TOWSON UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S MESSAGES ON

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

By

Danielle A. Lawrence

A thesis

Presented to the faculty of

Towson University

In partial fulfillment

Of the requirements for the degree
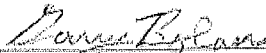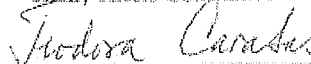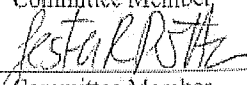
In Communications Management

May 2011

Towson University

Towson, MD 21252

TOWSON UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

THESIS APPROVAL PAGE

This is to certify that the thesis prepared by Danielle A. Lawrence

entitled ANALYZING THE IMPACT OF HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPAL'S MESSAGES

ON STUDENT PERCEPTION OF THE HIGH SCHOOL EXPERIENCE.

has been approved by his or her committee as satisfactory completions of the thesis

requirement for the degree Master of Science.

Garry Bolan _____   5/30/2011
                     Chair, Thesis Committee   Date

Teodora Carabas _____   5/30/2011
                        Committee Member   Date

Lester R. Potter _____   6/11/2011
                      Committee Member   Date

Lawrence Shirley _____   3 June 2011
                     Associate Dean, College of Graduate   Date
                     Studies and Research

i

ACKNOWLDEGEMENTS

I would like to first give thanks to my lord and savior, Jesus Christ, for the strength to complete this project. I would like to thank Professor Garry Bolan for his dedication and commitment to redefining my study and bringing it to a completion, as well as Dr. Teordora Carabas and Professor Lester Potter for their contributions to the study. To my good friend Angela Hood, thank you for your encouragement. To my special friend, Kevin Leach, thank you for your motivation. To my mother, Donna Lawrence, thank you for being my inspiration. To those that I did not mention, thank you for everything. Without teamwork, I would not have made it.

ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at whether communication practices used by the high school principals can impact students' perceptions of the high school experience upon or nearing graduation. The case study method was used to sample two schools in the Baltimore City Public School System (BPCSS). Interviews with principals were conducted to analyze the cognitive process of message development. Focus group discussions were conducted with students to analyze student responses to principals' messages and school themes. Findings from my study can be used for recruitment and retention efforts within schools, as well as add to communication research for measuring message success. The theoretical frameworks to support my study are: O'Keefe's (1988) Theory of Message Design Logics (MDL) and Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory (SLT), as well as Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way communication model.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my thesis is to study the impact of communication from high school principals to high school students and the overall influences such messages have on a student's perception of the high school experience. When analyzing messages and perceptions in a school environment, it is important to view communication not just as a one-way process, where principals are the senders and students are receivers, but also as a two-way process, where messages are inclusive of both principal goals and student feedback. In support of the two-way communication process, my research will explore if a student's perception of his or her educational experience can affect such things as high school dropout rates, college admissions and/or societal contributions. A study of student perceptions of their high school experiences may provide insight into whether student perceptions of their high school experience impacts postgraduate decision making, which may influence such things as social welfare, unemployment, and community development.

My study is not intended to suggest that two-way communication is the key to an educational utopia, as there are many other factors that can impact a student's perception of his or her educational environment such as race, economics, and social class. Many studies analyze the impact of race and economic class on school performance. Wong and Lee (2004) looked at both race and social economic influence on student resources and found that "their inequity may be exacerbated when educationally irrelevant factors such as race and socioeconomic status filter institutional support for schooling" (p. 4).

Wong's study looks at how racial and social economical barriers can impact support for schools by analyzing the variation in resources and curriculum of schools with this division.

Buendia, Ares, Juarez, and Peercy (2004) study geographic differences in schools and the power of racial and class-based divisions. Using racial and class-based divisions as the premise, the referenced study focuses on the differences in demographic and class division in the Salt Lake City Utah School district and the impact on the students' learning environment. Both of the studies referenced above view racial and social economic barriers from a different perspective, and provide information on racial and class based division in schools. This is an area that has been long debated in education research and as a result, will not be the focal point of my study.

While race and social economic class are very important factors of educational division that may also affect student perception, my study on student perceptions of the high school experience focuses on school messages versus resources and look at communication as a separate entity from race or social class. In other words my study isolates communication from race or class differences and analyzes communication from the principals to students based on their educational relationship.

The purpose for isolating communication practices from other social economical influences is to allow for all parties involved to be viewed equally. The intent of my study is not to underestimate the importance of racial barriers on student perceptions of the high school experience. As a communication study, my thesis seeks to add to research on academic barriers by concentrating on the communication practices that occur within the school to measure message success and the influence on students' perceptions.

By analyzing the impact of high school principals' messages on student perception of the high school experience, my study takes a different perspective into education research by looking solely at communication within the school and identifying school as its own system. Although other factors impact a school's function, my study proposes the idea that once inside the school walls, students, teacher, and principals are in their own system and oftentimes act differently than they would around other influences such as parents or local stakeholders.

By analyzing school as its own system this research places an emphasis on the importance of messages designed from principals to students, as well as student perceptions of the messages. Understanding the relationship between the two can help develop future school messages and expand opportunity for student feedback, which can be used in message development.

Because perceptions change and are often situational, understanding the complexity of school administering, the challenges that principals face, as well as the environmental factors that influence message development are important in reviewing the overall message success. Environmental factors that influence message development can be the demographics of the school or the demands from community members. Despite the influence, there is a cognitive process that occurs when school messages are developed by school principals. As a result, one can argue that a school principal's thoughts and beliefs, along with potential influences from teachers and supporting staff, shape the message. These thoughts are often reflected through messages delivered to students and affect student perception of the school environment.

This statement is supported by the Halawah (2005) argument that says, "Although a school's success is influenced by many people, school principals remain one of the most important factors in this success" (p. 334). In support of this statement the primary research questions of this thesis are: Do the communication practices used by high school principals impact student perceptions of the high school experience? Also, is there a correlation with student perceptions of the high school experience and postgraduate decision-making? In order to accomplish research goals, which are to measure trends in student perceptions of principals' messages, my study analyzes the type of messages that are sent to students, and examines how they are developed, sent, and whether or not they influence student perceptions.

In addition to the research questions above, the hypothesis of my study is if students are motivated with positive messages and higher expectations from their school principals, then they will view their school experience more positively and want to perform well in school. The hypothesis analyzes if positive messages equal positive performance, and if not, identify limitations in this area. The results from my study will be useful in developing inclusive communication practices between principals and students. By allowing principals to see how students perceive their messages, they will know if their messages are successful, or if messages need to be further adjusted.

This research focuses on student perception of the principal's message as an indicator of message success. Although there may be other influences such as self-motivation and parental influences, my study looks at the communication practices from the principal to student communication and how that impacts perceptions. The idea is that if students do not perceive the message positively, then they may not act upon the

message and are unable to achieve message goals. Findings about student perception can help with professional development of communication strategies within the school.

   With information on student perceptions of principal messages and the impact on his or her perception of the high school experience, principals can enhance professional development in schools as well as develop or enhance student recruitment and retention efforts. Analyzing student perception of the high school experience can support recruitment goals because the principal will have a measuring tool for message success based on student feedback and the same applies for retention goals. Feedback on student perception can allow for the development of a communications strategy that will include student interest in the development of school messages and/or themes.

   To obtain information on student perception of the high school experience, it is important to view the school as a system. In viewing school as a system, the argument is that communication between principals and students, as well as experiences within the school system can have a lifelong impact on students. This is important because schools serve as educational institutions that shape and mold our society and generally impact the lives of many. Simply speaking education impacts everyone. At some point in life, an individual is either actively participating in the educational process as a student or contributing as a teacher.

   In some way education impacts communities, determines growth, stimulates governments, and affects community budgets. That is why it is important to also view education as a social function. The extent that education impacts our communities is unlimited; however, in viewing education as a social function, my thesis analyzes how messages that are sent from principals to students impact a student's perception of his/her

educational experience. This research idea derived from my personal experience as a student in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) and informally communicating with other students about their educational experiences post graduation.

Over the years, talking with others about their high school experiences, and seeing my siblings go through the high school system, I observed through informal conversations, that there is a significant difference in students' high school experiences and their engagement with high school principals. I also noticed a difference in how students perceived school based on their high school experience. As a result, I determined that the variation in communication within the high school system and its impact on student perception is a subject worthy of additional research.

Findings from my study can be used to monitor trends in student responses and determine if student perceptions of principals' messages affected their perception of the high school experience upon or nearing graduation, as well as post graduation. Since there are many different factors such as parental influence that can affect student perception, this research is not intended to make conclusive generalizations, but seeks only to explore one factor of students' high school experiences, which is principal messages. My study seeks to explore the effectiveness of principals' messages. Additionally, findings from my study will add to communication research, rather than provide a conclusive assessment.

In order to discuss high school experiences and student perceptions, I must first analyze my perception of high school and my experiences. As a high school student, I was often reminded by principals and teachers at my school that I was growing into a young woman, and they are expecting "only the best" from my classmates and me. "Only

the best" was my high school motto, but it was also a message that was reiterated by our principal and principals before her. It was reinforced at assemblies and sporting events, on print correspondence, and at graduation.

Those three words held so much power in their presentation and how they were communicated from the principal to the students. This message, backed by the support of the principal, teachers and guidance counselors to achieve academic and interpersonal goals, encouraged me to strive to pass tests, attend college, and conduct myself in an upstanding manner even after I graduated high school. It was not until I interacted with high school students from various schools in the area that I realized my school experience, the reinforcement and encouragement that my classmates and I received, was not the same at all high schools in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS).

The Baltimore City Public School (BCPSS) system is located within the Mid-Atlantic part of the United States. As an urban school district, the BCPSS is no stranger to the scrutiny of its system, teachers, principals, and students. There are many themes that have come from the city school system with the most recent being "Great Kids, Great Schools". As stated on the BCPSS 2009 fast facts overview "To be great, schools must have great principals; great teachers in every classroom; instruction that reaches all kids, with their many different needs; the freedom to create a unique learning community; and involved parents and communities" (www.baltimorecityschools.org).

There are 32 high schools in the BCPSS with 24,049 students in grades 9-12. This includes charter and transformation schools. The demographics of the city school system are 88.4 percent African American; 7.8 percent white; 2.8 percent Latino; 0.7 percent

Asian-Pacific Islander; and 0.3 percent other (www.baltimorecityschools.org/fastfacts
2009) .

A new change in the school system is the ongoing development of school choice. This differs from the former way of school selection, which only allowed students school choice based on their residence and academic ability. Schools that required academic placement for admission are accelerated schools and maintain a reputation of success. Oftentimes accelerated schools provide updated resources and good teachers that may not be provided at other schools. I attended an accelerated school. Students in accelerated schools, like the one I attended, are labeled as smart and/or privileged children, but to me that is an excuse, a way to say that some groups of children are more manageable or tolerable than others. To me this concept serves as social acceptance of poorly performing students—students who rebel against the rules or dislike school; however, it overlooks why the students feel that way. Aside from resources and teachers in schools influencing the high school experience, students learn through observation. As a result social learning theory will be useful in the support of my study.

Traditionally, Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory has been used to study the effects of media violence on television viewers. Despite its correlation to television violence, social learning theory focuses on modeling. Through research of social learning theory Dainton & Zelly (2004) found that "Bandura's central claim is that most human behavior is learned observationally through modeling: from observing others one forms an idea of how new behaviors are performed, and on later occasions, this coded information serves as a guide for action" (p. 206). Using this idea, it will be interesting to see how students model themselves after the principal's actions and verbal

messages to form personal perceptions of the school environment, and if these perceptions influenced their actions toward achieving message goals.

Understanding the cognitive processes of message development and persuasion is important, as it will address the question of how messages are developed. For that reason, O'Keefe's Theory of Message Design Logics (MDL) (1988) is used to analyze the type of messages developed by principals. MDL breaks message design into three components: expressive, conventional and rhetorical. Each component uses different fundamentals and takes a different approach to achieving message goals.

The development of principals' messages is important because one could argue messages developed and sent from principals to students range from persuasive to authoritative. For example, the primary goal of school themes, slogans, or mottos is to motivate or persuade students to reach a level of performance or achieve a goal. Contrarily, messages can take an authoritative approach that demand student participation towards achieving message goals by using fear tactics. Authoritative messages may be messages of discipline and may not give students the option to express feedback.

My thesis also incorporates James Grunig and Todd Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model of communication to analyze effective two-way communication practices, which according to Lattimore, Heiman, and Van Leuvent (2004) "depicts a public relations orientation in which organizations and their publics adjust to each other" (p. 59). The two-way communication model will help analyze the impact of student feedback on student perceptions of the principal's messages and school themes.

The two-way communication model is relevant in the school system because it shows the relationships between principals and students and how that relationship

impacts messages that are sent and received. Schools are like systems or communities, and as with any system, successful relationships are important to success or failure.

The focus on social science in the two-way symmetrical model of communication is ideal for my study, which uses a qualitative research method to analyze student perceptions of principals' messages. It is important to look at communication in an academic environment as a two-way process versus a one-way persuasive process. That is not to say that messages transmitted in a two-way process are not persuasive because they can be, but the two-way symmetrical model allows for an inclusive flow of communication, which is a focal point in my study. Using Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model of communication will allow one to incorporate the students' perception in future message development and transmission.

Aside from the application of theory, this research is timely because the Baltimore City Public School System is undergoing a transformation, which includes the closure and reorganization of the following three high schools: Augusta Fells Savage Institute of Visual Arts High School, Doris M. Johnson High School and Frederick Douglass High School (http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/BoardDecision2010Final.pdf p. 4-6).

In response to this initiative the city school system identified transformation strategies that made the most sense for each school. These options include changing school leadership and staff, using reform principles to improve schools, closing schools and re-opening under the management of a new operator and closing schools that are underachieving altogether and transferring students to a higher performing school. http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/BoardDecision2010Final.pdf (p. 4-6).

This transformation in city schools will take seasoned principals away from their comfort zones and expose them to new personalities and expectations from students. It will also bring new principals into school systems that were formally established causing students to adjust to a new organizational structure. During this process, it is vital that themes are communicated successfully to retain students and develop healthy relationships within schools.

This research focuses on high school students who are at least age 18 and current seniors or recent graduates from two sample schools within the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS). High school was chosen because it offers a transitional environment from youth to adulthood. Baltimore City Public Schools were chosen because of my background as a student in the city public school system and because Baltimore City is a large urban school district that has made national news for its turmoils, such as school violence, high dropout rates, and poor test scores; transitions, such as new school leadership and the creation of charter schools; lastly, triumphs, such as increased student retention and giving schools autonomy to make the best decisions for their students; in exchange, schools are accountable for student achievement. http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/PDFs/2009_10_State_of_Our_High_Schools.pdf (p. 4).

In order to study this process, focus groups with students from the two sample schools were used to collect student feedback on principal messages and school themes and to analyze students' overall perception of the high school experience. Perceptions are measured by analyzing trends in student responses. For example if a student favors principal messages and indicates that the message was retained and impacted the

postgraduate decisions, then it can be determined that the student had a positive perception of their high school experience. On the contrary, if a student indicates that the principal's messages were not retained, and had little to no influence on his or her perception of the high school experience, or had a negative impact on their perception, then it can be concluded that the student was negatively influenced. By conducting focus group studies using two comparison schools, I analyze trends and positive and negative responses to find areas of additional development and implications for practice within schools.

There is prior research that addresses communication in academia from the student's perspective. Ames (1992) finds that "over the past 25 years considerable research and writings addressed how classroom learning environments influence student learning, but more recent attention has focused on how classroom environments influence students' views about the nature and purpose of learning" (p. 261). My study of students' perceptions has some similarities to Ames's article because it looks at how the learning environment can impact student perceptions of the educational experience.

However, my study is different, because it also analyzes the process of message development and the variation between two principals' approach to forming school messages. This is done by looking at factors that may influence message development such as school goals and student feedback, to name a few. Unlike Ames's study, my study isolates communication from environmental influences to analyze whether successful communication can curtail environmental influences and change student perceptions.

Reflecting back to the primary research question, do communication practices used by high school principals impact student perceptions of the high school experience. My study analyzes whether the principal's belief in school messages is transferred to students. For example, if a principal feels passionate about a message and delivers it with enthusiasm, will students adopt that behavior to achieve message goals? Will this same enthusiasm affect their perception of the school?

Halawah (2005) finds that "the effect of the principal on student learning cannot be overemphasized. Effective principals are liked and respected, rather than feared, and communicate caring for students" (p. 334). The point of creating an environment where students respect the principal versus one that encourages fear is important in message development. In theory, if students fear the principal, then they are less likely to be receptive to principal messages and may have negative perceptions of the principal and the school environment. Contrarily, if students respect the principal, they will be more likely to accept messages from the principal and maintain a positive perception of the school environment.

In order to create this respected relationship, Halawah (2005) states that the "principal must have knowledge and understanding of effective communication strategies. Creating a collaborative and open communication environment has been described as the single most important factor for successful school improvement initiatives" (p. 335). Oftentimes a collaborative and open communication environment is created between principal and teachers, and the flow of messages is often facilitated within that unit. This process eliminates students and leaves little room for student feedback. It is important to incorporate an open communication environment for students

so that their feedback can be included in professional development initiatives, curriculum

development, recruitment initiatives and retention efforts, because ultimately a school is

measured by the success or failure of its students.

   In addition to the primary research questions, exploratory questions analyze the

differences in the perception of messages delivered using the Internet. These questions

are: how effective is the electronic delivery of principal messages using the Internet?

Does the communication of messages to students using an electronic medium encourage

student feedback? Are students more likely to respond to and/or retain principal messages

sent using the Internet?

   This thesis makes an original contribution to prior research by analyzing a variety

of message behaviors from principals to students. From this research, one will be able to

address questions such as: Do principals greatly impact student morale through the of use

verbal messages and/or messages sent via the Internet? And what role do principals play

in establishing school themes?

   A qualitative research study using the case study method is used to gather

research findings. A case study is the best choice because it gives the research

participants autonomy, therefore removing them from scrutiny, which may taint the

research. Interviews with high school principals using preset questions (Appendix A) are

used to build one part of the case study. Each participant is provided an informed consent

and will remain confidential throughout the study (Appendix F). This research was

approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants at

Towson University (Appendix I).

To obtain student feedback, my study used focus groups with open-ended questions that incorporated principal message design and delivery and acknowledged the impact of outside influences such as parents, and communication theory (see Appendix B). Each participant was given an informed consent form and will remain confidential throughout the study (see Appendix D). A detailed explanation of the methodology is further outlined in chapter three of the thesis.

To recap on chapter one, my study analyzes high school students' perception of the principals' messages and its impact on their perception of the high school experience upon or nearing graduation, as well as post graduation. This is important because student perceptions can affect such things as high school dropout rates and post graduate decisions. The goal is to provide an objective research study that will contribute to both communication and education development. From an education standpoint, the research will measure student perception for message development, which can help with student recruitment and retention. From a communications standpoint, research findings will help identify a correlation between messages and perception to analyze message success and or failure, as well as to build on additional research for communication in academia.

Chapter two focuses on a review of scholarly literature on message development in an education environment (e.g. message type and message delivery), and student perceptions. It also includes a scholarly review of social learning theory, the theory of message design logics, and the two way symmetrical model of communication.

Chapter three, the method section, provides a detailed analysis on the methodology used, how the sample was selected, the focus group and interview processes, and benefits of using qualitative research as well as limitations to the research

method. From the interviews and focus group responses, themes were established to form case studies. Themes are school messages that are intended to reach a large audience (i.e. the student body) and achieve mass goals. Themes were formed based on the volume of responses to a topic from the principals and/or students. As a result, the themes that developed were both academic and nonacademic. To elaborate on the terminology nonacademic themes focused on building interpersonal skills, while academic themes focused on preparing for college, to name a few.

     Chapter four, the results section, describes the findings of the interview and focus group responses using a thematic analysis. The thematic analysis groups both the academic and nonacademic themes based on administrator and student feedback, as well as correlates the results to the appropriate theory where applicable. Although the schools selected were similar in the size of the student body and demographics, there were similarities and differences in students' responses to school themes.

     The variation in students' responses could be in part related to the principals' focus on different areas of concern. For example, the administrator at School A focused on sending messages that advised students that they had the choice to go to college; however, student respondents from School B did acknowledge that received the same encouragement. There is no way to control what messages are sent to students that attended different schools. While similarities are apparent, the differences are inevitable.

     My study sought to identify areas of similarities and differences in communication practices in schools with the hope that by doing so, students in the BCPSS can have similar experiences. This was done by providing insight on principals' messages and allowing both principals and students to speak independently of one

another and the communication process. In my opinion, it also helped that I am a third

party who is not affiliated with the school system, which may have allowed for more

candid responses. Chapter five, the discussion section, provides a comparative analysis of

the findings, identifies limitations to the study, and areas of additional research.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

For a study that focuses on messages and perceptions, it is beneficial to adopt a formal definition of communication that is applicable to this type of research. Communication has many definitions, both scholarly and non-scholarly. Cameron and McCollum's (1993) definition of communication is "a process in which individuals interpret their social reality and seek information that will fill gaps in their knowledge" (p. 219). This definition ties well into the concept of my study as it views communication as an information-seeking process that influences actions. In a high school environment, there is a flow of information communicated to the students from the principal. These messages can include personal communication, school themes, mottos, mission statements, and/or slogans. One important factor to consider is that as the population of school changes so does the need to adjust messages to accomplish organizational goals. School themes are isolated from school mottos for the purpose of my study because oftentimes school mottos predate the principal and serve as static symbol of the institution rather than a changing theme.

To answer the question of whether or not messages and themes sent in school fill gaps in students' knowledge of organizational goals and/or influence student perceptions, one must first understand the message development process. For the purpose of my study, we analyze messages developed by school principals because the Baltimore City Public School system (BCPSS) is "giving schools autonomy to make the best decisions for their students; in exchange, schools are accountable for student achievement" http://www.baltimorecityschools.org/PDFs/2009_10_State_of_Our_High_Schools.pdf (p.

4). That means principals are now responsible for school themes, messages, and budget allocations, in exchange for student success. Student success can be a number of things such as increased student graduation rates, higher test scores, or more college acceptances.

Due to this change in authority from the city school system to the school principal, it is important for one to understand the cognitive process of message development from principals. Understanding the cognitive process of principal's messages will provide insight into what it means to be a school principal, what factors go into message development, and the challenges of principals' messages. The theory of message design logics looks closely at the cognitive development of messages and as a result, fits well into the concept of my study.

Theory of Message Design Logics

Cortes, Larson, and Hample (2005) describe O'Keefe's (1988) theory of message design logic (MDL) as the idea "that people have different understandings of what a message is, what it is for, and what it can do" (p. 108). In other words, message development changes based on the individual and his/her priorities. Infante and Womack (2003) state that MDL "focuses on the way differences in the persuaders' cognitive processes are reflected in the persuasive message strategies they use" (p. 120). Based on the description, MDL can be used to compare principals' message design strategies within schools and the effectiveness of persuading students to achieve message goals.

The theory of message design logics is useful in a study that focuses on the impact of principal messages on student perceptions of his/her academic environment because it allows one to view how principals develop messages and the influences (i.e.

environment, rules, or goals). According to O'Keefe (1988) there are three different

components of message design logic: expressive, conventional, and rhetorical (p. 84).

