

EDUCATIONAL MARKETING AS A LEADERSHIP AND POLICY TOOL IN SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract

In an increasingly competitive and complex educational environment, schools are required to respond to demographic changes, accountability pressures, parental choice, and growing expectations for transparency and quality. Within this context, educational marketing is often narrowly perceived as a promotional or communication activity. This paper argues that educational marketing should instead be conceptualized as a strategic leadership and policy tool that supports organizational development, informed decision-making, and sustainable school improvement. Drawing on a leadership- and policy-oriented framework, the paper explores educational marketing as a means of strengthening communication, fostering strategic relationships between schools and local communities, and enhancing school identity and social legitimacy. The theoretical section distinguishes educational marketing from commercial practices, emphasizing its educational, social, and communicative dimensions, as well as its role in improving school performance and responsiveness to community needs. The role of the school principal is highlighted as central to the effective management of communication and the development of strategic relationships within and beyond the school organization. Empirically, the study employs qualitative research approach through the analysis of 15 interviews with primary and secondary school principals, which were thematically examined across key analytical axes, including school communication practices, the use of digital tools and school websites, collaboration with the local community, strategic promotion activities, leadership approaches to communication and marketing, perceived challenges, and differences in practices related to school type. The findings reveal the presence of communication strategies alongside significant challenges, such as limited parental involvement, technological constraints, and communication barriers. By reframing educational marketing as an organizational and leadership process rather than a market-driven practice, the paper contributes to contemporary debates on educational policy, school leadership, and organizational change. The findings suggest that educational marketing can enhance school quality, effectiveness, and public trust, supporting more reflective, value-based, and sustainable leadership practices in school organizations. Overall, the paper offers policy-relevant insights for educational leaders and decision-makers, highlighting how educational marketing can be strategically integrated into school leadership practices to support organizational coherence, community engagement, and sustainable educational improvement.

Keywords: *Educational marketing, school leadership, educational improvement strategies, school image, public schools.*

1. Introduction

The rapid transformation of educational systems in recent years has substantially redefined the scope and expectations of school leadership. Contemporary school leaders are no longer confined to administrative and instructional responsibilities; instead, they operate within increasingly complex, competitive, and accountability-driven environments (Bush & Bell, 2019). Within this evolving context, educational marketing has shifted from a peripheral communication function to a strategic mechanism that actively supports leadership practice and policy enactment in school organizations.

Educational marketing is no longer limited to image-building. Rather, it is closely associated with how schools interpret their external environment, respond to stakeholder expectations, and position themselves within both local and global educational landscapes. As highlighted in marketing theory (Kotler & Murphy, 2021), organizations that adopt a strategic and relational approach are better equipped to align

their services with the needs of their audiences. In education, this alignment extends beyond operational effectiveness to encompass institutional values, mission, and public accountability.

Moreover, the digital transformation of education—accelerated by the post-pandemic context—has intensified the need for coherent communication strategies and sustained stakeholder engagement (Harris & Jones, 2020). Visibility, transparency, and responsiveness have emerged as critical dimensions of school effectiveness. The integration of digital technologies has further strengthened the role of educational marketing. Tools such as school websites, social media platforms, and digital communication systems enhance stakeholder engagement and transparency, particularly in the post-pandemic era. Schools that effectively incorporate marketing strategies into their daily operations often report higher levels of satisfaction, increased enrollment, and stronger community participation.

Consequently, school leaders are required to adopt a more outward-oriented and strategic perspective, integrating marketing thinking into decision-making processes and policy implementation. In this sense, educational marketing functions as a bridge between internal school processes and external expectations, enabling leaders to articulate vision, build trust, and enhance institutional legitimacy.

2. The concept of educational marketing

Educational marketing is understood as a strategic and communicative process through which educational institutions identify, anticipate, and respond to stakeholder needs. The objective is not the promotion of products but the creation of value within the school community (Jain et al., 2024). This value-driven approach aligns with the principles of services marketing, where the user—in this case, the student and their family—is placed at the center of the process. Educational marketing differs fundamentally from traditional advertising or promotional activities. Rather than focusing solely on information dissemination, it emphasizes the development of long-term, trust-based relationships through continuous feedback, adaptation, and improvement. Quality assurance, stakeholder satisfaction, and educational equity are central to this approach.

