"They Want a Reply Immediately!" Teachers' Perceptions About Contact Between Home and School

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Abstract

In many countries today, there is emphasis on teachers' interaction with parents. Also, parents are expected to be involved in their children's schooling. Teacher education, however, has been criticized for not preparing the prospective teachers sufficiently for the task. International studies have found on the one hand that digital technology facilitates teachers' communication with guardians, and on the other hand that communication via email risks leading to negative consequences. The aim of this study is to explore how the contact between home and school is perceived from a group of Swedish teachers' perspective. The empirical material consists of questionnaires directed to schoolteachers. In this paper, we analyse how teachers have answered open-ended questions posed in the questionnaire. The teachers report that it has become much more common for parents to contact them, in particular via email, and parents expect teachers to be available for them and respond quickly. The teachers try to establish their own individual guidelines for how to handle parental contacts. Our conclusion is that collegial cooperation could facilitate the teachers' tasks involving parents, and that teacher education should address the issue of how to combine good working conditions with a professional approach and good relations with the parents.

Key Words: Parental contacts; parental involvement; parental engagement, parent-teacher relationship, school-home cooperation

Introduction

In this paper, we focus on the contact between home[3] and school, given the background that interaction with parents is increasingly emphasised in policy documents in many countries. Also, the policy documents for Swedish schools highlight the parents' right to influence and impact. For example, the Education Act states that parental guardians "must be offered the opportunity to influence the education" (SFS, 2010, p. 800), and the curriculum states that teachers "should collaborate with pupils' guardians so that together they can develop the school content and activities" (Skolverket, 2019, p. 14). From several countries, however, it has been claimed that teacher education does not prepare prospective teachers sufficiently for the task (Mandarakas, 2014; Brown, Harris, Jacobson & Trotti, 2014; Saltmarsh, Barr & Chapman, 2015). In Sweden, too, shortcomings regarding education in parental contact within teacher education have been identified. In program evaluations, alumni surveys, and in surveys conducted by

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[3] In the following, parents, guardians, and the home are used synonymously.

the teachers' unions, the conclusion is repeated that a professional approach to parents is something that is treated inadequately in teacher education (SOU, 2008; Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2017).

Literature Review

It is an international trend that parents are expected to be involved in their children's schooling; being engaged is part of today's good parenting (Ule, Živoder & du Bois-Reymond, 2015). Not all parents, however, have the same material resources and living conditions, which may affect interaction with the school. This has been argued by many researchers (Forsberg, 2009; Crozier, Reay & James, 2011; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 2002; Vincent & Ball, 2007). According to Lareau (2011), few schools in low-income districts can claim that many parents are involved in the school operation, while the opposite is often the case for schools in high-income districts.

Teacher union organisations and the Swedish Work Environment Authority have cautioned that the many parental contacts occupy an increasing amount of teachers' work time, leading to stress and unhealthy working conditions (Berling, 2016; Hammarberg & Nylander, 2017; Lärarnas Riksförbund, 2016b). There are, however, many factors that have had an impact on teachers' work in recent years. The employment conditions and work situation for Swedish teachers have deteriorated as a consequence of several major school reforms in recent decades (SOU, 2014). The status of the teaching profession has declined, which is linked to the shift to municipal control, where responsibility for operating the schools was transferred in the early 1990s from the state to the municipalities (Ringarp, 2011). Several interacting factors led to the work being intensified and the teacher's autonomy being cut, which has been described as a "proletarianisation" of the profession (Falkner, 1997; Gannerud, 1999; cf. Ozga & Lawn, 1988). This was followed by reforms for independent schools and free school choices, leading to a competition for students (Björvang & Galic, 2015). The ideological shift that occurred when the reforms were conducted meant that parents were given more power and influence, which affected the relationship between parents and teachers (Englund, 2018; Fredriksson, 2010). With a view that parents are customers in an education market, there is a risk that teachers and principals are regarded as a kind of service personnel who must satisfy the customers' (the parents') wishes (Fredriksson, 2010). Nevertheless, a study of teachers' views of parental involvement found that a large majority of the participating teachers felt there was a positive, trusting dialogue with most of the parents. There were, however, teachers who perceived the contact with parents as demanding, and approximately one in ten compulsory schoolteachers classified the contact as "stressful and sometimes threatening" (Erikson, 2009, p. 16).

