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**Using PR strategies to enhance public relations**  
**in state secondary schools**

Eileen Jones

A dissertation submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in  
Professional Development

THE UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD

May 2008

## **Abstract**

### **Using PR strategies to enhance public relations in state secondary schools**

**Eileen Jones, May 2008**

This research study sets out to examine the nature of communication between secondary schools and their publics, or stakeholders. Why is it that multi-million pound organisations (for such are the locally-held budgets of schools) are so reticent about sharing their successes and achievements? Why, when faced with crisis situations, do schools all too often close ranks and school gates, so that suspicion and doubt - rather than clarity and understanding - are fostered?

It is a field of study to which little attention has been paid by public relations professionals or academics outside of the inner London area, except in relation to crisis management issues, which will be examined here.

The aims of this study are:

1. To examine the nature of communications between school managers and stakeholders
2. To analyse attitudes among school managers about their relationship with various stakeholders
3. To evaluate the development of a network of local schools willing to try and implement PR practices with the help of final year media students.

The intended outcome is to persuade secondary schools generally that an open and transparent relationship with the media and other external publics will work to their benefit.

It is based on initial research carried out at Calder High School in Mytholmroyd, and subsequently with a network of secondary schools, mostly in West Yorkshire, for whom undergraduates studying Public Relations have been conducting communications audits under my supervision.

It also aims to foster beneficial relationships between the University of Huddersfield and local “feeder” secondary schools and, it is hoped, to enable further study in this field with a view to creating a centre of excellence in this field at the University’s department of journalism and media.

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Eileen Jones, May 2008

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## **Introduction**

Scientific discovery, record-breaking sporting achievement, work of great artistic merit, success in expected quarters, humour; all are areas of human endeavour which are celebrated by the societies in which they are contained. And yet, in the microcosmic world of education, these are passing un-noticed. Every day in every school, particularly in secondary schools, young people and their mentors are pursuing excellence with little recognition. Why are schools so unwilling to share their achievements with the world beyond their gates? Why are local communities not allowed to celebrate what is happening in their heartlands?

It might be said that this research project developed initially from the persistence of a group of parents who were anxious for information about their children's secondary schooling. Like many others, they had been involved with their children's education at primary level, perhaps helping out in class, listening to readers, supporting art projects, assisting at fund raising events. And the school gate was a daily conduit for the transmission of information, from parents to teachers and vice versa.

When pupils reach secondary school, they acquire a very sudden independence. The school gate is no longer a meeting place. Parents are no longer welcomed, either by the staff or by the pupils themselves, who regard parental presence as an embarrassment. Contact with the school becomes confined to the formality of parents' evenings and report cards.

Yet research by Alma Harris at Warwick University<sup>1</sup>, among others, indicates that parental involvement in secondary education is one of the strongest indicators in raising levels of achievement. And secondary schools themselves are fascinating places where talented groups and individuals are experimenting, performing, perfecting, and achieving, out of sight of the local community which might appreciate and celebrate such achievement.

When I found ways to become involved at Calder High School in Mytholmroyd, near Halifax, I observed much that was worthy of celebration and wider dissemination. Parents were largely unaware of what went on behind the school gates; so too were other stakeholders. But through the development of a Parents' Network, through involvement as a school governor, and with the support of a newly-appointed head teacher with a successful track record in media relations at his previous post, a "public relations" strategy was developed.

Two final-year undergraduate students at Huddersfield University, under my supervision, conducted a communications audit and PR campaign (as the basis for a 30-credit module practical project). They found that they had first to convince the majority of the staff of the wisdom of open, transparent and two-way communication with parents and the wider community. They needed to assess parental views on the way in which they viewed communication channels. They also had to train teaching and other staff to identify newsworthy activities which could then be promoted in the local paper to raise the image and reputation of the school.

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<sup>1</sup> Engaging Parents in Raising Achievement research and development conference, July 4, 2007.

With the head teacher's support, they made presentations to staff about PR principles and techniques. They illustrated how newsworthy items might be identified and written in a journalistic style. They re-designed the school newsletter, with a recommendation that it be issued more regularly, and they made a series of proposals for the further development of the school website. Crucially, they negotiated with the editor of the local paper, the Hebden Bridge Times, a page each month which would be dedicated to Calder High School, and for which items would be submitted by staff and students.

Their recommendations were embedded into the School Improvement Plan and also into the head teacher's Performance Review. The project came to the attention of other schools in the area. They too asked if the university could provide a similar service. And so a network of schools was developed, and head teachers and school managers were invited to a conference staged at the department of media and journalism (of which more detail will be provided); subsequently, Huddersfield students have been involved in a number of different PR projects at several schools in the area. The demand, so far, outweighs the supply of available final year undergraduates.

This research study sets out to examine the nature of communication between secondary schools and their publics, or stakeholders. Why is it that multi-million pound organisations (for such are the locally-held budgets of schools) are so reticent about sharing their successes and achievements? Why, when faced with crisis situations, do schools all too often close ranks and school gates, so that suspicion and doubt - rather than clarity and understanding - are fostered?



It is a field of study to which little attention has been paid by public relations professionals or academics outside of the inner London area, except in relation to crisis management issues, such as those at The Ridings school in Halifax, as outlined below. London schools have had to deal with a number of such crises, for example, the death of Kiyon Prince, a pupil at the London Academy in Barnet. In London, as elsewhere, media attention was drawn to schools in times of crisis, and heads and managers were not always able to handle the situation appropriately. Another example, also involving a violent attack by one pupil on another, and the subsequent media coverage, was at Myrtle Springs School in Sheffield.

At The Ridings School in Halifax in the 1990s an unwillingness to be publicly frank about difficulties led to one of the most (sadly) notorious episodes of educational media relations. McClellan and Gann (2002) suggest that by the 1990s it would have been expected that there was a greater sophistication in the way schools dealt with the press, in the light of high-profile instances. In fact, most state schools still relied on the LEA press office if things went wrong. The failure of that dependency was brought to a head by the crisis at the Ridings school in Halifax which began in 1996, and led to the recent (Nov 2007) announcement by Calderdale MBC that the school will close in two years time.

The Ofsted Inspection (October 1996) highlights the breakdown of order at the Ridings School on the second day of the inspection “in part because of the behaviour of a small number of pupils after a period of considerable media interest in the school and its

problems”. (Ofsted, 1996) Yet the Local Education Authority, Calderdale, had only one “press officer”, whose duties included external affairs for all departments, not just education. On the other hand, a contemporaneous advice manual from the Association of Metropolitan Authorities (1996) states: “Remember, your school does not have to deal with the media alone. The council's public relations unit will help. If you prefer, all media enquiries can be referred to them.” (p19)

Aside from times of crisis, managing the media should be an important function in school PR. According to the former Department for Education and Skills (now Department for Children, Schools and Families) it is important to recognise the need for “good press”.

It is important to contact the local authority press office. They will have a good working knowledge of the local media, and so will be able to recommend reliable local journalists. A friendly relationship must then be cultivated with these journalists. Interesting stories get good media coverage. Anything new or different is normally a good starting point, but also bear in mind that unusual human interest stories can often be more attractive to a journalist. ([www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk))

The DfES document further states that “an important part of the school PR strategy is to develop and maintain what is known as a crisis management plan”. ([www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk))

The most important element of the crisis management plan is to determine how the school will behave towards the media, and how much information will be passed on. The good relationships that the school has already formed with local journalists will mean that they are more sympathetic, and should therefore not be feared. Issuing a “no comment” statement is a definite grey area, as telling the media nothing will only give rise to speculation. Keeping journalists informed will allow them to report the story accurately. ([www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk))

Yet it is clear that state schools are only starting to appreciate why they need to develop a PR strategy. Only one LEA (Devon) has a dedicated education PR team.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile there are school PR practitioners in America and Canada, who follow guidelines set out by the National School Public Relations Association. In this country, schools in the private sector have funds to spend on PR to attract sufficient numbers of fee-paying parents. Schools harnessing the benefits of PR produce regular newsletters and set up seminars to teach parents about the most effective ways to enhance their child's learning. This generates a positive reputation, because parents can see the time that is invested in their child.

As an example, Stockport Grammar School recently (November 2007) sought to appoint a director of external relations. The job description states:

The director will be responsible to the headmaster and will be a member of the senior management team. Your department will be responsible for the development and implementation of an integrated external relations strategy to strengthen relations and

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<sup>2</sup> Devon County Council Media & Public Relations Service ([www.devon.gov.uk](http://www.devon.gov.uk))

Context: Schools are increasingly target-driven and need to promote their achievements in order to recruit new pupils and maintain and enhance their reputation within their communities. The service also provides reputation management at times of crisis.

Services to be Provided:

- Professional advice and representation on media relations
- Publicity/reputation management
- Support for Ofsted reports
- News releases and briefing notes
- Press conference support service
- Press cuttings & TV monitoring
- Professional public relations advice and support
- Pay As You Use Services
- Media training – including effective media relationships (e.g. interview techniques including live and recorded TV interviews)

manage the school's profile among all its key constituencies, through event management, marketing, communications and PR, fund-raising and alumni relations and managing relations with feeder schools and the local community. (PR Week 9/11/2007).

The post offers a salary of up to £55,000. State schools, meanwhile, have to rely on volunteer assistance and student projects. But aside from the obstacle of cost, there is still a reluctance to accept PR as a priority in education. Jo Confino of the Guardian Media Trust (whose conference of November 2006 will be described in some detail later) said: "For most schools PR is 95 out of 100 on their list of priorities, but it is there in that list." (Confino, Nov 29, 2006).

Describing the "middle class flight from London schools" he blamed the press, and the Evening Standard in particular, for running negative stories, often scare stories. "Not enough schools are talking to the media about the good stuff they do. The problem is that the good stuff has to be 100 times better than the bad stuff to get media attention. Positive stories need to work much harder to appear." (Confino, Nov 29, 2006)

In order to define the context of this study, it is helpful to briefly examine initiatives which have recently been put into place in schools in London. These have been achieved with considerable financial backing from central and local government and, via a charitable trust, from established PR agencies. There are examples of good practice which might be thought suitable for promulgation among the wider school community, but also limitations because of the funding apparently needed, as we shall see.

The need for the development of good relationships between schools and their stakeholders was highlighted by the Government's London Challenge initiative. The London Challenge was a five-year partnership between Government, schools and boroughs to raise educational standards in London's secondary school system.

It aimed to improve the educational opportunities for London's young people and make London a world leader in education. The Challenge focused on all aspects of the school system: teachers; students; leaders; and school buildings and environment.

It was launched with a level of PR strategy which was to mark the progress and achievements of the scheme, and might be taken as an indicator of how seriously schools need to consider public relations. The launch was at the London Eye, (Jan 19, 2002), which was donated free of charge. Each London borough had a school represented in each of the Eye's "pods".

Estelle Morris, then secretary of state for the department for education and skills , and London Mayor Ken Livingstone, switched on a brand symbol. BBC London was presented live from the event, and it was also featured on London Today. Press coverage was achieved in more than 30 borough newspapers.

Estelle Morris further promoted the London Challenge on 1 July 2002 in a speech at South Camden Community School. She recognised the need for schools to look beyond

their own boundaries, to promote what they were doing and, in particular, to attract the attention of local companies who might be in a position to help them develop.

We have some of the highest earning companies anywhere in the world, right here in the city and they are often positioned next to some of the schools that need the greatest support. I know the good work that industries do. I go along to East London, Tower Hamlets, and Newham and I can see the organisations throughout the City who are actually making links with schools. It's not just about giving resources but by really making good solid links which allow children to see and have role models of people who work in that sort of organisation. (Morris, 2002)

Media campaigns ran throughout the life of the Challenge, including poster campaigns on buses and Tube stations, courtesy of Viacom Outdoor promotions, and student award schemes for different areas of achievement were promoted to local and regional press.

