

BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences

Doctoral School of Political and Communication Sciences

PhD THESIS

Summary

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Dalit Kiraly

Scientific Coordinator:

PhD Assoc. Prof. Cristina Nistor-Beuran

Cluj-Napoca

2024

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Crisis Communication Strategies

With a Case Study on the Primary School System of Israel

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This study examined the ways of communication in elementary schools in Israel during a crisis, with the various stakeholders, to identify effective communication strategies, which will enable optimal dealing with the various circles during a crisis. In the current period, in which many and varied media channels participate - online, broadcast, and printed, and the information reaches the general public quickly, one of the most complex and essential challenges is handling crises.

Schools in general deal with a variety of crises that occur in the community or at school. Personal crises of students, staff members, families, etc., as well as crises at the national level, which radiate and affect the school such as security crisis, which has lasted for many years, in the case of Israel mainly in the northern and southern borders of the State of Israel, but sometimes, develops into an emergency throughout the country, when the crisis deepens and spreads to other areas. Along with the challenges facing schools on regular days, the global corona epidemic has created a new, unfamiliar reality. A reality of an ongoing crisis faced by all schools in the world, mainly in the fields of distance learning, staff management, students and parents, digital communication channels, and the operation of the learning and teaching system in the various online channels.

This study aims to provide recommendations for the implementation of strategies that will help schools manage their communication effectively in crises, thus giving administrators and staff members tools that will enable optimal utilization of communication channels with the various stakeholders.

The goal of the study is to recommend strategies for optimal school communication during a crisis. The purposes of the research:

1. To characterize the means of communication that schools use routinely and in times of crisis.
2. To characterize the types of messages/content conveyed by schools in the various communication channels in routine and in times of crisis.
3. To characterize the quality of communication between the schools and between the stakeholders in routine and in times of crisis.
4. To collect information about positions, ideas, and ambitions regarding the realization of the vision of optimal communication of schools in times of crisis among the various stakeholders. The research questions are based on the research objectives.

Research objectives:

- To analyze the communication means schools use, in routine and crisis.

- To analyze the types of messages/contents transmitted by schools in various communication means, in routine and crisis.
- To analyze the communication quality between schools and stakeholders, in routine and crisis.
- Collecting information regarding attitudes, ideas, and aspirations about realizing the school's optimal communication vision among various stakeholders, In routine and crisis.

Literature Review: School communication in the digital age

Coombs & Holladay, (2010) claims that there is still no accepted definition of the term crisis, but there are many definitions. The definition offered by Coombs to a crisis situation: "significant risk with potential for adverse and harmful consequences if not treated properly" (Coombs 2007a), he says crisis include three interrelated risk types: threat to public peace, financial loss and damage to reputation. In addition to damage to reputation, namely the image and credibility, some crises may cause disaster and loss of human life (Coombs, 2007b).

Social media can influence the society reaction to the crisis by improving information distribution (Soden & Palen, 2018), monitoring and analyzing data (Stieglitz et al, 2018) and overcoming time and space separation (Van der Meulen et al., 2019), all these allow planning the activity and the reaction and make the social media effective and more efficient reaction in crisis (Bruns & Burgess, 2014; Ehnis & Bunker, 2012).

Community involvement and intervention is required in designing messages based on the community representative unique insights regarding what the community needs and wants to hear and what is the best way to communicate with them about the crisis (Overton et al., 2021). Besides these guiding lines, there are models that offer communication management strategies. The Grissom & Condon (2021) five steps model illustrates coping based on life cycle (a) Mitigation / Prevention (b) Preparedness (c) Response (d) Recovery (e) Learning.

UNICEF (2021) report offers key principles for establishing effective communication and involvement of children and parents in school communication in crisis. These principles include: (a) establishing trust by maintaining transparency, informing the parents about the situation, learning schedules, school infrastructure,

medical and community activities. Open and sincere communication are the ground to build trust and nurture strong relationships in the long term, even in crisis. (b) encouraging participation in the learning environment. Creating varied and alternative communication channels with family members in the schooling space. These will allow better insights and approach to students whose parents are not present at home while online learning. (c) inclusion and generalization of opinion variety, attitudes and perspectives regarding the situation and school coping. (d) adherence to deadlines is essential for proper, fast and efficient action. (e) communication consistency in all platforms. Conflicting messages that are unclear or a result of change in communication strategies may influence communication effectiveness and cause doubts in decision making ability.

