

**PARENT-TEACHER COMMUNICATION PATTERNS
CONCERNING ACTIVITY AND POSITIVE-NEGATIVE
ATTITUDES**

Karmen Palts and Halliki Harro-Loit

University of Tartu

Abstract. Taking dialogue-based communication as a precondition, this study aimed to analyse Estonian parents' attitudes towards the school communication. By using the empirical data from six focus group interviews this study proposes five communication patterns that take into consideration the degree of activity and the positive-negative attitude towards interacting with the teacher. The results showed that parents with low communication activity were concerned mainly about grades and health issues. Active parents were also discussing the feedback and evaluation system. Different patterns would enable teachers to apply different communication strategies to efficiently involve parents in supporting the development of their child.

Keywords: parent teacher communication, communication patterns, parents, family school relationship, communication activity, Estonia

DOI: 10.3176/tr.2015.2.03

1. Introduction

Practitioners and academics agree that efficient communication between a school and a family is a precondition for partnership. Various studies claim that teachers can use a variety of communication formats and channels in order to promote parental involvement in building a sense of community between home and school (Harris and Goodall 2008, Webber and Mulford 2007, Shirvani 2007, Epstein and Sanders 2006, Graham-Clay 2005, Epstein 2001) as well as improving a child's learning environment (Lynch et al. 2013, Oostdam and Hooze 2013, Fan and Chan 2001). In the era of Internet society, the rapid evolution of communication technology has broadened the channels and formats of communication between families and school (Thompson and Mazer 2012, Graham-Clay 2005, Jennings and Wartella 2004). Electronic databases, telephone, video recordings,

voice messages (Bauch 1997), e-letters (Thompson 2007, Johnson 2000, Kilgore 2010, Nichols and Read 2002, Shinn 2002), blogs (Zhang and Hatcher 2011), different forms of meetings and classical diaries increase the diversity of channels and the formats one party or the other can choose to meet the aim of the specific communication act. By presenting the findings from an empirical study it is claimed that, although parents want the same information about their children, they prefer to receive it in different ways (Vornberg and Garret 2010). Generally, the teachers need to build up good relations with very different parents (Hughes and Read 2012, Tveit 2009).

This study is based on the notion of ‘dialogue’ and it refers to the conversational mode between a teacher and a parent; the dialogue endpoint is the condition in which multiple viewpoints are all equally legitimate (Baxter and Akkooir 2011). Graham-Clay points out the difference between one-way communication (which occurs when teachers seek to inform parents about events, activities, or a student’s progress through a variety of sources) and two-way communication. The latter involves interactive dialogue between teachers and parents through telephone calls, home visits, parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and various school-based community activities (Graham-Clay 2005).

Taking dialogue-based communication as a precondition, this study aimed to further develop the understanding about the two-way communication activities between parents and teachers. The aim of the study was to provide five communication patterns that take the degree of activity and the positive-negative attitude of the parents concerning being informed and interacting with the teacher into consideration. These five communication patterns would enable teachers to apply different communication strategies to efficiently involve parents in supporting the development of their child.

2. Method and sample

This paper is based on the study of the parents of children who attend primary level classes (age 7–10). The parents participated in six focus group interviews in different types of Estonian schools: a large city school (FG4, 6 respondents), a large rural school (FG8, 8 respondents), a medium-sized city school (FG2, 7 respondents), a medium-sized rural school (FG6, 7 respondents), a small city school (FG11, 7 respondents) and a small rural school (FG10, 7 respondents). The differences between the schools sampled provided the opportunity to see how the distance of the contacts between the community and the schools influenced the teacher-parent communication. At one end of the scale, in a small rural school, where the children’s parents and grandparents may well have attended the school too, the communication can be social. At the other end of the scale are non-district city schools that parents have chosen for their children.

Parents volunteered for the focus groups. Schools were asked for permission to conduct the survey and emails were sent to the parents to ask them to participate

and those willing to volunteer replied to the researchers by email. The first to make contact were enlisted and they received information about the topic being discussed.