Under the auspices of the Challenge initiative, a not-for-profit organisation, The Media Trust<sup>3</sup>, worked with the Guardian Media Group and Geronimo Communications to offer teachers specialist advice and guidance on school branding, reputation management and profiling. They maintained that: "In today's competitive education sector it has never been more important to ensure that the public's perception of your school matches the reality." ([www.mediatrust.co.uk](http://www.mediatrust.co.uk))

The Media Trust brings together media professionals and those working in charities and other non-profit organisations. They provide training and communications skills to help

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<sup>3</sup> The Media Trust corporate members are BBC, BskyB, Channel 4, Daily Mail, Discovery Networks Europe, Emap, Guardian Media Group, IPC Media, ITV, MTV Networks UK and Ireland, News International, Newsquest Media Group, Turner Broadcasting Systems Europe, Weber Shandwick, WPP.

spokespeople deal with media queries, to promote their activities, raise awareness and generally engage with various stakeholders.

They ran a course for London school heads and managers which included guidance on how to develop a valued brand, carry out effective PR, successfully deal with local and national press, keep cool in a crisis and develop a school's reputation. All course participants also had the opportunity to pitch for the services of a specialist branding agency, Heavenly PR, which was offered free.

The agency subsequently worked with one selected school, St Matthew's Academy, to deliver an agreed project, helping the school improve its profile with pupils, parents and the local community. The results were presented at a conference hosted by the Guardian Media Group in London in November 2006, attended by head teachers and managers from state secondary schools throughout England.

Jo Confino, The Guardian's Executive Editor, Social and Community Affairs, who chaired that conference, said that promoting the (deserved) good image and reputation of inner London schools was a vital part of the London Challenge. Geronimo Communications then presented a report on reputation management in schools. Their director, Peter Gilheany, said that in London there was a "perception-reality gap", with studies of theirs showing that while 85% of parents were happy with their child's school, 53% were unhappy about other schools.

Doing nothing leads to negative misconceptions. It is tougher to recruit staff. It is damaging for school morale, among both staff and pupils. And it can deter parents from sending their children to that school. (Gilheany, 2006).

Gilheany said that while a professional PR campaign would be beyond the budget of most schools, it was possible to devise a media strategy to be managed by either a member of staff, governor or parent over one or two days each month. Tasks should include building a local media network, sending out regular press releases, drafting a crisis management plan, and being pro-active on national issues, such as the local view in Anti-Bullying Week.

Non-media PR strategies, he said, might include regular updating of the school website, making all publications look professional and accessible, and organising better events for the school community and the wider community. (Gilheany, 2006).

It is interesting to note that all these strategies had been put into place by Huddersfield students working at Calder High School during the previous year. School heads and managers representing more than 40 schools at the conference were then given the opportunity to ask about the success of that particular project and how – in the light of the London experience – they might be able to implement similar strategies in their schools. Discussion focussed very clearly on cost and availability of personnel with time to take on the task. All present agreed that their schools, to date, did not consider public relations a priority. All now agreed that there appeared to be very considerable benefits, even by implementing just some of the strategies if not all.



Since then, a Government-funded Greater Manchester Challenge has been launched, and is being led by Prof Mel Ainscow at Manchester University. This is a £50 million campaign over three years to raise standards in schools across some of the most deprived areas of the region. Professor of Education and co-director of the Centre for Equity in Education at Manchester University, Prof Ainscow has an international reputation for his work on school improvement.

The programme was launched in April 2008 and will build on the experience of London Challenge, which has had a major impact on raising standards in schools in the most deprived parts of the capital.

Minister of State for Children, Young People and Families and Minister for the North West, Beverley Hughes, who is heading up the Greater Manchester Challenge, said:

I am delighted to welcome Professor Ainscow as the new Chief Adviser for Greater Manchester. Mel is renowned for his work on raising the achievement and attainment of all children and young people but particularly those from more disadvantaged backgrounds, which is a key focus of this programme. I am confident that he will be a major force in helping us to break the cycle between deprivation and low achievement in the region.

The Greater Manchester Challenge will build on our experience in London, where highly targeted investment in disadvantaged areas has brought dramatic results. I am confident that we can repeat this success in Greater Manchester and support the work already being done by our educational partners locally. (9/10/ 2007)

It will be interesting to note what prominence is given to public relations, and to the relationship between the Manchester schools and the media, once this scheme is under way. The benefits generally from a PR policy have been elucidated by a head of geography writing for Schoolzone Educational Intelligence website, Brin Best. He

believes that schools should realise that working positively with their community to ensure a positive image is an important part of the whole-school development plan.

([www.schoolzone.co.uk](http://www.schoolzone.co.uk)).

This heightening of awareness over the importance of a school's image, says Best, can be put down to a number of factors:

The competitive nature of many schools in overlapping catchment areas  
The knock-on effect of student recruitment on school finances  
The need to dispel negative publicity about Ofsted inspections, failing schools and special measures. ([www.schoolzone.co.uk](http://www.schoolzone.co.uk))

Best says that studies of schools with a positive image in their community show that in general they have the following characteristics:

- Exam results are good
- They are oversubscribed
- High student numbers means they are often well-resourced
- Staff morale is good
- Students are motivated and care about their school
- Parents are more likely to take an active role in helping the school  
([www.schoolzone.co.uk](http://www.schoolzone.co.uk))

Says Best:

Although schools with a strong track record in these areas obviously have a head start in projecting a positive image, even schools with 'unfavourable' characteristics can improve their image through a targeted campaign. This enhanced image has been shown to have a positive influence on student and staff morale, exam performance and student behaviour. ([www.schoolzone.co.uk](http://www.schoolzone.co.uk))

He also points out that it is important to remember schools with good internal morale will tend to find it easier to project a positive image, a message which the deputy head at a school in Lancashire, subject to Ofsted failure and local community scrutiny, hoped to address, and to which I shall return later. It is a view surely echoed by all good leaders, that this is a key management issue.

Best believes that schools that feel good about themselves can easily build a positive image in the community; those that do not will wonder why other schools always get the good publicity. "Good reporting in the press about the achievements of the staff and students may be one key development the school needs to realise its worth, so the two areas are obviously linked ." ([www.schoolzone.co.uk](http://www.schoolzone.co.uk)) This is all clearly common sense, yet the delegates at the Media Trust conference in London 2006, as we shall see, were all inhibited by anxiety – or financial restraint – from adopting such measures.

The Media Trust conference also saw a presentation from pupils and staff at Elizabeth Garrett Anderson girls' school in Islington, North London. They had been supported with both expertise and finance by The Guardian in a rebranding exercise. Their head teacher, Jo Dibb, told of a letter she had received from a local resident. "Your pupils are a league of hooligans. We need a petition to stop them walking through the market on their way home: they're a disgrace. Their behaviour is appalling. What sort of teaching are they getting?"

Yet, said Dibb, the last Ofsted inspection report, in January 2005, described it as "an excellent college with many outstanding features". The school, the report continued, had an excellent ethos. The quality of its teaching was very good. Overall, the quality of its education was excellent. So, too, were the school's leadership and management. The report, in fact, was glowing: so why, Dibb asked herself, was her school's name mud in the local area?

The Guardian's Joanna Moorhead, who covered the EGA story for the paper, wrote:

There is no school in the country where every pupil is a model of good behaviour on his or her way home, but Dibb knew that the majority of the girls at her 1,200-pupil 11-16 comprehensive were well-behaved, conscientious youngsters who wouldn't make trouble going through the market. The problem wasn't just the behaviour of an unruly few, it was that EGA was still suffering from a reputation it had long ago outgrown. The school had improved, but the people who lived around it knew little of these changes, and were still judging it the way locals had judged it more than a decade ago. (Guardian, 19/9/2006)

Trying to turn around a reputation isn't a problem unique to education, and the solution Dibb decided on was a PR exercise, pioneered not in schools, but in the commercial world.

"We decided to rebrand," says Dibb. "What I realised was that there was a huge gap between the place EGA really was, and the view people outside it had of it. What we needed to do was close that gap, and the way to do it was by looking first at ourselves, and then at how we could project the image that was really us to the community and the wider world around us." (Guardian, 19/9/2006)

It was not a task easily embraced. Just as schools have been reticent to embrace "relationships" with stakeholders, and especially the media, they were equally suspicious

of the notion of brand management. According to Moorhead, they saw that as “something dishonest and money-orientated that has no place in a world that's about children and learning, and being true to itself?” (Guardian, 19/9/2006)

But in fact, since the introduction of local management of schools, and then the publication of league tables, schools now exist firmly in a competitive marketplace. Moorhead quoted Nick Dormon of branding company Echo who believes that branding predates competition.

In the old days you had Mr Jones, the grocer, with his shop on the high street, and everyone bought their food there and knew him and trusted his goods. Now, though, they shop at supermarkets, and the link with Mr Jones is gone. What branding gives you is what the link with Mr Jones gave your grandparents: an emotional bond, a trust in the place you're buying your food.

Exactly the same is true of schools: in the past, and still in some areas, there's one school and it has a good reputation and everyone is happy with it. It doesn't need branding: it's already branded. But in other places, there are several schools and many have been through a period of flux: parents and pupils aren't really sure about what they offer. And branding can make that clear, so people can make choices. (Guardian 19/9/2006)

According to Danesi (2006:33), branding is ultimately a social act “It reifies the product, service or company inserting it as an element of the web of meanings that constitute a culture...It is equivalent to the process of bringing human beings into the social order by giving them a name.” (He defines reification as “the term used in philosophy referring to the actualizing or something that is conceptual in real ways”.)

Nick Dormon, quoted by Moorhead, adds that where branding is done properly in schools, “it is about self-evaluation and confidence-boosting: a chance to examine what makes a school really special, what its most vital ingredient is, and then looking at how that can best be communicated to the people outside it”. (Guardian, 19/9/2006)

The staff and pupils from EGA told the conference how they had adopted a new mission statement, “Without Limits”, something that was both “aspirational and represents the school holistically”; that they enlisted a fashion designer to work with them on a new uniform; that a new logo was designed and incorporated in school signs and notepaper; that the prospectus was redesigned.

"What this entire process has been about is signaling, internally and externally, that we're a successful and confident institution," said Jo Dibb. The London Challenge had public relations embedded into its strategy for improving state schools. But the cost of such a branding exercise, carried out by a team of professionals, would be in the region of £10,000, and it was here that the head teacher delegates were disheartened. The heads attending the Huddersfield conference the following week were given a much more optimistic strategy.

This study will analyse attitudes among heads and school managers about their relationship with various stakeholders, and their apparent ambivalence about external relations, and will evaluate the achievements to date in the development of the local

network of schools with whom the Huddersfield University department of media and journalism is working to implement PR practices.

The intended outcome is to illustrate that the benefits of using PR for schools are significant, not least because it enables teachers to control how their school is perceived. This study aims to explain why it is important that a school's reputation is not left to be determined by outsiders, and further, that in the worst possible circumstances, a well-written, clearly delivered statement can diffuse a potentially damaging situation.

Beyond the remit of media relations, this study aims to highlight other tangible benefits. Parents, pupils and new staff can be attracted to a school which is open about its achievements and honest in its communication. It is also possible to use public relations to change internal attitudes. A positive reputation can stimulate both pupils and the staff alike, creating a sense of pride and commitment. This pride can also extend into the wider community, encouraging members to take ownership of the school as a representative pillar of the community.

