the communication to each parent they will be honoring God. The Biblical perspective not only dictates the how of communication but also includes why a teacher should communicate to families, especially parents.

The Bible is clear that teachers and believers as a whole are to place the care of others in high regard. Relationships with one another should always be a priority when seeking to live a life that is God honoring. When James defines what religion is to look like in the believer's life, he even includes children. James 1:27 affirms "Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world." Paul also stresses this to the believer in Galatians 6:2 "Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." It is clear that a teacher with a Biblical worldview is to care about the students God places in the classroom. He or she should also care about the parent and that means becoming involved with the family. It is often a burden on a family to raise a child. Pressure can be coming from family for the child to succeed or excel.

The student with a learning disablement, or even the struggling student, can bring stress to a family. Sometimes the parent is carrying a burden of finances, marital stress or family discord. The burden of a family can even be more serious if an addiction exits in the home. The teacher's ability to communicate to these families will make a tremendous difference in carrying the burden. If the how of communication is clear and the why of communication is established, a further investigation must take place to confirm the importance of communication of the academic progress of a student to the parent.

The Bible is clear that the family was created for the furtherance of the human race and to provide a place of instruction (Genesis 1:28; 2:15-17). The Bible is also clear that instruction includes all areas of life. Proverbs 1:2-4 gives an overview of instruction when it states: "for gaining wisdom and instruction; for understanding words of insight; for receiving instruction in prudent behavior, doing what is right and just and fair; for giving prudence to those who are simple, knowledge and discretion to the young". God set the task of giving out this instruction for life in the context of the home and specifically to the parent. The Old Testament records an example of this as the Israelites begin to prepare to enter a new experience of living in the promised land. Their leader, Moses, had set before them the rules and regulations given by God for success. It is recorded how these statues were to be communicated. Deuteronomy 6: 6, 7 explains: "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." This same passage goes on to speak about preparing the child for living in the world. "Another lesson from Deuteronomy 6 is to teach them to be wary of the world around them. Parents need to prepare their children

for life in a world full of temptations, idols and even good things that can distract their hearts from the true God." (MacArthur, 1998, pp. 151-152) Setting the context of basic living instruction in the home gives the teacher another guideline for communication with the parent. As the school shares this task of instruction for daily living parents need to be informed. Teachers and administrators need to make it a priority to communicate what instruction is taking place and how well the student is learning the material. If the Word of God establishes a mandate for instruction it also gives a method to the parent.

Proverbs 22:6 sets forth a method for parents to begin instruction for living in this world. It states: "Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it." A closer look at this verse in its original Hebrew text reveals a directive to parents to study and know their child. The phrase, "in the way they should go" comes from the Hebrew word dârak meaning to bend a bow before shooting an arrow. It gives the implications that a child has a bent or individual way of bending. This is clearly seen in all children; for no two children are alike in mannerism and especially not in the way they learn. Since this passage in Proverbs is giving a direction for parents to take in instructing their children it would seem to be saying that the parent must discover how the child learns best. "The parent who is wise and sensitive comes to know the way God made the child, then fits his training accordingly." (Swindoll, 1977, pp. 21-22) This is where the teacher comes into the overall task of training a child. A good teacher will know effective ways to discover the bent of a child. The goal of teaching is to make sure that the student is learning. This can only be accomplished when the learning style of the child is discovered. As the teacher works with the student,

discovers the learning bent, they have a Biblical responsibility to communicate that to the parent. This is one way of sharing the task of training the child.

As this study has established the internet is an avenue available for accomplishing these Biblical mandates. Through successful use of an online progress report, the teacher can inform the parent of the curriculum being written, taught, assessed and learned. The parent can know what instruction is being given for everyday living in this world. The teacher can also help the parent know the child better by commenting on the student's learning style. Through carefully thought out messages the teacher can encourage the parent on a regular basis. Relationships can be built that will aid in the Biblical mandate of carrying the burden of rearing the child. The staff at Northfield Baptist Christian School can be encouraged that the student information system of Engrade has helped them to honor God in Biblical communication.

Relations of the Results to Theory

As reviewed in the literature two important theories were mentioned above. The theory of intentional positive communication as developed by Schumacher (2008) and the theory of overlapping spheres by Epstein (2011). These two theories set forth three important principles that this study confirmed. The importance of collaboration is the first principle. Each of the theorist claim that collaboration between the teacher and the parent will improve communication. This was proved true in the study. In the study, parents ask for a better explanation of how to use the system and its options. Parents mention that a hands-on session at the beginning of the school year would help them to better use the system. In other words, if teachers collaborated with parents on the logging

in and on initially using the student's identification code communication of the student's progress would be more effective throughout the year. The study also revealed the negative aspect of the Engrade system in regards to the teacher comments. It was shown by giving the parents a voice that the comments were not being viewed. Through this data teachers were able to understand how better to make a comment; and assure that the parent read that comment. Once again, this proves that working together on a system is the best way to use it effectively. Lastly, the parents voiced a need for consistency in the updating of the information on the system. It was clear that if the teacher collaborated with the parent on the time and schedule of placing information on the system, overall communication would improve.