Although most teachers have good relationships with the greater majority of their students' parents, many teachers report that parents today come with unwelcome comments about how they should perform their job. The National Teachers Association

(Lärarnas Riksförbund, 2016a) conducted a survey study among its members on how students' parents affect school and teaching. The results show that a substantial percentage of teachers, who work in schools where the parents' education level is high, have had parents trying to influence their grading. The parents also try to influence the design of the instruction, homework, and tests. Over half of the participants in the study say that parents have threatened to take action if their views are not listened to. The most common measure that parents threaten is to go to the principal, after which there is the threat to contact the School Inspectorate, and then there is the threat to have the student change schools.

An important aspect affecting teachers' work and professional conditions that has significance for parental contact is the role gained by Internet and digitalisation in current times. At schools, like most workplaces, digital technology has been introduced to facilitate communication and documentation. Schad (2018) however, who investigated the social interaction and communication of compulsory schoolteachers, found that many Swedish teachers experience an unmeasurable work situation with technology that is difficult to manage and a constant flow of email messages. In an Australian study the researchers found the digitalisation to be both liberating and exploitative for the teachers in the study. Many teachers appreciated digital tools and reported that their work was facilitated. Others emphasized that the digitalisation had led to an intensification that was perceived as stressful (Selwyn, Nemorin & Johnson, 2017). Also, research has shown that digital technology strengthens existing top-down patterns of social power. A great deal of digital technology in schools is used for managerial and administrative tasks, not least to strengthen the intensification of information flows (Selwyn, 2011).

Regarding the contact between home and school, parents often choose email communication when they contact their children's teachers (Thompson, Mazer & Flood Grady, 2015). Despite the increased workload that the digital technology can bring about, the use of email and other digital technology is often welcomed by students, parents, and teachers alike. The hope is among other things that communication will be promoted and that problems and misunderstandings can be more easily prevented (Grant, 2011). Nevertheless, communication is not always facilitated by email. Thompson (2009) found problems that tend to arise as a consequence of email communication between parents and teachers. The problems were the risk of misunderstandings when the communication takes place via email, the risk that face-to-face meetings are reduced or terminated and also a risk that students take less responsibility for their schoolwork when their parents, who have insight and control through frequent communication with teachers, remind their children of what to do. Furthermore, according to a study of 5700 schoolteachers in the US regarding their experience with cyberharassment by parents, 10 percent of the teachers in the sample had received harassing or threatening emails from parents (Foley, May, Blevins & Akers, 2015).

Purpose of the study

The emphasis on teachers' interaction with parents in school policy, the international trend that parents are expected to be involved in their children's schooling, and the digital development, have highlighted the need for teacher education to give teachers' parental contacts more attention. Sweden is at the forefront when it comes to such matters as access to the Internet and smartphones (Internetstiftelsen, 2021), nevertheless the matter of how Swedish teachers experience parental contacts has been scarcely investigated. As described above, international studies have found on the one hand that digital technology facilitates teachers' communication with guardians, and on the other hand that communication via email risks leading to negative consequences such as increased stress and misunderstandings.

The aim of this study is to explore how the contact between home and school is perceived from a group of Swedish teachers' perspective. We address the following research question: What views and experiences do teachers describe regarding changes in parental contacts during the time they have worked as a teacher? What are the views and experiences that teachers describe regarding how they manage parental contacts?

Theoretical Framework

In Sweden, of the entire population aged 16-85, nine out of ten use the internet every day. The mobile phone is the most used digital device and almost all adults use e-mail. (Internetstiftelsen, 2021). The increased amount of sent email means that many professional groups, including teachers, principals, and other school staff, have numerous email messages to manage daily (Rönkkö, Svensson, Svensson & Carlsson, 2017).