The study will report on examples of projects undertaken by Huddersfield University on behalf of local schools, and will examine the effects of the London Challenge initiative and its implications nationally. Reference will be made to both practical examples and accepted theory, to be discussed in the literature review.

So to summarise, the aims are:

4. To examine the nature of communications between school managers and stakeholders
5. To analyse attitudes among school managers about their relationship with various stakeholders
6. To evaluate the development of a network of local schools willing to try and implement PR practices with the help of final year media students.

The intended outcome is to persuade secondary schools generally that an open and transparent relationship with the media and other external publics will work to their benefit.

There are ethical issues to be considered. The nature of this project, that it is concerned to a significant degree with “publicity”, posed some difficulties regarding confidentiality. Much of the material presented in the appendices has actually been published elsewhere, to either limited or mass audiences, from school newsletters to newspaper reports. The initial project at Calder High School has received local, regional and national prominence in the media, and the head teacher has given permission to be quoted directly, by name, throughout this dissertation. Other schools, their managers or head teachers, are accorded anonymity for the purposes of this report.



## Literature review

Before addressing the specific relationship between schools and their public audiences, it is useful to examine just what is meant by “public relations”.

The professional body in Britain is the Chartered Institute of Public Relations and their definition is that:

Public relations is about reputation - the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations is the discipline which builds and maintains reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. ([www.cipr.co.uk](http://www.cipr.co.uk))

The CIPR adds that PR is “the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics.” ([www.cipr.co.uk](http://www.cipr.co.uk)) (Publics are defined as audiences, or stakeholders.) Note the crucial words “planned and sustained”, which indicate that PR should never be regarded as a knee-jerk response to a situation or crisis; and “goodwill and mutual understanding”, reflecting the development of professional practice since the early days of publicity stunts and press agency.

The principles of PR apply generally to all organisations, of course, so beyond the limited publication (to date) relating to “schools” I found particularly relevant the work of Regester and Larkin (2002) on crisis management; Kitchen (2002) on PR principles; and Green (2001) on creativity. But reference must first be made to James Grunig of Maryland University who, along with Larissa Grunig, Hunt, and Dozier, created the

framework for PR as an academic discipline. Their theories on the development of public relations – from propaganda and persuasion, to two-way asymmetrical, then two-way symmetrical communication, and ultimately to mutual understanding and the building and sustaining of relationships – lie at the heart of all PR study, and remain the core *raison d'être* of the CIPR.

The key text in this context is *The Manager's Guide to Excellence in Public Relations and Communications Management* (Dozier, Grunig and Grunig, 1995). And the key message is one which schools – in my view – need to adopt:

Excellent organisations blur boundaries between communication issues and organizational issues...Everything you do strategically has to do with relations with the outside world. (p 110)

Grunig and Hunt (1984) offered an historical framework for the development of PR in the USA (where the practice and the profession were first distinctly developed). They describe five distinct phases: the public be fooled, the public be damned, public information, propaganda, and public understanding.

The concept of mutual understanding in that final, public understanding, phase, was articulated by Bernays (1952) in a series of communication models which form the basis of PR as it is practised today. As described by Harrison (2000), Bernays was a leading proponent of this model.

It is truly two-way, taking the form of a kind of dialogue between the organisation and their publics; both parties are capable of being persuaded to modify their attitudes or behaviour as a result of the public relations activity. (Harrison, 2000:46)

Those publics, or audiences, are all the organisations and individuals with whom the business, the charity, the local authority, the government, the school has to communicate. The media are not strictly one of the publics, but a conduit through which others are reached. This means that media relations has to be considered one of the most important PR functions. And it is media “relations”, building relationships based on mutual understanding in order to communicate messages effectively, rather than simply sending out press releases.

L’Etang (2004) who is the leading authority on the development of PR in Britain, states that public relations is the practice of “presenting the public face of an organisation” and the “articulation of its aims and objectives”.

The currency of public relations is information. Much of this work is carried out through media relations: positioning the organisation as an information source on issues relevant to its operation....Public relations serves an educational and rhetorical role by providing the media with timely material packaged in a form that facilitates media use. The symbiotic relationship with the media is crucial and of great sociological significance. (2004:2)

Developing that relationship with the media, and providing timely material, are among the key factors of the schools and PR project developed at Huddersfield University.

PR also incorporates crisis management, event management, internal communications, corporate social responsibility, lobbying, and even marketing and advertising, which

come under the PR umbrella. As a recognisable activity it is widely undertaken by people in all walks of life, as outlined by Davis (2004:2)

- Professional practitioners employed in every corner of the public, private and not-for-profit sectors of the economy
- Managers and members of staff whose work includes an element of public relations responsibility and/or activity
- Volunteers who undertake public relations activities without pay in order to obtain and increase support for their interests and causes
- Individuals who wish to advance private interests on behalf of themselves or someone whom they represent

Davis discusses reputation (which, as we shall see, is critical in developing public perception of schools), insisting that image, identity and reputation are closely linked:

The identity contributes to the image and both condition the reputation. It is a popular adage that positive reputations take a long time to create but may be destroyed very quickly, the implication being that attention to detail in all reputation-making situations is highly advisable. (2004:29)

Moving an organisation forward, or encouraging an organisation to operate more transparently and communicate more effectively requires the co-operation of all staff (and particularly so in an education context). Smith and Mounter (2005) insist that an informed and engaged workforce produces better results. “Unless your people understand what your organisation is seeking to achieve and the part they have to play, arriving at your hoped-for corporate destination will not be a foregone conclusion.” (p2).

And re-inforcing the message that PR needs to be an integral part of any management operation, they say that responsibility for internal, as with other communications, should lie with the chief executive (who, in the school context, is the head teacher).

Experts in the field believe commitment or the lack of it on the part of senior management and their willingness to devote time and resources to the internal communications function will determine its and the organisation's success. (2005:46)

But perhaps the most succinct definition of PR was articulated recently by Douglas Smith, a senior Westminster lobbyist and political adviser in a guest lecture at Huddersfield University: "Public relations is about performance recognition – being good, and then telling people about it." (Smith, Feb 2008). In this short sentence he dismisses any notion that "spin doctoring" can be used as a PR device to mask organisational shortcomings. For PR today to be effective, the product, service, organisation or individual being promoted has to be intrinsically of worth, to have some value. And that is why, increasingly, PR professionals are working at the heart of organisations, helping to develop honest and transparent policies which they will be able to promote.

In spite of their wide range of publics (audiences) with whom they must communicate effectively, and in spite of a clear necessity to present an open, transparent and positive image, schools have been slow to appreciate the benefits of developing a PR strategy. Consequently, there has been little published so far which relates specifically to schools and public relations, although Peter Clark's contemporaneous account of the troubles at The Ridings School in the 1990s was an inevitable choice (Clark, 1998).

McClellan and Gann (2002) highlight the change in attitude; pressure on schools to be publicly accountable for their policies and results has inevitably led to more institutions being thrust into the media spotlight. They – a journalist and an education consultant – also point to the “information revolution” both in the technological advances and in the right to freedom of access to information, each of which impacts on organisations such as schools. And they examine the traditional barriers to the release of information:

Schools and media organisations need each other and feed off each other. They have more interests in common than areas of conflict. Yet they are often seen as being in conflict. Many schools still see it as a priority to ‘keep out of the papers’ – except for prize day and the opening of the new school library. A call from a local journalist as often as not sends the shutters up. A call from a national tabloid can induce panic. (2002:1)

It is this misconception which this research project aims to address.

McClellan and Gann use case studies to examine areas where the relationship between schools and the media have been helpful or otherwise. They also look at the historical context, highlighting the precise moment, in 1976, when schools were thrust into the political arena, in a speech by the then Prime Minister Jim Callaghan. Until then, say McClellan and Gann, everyone knew what they wanted from schools. “There was little or no debate outside the profession about the content of education – about what schools were supposed to give to children.” (p7). The PM’s speech, at Ruskin College, Oxford in October 1976, asked what the public (and the government) had a right to expect of the education profession. The controversial nature of the speech lay largely in the hands of its author, Bernard Donoghue whose polarized view (according to McClellan and Gann)

was that education was being ruined by “a bunch of middle class ideologues who did not themselves have a proper experience of state education”. (p8)

The major impact of the speech was to increase the public accountability of schools, and was followed by legislation under the Conservative governments of 1979-97 which included local management of schools, and national benchmarks and external testing, removing power from the local authorities. Head teachers were henceforth to work in partnership with lay governors (including those representing parents, and the local community), and as a result, the local communities developed a greater awareness of the schools in their midst.

McClellan and Gann say that those schools which gained unwanted national publicity in the second half of the twentieth century were “those where either a philosophy of education was being implemented which failed to take with it current local thinking, or where order had broken down” (p13). They suggest that by the 1990s it would have been expected that there was a greater sophistication in the way schools dealt with the press, in the light of high-profile instances. In fact, most state schools still relied on the LEA press office if things went wrong. The failure of that dependency was brought to a head by the crisis at the Ridings school in Halifax which began in 1996, (and has led – November 2007, to the announcement by Calderdale MBC that the school will close in two years time.)

The then headteacher of the Ridings, Peter Clark, described his experiences with the media in detail (Clark 1998). The Ridings hit the headlines after failing an Ofsted inspection which in itself was partly the result of an inappropriate amalgamation of two separate schools. Pupils' lack of achievement was the focus of media attention, until the pupils themselves and their unruly behaviour in the presence of TV cameras and reporters, made the news instead. (There was some evidence that the media encouraged unruly "performance" from the pupils, in fact.)

In a decidedly hothouse atmosphere, Clark found that when he started to work with the media, rather than allowing them to set the agenda, there was a marked change in the way the school was portrayed. "The coverage was much more positive: it began to concentrate on the issues and how we hoped to tackle them and less on the sensationalist School from Hell, or Superhead angles" (1998:68).

Say McClellan and Gann:

What seems to have happened in this dramatic example of school-media relationships was that disorder could be fostered by the press in the interests of an initially 'good' story, precisely because there was no sense of collegiate responsibility in the school – neither among the pupils, nor the staff, nor much of the LEA. Clark was able to persuade the stakeholders that their best interests lay in collectivity and a shared sense of belonging – feelings fostered, ironically, by the siege mentality which was the only sensible reaction to the media...From now on, just as in an effectively functioning family, visitors found that behaviour actually improved in the presence of outsiders. (2002 :16)

Mike Baker was the education correspondent for The Guardian for 18 years. He recently presented a series of three TV programmes, Behind the Headlines, in which he examined crisis issues at three schools, including The Ridings. Writing about this in Education



Guardian (How to ride out a media storm: Education Guardian September 25, 2007), he recalled the situation from the media viewpoint. Teachers had been ordered not to speak to the press and at that stage the head refused to give interviews or access (before Clark was brought in). So when a cameraman infamously captured a video shot of a girl flicking a V-sign at the head, “no one was able to explain that the girl had been excluded from another school and had no loyalty to a new head”.

Panorama’s semi-secret filming of apparently chaotic classrooms was open to misinterpretation, too, because no one could explain that these were not normal lessons but pupils waiting to go home after they had been told that the school was closing temporarily. (Guardian 25/9/07)

Baker wrote that Liz Meech was education correspondent for BBC Leeds and it was her cameraman who took the V-sign shot.

She argues that if the head had given interviews and allowed controlled access, the media would not have been camped outside and that shot would never have happened. This is underlined by the experience of Peter Clark. He had help, first from a government press officer and then from a BBC producer who suggested allowing controlled “pooled” access. Clark was shrewd enough to take that advice and the media circus, happy to have got its pictures, moved on. He also quickly learned that the media are always looking for the next stage in the story. They had done the ‘Ridings is a shambles’ story; now they wanted to do a ‘Ridings in recovery’ story. He found the media very helpful in promoting the school’s new image to local parents. (Guardian 25/9/07).

