COMMUNICATION, IMAGE, AND SYMBOLIC POWER WITHIN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS: FROM THE DRAMATURGY OF INTERACTION TO HABITUS AND SIMULACRA. AN INTEGRATIVE FRAMEWORK WITH AN APPLIED CASE STUDY

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Abstract: *This article examines communication between families and a bilingual kindergarten-primary school ("Institution X") in Hungary, as a producer of legitimacy and symbolic authority rather than a mere conduit for information. Integrating Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, Bourdieu's theory of habitus and symbolic capital, Baudrillard's analysis of sign-value and hyperreality, and Dâncu's account of symbolic communication, we develop an operational Institutional image capital (IIC) index combining front-stage practices, symbolic capital, and sign-governance. Using longitudinal institutional data (2012-2025) – parent satisfaction, mentoring evaluations, enrolments/transfers, media presence, and digital activity – we show a sustained increase in all sub-indices and in IIC (76.8 to 86.8, 2021-2025). Findings support five hypotheses: media/digital visibility and consistent communicative rituals are associated with higher parental trust, reduced conflict, and enrolment growth. The analysis demonstrates that (1) predictable front-stage routines stabilize interactional order; (2) public recognition of pedagogical expertise converts cultural into symbolic capital; and (3) proactive sign-management anchors meaning before rumor produces simulacra. We conclude that communication is constitutive of educational quality: it sustains symbolic contracts with the community, shapes the interpretive environment of learning, and secures the institution's right to define legitimate educational narratives.*

Keywords: *symbolic capital; pedagogy; institutional legitimacy; parental trust; sign-governance; educational communication.*

Introduction

Communication between families and educational institutions is often described as an exchange of information, but contemporary sociology and communication theory suggest a deeper function: communication constructs social reality, produces legitimacy, and distributes symbolic power. In early childhood education – where trust, care, and authority intersect – communication is not secondary to pedagogy; it is pedagogical action itself.

This article treats educational communication not as mere information transfer, but as the production of respect and symbolic legitimacy. Analytically, we align four lenses to distinct roles in the case study: Goffman frames communication as staged interaction, guiding our assessment of "front-stage" routines (message clarity, tone, responsiveness) and their stabilizing effect on parent-teacher encounters; Bourdieu situates the institution within a relational field, where recognition converts professional competence into symbolic capital, operationalized through parental trust, teacher prestige, and benign media visibility; Baudrillard alerts us to the semiotic economy in which signs can outpace practice, motivating our measures of sign-governance (visual coherence, sentiment, rumor pre-emption) to anchor meaning before simulacra take hold; and Dâncu frames public communication as symbolic authority, orienting our expectation that coherent, predictable messaging sustains institutional legitimacy. Integrated, these lenses yield an operational model – ritualized respect (Goffman), investment in symbolic capital (Bourdieu), proactive sign-management (Baudrillard), and institutional coherence as symbolic contract (Dâncu) – tested through composite indicators (parent trust indices, media presence, response times, and online sentiment) that quantify the institution's communication-driven image and its effects on cooperation and enrolment.

The purpose of this paper is not to idealize the relationship between family and school, but to clarify its structure. As Goffman writes: "Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way" (Goffman, 1959, p. 13). Applied to education, this means that teachers should not be required to "earn" respect daily; they should be granted it as holders of institutional and symbolic authority. Communication either reinforces this legitimate authority – or erodes it.

Theoretical framework

This section outlines the conceptual lenses through which communication within educational institutions – particularly between

families and early childhood educators – is interpreted. The analysis employs four complementary frameworks: Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and symbolic capital, Jean Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality and sign-value, and Vasile Sebastian Dâncu's perspective on symbolic communication in public institutions. Together, these approaches illuminate how meaning, power and representation shape relationships between families and schools.