Each message design has a different developmental process, which may achieve different

outcomes from the receiver.

Cortes et.al (2005) describe the three message design logics as follows:

> Expressive, in which a message is viewed as a way of saying whatever is being
> thought or felt; conventional, in which a message is seen as a convention-
> governed move in a well regulated encounter with mutually understood rules; and
> rhetorical, in which a message is understood as having the capability of changing
> the nature of the situation to one's advantage (p. 108).

There are pros and cons to each message design, yet each message design may have

significance in message development. By breaking down each component of the three

message design logics, one can see how each may be applicable in the design of

principals messages.

Expressive message design

O'Keefe (1988) finds that "communication is a process in which persons express

what they think or feel so others will know what they think or feel (p. 84). Expressive

design is the first of the three message design types. This design logic focuses on

messages that only serve the purpose to express one's feelings. These messages are often

undeveloped and/or unplanned. In support of this argument, O'Keefe defines expressive

design as "the simplest possible premise on which message production can be based.

Language is the medium for expressing thoughts and feelings" (1988, p. 84). This

statement implies that expressive design logic is simple and often a first response to a

direct situation. This is supported by the Hullman (2004) statement that "expressive

design logic reflects reactivity; a person responds to a prior message instead of focusing

on goals relevant to the situation" (p. 209). This highlights that expressive messages are often based on reaction and may not focus on the relevancy of the situation. This is a result of the unplanned and undeveloped premise of expressive design. These are relevant factors to my study, which focuses on students' perceptions of high school principals' messages, because one can determine if a principal's message using an expressive design have a significant impact on student perception of the message or if expressive design is only effective for immediate communication as described above.

Expressive design messages are usually based on feeling and come as the first reaction from the sender. Generally, expressive messages contain emotional content and fail to address explicitly the goals of the situation (Hullman, 2004, p. 209). In a school environment, an example of an expressive message is a message developed in response to student violence against teachers that made national coverage. This type of coverage and exposure may lead to hard hitting messages geared toward disciplinary actions rather than seeking the cause of such violence and developing long-term goals.

According to O'Keefe (1988), "persons operating with the expressive premise will give an overall impression of being very literal in message production and comprehension..." (p. 84). In the situational example provided above, the principal may be very literal of the consequences to the student's violent behavior and may even tread toward unprofessionalism, as this is a first response type of message.

Despite this implication that expressive messages are undeveloped, expressive design messages have their purpose in message design and may be favored by some school principals. O'Keefe (1988) argues that "the only job an expressive message can perform is expression. Although a person relying on the expressive premise can surely

recognize that messages have effects on hearers, the conception of message effects is exceedingly primitive and unelaborated" (p. 84). In a high school environment, students may easily understand messages sent using the expressive design as it lacks the complexity of formal messages. Messages sent using the expressive design may be viewed as personal communication due to the informal approach.

Students may prefer messages sent using the expressive design logic viewing them as sincere and straight from the heart. Expressive design messages may use terms that students are familiar with allowing the principal to identify with students' interests. Using expressive design logic in school does not mean that principals should remove themselves from professionalism; however, in order to capture the students' attention, sometimes it is best to express messages in a way that the students can relate.

According to O'Keefe (1988), "expressive conception messages are assumed to be received and straightforwardly understood by hearers who will be provoked to have thoughts, feelings, and reactions by those messages" (p. 85). Although there are possible positive outcomes of messages using an expressive design in schools, there are also risks because in a high school environment, students are impressionable and outcomes are uncertain. The response to expressive message design is often unanticipated by its developer. However, some may favor the expressive approach in school as principals may be viewed as "keeping it real"— a message strategy that is often appreciated by high school students and others may find it offensive.

In a high school environment, expressive messages may be used if the principal is responding to demands from the school system or other stakeholders (i.e. politicians, parents, etc.) due to a current event or breaking news. Expressive design logic appears

most effective when attempting to achieve short-term goals, but it may not hold the same influence over long-term goals. Student perceptions are considered a long-term goal as they travel with the student throughout their years in school and after they have left. That is why some principals may favor a more conventional and planned message development process, which is the second strategy of the theory of message design logics.

Conventional message design

According to Hullman (2004), "conventional design logic reflects a person's willingness to recognize the context of the current situation" (p. 209). Conventional message design logic may offer success in achieving long-term goals. Contrary to expressive message design, conventional message design does consider message goals and strategically follows rules to accomplish such goals. Conventional messages are task relevant and include mention of goals and possible actions that will be taken to accomplish goals (Hullman, 2004, p. 209). The conventional message design logic applies to my study on student perception because conventional messages are based on rules and structured tasks, which is a familiar design strategy in academia. However, as schools change and demands from students shift, so must the priorities on how to communicate old rules in a new way.

According to O'Keefe (1988)

The conventional message design views communication as a game played cooperatively, according to socially conventional rules and procedures. The conventional view subsumes the expressive premise; language is viewed as a means of expressing propositions… Conventional message design focuses on the premise that communication between the sender and receiver is constituted by cooperation (p. 86).

In other words, conventional messages are designed with the presumption that there will be cooperation and acceptance of the message. In the school environment, conventional message designs can be an effective way to achieve message goals because it takes a traditionalist approach. Principals may adopt practices that were used by principals before them despite its effectiveness or ineffectiveness on a new audience. If conventional message design focuses on receiver cooperation, then message effectiveness may be difficult to obtain in a high school environment where students are not always cooperative.

Of conventional message design logics, McClish (1993) states the following:

> When the conventional design logic is marshaled, one's proof "becomes clause" or support for a given assertion or truth claim usually includes a rule or guidelines that is derived from a body of rules or guidelines believed to be valued by the audience (p. 32).

That is to say that conventional message designs are structured with rules that the receiver (in this case students) will both respect and appreciate. In a school environment, principals taking a conventional message design approach may incorporate rules that students are familiar with and can easily accept.

School messages designed using a conventional premise can include the school uniform policy, attendance code and code of conduct. These rules are structured and students become familiar with the messages and expectations both prior to enrollment and during their academic career. Conventional messages set precedence and even if the precedence is broken, students know that it exists and most often understand that there are consequences to breaking the rules.

Unlike expressive messages conventional message designs are structured, goal oriented, and rule based. Messages using this design can be effective as they take minimal risk, but they can also be boring to students. Rhetorical message design, on the other hand, may be more intriguing to students as it motivates them to achieve message goals through negotiation and persuasion.

Rhetorical message design

Rhetorical design is the third component of the theory of message design logics (MDL). O'Keefe (1988) finds that rhetorical communication acts on the premise that "communication is the creation and negotiation of social selves and situations. Within this design logic, knowledge of conventional social forms and relations is subsumed within a view of selves and situations as mutable rather than fixed" (p. 87). That is to say that messages using a rhetorical design act as a negotiation strategy where the sender includes the interest of others stakeholders in order to develop messages that will gain the interest of the receiver. In the case of high school, messages developed with a rhetorical premise may also consider social and or cultural influences. The rhetorical design logic would include these external factors to develop messages that reflect students' interest and seek to persuade students to achieve message goals.

In a high school environment, rhetorical message design negotiates various different factors into the development of a message such as stakeholder request and industry influences all while trying to achieve the message goal of the principal. In support of this argument, Hullman (2004) states, "rhetorical messages reflect a person's awareness and ability to address his or her own goals and the receivers' goals simultaneously" (p. 210). Hullman's statement applies to my study on student

perceptions of administrators' messages because it shows the level of complexity involved in developing school messages using the rhetorical premise and will explore the differences in students' perception of messages developed using the rhetorical design logic versus messages using a conventional or expressive design.

Unlike conventional message design, rhetorical message design does not follow set rules or guidelines to achieve its goals. Despite the different strategy for rhetorical message design, this design logic can build from both conventional and expressive message design. In support of this idea, Peterson and Albrecht (1996) find that "rhetorical communicators may be adept at reading and reframing messages that are expressive or conventional" (p. 295). Peterson and Albrecht's statement shows that unlike expressive messages, which are said based on feeling or conventional messages, which are developed based on traditional practices, messages using a rhetorical design logic may be readdressed and tweaked to meet changing goals and expectations of participants involved (i.e. students). Peterson and Albrecht's statement highlights the negotiation aspect of rhetorical message design. Using the rhetorical design, the sender may often change goals to comply with stakeholder interests.

Of rhetorical communication, O'Keefe (1988) states,

Rather than seeing selves and situations as given in a conventional system of rules and rather than seeing meaning as fixed in messages by their form and context, instead all meaning is treated as a matter of dramaturgical enactment and social negotiation(p. 87).

In other words, O'Keefe finds that rhetorical messages differ from conventional messages because the context of rhetorical messages is based on how one defines the situation to form the message context. According to O'Keefe, the rhetorical premise does not view context as fixed. It is influenced by other variables, which are a matter of the message

developer's interpretation and willingness to negotiate. The influence of the situation on rhetorical communication is a matter of debate. The argument is whether rhetorical communication is in response to the requirements of a situation or if the rhetor shapes the situation through their interpretations and choices when designing the message.

In support of the argument that rhetorical communication is in response to the situation, Bitzer (1968) states "rhetorical discourse is called into existence by situation; the situation which the rhetor perceives amounts to an invitation to create and present discourse" (p. 9). This argument indicates that in rhetorical communication the rhetor or presenter identifies a situation and develops the message as a response to that situation.

If rhetorical communication is in response to a situation, then the response is most often planned to shape the audience perspective of the situation. This statement is supported by Bitzer's (1968) argument that describes responses to situations of rhetorical discourse as a "fitting response, a response that fits the situation" (p. 10). Bitzer's argument on rhetorical communication divides the situation into complex versus simple and analyzes rhetorical responses to such situations. Viewing rhetorical messages as a response to a situation removes the speaker from the responsibility of context.

The counter argument to Bitzer's claim is that rhetorical messages are based on the speaker's perception of a situation and how they chose to present the situation. According to Vatz (1973), Bitzer argues that the nature of the context determines the rhetoric" (p. 156). In other words it is the nature of the situation that determines the response; however, according to Vatz, a situation alone cannot be the basis of the message context, but also the interpretation of that situation by the message developer and what he or she decides to focus on in message development, as there are many

interpretations to a situation. This statement is supported by the Vatz (1973) argument

that "no situation can have a nature independent of the perception of its interpreter or

independent of the rhetoric with which he chooses to characterize it" (p. 154). An

interpretation of this statement is that the perception of the speaker determines the depth

of the situation and as a result, rhetorical messages developed based on the speaker's

perception of the situation and the the situation is not independent of the speaker's

perception.

This point of view is supported by Vatz (1973) statement "Thus rhetoric is a cause

not an effect of meaning. It is antecedent, not subsequent, to a situations impact" (p. 160).

Vatz (1973) view of rhetorical message design aligns with O'Keefe's view of rhetorical

communication as being mutable rather than fixed. The argument that rhetorical

communication is based on the rhetors interpretation of the situation and how he or she

depicts the situation is also supported by the O'Keefe (1988) description of the of the

rhetorical premise as,

> Knowledge of the ways in which communicative choice and language style
> convey character, attitude, and definitions of the situation is systematically
> exploited to (on one hand) enact a particular social reality and (on the other hand)
> provide "depth interpretation" of received messages (p. 88).

Looking at rhetorical communication based on the rhetors interpretation of a situation and

how he or she chooses to focus the message design situation applies to the study because

it analyzes how principals develop school messages and how those messages are

delivered. Through this analysis one can see variations in the principals' approach to

similar situations, such as preparing students for college.

Despite the approach to rhetorical message design, analyzing student perception

of the message design will help explore message effectiveness and highlight different

points of view that the principal may not have considered when developing the message.

An advantage to the rhetorical approach in a high school environment is that it will allow

for message creativity and adjustments that will reach the often changing student body.

   Although rhetorical communication design does not focus on preset rules and

message structures, it does not imply that there is no organization to a rhetorically

designed message. Actually, a rhetorically designed message can be very complex as it

must achieve message goals through persuasion and inclusion of the intended audience.

O'Keefe (1988) finds that "within the rhetorical view, the process of communication is

constituted by coordination and negotiation" (p. 87). That is to say that rhetorical design

messages focus on the coordination and negotiation between the sender and the receiver.

In a high school environment, messages using this design may involve students in the

development process.

   The coordination aspect of rhetorical message design is similar to conventional

message design in that is it organized and structured, but the negotiation aspect of

rhetorical message design differs from conventional message design in that while

conventional message design focuses on cooperation from its receivers, it almost assumes

that receivers will cooperate because of its rule based approach. However, negotiation is

different from cooperation. The negotiation approach, which is used in rhetorical

message design, assumes that not all receivers will be cooperative and accept the

message. As a result, further explanation of message goals and messages processes will

be needed to gain senders support.

   O'Keefe (1988) states the following about the producers of rhetorical message

designs:

Characteristically, then, rhetorical message producers give inordinate importance to interpersonal harmony and consensus. They tend to ignore power and resource control as means of conflict resolution; they persistently underestimate the force of social convention and routine and overestimate the individuality and creativity of themselves and others (p. 88).

That is to say that the developers of rhetorical messages may naively put focus on their creativity, the harmony of the message, and the consensus of their receivers.

Additionally O'Keefe (1988) finds that producers of rhetorical messages are "proactive rather than reactive; their use of communication is dominated by the goals they want to achieve or facility and so messages are designed toward effects rather than in response to the actions of others" (p. 88). Though interesting, this can prove challenging in a high school environment where the receivers are diverse spanning from different backgrounds, ethnicities, social, and economic class. Depending on the environmental needs in the high school and the message goals identified, a principal's rhetorical message approach may be effective, but in situations where students refuse to negotiate due to discipline problems, then a conventional approach may be more effective.

According to Hullman (2004) "message design logic theory explains how goals are enacted as behavior in the model. People's abilities and awareness of goals influence how they talk. Talk is the resulting communication that provides need fulfillment" (p. 211). In a school environment, it is assumed that messages change based on school need, and it is likely that one of these design types will be applied. In addition to studying message design from the principal's perspective, it is also important to analyze how students perceive and act upon principal's messages. Social learning theory (SLT)

provides insight on how people learn though observation and how that applies to a study on student perceptions of principals messages.

<u>Social Learning Theory</u>

According to Albert Bandura (1977), founder of SLT, "theories must demonstrate predictive power. They must accurately identify the determinants of human behavior as well as the intervening mechanisms responsible for the changes" (p. 5). Social learning theory applied in a study that analyzes students' perceptions of messages can not only predict message success for future professional development and research, but it can also predict the influences of school messages on student recruitment and retention. Bandura (1977) finds that "the power of theory is ultimately judged by the power of the procedures it generates to effect psychological changes" (p. 4). Though SLT, principals can assess if students have adopted the message behavior and/or the behavior of the principals sending the message.

Because communication is a two-way process, one also has to analyze the receiver. In this case, SLT will apply to students as receivers and how they perceive messages. It is important to analyze what happens when a message is fully developed by a sender and transmitted to the receiver. If that message is a rhetorical message, it is important to analyze what factors motivated the receiver to act upon the message or to reject the message; the same applies for conventional and expressive messages. Social Learning Theory (SLT) provides insight on what factors influence the actions of students once they have received a message.

Often categorized as human studies theory, SLT is applicable to my study to determine how messages from principals affect students' perceptions and actions. There

are four components of Bandura's (1977) SLT. They are attention, retention, motor reproduction, and motivational. The four components of SLT are applicable to my study because they analyze the process that messages undergo once they are sent from principals and received by students. This is significant to the impact of messages on student perception, as the lack of one component may greatly influence message effectiveness.

Attention, it the first component of SLT and is important because "people cannot learn much by observation unless they attend to, and perceive accurately, the significant features of the modeled behavior" (Bandura, 1977, p. 24). Although attention is important, it should be noted that people are selective in what they pay attention to. Bandura (1977) finds that "among the various attentional determinants, associational patterns are clearly of major importance" (p. 24). In other words people are most likely to pay attention to people or messages that they can associate themselves with.

The second component of SLT is retention. According to Bandura (1977) "people cannot be much influenced by observation of modeled behavior if they do not remember it" (p. 25). In other words attention is just one part of the social learning process, but it is not significant if the observer does not retain the message. Retention is an important aspect of analyzing perceptions.

The third component of SLT is motor reproduction, which " involves converting symbolic representations into appropriate actions" (Bandura, 1977, p. 27). Symbols can be the actions of the principal, teachers, or supporting staff such as guidance counselors. For the purpose of my study of students' perception of high school principals' messages, we will focus on symbols from the principal. Using Bandura's description of motor

reproduction, through constant exposure, students may replicate the behavior towards

message goals as observed. Motivation, the fourth component of SLT, focuses its

attention on an individual's desire to learn and reproduce observed behavior. According

to Bandura (1977)

> Social learning theory distinguishes between acquisition and performance because
> people do not enact upon everything that they learn. They are more likely to adopt
> modeled behavior if it results in outcomes they value than if it has unrewarding or
> punishing effects (p. 28).

In other words, people must see some reward or benefit to adopting the learned behavior.

In the case of analyzing principals' messages on student perceptions, students must

presume a reward or benefit to adopting the principal message, which will in turn help

build a positive perception.

In addition to the four components of SLT, this thesis explores the impact

environment and self-regulation has on students' perceptions of the high school

experience. Environmental influences and self-regulation are important to the study

because it shows that students are exposed to other elements that can influence their

perception of principals' messages and they have their own views, which may influence

behavior towards achieving message goals.

SLT argues that humans are not simply responders to their environment. People

are more than just receivers and communication is a two-way process. However, although

communication is a two-way process, consistency is a major factor in learned behavior.

Consistency is an aspect that Bandura often refers to in the effectiveness of social

learning theory. According to Bandura, "consistency not only implies virtues of

steadfast, principled conduct, but sets up the contrast as 'inconsistency' with its

implications of instability and expediency" (1977, p. 8). Through this statement Bandura

highlights the importance of consistency. When applied to messages, it is important that messages are consistent in their content and delivery in order to be successful, especially in a diverse and constantly changing environment like high school.

Of environmental influences, Bandura finds that "there are different times when environmental factors exercise powerful constraints on behavior and other times when personal factors are the overriding regulators of the course of environmental events" (1977, p. 10). This relates to the study because students are exposed to both internal and external environmental factors that may have a significant and at times conflicting effect on their perception of principal's messages. For example, students exposed to a negative environment outside of school, but a positive environment in school, will have to self-regulate using interpersonal factors to override the negative influences.

In support of this argument, Bandura (1977) states "environment, while important, is not always the only factor affecting behavioral responses. Behavioral responses can also be impacted by personal factors which can override environmental events" (1977, p. 10). This statement applies to the study on student perceptions because it implies that perceptions are not always formed by external influences, but also internal values and beliefs. My study explores which is most impactful on student perception of principals' messages and the high school experience.

Environmental influences are an important caveat in assessing message effectiveness in a high school environment. While environment may be a significant influence on message receipt and retention, other elements, such as social economic background, upbringing, and cultural beliefs, greatly influence social learning behavior. At times, these factors can override the environmental influences within the school.

These factors can also affect student perception. Much research has been done of the various issues that affect student learning, but my study does not focus on student learning, but rather student perceptions.

SLT argues that "people are neither driven by inner forces nor buffeted by environmental stimuli. Rather, psychological functioning is explained in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction of personal and environmental determinants" (Bandura, 1977, p. 12). That is to say people are influenced by both their personal and their environmental factors that they are continually exposed to. Learning through one's environment or surroundings requires the use of observation by the receiver.

The focus of this thesis is on student feelings and perceptions when they are in school as reported upon or nearing graduation, as well as post graduation. As a result, other external variables will not be incorporated. While it is important not to overlook such external factors, this thesis views school as its own community where the school environment has a major impact on student perception. This action is based on the belief that oftentimes principals and the school environment can influence students to change the beliefs that are established or influenced by external factors

In addition to environmental factors and personal influences, SLT focuses on the observational influences of learned behavior by the use of symbols. Bandura argues "symbols provide humans with a powerful means of dealing with their environment. Through verbal and imagined symbols, people process and preserve experiences in representational forms that serve as guides for future behavior" (1977, p. 13). This belief coordinates well with student perceptions as students are exposed to many symbols in their school environment, which can affect their learned behavior.

SLT is an inclusive theory. Not only does Bandura (1977) acknowledge the influence of environment, observations, and symbols on learned behavior, but he recognizes that social learning theory is unique because of "the prominent role it assigns to self-regulatory capacities. By arranging environmental inducements, generating cognitive arranging supports, and producing consequences for their own actions, people are able to exercise some measure of control over their own behavior "(p. 13). That is to say, SLT allows people to regulate their own responses—they are in control of their own actions. This statement implies that environmental, observational, and personal factors, while influential, are limited by the self-regulatory mechanisms of one's behavior. In other words, people are only going to go but so far in their learned behavior due to a self-regulating factor.

Bandura (1977) finds that "a model who repeatedly demonstrates desired responses, instructs others to reproduce the behavior, prompts them physically when they fail, and then rewards them when they succeed, may eventually produce matching responses in most people" (p. 29). When applying this to principal messages, if principals instruct others to reproduce the message behavior, encourages students when they fail to achieve message goals, and rewards them when they succeed, they are most likely to facilitate increased motivation among students to adopt messages goals, therefore building positive student perceptions.

Grusec (1992) finds that SLT " is mainly concerned with how children and adults operate cognitively in their social experiences and with how these cognitive operations then come to influence their behavior and development" (p. 781). That is to say that people abstract information from their external surroundings and past experiences to

develop cognitive responses that influence behavior. Grusec also touches on the components of SLT in her analysis. Attention, according to Grusec, "is determined by a variety of variables, including the power and attractiveness of the model as well as the conditions under which behavior is viewed" (p. 781). In other words, attention is based on how much the model attracts the audience. In the case of high school principals' messages, attention would be based on how attractive the message is to the student and/or how powerful the message is delivered.

The issue on the conditions under which the behavior is viewed is an interesting aspect of the attention process of SLT. The condition that a person observes a certain behavior may impact their response to that behavior, their retention of the behavior, and their motivation to reproduce the behavior. In a school environment, if the conditions in which the message was received are stressed or forceful, students may not receive the message properly. This applies to the study because one cannot rule out environmental factors that impact messages received in high school.

Although perceptions are not distinct, tangible elements such as large classroom size, teacher shortages, and budget shortfalls can influence the environment in which students receive principal messages. While these things are important in message receipt and student perception, it is my belief that principal's messages that are carefully developed and delivered, can overcome such obstacles. Through overcoming such environmental obstacles acknowledged in SLT, the message's success then bears upon the self-regulation of the student.

On the issue of self regulation in SLT, Grusec states the following:

> It is important to note that people do not passively absorb standards of behavior from whatever influences they experience. Indeed, they must select from

numerous evaluations that are prescribed and modeled by different individuals as well as by the same individual in differing circumstance (1992, p. 782).

In other words, there are many different factors that influence learned behavior. Even in observational learning as described in SLT, people must observe behavior on several different people in different situations, as well as the same person in different situations, to determine how they will respond and replicate such behavior.