The Ridings’ problems were far from solved by media relationships, of course. Much blame has been laid on the LEA for poor support and for fostering divisive policies by allowing the continued operation of several grammar schools in the area, creating a damaging two-tier system. But Clark was certainly proved right in the short term.

I will return to the issue of crisis management further in this literature review in a more general context. But first, brief mention of a practical text. Tim Devlin has been associated with the Independent Schools Information Service for many years, and has run courses on marketing and promotion for their members. He produced a practical guide, *Public Relations and Marketing for Schools*, (1998) and while he shares the view that good media relations are necessary, his involvement tends towards marketing and advertising. This is perhaps natural in a field where the “clients” – independent schools – may well have adequate budgets to spend on advertising in order to attract customers.

There is also more emphasis on targeting, and attracting the target audience, than might generally be the case within the state sector where, largely, pupils attend the neighbourhood school. (The exception here might be in London. The needs and problems of schools in London will be addressed in the chapter on the Guardian Conference.)

Devlin does emphasise the importance of research and planning in a public relations campaign and this, of course, is critical to all successful PR. Again, schools in the independent sector might have the financial resources and available staff to carry out detailed research and preparation. In state schools, as this study will show, there is no spare money in the budget, and seldom any staff with adequate time. This project is attempting to show to the schools involved that the time burden need not be considerable once good media relations have been established; and that help can be sought from volunteers among the parents, the governors and other members of the school

community. (The Huddersfield network group of schools is fortunate to have the benefit of well-trained students to initiate their PR campaigns, of course!)

There is an organisation for PR professionals working with or within education, EMPRA (<http://www.empira.co.uk>) but it is largely concerned with post-14 provision, FE colleges and universities. While the key principles are the same, few schools can afford to employ PR professionals to develop strategies for them.

Those who can afford to pay for professional help are largely in the independent sector, but nevertheless the key messages and principles apply, and web-based reading has included websites of organisations which purport to be educational specialists. One such is Livewire PR whose managing director, Richenda Wood, believes a proactive public relations strategy can improve a school's visibility and in a feature in PR Week (September 24, 2006) she re-iterated the essential characteristics of such a strategy. She says that choosing a child's school is one of the most important decisions a parent makes. With such a critical audience, schools need to reflect on the benefits a good reputation can bring.

Public relations as a profession has existed for years, but its influence in schools is fairly new, mainly due to a misconception as to what exactly public relations entails. According to the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, "Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you." It is clear that this definition is appropriate for schools. With the publication of league tables and the naming and shaming of failing schools in newspapers, educational establishments are continually subjected to public scrutiny. If a positive reputation can encourage pupils to attend a school, then it is crucial that educational establishments learn how to control external perceptions. (PR Week, 24/9/ 2006)

It is worth repeating in this context the statement made by Stephen Ball at the Huddersfield University Schools and PR Conference:

Schools ignore public relations at their peril. We have moved into an age in which we cannot control all of the messages about our schools; students and parents are being encouraged to post their views about us on the web; if we fail to create positive messages and a strong impression we will be very vulnerable to minorities who might seek to damage us. We are being negligent if we fail to recognise the need for PR. (Ball, 2006)

This leads us back to the emphasis on establishing and maintaining an organisation's reputation. Dozier, Grunig and Grunig(1995) quote Cutlip, Center and Broom (1994) whose definition of PR established it was a very distinct concept from marketing: "the management function that establishes and maintains mutually beneficial relationships between an organisation and publics on whom its success or failure depends." (p71).

Dozier, Grunig and Grunig believe that "top communicators must play advanced organisational roles of communication manager and senior advisor. The communication manager role consists of formal authority to manage the communication function and make communication policy decisions. Top communicators in this role hold themselves accountable for the success or failure of communication programs." (p 107)

This emphasises the principle that PR is not an adjunct activity to be carried out by a separate staff or team somewhere down the corridor, but that PR must be at the heart of an organisation and must be embraced by senior managers. This is why it was important

to invite heads and school managers to the Huddersfield University conference; admin staff (or, in some cases, Huddersfield students on placements) can carry out PR programmes, but the principles must be profoundly embedded and implemented at senior level.

Dozier, Grunig and Grunig also point to examples of where crises can change communication and organisational character. They carried out case studies which provided important insights: “The team found that crises and upheavals simultaneously create opportunities for excellence to flourish and organizational cultures to become more participative.” (p187). This indeed was reflected in the experience at The Ridings School, as previously mentioned, (although that strategy was not maintained.)

In Britain today the crisis management experts are recognised to be Regester and Larkin. They write of the rise of the precautionary principle (Regester and Larkin, 2002) and while they are describing businesses here, it has to be remembered that secondary schools are multi-million pound businesses operating in a competitive marketplace:

Businesses should understand that successful organisations are those which are outward-facing and which understand not only who their audiences are, but also what they think and what they want. So why are they so often surprised by controversy? Probably because they are used to rational decision-making based on technical and scientific data. They fail to understand that an issue can be viewed in many different ways and that emotion is a powerful changemaker. ( p22)

Regester and Larkin believe that the balance has to be redressed “and this can only be done through early and open communication.”

Policymakers need to work in ways to which the public can relate and demonstrate both competence and honest. Unless they do, the gap between their own efforts and the machinations of the media and other self-interested groups will grow ever larger, and ‘caution’ will undermine progress. (p23)

Other references include Don Stacks’ Primer of Public Relations Research (see bibliography). Stacks is the leading PR research methodologist and he insists that the role of research has become increasingly important as public relations “has transitioned from a technical to a management function” (p4).

In summary, the key points of this literature review are to examine what precisely is meant by public relations; to consider the emphasis on the building and maintaining of reputation; to examine how organisations should communicate with their various publics; and to assess how schools in particular need to address these issues in their dealings with their own stakeholders.

## Methodology

As outlined previously, the aims of this study are as follows:

- To examine the nature of communications between school managers and stakeholders
- To analyse attitudes among school managers about their relationship with various stakeholders
- To evaluate the development of a network of local schools willing to try and implement PR practices with the help of final year media students.

It is also hoped that this study will encourage school managers to be more pro-active in their relationships with the media, which will then enable a more positive response in times of crisis. This project may be described as action research, as it meets the four defining characteristics, according to Denscombe (2003:73/74): that it is practical, that it embraces change as an integral part of the research, that there is a cyclical loop “in which initial findings generate possibilities for change which are then implemented and evaluated as a prelude to further investigation”, and that there is participation by practitioners.

Denscombe (p74) quotes Somekh, (1995:43) on the integrated nature of action research:

Action research rejects the concept of a two-stage process in which research is carried out first by researchers and then in a separate second stage the knowledge generated from the research is applied by practitioners. Instead, the two processes of research and action are integrated.

Of course, as Denscombe points out (p75) simply being “practical” would not set apart a project from other approaches to research; the research needs to be undertaken “as part of practice rather than a bolt-on addition to it”.

To accord with the spirit of action research, the researcher needs to investigate his or her own practices with a view to altering these in a beneficial way. (p74)

This, I believe, underpins the “organic” nature of this project in which practice, both on the part of the lead researcher and the active participants, is changing as a result of findings made so far. The relationship between the department of media and journalism and the network of secondary schools is evolving, while both the opinions and the behaviour of the school managers involved is changing in response to the ongoing project.

While Denscombe then points out that “the critical reflection of the practitioner...can also involve an evaluation of changes just instigated, which can, in their own right, prompt further research”, but that “this is something of an ideal and that, in reality action research often limits itself to discrete, one-off pieces of research”(p76), I believe it would be fair to say that the schools and PR project has an ongoing nature which is constantly being reviewed, updated and adapted in the light of further evidence.

Denscombe says (p77) that the participatory nature of action research “is probably its most distinctive feature....Action research insists that practitioners must be participants, not just in the sense of taking part in the research but in the sense of being a partner in the



research.” This, too, appears to validate the schools and PR project. He does point to one of the disadvantages of action research (p81) in that

The integration of research with practice limits the feasibility of exercising controls over factors relevant to the research. The setting ... generally does not allow for the variables to be manipulated or for controls to be put in place, because the research is conducted not alongside routine activity but actually as part of that activity.

He also writes (p82) that the action researcher “is unlikely to be detached and impartial in his or her approach to the research”. This report will make quite clear where there are elements of partiality, and to what extent they contribute to the “organic” and multi-faceted nature of the project.

Stringer, whose work will be quoted in support of the methodology, says that action research, in its most effective forms, “provides the means by which stakeholders explored their experience, gain greater clarity and understanding of events and activities, and use those extended understandings to construct effective solutions to the problem(s) on which the study was focussed.” (2007:20).

According to Stringer (2007:19) “action research is grounded in a qualitative research paradigm whose purpose is to gain greater clarity and understanding of a question, problem or issue.”

..action research is necessarily based on localized studies that focus on the need to understand *how* things are happening, rather than merely *what* is happening, and to understand the ways that stakeholders – the different people concerned with the issue – perceive, interpret, and respond to events related to the issue investigated.

It was the first aim of this study to understand the nature of communication between schools and their various stakeholders, to assess the level and success of that communication process. As Stringer says (2007:20):

By incorporating the perspectives and responses of key stakeholders as an integral part of the research process, a collaborative analysis of the situation provides the basis for deep-seated understandings that lead to effective remedial action.

The schools involved in this study were invited to share their experiences and, in some cases, explain their reticence, or even fears, in relation to open and transparent communication, particularly with the media. Stringer (2007:29) writes:

When we seek to organize any set of activities within an organizational or community setting, we need to examine the type, nature and quality of relationships among clients, practitioners, administrators, and other stakeholders. At the base of a productive set of relationships is people's ability to feel that their ideas and agendas are acknowledged and that they can make worthwhile contributions to the common enterprise. This, ultimately, is at the core of the processes of a democratic society.

This was at the heart of the Calder High School project, an integral part of the wider study, where some considerable emphasis was placed both on internal communications, and on advising the staff of the importance of using public relations to raise the image and reputation of the school, and consequently the morale of both staff and students.

Stringer (p30) quotes Habermas on positive change and the fundamental conditions for effective communication, being understanding (the receiver can understand what is being communicated); truth (the information is accurate and not a fabrication); sincerity (the communicator is sincere in his or her attempts to communicate and has no hidden

agendas); and appropriateness (the manner, style and form of communication are appropriate to the people, the setting and the activity). I would argue that this is effectively the current philosophy of the public relations profession (especially in the light of the incorporation of its national body, now the *Chartered* Institute of Public Relations), in a field which is striving to cast off notions of propaganda and “spin”, and emphasise the need for transparency and mutual understanding.

### **The first stage**

The methodology involved the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data, the quantitative being in the initial stages in the pilot project at Calder High School.

This was undertaken in the autumn term 2005 by final year undergraduates Ruth Gross and Jenna Litchfield under my supervision. They reported directly to the recently-appointed head teacher, Stephen Ball, who had seen the benefits of good relations with the local media at his previous post in Burnley, Lancashire.

At Calder High it was felt that there was potential for celebrating and sharing the school’s considerable successes with the local community, and improving communication with parents and carers. It was also considered necessary to convince many of the staff of the wisdom of a more open policy and break down some traditional barriers. As one staff member told the research team: “We are professionals at what we do. We don’t need the scrutiny of outsiders. The papers always report things wrongly, and parents would be given more information if they asked for it.”