The theory of social acceleration

According to Hartmut Rosa (2013a; 2013b), the digital development is an example of the social acceleration that characterizes today's society. Rosa speaks of an acceleration in three areas that are central to today's society: the technical field, social change, and pace of life. If digitalisation is used as an example of what has happened in the technical field, it becomes clear how developments in the field drive social change and make us communicate in new ways. We are switching to faster computers, more advanced mobile phones and new Internet solutions. We get the latest news in our smart phones, but it also means that this news quickly gets old, and we have to update ourselves again soon so as not to fall behind. Digitalisation also means that we can be online and available for communication around the clock. This leads to an acceleration in terms of pace of life, which makes us demand even more efficient technical solutions in the hope that they will provide time savings. Rosa describes the acceleration as a totalitarian force that exerts a pressure that becomes impossible to escape once it has come to dominate society. We are also drawn into activities that we do not want to engage in. We can sit for hours and read emails or surf the Internet even though we do

not really want to, something that risks leading to what Rosa calls emotional aliena-tion. We become alienated from our own actions, which risks leading to illness. Even if it is impossible to escape the acceleration, it encounters obstacles of various kinds. This can be both such as side effects in the form of unintentional network crashes and the conscious resistance people can muster in order to counteract the acceleration. This, however, does not slow down development in any lasting way.

The boundary theory

Nevertheless, other scholars have been interested in how individuals manage the development and especially the situation in working life. Researchers talk about bound-less work, and this means that many activities and tasks are no longer tied to specific spatial, temporal, and organizational contexts (Derks, van Duin, Tims & Bakker, 2015; Aronsson, 2018). According to the boundary theory, different types of boundaries are reconsidered and exceeded, sometimes it happens after clear negotiations, sometimes the boundaries are dissolved without any clear discussions or decisions. To achieve a sense of so-called boundary control, the individual can use different boundary strate-gies. *Segmentation* is a strategy that means that working life and leisure time are kept apart. *Integration* instead means that working life and leisure time are allowed to over-lap. For example, certain tasks can be performed at home in the evening and in turn the workplace offers staff to meet personal needs during office hours (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000; Mellner, 2018). The strategies are often maintained by delimitation techniques. The delimitation techniques can be of a *temporal, spatial* or *psychological* nature. A delimitation technique that refers to a temporal aspect may be that the em-ployee, for example, never works on Sundays. A technique that applies to space can be that part of the work takes place at home, but only in a special office room. Psychologi-cal demarcation techniques can be important to use when thoughts of work interfere and disrupt what would be work-free time. An example of such a technique could be to book another activity such as running, or choir singing to dispel thoughts and provide space for recovery (Mellner, 2018).

Methodology

Few studies have examined how teachers perceive parental contacts and how the contacts are managed. How Swedish teachers perceive the matter is even more scarce-ly investigated. This study is therefore exploratory in nature. The empirical material at the basis of this study consists of questionnaires directed to compulsory schoolteach-ers in four municipalities in southern Sweden. Against the background of the teachers' work described as increasingly intensified, we were interested in the phenomenon pri-marily described by studies conducted in other countries, that is, parents involve them-selves to a greater extent in their children's schooling. The choice of schools was thus made according to the selection principle "most likely" (Flyvbjerg, 2006), meaning

that we chose schools where the probability was high for engaged parents to be found. Given that research has found that parents who are most active contacting the school are often highly educated parents, a request was sent to the principals of four compulsory schools in areas where the parents' education level was high based on the National Agency for Education's education statistics, where the parents' highest level of education is divided into three levels and scored as follows: Completed primary school (1p), completed upper secondary education (2p), post-secondary education (3p). In each of the four cities, the compulsory school with the highest scores was selected.

Together with the email messages to the four principals, an information sheet was attached with written explanation about the study purpose and implementation. It was emphasised that participation was voluntary and that the information from the participants would be dealt with confidentially. This information was also provided orally in subsequent phone calls. All the principals welcomed the study and invited us to administer the survey during staff development days when all the schoolteachers were gathered. When the survey was distributed, we began by providing both written and oral information again about the purpose, implementation, confidentiality of data and voluntary participation. That everyone participates voluntarily is important for ethical reasons, but also to help ensure honesty and strengthen credibility by the fact that those who participate are willing to share their experiences. We distributed the questionnaires ourselves and we also collected them. We were available in the room to answer any questions while the survey was being conducted. Being present the whole time gave us control over the process. Given that all the teachers were assembled in the same room, it was emphasised that those who did not want to participate in the study were welcome to return the questionnaire without anything being filled in or written on it. Another alternative provided was that they could write about completely different things from what we asked about in the survey, so that they did not show whether or not they participated. However, we did not get back any such questionnaires, nor any that were not filled in. There is the possibility, nevertheless, that a teacher could simply hold onto the empty questionnaire instead of turning it in to us.