- In recent years, with the development of Internet technologies, the use of new communication channels between schools is increasing. Applications such as e-mail, social networks, instant messages, institutional information and communication systems.
- Wireless communication such as smartphones has the potential to deepen parental involvement in school life and even lead to a change in the process between the role of teachers and parents in the younger generation.
- The ability to connect family and schools with new technologies provides many new opportunities to improve communication with parents beyond the traditional formats.
- Effective communication between parents and teachers and an open communication channel is very important and has a positive effect on solving problems that may improve the quality of education, the sense of belonging and the success of the students.
- The statistics show a direct relationship between success in studies and the involvement and support of the parents in their child.
- Studies have shown that using technology-based communication can help parents stay informed and involved in their children's lives, resulting in better student performance.

- Internet technology is the latest tool that schools have used to communicate with the parent community. School websites are used to convey a wide variety of school information. The use of the Internet through a school website makes the school accessible to the students, parents and the community and strengthens the relationship between teachers and students and vice versa.
- The power of using social media rests on the ability to engage stakeholders in two-way communication. tools like Instagram, Twitter, Google+ and YouTube allow us to share information about school activities more frequently and more accurately and provide real-time updates.
- Learning to use social media can improve the school's public image, community connections, and student learning.

Models of school communication during a crisis and developing resilience

- Studies demonstrate that the stress resulting from crises leads to many hardships in the school climate. Also, crises harm the communication processes of schools, both at the individual level with students, both at the class unit level and at the school level with the wider community and external factors.
- The impact of crises on students' well-being is at several levels: at the level of cognition. Learning and behavior are affected by exposure to stressful and traumatic circumstances, and long-term effects on socio-emotional development and academic abilities of students, depending on their age and the subjects being studied. at the socio-emotional level, a common response is emotional and social isolation resulting from trauma, which leads to daily dealing with fear, anxiety and uncertainty and which may include behaviors of avoidance or hyperarousal.
- With regard to teachers, it is evident that they face two sets of pressures. First, they are required for the challenges facing the general public, for example managing work and family at the same time during the crisis. Second, their professional role requires them to support their students' struggles.

- Negative effects of crises on school climate can at least in cases where intervention programs are implemented in schools, the coping strategies, the ability to build resilience and promote the well-being of the various parties. the Resilience Wheel is a tool that defines the constituent and required parameters for establishing school resilience. These factors are: (a) Social relationships. (b) consistent and clear boundaries. (c) life skills. (d) Demonstrating care and support. (e) Creating high and positive expectations. (f) providing opportunities for participation.

Models of school communication during a crisis and developing resilience

- Application of an educational model based on Maslow's pyramid of needs. According to him, a long-term gradual process of establishing the needs of the students, teachers and parents leads to a positive school climate. Establishing needs ranges from the physical level, through security to emotional needs such as love and creating self-worth. For this, a mobilization of community involvement is required.
- Models based on this approach create interventions that focus on strengthening social ties. People are empowered to take care of themselves and others around them, their self, personal and community confidence as well as their resources will improve, and hence the school climate in times of crisis.
- Organizations and authorities should ensure this by working with the community. It is important for the community to feel collective efficacy, meaning that the people feel they have the skills to overcome challenges and solve problems.

In emergency situations, this contributes to building resilience of the community and its members over time and within the educational institutions, to a positive school climate.

- In a pre-crisis period, crisis management requires mitigation and prevention strategies and preparedness strategies.