The questions for the respondents were as follows:

1. If you consider the parents' communication styles and activity, how would you describe and group them?
2. Please recall some instances or stories when a parent seeks to contact teachers to solve a problem.
3. What are the positive and negative sides of e-communication? What does it depend on? Why?
4. Do you consider regular teacher-parent communication to be supportive of the development of the child?

For the present study the researchers analysed six focus group interview transcripts using a constant comparative method to identify recurring patterns and themes (Boeije 2002). After the first focus group interview was transcribed a comparison of the different orientations was carried out. The transcripts were read several times in order to categorize the data to identify recurring patterns and themes. Once the patterns were recognized and organized sub-themes within each category were identified.

3. The five communication pattern profiles

When the researchers asked the participants to describe the communication patterns of various parents they had met, most of the respondents mentioned that parents are either very active or very passive. The activity-passivity scale is very clear. When describing the active parents, the respondents differentiated between parents who need constant information (*...they always want to be informed... receive email several times a day*); want to be involved in decision-making (*to have a say*) and discussions and activities in school (*if needed, participate in school events*) and parents who are passive and who do not contact the school and cause distress for their child (*her child is sitting in the corner and crying, because the mother or father is never there*).

In the following extracts the respondents described their position on the activity-passivity scale and expressed their attitudes on different types of activities. Parents distinguished between reactive activity ('in need') and proactive activity (taking initiative).

Respondent 5: *Some are the active parents I am one of them and can be annoying too. Then there are the go-betweens who mind their own business but when needed they are active in school too and the third group of parents never comes... (FG4).*

Respondent 6: *In my opinion there are always those who are always ready to do something and support teachers and those, who do not take the initiative unless someone insists, then they do everything that has to be done...and there are*

some who are, so to say, malicious, who think everything is [the] teacher's responsibility (FG11).

These extracts represent the opinion of most respondents in the focus groups that parents' activity is a kind of a scale phenomenon. Notably, the second parent linked the 'activities' with shared responsibility between the parent and the teacher, because 'active parents' support the teacher and the learning process at school, while passive parents are those who consider the teacher's work to be a service.

The analysis of the various responses enabled us to make an implicit assumption explicit: parents who have rather negative and problem-oriented expectations concerning home and school communication. These parents avoid meeting the teacher because their own experience at school was often negative. At the other end of this scale were parents who expected positive communication with teachers and the school. This result enabled us to create four basic profiles of parents concerning their expectations and habits in teacher-parent communications: *active-positive*; *active-negative*; *passive-positive* and *passive-negative*. Of these four profiles *passive-positive* was described as the most common: these are parents who do not consider it necessary to communicate with the school in the case of positive credits and when there are no problems with the child's behaviour. Some respondents in the focus group also represented the *negative-active* group (parents who described their negative attitude or who were very critical about teacher-parent communication). The *negative-passive* parents were described by other parents – only one respondent could be partly described as a representative of this group. In addition to these four profiles, another profile emerged: *flexible and literate parents* – parents whose experience in different schools and with different teachers enabled them to reflect critically on various communication patterns, who at the same time were able to adapt their communication methods and consider different factors.

3.1. Communication-literate and flexible parents

Parents with experience of different schools and teachers compared the information and were able to point out specific differences between the schools and the teachers. These 'communication-literate' parents highly rated the schools where communication is friendly and parents feel that they are welcome to meet their children's teachers, and were less positive about the schools where the academic level was high but communication was off-putting and incomplete. These parents also appreciated teachers who had initiated communication even before the child had started school. In the following extract one of this type of parent compared a so-called elite-school with a school that pays special attention to the dialogue between school and home:

Respondent 4: *As a parent I have experienced two different schools. My elder child attends a school with great competition and admittance tests. She has to walk a tightrope. My younger child attends this [other] school and I can see how much different a school can be. Teachers contacted me before the school*

started. ... I and my child were most welcome! I have all the information about my child's doings at school, my child's skills and room for development has been pointed out.

... Then I went to the school of my elder child, [she has been there for] over 4 years, I met her teacher and I was asked whose mother are you? And they said about her – who is so energetic – that she is the quietest child in the class. /.../ Now after four years when she has caused a problem I got a telephone call and was told to come to the school. Suddenly she had a 'two' in e-school for missing a workbook. Not once have I felt welcome in this school (FG4).