The four schools where we conducted the survey were municipal compulsory schools with all forms, which means that the schools had pupils in the ages six to sixteen years. The schools were located in four medium-sized cities in southern Sweden. 158 teachers participated in the survey. 36 of the participants were teaching in primary school, 39 were teaching in middle school and 74 were teaching in secondary school. Nine of the participants were teaching at both middle and secondary school. The teachers' average teaching experience was nineteen years. They were 109 women and 49 men. The women's average age was 46 and the men's was 49.

The questionnaire consisted of both open-ended questions and Likert-scale items. In this paper, we have analysed only how the teachers answered the open-ended questions that were asked. Our paper is thus a qualitative study of these responses. Accord-

ing to Toerien and Wilkinson (2004), an advantage of qualitative survey design is that it provides the opportunity to reach many participants while allowing the participants to express themselves and report of their experiences in their own words.

A question asked in the questionnaire was whether the work with parental contacts had changed over the time they have worked as a teacher. If their opinion was that there had been a change, they were asked to explain in what way. Other questions of particular interest for this study were about routines, strategies and conditions that facilitate or hampers the work with parental contacts. The questionnaire and the teachers' answers were written in Swedish. The quotations provided here have been translated to English for this paper.

When it comes to qualitative studies, one does not talk about reliability and validity in the same way as in quantitative research. The researcher strives for reliability, but not by using measuring instruments and a procedure that someone else should be able to repeat with exactly the same results. Reliability and validity are instead achieved by the researcher explaining any theoretical starting points, describing the method for collecting data, and by the researcher's interpretations are reported and made clear to the reader. When the researchers openly give an account of their interpretations and conclusions, the readers can try for themselves the trustworthiness of the reasoning that is conducted and in the analysis that is made (Kvale, 1997).

Larsson (1994), however, talks about validity criterions for qualitative studies. Firstly, empirical anchoring is an important validity criterion. The present study's empirical anchoring will be evident by the fact that relatively many interview quotes are presented in the result section. The interpretations and arguments used will be stated and thus left open to the reader's assessment. Secondly, a scientific work should have a heuristic value, according to Larsson. This means that the study must produce something new. It should provide a supplement of knowledge. The present study's contribution to knowledge will appear in both the results section and the discussion section. Thirdly, the pragmatic criterion concerns the consequences of the research results. The result should be useful, for example in that it contributes with increased understanding or is useful and has value for the practitioner. We will return to this at the end of the article when we discuss the study's implications.

Further, fundamental to good quality in a survey is the quality of the data that is collected. To ensure that the questions would work as well as possible, two pilot rounds were conducted where the questions were answered by three and four informants, respectively.

A thematic analysis of the empirical material has been carried out as this is a common approach in qualitative studies (Bryman, 2008). The purpose of a thematic analysis is to highlight patterns in the data material. What is presented as themes are thus aspects that can be said to be prominent in the material. The analysis of the material has been done in several steps. The answers to the open-ended questions in the survey

were compiled in a separate document. The parts that were relevant in relation to the purpose of the study were marked and coded. The coding meant that text sections were given a title that captured the essence of the content. The codes were then compared and combined into preliminary themes. The preliminary themes that had been developed were compared, regrouped, and reformulated. However, as is customary in qualitative studies, the analysis was not a linear process. Rather, we went back and forth between the empirical material, the coded sections, and the analysis. Furthermore, the theoretical framework was also not included from the beginning but was added after we searched for theories to understand the experiences that appeared in the material.

Concerning the themes, the researchers can either give an account of all the themes found in the material or highlight a few prominent themes. (Rännstam & Wästerfors, 2015; Widerberg, 1997). We have chosen to highlight the most prominent in the material. The clearest answers that stood out in the material are that according to the teachers, parental contacts have increased, and they involve demands on availability. Initially, the idea was that an increase in the number of parent contacts could be one theme, and requirements for accessibility could be another, but it turned out that these two aspects were not always easy to separate. The view that parental contacts have increased was often stated together with the view that the requirements for accessibility have also increased. Regarding teachers' views of managing the contacts, the main theme concerned setting limits. In the next section we will develop these themes.

