Jurnal Praktik Baik Pembelajaran Sekolah dan Pesantren
Vol. 5, No. 03, pp. 207-217
journal.iistr.org/index.php/PBPSP
DOI: 10.56741/IISTR.pbpsp.002387

Ethical Communication in School Public Relations: A Qualitative Case Study in an Indonesian Primary School

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history
Received 2 June 2026
Revised 21 October 2026
Accepted 25 October 2026

ABSTRACT

This study examines how communication ethics is practiced in public-relations interactions between SDN Lidah Wetan 2, a public elementary school in East Java, Indonesia, and its stakeholders. Drawing on dialogic communication as an analytical lens, it considers the intersection of respect, message clarity, responsiveness, stakeholder voice, and the affordances and limits of digital communication. A qualitative descriptive design involved eight purposively selected participants (one principal, two teachers, one public-relations-related staff member, and four parents); the original study reports observations, semi-structured interviews, and documentary material analyzed through an interactive process of reduction, display, and interpretation. Available accounts show courteous wording, attempts to respond to questions, and frequent use of class WhatsApp groups. They also reveal uneven understanding, delayed responses, and constraints on face-to-face interaction. The analysis distinguishes the efficient dissemination of information from meaningful reciprocal dialogue and proposes a four-dimension practice framework: respect, clarity, responsiveness, and inclusion. The findings identify plausible conditions for relational trust rather than demonstrate an increase in trust. As a single-school account with limited reproduced interview and documentary evidence, the study offers context-bound insights and priorities for more transparent school communication.

Keywords
Communication Ethics
Dialogic Communication
School Public Relations
School–Family Communication
Stakeholder Participation
WhatsApp

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Introduction

Communication between elementary schools and families is no longer confined to scheduled meetings or paper circulars. School announcements, instant messages, consultations, and routine service encounters together shape how parents experience institutional accessibility and accountability. A rapid message can communicate a timetable but fail to clarify what families are expected to do; similarly, seemingly polite speech can conceal one-way decision-making. These tensions make the ethics of school communication a practical concern involving respectful treatment, intelligibility, response to stakeholder questions, and opportunities for dialogue. Recent studies have examined digital parent–teacher interaction, family–school partnership interventions, and differences between parental and teacher perceptions [1–7]. Their findings provide reasons to examine the quality—not simply the frequency—of stakeholder exchanges.

In this article, communication ethics denotes normative expectations of respect, transparency, fairness, non-stigmatizing language, and appropriate attention to recipients' needs. Etiquette is treated as its observable interpersonal expression rather than an interchangeable synonym: greetings, courteous forms of address, requests phrased without blame, and clear explanations can enact respect, but ethical communication additionally requires opportunities to question, correct, or contest information. Dialogic communication supplies the organizing theoretical lens. Rather than viewing stakeholders merely as recipients of institutional messages, this lens asks whether exchange permits mutuality, acknowledgement, and meaningful response. In this case, the lens is used to interpret communication practices; it is not presented as a theory statistically tested by the available qualitative evidence. Transparency research offers a complementary concern with the intelligibility and accessibility of information [26].

The case setting gives the inquiry a concrete empirical problem. The original field account describes SDN Lidah Wetan 2 in Surabaya, East Java, as using both school-facing interactions and class WhatsApp groups. Preliminary observations reported inconsistent information delivery, limited participatory opportunities, and exchanges that could become formal and one-directional. Yet the same account records favourable comments about polite

speech and fast WhatsApp announcements. This juxtaposition of apparent courtesy and constrained dialogue is the immediate research puzzle. No verified prevalence statistics or externally comparable survey figures are available in the source material; therefore, this paper does not invent "shocking" numerical evidence to manufacture urgency. Its urgency rests on the documented contrast between message dissemination and communicative understanding.