The objectives of the exercise were:

- To improve methods of communication internally and externally
- To build awareness of school events and achievement
- Develop a raised profile of the school among parents, students, journalists and local residents. “A good reputation raises expectations about the organisation’s success and the organisation’s success will enhance its own reputation”. (Gregory,. p2 2000)

They set about their own supervised project which involved:

- Weekly meetings in school
- Increase in news coverage.
- Fundraisers/Events
- Website Promotion
- Newsletters
- Pupil Training and Post Audit Action
- Crisis and Issue Management

The results and subsequent developments will be explored in the following chapter.

The methods used were:

1:i. **A communications audit of parents and carers** to determine their views (qualitative responses) and also to determine the numbers with access to the internet, and the numbers who would prefer an electronic form of communication (quantitative data)

To encourage a worthwhile response, a £50 voucher from a local computer company was offered as a prize in a draw into which all those who returned questionnaires would be entered. This led to a return rate of more than 200, double the response previously experienced by the school when sending out reply-forms.

Parents/carers were asked if they believed that the school communicated well with them; how they usually found out about school events; if they had missed events by not receiving information on time; their preferred methods of contact; if they had access to the internet, used email and viewed the school website; and if they read school news in the local paper.

The advantages of using a survey sent home via “pupil post” with the prize draw incentive meant that an increased number of responses was obtained. However, in a school of more than 1200 pupils, therefore a parent/carer population of around 2,000, this is still disappointing. An assessment of parent/carer communication can be found in the following chapter.

1:ii. **A quantitative survey of coverage of news** about the school carried in the local weekly paper, the Hebden Bridge Times, and the daily Halifax Evening Courier, during the period September-December 2004, and comparing it with coverage in the same period in 2005.

This was carried out after the research team had met with the editor and the chief reporter of the Hebden Bridge Times to discuss coverage of school news, and how they would wish that news to be delivered to them. It was negotiated that the weekly paper would carry a page each month dedicated to Calder High news and written by staff/students.

A measurement of the number of column centimetres devoted to CHS revealed that in the first period (2004) there was a total of 850 c.c (in the HBT alone, nothing in the Courier); and that in the second period, following the introduction of the pro-active approach, this increased by 903c.c to 1753 c.c (in both papers. The Courier carried only one news item, and that was the Ofsted report.)

It must be pointed out at this stage that all of this coverage was of a positive nature. Measurement of press coverage is standard practice in Public Relations, and evaluation then assesses the positive/negative nature of that coverage. This is a field open to qualitative debate, and there are ongoing attempts to create computer software packages which can more accurately carry out the “evaluation”. A professional body, AMEC, represents PR companies involved in this field.

1:iii. **Focus group discussions** with the senior management team and faculty leaders at Calder High School to determine attitudes towards internal and external communications.

The research team found that while the head teacher had a positive attitude towards media relations, and was keen to explore ways to improve communication with parents, this was not shared by the school leadership team. As reported above, one member of staff said: “We are professionals at what we do. We don’t need the scrutiny of outsiders. The papers always report things wrongly, and parents would be given more information if they asked for it.” (Interviews with teachers, Sept 2005). There was a general sense that it was wiser NOT to speak to the media; and that parents of secondary school children did not wish to be involved in their children’s education.

The discussions with members of staff were of an informal nature; notes were taken by the student researchers. It was felt that this approach was more relaxed and relaxing for all parties, and staff regarded the occasions as opportunities for conversation, rather than meetings to which they had been summoned. (And teachers in schools are especially hostile to the imposition of yet more meetings!)

This method is justified by Stringer (2007:75)

Participant observation requires a form of observation distinctly different from observational routines common in experimental research or clinical practice, where the things to be observed are specifically defined. Observation in action research is more ethnographic, enabling an observer to build a picture of the lifeworld of those being observed and an understanding of the way they ordinarily go about their everyday activities.

The research team stressed the importance of being open and honest with the media, so that in the event of a major incident, the school would be able to set the news agenda and not be in a defensive position. They also stressed the importance of celebrating the school's achievements in the local community. They made a presentation to the staff on "news values", explaining how to recognise items of news value, and how these would be appreciated by local journalists.

The advantages of this approach were heightened by the enthusiasm of the head teacher for the project. Without that encouragement it would be difficult to bring senior staff on board. That was why it was important that heads and/or senior school managers subsequently attended the Huddersfield conference.

These messages were re-iterated by the head teacher when he subsequently addressed the Huddersfield University conference (see below). It was, obviously, of considerable advantage that the head teacher at CHS is a highly respected figure in the education field, and an acknowledged expert on leadership issues.

1:iv. **Ongoing interviews** with the chief reporter of the Hebden Bridge Times; the editor of the Hebden Bridge Times and Todmorden News (editor of both papers); and the Calder Valley district reporter of the Halifax Evening Courier. The research team met monthly with the local media, assessing the impact of what was being delivered, how



they might achieve more and better coverage, and what the media team wanted to know from the school.

These interviews aimed to determine how and when the media would accept news items from the school; in what format they should be delivered; and what each respective newspaper actually deemed “news” to be. (The evening paper, for example, expected a greater degree of community-wide interest.) The interviews also determined attitudes towards “bad” news, and the management of crisis issues when they occurred. Again, these meetings were of an informal nature, and followed the style of journalistic interview techniques, which were familiar to both parties, with the students using reporters’ notebooks (although not, at this stage, using shorthand; this would be a really valuable skill in situations where the presence of a tape recorder can sometimes appear intimidating to the interviewee.)

The advantage of local contacts was particularly important. It has to be said that subsequent efforts to engage sixth form students in the preparation and writing of news releases for the local paper have been only partially successful, and that the continued success of the school page in the HBT has been achieved with the efforts of the research team, in association with the head teacher’s PA.

## **The second stage**

As a result of the pilot project, and in response to requests from a number of head teachers in the area, a network of school head teachers and managers was formed, which might be deemed a focus group. As Stringer suggests, (p73) focus groups “provide another means of acquiring information and might be characterized as a group interview”.

Participants in a focus group should each have opportunities to discuss their experience and present their perspective on the issues discussed.

The group was partially self-selecting, in that they were the ones who made approaches to the media team at Huddersfield University. The remainder of the group was selected as follows. A mass mail-out invitation was sent to the head teacher of every secondary school in the Kirklees, Calderdale, Wakefield, Bradford and Oldham LEAs. That is, every head teacher who could be named and contacted via the school’s website. It was decided that this would be the first filtering determinant; we chose, for simplicity, only those who already had an active website and an active email address. (It was through this process that we learned of the deficiencies of several schools in failing to present adequate – and even, in some cases, accurate – information on the web, the very first communication portal for most queries.)

(The list of invitees was drawn up with the assistance of the Huddersfield University schools and colleges liaison department, as this provided an opportunity to develop and improve links with feeder schools in the area.)

The invitation was issued to attend a conference in Huddersfield in December 2006, and that places would be allocated on a first-come, first served basis. In fact, we had 50 positive responses, of whom eventually 20 attended. (It would have been possible to accommodate about 30, but some were unable to make that date; and in one instance, a respondent had to cancel at short notice when his school was subjected to a sudden Ofsted inspection!)

Before the conference, these heads (or their nominees; several school business managers were to attend) completed a simple questionnaire. The questions posed were as follows:

2:i. What methods do you use to communicate with parents?

1: Letters sent home by pupils

2: Letters sent by post

3: Email

4: School website

5: Meetings (Parent Teacher Associations/Parents Networks) other than curriculum-report parents' evenings.

2:ii. Do you believe that your school communicates effectively with parents?

2:iii. Do you believe that your school's achievements and successes are celebrated in the local community via the media?

2:iv. Do you have a media relations policy?

The participants then attended the conference at Huddersfield University, organised to allow head teachers and other senior staff (managers, communications officers) to analyse their own communications practices, and offer an insight into how public

relations can be used to improve a school's communication with its various audiences, internal and external, and in doing so raise its image and reputation.

Also in attendance were three members of the Media and Journalism department's Public Relations advisory panel, Adrian Roxan (freelance), Sue Norton (NHS) and Charlotte Taylor (HR Media). These are practising professionals who spend time with the PR tutors advising on curriculum development, and helping with work placements. Also in attendance was Prof John Thompson from the University's Business School; Cath Mercer, from Film in Education (who had been a delegate at the Media Trust conference the previous week, and asked to be invited to this event); and Jane Murphy, schools and colleges liaison officer.

Student representatives from years two and three of the degree course BA (Hons) Public Relations also attended and contributed. Those attending were given presentations by the Calder High head teacher Stephen Ball on crisis management ; and by Ruth Gross and Jenna Litchfield on the pilot project .

My introduction covered reputation management, news values, reaching key audiences, and using new technology to improve communication. Notes were taken of subsequent sessions and a report sent out to the heads attending.

The CHS head teacher Stephen Ball spoke of the need to develop good media relationships before crises occurred, with an illustration of an incident when a student let

off a smoke-bomb in a corridor, and the subsequent evening newspaper headline which ran: “School bomb puts nine in hospital”. In fact, nine students known to be asthma sufferers were checked by paramedics in an ambulance on the school drive, and all were cleared. He concluded that pro-active media relations would have led to a less dramatic and more factually accurate reportage.

The guests were also given the opportunity to take part in a mock-crisis management exercise in the TV studio. Two volunteer head teachers took the hot-seat and were interviewed by a member of the Media and Journalism teaching staff, Martin Cooper, who is also a BBC radio journalist. They were questioned about a hypothetical incident involving a pupil at a school who had taken an overdose of drugs on school premises. The interviews were filmed by another tutor and subsequently played back, to illustrate the importance of dealing with hostile media questioning.

Discussion following the presentations and this exercise focussed on the nature of communication between schools and key stakeholders, and examined attitudes towards relationships with outside audiences. Notes from this discussion were taken and points raised included:

3:i. Why do the local media have a hostile attitude? PR practitioners who had also worked as journalists discussed news values, and how good, personal relations with local journalists will enable an organisation to put across its side of the story.

3:ii. How can we develop a relationship with the local media? Again, the emphasis was on building a mutually-supportive relationship, in which a school can provide many items of a positive nature to fill the news pages and in doing so will be treated with greater respect should a crisis occur.

3:iii. How can we engage with the local community? Andy Green led the discussion here, outlining ways in which secondary schools could take a lead in community projects, while fulfilling the needs of the developing Extended Schools agenda.

3:iv. Where will we find the time/money to implement this? Stephen Ball pointed out that communication was a priority, and need not be overly time-consuming:

We have moved into an age in which we cannot control all of the messages about our schools; students and parents are being encouraged to post their views about us on the web; if we fail to create positive messages and a strong impression we will be very vulnerable to minorities who might seek to damage us. We are being negligent if we fail to recognise the need for PR. (Ball, 2006)

Following the conference, the delegates were again asked to complete a questionnaire whose results indicated that all would reconsider the way in which they communicated with parents and the media, and that they did see the need for a media relations policy. As we shall see, several attendees subsequently requested help from the PR team at Huddersfield.

A report on the conference, written by one of the students, was subsequently published in the national magazine, *Behind the Spin* (Macintyre, 2007; appendix xiv).

### **The third stage**

Subsequently the focus group of head teachers has kept in contact informally with the research team, either by personal visits, emails or telephone calls. The process is ongoing, and a second conference is to be staged at Huddersfield University, when the schools involved will be invited to share their experiences, and to discuss what – if any – changes have been implemented, and the effect those might have had.

On occasion individual schools have called or emailed to ask for specific advice in relation to contacting the media, particularly in dealing with sensitive or potentially damaging issues. In this way the research team is acting as consultant/PR advisor to those schools.