Lastly, on the issue of self-regulation, Grusec (1992) finds that "Bandura's contributions during the 1960s and 1970s provided ample evidence of the central role of observational learning in a diversity of areas, particularly in self-regulation" (p. 784). A lot has changed since the 1970s; however, SLT is often used in communication, psychology and education research today. Although heavily used and widely respected, Bandura's SLT is not without limits.

Grusec (1992) identifies that more attention needs to be paid to development and the basic building blocks of social learning and social cognitive theory such as reinforcement, punishment, reasoning, and modeling (1992, p. 785). This thesis analyzes the reasoning aspect and practice. By factoring in a communications model, the goal is to show how models can be applied or paired with communication theories. For a study such as this one, which focuses on the affect or principal messages on student perceptions, James Grunig and Todd Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical model of communication would be most effective as it provides a practical assessment on the importance of feedback and two-way flow of communication.

Two-way symmetrical model of communication

Grunig and Hunt's two-way symmetrical model of communication often serves as a public relations model. The two-way symmetrical model of communication depicts a public relations orientation in which organizations and their publics adjust to each other (Lattimore, Baskin, Heiman, Toth, Leuven, 2004, p. 59). This model considers communication from organizations to their publics as a two-way process vs. a one-way process. Grunig and Hunt's asymmetrical models of communication have more of a one-way approach and do not apply to the content of my study.

According to Lattimore, et al. (2004) the two-way asymmetrical model of communication differs from Grunig and Hunt's two-way symmetrical models because "it considers public relations to be scientific persuasion. This model employs social science research method to increase the persuasiveness of messages" (p. 59). Since my study does not focus on the idea to increase the persuasiveness of messages, but more so to provide an analysis of the two-way effectiveness of message development, delivery, and student perceptions, the two-way symmetrical model is more applicable to this thesis.

The two-way symmetrical model also uses a social science approach, but rather than trying to persuade message recipients as the primary agenda, the two-way symmetrical model "focuses on the use of social science research method to achieve mutual understanding and two-way communication rather than one-way persuasion" (Lattimore, et al., 2004, p. 59). This explanation indicates that two-way communication seeks to incorporate feedback and gain an understanding from both parties rather than develop messages that are sent using a one-way channel. This applies to the study because through interviews with principals and feedback from students, results show the

current strategy used to communicate school messages (i.e. two-way or one-way communication model) and how students perceive such practices.

Additionally, Lattimore, et al. (2004) depicts the two-way model of communication as a method that is "used to move public, dominant coalition, or both to *[sic]* acceptable "win-win" zone (2004, p. 59). This indicates that by using mutual communication method versus one-way persuasion, organizations can achieve success in both persuasion and acceptance. The two-way symmetrical communication model applies to the study because it will explore how principals can achieve a win-win zone in message development.

Roper (2005) indicates that "two-way symmetrical communication, as conceptualized by James E. Grunig and Hunt, is said to form the basis of excellence in public relations practice. Much public relations research incorporates two-way symmetrical communication as the most effective way to achieve organizational excellence. Although, schools are a different type of organization, two-way symmetrical communication can be illustrated as successful between principals and students.

Additionally, Roper (2005) finds that symmetrical communication is characterized by a willingness of an organization to listen to and respond to the concerns and interest of key stakeholders" (p. 69). This description of the two-way communication model applies to the study because it looks at student feedback opportunities. Through interviews and focus group discussions, the research explores whether principals provide opportunities for student feedback in message development and how students perceive these opportunities, as well as whether there is a difference in how students perceive messages that include their feedback versus those that do not.

Using the two-way symmetrical communication model in schools, one can imply that principals will have to first listen to the students, their concerns and their agendas, to develop messages that respond to their needs. Schools are unique from other organizations because there are several stakeholders such as parents, community members, and political figures, each with their own agendas, which differ in nature and priority. Although each stakeholder and their priorities may be important, for the purposes of this thesis we fill focus on the students as the primary stakeholders. Students are presumed to be the most important stakeholders because it is their actions, their success or failure, their like or dislike of school that impacts the way that the school functions and the community outlook of the school.

Two-way symmetrical communication is unique to schools because it instructs organizations to "listen to their stakeholders, but use the information thus obtained to tailor their communication to allay the concerns of stakeholders, but does not make corresponding alterations to their behavior" (Roper, 2005, p. 69). This is interesting in principal to student communication because while principals should listen to students' interest when developing messages, they must also maintain a sense of authority and stand by their own agendas to achieve school goals.

Using the two-way symmetrical communication method requires sacrifice on the principal's part. Principals may sacrifice their goals to accommodate students or they may sacrifice students' goals to accommodate the goals of the school system. This can be applied with the supportive communication strategy where the sender motivates the receiver to achieve message goals.

There is a lot of research on supportive communication, which is a strategy that will prove beneficial in creating motivational messages within the schools. Strom, et al. (2007) define supportive communication as " verbal and non-verbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid" (p. 435). That is to say, that supportive communication can come in the form of words or actions to encourage another person. Supportive communication applies to my study because it focuses on the words and actions of principals to determine if it has an impact on student perception of the high school experience. This is based on the belief that principals define the school culture.

According to Rosenfeld and Richman (1999), "findings from a large body of research indicate a positive relationship between social support and variables of interest to educators, such as student motivation, school adjustment, academic and behavioral adjustment and school achievement…" (p. 294). In other words, if principals have a positive relationship with students and properly motivate students to achieve goals, students may adjust their behavior and achievement may increase. The use of supportive communication in schools may help principals create messages and themes that are inclusive of the students and other stakeholders. Through the use of both persuasive and supportive communication, principals can develop messages that will motivate students to reach a common goal. This is important in the area of student retention because students who drop out are most likely to become disconnected from their teachers, principals, and school environment.

Goldsmith and Albrecht (1993) find that "supportive communication reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, and/or the relationship, and functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience" (p. 143). If messages developed within schools incorporate supportive communication and reduce uncertainty among students, it is possible that principals can develop supportive relationships with students that will increase both motivation and morale, something of which both the principals and students can become proud. There is a passion that drives a person when he/she believes in a message and he/she reiterates that message in such a way that makes others want to be involved. Developing a message is only part of the goal for school principals, but obtaining support for that message from students and watching them reiterate that message to others is another outcome of supportive communication.

The use of supportive communication within messages can also create an empowered student. Houser & Frymier (2009) find that " to be an empowered learner means to be motivated to perform tasks, and more specifically, an empowered person finds the tasks meaningful, feels competent to perform them, and feels his/her efforts have an impact on the scheme of things" (p. 36). This empowerment can impact student temperament and student temperament impacts student perceptions.

The use of supportive communication to develop empowered students applies to the study because students' perceptions of school messages determine their performance toward message goals. In support of this statement, Houser & Frymier (2009) find that "temperament influences how students communicate, thus it seems likely that it also influences how students experience the classroom environment" (p. 38). All of these

factors can be analyzed by first looking at message development to include the type of message and the delivery media (e.g. the Internet).

<u>Message Type</u>

The type of messages sent from principals to students play an important role in themes established by principals and has an important influence on both persuasion and student perception because student perception can influence school culture. According to Ledoux (2005), "the definition of culture congeals around the concepts of story, history, climate, identity, symbols, language, rules, feelings, shared values, and charism" (p. 237). Using this definition, one can see how message type can affect school culture and student perceptions. Due to the evolution of the student body and changing demands, it is important for principals to adjust the type of messages that make school themes.

The type of message that principals send to students extends beyond message form (i.e. announcements or speeches), and can be viewed as the way that messages are communicated (i.e. motivational, instructional, disciplinary etc). There are certain factors that go into the type of message and how it is communicated. First, in order to achieve message success the message must have a connection with the audience. This creates student empowerment. According to Houser and Frymier (2009), "empowered learners are more motivated to perform classroom task and they feel more competent in the classroom, find the required task more meaningful, and feel they have an impact on their learning process" (p. 35). In other words, students are more likely to be motivated about message goals when they are competent of the goals and find the goals meaningful.

In addition, messages are most successful when there is a similarity between the message and the audience (i.e. characteristics and traits), and when they are

communicated with the inclusion of the audience in mind. The significance of having a similarity with the audience in message type is important because students should see themselves in the messages that they receive. Having this connection with the message will aid in message retention and meaningfulness. School messages should be something students feel they can realistically achieve and be proud of, not just a demand for action.

In order for message similarities to be successful, the source of the message must be credible. According to King and Sereno (1973), the greater the perceived credibility of the source, the greater will be his or her persuasive impact (p. 220). This is to say that if the message source is credible, then the message persuasion will most likely be successful. In high schools, this is important because students must believe the principal is credible in order to be persuaded by principal's messages and to maintain a positive perception of those messages. Additionally, King and Sereno (1973) find "when credibility has been manipulated by varying perceptions of a speaker's competence through an introduction, the general conclusion has been that sources perceived as highly credible were more persuasive" (p. 220). Based on this statement, principals must be fully competent of the messages that they develop and aware of how it will impact the student audience. This competency increases their credibility and persuasive power.

Lastly, principals must create messages that both persuade and include students' thoughts and beliefs in its development. In order to achieve this goal, principals must show competence of students' thoughts and feelings when developing school messages. In other words, principals must both fully understand the message itself and how it may be interpreted by students in order for the message to be successful.

In addition to creating messages that include students and incorporate similarities from the source (principals) to the receiver (students) and competence, principals should also exemplify a belief in the messages they send. King & Sereno (1973) state "if the communicator's message is primarily a belief message, he will be more persuasive…" (p. 223). This is applicable in schools because if principals develop a message and show that they believe in the message, then students will develop that same belief in the message and are more likely to achieve message goals. On the contrary, if a principal develops a message, but does not believe in the message, that message will not be as successful with students.

Message type affects the success or failure of messages in schools. The criteria for O'Keefe's (1988) Theory of Message Design Logics can be applied when analyzing the type of message sent to students because deciding on the type of message goes into the cognitive process of message development. Once decided, the message type can be simple and short lived or broader, and serve as a school theme, which can last for an extended period. Either way, the type of message is important when analyzing how it impacted student perception. When combined with message type, message delivery is pertinent when it measures the success and/or failure of a message and the impact on student perceptions.

Message Delivery

According to McCroskey and Mehrley (1969), "rhetorical theorists commonly assert that message disorganization and nonfluent delivery reduce persuasive effectiveness." (p. 13). That is to say if a message is disorganized and delivered ineffectively, then it may lose its impact on the receiver. Message delivery can be viewed

in many different aspects such as verbal or non-verbal. Non-verbal messages for the purpose of my study would be those sent via print correspondence or the Internet.

Principals are have a responsibility to manage the verbal messages delivered to students and such things as message tone or organization can greatly impact student perceptions. Due to their role at the hierarchy of the organization, principals' messages may often appear authoritative. Despite the authoritative role, at times, principals' messages may also be perceived as weak and ineffective. As a result, it is important to analyze how message delivery affects student perceptions. On the subject of authoritative messages from principals to students, Ros Seyd (2000) states "administrators on the other hand, may be viewed by academics as rule bound, bureaucratic, more concerned with process and systems than with the substance of issues, and lacking imagination" (p. 35).

This is a common practice in traditional educational communication, however, in today's fast paced and diverse academic environment, if principal messages are bureaucratic and rule bound it may lose effectiveness. Principals that are rule bound, bureaucratic or more concerned with process can appear verbally aggressive in their messages. Verbally aggressive messages within a school environment can create message suicide.

In a school environment, students are impressionable, and the verbal messages sent by principals can affect their learned behavior. According to Infante (1992), "If a message is verbally aggressive, then it can affect such emotions as embarrassment, feelings of inadequacy, humiliation, hopelessness, despair, and depression" (p. 116). Imagine the impact of such emotions on the overall perception of student's educational environment. Take for example a principal's message that strives to increase student

performance on a mandatory state standardized test. The message can be both supportive and creative, but if delivered aggressively, then the messages appears forceful, and the emotions described by Infante become high. If this example proves true, then students will be defensive to that particular message and any other messages sent by the principal in the school.

The above example can result in negative student perceptions where attitudes arise, rebellion grows, test scores drop, and drop-out rates increase. Overall, one can argue that an effective message delivered ineffectively can destroy the message's success. Infante (1992) finds that "the likelihood of verbal aggression in a situation may increase when, in addition, the person is a high verbal aggressive who wants to appear tough, and wants to be mean, to a person who is disdained" (p. 123). This can apply in the school environment because oftentimes the traditional method of communication in a high school environment is for the principals to appear hard-nosed or tough to earn student's respect, but it is important to understand the message breakdown that can occur if this strategy is adopted.

Some examples of message break-downs include verbal spats between principals and students, increased behavioral problems among students, increased suspensions and expulsion of students. If these things occur, the message that is sent is superseded with a message of control and punishment. As a result, the overall school message and theme focuses on discipline more than development.

This statement is supported by the Seyd (2000) argument for principals to "further professionalize their role, to broaden their skills, and increase their grasp of the fast-changing external context in which their institutions operate. They have to respond to

changing student expectations and develop student friendly systems and processes…" (p. 36). In other words, to generate new messages to new student bodies, the old way of communicating will not work. Principal messages cannot simply take on an authoritative tone. The message must be inclusive and considerate of the student body and delivered in such a way that students can both understand and relate to the message.

In addition to the way a message is delivered, the medium by which it is delivered is equally important. In today's society, students have become increasingly reliant on messages sent using the Internet. This statement is supported by the findings from Hesketh and Selwyn (1999) that "according to the Labour Government, the synergy of the Internet with education is now not only desirable, ethical, or a wise use of resources, but is one of necessity…" (p. 520). It is important for high school principals to understand how influential the use of technology can be on message delivery.

This new medium of delivery can be more direct and inclusive for students. It also creates an avenue for student feedback. Some may argue that this is a more indirect way of sending messages to students, but taking an indirect approach by sending messages via technology can develop a sense of freedom from students to principals and also develop inclusion.

Technology has become an integral part of our society and youths are more and more dependent on it to obtain information. Hesketh and Selwyn (1999) find that a" vast proportion of educational discussion on the Internet has concentrated on its role as a source of information to teachers and students, subsequently focusing on the supply of information as opposed to the demand for, or the response to, the new information medium" (p. 4). In other words, educational discussions around the use of the Internet in

schools has concentrated on the viewing the Internet as a one-way communication tool, where information is supplied to the teachers and students, but does not address their demands or interests.

One could argue using Hesketh and Selwyn's (1999) statement that the Internet's primary use in schools is to send messages and it does not include demand or opportunities for feedback from receivers. This is where the analysis of student perception is applicable. If principals use the Internet to connect with students and include students in school messages or attempt to use it as a method of rhetorical communication, then that message forum must allow for student feedback or contribution. This will allow for the measurement of message success and impact on student perceptions.

From message type to delivery, each phase is important in the development of school messages; thus analyzing the cognitive process and observational impact of high school principals' messages is crucial. There are many ways in which a principal can cognitively develop messages. The fundamental basis of the Theory of Message Design Logics (MDL) and Social Learning Theory (SLT) apply to this thesis and will be used to support the findings of my study.

Chapter three, the method section, describes the methodology used to gather and organize the data through case studies, student focus group, and principal's interviews. The goal is to provide a structured description of the method of choice, as well as pros and cons to using the method.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

Due to the transformational changes in the Baltimore City's school system, which includes closing poorly performing high schools, reassigning principals and giving them more control over their operations, it is appropriate to measure how these changes and the shift in principal control affects students' perception of the high school experience.

A qualitative research approach provides an effective method for analyzing the impact of principal's messages on student perceptions. Research findings can help analyze how new messages are sent and received from principals to students.

As stated previously, this thesis seeks to explore school themes sent from principals to students and its effect on student perception. School themes are important because they are often created and publicized within the school, but also have external influences in the community through students. School themes often serve as a means of mass communication within schools and are continually instilled into students. The meaning of such messages and themes to students is important in the administrative process for consideration of future development of messages and how messages may affect both student recruitment and retention.

The qualitative approach

There are two different types of research methods, qualitative and quantitative. Neuman (2006) defines qualitative and quantitative researchers as follows:

> Qualitative researchers often rely on interpretive or critical social science. They apply 'logic in practice' and follow a nonlinear research path. Quantitative researchers on the other hand, rely on a positivist approach to social science. They apply 'reconstructed logic' and follow a linear research path" (p. 151).

That is to say that qualitative researchers focus on interpretation of the data. Qualitative researchers often take an open-ended approach to the gathering data using a non-linear path, which differs from the direct linear approach of quantitative researchers. Based on Neuman's comparison of the two, this thesis will take on a qualitative approach to analyze student perceptions of principals' messages and the high school experience.

According to Neuman (2006),

Qualitative researchers use a language of cases and contexts, employ bricolage, examine social processes and cases in their social context, and look at interpretations or the creation of meaning in specific settings (p. 157).

In other words, qualitative research looks at the social process to gather data and findings. The premise of Neuman's definition ties well into why I chose a qualitative research method to study this subject. Using the case study analysis, my research compares similarities and differences in the principals' message design strategies and students' perceptions to determine the impact of messages.

My study focuses in part on principals because of their responsibility to form school themes. This is supported by the principals' interviews and the role and responsibility given to principals from the BCPSS as identified in Chapter I. Principals also play an important role in the school environment and culture. Through the principal, teachers and staff members get their directive on how to organize and communicate school themes.

As stated in Chapter I, the research questions studied here are: Do the communication practices used by high school principals impact student perceptions of the high school experience? Also, is there a correlation with student perceptions of the high

school experience and postgraduate decision-making? These questions will be analyzed

using the case study method of qualitative research.

The case study

According to Yin (2003), "the case study is the method of choice when the

phenomenon under the study is not readily distinguishable from its context" (p. 4). This

will assist in determining the phenomenon of student perceptions and the cognitive

development of principal messages, both of which are important to my study.

In this scenario, where both principal messages and student perceptions influence

the outcome, case studies are an appropriate research method because it provides

autonomy to the participants, allowing them to be candid, without fear of repercussions,

and allows for me to actively engage in the social process without interrupting the day-to-

day flow of business.

Yin (2003) identifies six different types of case studies as follows:

A single case study focuses on a single case only. Multiple case studies include two or more cases within the same study. An exploratory case study, (whether based on single or multiple cases), is aimed at defining the questions and hypothesis of a subsequent study (not necessarily a case study) or at determining the feasibility of the desired research procedures. A descriptive case study presents a complete description of a phenomenon with its context. An explanatory case study presents data bearing on cause-effect relations…" (p. 5). The last is an exemplary case study method, which according to Yin (2003), means that all of the cases will reflect strong, positive examples of the phenomenon of interest (p. 13).

For the purposes of this thesis, an exploratory case study method is applicable, as the

study will explore into the unknown, which is student perceptions and allow for

additional research development from the findings. The exploratory case study method is

a logical approach because this research is not set to provide a resolution to problem, but

to aid in additional development when lack of effective communication practices are

found within Baltimore City Public high schools. Two sample school high schools in the

Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) are used for comparison purposes.

<u>Gathering the Sample</u>

The research sample consists of principals, recent alumni from the class of 2009-

2010, and current high school seniors who are at least age 18. There were two schools

sampled based on the principals willingness to participate in the study. Principals were

contacted email and phone to ask for permission to participate in the study. The schools

were selected based on the size of the student body, budget allocations to the school, and

the age of the school. I did not want to compare schools that were not similar in the size

of the student body, as well as those that had a significant variation in budget allocations

or were more established than the other. The school's information was obtained from the

BCPSS website at www.baltimorecityschools.org.

To solicit principals, I emailed two schools that met the search criteria and did not

receive a response after about two weeks. Afterwards, I took another approach by calling

the schools. I called four schools. Of the four schools, I was able to connect with two. I

explained the nature of the research and requested permission to study the school. The

principals were advised that their students would be participating in a focus group

discussion; however, the student participants remained anonymous. After the telephone

conversation with the principals, interviews were scheduled. I placed follow-up calls to

each principal to confirm the interviews.

I chose to sample two schools because of the personal appeal and direct one-on-

one approach that the smaller sample could provide. Additionally sampling two schools

provided a direct comparative analysis of the two distinct practices between principals.

The two sample schools for my study are both located in Baltimore City. One school, identified as School A, is a charter school that offers students knowledge in a specific career track, which will not be revealed in my study to maintain confidentiality. School B, is a general education school. Neither of the schools require advanced placement for admission. Each sample school is a smaller fragment of an older school within the city school system that was dismantled.

Student alumni and high school seniors were chosen because it is believed that these students have the most current recollection of the principal's messages and school themes and the impact of those messages on their perception of the high school experience. Recent graduates were selected because this group of students is believed to the most recent memory of administrator messages and the high school experience. These students are most likely college freshman or new to the working environment and may not have significant influences from these post graduate experiences.

High school seniors were added during recruitment efforts for the study based on their desire to participate in the study. The current seniors that participated in the study were students that should have graduated in 2010, but were held back for academic reasons. As a result, these students were familiar with the experiences of the 2010 graduates and knew each of them from school. Despite their academic standing, the feedback of current seniors can be as valuable as the alumni. This proved true in the study, as the students from the class of 2010 connected with the current seniors in such a way that they could not understand why these students did not graduate with them.

I used a variety of methods to locate students from the sample schools. Fliers were distributed at two universities in the Baltimore City metropolitan area (Appendix

C). Electronic solicitation was conducted using Facebook and emails (Appendix E). Using Facebook, I created a designated profile outlining the research efforts. I found the unofficial web page for each school and joined the page as a friend.

Using the school's unofficial Facebook page, I filtered friends of the school's page by doing a search to find students who attended the sample schools from 2009-2011. I then sent a friend request to these students based their profile criteria. I sent friend requests to about 140 students. Other students from the schools contacted me by sending a friend request if they saw that I shared a mutual friend.

Once the friend request was accepted, I sent each student a social networking solicitation (Appendix E). Using Facebook, I also created wall posts to send out mass solicitations to friends online. The guidance counselor at School B encouraged students via Facebook by writing on my wall and commenting on the study to motivate students. My Facebook profile was updated at least twice a day with recruitment information.

In addition to Facebook, I established MySpace and Twitter accounts to send solicitations, but neither of these social networking sites received a response. Students were more responsive to Facebook. Of the 140 students solicited, approximately 24 expressed an interest in participating in the study via Facebook. Of the 24 students, approximately 10 students actually attended the focus group sessions. This was divided into five students for each school.

For email solicitation, the guidance counselor at School A gave me a email list of 20 graduates from the class of 2010 who might be interested in the study bringing the total number of students solicited via social networking and email to approximately 160. All of the students on the email list were presumed to be at least 18 years old, as this

requirement was expressed to the guidance counselor. It is unknown if the guidance counselor obtained students' permission prior to releasing the email addresses.

Using this email list, I sent the email solicitation announcement to the students (Appendix E). Fliers were distributed by participating faculty members at two universities (see Appendix C). It is unknown how many students actually received fliers at the schools. Approximately one week prior to the focus group sessions, students that agreed to participate in the study were recontacted via Facebook as a reminder of the date, time, and location of the study. A follow-up phone call was placed to students the night before and the day of the study.

Conducting the Study

I used a combination of interviews with two high school principals and three focus groups with students from the class of 2009-2011 to obtain feedback. The interview format was used for principals due to scheduling and convenience. Principals are usually very busy, and an in-person interview with the principals allowed me to observe and gage feedback on the cognitive process of message development, message type and message delivery. Each principal answered questions from Appendix A.