Characteristics of the media during the Corona crisis

- Transferring responsibility to parents and increasing their level of supervision and involvement in their children's learning without mediation and regular communication with teachers is challenging and entails various barriers.
- The parents reported pedagogical difficulties, as well as new difficulties in relationships with their children.
- The teachers were required to undergo adapted training for communication with parents in crisis situations.
- Flexibility and adaptation of the school environment was required in order to preserve and stabilize the school climate.
- Effective communication was based on reliable data, included all communities and addressed them in a dedicated manner.
- The communication messages were tailored, culturally compatible, and delivered by trusted messengers.
- Quickly dealing with misinformation and disinformation.
- Dedicated funding is required for communication with underprivileged populations or those who lack an adapted technological infrastructure for online communication during a crisis.
- Two-way communication.

The Research Design

This study uses two research methods: Qualitative research and quantitative research. In the qualitative research, semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with three research populations that reflect the stakeholders' environment, including 12 key people in senior positions in the Ministry of Education and local authorities (with an emphasis on the education departments); 12 journalists in the field of education from various media bodies and 15 school principals.

The main research question:

What are the most efficient strategies for optimal communication in schools during a crisis?

The research questions:

Communication means characterization: How does the school communicate with students, parents, staff, local authority, Ministry of Education, and media?

Message characterization: What are the contents transmitted in each communication channel in routine and crisis?

Communication quality: How satisfied are the stakeholders from school communication in routine and in crisis?

Optimal communication: What is the optimal school communication in routine and crisis?

The research rationale:

The data collection is performed with all factors related to school – inside and outside the school environment.

Data collection is based on the school's main stakeholders:

Performed with all factors related to school – inside and outside the school environment.

- a. School community – parents and students
- b. The educational staff – teachers and school principals
- c. The local authority – education department managers, mayor
- d. The Ministry of Education – policy makers, Ministry of education spokesman
- e. Media – communication – education reporters and journalists

The research hypotheses:

1- Communication means characterization: Schools will use more digital channels to communicate in crisis than in routine.

2- Message characterization: Schools will transmit and receive more messages related to information updates, student status, and educational content in digital channels in crisis than in routine.

3- Communication quality: The communication quality in crisis depends on the existing and pre-crisis connection between the school and its environment.

4- Optimal communication: School optimal communication in crisis will be defined as addressing the expectations and needs of all stakeholders – in the inner and outer school circle.

School optimal communication allows the school community to cope well with the crisis and its consequences.

The research methods:

The research uses the combination of two main research methods: quantitative research and qualitative research, which are intended to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

The quantitative research: Includes the use of surveys and questionnaires for school principals, students, parents, and teachers.

The qualitative research: Includes personal interviews with school principals, mayors, education departments' managers, Ministry of Education spokesmen, education.

The research tools:

Questionnaires / Surveys: Each research population responds to a different adjusted questionnaire.

Personal interviews: Each stakeholder gets a different interview adjusted to his role.

Questionnaire's formulation: The questionnaire formulation was based on questionnaires in similar surveys and research that have examined school communication, parent–school relations, and definitions of optimal communication.

Formulating student questionnaire – based on the school climate questionnaire distributed by the Ministry of Education, state of Israel.

To confirm the research hypotheses.

We used combined methods:

Communication means characterization: combined method – quantitative and qualitative questionnaires 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9.

Messages characterization: combined method – quantitative and qualitative questionnaires 1,2,3,4,5,6.

Communication quality: combined method – quantitative and qualitative questionnaires 1,2,3,4,5,6.

Optimal communication: qualitative research – questionnaires 6,7,8,9,10,11,12

The data collection method:

Questionnaires for parents, and school principals – the questionnaires were distributed in Google Forms format by digital means.

Personal interviews were performed in personal meetings, phone calls or WhatsApp video calls to school principals, education department managers, mayors, education ministers, Ministry of Education spokesmen, and media reporters.

The research stages:

Stage 1: parents pilot research – distributing a pilot questionnaire to parents on communication with school. The research goal is to obtain preliminary information from the parents and to improve the research questionnaires.

Stage 2: questionnaires distribution and collection - distribution and collection of questionnaires to parents, teachers, school principals.

Stage 3: personal interviews - personal interviews of school principals, local authority education department managers, mayors, district inspector (Ministry of Education), reporters and journalists in news channels.