Increased Contacts for Teachers to Handle

Below it is described how the teachers have depicted the perceived change regarding parental contacts, followed by teachers' views of managing the contacts.

More parent contacts and expectations of availability for quick response

A recurring response from the teachers is that contacts with parents have increased and that they are at the parents' initiative. Parents now contact teachers to an extent that did not occur previously. Teachers, who have been in the profession for many years and who can thereby compare the situation with how it was back in time, perceive a substantial difference. A primary school teacher with 29 years of professional experience says that the relatively few contacts earlier, of parent meetings and parent-teacher conferences, have been replaced by frequent communication with some guardians:

The contacts are much more frequent now. When I started as a teacher, there were only contacts with parents at parent meetings and parent-teacher conferences. Now you have daily contact with one or more parents.

A secondary school teacher with 29 years in the profession expresses herself in terms of parents "chasing" teachers today. In addition, reversed roles are described such that the contact before was mostly initiated by the teacher, while today the parent is the active party. The teacher writes:

When I started, it was mostly teachers who took contact with the homes. Today it is the parents who chase the teachers.

The word "chase" in the quotation above has a negative tone, which implies that the person being chased experiences the contacts as stressful. This can be understood on the basis that teachers' working conditions have deteriorated over time. Studies have shown that teachers have acquired a markedly increased workload since the 1990s. More teachers now have difficulty accomplishing their work duties. In addition, their own influence has diminished, which adds to the perception of a pressured work situation (Ringarp, 2011; SOU, 2014). Also, according to Hartmut Rosa (2013), the pace of life has increased throughout society. Based on this background, the wording that "the parents chase the teachers" can be understood as the parental contacts becoming another task that is stressful and difficult to find time for.

The material also contains answers showing that the change that has entailed increased contacts and communication via email can be experienced as positive. A teacher who works in upper secondary school and has 27 years of teaching experience mentions that the school is now not only responsible for what happens during school hours, teachers today are expected to have a bigger picture of the student's social situation. In this context, it can be perceived as an advantage for teachers to receive email instead of phone calls home. The teacher describes the change that has occurred over the time she has worked as a teacher:

Increased expectations of having contact, informing and feedback. And to have greater knowledge of the student's situation outside school now compared to before. Nowadays, most contact is via e-mail. Previously, it was a phone call home. I am positive about this change.

The changed situation, involving the guardians taking contact to an increased extent, is also related to changes in communication channels. The teachers in this study state that parents now often contact them via email and text messages. Especially email messages have increased in scope. A middle school teacher who has worked 35 years responds briefly about what has changed regarding parental contacts: *Email "demanding" action (immediately).*

Email messages from parents can be considered demanding when the parents expect the reply to come swiftly. A quick response presupposes that the teachers are available, sometimes also that they are prepared to prioritize parental contact over other tasks. A middle school teacher who has worked as a teacher for twenty years writes:

With today's communication technology, new demands are placed on teachers where immediate response, preferably around-the-clock, seven days a week, is seen as something natural among some parents.

The new communication technology makes it easier for parents to contact teachers outside "office hours." As teachers describe when parents contact them, "around-the-clock" is an expression which suggests a frustration over the fact that not all parents

regard teachers as employees with the right to undisturbed leisure time. Participants in the study describe expectations on them to be available, to answer questions or discuss situations that involve students, at times when other employees have the right to relax from work. According to the teachers, it is common that parents expect the teachers to be available and willing to reply, even in cases when the contact is made on the weekend or late in the evening. One primary school teacher who has worked for eight years in the profession says:

Today parents can email at ten o'clock at night and send another email at 7:30 pointing out that I have not replied. They want a reply immediately!