Each interview participant signed an informed consent form (see Appendix G). The interviews were about two weeks apart, with School A's interview on January 27, 2011 and School B's interview on February 8, 2011. Each interview was one hour long. School A's interview was from 2:00-3:00 and School B's interview was from 9:30-10:30. The 9:30-10:30 session was more distractive because students were just getting to school and the principal had to take care of hall duty prior to the interview. School A's principal

agreed to be tape recorded. The tape and transcription are available for review. School

B's principal declined to be tape recorded and I had to take handwritten notes.

After the interviews, I conducted focus groups with the students. Themes

discussed at the interviews with the principals were presented to students for feedback

and open discussion. There were two focus groups on the same day, February 26th 2011,

held on a campus in the Baltimore County metropolitan area. School A's focus group

session was from 3:00-4:00 p.m. There were two focus group sessions for School A due

to scheduling conflicts. The second session was held 3 days after the first session from

6:30-7:30 p.m. on the campus of a suburban college in the metropolitan area. A single

session was held for School B at a university in the Baltimore County metropolitan area

from 12:15-1:15 pm.

There were five students sampled from each school. Three students were in the

first session for School A and two in the second. There were five students total in the

School B's focus group session. Each student was given a number based on their seating

arrangement for the February 26, 2011 focus groups. Students from the first session for

School A are numbers 3, 5, and 6. Students from School B are numbers 2-6. The two

students in the March 1, 2011 focus group for School A were given numbers 1 and 2.

Table 1 (Appendix G), provides a reference chart for additional clarification.

Students were asked focus group questions from Appendix B. Student responses

were recorded. The tape and transcriptions are available for review. I did not use a video

recorder, as the focus is on verbal communication. Using two small focus groups allowed

me to maintain control of the discussion as a moderator and allowed for a personal one-

on- one approach. Students were receptive to the small focus group and each person had

the opportunity to express themselves. Students worked well together and appeared comfortable with me as the moderator.

There are seven potential factors that a researcher must take into consideration when choosing a moderator, which include gender, race, age, language, socioeconomic characteristics, perceived power differences, and technical knowledge (Krueger, 2000). In my study, the reason I made an effective moderator is because of my relationship and experience as a former student within the Baltimore City school system. This enabled me to be familiar with the terms and processes used in the school system from a student perspective.

My ethnic and social economical background aligned with the greater demographics of the school system. These similarities allowed students to feel comfortable with me as a moderator. Yet, objectivity was maintained because of the intent to have open-ended and candid discussions with everyone involved.

The focus group

Focus groups are defined as a qualitative interview technique that aim to assess user needs and feelings both before the interface has been designed and after it has been in use for some time (Neilsen, 1993, p. 214). Based on this description, focus groups are applicable to my study because students can respond to topics of principal messages and school themes, many of which have been around for a long time. A focus group is utilized to better understand how people perceive an issue, a product, or service and can help uncover a wide range of opinions and perspectives (Krueger, 2000). Focus groups allowed me to measure student perceptions in an open and candid environment.

The focus group technique has many benefits, including the fact that it "can be used at an early stage of the design process to bring in the participants' feelings and opinions about the system…" (Kuhn, 2000, p. 310). Oftentimes, students do not have the opportunity to express their feelings while in school, but having a focus group provided an open forum for students to discuss their feelings about school themes, how they were communicated, and how it affected their school experience.

Focus groups are an appropriate choice when trying to understand new topics because of the discussions that develop. (Helou-Brown, 2006). By having others around and grouping students by their school, students may feel more secure and be more forthcoming about their experience and the influence of such experiences.

<u>Organizing the focus group study</u>

The focus groups were held on the campus of a mid-size public university in Baltimore, Maryland. A conference room was set up for the focus group attendees. Students were given pizza, cookies, water and soda for lunch. Students were recorded as stated above. Prior to starting the discussion, each student signed the consent form (Appendix D). Students were made aware that their responses were completely confidential and their names would not be used in the analysis. Students were also notified that participation was voluntary and they could refuse participation at any time without prejudice. Although students were given the option not to be recorded, each student was comfortable with being recorded. At the end of the focus group discussion, each student was given $10 for participating and entered into a $25 raffle drawing. One student from each session won the $25 raffle.

Various themes determined by the school principal that were communicated during the 2009-2011 school year were discussed. From the focus group, I analyzed themes in student responses to school themes and principal messages. I observed trends in the students' thoughts about message themes and interpersonal development post graduation. The results are discussed in Chapter IV.

Limitations of the focus group

As with any research method, focus groups have limitations. Analyzing the data is one limitation to conducting a focus group study because one must be careful not to generalize or infer that the focus group responses reflect that of the larger population. According to Vicsek (2010), "one of the limits of generalisation with focus groups is that the method of asking questions is not standardized and thus it might differ according to the individual situation" (p. 123). Based on this, one cannot assume that what the focus group feels, or individuals in the focus group feel, is a general representation of everyone affected.

To approach the issue of generalization, Vicsek (2010) proposes a term called "existence generalisation" and states:

> We simply generalize the existence of a certain response, but not its distribution, and we do not claim that this is the whole range of responses. Thus we draw conclusions about dimensions, concepts, approaches, and mechanisms potential present in the population, but we do not claim that other dimensions and approaches do not exist. (p. 126).

It is known that these students will not represent all of the factors involved in a school system that may impact perceptions, nor do they speak for every student in their class, but they will aid in drawing conclusions on approaches to messages and help form considerations to measure message impact.

Application of Theory

        Conducting a case study analysis using interviews and focus groups applies to both Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT) and O'Keefe's (1988) theory of message design logics (MDL), as it probes into the cognitive development of messages as well as the learned behavior of the students that receive the messages.

        By interviewing principals about their school themes and message delivery, findings are applicable to the study of the theory of message design logics as it pertains to the message type (i.e. expressive, conventional, or rhetorical) and its impact. Other topics of interest as they pertain to the theory of message design logics in my study are why the principal chose a particular message strategy and what factors influenced them (e.g. response to a direct stimuli, environmental influences and/or traditional practices).

        A focus group discussion with student alumni relates to SLT, as it provides an open forum to discuss perceptions and the learned behavior of students from the messages that they received. One component of SLT that is researchable through a focus group study is the predictive power. The focus group discussion will allow students to provide insight on the influences of principal's messages and message delivery. This may influence change in the message development process for principals and/or lead to additional research in the area of student perceptions and learned behavior.

        Another component of SLT that will be studied in the focus group is the "two-way" communication process. As stated in the literature review, SLT argues that communication is a two-way process. The two-way communication model is applicable in using both the interview and focus group techniques because it allowed me to assess feedback in the communication process between principals and students. By using focus

groups, one can determine whether students feel that their voices are heard in messages and school themes as well as allow for feedback from students to principals for future message development.

Finally, the element of self-regulation, which is an important component of SLT, can be assessed in the focus group study. SLT argues that people are not just receivers of messages but their own self-regulatory behavior has a great influence on their learned behavior. By having a focus group discussion, students are probed about their own self-regulating factors.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of my study is to analyze the impact of principal messages on student perception of the high school experience. As identified throughout the study, principals define the school culture and messages that they design can affect student perceptions. Principals were asked about their role in forming school messages and themes and they both identified that they are the primary decision makers. Although they may receive feedback from students, teachers, and other stakeholders, the principal makes the decision on messages and themes that will be communicated in the school.

Focus groups were conducted to gather input from students about their perception of principals' messages in addition to interviews with principals to obtain feedback on the message design. As stated in the method section, the focus groups consisted of students from the two sample high schools referred to as School A and School B. School A's focus group was broken into two sessions. The first focus group session consisted of three female students age 18-19.

One student graduated in 2009, one in 2010 and one is currently attending the school as a senior with an expected 2011 graduation date. The second focus group session for School A consisted of two students, one male and one female, both age 18. One graduated in 2010 and one currently attends the high school as a senior with an expected 2011 graduation date. It should be noted that School A's focus group session was broken into two parts due to scheduling conflicts, but the standard methodology described in Chapter III applied to both sessions.

School B's focus group session consisted of five students in a single session, two females and three males all age 18-19. Four students graduated in 2010 and one is currently a senior with an expected graduation date in 2011. As stated in the method section, although students who participated in the focus group sessions have various different graduation dates (i.e. 2010 and 2011). The 2009-2010 students enrolled together and were exposed to the same principal messages during their time in school. The 2009 graduate from School A, who had a different enrollment date. Additionally, students from 2011 have insight on the changes to principal messages. Despite the academic standing, students from each focus group were asked questions from Appendix B.

For the interviews with principals, the primary principal from both Schools A and B were interviewed in an one-on-one session for one hour at the school. Both principals are female. Principal A is between 46-55 years old, has a Ph.D., and seven years of administrative experience. Principal B is age 56 or above, has a Master's degree, and 11-15 years experience as a principal.

A thematic analysis (TA) was used to code and assess both the students' and the principals' responses. Thematic analysis according to Shank is "about searching for patterns in data. When we find a pattern, then we have a good reason to suppose that something systematic is creating that pattern" (p. 128). Using a TA, responses are categorized into themes and compared between students and principals.

The TA is also used to assess the hypothesis of my study, which is, if students are motivated with a positive message and higher expectations from their school principals, then they will view their school experience more positively and want to perform well in

school. This hypothesis is based off the supportive communication approach discussed in Chapter II of this thesis.

Shank (2002) finds that "there are three fundamental aspects to any TA project—the 'inductive' approach, feedback and comparison, and saturation" (p. 130). For the purpose of this thesis, the feedback and comparison aspect of thematic analysis (TA) is appropriate. Both principals and students felt passionately about some topics and gave extensive feedback, which is translated into themes to analyze the effectiveness of school messages and themes and the impact on student perception of the high school experience. As stated in Chapter I, there are both academic and nonacademic themes based on students' and principals' responses. The results that follow are analyzed using the case study method where principal responses are compared with student feedback to measure student perceptions.

Themes are separated by school type based on the responses from both the principal interviews and student focus groups. Table 2 (Appendix H), outlines each theme type by case number and school letter (i.e. Case I/School A and Case II/School B).

Case I/School A

Professionalism theme

This a nonacademic theme that used to build help students prepare for postgraduate careers by identifying industry practices. The principal indicated that this theme has to do with molding students to be professionals, both in school and in preparation for their postgraduate careers. According to the principal, "several things go into this such as appropriate dress. We ask does your doctor come in with jeans and a tee shirt? Does your nurse come in with flip flops?" (personal communication, January 27,

2011). Students think and act as professionals by modeling after real life examples of professionals in their career track. The principal takes proactive steps to reinforce the message by providing real life examples of professionalism to the students.

This message is verbally reiterated to students by outlining the role and character qualities of a professional. In addition to verbal reinforcement of the message, students are offered hands-on experience to achieve message goals. Requirements and standards are set to implement this message goal. Per the principal, "we also look at the role of a professional. The other is how you behave and carry yourself in a professional setting. In the last year, we prepare students for their internships" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). The principal's words reflect a strong feeling about this theme. Her belief is that if a student acts and dresses professionally in school, then he or she will be better equipped to succeed in a professional environment, be it school or work, post graduation.

When asked about their perception of this theme, the students in the focus group responded positively. One student stated, "It's like the way you present yourself for your class or outside is the way people judge you. It's based on what you say out your mouth" (Student 5, personal communication, February 26, 2011). Overall, students remembered the message and understood the goals.

Students also had personal conversations with the principal about professionalism and building professional characteristics. Even after graduation, Student 6 identifies the impact of this message on her interpersonal skills stating, "Like at first my attitude was not professional at all, but like now ever since I graduated from there, I changed the way my attitude is towards people so first impressions mean a lot" (personal communication,

February 26, 2011). This shows that the message had a positive impact on the student's perception of her attitude and helped her change her interpersonal skills.

Focus group responses from the second session indicated that students maintained a positive perception of the professionalism message. Per Student 1, a current senior at the school,

> I think the good message in that is once you get out into the real world outside of high school if you working in any job setting and they have a dress code. They're letting you know now that you won't get past or in the door to your job without your appropriate wardrobe because they'll turn you around (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

Although students appreciate the message and have a positive reflection of message goals, they did find that the principal was strict about the message. According to Student 3, a 2009 graduate, "Yeah she was real strict about that. Like we had our [uniforms] and we had to wear them in class" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). Even though the principal was strict about the message, students could relate with the need to act and dress as a professional. Students felt comfortable with the professionalism theme and the principal's tactics worked, as students recalled the message goals outside of school.

The four components of Bandura's (1977) SLT are supported by the students' responses to the professionalism theme. The students paid attention to the message, which was indicated by their ability to recap the message content. They retained the message based on their responses that they did follow the uniform policy and understood why this was necessary. They reproduced the message, which was indicated in their ability to transfer these professional skills outside of school, or to understand what is required to succeed as a professional, and they were motivated to achieve message goals.

Preparing students for careers
or post secondary education theme

This theme can be classified as a supportive communication theme since messages are developed to encourage students and prepare them for post-graduate endeavors. Strom, et al. (2007) define supportive communication as " verbal and non-verbal behavior produced with the intention of providing assistance to others perceived as needing that aid" (p. 435). Preparing students for post secondary education is an academic theme. This theme is used to verbally encourage students to prepare for college and understand that they are equipped for college, but the choice is theirs.

The principal acknowledged that even with motivation students may choose not to go to college, but she emphasized the importance that students are equipped for college. The principal supported this belief stating "We are realistic, we know that everyone won't go to college, but we want students to elect not to go" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). The principal acknowledged that no matter how many motivational or achievement-based messages are sent, not every child will go to college. The principal stated, "We want our students to have a choice. If you don't go to college, it's because you chose not to go. Not because you don't have a choice" (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

Although the principal felt messages were developed to give students a choice of post-graduate decisions, students felt the information for college was often misleading. Per Student 5, a current student at the school, "My whole perception changed, because everything they told us about the school none of it happened" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This shows that the student felt misinformed prior to enrollment and formed her perception based on her experiences.

Student 3, a 2009 graduate, agreed with this statement stating, "they made it seem like it was a good school, but when I got down there it was like a big fashion show" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This was prior to the enforcement of the current uniform policy. Student 3's perception of college preparation messages differed from Student 5's because Student 5 focused more on her expectations of learning skills that would help her get into college.

According to Student 5,

> Two years ago they told everybody they were going to get [qualified]. This year they just working on getting everybody [qualified] that is graduating. They told me that our school was college prep. There is nothing at our school that is college prep (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

When asked if it was communicated to them that the school was not equipped to meet the expectations, Student 3 responded, "They ain't telling you nothing. You just flow with it. They not going to tell you this is not a college prep school. They just want you to do what you have to do" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). Here the student shows that the school does not address apparent gaps in what they said students would experience while attending the school and what students actually experienced.

Student 5, elaborates on this stating,

> So now the school is more hands on. We have internships, but it's still not like college prep. We have four classes a day. I don't feel that's enough. 1 hour and 30 minutes each class and we don't have English teachers. So that's another thing. Us seniors going to college not having English, we are going to be set back (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

This shows that the student feels the school is not preparing her for college by not offering the core requirements needed for college. The student is not satisfied with having fewer classes for longer periods. She expressed that not having more classes and a core class affects her perception of the college preparation experience in high school.

In this assessment, there is a gap between what the principal says is being communicated to students to prepare them for college and/or let them know that they have a choice if they decide not to go to college, and what the students perceive of that message based on their observations. According to the students' responses, they do not feel like the messages are supported by the resources, for example when the student said "there is nothing college prep about the school".

The response from Student 5 shows that her perception of the school is that it did not prepare her for college. Additionally, the student indicates that the school did not address why it did not achieve college preparatory goals. There may be a gap between what the student perceives as a college preparatory school and what she actually experienced. The student did not provide any information what her expectations were of a college preparatory school. However, her perception of how the school prepared her for college was negative. The other students concurred with this perception.

Motivational theme

This theme has to do with motivating students to achieve message goals. Motivational themes can be classified under O'Keefe's (1988) Theory of Message Design Logics (MDL) because this type of theme can take an expressive, conventional, or rhetorical approach. One motivational theme per the principal is "healing ourselves, our community and our world" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). The motivational theme is a nonacademic theme that was used to develop students' interpersonal skills.

The principal emphasized the importance of addressing mental health and psychological issues that students may have prior to issuing messages or school themes.

According to the principal, "this deals with the state of mind, psychological, and mental conditions we get with a lot of our kids" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). Students who attend this school come from all over Baltimore City and from various different backgrounds.

As a result, the principal incorporated self reflection into the development of this message. The principal described this process as "know that they (students) have to work on themselves. Once you work on yourself, then you can move out into the community" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). Through this message, the principal encourages students to develop their nonacademic skills, such as their personality, which will benefit them outside of school.

The principal also focused on achievement as an underlying theme. Messages developed and sent to students are described as "trying to help them (students) understand that there is no limit to what they can do; the whole word is available to them" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). This message is geared to help students believe in themselves and their opportunities both in school and after graduation.

There are different factors in place to motivate students such as taking control of one's own academic success. The principal has developed her own unique grading system that allows students to take an incomplete on a low scoring assignment. This is not a common or required practice in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS). The development of a grading system that impacts the entire school shows the independence and control that principals have in the BCPSS. The goal of this grading system is to encourage students to try again and achieve a higher grade knowing that they are capable of more and the desire is not to fail them. When asked about their perception

of this process, students responded positively. Student 2 describes her perception of this

process as,

> That's where you could resubmit an assignment when a teacher feels that you didn't do your best ability on it. You just struggled with the assignment, you had the opportunity to do it again, but that was just to make sure that you mastered that assignment. So I think that a lot of different schools should have something like that in place because it really helped me (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This response shows that the student understands the message and the process to achieve

the message goals. It also shows that the student feels that other schools should

incorporate a similar program to help students achieve academic success.

Student 6 describes her perception of this process stating,

> When they say you're in control of your own success, they're not making you do anything you don't want to do. They're not going to force you or nothing. It was either you do it and you get your grade for it or you don't do it and you don't get a grade (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

Students have a positive perception of being in control their own academic success,

which is the message goal. Students are familiar with the message and know how to

achieve message goals, which is to improve the grade on an assignment and take

responsibility for their own academic success.

Despite feeling positively about being in control of her own success, Student 6

identified instances where she did not feel motivated by principal's messages and that

motivational messages were selective based on academic status.

> For me it was like she had her pick of who she wanted to talk to and who she didn't. So like my grades wasn't like As, so we was excluded. Kids that were getting Cs and Ds or Bs were excluded from the A students and so we didn't know a lot of information. We didn't get a lot of internships because of the simple fact our grades weren't where she felt our grades were, or she felt we wasn't working as hard as other students and that wasn't really the case sometimes and so we really didn't really get to learn, or didn't get to know things like they would learn (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

This statement shows that the student felt like the messages and school themes were developed for students who were academically successful and did not address students who were developing or struggled academically.

Although students agreed that there was a gap between communication with academically successful students and those who were struggling academically, students also agreed that the attention from the principal and motivational messages increased when they were seniors. At that point, students were reluctant to accept the message because they already formed their own perception of the principal and the school. On this topic, Student 6 states,

> I mean the only time they really got involved like that with your grades is senior meetings. When you become a senior and they were trying to help you graduate. That's the only time they kind of sat you down and work with you about your grades, but other than that, no" (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

Based on this comment the student's perception of motivational messages sent in her senior year is that they were self-serving for the principal and driven by the desire to increase college acceptance rates and scholarship funding. Student 3 supports that argument stating,

> You never got praised when you were going good, but as soon as you got in trouble they were calling your parent like you were in there prancing around. So I felt as though like [the principal], I don't really consider her a good principal when I was down there because I felt like she wasn't on top of nothing. That's another reason why I wanted to get out of there and be done (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

These responses show that some students felt like the motivational messages were delivered too late in their academic career. Students preferred constant communication during their high school years. Students expressed interest in motivational communication from as early as the ninth grade. Students did not have a positive

perception of motivational messages initiated in their twelfth grade year if they did not have the same experiences for the other three years.

Some students felt like they did not have equal opportunities or did not receive equal motivation because of their grades. When developing messages, the principal acknowledged psychological barriers that she must overcome from students who have troubled backgrounds. The next section looks at student feedback opportunities to see if there is value that may bridge the gap between principal's messages and student perceptions of the message.

Student feedback theme

This theme focuses on Grunig and Hunt's (1984) two-way symmetrical communication model because it "looks at the willingness of the organization to listen to and respond to the messages from key stakeholders" (Roper, 2005, p. 69). In other words two-way symmetrical communication supports feedback from the sender and receiver. In a high school environment two-way symmetrical communication is supported when students can provide feedback to the administrator about school messages. According to the principal, students have multiple opportunities to communicate their ideas both formally and informally. This feedback is used when planning school messages and/or school themes. Student feedback is an academic theme because it focuses on actions that can affect the function of the school. The principal acknowledged both formal and informal opportunities for student feedback. Per the principal, "my students are extremely vocal. I usually don't have to go and seek information" (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

Formal feedback opportunities come from Student Government Association

(SGA) representatives such as the student president. The principal acknowledged this

formal process stating,

> We have a SGA and messages that we get through them. Usually they are formal proposals or they (students) stop me in the hall and say this is what we want to do and you are going to get the proposal" (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

The SGA is a more formal and traditional approach to student feedback. It allows

students to get involved and to push for the implementation of their ideas. In addition to

feedback from SGA, the principal states,

> We also have an advisory program here where teachers serve as mentors for students and we get a lot of feedback from them. There is also a school family council team with a parent representative, a staff representative, partners and community reps (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

Student perception of feedback opportunities was positive especially when they thought

that their voices had an impact on school changes. Student 5, the current president of the

SGA, describes the process stating,

> We were like the voice of the school and we had like two advisory reps. During the week if any student had a question or if they want to know if anything changed they'll come to us and we'll all talk about it. Me, as a president, I would go to the principal and we would have a sit down meeting. Me and the principal and the SGA, and she'll tell us it's a certain point of what we can and cannot do. Like we can't do so much changing, but a little bit change did happen. (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

The response shows that the student is knowledgeable of the feedback process and

understands situations where student feedback cannot be applied in school. The student

did not have a negative perception of the process or the times when feedback was not

used. Student 2, a 2010 SGA president, describes the experience as,

> You could always give feedback, but it might not be the right time. So all the principals might be busy and some things aren't getting done. But like with SGA we really tried and we pushed so anytime something was going on and we wanted

to have an event, or something needed to be told to the student body, SGA walked around, asked what do you want to have, what's the problem, and how can we fix this? (personal communication, March 1,2011)

Both of the SGA representatives from 2010-2011, and the students involved that saw change within the school, were proud of the accomplishments made through student feedback.

Although, the principal mentioned the success of SGA, she did not acknowledge the development of this process. According to Student 2,

SGA is a big part of student feedback. So now, all of the principals are willing to help. Before they didn't want to do that because it was new and the principals would be like I don't want to do that. I can just go home or it's too much work (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

Due to the change in the principal's commitment to establish opportunities for students to provide feedback, students had a positive perception of the feedback experience. Students acknowledged the extra work involved and were willing to put in the extra effort to achieve goals.