There is also dialogue with those schools who have used/are using student projects to determine PR objectives, and these will be examined in the next chapter.

### Analysis

From the evidence that will be discussed here, it is apparent from primary and other research that many secondary schools have been operating the one-way communication model as defined by Grunig and Hunt (1984) and, unlike most other organisations today, did not appreciate that beneficial communication relies on two-way dialogue, mutual understanding, and the development of relationships ([www.cipr.co.uk](http://www.cipr.co.uk)).

Apart from schools in the independent sector, who need to use PR tactics in order to encourage “customers” in the face of opposition, it appears from this study (see summary of the pilot study, and analysis of attitudes, below) that secondary schools underestimated the significance of communication with parents and the local community, failed to appreciate the beneficial effects of positive media coverage, were consequently at a disadvantage when crises put them in the media spotlight, and generally preferred to operate behind closed doors.

But as Grunig and Hunt (1984), and many others since, state, public relations makes organisations more effective by building relationships with stakeholders. They need to both disseminate to and seek information from their publics in order to operate successfully. When organisations forget or ignore the importance of public relations in their organisational structure, this may often result in dissatisfaction among their publics.

What was also apparent was that the publication of well-meaning advice guidebooks had limited impact on practice in schools. What this study found was that a genuine shift in



attitude and consequent change in practice could be brought about by practical demonstration of successfully applied techniques, and particularly the endorsement of that belief by respected colleagues in the education profession.

For example, one of the schools at the heart of the Guardian Media Trust project (discussed in an earlier chapter) was Elizabeth Garrett Anderson in London. Staff and pupils from the school addressed the conference which, as was outlined previously, was attended by both PR professionals and head teachers and school managers from across Britain. The head teacher, Job Dibb, described then the re-branding exercise which the school had undertaken, how the Guardian's fashion desk had brought in a designer, Bella Freud, to work with pupils on new uniform designs, and how a new logo and new signs were in place. She told the conference (Nov 2006): "It would be easy to dismiss the project as an exercise aimed at promoting the school without any real substance. This is not how we perceive it, and hope that the process as well as the outcomes will help us to focus on our central mission and purpose."

A year later the school was featured in *The Guardian/Education* (9/10/ 2007) in an article about school uniform, dissent, and new government guidance on the wearing of religious symbols in school. A photo showed four pupils wearing variations on the uniform theme, which allow both headcover and the hijab – the Islamic headscarf. It illustrates how they had addressed a PR issue, "brand identity" (ie uniform) in an inclusive way, indicating that public relations at its best is genuinely about relationships and mutual understanding.

### How schools communicate: communicating with parents

An analysis of the results to date of this research project will begin with the issue of communication between secondary schools and parents/carers (Chapter 3:1:i)

Detailed results from the questionnaire at Calder High School in 2005, and a detailed analysis of those, are summarized here. The main points from the survey are as follows (while noting the disappointing return rate, from a school population of around 1200):

- i. Of the 201 forms returned, the highest percentage (36%) were from the Year 7 cohort, and the response rate dropped year by year to just 4% from parents of sixth form pupils. This was predictable, as parents bring a habit of school involvement from primary school, and this inevitably declines (not least through pressure from teenage offspring, who are often embarrassed by parental contact with school.)
- ii. At this stage – before the introduction of email correspondence with parents, and prior to development of the website – some 52% of those responding believed that the school communicated well. Of course, those parents who failed to respond at all, may not have received the form, due to the variable success rate of pupil post.
- iii. This section covered WHAT the parents wanted to know about, mostly school developments and student achievements.
- iv. Preferred method of contact. At this stage, the majority still preferred pupil-post letter correspondence. However, the school has subsequently introduced regular

- emailings, and unsubstantiated evidence is that messages are much more successfully reaching their target. (The school is about to conduct a follow-up survey, in the summer term 2008.)
- v. A high percentage (71.5%) read the Hebden Bridge Times, although at that stage only 46% claimed to have seen the CHS page. As this page has now run every month for more than two years, there is unsubstantiated evidence that its impact is now quite considerable. The percentage increase in coverage during the term of the pilot study was impressive. More details of the media relationship will follow.
  - vi. Parents' development group. The survey reported that 20% of those replying would be interested in a parents' group. Respondents then listed issues which they wanted to raise. These include issues which are clearly personal matters.

#### The Parents' Network

This was set up at CHS in response to the survey, and was enthusiastically fostered by the head teacher. He believed that parents and carers at secondary level wanted more than a fund-raising PTA, and he was (uniquely) prepared to offer participation in some parts of policy making. The Network has run for just over two years now, but with limited success. For all that parents claimed to want involvement, attendance was only ever patchy and never representative. Meetings were held at least each half term, and to date parents have been involved in policy-making decisions about uniform, a new behaviour for learning strategy, and homework.

However, the meetings have been notable for the personal issues raised by a minority of parents, issues which correctly should be raised with heads of year or heads of faculty, and not in an open forum. The unrepresentative nature of attendance has since led to a decision by the head and the chair of the Network that a different approach needs to be taken. The school is due (April 2008) to distribute an extensive survey of parental attitudes on all aspects of life, combining this with a survey among staff and pupils, to garner clear perceptions, and potentially to enlist the help of all parties in moving the school from the Ofsted-rated “good” category, to “outstanding”. (Interview with head teacher, April 17).

Responses to this survey – which is being widely publicised, in letters home, on the school website, and in the local media, in an attempt to elicit maximum response rate – will determine the future of the Network meetings. Poor attendance to date may well be due to a general approval of what the school is achieving, or attempting to achieve. It certainly reinforces the notion that parents are much less inclined to become involved beyond primary level. On the other hand, there are determined government initiatives to encourage involvement, particularly in the light of recent research about parental engagement in raising attainment. Alternatives are being studied at CHS and, no doubt, elsewhere.

### Communicating with the media

The research team had made contact with the local paper (Hebden Bridge Times) and introduced themselves to the editor, and the news editor, and also to the local reporter for the Halifax Evening Courier. They made a presentation to sixth form media students, encouraging them to look for news items that might be happening around them, and to write about them for the paper. They also made a presentation to staff, stressing the importance of media relations and showing how good local publicity could enhance the reputation of the school.

It must be pointed out that just two weeks into the project at CHS, there was an Ofsted inspection. It was the first in Calderdale under the new “short notice” arrangements, short in this case meaning three days. The students volunteered to postpone their research until after the HMI visit, but the head insisted that they stay to see the process through. Following the inspection and production of the Ofsted report, it was the students who wrote the press release for the local papers, and achieved prominent coverage.

One of the outcomes was an arrangement for the school to be given a page every four weeks dedicated to school news, on the understanding that it would be delivered in appropriate style and format, ready to publish. This page has been maintained ever since, through an arrangement between the school and the PR teaching team at Huddersfield University.

As mentioned earlier, the results of the quantitative survey of news coverage (1:ii) reveal the benefits of a pro-active media relations policy in raising the profile of an organisation by determined and systematic release of newsworthy items to media outlets. The editor is clearly appreciative of well-written, newsworthy material which is delivered on time, and which is of genuine news value to the local community. She said:

The school is a focal point in our community, and its achievements deserved to be acknowledged widely. There is a great deal happening within the school which is of news value, and I have feedback from readers that they enjoy seeing this material. It is an excellent partnership for us, and we are pleased that the school continues to recognise newsworthy stories and forwards them to us. (Interview with Editor, Dec 2007).

The news editor, himself a former CHS pupil, said:

Everyone is talking about the school again. This is how it should be. The school should be there at the forefront of the community, not tucked away. People are noticing the good things that are going on. This is really important for the school, for the whole community – and for our paper. (Interview, news editor Dec 2007)

One such item of reader feedback included a letter from a local councillor who was delighted to read so much about the local achievements. Another story in the paper prompted a donation of £1000 from a parent for the refurbishment of a climbing wall in the school sports hall.

### Involving school staff

The focus group discussions with staff (1:iii) have led to a sustained appreciation of the importance of media relationships and sharing news with the community. The school page in the HBT is filled easily each month with material volunteered by staff in different faculties (although interestingly, the expressive arts team is particularly pro-active here, while the head teacher is trying to encourage submissions from the technology faculty as the school is a designated Technology College).

School staff now also encourage pupils to write and submit material themselves, and issues of the local paper regularly carry the “bylines” of pupils, which is of great value for their self esteem (and also useful for university-application personal statements).

So the message about sharing news has clearly been disseminated and built into school practice though again it must be said that this would have been far less successful without the proactive encouragement and enthusiasm of the head teacher.

When “difficult” issues arise, the head teacher and his PA now have a direct line to familiar journalists on both the local weekly and evening newspapers; they have found as a result, a greater degree of understanding and more favourable coverage. A senior reporter with the Halifax Courier said: “It makes our job so much easier when we know that we can get to the heart of the matter and report a situation accurately and quickly

because a local school understands what we are doing – and we understand what they are doing.” (Interview, Nov 2007).

There have been several occasions when “crisis management” has come into play, and when sensationalist and inaccurate news coverage has been avoided because of the school’s determination to set the media agenda. (The most recent involved the disappearance of a highly dangerous chemical from a school lab. The school had to be closed for half a day, and the head decided to contact both the evening and weekly papers himself, rather than wait to be contacted by them once news/rumour had started to circulate in the community. It was a decision subsequently endorsed by the governors.

### Summary of the pilot study

The results of the CHS pilot study can be summarised as follows:

- **Newspaper journalists more accommodating.** This emphasises the “relationship” aspect of media relations, that when a journalist knows the person on the other end of the phone, or at the opposite side of the interview table, there is a greater willingness to listen to points of view and to publish a more balanced picture, rather than necessarily seeking a strong news angle regardless of the complexities involved.
- **School adopted a more pro-active approach to media relations.** The staff are now aware of the importance of maintaining and raising the school’s profile in the local media, and they have learned to recognise “news” values in what is happening in and around the classrooms. Most recently this has included the promotion of a “spring clean” of the local neighbourhood by Year 8 pupils; the inclusion of a sixth former in the world championship winning GB women’s ice-hockey team; the fundraising efforts of a group planning to visit Uganda on a community relations exercise; and the promotion of an international pen-pal scheme following the head’s visit to schools in Odessa in the Ukraine. All of these items were presented to the media relations office for inclusion in the local paper.



- **Head teacher's assistant had media relations incorporated into her job.** This means that there is a dedicated member of staff who collates news items presented by colleagues, and is a now-familiar point of contact for local reporters.
- **The recommendations made have been incorporated into the School Improvement Plan.** This aims to ensure the sustainability of the media relations policy.
- **Recommendations listed as one of the objectives in the Head's Performance Review.** This places the requirement to sustain good communications with the head of the senior management team.
- **Increase in website awareness.** (Interviews with teaching and admin staff, Jan 2007, Jan 2008). Staff are able to assess from daily contact with parents in particular that messages are reaching their audience; they find it invaluable to be able to refer queries, for example, about exam dates or extra-curricular activities, to the relevant page of the site.

Following the project by undergraduates Gross and Litchfield, the head teacher Stephen

Ball said:

The school could not have been happier with the work they did on our behalf. Their work will have a long term and lasting benefit for us and we will be exceptionally grateful to them for many years to come. Our communication – and consequently our relationships – with our stakeholders will improve significantly as a direct result of their work. (Behind the Spin, May 2006).

As mentioned previously, the recommendations made by Gross and Litchfield were incorporated into the School Improvement Plan, and the head teacher's Performance Review, and media relations was added to the job description of the head teachers' PA.