The research literature can be grouped into three partially overlapping strands. First, work on digital parent–teacher communication examines the convenience and relational challenges of messaging and other platforms [1–3]. Second, intervention and relational studies address school–family engagement, perceived relationships, and discrepancies between teachers' and parents' perspectives [4–10]. Third, scholarship on qualitative research transparency and communicative transparency cautions against interpreting sparse accounts as proof of generalized or causal effects [23–26]. Taken together, these strands establish the relevance of communication practices, but they do not resolve how politeness, comprehensibility, reciprocal response, and unequal channel access coexist in this particular school. The contribution is thus an explicitly bounded, context-sensitive interpretation—not a claim that the subject has never been studied elsewhere.

This study asks: (1) How is communication ethics expressed in everyday verbal and digital exchanges between SDN Lidah Wetan 2 and stakeholders? (2) How do responsiveness and opportunities for stakeholder voice relate to the school's communication practices? (3) What limitations emerge when WhatsApp is used as a principal communication channel? The objectives are to describe those practices, interpret them through dialogic communication, and generate practical indicators for school-level reflection. The proposed novelty lies in separating interpersonal courtesy from more demanding ethical conditions of clarity, reciprocal responsiveness, and inclusion, while retaining the limits of a single-school qualitative account.

Methods

A. Design and setting

The study employed qualitative description at SDN Lidah Wetan 2, Surabaya, East Java, during the second semester of the 2025/2026 school year. The site was selected because the original field account reports routine interaction with parents and other stakeholders both directly and through digital media. This selection provides an information-rich context for exploring communication ethics, not a representative sample of Indonesian schools. The source manuscript does not specify the exact fieldwork dates, the duration of observation, or the number and length of interviews; these details must be supplied from original research records before submission.

B. Participants and sampling

The original manuscript reports purposive recruitment of eight informants directly involved in school communication: one principal, two teachers, one school staff member engaged in public relations activities, and four parents. These roles provide both institutional and family-side perspectives, but the original document does not establish whether the parent sample captured variation in digital access, education, or prior engagement. Criteria for recruitment, approaches to participants, refusal rates, and the rationale for sample adequacy require confirmation in the underlying field records before submission.

Table 1. Respondent's Characteristics

Participant group	Number	Role in the study
Principal	1	School communication and institutional perspective
Teachers	2	Direct interaction and information delivery
Public-relations-related staff	1	Stakeholder-facing communication practices
Parents	4	Recipients and respondents to school messages
Total	8	Purposively selected informants

C. Data sources and collection

The original study reports observation of formal and informal interactions, semi-structured interviews concerning school information, courtesy, perceived barriers, and stakeholder responses, and documentation including announcements and communication records. The available article reproduces two interview excerpts but does not contain anonymized WhatsApp screenshots, an interview guide, or a document inventory. Consequently, such materials are identified as evidence to be supplied if the authors have permission to publish them, not reproduced or fabricated here. If WhatsApp extracts are added, names, telephone numbers, student identifiers, profile images, and contextual clues must be redacted after appropriate consent.

D. Data analysis and trustworthiness

The source manuscript describes an interactive sequence of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. In this revision, interpretation is organized around a transparent deductive–descriptive reading of the already reported material: (i) identify concrete descriptions or quotations; (ii) group accounts concerning respectful expression, clarity, responsiveness, stakeholder voice, or channel access; (iii) examine convergences and tensions across reported interviews and observations; and (iv) mark the limits of each inference in the evidence matrix. This description explains the analytical structure of the revised report; it must not be mistaken for a claim that newly coded transcripts or a new inter-coder reliability exercise were undertaken.

The original report states that source and technique triangulation were used, but it does not provide raw material sufficient for independent checking of agreement or disagreement

among participants. The evidence matrix distinguishes what is explicitly supported by quotations, what is summarized from observations, and what remains an interpretive proposition. For further trustworthiness, authors should document who collected the material, how notes and transcripts were handled, how alternative explanations were considered, and whether participant checking was performed. These procedures should only be reported as completed if research records confirm them [23–25].

E. Research ethics

The source states that participant identities were treated confidentially and information was used for research purposes. However, it does not establish whether formal school permission, informed consent, ethics approval or a justified exemption, withdrawal rights, secure storage, or consent for quotation and digital records were obtained. The authors must complete an accurate ethics statement from contemporaneous documentation. No approval number, board decision, or consent procedure is invented in this revision.