Aside from formal feedback opportunities, the principal acknowledged student feedback through informal messages. This could be through conversations with students passing in the hall. According to the principal, "the other way I'm approached usually starts with 'how come we can't' or 'how come you don't' and so we start looking" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). These informal conversations are equally as important as formal proposals or advisory meetings because they are expressive messages from students. Expressive messages are unplanned and straight for the heart. Through expressive messages, principals can get raw and unfiltered information that will be valuable for message development.

In the informal setting, students may give an abstract of an idea or an issue that is not fully developed. That student is then routed to further develop the idea and present it as a formal proposal for consideration by the principal and her staff. The messages that derive because of this informal approach should have the students concerns in mind. Questions like "how come you don't" and "how come we can't" are gateways to a bigger picture or problem and should be taken into consideration, which is what the principal said she is currently doing.

Overall, students maintained a positive perception of the formal and informal feedback opportunities. However, there are some instances where students did not feel the principal acknowledged their feedback. Student 6, a 2010 graduate, felt strongly about being "brushed off" by the principal when she provided informal feedback about bullying, but she later saw a change in the personal communication practices from the principal. On the issue of how the principal addresses situations like fights, she stated,

> They got stricter about that. If you come to her with a problem she (the principal) didn't brush it off, she straightened it out. Phone call, suspension, detention, something like that, but the way it was at first, they were brushing it off like well it's not that serious. (Student 6, personal communication, February 26, 2011).

That differs from the 2009 graduate responses. When asked how the principal communicated messages in the instance of a fight she stated, "She (the principal) tell you that you going to get suspended and that's it. It's not like some principals that try to make you get along and tell you should do this. They just let things go" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). Comparing these two experiences, you can see how the 2010 graduate has a more positive perception of the experience and feedback opportunities than the 2009 graduate who said you would simply be suspended for your actions, but not encouraged to do better. This indicates opportunities for personal

communication between the principal and student, which may curtail negative

perceptions.

Personal communication theme

This theme looks at the impact of personal communication on students'

perception of the principal's messages. This is an area where students talk to the principal

one-to-one. The personal communication theme is a nonacademic theme because it

focuses on the relationships that develop between principals and students through a

communication practice. Personal communication opportunities are highly favored by

students. Currently the school is taking a proactive approach to engage with students and

foster working relationships through individual meetings. On the topic of personal

communication, Student 1, a current senior at the school, states,

> They have meetings for each class instead of just seniors like most schools. Like once every two months and this is one-on-one meeting not like a big class. So they let you know one-on-one what is needed to stay on track and before they didn't do that. It was just win or lose you pass you fail. Now they making sure you do what you supposed to do and making sure every student is on track (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This shows that the student was receptive to one-on-one meeting to discuss her academic

progress and valued feedback from the principal.

Student 3 expressed the same sentiment, but from a negative experience.

According to Student 3,

> The only time I got a meeting from an administrator was when they were talking about the H.S.A.[high school assessment exam] and you were prepping yourself like come to school, eat breakfast, get in early, other than that, it was like you was just there. They wasn't really involved (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

This shows that the student acknowledged personal communication from the

administrators but felt it was only supported by the need for her to perform well on the

H.S.A. exams. The student was not receptive to personal communication that was targeted to achieve a short-term goal and was not followed by continual communication efforts to motivate her to achieve long-term academic goals.

The student did acknowledge a teacher that took extra time to communicate with her personally and encourage her to come to school despite other obstacles. Per Student 3, "I'll say I only had one teacher that was really involved as far as making sure I had my work done. Calling me at home saying 'you can do it' (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This shows that the student appreciated the extra effort from the teacher and it helped get through school despite the lack of direct communication with the principal.

Based on the focus group responses, students who engaged in personal communication felt the most positive about the experience and the principal's message goals. If it was a targeted short-term goal that is not supported by continual efforts, students may not be as receptive to personal communication. If it was a long-term goal, such as preparing for college, followed by continual efforts from the principal and staff, students were receptive to the message.

In the focus groups, this was more apparent in the 2011 students versus the 2010 or 2009 students' responses. The 2011 student respondents experienced more changes within the school and were more knowledgeable of the new communication processes, such as one-on-one meetings with the principal and/or staff. This was not evident with the class of 2009 respondent, who seemed to have the most negative experience. The 2010 student respondents did see gradual change and felt positively about their personal communication experience with the principal. Due to the sample size, the student

responses are not intended to generalize the opinions the full student body from their

respective class, but to solely represent their knowledge of the communication practices

and to identify apparent changes in the process. In support of this statement, students

from the preceding classes acknowledged that there were changes made that they were

not aware of until they attended the focus group.

> According to Student 2, a 2010 graduate,

> We loved [the principal], so like whenever we did something we would have awards ceremonies or attendance ceremonies and we would give out like certificates and pins for people who made the principal's role or the merit role and things like that, but at the same time she made it clear you need to do what you had to do, you need to be in class when you need to be in class. So you could talk to her like after hours. It was just that community thing. She was in charge. She was the principal (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This comment reflects a positive perception of personal communication with the

principal. Through effective personal communication, this student viewed the school as a

community. This perception made the student feel comfortable in his environment and

encouraged him to achieve academic success (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

> Students from 2010-11 acknowledge a closer relationship with the principal and a

better understanding of the principal's message goals and behavioral expectations. Per

Student 1,

> [The principal], she doesn't like a liar. That will make you feel threatened if you lie in her face, because she'll be like, 'I know you're lying and I know the truth, I was just going to see if you were going to tell me.' So it's really like a mother-daughter relationship to me with [principal's name] to me, with every student (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This shows that the message type can affect student perceptions. The next section looks

at message type and the differences in what the principal thinks is the type of message

sent and how students perceive the message type.

Message type theme

This theme looks at the type of message using O'Keefe's (1988) theory of message design logics (MDL) and the cognitive process that goes into message development. MDL divides message design into three categories: expressive, conventional and rhetorical. The message type theme is an academic theme because it focuses on the type of messages sent to students and the process that goes into developing school themes. This theme looks at which design logic is used by the principal and students' perception of that approach. On the topic of expressive design logic, the principal denies frequent use of expressive design logic for her messages and stated,

> Overall, I can't think of a time where I just all of a sudden said something. Maybe one-on-one to students. Like maybe a fight and I have the two students there and I'm having a conversation, but as a whole, usually not (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

Expressive messages are unplanned and are often communicated due to an acute situation. Using expressive message design seems appropriate in situations of conflict such as a fight between students because there is not time for planning. The reaction and communication must be immediate.

According to the principal, expressive messages are used "in situations where I'm looking at safety. I'm telling you this is what you're going to do. You're going to do it now. I don't have a lot of time. Somebody's life is at stake" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). In this situation, an expressive message design may be the most appropriate if the principal has pressing concerns and may be operating in a state of urgency.

When asked about their perception of principal message types, students felt the messages were more expressive. Student 1 elaborated on the expressive approach stating,

> Like for me it's expressive because like I said, I have a personal relationship with every principal there from the hall monitors, to guidance, to the main office. So everything that they say to me come from the heart. So if they're telling me you need to go to class, you need to do this, or that, I know it's coming from the heart. I know it's because they care because like it's a personal relationship more so than like a principal relationship (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This statement indicates that expressive messages may have a positive impact on student perception if the message is sincere and backed with personal communication.

Students were receptive to expressive messages from the principal if they showed purpose or concern. Student 1 responded that "[the principal] told me last year 'when I don't yell at you, that's when you need to worry' and she walked away and she said nothing else because I upset her" (personal communication, March 1, 2011). Both Students 1 and 2 remembered this message and felt that the principal was trying to motivate them to achieve higher goals. As a result, their perception of the principal and the message became positive.

While the principal did acknowledge limited use of expressive messages, conventional messages were more undeveloped. According to the principal,

> Because we were a new school, there was no tradition. So we set our own. I think (pause) we really don't have traditions. We don't have to do a lot with the traditions. The kids kind of expect it. So I just remind them… (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

Although there are no traditional messages, the principal does acknowledge the value of conventional message design. However, there are limitations beyond the control of the principal that delay the establishment of formal traditions. According to the principal, "We have a lot of student turnover, not as drop outs, but we are not far from the county line and we have students moving in and out all year so we are constantly trying to

rebuild" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). This indicates that conventional

messages can be influenced by environmental factors.

Despite the environmental influences, the principal does identify a developing

conventional theme within the school. This is a unity theme. Of the unity theme the

principal states,

> We don't separate our kids by class. Yes, they know what class they're in, but we did away with class days. We have school wide days so that everybody participates. We're more focused on themes that unify the students as opposed to separating them." (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

Through this theme, students learn the message goals through action. In other words, if

the theme is unity, students are put into situations where they must be unified like joint

proms or class activities.

The students acknowledge the lack of conventional themes. Student 5 states,

"they not really strong on the themes" (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

However, despite the lack of conventional themes or messages, there is no apparent

impact on student perception of the message goals. Resources like internships, labs, and

partnerships with community industries support school messages, which are generally

about helping others. The hands-on approach to achieving message goals through

internships has a positive impact on student perceptions. Of internship opportunities,

Student 2 stated,

> I did like a lot of internships and things like that and worked with a lot of partners from our school that I can go to now even though I'm not there anymore. So my senior year I actually did an internship at the University of Maryland, so that was interesting. I'm like wow I'm getting all this experience before I go to college (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This shows that the internship opportunities long-term impacted the student's perception.

The student liked the exposure to the industry as well as the networking opportunities that

the internship provided. The student acknowledged that the internship lead to a continual working relationship with the internship provider after graduation.

Although participation in an internship is not a conventional message, taking a hands-on approach to achieve school goals can be a conventional strategy to send principal's messages and school themes. Of rhetorical message design, which is viewed as persuasive communication for my study, the principal favored the rhetorical approach for her messages because School A is a relatively new school that responds to industry and parental demands for curriculum and school activities, but must also satisfy the needs of the students. According to the principal, the rhetorical message design logic is used about "90% of the time" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). The principal acknowledged her messages are persuasion based. Using O'Keefe's (1988) description of rhetorical communication, the messages identified for School A use negotiation to motivate students to achieve message goals.

When asked if she thought the rhetorical approach was most effective in her school the principal replied "Yes, or as the children tell me, here's she's preaching again. No I'm explaining" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). Explaining message goals or reiterating the message to students provides opportunities for students to not only hear the message, but also reminds them of the importance of the message. The students did not identify with the rhetorical approach in their responses because they viewed the principal's messages as expressive versus rhetorical.

The next set of themes analyzes message delivery method as described in the literature review to determine if the delivery medium is impactful on student perception.

Impact is measured by whether students recall the message and their responses about the message.

Message delivery theme

This theme covers the principal's perception of different delivery media (i.e. print, verbal and Internet), and how it impacts student perception of the message. The message delivery theme is an academic theme because it focuses on how students receive school messages.

According to the principal,

> Verbal works depending on the topic. So if it is a topic of high interest, verbal works. Usually we do writing and send out communications over the telephone through our automated system. I don't think that one is necessarily any better than the other. We find that we have to use a variety to reach everybody" (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

The principal highlights a very important limitation of verbal communication and that is interest. If messages are communicated via the intercom, at assemblies, or even in person, if students do not have interest in that message, then verbal communication efforts may be ineffective. However, if it is a topic of high interest, like prom or graduation, students will pay more attention to the message and try to achieve message goals.

Student responses in the message delivery theme show that students are receptive to personal communication, as it build relationships and shows interest from the principal. In addition to verbal messages, the principal uses print messages, but there are limitations. The principal acknowledges this by saying "Some people no matter how many fliers or letters we send out, they don't read them. Other people, no matter how many announcements we make they're not paying attention to them, again unless it's high interest" (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

The principal's response indicates that multiple communication method are needed to obtain interest. Messages sent in print will most likely need to be followed up with verbal communication or telephone calls. Telephone calls serve as a form of immediate communication, but are generally automated whenever a student is late or absent from school.

For messages sent by phone, the principal states, "we do the phone calls, which are usually more effective for parents. We have attendance set up so that there is an automated system that text a parent so that seems to be effective" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). The most effective communication method according to students varied from phone calls and mail to Facebook and the Internet. Student 1 prefers phone calls and mail stating,

> They just don't tell you something one time and expect you to get it. They drill everything that you learn there. Every motto, every method, every moral. Everything that you get there from that school, you get it in about three different ways (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This statement shows that the student has expectations to receive the message more than one way, which supports the principal's statement.

Student 2 favored personal communication, but felt that updating the website adds value to sending school messages. There are also opportunities for parents and students to use the school's website, but information on the website is not current. Student 2 stated, "When I was there, the website was never updated and that may be something they want to do" (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

According to the principal, communication with students requires "a combination and still sometimes it's hit or miss, but I honestly believe, the social network piece would be the way to get to them, but there are other obstacles that get in the way of why we

can't" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). Becoming in tune with changing

technology and communication media that is most utilized by students can impact student

perception because it shows that the school, and the principal, are taking a proactive

approach to communicating message goals.

Additionally, the principal elaborates on opportunities to use social networking

for school messages stating,

> It would be ideal because that's what children are now used to. Everybody's got a
> cell phone, everybody is trying to text. It's just what kids are used to. That's it.
> All day long, it's what they do on the weekend. It's how they communicate with
> each other." (personal communication, January 27, 2011).

This response shows that the principal sees an opportunity in using social networking

websites and text messages to communicate with students. The principal views this is a

medium that students are familiar with and acknowledged that students spend a

significant amount of time using these tools. After reviewing how the message delivery

affects students' perceptions upon or nearing graduation, there is also value in measuring

students' perceptions prior to enrollment to see if there are any changes.

School choice theme

This theme looks at school choice to determine if student perception of the high

school and school messages differed prior to enrollment, during enrollment, and upon or

nearing graduation. The school choice theme is an academic theme because it focuses on

the process that goes into school selection. Upon entering School A, 4 out of 5 students

were assigned to the school and one chose to attend the school due to the career track. It

should be noted that School A is a charter school and would normally be on the student's

list of high school choices in order to be considered for enrollment. The same applies for

transfer students. Students usually solicit the school to be considered for a transfer.

Although students say they were assigned to the school, it is possible that a parent or

guardian put the school on the student's high school choice list prior to enrollment; my

study did not explore that information.

Once in the school, 4 out of 5 students had negative perceptions of the school.

Student 2 described his perception of the school prior to enrollment as,

> So it wasn't my first choice. So I went to [School A] but I was like I don't want to be here so I'm going to do what I have to do so that I can transfer out after the first year (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This shows a student with a negative perception prior to enrollment. Due to this

perception, the student had intentions to transfer after the first year.

Student 6 had fluctuating perceptions. As a transfer student from Baltimore

County, she did not know much about the school to form a perception prior to

enrollment. She stated the following about her perception once she enrolled:

> I went to [School A] like the middle of 9th grade so I didn't get to go to orientation or nothing like that and I really didn't know nothing about the school. Didn't know anybody in the school. And it was kind of hard because you had your want to be bullies because I was kind of quiet at the time, which made my attitude worse because the simple fact they just kept messing with me and when I went to them [the principals], they wouldn't do nothing. My perception changed a whole lot from being interested to just not wanting to go (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

This shows a student with an independent perception prior to enrollment that could be

altered either way, however in this example, the student's response indicates how the lack

of student-to-principal feedback can negatively impact student perceptions of the high

school experience.

Of his perception prior to enrollment, Student 2 stated,

> The bus would ride pass every day when I was in eighth grade and they were just off the hook. Nobody would go to school they would just stand at the bottom of

the hill and I was like this is the school I'm going to; I'm not going, like No. (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This student had a negative perception of the school prior to enrollment based on his observations of other students who were attending school. From these observations, this student did not want to be in that environment. Thus, his initial perception of the school was negative.

Student 1, a transfer student from Baltimore County, did not know much about the school. She had a positive perception of the school because of the career tracks that it offers. She stated the following of her perception prior to enrollment:

> It was a [career track school]. Like that's what drew me to it. Like every since I was little I wanted to do something in the [career name] field. I wanted to be a [career type] when I first got here, but I was placed into [class name] so when I got into to [class name], I feel in love with my teacher (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This showed that students also form perceptions prior to enrollment based on their knowledge of the school programs. If their interest matches the programs offered at the school, then they may perceive the school positively. This is in addition to observations from other students and knowledge of course programs offered at the school. Parental influences can also affect student perception.

Parental influences theme

This theme looks at the impact of parent or guardian perceptions of a school and principal's messages on the student's perception of the high school experience. Parental influences are a nonacademic theme because it looks at the impact of the parents' opinions on student perceptions of the high school experience. In some cases, parents may influence students who have not formed their own perceptions, however one can

argue that once students are enrolled in school, or prior to the enrollment, they can form their own perceptions, which may differ from their parent's or guardian's perception.

The parental influences theme can be applied to the concepts of Bandura's (1977) SLT because students can develop learned behavior based on their observations of their parents' behavior towards the school or the administrators. Based on these observations, students can chose to pay attention to their parents' messages about the school and retain the messages. Through attention and retention of the message, they can reproduce their parents' behavior and if so, they can be motivated or unmotivated to take action towards achieving school goals. The results analyze how much parents influence the focus group respondents' perceptions.

The focus group responses revealed that parents or guardians often had a different perception of the school. Student 2 describes the difference between his perception of the school and his guardian stating,

> I was like I don't want to go to that school and she was like 'oh no you going, this is a [confidential]' she hadn't stepped foot in the door, she hadn't been to the school all she knew was it's a [type of school]. I was like okay I don't have a choice (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This response indicates that parents or guardians may not be as knowledgeable of the school due to different observations. Parents and guardians may base their perception of the school from advertisements and what they see or hear in formal and controlled settings such as an open house. Despite the parent or guardian's perception, students did not show that they were impacted by how their parents felt. The two students who transferred to the school from surrounding counties did not indicate that their parents had a perception of the school, due to lack of in-depth knowledge; however, Student 1 maintained a positive perception based on the course curriculum that the school offered.

This shows that students may act independently of their parents to form perceptions based on their own interests.

Postgraduate perception theme

This theme looks at the overall perceptions of students upon or nearing graduation. The postgraduate perceptions theme is a nonacademic theme because it focuses on how students felt about their high school experience and does not affect how the high school functions. In the case of School A, a majority of the students perceived the high school experience positively upon or nearing graduation and post graduation. When asked about their perception of the school, post graduation, all of the 2010 graduates said they "miss and love it" (personal communication, January 27 and March 1, 2011).

The 2011 seniors enjoy the school and remain very active in SGA and extracurricular activities such as advanced placement (AP) classes and Saturday activities at the school. Student 2, a 2010 graduate, who entered the school with a negative perception and the desire to transfer after the first year, describes the experience as,

> I loved it. At first when I graduated, I was like oh my God I should do this again. I should totally do this again and make up for my ninth grade year. When I got to college I was like okay I like college better. But I really liked high school. (personal communication, March 1, 2011).

This shows a change in perception because Student 2 had a negative perception prior to enrollment, based on his observation of other students, however during his time at the school his perception changed due to personal communication with the principal, working relationships with teachers, and being active in SGA activities. This student wanted to transfer after the first year due to his negative perception, but as his perception changed, so did his performance, and he graduated with honors.

This indicates that student perception can change once they are in school. In reflection of postgraduate decision-making, Student 2 indicated that his choice to go to a small college was based around the family relationship he had going to a small high school (personal communication, March 1, 2011). Student 5, a current student, expressed interest in attending college, which was not her original intent, but this changed because of her high school experience (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

Student 6 said she misses the experience and would like to get into the field of interest because of what she learned while in high school" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). Student 3, the 2009 graduate felt the school did not affect her postgraduate decisions (personal communication, February 26, 2010). Although she did not have a positive perception, she continues to strive for her goals and is working part-time and attending junior college. The next case looks at the principal's messages at School B and compares them with student perception of the messages.

Case Study 2: School B

Motivational theme

This theme looks at motivational messages sent from the principal to students. The motivational theme in this case is an academic theme because it focuses on achieving academic goals such as passing class. One message that the principal identified as an motivational theme is "why not pass the class the first time when it's given to you for free" (personal communication, February 8, 2011). This theme is used to encourage students to do well in their classes during the school year so that they will not have to take classes in summer school or online, which cost money. According to the principal, this theme is "delivered twice daily (morning/afternoon), at the end of 1st and 4th quarter"

(personal communication, February 8, 2011). Delivering the messages at least twice a

day may help to drill the message into students and show principal's commitment to the

message.

Students had a lot of feedback about the theme "why not pass the class the first

time, when it is given to you for free". Student 2, stated,

> The whole thing about that is they say you should have passed the class the first
> time, but there are certain circumstances where you were unable to attend class.
> Certain teachers, if you go back and ask for work, they're like 'no I'm not giving
> it to you' (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

This student acknowledges that there is a gap between students passing the class and

resources or teacher availability for students to achieve the message goal, which is to pass

the class the first time. Student 2, further elaborates on this issue by stating,

> So it's not just our participation or our part about going to class, it's also about the
> student teacher relationship and how a lot of the teachers wouldn't give you the
> time of day to give you the work or anything else (personal communication,
> February 26, 2011).

This shows that message goals are not backed by teachers, a point which is supported

throughout the focus group discussion.

To expand on this belief Student 5 stated,

> They instilled it in us, like you should pass the class the first time, but they didn't
> give you the tools to pass. Like you telling someone you would walk across that
> bridge, but at the same time, where is the bridge (group) (personal
> communication, February 26, 2011).

Due to the lack resources and effective communication on how to achieve message goals,

students were not receptive to the message.

Student 6 cites poor teacher resources and commitment as a hindrance to achieve

message goals. When asked about coach class opportunities to achieve message goals and

pass the class the first time, Student 6 states, "to have coach class, you have to have

teachers that will actually stay after school. There are times where once that bell rings,

before that bell even rings, once the announcements come on, teachers are gone"

(personal communication, February 26, 2011). Coach class is a common name in

Baltimore City public schools for tutoring sessions with the teacher before or after

school. The responses show that students view the lack of teacher commitment to coach

class as a lack support or commitment to the principal's messages.

Despite students' responses, one cannot assume that all teachers undermine the

principal's message goals by leaving early or not providing the assistance needed to

achieve message goals. On the contrary, Student 5 recalls a teacher that was committed

to helping students achieve message goals and pass the class.

This teacher, according to Student 5,

> Went above and beyond her job to help people graduate. She would force you to
> do your job. I'm not saying she was a mean lady, she was actually very nice, she
> just instilled in you that you were going to do the work (personal communication,
> February 26, 2011).

Teachers, like the one described by Student 5, had more of an impact on the student's

perception of the principal's message and/or school themes than the principal. This is

because these teachers showed commitment to the message, but in a school system,

where there are many influences, if the commitment is not universally consistent, then the

message loses its effectiveness. Because of the inconsistency, students' perception, in the

case of the focus group responses, is negative of the message as a whole.

Student 3 identifies challenges with teacher retention that makes achieving

message goals of "passing the class the first time" difficult. According to Student 3,

> It gets to a point where you would have substitutes for substitutes so the teachers
> wouldn't be there when you mess up and you take advantage of that. So when you
> mess up, you have no teacher to say 'okay this is where you messed up in class

and this is where you need to be.' So nobody knows what's going on. So us being young-minded we really not paying attention (personal communication, February 26, 2011)."