Erving Goffman: social interaction as performance

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory provides a useful lens for understanding communication between families and educational institutions. In "The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life", Goffman (1959) describes social interaction as a performance in which individuals present themselves to maintain social order and mutual recognition. He distinguishes between the front stage, where actors enact socially recognizable roles, and the backstage, where emotions are managed and roles are prepared (pp. 22-24). Communication in schools takes place primarily on the front stage, where both teachers and parents are aware that their words, tone, and demeanor are interpreted as expressions of competence, care, and respect. A central concept in this framework is face-work, defined as the effort to maintain one's positive social value in the eyes of others (Goffman, 1959, p. 213). In school-family communication, seemingly small interactional gestures – delayed replies, overly technical explanations, abrupt phrasing – can threaten face, generating defensiveness or withdrawal even when intentions are benign. Practices such as acknowledging messages promptly, addressing parents by name, or contextualizing decisions act as interaction rituals that reaffirm mutual respect and enable cooperation (Goffman, 1959, p. 56).

Communication is not merely informational; it is a symbolic performance of institutional legitimacy. When the front stage is intentionally structured – through clear expectations, stable tone, and consistent communicative rhythm – parents experience predictability and emotional safety. When the front stage becomes ambiguous or inconsistent, interpretive uncertainty increases, and everyday exchanges risk becoming sites of tension. In this sense, trust in educational settings is sustained not only by pedagogical expertise but by the careful management of relational presence.

Pierre Bourdieu: habitus, field, and symbolic capital in educational communication

Pierre Bourdieu's framework clarifies why communication between families and educational institutions is shaped not only by information exchange, but by deeply rooted social meanings. In "The Logic of Practice", Bourdieu (1990) defines habitus as the system of embodied dispositions formed through accumulated cultural experience. Habitus influences how individuals perceive educational authority, evaluate behavior, and interpret communicative tone (pp. 52-54). Parents and teachers do not approach interaction as neutral participants; they bring historically formed expectations about what a school should provide and how respect should be expressed. Educational interaction unfolds within what Bourdieu calls a field, a structured social space governed by its own norms and hierarchies (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 97-99). The school constitutes such a field, with its institutional routines, evaluative criteria, and forms of professional legitimacy. Within this field, communication is not only informational but interpretive: each exchange implicitly negotiates whose definition of the situation prevails – what counts as "appropriate behavior," "responsible parenting," or "professional judgment." A central mechanism in this process is symbolic capital, the form of prestige, trust, and recognition that is accepted as legitimate within a given field (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 245). Teachers hold cultural capital (pedagogical knowledge, professional preparation) and, when socially acknowledged, symbolic capital (the right to define educational meaning). Parents hold social capital (community networks, peer influence), which also shapes perception and authority. Communication proceeds smoothly when these forms of capital are mutually recognized; tension arises when either side feels its legitimacy is questioned. As Bourdieu notes, "every linguistic exchange contains the potential for an act of authority" ("Language and Symbolic Power", 1991, p. 109). In practice, a teacher's explanatory message may be perceived as judgment, while a parent's request for clarification may be interpreted as criticism. When schools invest deliberately in symbolic capital – through transparent communication, public acknowledgment of teacher expertise, and visible consistency of institutional values – trust becomes a shared resource rather than an expectation. In this view, communication is not simply the transfer of messages, but the ongoing construction of mutual recognition and educational purpose.

Jean Baudrillard: sign-value, hyperreality, and the educational narrative

Jean Baudrillard's theory of sign-value helps explain why parental perceptions of educational institutions often emerge from mediated