More fundamentally, there has been a significant shift in attitude among all the staff, a much more welcoming approach and a much more positive view of communication generally.

The website has been redesigned and is lively, informative, and updated at least weekly. There are direct contact email addresses for heads of faculty, heads of year, and subject leaders. Messages from school to parents are sent out via email, as well as in hard copy (although it has to be said that there are still complaints about letters discovered months later at the bottom of school bags; about the use of email when not all parents have access to a computer; and about multiple email messages appearing when a family has more than one child in the school!) (Interviews with parents, October 2007))

A monthly newsletter, designed by Gross and Litchfield, has been further developed, and now also incorporates items from a new magazine, Calder Eye, produced entirely by students. An electronic version appears on the website, along with regularly updated school news. ([www.calderhigh.org.uk](http://www.calderhigh.org.uk)). More significantly, there has been a change of attitude, with staff now aware of the need to promote success and achievement; they now provide information for the local newspaper without prompting. They also agree that internal communication among staff in different faculties is considerably improved. (Discussions with staff, both informal and via governors' meetings.)

### **The second stage: analysing school attitudes**

Prior to the Huddersfield University Conference of Dec 2006, heads and school managers completed a short questionnaire (2:i)

All 20 respondents said that they used pupil post and letter post to deliver messages. Only two schools at that stage used email, only three regularly communicated via the school website, and only one had a parents' group.

Did they communicate effectively? Three said "yes", three (frankly) said "no" and 14 said "sometimes".

Only four believed that their school's achievements were celebrated in the local media, and none actually had a media relations policy.

When inviting schools to the Huddersfield conference, the first point of contact was, inevitably, the school website. It became apparent that this first portal was, sometimes, a closed door rather than an inviting entrance, for all stakeholders concerned. One school website presented an incorrect email address for contact. Another carried a photo of the head teacher, but without naming him. Another carried a message of "welcome" from the headteacher, without naming him or her. There were home pages so densely packed with text and information that they were daunting to read; other sites were difficult to navigate; several sites claimed to be "under construction".

These issues were discussed at the Huddersfield conference, and it is notable that the school websites of the participating organisations are all now greatly improved in terms of accessibility, accuracy and navigation. This was in response to a growing awareness

that the website is now the most usual first portal used by “visitors”, that is, parents and potential students; outside organisations; and teachers applying for posts.

Furthermore, the short post-conference survey indicated that all attendees did plan to change the way that they communicated with parents, and with the media; all agreed that a media relations policy was essential; and all wished to have the services of PR students.

Delegates admitted (a large majority) that they had originally been wary of involving the media, and their instinct was usually to close ranks and prevent being transmitted beyond the school gates. The delegate from Horbury School said that this attitude prevailed in spite of the knowledge that rumour would circulate and that the press might sensationalise information gained from third parties.

The delegate from Belle Vue School gave several examples of similar incidents, but admitted at the end of the session that he could clearly see the benefit now of more open and transparent media relationships. The delegates were clearly influenced very strongly by the messages transmitted at the conference. Again, it must be said that the participation of the CHS head teacher, recognised in the local education community for outstanding leadership, was a key feature in that persuasion; as was the involvement of a senior PR professional, Andy Green.

It also became clear that the example of the CHS project encouraged other schools to develop strategies to celebrate publicly their achievements, to engage more readily with

local media, to recognise the potential of websites and email as methods of communication, and to be prepared to answer honestly and transparently when media interest was focussed on them. (Responses from questionnaires, and subsequent emails/phone interviews, Dec 2006/Jan 2007).

The following comments were provided by delegates in addition to the completion of the post-conference survey.

1: *“Part of what I do as Partnership Manager is PR, though it isn’t identified as such. I am becoming more involved in PR and Communications and, in response to this, the school is currently reviewing my Job Description to formalise the process for the future. I would like to learn more. A short course, or part-time or correspondence course on how PR can be used in schools would be really helpful.”*

There was an awareness here already of some importance of PR, and the university response is to consider arranging short-courses for local schools as an enterprise exercise.

2: *“We would be interested in having PR students run a campaign for us. Similarly to Calder High we have suffered some damning press in the past and there is a great need to turn that around. We now intend to run a major Family Learning Programme next year as part of our campaign to increase parental and family*

*involvement in the school. In addition to that, I will be creating a Communications Strategy and Team from scratch in the very near future.”*

Final year undergraduates have worked with this school since on a practical project which aimed to raise awareness of the family learning programme. An assessment has yet to be made on the success or otherwise of increasing family and parental involvement.

- 3: *“There was a student who made two brilliant contributions: One about having pupils involved in all events, so that parents are more likely to attend; The other was that parents don’t always choose schools according to league tables, but will look at the culture of the school as being as important.*
- I’d like to thank you for organising the event. The fact that there were so many Headteachers there shows how needed sessions like this are.”*

(That particular student, mentioned here, is now in fact running a PR campaign for the school as part of her final year practical project.)

- 4: *“We especially need to work on our relationship with parents. The challenge gets even more interesting as we try to involve parents in their sons' education by actually teaching some of them to speak English so they can contribute. All the research points to parental influence as being a major factor in boys' achievement.”*

This school, an inner city school in Bradford, is currently using two Huddersfield students to help them achieve this, again as part of a practical project for their final year of study. Results from their project will be assessed in due course.

5: *“An interesting, informative conference which will change the format of our contact with parents through our regular newsletter.”*

6: *“Great course.....very useful and informative and a cunning way of developing your students..... the studio session was on a par with lifting your surgical gown for a gathering of medical students. I hope it proved worthwhile experience for all. I am certainly going to go back and review our media policy and responses in the light of the conference. “*

The head teacher here was one who volunteered to sit behind the cameras for the mock crisis scenario. She is about to report back on the review of the school’s media policy.

7: *“I am very interested in taking up your offer of students coming into my school to do a similar project to that undertaken at CHS. We are also looking to employ a Business Manager for the first time and so would welcome any Business students expertise in auditing / identifying our business needs and the development of the post and recruitment...please pass my details on to your colleague in the School of Business.”*

This request is yet to be acted upon.

8: *“Thank you for an excellent afternoon, it was time well spent. All items on the agenda were very relevant. I particularly admired Stephen Ball for his honesty and openness in reliving his 'day of hell' for us all to learn from.”*

9: *“I really appreciated the presentation about the Calder High project, and how to deal in a crisis when things go wrong. It is good to network and share ideas, and it would be good to continue this in a support group that gathered for meetings occasionally.”*

(This last point is being developed and a further meeting is planned shortly.)

Subsequently we received a further message from one of the delegates:

Remember you said way back in December, think about having a student for a term? Well, have finally managed to get it to the top of the list with the Head and she has agreed. If you still have a student who is looking for a place, we'd love to have them here for the autumn term. Our main issues are communication around BSF (Building Schools for the Future), where we have a £25m project starting next week and we need to keep positive messages coming out of it.” *A student is currently working with this school, Jan 2008).*

In fact, all the heads and school managers who attended the Huddersfield conference expressed interest in developing a network for future contact, and as shown here a number were very willing to try and implement PR practices with the help of final year media students. What was happening here reflects Stringer's definition of the task of the



research facilitator (p96), that it is to “interpret and render understandable the problematic experiences being considered. Interpretation builds on description through conceptual frameworks that enable participants to make better use of their experiences.”

It is, however, important to make it clear that it would be cynical to attempt to use public relations to mask the reality of situations deriving from poor management; and, in fact, that public relations cannot mask bad practice or poor leadership. A small case study illustrates this point. A situation somewhat similar to that of The Ridings school (discussed elsewhere) exists currently in Lancashire where two previously “rival” schools were merged in what most observers see as a serious mistake. Compounded by a failure to provide adequate premises on time, and a failure to support the new management team of the merged school, problems escalated in the first term of operation. As with The Ridings, unhappy parents took their stories to the local press (while their offspring took advantage of newly-developed social media by swamping weblogs with a wide range of complaints and – sometimes staged – images). The presence of an active BNP in the town further fuelled the problems when they claimed that the troubles were racially based.

This school had been unable to send a representative to the Huddersfield University conference, but I was subsequently invited by the deputy head to offer a some PR advice. I spent some time working with her, suggesting media strategies including developing a relationship with the previously-friendly local paper, and enlisting the help of a local PR consultancy whose staff were known to be supporters of the school; the governors, it seems, had even suggested that money could be spent in that direction.

However, the deputy failed to convince the headteacher, and a “no comment” mentality prevailed in dealing with any difficulties. The local community cannot help but be affected; the school roll is falling, and a significant number of staff have taken early retirement or are on prolonged sick leave. It is recognised locally that strong management and leadership would have prevented some of the problems developing. At the same time, strong leadership would acknowledge that media relations, while not solving the problems, would improve the perception. More importantly, relationships with the parents have been neglected so that damaging misinformation has been allowed to thrive.

### **The third stage: evaluating the development of a network of schools**

It was bringing the school managers and heads together for discussion, and in particular, to hear first hand the experiences of an influential and respected colleague, that provided the “conceptual framework” through which they could appreciate what might need to be done, and what might be possible to do. Discussion continued – usually via email, occasionally by telephone – after receipt of the feedback comments, and invariably led to a request: “What can you do to help us with our particular situation?” This in itself would have been a satisfactory conclusion of the research exercise; we were able to fulfill some of their needs, in a way which has extended our own area of expertise, has enabled students to develop professional skills by tackling crucial issues, and has maintained the

discourse of the network, drawing in other potential participants who have heard about our work.

To date, the following have either been concluded or are still ongoing.

1: The production of a promotional leaflet about a new range of courses at a school in Bradford, including the design, content, and distribution. This was carried out by three students. (Belle Vue)

2: A communications audit for a high school in Leeds. The school was about to re-open with a new building and new name, and the head asked for help with branding, and in particular, with developing a new website. Two students worked with him for a term, analysing and comparing websites of similar schools and drawing up a strategy for further development. (John Smeaton High)

3: A project for a high school in Leeds in which one student is working for a term on developing a range of communication strategies. (Allerton High) This includes the production of a new-style school newsletter .

4. A project for a Huddersfield high school with three PR approaches: to send press releases to the local paper about school events; to redesign the school prospectus; to organise an end-of-year ball for Year 11 students, using event management skills. (Newsome High)

5. A communications audit for a Sheffield school which is being rebuilt, with an emphasis on developing the already good reputation of the school in the catchment area. (Silverdale School)

Furthermore, the schools enthusiastically took up an invitation to a day event at the department of Media and Journalism in June 2007. Staff, and pupils completing Year 12 (ie, those who would be applying to university during the subsequent academic year), were invited to a media day where they could sample a range of courses including Public Relations, Journalism, Radio and TV Production.

The theme for the event was press publicity, and we were assisted by a young actor currently appearing in a TV soap opera who agreed to be “interviewed” by the students. This took place in the TV studio, after initial training sessions when groups of student visitors were taught the rudiments of camera work, interviewing, note taking, sound recording. They subsequently created media products – short videos, radio slots, feature articles, press releases – based on the interview session. The event was greatly appreciated and, it is hoped, might lead to applications from some of the pupils who took part. For the staff, it provided further evidence of the positive role of media training, and in particular, public relations.

Meanwhile, a national event was being planned which, it seemed, would reflect what we had attempted at local level. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations announced that it

was to hold its first one-day seminar dedicated to the issue of school public relations and communications. The seminar was open to state and independent sector schools; local authority communications teams; central government education agencies; and PR agencies. The CIPR invitation highlighted the government's policy of stressing "parental choice" of school places against a background of fragmentation of school types.