Student focus group responses show that despite the message goals to pass the class the first time, when not properly directed or reinforced, students self-regulate and do whatever they want, which is oftentimes unproductive.

In hindsight, Student 3 was able to see the importance of the message, but only after he experienced paying for additional classes outside of the regular school year. Student 3's thoughts on the issue are "I should have done it because I wouldn't have had to pay the money and I could have used the money for something else" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This perception was in hindsight of the actual experience, and focused on the money aspect of the experience versus the overall impact (i.e. time lost over the summer, potential of failing, etc.). This shows a lack of knowledge form the student's perspective on the full impact of not achieving message goals. The next theme looks at how building working relationships with students can affect their perception of school messages and themes.

The components of Bandura's (1977) SLT are not supported by the results. The students did pay attention to the message and retained the message based on their ability to recap the message content and their experiences with achieving message goals; however, the message failed when the students tried to reproduce the message goals and ran into obstacles due to the lack of teacher commitment or inefficient resources.

Relationship building theme

This theme focuses on messages that build relationships with students and the impact on student perceptions. The relationship-building theme is a nonacademic theme because

it focuses on building partnerships between the students and staff members throughout high school and after graduation. According to the principal, school themes also focus on helping students after graduation. She emphasized that "relationships with students are continual" (personal communication, February 8, 2011). A message that the principal developed to communicate this goal to students is "We cannot go back and create a new start, but we can make sure to have a successful ending" (personal communication, February 8, 2011). The message goal is to express to students that they can succeed despite past obstacles and that they can always come back to the school for help.

When asked how this message affected their perception, students were not impacted by the message. Most of the students did not remember the message. Student 6 recalled the message stating, "She said that at graduation, but I thought it was something she was just saying" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). When asked if the message impacted him, Student 6 replied "I didn't really pay attention. When I got that diploma that was it" (personal communication, February 26, 2010).

This is another example of a message or theme that did not stick with students. However, rather than have a negative or positive impact of student perception of the message or the high school experience, students were not at all impacted and their perceptions were not influenced. Student 5, weighed in on why this was the case stating, "I think it didn't drive home because she was saying it to say it instead of saying it to mean it" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This supports Grusec's analysis of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT) that states "people do not passively absorb standards of behavior by one observation, but through many observations of different people or the same person in different circumstances" (1992, p. 782).

In this case, students observed the principal in many different circumstances to determine her commitment to the message and if they should commit.

Student 5, elaborates on this process stating,

> It's the whole way she presented it to us. Like the whole duration of the school and the time I was there, she would say stuff to say that she said it, but she wouldn't really show you that she meant it (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

This response points out that students may not believe in a message or message goals if the sender does not show commitment and dedication to that message. Commitment to a message or theme is not shown through message delivery, (i.e. two times a day), but through the sender's devotion to the message. A message delivered repetitively is not effective if it is not delivered with conviction. Students must feel that the principal believes in the message in order to gain interest in message goals.

Student 2 supports this idea by stating,

> I mean it's like if you are going to say something, say it with meaning and conviction. If you're going to try to drive something home, you can't say well, this and this, no you have to get our attention like you're trying to reach out to us. (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

This shows that students are aware of when the principal is motivated about a message and they use observations of the principal's behavior toward a message to determine how important that message is to them.

Students are also aware of when the principal is motivated to achieve message goals and use that as one of the guiding factors in determining their response to the message. Student 3 supports this statement by saying, "You always knew when she (the principal) was like passionate about something because she would always say it (personal communication, February 26, 2011). Students felt that the message to assure them that

they could maintain a continued relationship after graduation was not consistent because the principal did not show passion or commitment to the message. As a result, students have no perception that the opportunity for ongoing support exists from the school after graduation.

Parental influences theme

This theme looks at parental influences on message development and the impact, if any, on student perception of the message. The parental influences theme is a nonacademic theme because it focuses on how such influences impact student perceptions as defined in Case I. Themes, according to the principal, "are developed based on data and administrative meetings, but no parental involvement. Parents are invited in for budget conversations, but there are still struggles" (personal communication, February 8, 2011). Parental influence was not evident in development of themes. The principal acknowledges this as an area for future growth.

The parental influences theme analyzes how the parents' perceptions of the school and/or principal impacted students' perceptions. This is important since parents are not actively involved in the development of school messages. Responses from students show that they felt differently about the value of parental involvement. Students felt that communication to parents from the school was slow and outdated, which made parents' perception of the school negative. Per Student 5, "Like they'll send a note home, but the note will say February 13th and you'll get it March 1st. My parents would be like 'what kind of school is that when you are getting it this late' " (personal communication, February 26, 2011). According to the student, his parents had a negative perception of the school based on delays in communication from the school. This often came from the

parent's comparison to other schools within the Baltimore City Public School System

(BCPSS) based on their own experiences.

Student 3 had a different experience, although communication to parents was slow,

his parent took an active role in the school and greatly impacted his perception of the

school. Of his parent's role in the school, Student 3 stated, "He was always there…I was

the class clown, but really I couldn't do too much bad because I would see him and be

like God my father is here" (personal communication February 26, 2011).

Despite the lack of timely communication from the school to parents, Student 3's

father motivated him to complete high school and had a significant impact on his

perception during high school. Per Student 3, one of the most memorable statements from

his father that motivated him to achieve graduation goals is,

> 'You don't want to be in the 12th grade with your brothers'. I have two younger
> brothers that were coming up and they were always like if you mess up, we going
> to graduate with you, and I don't want that (personal communication, February
> 26, 2011).

The example shows that parental involvement is very important in message development

and establishing message goals, in addition to administrative meetings, as identified by

the principal.

On the topic of parental involvement in school, Student 2 states,

> My mom was calling the school like every other day because I was sick a lot so
> my mom would go to get my work and like she would have to fight with the
> school just to get my work (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

This experience, according to the student, made her mother dislike the school. The

student also shares the same negative perception of the school. Per Student 2, " she (her

mother) couldn't stand the school. Like that school screwed me over so many times"

(personal communication, February 26, 2011).

When asked whether her parent's perception of the school affected her perception, Student 2 responded "no because my mom didn't go there every day. She didn't understand. She just knew one side of it or she'll hear me complain about stuff. But she didn't know the reason behind it" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This indicates that without effective and timely communication from the school, parents may be misinformed or only partially informed of the student's high school experience, which may skew their perception based only on student feedback.

Bandura's (1977) SLT is not supported by the students' responses. Although the students did pay attention to and retain their parents messages about the school, they self-regulated to form their own perceptions.

Student feedback theme

This theme covers opportunity for student feedback as a way to determine if such feedback impacts student perceptions of principal messages and the high school experience. Similar to Case I, the student feedback theme is an academic theme in Case II. This theme has to do with feedback opportunities from students to principals that will impact school functioning. This is important to the development of messages because students may not be as receptive to messages that do not have their interest in mind.

According to the principal, student feedback comes from "a combination of influences such as mentors and teachers" (personal communication, February 8, 2011). While using both teachers and mentors is beneficial, as they both have direct contact with the students, the impact is not as valuable as actually hearing feedback from the students themselves.

Students in the focus group acknowledge few opportunities to provide feedback to the principal through personal conversations. Student 2 describes this experience as "[the principal] sometimes would pull me over like 'what's going on'? But it's like they never set a plan for me to graduate and they would never check up and follow through" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). In this case, obtaining student feedback would allow the principal to know the students concerns regarding their academic success.

Other students shared the same sentiment about feedback opportunities and the principal's efforts to obtain student feedback. Student 5 stated, "They never took initiative ever. It's like their job is to get you in class and get you out of class" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). During the focus group the students shared the same sentiment that the principal and staff were simply moving them through; however, there was no real care or concern or communication with the students to encourage them to achieve message goals (e.g. graduation). Student 2 states, "I think they care more about their graduation rate than they did about the kids that are graduating" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). Based on students' responses, feedback opportunities were superficial. Students did not feel like their opinion mattered and their perceptions of the experience reflected this.

However, Student 4 had a more positive insight on feedback opportunities, stating,

> We had to take things upon ourselves to change. When we got there, like nobody was in uniform besides freshman and they were trying to make it mandatory to wear uniforms. So we all took a vote and decided that we were not going to wear uniforms. It takes a whole lot instead of just one voice to speak out (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

Student 3 agreed with this statement stating, "If too many people did it at one time, they would change it" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This shows students appreciated feedback opportunities through inclusive participation. Something like the uniform policy, as described by Student 4, is instrumental to the school's function; having the opportunity to change something significant was impactful on student perception. This shows that students may feel proud and perceive the experience well when they have an influential input. Student 3, a member of the Student Government Association (SGA), acknowledged that you got what you wanted "as long as it ain't nothing too big" (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

Student 2, also a member of the SGA, acknowledged that students could reach other students where principals could not. She also acknowledged change in the enthusiasm amongst students to provide feedback stating," Our class meetings, like freshman and sophomore year we got through, but like junior and senior year, everybody was like 'I don't care anymore'" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This shows that student interest in feedback opportunities may change depending on the experience. It is unclear what influenced the change in the enthusiasm for SGA at School B.

Student 3 had a different experience, although he did not directly provide feedback to the principals, the presence of his active parent served as feedback on his behalf. According to Student 3,

> It was different for me. My father was one of the few fathers who showed initiative. I would go to the office and be asked 'did you do this paper yet'?" Everybody had a different agenda for me to do right and they looked out (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

It is interesting to see how feedback from parents to students can affect student perception of the high school experience. This feedback may not involve information about the school directly, but address the direct concerns of the student. This is interesting because the student himself did not take the initiative and actually admits to being a "class clown", but due to his parent's involvement, he received direct attention from the principal and established a more personal relationship. As a result, his perception of the principal and the school was more positive than the other students.

The responses to the student feedback theme indicate that students value feedback from principals, when backed by conviction, as well as the opportunity to provide feedback to principals. Students who did not have feedback opportunities maintained a negative perception of the principal's messages, whereas, students who did have feedback outlets, such as an active parent, felt more positively about the principal's messages and high school experience. The type of message sent from the principal may influence the opportunity for students to provide feedback.

Message type theme

This theme looks at the type of messages sent to students using O'Keefe's (1988) Theory of Message Design Logics as a guide. According to O'Keefe, message designs can be expressive, conventional, or rhetorical, as outlined in the literature review. This theme looks at which design logic the principal uses and how students perceive the message. Similar to Case I, the message type theme is an academic theme in Case II. This theme focuses on the type of messages that are sent to students and may impact the schools function. According to the principal, messages are "25% rhetorical, 25% expressive and 50% conventional" (personal communication, February 8, 2011).

Expressive messages occur through personal communication in the hallway or passing by a student when the principal responds to a direct situation.

When asked about their perception of expressive messages from the principal, Student 2 stated "The only way I would believe something and not from [the principal] is if they said I'm going to call your mother. If [the principal] said I'm going to call your mother, I would have laughed at her." (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This shows the student had a lack of confidence in the principal and did not value her word. From this response one could argue that the student had a negative perception of the principal's message or no perception at all because he did not take the message seriously if it was coming from the principal.

Student 5 stated that the principal uses conventional message design because

> She's not saying it from the heart. She's saying it because it's her job. The principal was only as good as her worst teacher. She wouldn't help her teachers try to communicate with the students, then how good are you trying to communicate with the students (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

Student 5's comment reflects a negative perception of the message because it is not backed by the sincerity of the principal. The response highlights that some students are not only looking at the communication practices of the principal, but also the teachers.

Student 3 feels that the principal's messages took a rhetorical design stating, "Rhetorical because she said stuff to put fear in you. She just said stuff so you could listen or do what she wanted you to do just for that moment" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This shows that the student felt that the principal used fear to persuade students to achieve message goals. Using a fear tactic is verbally aggressive behavior.

As stated in the literature review, "a message that is verbally aggressive can effect such emotions as embarrassment, feeling of inadequacy, humiliation, hopelessness, despair and depression" (Infante, 1992, p. 116). While students did not express these types of feelings, there was resentment within the group. Student 3, who identified that the principal tried to put fear in you, also stated that he "only did what was asked by the principal for the time that she was standing over him" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This shows that fear tactics in message type and delivery are unsuccessful for the long term. Despite the message type, delivery of the message also played an important role into student responses and perception. Factors such as the message delivery medium (e.g., print, phone, or Internet), not only influenced the way the student received the message, but also the way they viewed the content of the message, which can influence their interest in the message.

Message delivery theme

This theme covers the delivery method used by the principal to determine its impact on student perception. As with Case I, the message delivery theme is an academic theme in Case II. This has to do with the medium which students receive school messages. This is important because an effective message delivered ineffectively will not retain with students and will not achieve the principal's message goals. It is also important that message delivery method are up to date to be effective due to changing technology and other media such as cell phones and text messages that capture the attention of students. According to the principal, messages are "delivered over the intercom and by mail. Social networks like Facebook, are used to find students for attendance purposes."(personal communication, February 8, 2011). Delivering messages

via the intercom is a traditional method of communication in schools. Facebook, when used effectively, can be a two-way communication tool to post formal messages and themes about attendance and communicate goals or incentives to students.

Currently, there are limitations to using Facebook as a two-way communications tool. Per the principal, a formal Facebook page for the school is still pending" (personal communication, February 8, 2011). Print correspondence is the preferred method of communication and is often "a letter with key points bolded, newsletters to parents or personal correspondence" (personal communication, February 8, 2011).When asked about their recollection of message delivery media and how it impacted their perception, student responses ranged from print to phone calls home. Student 3 states, "Prints was always late. Report cards always came late. Something was always going wrong" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). Due to the delay in print communication, student perception during the focus group discussion was either negatively impacted or not at all impacted.

The focus group feedback shows that students developed low expectations of the school and become less enthused to achieve message goals when school messages are late. This shows that while the principal does send letters with key points, students may not care about the key points because they may be outdated, or it is not taken seriously since the notice is late. Students also filtered print communication that came in the mail. Student 2 stated, "I think we would all open them before our parents like it's not nothing, throw it away" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This reveals a gap between what the principal thinks she sent and what students actually read. Student 4 agrees with this stating "Yeah, like if you saw the label this is from Baltimore City then tear"

(personal communication, February 26, 2011). The students' responses indicated that print messages may not reach students. That is why multiple communication method are necessary in a high school environment. It shows commitment to the message and counters the possibility that the message will not get to the intended recipient.

When asked what their preferred method of communication is, Student 2 responded " As teenagers, we are always on Facebook, always on the Internet or something and it's like our teachers got to us quicker by sending an email " (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This outlines two possible method to send school messages using social networking sites like Facebook and through email. Student 5 expressed frustration with not having communication through the Internet stating, "when I was in [another school in another state], I realized that even the alternative school has a website that keeps you updated about the school, but [School B], you can't even Google [School B]" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). It should be noted that I did advise the students that School B has a website. Overall, the focus group responses show that students have a growing interest in using technology to receive school messages and updated information.

The principal acknowledged opportunities for communication using the Internet in the future by suggesting, "readers can be deferred to the website via other communication formats (i.e. print)" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This comment emphasizes the value of using multiple communication method in schools. By using multiple communication method (e.g., Internet, print, and phone calls), students will know that the message is delivered more than one way and may take notice to the message content. As identified by the principal, the use of the Internet to communicate

with students is still developing. To move forward with web enhancements, the principal acknowledges a need for "team involvement and measuring instruments, such as surveys, to see which method are most effective" (personal communication, February 8, 2011).

Currently themes are measured "by looking at the pass/fail rate" (personal communication, February 8, 2011). Using the pass/fail rate is a production measurement tool. However, it does not give an accurate depiction of message success or the factors that may have influenced students' success or failure.

Postgraduate perceptions theme

This theme takes a holistic view of the high school experience and how student perception of the principal's messages and the high school experience impacted their postgraduate decisions. Similar to Case I, the postgraduate perceptions theme is a nonacademic theme because it looks at the students overall perception of the high school experience and does not impact school functioning. .

When asked of their overall perception of the high school experience, Student 4 states, "it was just a fun place to hang out" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This shows that the student focused on the personal aspect of the experience and not the academic. Student 5 reinforces that statement stating, "It was a club in there, my high school experience was great."(personal communication, February 26, 2011). Again, the student is showing the personal benefit of the high school experience, which is not reflective of school themes and the principal's message goals.

Student 6 states, "I would not recommend it for nobody cause you not going to learn" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This student shows a negative perception of the school indicating a desire to learn more while in school. Student 5

expressed a similar sentiment stating, "I say if I can go back, I wouldn't have went to that school" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). The fact that the students did not have a positive perception of the school shows that there is a gap between the principal's efforts for message design and delivery and the impact on student perception. While students recalled the message, they felt strongly about the messages being insincere and not backed by resources. As a result, students did not have a positive perception of the school or the principal.

When asked how the school could do things differently to connect with students, Student 5 states,

> Take pride in your work. [The principal] could look at it and say yeah a lot of my students graduated, but the process that we had to go through to graduate was terrible. It's like you got the number that you wanted, but look what you had to do to get there (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

This statement shows that the student perceived the principal's messages poorly even after graduation. If the message was to get students to graduate, although he did graduate, Student 5 acknowledged the flaws in the process. This truly shows that some students are paying attention to not only what is expected of them, but also how these expectations are being facilitated. If the process is poorly facilitated, then students may have a negative perception of the message and discount the objective to achieve message goals.

When asked if the negative perception of principal's messages impacted post-graduate decisions, students unanimously responded "no" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). Students pride themselves in overcoming obstacles and negativity in school to achieve their own set goals (e.g. college or working). Student 6 states, "I've done everything I needed to do and everything I said I was going to do, with or without that school." (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Using the qualitative research approach, my study sought to analyze the impact of high school principal's messages on students' perceptions of the high school experience. This was done by analyzing the following primary research questions: Do the communication practices from high school principals impact student perceptions of the high school experience? Also, is there a correlation between student perception of the high school experience and post-graduate decision making? The findings from my study indicate that student's perceptions are influenced by principal's messages and school themes; however, there is not a definitive correlation between student perceptions of the high school experience and postgraduate decision-making. This chapter provides an overview of the results that support these findings and applicable theory.

The findings from the principal interviews show that they are the primary decision makers and they do interact with students. Students are familiar with the principals' policies and tactics. Principals develop school messages and themes in collaboration with other stakeholders such as teachers, guidance counselors, community member, parents, and student. Although teachers, guidance counselors and other stakeholders may be involved in message development, the principal is responsible for creating messages that have the interest of all parties and assures that the message is delivered effectively.

There were identifiable differences in the approach that the two principals sampled used in the development of school messages and the parties that were involved in the process. For example, the administrator at School A included student representatives, community advocates, teachers, administrators and parents when

developing school messages and themes, and the Administrator at School B takes a more internal approach with mostly teachers and staff members involved in developing messages.

Despite the variation of parties involved with developing school messages, the only constant is the principal. In the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS), the principal is responsible for the school functioning and makes final approvals on school messages or themes. In addition to analyzing school themes, which take a mass message approach, my study analyzed the personal communication practices from the principal to the students, which takes a one-on-one approach.

Personal communication can occur in the expressive form, which is straightforward and unplanned, the rhetorical form, with the intention to persuade students to achieve message goals, and in the conventional form, which is often static. The findings of my study indicate that no matter if messages are delivered to a larger student body or via personal communication, one-on-one communication, the message development practices of principals and how they behave toward achieving message goals can impact student perception of the high school experience. As leaders of the organization, principals are responsible for messages that are developed and delivered. No matter who is involved in the development process, principals cannot remove themselves from this responsibility.

In support of this argument, student focus group responses indicated that students hold the principal responsible for how school messages are developed and delivered. Students at School B felt that the principal did not develop messages that had their interest in mind and that school themes were often delivered without conviction. As a

result, they had no perception of the message or a negative perception indicating that the message was not sincere. Students at School A held the principal responsible for the messages developed and often looked to principals for personal communication to support the message. This supports the hypothesis of the study, which is if students are motivated with positive messages and higher expectations from the principals, then they will view the high school experience positively and want to perform well in school.

The hypothesis looks at how message design can impact student perception, using O'Keefe's (1988) Theory of Message Design Logics (MDL). There are two interpretations of the hypothesis based on the results. There is a significant difference in student perceptions of the high school from School A and School B. Students at School A had a more positive perception of the high school experience than students at School B; however, one cannot conclude that the perception of the principal's messages adversely impacted students' perception of the high school experience at School B. This is because despite their perception of the principal's messages and school themes, students from School B actually enjoyed their high school experience due to personal experiences such as the fun that they had with friends.

Applying Message Design Logics

According to O'Keefe (1988) MDL has three design logics: expressive, rhetorical, and conventional, which are all components of the study. The findings of the study indicate that expressive messages are most often used in situations of urgency or in one-on-one conversations between principals and students. This supports O'Keefe's (1988) description of the expressive premise where "language is a medium for expressing thoughts and feelings" (1988, p. 84). Through personal communication, both the

principal and students have an outlet to express their thoughts and feelings about a situation. O'Keefe's (1988) description of conventional messages as "a game played cooperatively, according to socially conventional rules and procedures" (p. 86), can be analyzed within a high school environment where conventional messages are used to develop long-standing messages. This is because conventional messages are already established based on known practices and students gain knowledge of the message very early in their academic career. An example of a conventional message would be the message delivered at School B "why not pass the class the first time, when you can pass it free?" This message is static. It does not change. The goals are set and the agenda is apparent, however the method is not effective.

The principal at School B indicated that she used conventional messages much like the example given above 50% of the time; however, students did not have a positive perception of the messages since it was not delivered with conviction. Students view a message delivered with conviction as a message delivered with sincerity and passion. As indicated by Bandura's (1977) SLT, students model themselves after symbols of behavior. This is a form of observational learning. Students observe the level of sincerity the administrator has for a message and determine how they should respond to the message. Conventional messages that are not delivered with that sincerity will not get a strong response from students to achieve message goals.

As the researcher, I had my own experience with the ineffectiveness of conventional messages when trying to solicit students using print fliers. Students did not respond to the fliers. The fliers followed the traditional delivery approach, but they did not capture the students' attention. The principal at School B indicated that she uses fliers

to send messages to students with bulleted points, but as indicated from the focus group responses, students are not receptive to this approach and oftentimes did not read the message. The principal's way of using conventional message is supported by O'Keefe's definition; however the findings show that students were not cooperative to conventional message goals. As a result, students maintained a negative perception of conventional messages or no perception at all.

Looking at the results of the principal interviews, School A does not currently have messages designed using the conventional approach. However, the principal does acknowledge that conventional messages can be beneficial to students and can help support school goals. Based on these findings, one could question the need for conventional messages in today's schools because students at School B indicated that they were not impacted by the message or had a negative perception of the conventional message, and students at School A were not exposed to the message design. However, students from School A still maintained a positive perception of the principal's messages, which according to the principal take a rhetorical approach of using persuasion to communicate message goals.