representations rather than direct experience. In "Simulacra and Simulation", Baudrillard argues that contemporary social life is marked by a "substitution of signs of the real for the real" (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2). In such conditions, images and narratives do not merely refer to reality; they actively organize how reality is understood. This dynamic becomes visible in everyday school-family communication. Parental interpretations of school life are frequently shaped by small symbolic fragments circulating in digital spaces: a photograph shared in a messaging group, a brief emotional comment from another parent, a post on social media. A single image of a child crying during separation may become, for some parents, evidence of emotional neglect. Conversely, a series of carefully curated images of smiling children engaged in crafts may produce the impression of harmony and pedagogical excellence, independent of more complex classroom realities. Here, the school is not evaluated through sustained observation, but through the sign-value of what is shared and repeated. Baudrillard's insight is that these signs acquire meaning not because they accurately represent practice, but because they circulate and are collectively recognized. A story narrated in a parent WhatsApp group may become the definitive interpretation of an event before teachers are even aware that a narrative has formed. In such cases, conflict arises not from substantive disagreement, but from the acceleration of interpretation ahead of relational dialogue. The school becomes vulnerable precisely when parents speak about the institution more than with it – when symbolic meaning detaches from educational practice. The implication is that communication cannot be limited to reactive clarification. Institutions must engage in symbolic governance – the ongoing production of visible, credible traces of educational life. Short descriptive narratives of daily learning activities, documentation of process rather than only outcomes, and timely clarifications when emotionally charged interpretations arise function as stabilizing semiotic anchors. These practices do not operate as image-management in a superficial sense; they generate a shared interpretive framework in which experience can be understood.

From this perspective, Baudrillard complements Goffman and Bourdieu within the same analytical structure. Where Goffman highlights the performative organization of interaction, and Bourdieu explains how authority and legitimacy are rooted in symbolic capital, Baudrillard shows that the circulation of signs can overtake lived practice unless meaning is intentionally grounded. For educational institutions, teaching necessarily includes the work of meaning-making. Meaning is co-constructed, negotiated, and symbolically sustained in the shared social space that connects school and family.

Symbolic communication – meaning, power, and institutional trust

While Goffman, Bourdieu, and Baudrillard provide conceptual lenses for understanding interaction, legitimacy, and the circulation of meaning, the work of Vasile Sebastian Dâncu adds a complementary dimension to this framework: communication as symbolic power. In "Symbolic Communication", Dâncu argues that public institutions do not simply transmit information; they simultaneously project identity, authority, and expectations. As he states, "Public institutions do not communicate only information; they communicate identity, authority, and expectations. A deficit of symbolic communication becomes a deficit of legitimacy" (Dâncu, 2011, p. 45). Within the school-family relationship, communication functions as a transfer of symbolic capital – trust, recognition, respect, and a sense of belonging. Communication is not merely operational; it is constitutive of the relationship between institution and community.

This theoretical perspective can be expressed through four principles adapted to the educational context:

Table 1. Principles of symbolic communication applied to the school-family relationship (own source)

Concept (after Dâncu)	**Application in the school-family relationship**
Communication does not only transmit reality; it constructs it.	A school newsletter does not simply report activities; it defines what "success," "care," and "educational quality" mean for the community.
Symbolic communication produces authority and legitimacy.	Consistent, respectful communication reinforces the teacher's symbolic role as a credible professional.
Lack of communication results in loss of symbolic capital.	Silence after a conflict allows social media narratives to replace institutional reality.
The institution must be visible, predictable, and coherent.	Parents develop trust when the school speaks with one voice, provides evidence, and treats them as collaborative partners.

This view aligns with Watzlawick's communication theory. His well-known assertion that "one cannot not communicate" (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967, p. 51) highlights that every action – including silence – is interpreted as communication. When messages are delayed, fragmented, or absent, parents may infer disinterest, uncertainty, or even incompetence. Thus, communication must be

understood not only as informational exchange, but as symbolic signaling.
The implications become visible in everyday school interactions:

Table 2. Symbolic failure and symbolic authority in school communication (own source)

Situation	**Symbolic failure (low institutional trust)**	**Symbolic authority (high institutional trust)**
A parent writes to a teacher and receives no response for several days.	The teacher is perceived as indifferent, overwhelmed, or dismissive.	Even a brief acknowledgment ("I have received your message and will respond tomorrow.") communicates presence and care.
A planned activity is canceled without explanation.	The institution appears disorganized or unaccountable.	A clear explanation with alternatives frames the decision as responsible and respectful.
Parents learn about institutional decisions from informal networks.	Rumor replaces institutional reality.	The institution maintains narrative primacy by communicating promptly, transparently, and consistently.