Results

A. Courteous and intelligible communication

The observations summarized in the original report characterize school announcements and interpersonal services as polite, friendly, and relatively open. A teacher stated: "The school tries to convey information in polite language so that it is easier for students' parents to understand the information provided." In this account, politeness refers to non-offensive wording, respectful address, and understandable explanations rather than a measurable linguistic scale. The manuscript does not reproduce verbatim Indonesian greeting forms; illustrative phrases such as "please," "thank you," or "may we clarify" would therefore be examples of recommended practice, not recorded speech. This distinction preserves the boundary between observed data and interpretation.

The distinction matters analytically: respectful wording can make an interaction feel less hierarchical, but clear content and the opportunity to ask follow-up questions remain necessary for shared understanding. The original description of two-way exchanges about school activities and students' problems is consistent with efforts to turn ordinary announcements into relationship-maintaining communication; its frequency and distribution across parents were not documented.

B. Responsiveness and stakeholder voice

The original description reports attempts to answer parents' questions and provide opportunities for suggestions, criticism, and discussion of school activities. From a dialogic standpoint, these exchanges are ethically relevant because they potentially recognize families as interlocutors, rather than simply recipients. Nevertheless, the available record does not show how frequently such opportunities occurred, whose suggestions changed a decision, or

whether participants experienced disagreement as safe. Responsive intention and demonstrable shared influence therefore need to be distinguished.

This tension helps explain why etiquette must be understood beyond courteous vocabulary: acknowledged concerns, opportunities to clarify messages, and a visible response to feedback are integral to relational communication. Whether families actually influence decisions was not established by the available dataset.

C. WhatsApp communication and its limits

WhatsApp groups were described as frequently used channels for class and school announcements. One parent explained: "Information from the school is usually clear and quickly conveyed through WhatsApp groups, so parents find it easier for parents to know school activities." The wording is retained from the source for evidential fidelity, despite its awkward English formulation. The quotation supports a favourable account of convenience from one informant; it does not establish that all parents have the same access, reading habits, or comprehension. Prior research on digital home–school communication provides comparative context [1–3].

Observed and reported difficulties qualify this favourable account. Some parents were slow to respond, school personnel sometimes had to repeat notices, and participants differed in how they understood messages. Thus, rapid distribution and effective communication cannot be treated as equivalent. For families who miss messages or need clarification, digital communication may require supplementary interpersonal contact. Comparable research shows that messaging platforms offer immediacy but may also impose constant-availability expectations, reduce boundaries, and exclude less digitally connected families [1–3].

D. Barriers and adaptive communication

Barriers in the source include delayed replies to group announcements, different interpretations of instructions, and limited time for in-person interaction. Through the dialogic lens, repeated notices may solve a delivery problem without resolving misunderstanding; similarly, a lack of response may reflect time constraints or channel preferences rather than lack of stakeholder interest. This is an analytical possibility, not a new interview finding. The school's mixed use of in-person contact and WhatsApp suggests the practical value of communication that adapts to varying recipient needs.

Table 2 presents an evidence-to-interpretation matrix using only claims and excerpts available in the original manuscript. It intentionally distinguishes direct evidence from conceptual interpretation.

Table 2. Evidence-to-Interpretation Matrix

Descriptive pattern	Evidence in source manuscript	Analytical interpretation/ boundary
Courtesy and clarity	Teacher quotation on polite and understandable information; reported observations of courteous wording	Respect and comprehensibility appear linked in practice; no independent comprehension test
Responsiveness and voice	Descriptions of responses to questions and opportunities for criticism or suggestions	Reciprocity is an expressed practice, not evidence of decision-making influence
Digital immediacy	Parent quotation about timely, clear WhatsApp information; observation that groups are frequently used	Efficiency for at least one parent; inclusion and universal access unmeasured
Interpretive and time barriers	Accounts of varied understanding, delayed replies and insufficient meeting time	Communication effectiveness depends on adaptation, repetition and alternative contacts

Discussion

A. From politeness to relational communication

Dialogic communication offers a useful interpretive distinction between transmission and exchange. Courteous messages can support interpersonal respect, but they become more dialogic when they are accompanied by invitations to ask questions, credible acknowledgement of concerns, and follow-up where clarification is needed. The source contains examples consistent with each of these practices, although the detail required to examine their consistency across stakeholder groups is limited. The proposed dimensions of ethical communication are therefore interconnected but not empirically validated scales.