In this extract the parent provided a list of information that she liked to be informed about. The specific aspects of her child's development that the mother was able to point out shows that the teacher had 'educated' the parents and provided sophisticated information about the development of their children, not just a 'list of credits'. The mother critically pointed out her negative feelings that she was contacted only when there was a problem with her child. For this mother, who had experience of a very efficient dialogue between home and school, this approach equalled negligence.

Another respondent added an additional critical observation concerning the difference between another two schools: at one school the wellbeing of the child was placed first and the presence of a parent was regarded as additional security for a child (*... parents should take the children to the classroom door at least in the first months ... then she could feel safe*, FG 4). It was noticeable that parents had been discussing that in another school the overcrowded classes established the values of this school (*... We have little room, as it is, so don't cram in, wait for the child at the corner of the building...*, FG4).

These two extracts showed that 'communication-literate' parents tended to identify the actual values that guide the daily communication practices of the school. These parents appreciated the dialogic approach to the school-home communication and also the effort that teachers made in communicating with parents. The quote below deserves attention as it opened up the intense relations between school and home, where parents were not ashamed to learn and saw this as a positive achievement.

We have such a nice class-teacher, who is very competent in psychology and who senses things that an average primary school teacher might not notice./.../ She foresees things and prevents them. For example we had some misunderstandings because we are different strong personalities, who point out things that should be better and the teacher said that it is not nice to evaluate others. So during the year we (respondent and her husband – KP and HHL) had to correct ourselves /.../ Now we have become good communicators thanks to our teacher's observations... (Respondent1, FG4).

As soon as parents got comparative experience on different communication patterns and the values communicated by different schools, they became very critical about the schools where supportive and positive feedback was missing.

The following criticism was about another elite-school, a ‘dream-school for many parents’:

Respondent 4: *I have an experience from an academically strong and strict school, a dream-school for many parents. He was my sister’s son and she was away in Brussels, so the child stayed with my family. [The school offered] No sports, no extracurricular activities. He was always studying and he often cried. The teacher was never satisfied. So he came to our school, because we had had enough. The picture changed completely: [the school had both] sports and a choir. His mother can see the results on e-school and can see her child doing well and being happy. And can you imagine, she can talk with the teacher even when nothing is wrong! You can email or call the teacher and you get a response and she comments upon each mark in e-school. That is the difference!* (FG4).

In this extract the parent appreciated that the teacher used e-school as well as e-mail, and that credits were not just numbers but comments were added. All these parents maintained that it was the school’s communication culture that enabled them to develop a dialogue with the teachers.

In addition to different experiences concerning the communication conventions set by the school, the parents also described their different experiences with different teachers. Several parents in the focus groups shared the attitude that they tried to adapt their communication patterns according to the communication habits of the teacher.

Respondent 3: *I have had three class-teachers, I have three children. With two I had a favourable contact and with one I did not have any ‘personal contact’. I don’t meet her and never have an eye-to eye contact; I email or send messages if the child is absent. I don’t use Skype and Facebook and I always think carefully, on what would be the favourable way for this teacher, I try to consider her ways and character. As to one of the other teachers, I received a welcome letter from her and she welcomed us to the first grade and said that ‘Your school is waiting for you’. Through this communication I knew what was going on and what is going to happen. It was great to receive the letter* (FG4).

Those parents who pointed out differences between the teachers said that even if the teacher was not very easily accessible they could get information via e-school and where they needed more personal contact they were pro-active and wrote to the teacher. If the reason for the communication was very private they preferred interpersonal and not mediated communication.

Another common aspect that the flexible parents stressed was that those who had more than one child felt that different children needed different communication patterns. Some children ‘cope’, others need parents as interpreters or moderators. Several parents pointed out character and gender based differences.

Respondent 3: *With my first child I belonged to the first group (active communicator – KP and HHL), but then he was a sensitive boy. With the second (child) we did not have the need to be so eagerly at school. And the third can also manage. But they are girls* (FG4).