Stage 4: statistical and qualitative data analysis – statistical analysis of the questionnaires and qualitative analysis of personal interviews of stakeholders.

Stage 5: findings formulation – formulating and analyzing the findings.

The tools for the statistical analysis: Descriptive statistics, pie chart, histogram, bar chart, box-plot, T-tests, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA)

The expected research results:

- a. Of the student population – understanding how they feel in general and in school, what they need, what would have helped them to feel and function better in routine and in crisis.
- b. Of the school principals' population – understand what their communication methods with the various stakeholders are, what they need to have school function better in routine and in crisis.
- c. Mayors – learn what are their influence and contribution to improve communication with schools, what are their expectations and attitudes regarding optimal communication with and of schools, in routine and in crisis.
- d. Of local authority education department managers – understand what the expectation of schools and their communication method with them is. Learn how they assist and can assist schools' optimal functioning in the various circles, in routine and in crisis.
- e. Decisions makers in the Ministry of education – present their attitude towards optimal functioning of principals / schools. What messages they want to submit and understand how messages pass from the ministry to schools and vice versa.
- f. Ministry of Education spokesmen – describe their communication methods with schools in routine and in crisis. What interesting subjects they communicate with the schools about.
- g. Education reporters and journalists representing the media – information about reporters' perception of reviewing education in crisis, data about using communication channels, reviewing frequency, main review content and subjects in crisis, and finally, journalists' attitudes about the question what

optimal communication with schools is and what is their personal vision of optimal communication.

Expected outputs:

- a. Understanding what communication channels schools use in crisis.
- b. Defining the communication expectations and needs of parents, students and school staff.
- c. Characterizing the difficulties and struggles parents, students, school staff and principals have in crisis.
- d. Principles of creating vision of school optimal communication in crisis.

Challenges in the educational space during a routine time

- Challenges related to communication - Characteristics of Social Networks.
- Educators lack the understanding and skills to use digital communication.
- Challenges related to audience attributes: Low parental Involvement.
- Establishing close communication between different populations in the school.
- Promote engagement and teachers-parents cooperation.
- System-related challenges: Lack of direct communication with principals.

Communication in the educational space in a time of crisis

- Optimal communication perceptions in the educational space during a crisis
- The school as a mediator and implementer
- The Local Authority as an Acting Director of the Ministry of Education's Policy
- Journalists as credible reporters - "gatekeepers"

Features similar to routine time

- Supportive communication
- Availability and providing immediate response in real time
- Directed and organized communication
- Cooperation and reciprocity

- Empathic, personal and trust-based communication
- Focused and clear messages
- Maintaining the interpersonal connection

Communication between the local authority and the school

- The more the local authority worked to promote cooperation with the school in the way it dealt with the crisis, the better quality and communication were perceived by both parties.
- The contents - administrative preparations, solving operational problems of distance learning, adapting teaching methods and curricula.
- Communication channels- online meetings (zoom), emails, WhatsApp, and phone.
- Frequency - The more often the communication was higher, so the crisis is perceived as an event that can be handled in a better way.

The challenges of the municipalities:

- Lack of direct and regular communication with the Ministry of Education causes a lack of information that harms the ability to deal with the crisis at the local level. In addition, these deficiencies cause rumors and difficulty in planning.
- Coping with media coverage that compares municipalities' coping with the education field. A comparison that caused competition between the municipalities for opening the study week (adding study days), was perceived as a sign of the municipality's success in coping with the crisis and defeating the pandemic in its area.
- Difficulty in preparing technological infrastructure for communication between schools.
- Caring for the welfare of the isolated student community.
- Lack of experience and lack of training for managing crises.

The media challenges in crisis:

- Competition in communication means - the journalist works in a commercial framework and the pressure to issue original articles that attract ratings and publish them first, before other journalistic platforms, leads to immediate publications, which are not necessarily reliable or established.
- Journalistic work in changing intense conditions - the pandemic requires the journalist to be attentive for a long time, to deal with a large and intense amount of information, containing a significantly greater amount of factors and data than usual.