Depending on which argument of rhetorical message design you support, messages developed using the rhetorical design can either be in response to a situation or formed based on the rhetor's perception of a situation and the choices made when developing the message. In schools, principals can determine the nature of the situation and develop messages based on that perception, which is supportive of O'Keefe and Vatz's argument that the rhetor shapes the situation through message design choices. For example, if a school is persistently dangerous, the principal has the responsibility to

change that environment, this is a situation, but the principal's interpretation of the situation determines the type of messages that will be developed. The principal can see the issue of being a dangerous school as a surface problem and develop messages that seek only to stop students from bringing weapons to school or to stop violence in school. On the other hand, the principal can interpret the issue as being a result of external environmental factors such as gangs and develop messages that curtail these affiliations. These are two different approaches and the messages developed will reflect the interpretation of the situation.

Using O'Keefe's (1988) definition of rhetorical design as 'context' is created by the message…" (p. 87), School A's results support this argument. Because School A is a new school, the principal uses rhetorical messages to gain student support. The example given in the results section was the elimination of class days by academic standing; this was not developed in response to an apparent situation. The principal at School A did not indicate that this message was in response to an event, but she decided to eliminate activities by class to develop a unity theme based on her interpretation of the school's needs. The principal acknowledged challenges in this process because students and parents are use to traditional practices (personal communication, January 27, 2011). That is not to say that the design strategy is unsuccessful. Although students may not like sharing their class days, they understand that this is a school goal and adapt.

Rhetorical messages under O'Keefe's (1988) definition take a more persuasive approach to sending message themes. Although the principal from School A views her messages as taking a rhetorical approach, students from School A view the messages as

taking an expressive approach. This shows that there can be a gap in how the principal views the message design and how students perceive that design.

The principal at School A views her messages using a rhetorical design because she is explaining or preaching the message to students to gain student support up front, but students view this as an expressive approach because of the personal communication involved when the principal is trying to get the message through. This indicates that message design in and of itself is a matter of perception. The negotiation aspect of rhetorical communication can be viewed as personal communication to the sender because the rhetorical communicator seeks to include the stakeholder.

The principal at School A favors the rhetorical design for school messages due to the belief that this message design will increase student support early on. For example, if message goals are to unify classes, the principal would continually reiterate the message to students and outline why the message was important to help gain support. This informed students from School A about the message goals and they strived to achieve such goals.

An interesting aspect of the results from School A is that although students maintained a positive perception of the principal's messages and school themes, this was not the case when the messages were initiated in the senior year. Per the focus group results, students did not perceive messages positively if it was initiated in their senior year. Students were often defensive of messages initially sent in their senior year and were reluctant to pursue message goals. This shows that student perception of principal messages and school themes begins as early as the ninth grade and must be continual throughout the academic career.

Perhaps the principal at School A recognized this as a situation to establish rhetorical communication with students and foster two-way communication early in the high-school career. One cannot assume that this is the principal's strategy, but the findings indicate that current use of two-way, rhetorical communication, as defined by the principal, had a positive impact on student perception of school messages and the high school experience.

Despite their perception of the messages sent in their senior year, students at School A remembered the principal's messages and school themes. Students remembered their personal conversations with the principal and had an overall positive perception of the high school experience. Students from School A favored the expressive approach and personal communication between them and the principal and/or staff members. Through expressive communication, students felt like the principal cared.

This is contradictory to O'Keefe's (1988) view of expressive messages that says, "The conception of message effects is exceedingly primitive and unelaborated" (p. 84). The statement that expressive messages are primitive and unelaborated is subjective. In situations of safety or personal communication with students, focus group responses from School A show that the expressive messages had a long-term impact on student perception of the message. This may indicate that expressive messages, followed by commitment and follow-up, can also have a long-term impact on receivers.

Students from School B also favored an expressive approach for the same reason as students from School A. Through an expressive design, students felt like the principal cared, but they also felt that the expressive messages should be supported by conviction and follow-up from the principal and staff. Students from school B expressed less of an

interest in conventional messages indicating their belief that conventional messages are said without meaning or conviction. Based on focus group responses, students at School B did not take conventional messages seriously. This supports the argument that conventional messages must be updated to reflect both student interest and the changing student body.

The findings indicate that when students are involved in message development and have the opportunity to provide feedback on messages, they are most likely to strive to achieve message goals and maintain a positive perception of the high school experience. In support of this statement, students from School A had both formal and informal outlets to provide feedback to the principal and maintained a positive perception of both processes. This supports Grunig and Hunt's two-way communication model wherein "organizations listen to their stakeholders but use the information thus obtained to tailor their communication to allay the concerns of stakeholders…" (Roper, 2005, p. 69). In other words, through two-way communication, organizations listen to their stakeholders and tailor messages to address stakeholder concerns and/or interest.

This is mostly apparent at School A where the principal, using feedback from the SGA and advisory councils, develops school messages that include student's interests as well as the interest of the school, parents, and community partners. Students also maintained a positive perception when they saw their input reflected in school messages and/or themes.

The opposite is true when students are not actively involved in message development and school themes. Based on focus group responses, students at School B did not feel as confident about their feedback opportunities. They did acknowledge

situations where their feedback was incorporated, but expressed that SGA efforts have

significantly reduced due to the lack of student interest. The research findings are unable

to determine if the weakened SGA had a negative impact on student perception of the

high school experience. Overall, the focus group results from School B indicate that

students who had a negative perception of the high school experience and principal

messages also had a negative perception of the principal.

As stated by Halawah (2005) "although school success is influenced by many

people, school principals remain one of the most important factors in this success" (p.

334). Looking at success as effective communication between the principal and the

student, Halawah's statement is supported because students' responses in my study show

that they have a more positive perception of the school and principal messages when they

view the principal positively. However, a negative perception of the principal or school

messages, as identified in School B, does not always equal a negative perception of the

high school experience. Students from School B maintained a positive perception of the

high school experience based on their social life with friends, which is consistent with the

self-regulation factor of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT).

Applying Social Learning Theory

In addition to analyzing how messages are designed by the principal, this thesis

looks at students perception of the messages based on Bandura's (1977) social learning

theory. Bandura's (1977) SLT describes four factors that are components of observational

learning: attention, retention, motor reproduction and motivation.

In order to develop a perception, students must care enough to pay attention to the

message. The results indicate that students do not pay attention to messages delivered

without sincerity. Additionally, if the message does not gain student interest, students rarely pay attention to the message content. Students who did not pay attention to the message felt either the message was pointless or it simply did not apply to them. Students who do not pay attention to a message may not be aware of the principles that support the message and therefore will not be able to achieve message goals. This is apparent at School B, when the principal said, "we cannot go back and create a new start, but we can make sure to have a successful ending" (personal communication, February 8, 2011). This message was geared to foster continual relationships with students, but students did not understand the principle of the message because it did not capture their attention. As a result, students did not achieve the message goals because they were not aware that such opportunities existed.

In support of this statement, the principal at School A acknowledged the importance of obtaining student interest in messages in school stating that "verbal communication works if there is a high interest" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). This indicates that with topics of high interest to students, communication can be easier. Obtaining student interest in message development helps gain student attention to the message and increases positive feedback from students. An example that supports this statement is when Student 3 from School B states that his father motivated him to graduate by saying, "you do not want to graduate with your younger brothers" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This hit home for the student more than a generic message or theme that states, "pass the class the first time", as indicated by the principal at School B.

The second factor of Bandura's SLT is retention. Students that pay attention to the message must also retain the message content in order to achieve message goals. Students who did not retain the message had either no perception at all or a negative perception of the message when reminded of the message content. Based on student responses, the most common reason why a school message was not retained was that the principal did not show commitment or follow through with message goals. For example, if the message was to pass the class the first time, students did not retain the message if it was not supported by resources such as coach class or if teachers did not show the same commitment to help them achieve message goals. Students that had a negative perception of principal's messages often had a negative perception of the experience when they did try to achieve message goals.

In support of this argument, School B's principal indicated that a message sent to students is "why not pass the class the first time when it's given to you for free" (personal communication, February 8, 2011); however, Student 4 at School B indicated that when he tried to make up an assignment that the teacher told him it was too late because "it's better to turn an assignment in early than to turn it in on time" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). There is a gap between the principal's message goals and what the student experienced when trying to achieve the goal because the message was not supported by the staff member. This supports Halawah's (2005) statement that "ideally principals should be able to create consensus among staff on rules and their enforcement" (p. 335). The same should apply to messages. Through effective communication practices, the principal at School B should be able to create consensus among the staff to achieve message goals.

Due to the lack of consensus between the principal and the staff member on how to achieve the message goal of helping the student pass the class, Student 4 maintained a negative perception of the message, and staff and felt that his efforts were useless (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This example applies to the observational learning aspect of SLT. Of SLT, Grusec (1992) argues, "individuals mentally represent their environments and themselves in terms of certain crucial classes of cognitions that include response-outcome expectancies, perceptions of self-efficacy, and standards for evaluative self-reactions" (p. 781). That is to say, that individual responses are based on expectations, desired results, and their own reaction to the experience, as shows in the example.

In the example given by Student 4, the expectations were lowered based on evaluation of the experience, which guided the immediate reaction and future behavior. Overall this student maintained a negative perception of the high school experience stating, "I wouldn't recommend it because "you won't learn anything" (personal communication, February 26, 2011). This shows that without consistency within the system, the principal's message may lose credibility.

The focus group results from School B indicate that students held the principal responsible for teachers who did not support school messages and thought that the principal's behavior toward the message, and her inability to effectively communicate with students, set the example for teachers to act similarly. The responsibility of principals to set the tone for behavior towards school messages and themes is one of the driving factors of this thesis. Students communicate with multiple people while in school (i.e. teachers, guidance counselors, etc.), but the principal is the main influence on all

parties involved. He or she determines the organization of the school and sets the

standards especially in Baltimore City, where principals have primary control over the

school as stated in Chapter I. If students observe that the principal does not provide a

good example for teachers on how to communicate school themes, they may hold the

principal responsible for the poor communication within the school. Student 5 at School

B supports this comment when he said that the principal "is only as good as her worst

teacher" (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

       Contrarily to School B, students at School A indicated that school messages and

themes were reinforced by the principal and her staff. This helped students retain the

message and they expressed a positive perception of the message. For example, at School

A, students maintain a positive perception of the professionalism theme. They retained

the message goal to dress and act as a professional because they had a personal interest.

These students desired to work in the industry and understood that appropriate dress is a

career requirement. Since they retained the message, students could apply the message

goals to their interpersonal skills and their actions outside of school. This reinforces

Bandura's (1977) SLT theory because it states, "through verbal and imagined symbols,

people process and preserve experiences in representational forms that serve as guides for

future behavior" (p. 13). For School A, the symbol was the constant reinforcement of

professional dress and uniforms, which guided student behavior while in school and after

graduation.

       Bandura (1977) argues in the third component of SLT, motivation, that "social

learning theory distinguishes between acquisition and performance because people do not

enact upon everything that they learn" (p. 28). Bandura's argument runs counter to the

results of this thesis. Self-motivation plays an important role in student perception as do influences from the principals, teachers, and/or parents. Looking at the focus groups for example, most students from School A had a positive perception of the high school experience and are motivated to succeed based on these experiences, which supports the hypothesis of my study: if students are motivated with a positive message and higher expectations from their school principals, then they will view their school experience more positively and want to perform well in school. However, there are students who may not feel encouraged despite the principal's efforts, which is not reflected in my study. The number of students in this category is unknown, but it may be interesting to gather feedback from these students on their perception and what motivated them to respond differently.

The fourth component of SLT is motor reproduction. Motor reproduction, according to Bandura "involves converting symbolic representations into appropriate actions" (Bandura, 1977, p. 27). The findings from School A support this argument. Students from School A took the symbols of professionalism and helping others through their school messages, principal and staff support, and internship opportunities to reproduce the behavior and achieve school goals. One could argue that students from School B used similar symbols to mold their actions towards school messages and themes. For example, students from School B argued that neither the principal nor the staff acted in a way to support the school messages or themes. The students felt that the principal was not sincere in her message goals; as a result, they did not care about achieving message goals. The lack of sincerity perceived by the students can be viewed

as a symbol of behavior from the principal and staff, which was then replicated by students.

Message type was one component of my study. Findings support that message type had a significant impact on student perception; however, it does not necessarily influence postgraduate decisions. It was implied in Chapter I that student's perceptions of principal messages and the high school experience could have postgraduate implications on societal contributions, high school dropout rates and college admissions. This research was only able to identify a correlation between message perception and college admission. Students who participated in the focus group discussions were not high school dropouts nor did they identify a desire to drop out due to a negative or positive experience perception of the high school experience. Contrarily, students who had a negative experience stayed in school and completed the requirements.

As stated in Chapter IV, students continued to achieve personal and professional goals post graduation despite their perception of the high school experience. The correlation of perceptional influence on postgraduate decisions is identifiable for college admissions because some of the students' responses from School A acknowledge that the principal's messages and school themes had a positive influence on their perception of the high school experience and influenced them to attend a college that is similar in size (i.e. a small school), or that offers similar curriculum as they had in high school.

Message delivery, the other component analyzed in this thesis, may also have an influence on student perceptions of principal messages and school themes due to the changing and immediate demand for information. The next section explores message

delivery media based on the principals' feedback, and how students felt about the delivery method, to determine if delivery had an impact on student perception.

Message Delivery

Message delivery is very important when analyzing how students perceive principal messages because as the results show, students have expectations of how they receive messages. In order for a message to reach the point where students are responsive and apply the message goals, the delivery medium should be appropriate to the audience. As stated in the literature review, an effective message delivered using an ineffective media can create message failure.

In addition to the primary research question, exploratory questions for my study analyzed the impact of principal's messages delivered via the Internet has on student perceptions. The exploratory questions proposed in Chapter I are: How effective are principal's messages delivered using the Internet? Does communication of messages to students using the Internet encourage student feedback? Are students more likely to respond and/or retain messages sent using the Internet? My study does not draw distinct conclusions to answer these questions because the Internet was not used as a primary communication tool, but it does provide insight for future development on using the Internet to send school messages and themes.

For the first question how effective are principal's messages delivered using the Internet, currently the school websites serve as static information pages. The principal at School A indicated that parents can email teachers through an external link, but there is no information on opportunities for students to engage in two-way communication using the school's website. There is also lack of information on how successful parents are

when trying to communicate with teachers using the external email link. Two-way communication is an outlet for feedback, which students value.

The second exploratory question looks at opportunities for students to provide feedback using the Internet. Student feedback opportunities are not evident in the current use of the schools' website. However, students did express an interest in using the website as a communication tool. Based on the interviews and focus group responses, there is no indication that the school websites were promoted as a communication tool to students. Both students and principals acknowledged that there is a lot of room for development of the website to both support other delivery media and to provide two-way communication outlets.

Since the Internet is not the primary communication tool for the schools, information could not be gathered to support the third exploratory question, which asks if students are most likely to respond to or retain school messages sent via the Internet. The findings indicate that students will at least pay attention to the messages sent via the Internet due to their interest in receiving messages using this media. Students also expressed an interest in receiving messages via social networking sites like Facebook, but the results do not provide support as to whether they will actually retain and apply the message. Both the school websites and the social networking pages create an opportunity to communicate school messages and themes using new media; however, there are challenges, such as security concerns.

Overall responses from student focus groups are that students prefer verbal messages via one-to-one communication with the principal. Students did not specify how often this is needed to be done, but stress the importance of reinforcement and follow-up

on verbal messages. Students at both schools expressed interest in a plan to achieve success and follow-up conversations to make sure that they are on the right path. Students valued personal communication with principals and staff because they were seen as an individual rather than as a member of a larger student body. Some students viewed personal communication as more valuable than mass messages. In support of that statement, Student 5 from School B stated, "they just need to get rid of the whole message thing and just talk to people" (personal communication, February 26, 2011).

Although, students value personal communication, this research does not imply that the principal must talk with each student individually and follow-up with each student periodically, as that can be time consuming. However, practices similar to the one at School A where schools have individual student meetings and class meetings may help to gather feedback and build relationships. Students from School A appreciated the meetings and the principal remained updated. Of note, is that the principal is not the only one supporting these meetings. Oftentimes, students interact with staff and guidance counselors and feedback is communicated to the principal. This shows consistency within the school and widespread support for the message. It also gives personal attention to every student so that no one feels left out.

When asked about print delivery mediums, students at School B did not have a perception of the message because oftentimes they did not read print correspondence. Students at School A recognized that print correspondence came via certified mail, but did not have any feedback on the content. This implies that print correspondence do not have an impact on student perception and may not be the most effective way to communicate with high school students. The principal at School B favored print

correspondence by use of newsletters, notices sent home and fliers. However, if the message on print correspondence is not read by the students, then these efforts are a waste of resources and students will not identify with message goals.

Students viewed messages sent by phone as being directed to their parents. Most often students perceived these messages negatively because a call home often meant that the student is in trouble. Students did express that it would be better if the principal called to report good behavior or accomplishments instead of only calling to report bad behavior. Students felt this was not a good representation of their overall conduct. Principals at both schools acknowledge that phone calls home are mostly for parents and are often an automated message to report attendance. Based on the findings of the focus groups, phone calls home either resulted in a negative perception of the principal's message or did not impact student perception at all. This brings into question the effectiveness of phone calls, but if the main use is for parents, then student's perception may not be relevant.

Aside from the Internet, students mentioned that messages sent via text messages have a greater impact because these come directly to them in real time. This also gives students the opportunity to respond to school messages. In order to utilize text messages schools must have the student's cell phone number. There are limitations to this method since text messages may cost depending on the cell phone carrier. Aside from text, students mentioned email as another way to communicate, but email is not preferable, as they do not check email as often as they check text messages or social networking sites.

The principal at School A acknowledges limitations with email due to student learning curves stating, "Typically, which is very ironic, we only have a few students

who email regularly. We are usually teaching them how to email so they can get in touch

with teachers" (personal communication, January 27, 2011). Many students in urban

school districts do not have computers and can only access a computer at school or in a

public space. Based on the principal responses one could argue that email messages do

not have a significant impact on student perception of principal's messages because of

student learning curves and accessibility limitations.

Although student responses show they prefer electronic communication (e.g.

Internet, text, and email), if the student does not know how to use email, then the

message will not be effective and the student may develop a negative perception of the

message or no perception at all. Similar to print messages, email messages must be

updated constantly and sent in a timely manner or these may become old and not affect

student perception. Email also poses the risk of having messages go directly to junk mail

or being overlooked if the recipient does not check their mailbox often.

Overall students saw a lot of opportunity in communicating messages

electronically via the Internet, text, or email. Students expressed no perception of the

current school's website. Based on the focus group findings, one can conclude that

current communication via the school's website does not have a significant impact on

students' perception of the high school experience. Resources and other limitations may

have an impact on how students perceive the current communication via the Internet, and

if so, this information should be verbally communicated with students to avoid lack of

support for the school's website.

When asked about how the message delivery media affected their perception of

the high school experience, students were not impacted by the delivery as much as they

were impacted by the message type. Students' perception of the high school experience was impacted by what was being said more so than the media was used.

Implications for practice

My study looks at both principal's message design and how students perceive those messages upon or nearing graduation. The findings show apparent gaps between what the principal thought of the message design and goals and how students perceived the message. One way to bridge this gap is for principals to communicate with students changes in the current plan and limitations to school goals.

For example, if the school vows to achieve a tangible goal during recruitment efforts, but is unable to do so due to administrative or financial setbacks, this should be communicated with the students. Otherwise the students may feel misled and lose trust in the principal's credibility. It is understandable that the principal will not communicate every business process or limitation with the students, but highlighting areas that may interest the student, such as college preparation, may help students feel informed of the process.

Another recommendation is creating all-inclusive messages. The findings from my study indicate that students may feel isolated from school messages that appear to target one audience based on academic performance. This can lead to negative perceptions and the lack of development in achieving message goals. This shows that sending messages to one part of the student body may only further remove the other students from message goals, and negatively affect student perception.

This does not imply that a negative perception cannot be changed later in the student's academic career, but there are obstacles in forming relationships that must be

overcome such as building trust from the student and forming principal credibility. To curtail these perceptions it is recommended that principals develop messages that are representative of the entire student population. If the message is to increase grades, the content should address the interest of students who are academically successful, as well as those who are not.

Consistency within an organization to support message goals is another implication for practice. Students identified examples of when a school message or theme was not consistent from the principal to the teacher, which shows lack of support. To help curtail message inconsistency within the school, it is important that principals obtain support of school messages and themes from their staff and periodically readdress school goals as a standard practice.

In addition to building consistency among staff to support message goals, one cannot overstate the importance of student feedback, before, during and after enrollment. Through student feedback, principals can design messages that help students prior to enrollment, such as how to avoid negative influences, during enrollment, such as how to increase grades, and after graduation, such as how to maintain continual relationships. No matter the content, the message is only strong when it includes the concerns and interest of the students. Students know what they want to hear, principals can only assume, but together they can build strong messages that lead to strong working relationships.

Future research

As with any study, there are limitations to my study that require additional research. One area of additional research is whether student perceptions of the principal's messages and high school experience change after being out of school for longer than one

to two years. One can argue that students who recently graduated or are currently attending high school have not had enough time away from that environment to form new perceptions, and/or to fully understand the messages that were sent while in school. However, after experiencing different challenges and successes in life, students may find that the messages they received in school were beneficial and develop a more positive perception of the experience.

In addition to reviewing differences in student perception of the high school experience several years after graduation, one could also research students who excel despite the overall negative perception of the school or declined despite the overall positive perception of the school. This information can be useful to develop messages that bridge the gap between student perceptions and to factor in self-regulatory behavior that may affect those perceptions.

The influence of others involved in the school is also a limitation to the study. The focus group responses indicated that teachers and staff members (i.e. guidance counselors) had an important impact on student perception of school messages and themes. Students in both focus groups acknowledged at least one teacher or guidance counselor with whom they had a personal relationship that helped changed their perception of the school messages. On the contrary, if students do not feel that support from other staff members within the school, they may feel lost and leave with an overall negative perception of the high school experience. This was a limitation to the study because teachers and staff were not included based on the premise that principals set the school culture. However, the research shows that supporting staff can change the perception of student.

Additional research on the consistency of messages between schools in the same system may further expand upon the finding of my study. It was apparent in the principal responses that some messages were not consistent between schools, such as messages that support college preparation. The principal at School A advised that her messages let students know that they have the "choice" to attend college. Students from School A were familiar with this message and identified with the message goal. On the other hand, the principal at School B did not focus on this as a school message and students from School B did not identify with the choice of attending college post graduation.

Analyzing message consistency between schools is important because although school priorities may differ depending on the situation presented at the school, the main priority is to prepare students for the next level post graduation. This does not have to be college, but it should include preparation for success. Exploring message consistency between schools may help when developing systematic goals.

Another area of additional research is the use of social networking and technology to communicate school themes and messages. At the time this thesis was conducted, the school websites were still developing and not used as a primary communication tool. The same applies for social networking sites. The schools did not have a formal social networking page and were not using social networking sites to support school messages and or themes due to resource and security limitations.

While students value personal communication, they favored using the school website and social networking sites to receive school messages. It would be interesting to see how students perceive messages on their college web pages in order to build better websites at the high school level.

As for social networking sites, both students and principals mentioned Facebook as a valuable resource for communicating messages, along with text messages and emails. Students indicated that they spend most of their time on Facebook or other social networking sites (i.e. MySpace and Twitter). Students are familiar with how to send and receive messages using Facebook groups and often respond to messages sent via this media.