The analysis of the focus group interviews showed that ‘communication-literate and flexible’ parents have more than one school or class-teacher experience. They could be good advisors for school leaders and teachers as they are able to point out small details that could support a good communication culture in any school.

3.2. Passive-positive parents: no problems

These parents only saw the need to communicate with the teacher or school when there were problems with credits or school behaviour. They believed that their children were able to manage the school-related information, hence there was no need for them to interact with the teacher. These parents informed the teacher when their child was unwell and had to stay at home: *I don't have a great need to communicate. I put the health-note into e-school or the register* (Respondent 2, FG6). These parents were positive about getting positive feedback from the teacher but they would not discuss values or feel the need to be informed about the learning context, although actually they do not know what children are doing in school.

Usually these parents valued passive communication patterns as they pointed out that this indicates that they have ‘good children’, ‘children with whom they have no problems’. *(Well, I actually do not communicate with teachers, because I don't have to, I have good children. I have to say that I haven't had a need for communication, because my child has a sense of duty and she is sensible* (Respondent 5, FG6).

The analysis showed that the information that these parents expected from the teacher compared to the ‘literate’ parents was rather narrow – how the child behaves and how they cope. These parents were not pro-active and tended to believe that to be pro-active would be inappropriate.

*Well, I actually do not communicate with teachers, because I don't have to, /.../
It's good if I get feedback and information concerning things I haven't noticed,
[like] how my child behaves in school* (Respondent 5, FG6).

*But I have to say that I haven't had a need for communication, because my child
has a sense of duty and she is sensible. And if the teacher is not looking for me, I
would not insist* (Respondent 7, FG11).

Several parents pointed out another reason for being passive – children should learn about information management and should not rely on e-communication or their parents. Several parents compared their children’s communication situation with what they were used to when they attended school (e.g. ‘it was out of the question that my parents would be responsible for my learning’), and some of them were critical about e-communication, which enables children to check their homework and grades.

*I have also been a schoolchild, a while ago, and it was out of the question that
my parents would be responsible for my learning. What else is the e-school
about! The child just doesn't mark tasks in his register, because he knows that
he will manage. Everybody would do it to make life easier* (Respondent 8, FG8).

I want my child to mark and take responsibility for his tasks, a computer or mother should not do it (Respondent 2, FG8).

Although I theoretically have time to deal with e-school I want my child to manage her things and develop responsibility (Respondent 7, FG8).

The difference between the active and passive parents was that the active parents viewed communication as a separate activity and they were interested in being informed. Active parents stepped back in time; passive parents at first excluded communication or restricted the communication channels.

A few parents pointed out that a fair amount of time was spent on communication. One representative of a passive group pointed out that there was no need for teachers and parents to spend time on trivia and that the school had spent too much on communication ('pressed this button too much'). However, this person did not explain the point fully. One could interpret this as a view that communication is not the teacher's main obligation, that academic achievement is more important:

I say that one has to communicate as much as possible or as little as possible. Time is valuable for everybody and there is no need to meet just for that and make a 'mountain out of a molehill'. It seems to me that school has pressed this button too much. /.../ Teachers are tired of constantly doing some additional activities that appear out of nowhere. All these conferences with parents, e-schools – if we add to those, does it give us the results we expect? (Respondent 6, FG2).

This opinion was partly supported by another participant in this focus group, who added an important detail: parents do not have time to react in time (especially in the case of value conflicts concerning bullying or violent behaviour) and, on many occasions, even though they believe that it would be right, they calculated how much time the discussions would take.

Limited time is the reason that parents don't know about [bullying] in time. You learn about it later and then there is no point in reacting. Time is limited and when you know that it doesn't directly concern your child, you keep your distance. Otherwise you have to spend more time and energy dealing with the problem. And besides it's a shame to bother the teacher (Respondent 2, FG2).

In some cases the reason for passive communication was the view that it was difficult to communicate with the teacher, and some parents did not have a convenient communication channel, access to IT resources or they lacked knowledge and skills about IT. Passive parents could be moulded by their child's first teacher. Parents who communicated when there were problems reduced communication when the problems were solved.