Along with the challenges, the crisis has offered new communicational opportunities in the educational space, both technological and pedagogical:

- Advanced and effective education technologies personally adjusted to school needs. It seems that the interviewees perceive that these opportunities contribute to the students and the teachers, because understanding better online teaching may empower them.
- Technologies that enable improving, streamlining and deepening the communication quality. so, on one hand, the school-community direct communication may be established and improved, and on the other hand, parental involvement is increased.

Communication between the local Municipal Authority and the schools with journalists

- Shifting from " firefighting", support and backing to principals, to collaborative communication, with a common interest, quick, effective, and reliable notification for the public.
- Shifting from covering personal stories to emergency updates.
- Most of the coverage dealt with COVID-19 and its vast implications on the education system.

Communication between the school and parents

- Affected by the communication between the school authority and the Ministry of Education.

- Communication channels - Microsoft - Timms, Smart-school, WhatsApp, and phone calls.
- WhatsApp has become the preferred channel for instant communication.
- Email usage has dropped significantly among principals and teachers.
- Content - The subject of discipline has dropped completely; a new topic has arisen - relaxing talks and update talks. Academic achievements and social issues remained.
- The scope and frequency of communication with parents is significantly increased over time.
- The level of trust with the parents - increased or did not change.
- Most teachers noted that during the crisis they received instructions from the principal.
- Most parents mentioned the frequency and quality of contact with the school was very good.
- Principals offered more direct and regular contact with parents and more transparency and mutual listening.

The challenges of principals in crisis:

- The technological aspect - the principals dealt with the technological challenges of distance learning. The requirement for e-learning discovered teachers' lack of abilities and skills that affected study quality and created gaps between schools.
- The budgetary aspect - planning and operating communication requires designated budgets in crisis. Without badgers, principals will not be able to solve some of the problems they are facing and improve their communication with the community.
- The interpersonal aspect - the principals' perception is that lack of face-to-face interpersonal meetings harms optimal creativity, cooperation and communication realization.

The challenges from the school's staff perspective

- The technological aspect - the lack of skills and abilities of teachers
- The budgetary aspect - lack of resources.
- The interpersonal aspect - the physical distance, the load of digital communication.
- "The need to reinvent themselves “, exposure to criticism and distrust.

The challenges from the parent’s perspective

- Internet problems - means and faults in the network.
- Dealing with children's frustrations and anxieties.
- Difficulties of students concentrating.
- Difficulty of parents to "divide" between tasks.
- Teachers' lack of experience in distance learning.
- Family difficulty in assisting with distance learning problems.

Communication opportunities in the educational sphere during the COVID-19 period

- Development of advanced, effective, and customized educational technologies.
- Development of technologies that improve, optimize, and deepen the quality of communication between the various factors.
- Developing creativity and the ability to deal with crises.
- Strengthening the interpersonal student-parents-educational staff relationships.

Confirmation of the research hypotheses:

1- Communication means characterization: schools will use more digital channels to communicate in crisis than in routine.

Verified - Communication channels- online meetings (zoom), emails, WhatsApp, and phone.

2- Message characterization: schools will transmit and receive more messages related to information updates, student status, and educational content at digital channels in crisis than in routine.

Verified - The contents - relaxing messages to strengthen resilience, administrative preparations, solving operational problems of distance learning, adapting teaching methods and curricula.

3- Communication quality: the communication quality in crisis depends on the pre-crisis existing relations between the school and its environment.

Verified - The more often the previous communication was better, so the crisis was perceived as an event that could be handled in a better way.

4- Optimal communication: School optimal communication in crisis will be defined as addressing the expectations and needs of all stakeholders – in the inner and outer school circle.

Verified - Schools that reported better dealing with the crisis were schools where the principal received support and backing from the Ministry of Education, the supervision, and the local authority, the teachers received tools to cope, the students received support, the parents received a response to their needs, and the media communicated the messages transparently and clearly.