Relational trust is treated as a theoretically plausible outcome of sustained ethical interaction, not an observed before-and-after effect. The study has no repeated trust measure or longitudinal evidence, and its eight participants do not provide a basis for estimating the impact of a communications program. An equally plausible alternative is that existing positive relations shape how parents interpret school messages. This interpretive restraint avoids converting qualitative expressions of appreciation into unsupported causal claims.

B. Family partnership and stakeholder participation

Studies of family–school engagement highlight the need to distinguish attendance, receipt of information, relationship quality, and actual participation in decisions [4–10]. The school account suggests that stakeholder voice is recognized in principle, because parents may submit suggestions and criticisms. However, the evidence does not document the pathways by which suggestions are assessed and resolved. Under a dialogic lens, openness should include visible follow-through as well as an invitation to comment. School leaders can therefore examine both access to channels and the quality of responses.

A distinct contribution of this case is its articulation of a tension between courteous institutional communication and genuinely reciprocal communication in a public elementary-

school setting. The findings should be read as an empirically informed conceptual clarification specific to the available record. They extend discussion from how messages are sent to how respect, comprehensibility, voice, and inclusion may be jointly assessed. The case cannot establish a general model without comparative sites and fuller data.

C. Proposed practice framework

A practical reflective framework follows from the combined evidence and theoretical lens: Respect (respectful, non-blaming and culturally sensitive expression); Clarity (explicit purpose, date, required action, and a route for clarification); Responsiveness (acknowledgement and closure of questions or complaints); and Inclusion (alternatives for families who cannot reliably use WhatsApp). This four-part framework is proposed for future school assessment, not claimed as a validated instrument. For instance, a school may review anonymized message templates, sample clarification requests, and document whether feedback has been addressed.

Table 3. The practical reflective framework

Dimension	School practice to consider	Possible monitoring evidence (future evaluation)
Respect	Use courteous, non-blaming wording and consistent greeting conventions	Review of anonymised message templates and complaints
Clarity	Include purpose, date, action and contact person in notices	Parent comprehension checks or clarification requests
Responsiveness	Set realistic reply windows and report follow-up outcomes	Response log and resolution of reported concerns
Inclusion	Provide paper, telephone, or scheduled face-to-face alternatives	Reach by channel and feedback from hard-to-reach families

Limitations and implications

The study is restricted to one school, eight purposively selected informants, two quotations reproduced in the original report, and summarized observations and documentation whose underlying records were not supplied for this revision. The account does not measure stakeholder trust, compare channels systematically, or establish the effects of specific wording on understanding. Moreover, the source does not report a negative-case analysis or direct documentary examples from WhatsApp. Future investigations could incorporate consented and anonymized messages, multiple parent perspectives, more than one school, and systematic observation of how questions are handled over time.

For school leaders, the practical implication is to evaluate communication quality by more than transmission speed: schools should consider whether messages are understood, whether questions receive meaningful replies, and whether families with different schedules or digital access can participate. For future research, multi-school comparisons, systematically coded interview datasets, document analysis, and longitudinal or mixed-method designs could test how specific etiquette practices relate to perceived respect, trust, participation, and school image.

Conclusion

At SDN Lidah Wetan 2, communication ethics emerges in the reported use of respectful wording, efforts to clarify information and answer questions, and the frequent use of WhatsApp for stakeholder contact. These practices coexist with differences in comprehension, delayed responses, and limited opportunities for face-to-face discussion. Interpreted through dialogic communication, the case suggests that ethical school public relations requires more than politeness or rapid announcement delivery: it entails respect, intelligibility, responsiveness, and inclusive opportunities for stakeholder voice. The analysis offers a practical four-dimension framework for school self-review, but it neither proves increased trust nor supports generalization beyond the available evidence. Fuller field records and verified ethics documentation are needed before stronger claims can be made.

Conflict of interest

Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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