3.3. Passive-negative parents

Several respondents had the characteristics of this communication pattern and one parent represented this group. A common feature of these parents was that they perceived that the schools expected them to communicate when there were problems and even then the communication was an unpleasant obligation. Usually

these parents have experienced some embarrassing moments themselves or in connection with their children. From the point of this study it is important to underline that the public humiliation of parents in the Soviet school system was common practice.

... I will also say that some twenty years ago when my daughters attended this school we had a couple of people, whose children had lots of problems and [grade] two's. And if you are at the meeting, maybe, you would be reprimanded publicly. /.../ That caused problems and disagreements among the parents, we have a small place you know. The majority knows whose children attend class (Respondent 6, FG6).

Today nobody mentions any names, but in my experience some parents are very ready to name other parent's children and criticize them (Respondent 3, FG6).

This communication pattern group regards the teacher as an authoritarian party and not as a partner:

You are summoned in case of a problem and may God help you if you dare not turn up (Respondent 1, FG6).

... who wants us here ...I /.../ try at times like this, not to go shopping when I might meet some teachers (Respondent 1, FG10).

... it would be a mess if we all dared to come here and ask for feedback about our children. We will meet once a year at the conferences (Respondent 5, FG10).

These quotations implicitly reflected the view that feedback is a luxury, a limited resource. As two mothers from the same school reported that they avoided contact with the school, it could be assumed that the reason they were afraid of teacher-parent communication was in the communication culture and values set by the school rather than particular teachers. Parents often seemed to consider the problem with communication to be that it predominantly concerned negative messages, mistakes and errors. For example, one mother stated:

Some parents from our class have told me that they are afraid to open email from the teacher, because there is always something negative, there are constantly some problems. I have thought that teachers should be told to praise children. It is nice when a teacher notices problems and deals with them, if she has the social nerve and will, but parents would like to hear that sometimes there are good things too. And I think that teachers would feel better too. These praising emails should accompany the other emails once in a while (Respondent 4, FG8).

It is important to note that parents considered it valuable if teachers noticed developments and let both the child and the parents know about it. The preceding and the following example reflected another dominant aspect: parents were afraid to learn about trouble and problems especially because the teacher might refer to a problem that the parents cannot help with. For instance, the parents cannot interfere when they learned that their child had talked in the class. They said that they might tell their children that this is bad manners but that was all.

Passive and problem-oriented communication patterns might also result from general social competencies. Interviewees from all of the focus groups agreed that almost in every class there were insecure parents, who were not comfortable talking with teachers or other parents. The respondents also suggested that possible socio-economic problems might be the reason for their insecurity:

For example, in our class there is a child, who never visits the theatre or other events and the mother doesn't respond to emails or attend school and the teacher has never seen the mother. We have heard the financial situation in this family is very complicated. We have agreed in our class that other parents add to the class bank a bit more, so this child could come with us but the mother hasn't reacted in any way (Respondent 3, FG8).

The analysis of the focus group discussions showed that the passive parents were described first and then it was mentioned that the children of these parents had many problems.

Then there are parents who are so shy and even insecure, they don't dare to open their mouths, they even do not respond when approached... if I think about it now, yes, these are the parents whose children have constant trouble (Respondent 1, FG10).

The parents also said that publicising critical remarks about grades, academic results and behaviour might discourage parents from coming to school meetings:

...and maybe it would be mentioned in front of others that the child [is poor at] studies and behaves badly (Respondent 7, FG6).

In summary, the interviews revealed that passive and problem-oriented communication patterns involved the school, the teachers and also other parents. Some concerns come from parent-parent communication situations and several parents referred to situations where they were under pressure from other parents. One mother expressed this explicitly:

Listen, if some parents have nothing else to do than make a fuss over small things, I have to protect my child (Respondent 1, FG8).

Passive and problem-oriented communication patterns are linked with critical remarks, public embarrassment and paternalistic communication conventions. It may not be the deliberate aim of the school to take an authoritative position and it would be wise for the teachers to listen to the parents' needs and find out what causes fear and unpleasant feelings.