Internet and email facilitate the contact in many ways, but the teachers do not consider all the email messages that are received as reasonable. There is the implication that because it is easy to send off a quick message, some are sent out of convenience. For example, it happens that parents turn to teachers to get answers that they should seek elsewhere. It is claimed that certain parents ask about things they have already received information about or about things they can find out on the Internet. One middle school teacher with twenty years of teaching experience implies that parents out of convenience do not look for the information they want. Instead, an email is sent to the teacher, which gives the teacher an increased workload. The teacher explains:

We are contactable around-the-clock via email. They expect a quick reply. Although there is a lot more information for parents than before, they want to have more because it is inconvenient to go in on, for example, [name of the education portal].

The education portal mentioned in the above quotation is a web-based education platform that among other things, should facilitate communication between home and school. The intention is that parents log in to see their children's school results and learning, as well as more general information about the class and school, but what appears in the quotation is that parents would rather contact the teachers than enter the education portal. Moreover, the major investments schools have made in education portals have been criticized. The critics claim that the education portals risk contributing to an increased workload for teachers who must spend time and effort documenting in an education platform that does not suit their needs (Lärarförbundet, 2019).

The expectations of being available for communication apply not only when parents want to reach teachers, but also when teachers need to get hold of parents. A high school teacher who has 24 years of teaching experience points out that digital technology makes it easier when teachers need to contact parents quickly:

Through the development of technology, parents want quick answers to what is happening in school. At the same time, it is a convenient way to quickly reach parents in an emergency situation.

Keeping the boundary between work and leisure time

The increased contacts and the parents' many email messages also require a

changed behaviour on the part of teachers and stressing the boundary between work and leisure time is important for many teachers. The material contains answers that show that, according to teachers the email can reduce the feeling of having to be constantly available. There are teachers who state that parent contacts are taken care of during working hours and that the email is managed in an unproblematic way. The possibility to choose the time at which to manage the email messages is perceived as facilitating communication. Emphasizing that you have a private life, which means not always being available is for example put forward, by a secondary school teacher with 12 years of teaching experience. She writes that email communication saves time and also she does not always have to be on duty when parents make contact:

It helps to not always be available. I too have a private life. I prefer email instead of phone calls, it saves time for me.

One primary school teacher with twenty years of teaching experience pointed out that you do not have read the email messages on your leisure time. She says, *"the email messages have increased, but I do not have to read the mail on weekends and late evenings."*

The wording "I do not have to" suggests that teachers may choose or choose not to read emails late evenings and weekends. It is possible to interpret this as meaning that the teacher is well aware that her segmentation strategy is not preferred by all teachers, and those who instead believe that the integration strategy suits them better have made a choice that means that working hours and leisure time overlap.

One way to keep the boundary between work and free time is not to leave your private phone number to students and parents, but instead consistently refer to the school phone. This is something that several teachers state that they apply. However, an elementary school teacher with 35 years of experience as a teacher writes that it does not always work for her: *I do not give out my private phone number (but some find out anyway).*

Struggling with the boundary between work and leisure time

Many teachers describe that by applying a boundary technique, they avoid being available. A secondary school teacher with three years of teaching experience describes how she uses a spatial delimitation technique, which means managing the tasks at the workplace and not taking them home:

I try to stay at work after school so that I do not take work home. Try to avoid email on weekends.

Also, not reading email messages on weekends can be described as a temporal delimitation technique. By keeping the weekends free from work-related tasks, the boundary between work and leisure can be maintained. However, "Try" and "avoid" are words that are used when the handling of email is described. This word choice suggests that the teacher struggle to maintain her leisure time by not reading email when

she should be free, but she might not always manage to stick to her intentions. For those who, through digital technology from home, can read messages and information that were previously provided only at the workplace, it can be difficult to maintain the boundary between work and leisure. Further, another thing that can make it difficult to write email messages during work time is that it is important how one expresses oneself so that the recipient does not misunderstand the message. It is also important to be clear and straightforward in order to avoid that one's answer sets off further questions and more email messages. A middle school teacher, who has almost forty years of teaching experience, says that it takes a long time to formulate answers in an effective way, and there is no time for this during working hours. The aim is really to write the answers at work, but that is not always so:

I do not always follow that, because there must be focus on wording, which I think a lot about.

The quotation above testifies that the teacher sits at home and writes some of her email to be able to think about the wording in peace and quiet. Similarly, Rönkkö, et al. (2017) found that principals answer a large proportion of their work-related emails at home outside the ordinary workday timeframe, precisely because many answers require that word choices are carefully considered.