Educational marketing is grounded in the broader field of marketing management, which emphasizes the strategic coordination of organizational activities to create value for stakeholders (Kotler & Murphy, 2021). In the educational context, this perspective highlights the central role of leadership in shaping a market-oriented approach that remains aligned with the social and pedagogical mission of schooling. School leaders act as mediators between policy demands and community expectations, guiding their institutions toward greater responsiveness and adaptability (Bush, 2016). This reflects a shift from internally focused administration to a more outward-oriented leadership model that prioritizes communication, relationships, and stakeholder engagement.

Strategic management constitutes a key dimension of educational marketing when viewed as both a leadership and policy tool. Strategic processes in education involve continuous interaction between environmental analysis, strategic choice, and organizational action (Davies & Davies, 2020). Within this framework, school leaders are required to assess stakeholder needs, interpret policy frameworks, and identify opportunities for improvement and differentiation. Educational marketing supports these processes by providing tools for positioning the school, shaping its identity, and translating strategic priorities into coherent practices. In this way, it becomes closely linked to policy enactment, influencing not only implementation but also how policies are communicated and experienced within the school community.

The effectiveness of educational marketing also depends on the capacity of school administration systems. Flexible and responsive organizational structures are essential for adapting to changing environments (Bush, 2016). Administrative processes must support data use, internal coordination, and consistent communication with stakeholders. As a result, educational marketing becomes embedded in everyday school operations, contributing to organizational coherence and overall effectiveness.

Equally important is the development of an organizational culture that supports a market-oriented approach. Such a culture is characterized by openness to change, a focus on stakeholder needs, and a commitment to continuous improvement (Harris & Jones, 2019). Leadership plays a crucial role in fostering this culture by promoting shared values, participation, and alignment between individual and organizational goals. Although this transition may create tensions with traditional educational values, when grounded in clear ethical principles, it can enhance responsiveness and inclusivity.

Within this framework, educational marketing can be understood as a dynamic practice that shapes how schools operate and communicate. Unlike traditional markets driven by profit, it focuses on improving communication, enhancing service quality, and strengthening schools as centres of learning and community development (Bellei & Muñoz, 2023). Empirical research supports this view, indicating that schools adopting marketing practices—such as needs analysis, structured communication strategies, and quality evaluation—develop stronger relationships with stakeholders and gain a clearer understanding of their service quality (Palla et al., 2025).

In primary and secondary education, these processes are particularly significant due to the complex relationships among schools, students, and families. As students become more active participants in their learning and parents play an increasingly important role in school choice, effective communication and engagement strategies become critical for school success (Kumari & Biswas, 2023). At the same time, the implementation of marketing principles remains context-dependent, influenced by institutional, social, and cultural factors.

The adoption of educational marketing offers several advantages. It enhances communication with stakeholders, strengthens trust, and improves service quality through alignment with student needs and continuous evaluation processes (Serder, 2024). It also supports the development of stronger relationships within the school community and encourages greater participation in educational activities. Despite these benefits, educational marketing has attracted criticism, particularly regarding the risk of shifting focus from education to institutional promotion. However, current research suggests that when applied strategically and ethically, it can improve school effectiveness without undermining core educational values.

3. Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore Cypriot school principals' perceptions of educational marketing and its connection to school leadership. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate, as it enables an in-depth understanding of complex phenomena such as leadership practices, communication strategies, and stakeholder interaction, which are not easily captured through quantitative methods (Creswell, 2024). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing flexibility in exploring participants' perspectives while ensuring consistency across cases. The interview protocol focused on communication practices, digital tools, school visibility, collaboration with the community, and challenges in stakeholder engagement. Emphasis was placed on how principals interpret and enact their leadership role within this context.

The sample consisted of fifteen (15) primary and secondary school principals, selected through purposive sampling based on their active involvement in school administration and communication processes. The aim was to include information-rich cases rather than achieve statistical generalization. Participants reflected diverse professional backgrounds, enhancing the breadth and credibility of the findings. Data collection took place over a one-month period. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or online, lasted approximately 60 minutes, and were audio-recorded with informed consent. Ethical principles, including voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw, were strictly observed. Data were analysed using thematic analysis, involving familiarization, coding, categorization, and refinement of themes. The process ensured a systematic and credible interpretation of the data while maintaining the overall ethical integrity of the study.