The second principle set forth by theory and shown to be accurate by this study was the principle of teacher initiation. When a teacher begins the conversation to the parent the overall relationship is better founded. A positive framework has then been established from which the teacher can work. In this study the data clearly showed a direct relationship between teacher usage and parent usage. The teacher that used the most features had parents using the most features. The teachers that only put grades on the system had the parents that only viewed the grades occasionally. Parents who voiced their opinions in this study clearly responded to the teachers initiating conversations. This was seen in the e-mailing. Four of the five teachers used the e-mail option and all the parents using that option were in the four classes. Only when the teacher initiates positive communication will positive communication be returned.

The third and final principle laid out in theory states that a direct correlation exists between good communication and school support. Although a direct question was not asked about opinion of the school, the question was asked if the school was doing a good job with communication. Seventy-seven percent of the parents were pleased and stated that the system had improved their knowledge of their child's progress. These parents were happy to have a channel to communicate with the teacher. They were glad that the school has taken the time to enhance the conversation between home and school. This overwhelming result confirms what the theorist claims, that good communication improves school support.

Strengths of the Study

The initial purpose of this study was to give the parents a voice in the usage of a new communications system. I believe the study accomplished its goal and the parents were heard. Over three-fourths of the parents in the school participated, making the results very strong. The data showed a large majority of the parents pleased with the system, yet also wanting it to expand. This then gives the school somewhere to go with the system. The validity in any study comes when changes are made and growth results. This study will become more valid as changes suggested are implemented and parents see results from their comments.

In doing the research on student information systems it was discovered that very little documented research exists on the systems themselves. There are many web sites explaining the systems and making wonderful claims about results after using the system. These sites are produced by the companies themselves and are developed for the purpose

of advertisement. They are designed to highlight the positive aspects of the systems and often do not discuss the difficulties or potential problems. Research abounded concerning the parent teacher relationship and communication within the home and the school. Yet very little of that research spoke directly to the effects of using an online information system. This study addresses that void; and shows the documented results of how a system changes the communication of student progress to the parent.

It was also shown that, although many systems costing money are in existence and serve schools well, the free system of Engrade is sufficient for the small Christian School. Parents are receiving the information they need to help their child succeed in the academic realm. With the changes in the usage of the system that have been suggested, parents will continue to grow in their knowledge of what is happening in the classroom.

Limitations of the Study

The greatest limit to this study was the population involved in the interviews. Hearing the voice of the parents in a small Christian school, helps the individual school tremendously but, is not very valid for the larger school system. It would be difficult to generalize this study to all the schools using the Engrade system. The population in this study was all from the same basic economic background. Every parent interviewed had internet access and used the internet outside the school system. This would not be the reality of a larger individual school and certainly not the population of a large school system.

The scope of this study was also limited. The questions in the interviews were restricted to just the communication of progress. The parents were not asked specific

questions as to whether their relationship with the teacher or school changed. This would have involved bringing in a neutral interviewer and parents would have to be placed in a situation where they would feel comfortable speaking about personal issues instead of just academic progress. The fact that I was a teacher in the school and knew personally each of the parents interviewed forced the questions to be of an unbiased nature. Although every step was taken to be professional, some parent might not have been completely honest with their answers.

Lastly, the study is limited because it only covered the second through the sixth grade in the school. The result might have varied greatly if the younger grades of first, kindergarten and preschool were included. These parents are often looking for a different type of communication, other than grades. The teachers in these grades are setting different goals for their students. Trying to communicate these on line might be difficult. The system did offer a place where teachers could set their own grading scale but little was available for developmental scales. The study did not address this issue. Including this population in the study could have changed the results and therefore does limit the existing data.

Suggestions for Further Research

Much more documented research on information systems needs to be done. The larger question of how they are changing the overall culture of the school needs to be addressed. A study needs to include the personal relationship that is so affected by the communication between home and school. This type of study needs to be done on a larger scale. Do parents in the larger systems feel closer to their teachers because of the

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information systems? Or, has the internet created a void due to lack of face-to-face conversations? Along this thought, does the elementary parent feel different about the necessity for communication than the high school parent? A comparison of systems in both settings would offer schools great insight into bettering communication and meeting the needs of individual parents.

More research needs to be done to validate the free systems being offered in relation to the paid, more complex systems. Does the offering of more options increase parent teacher relationships? Does the teacher become a better communicator with better choices? Is more just more, or is it better?

Lastly, research needs to be done with the lower socio-economic parent who cannot access the internet. If a parent cannot take advantage of the information system, what is being done? Is their voice also being heard? Do teachers feel compelled to offer paper copies of progress, or do they think it is the parent's task to find available internet. All of the above questions need to be answered to give the educational community a true picture of how student information systems are shaping the culture of our schools.