Some teachers read work emails during evenings and weekends, and then wait for daytime and weekdays to respond. However, this way of handling email messages can be a problem, because it is not always easy to turn off one's thoughts awakened by the read email. A primary school teacher with thirty years of teaching experience writes:

Do not respond to emails on my free time, although I read them sometimes. That is something I shouldn't do because it stresses me.

One boundary technique is not to have email connected to one's private mobile phone, but only on the computer. Then it is easier to leave email messages unread over the weekend and thereby keep the boundary between work and leisure. The contacts in the form of telephone calls and text messages do not come with the same possibility. The teachers who use their private mobile phones to communicate with parents via text messages and mobile calls are more available. A middle school teacher with ten years of teaching experience says:

Don't check my email from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon. Text messages and phone calls are harder to defend myself from.

The phrasing "harder to defend myself from" above suggests that the text messages and calls at weekends are perceived as burdensome. Also, the phrasing suggests that the teacher's intention is to use the temporal delimitation technique, i.e., not to let the work interfere with free time during the period from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon. In practice, however, it is not always easy for teachers to safeguard their free time. One primary school teacher with 25 years of teaching experience writes:

Try to keep up with parent contacts during work time, make it clear to guardians

that contact happens during work time – but that's hard to stick to.

The temporal delimitation technique that means that teachers try to complete their tasks during "office hours", while evenings and weekends are kept off work, seems to be difficult to apply. In many situations, it can be difficult to reject contacts that are made. When the parents contact the teachers during the weekends, it may be that they want to discuss worries and concerns. A secondary school teacher who has worked as a teacher for 24 years explains that she tries to direct the contacts to the weekdays, but if the parents call her and yet it happens to be the weekend, she does not reject them:

I tell parents, who are usually worried about their child if they get in touch on the weekend, that I prefer to respond to email and text messages on weekdays. If they call, I listen anyway, of course.

When the teacher above says that she "preferably" does not want to reply to emails and text messages during the weekends, it appears as if her right to undisturbed leisure time is uncertain. She then says that she "of course" listens when parents call, which can be understood as justifying her desire to be free by ensuring that she is still available for telephone calls. The quotation can therefore be interpreted as an illustration that there are expectations to be available and that she relates to these expectations in a negotiating way. That her wish to be free on the weekends must be justified suggests that the expectations for her to be available are perceived as strong.

The difficulty of rejecting parents who get in touch during weekends and evenings can also be understood on the basis of the disadvantages that may occur if there are conflicts with parents. The teachers' work can be facilitated when they have good relations with parents, also teachers are concerned about the consequences when there is dissatisfaction. Dissatisfied parents may threaten to change schools, go to the media with their criticism or file a report with the Child and School Student Representative and the School Inspectorate. The fact that there are parents who take this type of action, or threaten to do so, is described. A middle and secondary school teacher with 25 years of professional experience maintains that the biggest change that has occurred during her time as a teacher is that parents can now threaten to file a report, which sets off a burdensome bureaucratic process. The teacher writes: *The difference is the threat of reporting and all the paperwork entailed. That's the big difference.*

The survey also shows some concern about causing dissatisfaction that could lead to the spread of rumors among the parents, for example, via social media. Social media and the role social media can play in spreading attacks and offensive statements is mentioned and in this context it is important to teachers that parents can contact them if something is unclear. Email is sometimes preferred, because it is a communication channel that gives teachers some flexibility and the possibility to choose when to answer. Some issues, however, are better suited to conversations over the phone. For longer discussions and explanations, it is both impractical and time-consuming to write email messages. A middle school teacher with fifteen years of teaching experi-

ence explains:

Email contact is easiest in most cases. It can happen when I have time. Things that need to be explained are easier with phone calls.

Preventing or sorting out misunderstandings that may arise seems to be important, but a practical problem for many teachers is that they do not have their own work phones (Leffler, 2020). It is common for the phone to be shared with several colleagues, and a place to speak undisturbed is lacking in many schools. A primary school teacher with 28 professional years explains: *There is no separate place at school for phone calls.* The contacts that the teacher herself makes with parents via the telephone must therefore often be made from home with the teacher's private phone. That is thus another aspect that blurs the boundary between work and the private sphere.