While co-operation between schools on matters of educational practice still underpins the ethos of the sector, competition for pupils – or parents – can bring increasing tensions between them. As schools look ever more outwards, initiatives such as extended schools and requirements for sponsorship bring new opportunities and pressures. Yet while many schools have invested heavily in developing key areas of management expertise such as finance, there is sometimes less awareness of how to develop strong public relations and communications practice. ([www.cipr.co.uk](http://www.cipr.co.uk))

Keynote speakers were to be from PR agencies, communications strategists, and the publicity manager for the General Teaching Council for England, Peter Aylmer.

This seminar will examine the key audience groups with which schools need to communicate, consider the role that public relations has to play in addressing current issues, and look forward to the ways in which schools can best be supported in meeting them. ([www.cipr.co.uk](http://www.cipr.co.uk))

The cost of the event was £95 for CIPR members, and £145 for non-members. And it seems that this was to prove prohibitive, as the event was cancelled at short notice. I had hoped to attend but the event coincided with another key national conference to which I was delegated. It was only later, when I asked for a report of the day's proceedings, that Eloise West of the CIPR confided that it had not taken place. There had been a poor response rate, particularly from among schools, she said.

In the light of the research at Huddersfield, it seems that school managers and heads would prefer to learn from the experience of respected colleagues, than to be told “how to do PR” by professionals working in agencies. It is also clear that schools do not have funds in their budgets to accommodate attendance at an event to discuss what they have not yet been convinced is essential practice. It is to be hoped that by example, and by dissemination of good practice at local level, that further networks can be developed to encourage schools to use good PR practice. McClellan and Gann confirm this necessity:

A school’s public profile tells its public the kind of school that it is, its aspirations for its children, the messages that are given out day by day, by default as much as by intention. All schools are now ‘in the spotlight’ – continuously, incessantly. Although this increases the stress on staff and children, it is the necessary corollary of education being valued and being talked about now more than at any time in the past hundred years. Being in the spotlight brings rewards, provided it is seen as part of the school’s mission to communicate to, to enlist and to share its learning with its public. (p96)

This is a very unambiguous message to educationalists that their practice has to be open and transparent, and that there are a great many stakeholders – beyond the parents of the children in any one school – who take a keen interest in what goes on inside the school gates and inside the classrooms. The point about “stress” on staff and children is not necessarily to be seen as a negative one; the exhortation to “good behaviour” in the public eye can apply not just to the pupils, but also to staff whose professional practice and development can improve as a result.

The schools in our “network” are using PR in a number of different ways as a result of their involvement in the project. They are doing so, sometimes, with the assistance of our PR students, which in turn generates more goodwill and might in future assist with

student recruitment. Those participating have embraced, to varying degrees, the message that schools need to be open and honest with their stakeholders. That they have done so on the basis of a successful experiment at one school, under the leadership of a widely respected head teacher, suggests that we might have a model to develop further and promote more widely.

## Conclusion

This report set out to examine the nature of communications between school managers and stakeholders; to analyse attitudes among school managers about their relationship with various stakeholders; and to evaluate the development of a network of local schools willing to try and implement PR practices with the help of final year media students.

### 1: Summary of findings.

#### 1:i. Examining the nature of communication.

In effect, the concentration was on two main stakeholders: parents/carers, and the local community via the media. In both cases the pilot study at CHS was the cornerstone of the broader project, and continues to be so. CHS provided a platform for developing a dialogue in which school communications could be analysed, and from which a schools network could be created to encouraged the positive use of public relations.

The research team continues to work closely with the senior management, staff and governors at CHS, helping to develop policy and offering PR advice and assistance. (A recent example highlights this. The school had to be closed for a morning when a quantity of a dangerous and potentially explosive chemical went missing from a school lab. Communication with the significant stakeholders was crucial. Parents had to be alerted at very short notice about the closure (and it was here that email alerts and use of the school website, developed on the recommendations of the research team, enabled such efficiency that only three out of 1200 pupils actually turned up the next day, having



missed the message.) The head called to discuss media tactics and it was agreed that a pro-active approach was needed, so that the school could set the agenda and explain coolly and accurately what was happening, and how the situation was being addressed.

Parental engagement proves more difficult, even though it is clear that schools are communicating more effectively. At CHS, as mentioned, the Parents' Network was established to improve communications AND offer parents a role in policy-making. It was a ground-breaking experiment which the Government's latest recommendations echo: that parental engagement in secondary schools can raise attainment in pupils. (Harris and Goodall, 2007) However, as discussed earlier, this has had limited success and will be revisited below in my recommendations.

It was fortunate that the head teacher at CHS was fully appreciative of the need for honest, transparent and open communication with all stakeholders, but when he first arrived, he appreciated the assistance of the Huddersfield University research team in building local media relationships and, significantly, helping him to convince his own staff of the need to be more media aware and media friendly.

#### 1:ii. Analysing attitudes among school managers

The comprehensive nature of that project provided a strong foundation for discussion with other local schools. As mentioned previously, the success of the project travelled by word of mouth around the local education community and we were subsequently contacted with requests for similar assistance elsewhere. That in itself was evidence of

good public relations; the critical importance of “word of mouth” messages among key stakeholders has long been overlooked, according to Green (2005).

The development of the network of schools, and in particular their attendance at the Huddersfield conference, enabled wider examination of how schools communicated with their various publics, and further analysis of attitudes in secondary schools. The network is informal and evolving; some of the original staff have moved to other schools, while schools not originally involved have now become associated.

#### 1:iii. Evaluating the network of schools using PR

From a baseline of mistrust of the media, and a generally acknowledged failure to communicate effectively with parents and the local community, there is now a strongly-held belief among that group that PR is necessary, and is more than just a necessary evil. This is demonstrated in the range of work which is being carried out in the schools by PR students, because while the schools recognise the need for PR, they are still unable to make budgetary provision and rely on the volunteer assistance of the University department.

In some cases this has been an educational process in itself, and there are now staff in schools who feel more able and willing to take on the role of publicity and media relations as part of their administrative function; their student volunteers having demonstrated the techniques effectively. We have also seen a wider range of PR applications, and more specific requirements, than anticipated. For example, the broad

scope of the research project at a Leeds high school involved examination of a spectrum of communications methods and a thorough assessment of successful website design. Meanwhile, at one of the Bradford schools, the need was for very specific information to be delivered to a particular target audience in a specified medium. The ongoing re-branding project at a Sheffield school will provide tantalising new experiences and – it is to be hoped – tangible results for all concerned.

The crisis management lesson has also been taken on board. Subsequent to the “school bomb” front page news experience, one of the head teachers very successfully dealt with both media inquiries and parental concerns when it was discovered that an individual who had been (briefly) connected with the school had been arrested. (Further details are currently sub judice.)

So clearly, schools who take a pro-active approach to public relations will benefit in terms of their image and reputation. What this study has also shown was perhaps the inevitable; that the most important stakeholders with whom relationships need to be developed are the parents of pupils at the schools. They are the ones whose “word of mouth” PR can create the most positive benefit for the image and reputation of a school. They are the ones for whom improved newsletters and well-designed web sites create important points of contact. Discussions with individual teachers have indicated that they are not instinctively guarded or wary of stakeholder relationships, but a culture of draw-bridge lifting can most certainly permeate from the top downwards. It is enlightened leadership, more than anything else, which can create a more open and transparent

attitude towards communications, and the case studies being conducted by Huddersfield students under the umbrella of this project are proving that to be true.

Evaluation of the network is ongoing, through the work being carried out in these case studies and practical projects. They are varied in nature, reflecting the needs of individual schools (and using the specific skills of groups of students. For example, students with an aptitude for page design have developed news letters; those with IT skills have helped develop web sites).

## 2. Recommendations arising from this study

### 2.i. Communicating with the media

It is through the evidence of good practice that schools can be encouraged to be more confident about dealing with the media. For example, we have gathered from informal comment that throughout Calderdale there is envy among other schools at the amount of positive press coverage gained by CHS.

It may well be that a more structured series of networks might be developed, in association with Local Education Authorities. The Huddersfield University team has only limited resources in terms of extending the current network (and a finite number of students to help in those schools.) But to work with the PR staff in LEAs would enable all schools to benefit. The difficulties so far are that local authorities' still employ only general PR teams (as mentioned, with the exception of Devon), but it would certainly be

worth attempting the dialogue so that PR professionals in each area could encourage consistent good practice across all schools.

#### 2:ii. Communicating with parents

Communication with the other key stakeholder group, parents, is being assisted by technology, although it is surprising that many schools are slow to appreciate the importance of the “first portal” web site. While email is being adopted by a number of schools now, and there are software packages which can enable a desktop alert when such a message appears, staff and governors at CHS are now discussing establishing a database of mobile phone numbers, so that text messages can be sent to parents with reminders of meetings or alerts to urgent news.

It has always to be remembered that a small percentage of families do not have home access to the internet, nor do all parents regularly use mobile phones, and these groups must not be disenfranchised. Further discussion is necessary with all groups concerned.

#### 2:iii. Engaging parents.

As Harris and Goodall report (2007), engaging parents in their children’s education need not mean bringing them into the school building. The recommendations of their report need to be assessed by individual schools, and it will be clear that PR techniques will be required to bring parents and educators together in this respect.

Meanwhile the government has asked local authorities to appoint “choice advisers” introducing better information for all parents when their children enter primary and secondary school, and dedicated choice advisers to help the least well-off parents to exercise their choices. ([www.teachernet.gov.uk](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk)). In fact, a new report suggests a further reason why schools need to concentrate on effective communication with parents, and on encouraging parents to be the best ambassadors. A European Advocacy study conducted by Paul Marsden and Weber Shandwick PR revealed that “brand advocacy” was worth five times that of money spent on advertising. ([www.webershandwick.co.uk](http://www.webershandwick.co.uk)) Clearly schools need to be aware of their brand image and while this study relates to commercial brands, the “word of mouth” message about brand advocacy, “the act of consumers promoting a brand to their friends or acquaintances on influencing brand choice.”

#### 2:iv. Developing the network.

We are planning to host a second conference in early summer, and (when time and resources are made available) to design a series of short-course instruction/refresher for heads and school managers. It is important to concentrate now on the sustainability of good practice; as with school leadership generally, the impetus for change and improvement can often depend on one person at the helm, which is why media policies are important. And, as mentioned above, the scheme needs to be adopted regionally, or nationally, possibly through the press offices LEAs.

### 3. Professional development

This has been a fascinating exercise which has prompted an intensive study of PR principles and practice, and in particular, media relations. This in itself has enriched my own teaching practice. But perhaps more significantly has been the opening of opportunities for my final year students to undertake practical projects for external clients, working with multi-million pound businesses (for such are secondary schools) alongside professionals, and putting their learning into effect. Facilitating and supervising these is most rewarding.

### 4: Dissemination

Articles have already appeared in *Behind the Spin*, the PR journal for undergraduates, graduates and professionals, and the latest findings will also be submitted there for publications. It might also be appropriate to submit a summary to the *Journal of Communication Studies*. Education journals, importantly those read by head teachers, would be another potential outlet.

The supervision of final year projects in schools is being hailed as good practice in the School of Music Humanities and Media, and I often make presentations to colleagues on this aspect. It might be appropriate to include a paper at the university's autumn teaching and learning conference.

## 5: Evaluation

I believe that if we can develop contacts with local LEA public relations teams, then we might have a model of good practice to hand over to them for further development.

In terms of content, I have largely ignored the entire field of web-communication, in particular blogging, a critical new area of communication over which the traditional gatekeepers have no control. To include this would have been beyond the realms of my own knowledge and technical ability at this stage, but would certainly provide a platform for very critical research in the near future.



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