3.4. Active-positive parents

Fourteen respondents held this position, six of them were from a large city school and three were from a large rural school. These parents were quite different to the passive parents, they were proactive, wanted to be informed, were well aware of the information that they needed about their child and they knew who to communicate with to make school life smooth. These parents considered it important to help teachers to organize events. The teacher, pupils and these parents did not thus only meet to talk about particular issues, but they were present on a

range of occasions and thus had the opportunity to be informed and communicate with one another. These parents maintained that in primary school the teacher was the main creator of communication conventions. They also mentioned the role of other parents in creating a positive and inclusive communication model (for example, when one parent had not visited the school for some time, the others asked her where she had been). The following example clearly shows how active-positive parents differ from problem-oriented parents, as this mother stated that she did not visit the school because of problems, but rather for daily communication with the teacher.

I visit school very often, but not because the problems. I just pick my child up or take him to do sports or something and then I also run into the teacher and then we talk face-to-face (Respondent 5, FG11).

Another example illustrated that being an active parent means doing things with her child or her class and helping the teacher. Communication was a by-product of these activities and the parent considered it to be a way of preventing problems (*you can probably prevent the possible problems and so there won't be any*). This parent believed that being actively involved and helping teachers had a positive effect on her child:

I communicate a lot. I like it and I take time and I attend the school trips and outings. And I help out at school if necessary. Sometimes I have assisted the classes and helped in drama rehearsals. So, during these activities you also communicate with the teachers and thus you can probably prevent the possible problems and so there won't be any. I somehow believe that all these activities are good for my child (Respondent 2, FG11).

The third quotation also reflected the contrast with the communication patterns of passive and problem-oriented parents. The active parents were confident and not afraid of problems, so they did not avoid communicating about them:

I communicate all the time and not only when there are problems and I like our relationship with the teacher and I am not afraid to ask and I am not afraid of negative information (Respondent 2, FG8).

The communication patterns of the actively communicating parents depended on having time available and perceiving the need for involvement during the early school years. Understanding the needs of the child made the parents interested in their school life.

As mentioned above, both the active and the passive parents perceived too much nursing and communicating to be a problem that would hinder the child's independence. In the case of the active parents the difference was that they gradually distanced themselves from the support.

Parents with active and positive communication patterns also talked about 'developing' together with their child and changing their ways of communicating and reducing parental control.

As a mother I was developing a lot with my first child. During the first school year we had very intense cooperation with the teacher. Every day I picked my

child up and we talked about her day with the teacher./.../ I have to admit that giving up the everyday control was hard. I talked to the teacher and found out that my child trusts her and we trust her and everybody is satisfied. At present we rely on emails and once a week or fortnight we receive long letters from the teacher with explanations and discussions about our child's development and activities. /.../ By the way, we have a class blog with lots of information (Respondent 1, FG4).

Representatives of active and positive communication patterns supported the view that it is important that the child knows that the parents and teachers communicate. They considered this transparent communication practice and behavioural convention to be of great importance.

If a child knows the rules, he will know exactly what is right and what is wrong:

I consider it very important and necessary for primary classes /.../ If the child knows that any information of her misconduct will reach her parents, she will adjust her behaviour on the spot /.../

She tries to pull [everything] together, not take it easy....the child will learn the rules and knows exactly what is right or wrong (Respondent 5, FG4).

3.5. Active-negative parents

These can be called the 'worrying types' at school because they are either not satisfied with the child's development or are insecure parents who need constant support from the teacher. This communication pattern is probably the most tiresome for the teacher. It should also be pointed out that being ashamed of a child is a risk factor and parents can too easily start blaming their child for some problems:

One of the representatives of this group (Respondent 2, FG10) was restless and she perceived a lot of problems. She was also ashamed of the problems.

... at first I had the problem that the child could not sit still at his desk, often he was under the desk and the teacher could not make him sit properly. To be honest, it was very embarrassing. As if he didn't listen to the teacher (Respondent 2, FG 10).