4. Presentation of key findings

The analysis revealed three interrelated thematic areas: (a) digital communication and school visibility, (b) stakeholder engagement and school–community relations, and (c) challenges and constraints in communication practices.

4.1. Digital communication and school visibility

Digital tools constitute a central component of contemporary school communication. The official platform serves as the primary institutional channel for disseminating information related to announcements, ensuring reliability and formal accountability. However, its technical limitations have led schools to adopt complementary tools, particularly school websites and social media platforms. School websites function as dynamic information hubs, providing access to announcements, schedules, regulations, and documentation of school activities. As one participant noted, *“the website is updated almost daily; it is our main way to ensure that parents are informed immediately”* (P3). Social media platforms are also increasingly used to promote school activities and achievements, enabling more interactive forms of communication. According to one principal, *“through social media, parents can see what happens at school and respond instantly, which creates a sense of openness”* (P7). In several cases, communication channels are interconnected to maximize outreach. This multi-channel approach enhances visibility, accessibility, and responsiveness, reflecting a shift toward more strategic communication practices. As another participant explained, *“we try to combine all tools, the website, and social media, so that no information is missed”* (P11).

4.2. Stakeholder engagement and school–community relations

Despite the expansion of digital communication, face-to-face interaction remains fundamental for building trust and strengthening relationships with parents and the wider community. Meetings at the beginning of the school year play a key role in establishing communication frameworks. As one principal stated, “*the first meeting is crucial; it sets the tone for cooperation with parents*” (P2). Regular meetings throughout the year provide opportunities to discuss students’ progress and address concerns. In some schools, structured communication days allow parents to meet all teachers, reinforcing transparency and collaboration. Beyond information exchange, some schools implement supportive initiatives, such as parent education programs. As noted by a participant, “*we try to support parents as well, not only inform them, especially when there are learning or behavioural issues*” (P9). Telephone and email communication further strengthen interaction. Telephone contact is particularly important in urgent situations, offering immediacy and personal engagement. As one principal explained, “*when something serious happens, I prefer to call the parent directly; it shows responsibility and care*” (P5). Email communication supports more routine exchanges and documentation, often extending beyond formal working hours, enhancing accessibility and responsiveness.

4.3. Challenges and constraints in communication practices

Although multiple communication channels increase accessibility, several challenges persist. A common issue is the limited responsiveness of some parents, who may overlook or misinterpret information. As one participant noted, “*even when we send messages, some parents do not read them carefully, and we have to repeat the same information*” (P8). Participants also referred to a communication gap related to comprehension and engagement. “*Sometimes the problem is not the lack of communication, but how the message is understood*” (P4), highlighting the complexity of effective interaction. Furthermore, while digital tools enhance efficiency, they cannot fully replace personal contact. As one principal emphasized, “*digital communication helps, but it cannot substitute face-to-face discussion, especially in sensitive cases*” (P10). Despite these challenges, most participants consider their communication strategies effective, as they provide multiple access points and support continuous interaction. This creates a dynamic and reciprocal communication process, reinforcing the role of communication as a key dimension of school leadership and stakeholder engagement.

5. Discussion and recommendations

The findings highlight the transformation of the Cypriot school into a more open and outward-oriented institution. Communication emerges as a central pillar, with schools adopting multi-channel strategies to enhance transparency and accessibility. At the same time, face-to-face interaction remains essential for building trust and strengthening school family relationships. Collaboration with the local community further reinforces the school’s social and educational role, while participation in broader initiatives (e.g., Erasmus+) enhances visibility and institutional credibility. These practices contribute to a more dynamic and engaged school environment. However, important challenges persist. Limited parental involvement, technical constraints, and unequal digital literacy affect communication effectiveness. Additionally, language barriers and misunderstandings highlight the need for more inclusive and clear communication strategies. Overall, schools demonstrate progress, but continued support and adaptation are required.

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