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A Teacher/Parent Perspective on Engrade Questionnaire

Parent Interview Number _____   Number of Students _____

                                         Grades _____

Thank you for agreeing to talk to me today. I am going to ask you just a few questions about the efficiency of Engrade to communicate to you the progress of your child/children. Please let me remind you that all your answers will be used only for my research and will remain private.

To begin with I'd like to know a little about your use of the computer in general:

How often do you use the computer, excluding usage for school?

How often do you use the Engrade site to check the progress of your student?

How do you view security of grades on the internet?

Now please share with me a little about the Engrade site, itself:

Share your experiences with logging in and moving around the options offered on Engrade?

What aspects of the web site do you prefer most?

Share any additional thoughts, negative or positive, about the site itself.

Finally, let's talk about your perceptions of Engrade communicating your child's progress:

        Has the use of Engrade changed your knowledge of your student's progress?

If given the choice, would you continue to use Engrade? Would you expand its use?

Please comment on your overall Engrade experience.

Thank you again for your time. Your answers have been very helpful.

APPENDIX B

Cedarville IRB Form/Approval

Student Name(s) and email: Jane Miner grade2@zoominternet.net
Faculty Name(s): Dr. Steve Gruber, Dr. Andy Runyan
External Researcher Name(s) and contact information: N/A
Date: March 2, 2010

Project Title: Parent and Teacher Perceptions of Online Communications Concerning Elementary Student Progress

1. Summarize the main steps of your research plan.
    The basic steps of the plan are as follows: 1. Allow parents and teachers to use the online class management site, Engrade, for a semester. 2. Conduct face to face interviews to determine if online communication of student progress is effective. 3. Summarize information and draw conclusions as to the effectiveness and validity of using the online progress reports.

2. Describe any potential harm you foresee occurring to participants in your study.
    To my knowledge no harm will come from the interviews.

3. If foreseeable potential harm may occur to your research subjects, describe what steps you intend to take to minimize this harm or to keep it within acceptable ethical and moral parameters.
    N/A

4. Provide the anticipated benefits of your study. If there are anticipated significant risks to subjects, weigh these two factors from your perspective.
    My hope is that the study will aid my school, Northfield Baptist Christian School, in creating an environment where parents feel the academic and social progress of their children is being effectively communicated.

5. Will subjects provide informed consent regarding their participation in the study? Yes/No
    Yes

6. If subjects will be provided with informed consent regarding their participation in the study, identify the means by which that will occur.
    A letter will be sent to all participants explaining the goal of the study and the reason for the interviews. It will request that they agree to a time to be interviewed. They will sign and return the form.

7. If subjects will not be provided with informed consent regarding their participation in the study, explain why this will not be necessary or why the cost/benefit warrants not doing so.
    N/A

8. Identify the anticipated beginning and ending dates of your connection with human participants.
    I hope to begin interviews by March 14, 2011 and finish them by the end of April, 2011.

9. Describe what you anticipate human subjects in your research study will do (describe the activities they will participate in, what they will be asked to do or be observed doing, types of questions they will be asked, or behaviors you would expect to observe)
    Subjects will be asked to answer open-ended questions orally.
    Please see attached form with questions listed.

10. Describe how you will ensure that the publication or presentation of your results will ensure the anonymity of those participating in the study.
    Interviews will be numbered. Numbers will correspond to names that will be kept in a secure file. No names will be used in the final summations.

11. Are you seeking expedited review of this research project? Yes/No
    No

E-mail received from Dr. Runyan April 27, 2011

Jane,
My apologies for the delay in a response to this request. You are approved to proceed with the proposal as specified.
Andy Runyan

>>> "Jane Miner" <grade2@zoominternet.net> 3/2/2011 10:34 PM >>>
Dr. Runyan,
Thanks for looking over my questions. Here is the IRB form. I saved it into a pdf file off of the Cedarville site. I have attached the questionnaires in case you needed those. If you need anything else, just let me know.
In Him,
Jane Miner

Parent Request Letter

April 2011

Dear Parent,

       As you know, our school has begun communicating the progress of your child on the internet. We are presently using the Engrade Learning Systems. We chose this avenue over the traditional paper progress report in hopes that it would better convey the academic and social growth of your child. We would like to know if this is a true fact.

       In correlation with this concern, I have chosen this as my research thesis topic. I have been doing research about communication in schools and the options that the internet provides. I would like to interview you about the effectiveness of Engrade. The interview will only take about 20 minutes of your time. I would like to do this at the most convenient time for you. Below is listed times that I will be conducting interviews. Please check the best time for you and return the bottom of this letter to your child's teacher.

       Thank you in advance for your time and consideration in helping me in this endeavor.

                              In Jesus' Service,

                              Mrs. Jane Miner

Please circle a time that works the best for you, and I will return a confirmation time to you. I would like to conduct interviews within the next month.

Before School from 8:00 – 8:25am (Your child may be in before care without cost)

Monday   Tuesday   Wednesday   Thursday   Friday

Thursday morning at school from 9:00-9:25am

After school from 3:30-3:50pm (Your child may be in after care without cost)

Monday   Tuesday   Wednesday   Thursday   Friday