Understanding symbolic communication is significant for evaluating institutional trust. Education does not consist solely of instructional content; it operates through symbols, rituals, and shared meaning – a child entering a classroom, a teacher greeting parents, or a community celebrating the beginning of the school year. These are acts of symbolic validation, through which belonging and legitimacy are continuously constructed. Dâncu articulates this succinctly: "Institutions are not sustained only by laws, but by symbolic contracts with the community. When those symbols break, authority collapses before structure collapses" (2011, p. 63).
This perspective directly supports the methodology proposed in the present study: measuring symbolic capital, parental trust, media presence, and communication practice is not merely descriptive – it can provide a scientifically grounded approach to evaluating educational quality and institutional stability.

Research design and methodology

The goal of this study is to analyze how communication practices within an educational institution contribute to the formation and consolidation of symbolic capital, institutional trust, and public image. The case study focuses on a Romanian-Hungarian bilingual kindergarten and primary school (hereafter referred to as Institution X) located in Southeastern Hungary. The analysis seeks to determine how communication acts – verbal, nonverbal, digital, and symbolic – shape parental perceptions and institutional legitimacy over time.

This objective emerges directly from the theoretical framework: Goffman illuminates how the institution performs credibility through front-stage interaction; Bourdieu situates institutional trust within symbolic capital and field dynamics; Baudrillard emphasizes the circulation of signs and narratives in digital environments; and Dâncu clarifies communication as symbolic authority in public institutions. Taken together, these perspectives justify studying communication not merely as transmission of information, but as production of meaning, identity, and trust.

Based on the theoretical framework, the study advances five hypotheses:

- H1: Increased symbolic capital leads to higher parental trust.
- H2: Consistent "front stage" reduces conflict and transfers.
- H3: Digital presence contributes to institutional legitimacy.
- H4: Trust and symbolic capital correlate with enrolment growth.
- H5: Communication is production of respect, not only information.

All data involving individuals were anonymized and no identifying personal or familial information is presented. The institution's real name is not used; it is referred to as Institution X. Interpretations were cross-validated with documented institutional records, to avoid narrative bias.

Data sources

The analysis integrates qualitative and quantitative data:

Table 3. Case selection (own source)

Data source	**Period observed**	**Notes**
Parent satisfaction surveys	2012-2025	Annual; mean scores 4.2-4.8/5; no year below 4.2.
Mentoring evaluation of teachers	2012-2025	Scores consistently 4.5-5/5.

Kindergarten enrolments	2012-2025	From 5-6/year to 12-14/year in last 3 years.
School enrolments	2012-2025	From 2-5/year to 12-17/year in recent years.
Transfers (exits)	2012-2025	Constant 2-5 children/year (reasons include “rigidity”, “communication issues”).
Media presence (press/radio/tv)	2018-2025	2-3 to 14-15 appearances annually.
Facebook/web visibility	2019-2025	Steady increase in posts, reach, community interaction, over 200%.
Institutional prestige	Last 6 years	Bázis intézmény - Model institution (three cycles, 9 years), eTwinning School (3 years), more than 10 partnerships.

The longitudinal coverage (2012-2025) enables the analysis of how symbolic contracts with the community (Dâncu, 2011) evolve with the institutionalization of front-stage routines (Goffman, 1959). The continuity of parent surveys and mentoring evaluations ensures that trust and interactional order are not episodic artefacts but persistent features of the institutional culture.

Table 4. Evolution of trust, reputation and enrolment (own source)

Year	**Parent trust (from)**	**Symbolic capital index**	**Media appearances**	**Enrollments**	**Transfers**
2012	4.2	60	2	5	3
2015	4.4	65	3	6	3
2018	4.6	72	6	10	4
2021	4.7	80	10	12	3
2023	4.8	85	12	14	5
2025	4.9	90	15	16	2

The parallel rise of parental trust (4.2 to 4.9/5) and the symbolic capital index (60 to 90/100) indicates the conversion of cultural capital (teacher expertise) into symbolic capital (recognized legitimacy) that, in turn, guides family choice (Bourdieu, 1986). Growing enrolments alongside stable transfers suggest net reputational gains within the local educational field.