Discussion and Conclusion

It is important that students in their teacher education are prepared for all the different tasks of the teaching profession, including the task of having contact with parents. In Sweden very few research studies have examined how the parental contacts are perceived from the teachers' perspective. According to the teachers' description in this study, parents contact them to an extent that did not occur previously. It needs not be a disadvantage in itself that parents to a greater extent than before bring their questions and thoughts to the teachers, but it leads to an increased workload for the teachers. The contacts have increased with the communication technology, which makes it easy to send messages quickly, and many parents also expect to receive a reply without delay. According to Rosa's theory of social acceleration (2013a; 2013b), the technological advances that have made it easy to send fast digital messages have brought about a social change; parents use this method to communicate more with their children's teachers. The rapid technology is also accelerating the pace of life and parents expect teachers to respond quickly to their message.

Teachers are eager to have good relationships with the parents, to facilitate their work and benefit everyone. Parents are involved in their children's schooling in a way that parents have not been before. This is in line with policy documents that emphasise parents' right to influence. For teachers, there is a concern, however, about dissatisfied parents and also about the actions parents can take. Reporting to the School Inspectorate, in particular, is mentioned as a spoken or unspoken threat. Parents' reports to the Swedish Schools Inspectorate have increased sharply, which has been discussed in both teachers' trade union media and news media (Åstrand & Rydman, 2018). The teachers who have participated in this study can be assumed to be aware of the increase in reports, whether they have been reported themselves or not.

When teachers emphasize the importance of not engaging in parental contacts in their free time, this is an example of the boundary control that researchers talk about. Teachers use delimitation techniques to safeguard their private time. A temporal de-

limitation technique used is to manage parent contacts during "office hours". A spatial delimitation technique that is used is to manage the contacts at the workplace instead of at home. However, maintaining the boundary between work and leisure in this way is not always easy. Teachers struggle with the issue. Especially the handling of email during the weekends can be described with words such as "defend myself", "try" and "avoid". The digital technology that enables teachers to read emails from parents at any time and at home, means that it can be difficult not to. Rosa points out that we are easily drawn into activities via digital technology. We can spend hours surfing the web or reading emails, even though we do not really want to. According to Rosa, there is a danger that eventually it can lead to what he calls emotional alienation.

There is a variety of ways in which the participating teachers manage the parental contacts and the demands on their availability. The teachers are left trying to establish their own individual guidelines. Given that the school has undergone reforms which have resulted in deteriorating working conditions and an increasingly pressured work situation (Ringarp, 2011; SOU, 2014), we would like to propose schools to establish common guidelines and promote collegial support regarding how to deal with time-consuming parental contacts. Also, it is important that teacher education address the matter of how to combine good working conditions with a professional approach and good relations with the parents. The teacher education could for example, invite schoolteachers with good experience of how this can be handled. These teachers could both lecture on how they have dealt with the issue and discuss the matter with the student teachers. We also believe that it would be helpful for the student teachers to be given special tasks dealing with teachers' parental contacts to conduct during their practicum.

A limitation with questionnaire studies such as this is that the participants' answers are not always easy to interpret and, unlike in interview studies, it is not possible to ask follow-up questions to get explanations for any ambiguities. Another limitation is that the questionnaires were answered when all the teachers were gathered in the same room. To sit separately and complete the questionnaire in peace and quiet may have been preferred by some participants.

Furthermore, as this small scale-study is exploratory in nature and based on a selective sample, conclusions must be drawn with caution. A study like this cannot result in research results that can be generalised in the sense that they can indicate how widespread or common a phenomenon is. In contrast, Johannessen and Tufte (2003) speak of transferability, which means that results from qualitative studies should be able to be used to understand similar phenomena and mechanisms. As we have described we chose schools where the probability was high for engaged parents to be found. Yet we find it likely that parental contacts have increased for many teachers in Sweden, not least in view of digitalisation and the role that email, and texting now play. Nevertheless, more studies are needed to investigate this further. Also, in terms of

future research in-depth interviews allowing teachers to freely describe and share their experiences and thoughts regarding parental contacts can increase our understanding of how teachers experience parental contacts and how they handle these contacts.

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