Key points:

- The research goal is to examine how elementary schools (in Israel) communicate in crisis with all their stakeholders.
- The research objective is to define a strategy for optimal communication in elementary schools in crisis.
- The COVID-19 crisis was selected as a case study in the research.
- The current research findings indicate that during crises like the COVID- 19 pandemic, school communication is the key to developing and maintaining an effective and reliable relationship between students, parents and teachers.
- School optimal communication is a communication that meets the needs and expectations of all stakeholders and allows the school community to cope well with the crisis and its consequences.

Key Crisis Communication Strategies for Schools:

In routine (before the crisis):

- 1- The principal has to understand his central role in managing school communication and outlining school's conduct with all stakeholders.
- 2- Build, develop and nurture a good school climate, based on openness, trust and cooperation with all school stakeholders, in routine, regardless and crisis.
- 3- Develop, nurture and strengthen educational staff that can cope with challenges.

During the crisis:

- 4- At the beginning of the crisis, having a profound mapping and identifying the needs and difficulties of the school, the teachers, the students and the parents, for optimal functioning in the crisis.
- 5- Build with the school leading team a clear intervention program according to the various needs mapping. If necessary, involve additional factors in the community (school psychologist, welfare, education department etc.).
- 6- Continuously monitor and control the intervention program, and refine it in accordance with the changing needs of all relevant parties.
- 7- Build an "emergency routine" - regular meetings and activities (in Zoom, if face-to-face is impossible) with the school staff, the parents and the students, for sharing information and venting and also for joint thinking about the staff needs - to create a sense of cohesion and consolidation, to normalize the emotions and feelings, to strengthen and establish a sense of team resilience, and to calm tensions and uncertainty.
- 8- Maintain a joint and continuous dialogue of the management team and the therapeutic team with all partners: the parent leadership, managers of the education and welfare departments, regular visits, mayors and the Ministry of Education supervision.
- 9- Keep a uniform language and convey uniform messages of all the school entities.
- 10- Understand and accept the difference between the teachers and the student population and be flexible to their needs.

- 11- Encouraging initiative, involvement and cooperation among the teachers, students and parents – providing the opportunity and space for everyone to be involved - will strengthen solidarity, caring, partnership and personal contribution in a crisis.
- 12- Thinking outside the box and being creative in providing adjusted responses for all the school students and the teacher staff.

Recommendations for future research:

In order to strengthen the communication model of schools during a crisis, further studies may explore the following aspects:

- 1- To test the effect of the various media channels on the level of parents' involvement in school activities.
- 2- To check whether there has been a change in the teachers' and parents' perceptions of their role and responsibility in the educational process, following the corona crisis.
- 3- To make a comparison between the use of the traditional means of communication and the use of the new means following the Corona crisis. Does any of the stakeholders prefer any measure, and if so, does the preference depend on the subject or context?
- 4- What are the advantages and disadvantages of using the new communication channels?
- 5- To what extent does the use of the new communication channels shape a new school communication model or does it preserve the existing model.
- 6- What will be the characteristics of the teacher-parent communication relations in the digital age?
- 7- The qualitative research included a population of teachers, parents and students from one school. It is recommended to expand and examine teachers, parents and students from other schools.

- 8- The research referred to an elementary school, it is also recommended to research additional education levels: kindergartens, junior-high, and high school.

Limitations of the study:

- 1- The population of students, teachers and parents who participated in the study was from only one school with unique and high socioeconomic characteristics and high accessibility to technological resources. There is room to expand the research to additional schools, with a different population at diverse socioeconomic levels, with diverse access to technological resources, and to examine the impact of diversity on the results of the research.
- 2- The school climate in the school that was examined is good and the teaching staff works in full cooperation, this fact may affect the results. There is room to check other schools with different climate data, and check whether the research results change.
- 3- Another limitation concerns the way the information is collected. Since some of the research tools are closed questionnaires, the range of freedom for the respondents is limited and they must answer according to the answers presented to them (scaling of answers). It is possible that if it was possible to freely answer open questions, different information would be received.
- 4- The research was carried out in the midst of the corona crisis. There is room to conduct further research from the perspective of time- Examine the impact of the crisis in the long term and check whether there has been a change in the results.

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