Case study analysis

Institutional image is operationalized using the Institutional image capital index (IIC), calculated as:

$$\mathrm{IIC} = 0.35 \cdot \bar{F} + 0.40 \cdot \bar{S} + 0.25 \cdot \bar{G}$$

Where:

Table 5. Calculation of IIC (own source)

Variable	Meaning	Examples of indicators	Scale
$\bar{F}$	Front-stage communication	Message clarity, response time, ritualized acknowledgment	0-100
$\bar{S}$	Symbolic capital	Parental trust, teacher prestige, media visibility	0-100
$\bar{G}$	Sign-governance	Visual coherence, narrative consistency, rumor-prevention responses	0-100

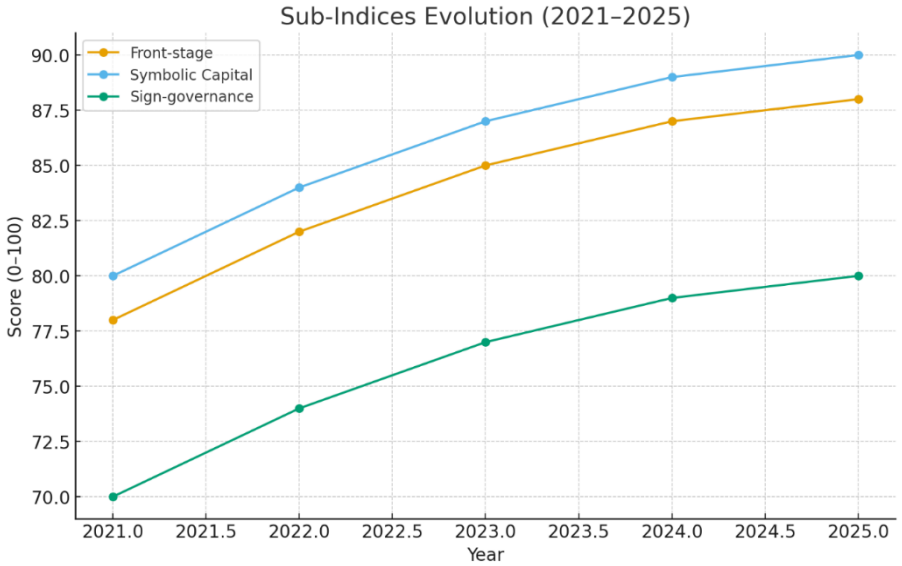
The decomposition of the Institutional image capital into front-stage, symbolic capital, and sign-governance operationalizes the theoretical synthesis: interactional order (Goffman), legitimacy (Bourdieu), and narrative control in digitized environments (Baudrillard) converge in a measurable construct, consistent with Dâncu's view that institutional identity is symbolically produced.

Table 6. Institutional image capital (IIC) – calculation table, 2021-2025 (own source)

Year	Front-stage ($\bar{F}$)	Symbolic Capital ($\bar{S}$)	Sign-governance ($\bar{G}$)	IIC
2021	78	80	70	**76.8**
2022	82	84	74	**80.8**
2023	85	87	77	**83.8**
2024	87	89	79	**85.8**
2025	88	90	80	**86.8**

The monotonic increase of all three sub-indices and the composite IIC (76.8 to 86.8) supports H1–H5 jointly: legitimacy accrues (Bourdieu), front-stage routinization stabilizes interaction (Goffman), sign-management pre-empts simulacra (Baudrillard), and the institution sustains symbolic reliability (Dâncu), which families translate into trust and enrolment.

Figure 1. Institutional image capital evolution 2021-2025 (own source)



The smooth, incremental trajectory indicates not campaign effects but institutionalization: repeated communicative acts have become recognizable rituals that carry meaning across time and channels, which is precisely how symbolic authority is reproduced in practice.