School websites and social networking pages also create opportunities for two-way communication. Grunig and Hunt described two-way communication as a win-win zone for achieving message goals. In other words, both the sender and the receiver can benefit from two-way communication practices. Use of the Internet and social networking can create a win-win zone for both the principals and students because school messages are sent out faster using a media that most students prefer and students have the opportunity to provide feedback in their comfort zone . There are potential gaps in the principal-to-student relationship, and some students may feel uncomfortable expressing themselves through personal communication.

The Internet creates a filter for students who may feel less comfortable with personal communication, but more comfortable expressing themselves online. The principal at School A acknowledged that colleges use the Internet and social networks to communicate messages. Using social networks as a communication tool for high school has a lot of potential because both the students and principals acknowledge that students spend a large amount of their time communicating on sites such as Facebook.

In support of this argument, student responses to participate in the focus groups were 100% successful using Facebook, a social networking site. Although three

solicitation method were used (i.e. print, email, and social networking), students were most responsive to Facebook messages. Students did not respond to email solicitations to participate in the study. Students did inquire about the fliers, but did not respond to follow-up phone calls and emails. For this research study, Facebook proved to be the most effective when communicating because it created immediate two-way communication opportunities.

The use of social networking sites is a limitation to the study due to technology limitations within the schools. Although it is mandatory that each school have a website, there are restrictions to accessing Facebook or other social networking sites within the school. Additional research can explore the pros and cons of using this as a formal communication tool in schools.

Limitation to the study

The sample size is a limitation of my study. As indicated in Chapter III, having a smaller sample provided a personable approach for the students. Students felt comfortable with their environment and were very forthcoming in their responses. However, the small sample size does not allow for much variation in student responses especially between graduating classes. The smaller sample size is an identifier of how challenging it may be to reach this target audience of young adults ages 18-22. This was indicated through the solicitation efforts that were involved in trying to recruit the students. I contacted about 160 students to inform them of the study. Of the 160 students, about 24 confirmed and 10 actually showed up. This could be related to the lack of interest in the subject matter. It is a challenging area to capture student's interest about the subject matter outside of school.

One way to approach this limitation is by sampling students in a controlled classroom environment such as the high school or a college class. By doing this, you are likely to get a larger sample, but the sample will not be as diverse. This sample will only consist of students who attend college are in high school. Whereas my sample covers a diverse population of students who attend school, work, and those who are not doing anything post graduation. Furthermore, if the sample is done in a classroom, students may not feel comfortable with the environment and may not be as candid in their responses. Outside of the qualitative research approach used in my study, other methodology could be used to obtain a larger sample such as surveys or telephone interviews.

Potential bias of the study

A potential bias of my study is that School A had a more diverse representation of classes from 2009-2011, which highlighted changes within the communication process. All of the participants from School B were 2010 graduates with one participant being a 2011 senior. As a result, transitions at School B were not effectively represented. In addition, the 2009 graduate from School A was a minority in the focus group and there was no other representative from her class to counter her feedback. Obtaining a larger sample of students from various different classes over a longer period could resolve this issue.

Contribution to communication studies

This thesis contributes to communication studies because it provides insight on how messages are perceived in a systematic environment such as schools and the impact of that perception on human behavior. Such findings can be used for communication

practices in schools, organizations, and government to help industry leaders view communication as a complex, yet structured, process that is constantly changing.

In systems like school, messages continually change with the audience. As a result, formal communication plans are needed to measure message success and failure. In schools, this research helps to highlight the importance of student involvement in message development, as well as involvement from parents, guidance counselors, staff members and members of the community. Each representative may have a different approach that can help build stronger school messages.

This research also provides insight into opportunities to move forward with message delivery in the Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) using the Internet. As stated in the introduction, such enhancements may support student retention efforts and enhance recruitment efforts when using the school's website and social networking sites as a primary communication tool.

In closing, this thesis shows the importance of consistency in systems by highlighting that messages can break down if not supported by every component of the organization. This breakdown can have residual effects on high school students who are developing into young men and women. One cannot provide an absolute resolution to communication pitfalls, but building from feedback and measuring perceptions is a proactive way to address ongoing communication needs and build effective messages that empower students.

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Principal Interview Questions

I.   General identifying information

1.) Gender

   a. Male

   b. Female

2.) Age

   a. 25-35

   b.   36-45

   c. 46-55

   d. 56 and above

3.) Level of education

   a. Bachelor's degree

   b. Master's degree

   c. Ph.D

   d. J.D.

   e. Other

4.) Number of years as a principal

   a. Less than one

   b. 1-5

   c. 6-10

   d. 11-15

   e. 15 or more

5. Number of years as a principal at this school

      a. Less than one

      b. 1-5

      c. 6-10

      d. 11-15

      e. 15 or more

II.   Message Development

This thesis focuses in part on the development of messages sent from principals to students. It is believed that there are several factors that go into the development of principal's messages to students. The next few questions are geared to provide insight into that development process.

1. Name two school themes or messages sent to students on a regular basis in the 2009-2010 school years?

2. How often are these messages/themes communicated to students and why are they important?

3. What are the message goals and how are these goals developed?

4. When developing school messages and/or school themes what factors are included?

5. When developing school messages and/or school themes, how much input do you obtain from students and how is the information gathered?

6. When developing school messages and/or school themes do you include parental feedback and/or concerns?

III. Message Type

There are three types of messages discussed in this thesis, they are as follows: expressive, conventional, and rhetorical. Expressive messages are generally impromptu, unplanned and direct. Conventional messages are planned out and traditional. Rhetorical messages are persuasive and compromising. The following questions are geared to identify the types of messages used when communication occurs between principals and students.

1. How often are your messages to students in response to an immediate situation vs. planned communication?

2. How often do you incorporate traditional values and beliefs of the school in your messages and what are they? Explain.

3. How often do you try to persuade students toward achieving a certain goal in your messages?

4. How often to you provide mostly informative messages to students and what determines the method?

5. Provide examples of when it is more appropriate to use expressive messages vs. conventional and rhetorical messages to students and why?

6. Which message type (expressive, conventional, rhetorical) do you think students are most receptive towards and why?

IV. Message Delivery

This thesis will also focus on message delivery in order to determine if there is a link between message delivery and its retention among students. Some examples of delivery mediums are electronic (i.e. school website, school social networking page,

text), verbal (i.e. school announcements, assemblies, class/student meetings), and/or print (school mail, newsletter, etc.)

1. Which delivery method do you prefer and why?

2. Which delivery method do you think is most effective for present day students and why?

3. How has this changed from past message delivery strategies?

4. Does your school website provide opportunities for message delivery to students?

5. If so, how often do you deliver school messages electronically (i.e. using the school's website)?

6. If school messages are currently communicated using the Internet, how often do students respond to these messages and via what channels (e.g. email, response box, etc.)?

7. If school messages are not communicated using the Internet, how do you suggest that the website can be improved to incorporate messages and themes sent to students?

8. If the school does not use the Internet to deliver school messages/themes, do students have opportunities to provide feedback on messages delivered verbally or in print? Explain.

9. If the school messages/themes are not currently delivered via the Internet, what suggestions do you have for future message development using the Internet (e.g. school website, social networking pages, etc)?

10. Which media do you think provides the best opportunity for student feedback of messages and why?

11. How do you measure the success or failure of messages delivered across various media?

Appendix B

Student Focus Group Questions

1. Gender (male/female)

2. Age
    a. 18-21
    b. 22-25

3. Currently enrolled and attending college (yes/no)

4. If you are not attending college, please state your current post graduate activity
    a. Working full-time
    b. Working part-time
    c. Attending trade school
    d. Unemployed
    e. Prefer not to answer

5. Name two high school themes/messages that you remember and what factors made you remember them (e.g. message content, message delivery)?

6. Reflecting back on your high school selection, how influential was the school's messages and/or reputation on your school choice? Explain.

7. Once enrolled in the school, did you maintain the same perception of the school as you had prior to enrollment?

8. How often did principals communicate school themes to your class and how did these messages make you feel? (Example: enthused, respected, threatened, motivated, etc.).

9. Did your parent(s) influence your perception of school themes and/or principal's messages? Explain.

10. What were some of the ways that school themes were communicated and how effective do you think this was?

    a. Print
    b. Electronically (email or Intranet website)
    c. Text
    d. Assemblies or in person

11. If your high school used the Internet to communicate messages, did you have the option to provide feedback to messages and/or electronically suggest ideas that were included in message themes? Explain.

12. If your school did not use the Internet to communicate messages, how often were you given the opportunity to provide insight or feedback on school messages and what was the approach? (e.g. student/teacher conferences, etc.) How effective do you think this approach was vs. the Internet?

13. If asked to contribute to school message development or provide feedback, did you see you suggestions implemented in the messages?

14. Do you think the messages and themes sent from principals were believable and achievable? For example did the principal seem to believe in the message and outline a way to achieve message goals?

    a. If yes, how did you achieve message goals
    b. If no, how could this have been achieved

15. Were you more receptive to messages sent from the principal or vice principal? Explain.

16. Do you feel that the messages/themes communicated from the principals was expressive (straight from the heart), conventional, (planned and organized following a formal approach), or rhetorical, (geared to persuade students to achieve a goal). Explain

17. Did school messages/themes motivate you to achieve academic or personal goals? Explain.

18. If so, how influential do you think school themes were on your post graduate choices? Explain.

19. Focusing only on messages that were sent from the principals and your perception of those messages, what is your overall perception of your high school experience?

20. What are some recommendations for future message development and deliver that you would suggest for your high school and why?

Appendix C

Focus Group- Recruitment poster

Attention: Freshman

Are you a class of 2010 graduate from W.E.B. Dubois High School or Vivian T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy?

Would you like to participate in a focus group discussion about your perception of your high school principal's messages and school themes?

If so, you can receive $10 and be entered into a raffle drawing for a chance to win a $25 cash prize for your participation.

By participating in a confidential 60-minute focus group study with your high school classmates, you will have the opportunity to provide feedback on school messages and themes and how they influenced your perception of high school. The data collected from this focus group will also be used to explore if your perceptions of school principal messages to measure message success and/or failure. Information obtained from this focus group will be used in the completion of a Master's Thesis at Towson University and to add to communications research.

Focus group sessions:

Where:
- **Towson University Media Center, RM 203**

When:
- **W.E.B Dubois Students – Saturday, February 26, 2011 at 12:00 p.m.**
- **Vivian T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy Students-Saturday, February 26, 2011 at 2:00 p.m.**

If interested, please email Danielle Lawrence at **dlawre2@students.towson.edu** or call at 410-925-0873, to inquire about participation. Each participant must be at least 18-years-old and sign an informed consent form. Personal information will not be shared with anyone outside the research project.

This study has been reviewed by the Towson University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants.

If you have any questions or problems in connection to this study, please contact Danielle Lawrence, the principal researcher, at 410-925-0873 or via email at **dlawre2@students.towson.edu**; Prof. Garry Bolan, research advisor, at 410-704-4657 or via email at **gbolan@towson.edu**; or Dr. Deborah Gartland, Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants office at 410-704-2236. This project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board for the protection of all human participants.

     I, _____, affirm that I have read and understood the above statement and all of my questions were answered.

Date: _____

Signature: _____

Witness: _____

Appendix E

Focus Group- Email/Social Networking Announcement

To: 2010 Graduates of W.E.B. Dubois and Vivian T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy
From: Danielle Lawrence

Subject: Thesis Research Study/ Free $10 Panera Bread gift card incentive.

Dear Student:

You are invited to receive $10 and a chance to win a $25 raffle prize for your participation in a focus group session at Towson University. This focus group discussion is for the partial completion of a communications management graduate student's thesis project at Towson University. The focus group session will be held on 02/26/2011 at Towson University Media Center, RM 203.

The focus group sessions will consist of participants from your 2010 high school graduating class. This research project intends to explore student perceptions of their high school principal's messages and high school themes to measure message success and/or failure for future message development and to add to communications research. You do not have to be currently enrolled in college to participate in this study.

Focus group sessions:

Where:
- **Towson University Media Center, RM 203**

When:
- **W.E.B Dubois Students- Saturday, February 26, 2011 at 12:00 p.m.**
- **Vivian T. Thomas Medical Arts Academy Students- Saturday, February 26, 2011 at 2:00 p.m.**

Please contact Danielle Lawrence at dlawre2@students.towson.edu, or call at 410-925-0873, to inquire about participation in the focus group. Each participant must be at least 18-years and sign an informed consent form. Personal information will not be shared with anyone outside the research project. **This study has been reviewed by the Towson University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants.**

Sincerely,

Danielle Lawrence

Danielle Lawrence
Communications Management Graduate Student, Towson University

Appendix F

Informed Consent Form to participate in the study entitled

"Analyzing the impact of high school principal messages on student perceptions of the high school experience"

Danielle Lawrence, a communications management graduate student at Towson University, is conducting the study entitled "**Analyzing the impact of high school principal messages on student perceptions of the high school experience**". The purpose of the study is to analyze the impact of student perceptions of high school principal's messages and school themes and its impact on student perception of the high school experience. Exploratory research will observe trends from both the interview responses from principals and focus group responses from students to measure message success or failure for additional development in communications research.

You will participate in a 60-minute face-to-face interview. During the interview you will be asked to discuss messages and/or themes sent in school, how these messages were developed and delivered, and student input, if any.

Participation in this study is voluntary, and all information will remain strictly confidential. Although descriptions and findings may be published, your name will not be used at any time. You have the option to discontinue participation in the interview at any time without prejudice. You may experience minimal psychological risk discussing your past experiences; however, the benefit of gathering your feedback for future communication development outweighs the risk. Should you wish to discontinue participation even after the interview is over, you may do so at any time without penalty by contacting Danielle Lawrence, the principal researcher, at 410-925-0873 or via email at dlawre2@towson.edu.

If you have any questions or problems in connection to this study, please contact Danielle Lawrence, the principal researcher, at 410-925-0873 or via email at dlawre2@students.towson.edu; Prof. Garry Bolan, research advisor, at 410-704-4657 or via email at gbolan@towson.edu; or Dr. Deborah Gartland, Chair of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants office at 410-704-2236. This project has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board for the protection of human participants at Towson University.

I, _____, affirm that I have read and understood the above statement and all of my questions were answered.

Date: _____

Signature: _____
Witness: _____

Appendix G

Table 1[1]

Student Focus Group Roster

Student Number	School A	School B
1	Yes	No
2	Yes	Yes
3	Yes	Yes
4	No	Yes
5	Yes	Yes
6	Yes	Yes

---

[1] The student number in attendance is identified by putting Yes or No in the table. If the school did not have a student with the assigned number, the indicator on the chart is No. If the student did have a number on the assigned chart, the indicator is Yes.

Appendix H

Table 2

Theme Type by School

Theme	Case I/ School A	Case II/ School B
Professionalism	Yes	No
Preparing students for careers or post secondary education theme	Yes	No
Relationship building	No	Yes
Student feedback theme	Yes	Yes
Personal communication theme	Yes	No
Message type theme	Yes	Yes
Message delivery theme	Yes	Yes
Parental influences theme	Yes	Yes
Motivational theme	Yes	Yes
School choice theme	Yes	No
Postgraduate perceptions theme	Yes	Yes

Appendix I

TOWSON
UNIVERSITY

Date: 1/12/2011

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

TO: Danielle   Lawrence   **DEPT:**   MCCS

PROJECT TITLE: *Analyzing the impact of high school administrator's messages on student perceptions of the high school experience*

SPONSORING AGENCY:

APPROVAL NUMBER: 11-A049

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Participants has approved the project described above. Approval was based on the descriptive material and procedures you submitted for review. Should any changes be made in your procedures, or if you should encounter any new risks, reactions, injuries, or deaths of persons as participants, you must notify the Board.

A consent form: [√] is   [   ] is not   required of each participant

Assent: [   ] is   [   ] is not   required of each participant

Please use copies of any enclosed consent forms and recruitment flyers, approved by the IRB for your study, in lieu of the unstamped versions.
This protocol was first approved on: 12-Jan-2011
This research will be reviewed every year from the date of first approval.

Deborah Gartland
Deborah Gartland, Chair
Towson University Institutional Review Board

REFERENCES

Albrechet,T., & Goldsmith, D. (1993). The impact of supportive communication networks on test anxiety and performance. *Communication Education,* (42), 142-157. Retrieved April 3, 2010, from Ebscohost database.

Albrecht, T., & Peterson, L. (1996). Message design logic, social support, and mixed-status relationships. *Western Journal of Communication,* 60 (4), 291-309. Retrieved November 29, 2010, from Ebscohost database.

Ames, C. (1992). Classrooms: Goals, structures, and student motivation. *Journal of Educational Psychology,* 84(2), 261-271. Retrieved November 29, 2010 from Ebscohost database.

Ares, N., Buendia, E., Juarez, B.G., & Peercy, M. (2004). The geographies of difference: the production of the east side, west side, and central city school. *American Educational Research Journal,* 41(4), *833-863*. doi. 10.3102/00028312041004833.

Baltimore city public school system. (2009-10). *Board decision, state of our high schools, fast fact sheet*. Baltimore, MD. Retrieved December 1, 2010 from www.baltimorecityschools.org.

Bandura, A. (1977). *Social learning theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.

Baskin, O., Heiman, S.T., Lattimore, D., Toth, E.L., & Van Lueven, J.K. (2004). Models of public relations. Public Relations. The profession and the practice. (pp. 58-59). New York, NY: Mcgraw Hill.

Bitzer, L.F. (1968). The rhetorical situation. *Philosophy & Rhetoric,* 1 (1). 1-14. Retrieved April 6, 2011, from www.eric.ed.gov.

Cameron, G.T., & McCollum, T. (1993). Competing corporate cultures: a multi-method, cultural analysis of the role of internal communication. *Journal of Public Relations Research,* 5(4), 217-250. Retrieved January 10, 2010 from Ebscohost database.

Cortes, C. Hample, & D. Larson, C. (2005). Relations among message design logic, interpersonal construct differentiation, and sex for Mexican and US nationals. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research,* 34 (2), 108-118. Retrieved November 29, 2010 from Ebscohost database.

Dainton, M., Zelly, E., & Zelly, E. D. (2004). Social learning theory. Applying communication theory for professional life. A practical introduction, (Eds). (pp. 206-209). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Grusec, J.E. (1992). Social learning theory and developmental psychology: the legacies of Robert Sears and Albert Bandura. *Developmental Psychology*, 28(5), 776-786. Retrieved May 30, 2010 from Ebscohost database.

Halawah, I. (2005). The relationship between effective communication of high school principal and school climate. *Education*, 126 (2), 334-345, Retrieved June 1, 2010 from Ebscohost database.

Hesketh, A.J., & Selwyn,N. (1999). Surfing to school: the electronic reconstruction of institutional identities. *Oxford Review of Education*, 25(4), 501-520. Retrieved May 27, 2010, from Ebscohost database.

Helou-Brown, D. (2006). *Understanding the female gamer: Targeting females effectively with video gaming marketing.* (master's thesis). Towson University, Towson MD.

Houser, M.L., & Frymier, A.B. (2009). The role of student characteristics and teacher behaviors in students' learner empowerment. *Communication Education,* 58 (1), 35-53. Retrieved December 1 , 2010 from Ebscohost database.

Hullman, G.A. (2004). Interpersonal communication motives and message design logic: exploring their interaction on perceptions of competence. *Communication Monographs*, 71(2), 208-225. Retrieved May 13, 2010, from Ebscohost database.

Infante, D.A., Horvath, C.L., Riddle, B.L., & Tumlin, S.A. (1992). Verbal aggressiveness: messages and reasons. *Communication Quarterly*, 40(2), 116-136. Retrieved March 21, 2010, from Ebscohost database.

Infante, D.A, Rancer, A.S, & Womack, D.F. (2003). Theory of message design logics. *Building Communication Theory* (pp. 120-122). Longgrove, IL : Waveland Press, Inc.

King, S.W. & Sereno, K.K. (1973). Attitude change as a function of degree and type of interpersonal similarity and message type. *Western Speech*, n/a, 218-232. Retrieved September 12, 2009, from Ebscohost database.

Krueger, R. & Casey, M.A. (2000). Focus Groups. Thousand Oaks. Sage Publicatins.

Kuhn,K.(2000). Problems and benefits of requirements gathering with focus groups: a case study. *International Journal of Human-Computer Interaction*, 12 (3/4), 309-325. Retrieved 8/25/2010 from Ebscohost database.

Ledoux, M.W.(2005). School culture in action. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 31(3), 237-239. Retrieved December 1, 2009, from Ebscohost database.

Lee, J., & Wong, K.K. (2004). The impact of accountability on racial and socioeconomic equity: considering both school resources and achievement outcomes. *American Educational Research Journal,* 41 (4), *797-832*. doi. 10.3102/00028312041004797

Mehrley, R.S., & McCroskey, J.C.(1969). The effects of disorganization and nonfluency on attitude change and source credibility. *Speech Monographs*, 36 (1*)*, 13-21. Retrieved May 25, 2010, from Ebscohost database.

Nielsen, J. (1993). *Usability engineering*. San Diego, CA: Academic.

Neuman, W.L. (2006). Social Research Method. Qualitative and quantitative approaches (Eds.). Boston, MA. Pearsons Education, Inc.

O'Keefe, B.J. (1988). The logic of message design: individual differences in reasoning about communication. *Communication Monographs*, 55, 80-103. Retrieved April 20, 2010 from Ebscohost database.

Richman, J.M., & Rosenfeld, L.B. (1999). Supportive communication and school outcomes, part II: academically "at-risk" low income high school students. *Communication Education*, 48, 294-307. Retrieved September 5, 2009 from Ebscohost database.

Roper, J. (2005). Symmetrical communication excellent public relations or a strategy for hegemony? *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(1), 69-86. Retrieved June 1, 2010, from Ebscohost database.

Seyd, R. (2000). Breaking down barriers: the principal and the academic. *Perspectives*, 4(2), 35-37. Retrieved May 15, 2010 from Ebscohost database.

Vatz, R.E. (1973). The myth of the rhetorical situation. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 6(3). 154-161 Retrieved April 6, 2011 from www.public.iastate.edu.

Vicsek, L. (2010). Issues in the analysis of focus groups: generalisability, quantifiability, treatment of context and quotations. *The Qualitative Report.* 15(1), 122-141. Retrieved 8/25/2010 from Ebscohost database.

Yin, R. (2003). Applications of case study research. (Eds.). Applied social research, 34, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

CURRICULUM VITAE

DANIELLE LAWRENCE
Parkville, MD | Danielle.lawrence08@gmail.com

EDUCATION
Towson University, Baltimore MD
M.S. in Communications Management   **2011**
Thesis: "Analyzing the Impact of High School Principal's Messages on Student
Perceptions Of the High School Experience."

Morgan State University, Baltimore MD
B.S. Mass Communications   **2002**

AWARDS
Social Security Administration Exemplary Contribution of Service Award 2008 -
2010

RELATED EXPERIENCE
Social Security Administration
Baltimore, MD

Program Analyst   **October 2010 – Present**

Social Insurance Specialist   **March 2006-October 2010**