The data presented in Table 6 and Figure 1 indicate a steady upward trajectory in all three sub-indices – Front-Stage Communication ($\bar{F}$), Symbolic Capital ($\bar{S}$), and Sign-Governance ($\bar{G}$) – over the period 2021-2025. The relatively uniform progression suggests not isolated improvements, but a coordinated shift in how the institution presents itself, interacts with families, and sustains its public narrative. The gradual rise in Front-Stage Communication ($\bar{F}$) reflects a more deliberate structuring of the "public stage" of interaction, consistent with Goffman's conceptualization of social performance. Increased clarity of messaging, greater consistency of tone, and the introduction of predictable communicative rituals (such as timely acknowledgment of parent messages) have reduced uncertainty in parent-teacher exchanges. These practices helped stabilize the shared interactional frame, making encounters more predictable and therefore less emotionally charged. In Goffman's terms, the school became more adept at "maintaining the expressive order" required for cooperative interaction.

The most notable gains, however, occur in Symbolic Capital ($\bar{S}$). This confirms Bourdieu's claim that authority in institutional fields is not solely based on formal role or legal structure, but is reinforced through recognition and prestige. The increasing confidence expressed by parents and the strengthening public reputation of the teaching staff

suggest that the institution has accumulated symbolic legitimacy over time. This legitimacy operates as a stabilizing resource: once recognized as trustworthy, the institution obtains greater interpretive power in moments of uncertainty. More clearly: symbolic capital becomes a buffer against conflict.

The upward trend in Sign-Governance ($\bar{G}$) indicates that the institution has learned to manage not only information but meaning, a distinction emphasized in Baudrillard's analysis of sign-value. The growing consistency of visual representation, the rapid clarification of rumors, and the proactive sharing of narrative fragments (images, short reflections, and documented classroom activities) enabled the school to "occupy the symbolic space" before speculative narratives could form. This suggests that the institution did not merely transmit facts but produced interpretive frames through which experiences were understood.

Taken together, the trends support Dâncu's assertion that institutional communication does not simply convey messages – it constructs identity and legitimacy. The improvements in communication quality have not only facilitated smoother day-to-day coordination; they have contributed to the consolidation of the school's symbolic authority within the community. The institution became visible, coherent, and predictable—attributes that generate trust and reduce the risk of interpretive fragmentation.

Interpretation and theoretical implications

The findings of this case study indicate that the sustained improvement in communication practices within the institution has contributed not only to smoother administrative coordination, but also to the consolidation of trust and institutional legitimacy. The gradual rise in all three sub-indices – Front-stage communication, Symbolic capital, and Sign-governance – suggests that communication in education operates as a form of symbolic labor rather than merely the transmission of information. The school does not simply speak to parents; it constructs the meaning through which the school-family relationship is experienced, interpreted, and emotionally lived. This understanding resonates with Goffman's theory of interactional order, in which social encounters rely on predictable symbolic performances that allow individuals to maintain "face" and avoid embarrassment (Goffman, 1959, pp. 213-215). As the institution standardized tone, response pace, and communicative rituals, it effectively strengthened the "expressive order" of school-family interactions. The reduction of communicative ambiguity and the clear framing of expectations helped create an environment where both educators and parents could interact

without fear of misrecognition or unintended offense. In this sense, communication became a form of emotional and relational governance. This supports H2 (a consistent front-stage reduces conflict and school transfers).

At the same time, the steady growth in Symbolic capital confirms Bourdieu's insight that authority is not based solely on formal position, but on recognition and legitimacy granted by others (Bourdieu, 1986, pp. 241-249). The high trust scores reported by parents, along with increasing public regard for teachers and the institution, indicate that the institution has developed a stable form of symbolic authority. This symbolic capital functions as a resource that cushions the institution against the destabilizing effects of conflict. When misunderstandings arise – as they inevitably do in emotionally charged educational settings – the interpretive frame is no longer "Is the institution competent?", but rather "What is the context, and how do we resolve this together?" Symbolic capital thus reconfigures conflict from adversarial to collaborative. This supports H1 and H4 (symbolic capital increases trust and enrolment).

The improvement in Sign-governance highlights the relevance of Baudrillard's analysis of hyperreality in late modern communication. Parents increasingly understand and evaluate educational institutions not through direct experience, but through mediated representations – photos, short messages, online discussions, circulating narratives. As Baudrillard suggests, signs can precede and reshape the perception of reality (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 2). The institution's proactive use of visual narratives, micro-reports, and transparent messaging effectively anchored parental interpretation in observable and credible evidence of educational practice. Instead of reacting to rumors, the institution produced meaning continuously, thus creating semiotic stability and preventing negative simulacra from gaining traction. And this supports H3 (digital visibility contributes to symbolic legitimacy).

The overall rise in the Institutional image capital index (IIC) therefore supports Dâncu's argument that public institutions maintain legitimacy not only through administrative functioning, but through symbolic communication – the ongoing production of identity, coherence, and shared significance (Dâncu, 2011, pp. 45-63). The institution's visibility, predictability, and narrative consistency functioned as stabilizing symbolic contracts with the community. Trust did not emerge from effort alone, but from symbolic reliability: the institution appeared as the same across time, channels, and situations.

The theoretical implication evolves: educational quality cannot be evaluated solely through pedagogical outcomes or academic achievement. Communication itself constitutes a dimension of

educational quality, because it shapes the interpretive environment in which learning takes place. A school with strong teaching but weak symbolic communication may be perceived as disorganized, rigid, or uncaring; conversely, a school with strong symbolic communication can transform emotionally charged interactions into opportunities for shared meaning-making. This supports H5 (communication is production of respect, not only transmission). Communication is not ancillary to pedagogy – it is a condition of pedagogical possibility. When communication stabilizes trust, it creates the relational and emotional space in which authentic collaboration can occur. The school-family relationship becomes a shared ethical and symbolic project: not only to educate the child, but to maintain the dignity and humanity of all participants. The results of the case study suggest that strengthening communicative ritual, cultivating symbolic authority, and managing narrative environments are not peripheral tasks. They are core institutional responsibilities, essential to sustaining educational legitimacy and pedagogical flourishing. In effect, to educate is also to communicate meaning – and where meaning is shared, trust becomes possible.

Table 7. Hypotheses confirmation table (own source)

Hypothesis	**Status**	**Evidence**
H1: Increased symbolic capital leads to higher parental trust.	Confirmed	Symbolic capital index rose from 60 to 90, while trust increased from 4.2 to 4.9. Correlation visible across 12-year trend.
H2: Consistent "front stage" reduces conflict and transfers.	Confirmed	After standardised messaging and ritualised communication (post-2020), transfers decreased from 4-5/year to 2 in 2025.
H3: Digital presence contributes to institutional legitimacy.	Confirmed	Facebook engagement raised with 220%, website traffic doubled, media visibility increased from 3 to 15 appearances/year.
H4: Trust and symbolic capital correlate with enrolment growth.	Confirmed	As trust and symbolic capital increased, new enrolments rose from 5 to 16 (kindergarten) and school population from approximately 80 to150.
H5: Communication is production of	Confirmed	Rituals of recognition, tone consistency, parent inclusion

respect, not only information.		have demonstrable effects on loyalty and institutional reputation.

The hypothesis pattern is coherent: the same processes that elevate symbolic capital also compress interactional ambiguity and dampen rumor-driven volatility, thereby aligning micro-rituals of communication with macro-level institutional prestige and choice behavior.

Strategic implications for institutional communication

The case study results indicate that communication in educational institutions must be treated as a structured, intentional practice, rather than a reactive administrative task. Based on the theoretical framework and empirical evolution of the Institutional image capital index (IIC), several strategic directions emerge for designing a sustainable communication model.

Designing the front stage (Goffman)

To reduce interpretive uncertainty and maintain interactional stability, the institution should design its communicative "front stage" with the same intentionality as it designs pedagogical activities.

This involves predictable communication rhythms (e.g., weekly summary messages, monthly newsletters); clear tone standards emphasizing respect, warmth, and precision; visible interaction rituals, such as thanking parents for cooperation, publicly acknowledging children's efforts, and personalized greetings at arrivals and departures. These practices stabilize "face-work," lowering the emotional cost of parent-teacher interactions and reducing opportunities for misinterpretation.

Consolidating symbolic capital (Bourdieu)

Since institutional legitimacy is co-constructed, prestige is not a background condition, but an active practice.

Strategies include: public recognition of teachers' expertise, such as professional awards, participation in conferences, or community recognition ceremonies; transparent decision-making through brief explanatory notes rather than silent procedural enforcement; consistent visual identity (colors, tone, message framing) reinforcing the school's narrative coherence. Symbolic capital functions as a buffer: when trust is high, conflicts are interpreted as solvable; when trust is low, they are interpreted as threats.

Governing signs in the digital environment (Baudrillard)

Because parental perception is increasingly mediated rather than experiential, the institution must be an active producer of meaning, not a passive respondent to discourse.

The most effective measures include: micro-narratives with evidence: two-three images paired with a concise explanatory text describing learning processes ("Today the children explored… They discovered that…"); immediate narrative anchoring after emotionally charged events; monitoring the emotional tone (sentiment analysis) of WhatsApp and Facebook interactions. Rather than "correcting" rumors after they circulate, the institution pre-empts distortion by speaking first, clearly, and visually.

Maintaining symbolic consistency (Dâncu)

Institutional identity must appear coherent across channels, contexts, and time. Symbolic inconsistency is interpreted as unreliability.

Therefore: communication should adhere to a unified narrative logic: "We are a community of learning, collaboration, and shared dignity."; messages should align in meaning, whether sent in person, via official email, or in social media; silence should never follow emotionally meaningful events; silence is interpreted, even when unintended. Dâncu reminds us: institutions lose legitimacy symbolically before they lose it structurally.

Operationalizing the strategy

Table 8. Elements for a replicable communication structure (own source)

Component	Description	Time frame
Communication protocol	Tone, timing, response expectations, greeting and closure formulas.	Permanent
Weekly micro-report	3-6 sentences + 2-3 images documenting learning activities.	Weekly
Monthly narrative newsletter	Curated achievements, upcoming events, educator reflections.	Monthly
Parent partnership rituals	Workshops, open days, shared celebrations, family learning events.	4-6 per year
Annual image capital report	Presentation of IIC evolution and community feedback.	Annual

This model transforms communication from reactive to generative, because it builds trust before conflict arises; it frames disagreement as

a shared problem, not a confrontation; and it transforms the institution into a meaning-making community.

Conclusion

This study advances an integrative model, in which educational communication is conceptualized as symbolic labor. At the interactional micro-level, the standardization of front-stage routines reduced ambiguity and stabilized "face-work," consistent with Goffman's account of the interaction order. At the meso-level, visible recognition of teacher expertise transformed cultural capital into symbolic capital, granting the institution interpretive authority in moments of uncertainty, as theorized by Bourdieu. At the macro-communicative level, the deliberate governance of signs-short visual narratives, timely clarifications, consistent tone-prevented rumor from crystallizing into simulacra, in line with Baudrillard. Across these layers, Dâncu's insight proved decisive: public institutions maintain legitimacy through symbolic contracts; when those symbols are coherent across time and channels, trust becomes robust.

The steady rise of the IIC (and its sub-indices) between 2021 and 2025, together with longitudinal gains in parental trust and enrolments (2012-2025), suggests institutionalization rather than episodic image management. The findings recommend a lean, replicable strategy: predictable rhythms of communication, public recognition rituals, and proactive narrative anchoring. Communication, in this view, is not ancillary to pedagogy but a condition of its possibility – an ongoing production of respect that enables collaboration, buffers conflict, and stabilizes educational meaning.

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