This quote reflected information that the parent had acquired from the teacher: *...child could not sit at the desk ... as if he didn't listen to the teacher.* A self-confident parent would perhaps have asked the teacher about ways to support the child's focusing skills.

Parents with an active but problem-oriented communication pattern did not avoid communication, but for them communication was related to a negative experience or the child's behavioural problems.

The discourse of embarrassment is caused by living in a small community, where 'everybody knows everybody' and there is no privacy. The following quotes revealed that there is a need for private communication in small societies and the teacher's role and skills in controlling the communication processes may be of greatest importance in developing the parent-teacher relationship.

...it's most ridiculous, when there are six or seven pupils in the class and the teacher asks half of them to stay after classes because she wants to talk. Most of the children will tell parents at home about troubles at school. And then I know when after meeting one or another, [which] parent had to stay and talk to the teacher (Respondent 5, FG6).

A different type of active communicator, who has had to solve problems at school, is Respondent 2, FG6:

When my child started school, she cried all through the first term /.../ Then I started to go to school each day and talked with the teacher and she accepted me and I helped at the Sports Day. /.../ Now we talk about once a week. I am quite sure, if I hadn't talked with the teacher each day, my daughter would still be crying under the desk... (Respondent 2, FG6).

This quote revealed a view that in order to ease the child's problems the mother tried to help the teacher. Here, the mother's position was to make herself useful. Then again there are parents who visit school for trivial reasons:

...I sometimes call the teacher and ask her to see if the painting brushes have stayed behind [not been brought home] and she [the teacher] says that they are not there. But when I go to school I find them at once (Respondent 6, FG10).

This gave the impression that parents will take advantage of easy access to the teacher.

Most parents of this group appreciated the parents' activity, because the teacher has a class full of students and she cannot notice everything: *If a parent wants to talk with the teacher and they see problems and react, they should do it. Because the teacher has a class full of students, she cannot notice everything (Respondent 1, FG2).*

4. Conclusions

The five types of communication patterns made more sense when we analysed how the different types were represented in different schools. When the six parents' focus groups were analysed it became clear that if the school had made communication a part of the school culture, parents would have learned to become active-positive partners.

1. 'Communication-literate and flexible' parents – this is the communication pattern that more active and positive parents were likely to practice. The characteristic of this communication model was the wide comparative spectrum and this was revealed in the critical and demanding attitude towards the school's communication culture. Those moderately active parents who thought carefully about when to become active in their communication with the school were also in this group.

2. 'Passive-positive' parents

Most of these parents were from a medium-sized city school and the medium-sized rural school (FG2 and FG6). This communication model seems to be

dominant. Parents are not expected to actively support their children and the school does not expect adequate information about the child's needs from the parents.

3. 'Active-positive' parents

Most parents in this group belonged to a large city (FG4) and medium and a large rural school (FG6 and FG8). In these schools extra attention was paid to communication and the school culture assumed proactive teachers, who establish the communication culture. A large number (14) of the representatives stated that teachers were able to rely on these parents for assistance in their everyday work.

4. 'Passive-negative' parents

There were parents belonging partly to this group in most of the school types (FG 8; FG10; FG11) except the large city school (FG4). However, we still have little information about this group because respondents described these parents as 'most complicated', causing problems in the overall communication culture as their communication literacy is low and they have preconceived ideas about schools and teachers.

5. 'Active-negative' parents

Most parents in this group were from the medium-sized rural school (FG6) and the small rural school (FG10). These parents could probably benefit from support to enhance their social skills, which would help the teachers in building up communication cultures to support the students' development.

The five types of communication patterns would enable teachers to plan their communication strategically. It is important to note that parents with normative attitudes are influenced by their previous experience and memories. In the case of parents who focus on problems, it would be beneficial to find out what is difficult for them and how they feel in different school-based communication situations. Taking the different types of parents into consideration will strengthen the partnership between schools and parents.

Parent-teacher communication patterns are also linked to the issues and aims of the interaction. Thompson (2007:208) states that "research on the parents and teachers e-mail communication brings out five main issues of parent-teacher communication: grades (most common, e.g. under-achieving students, find out reasons for underachievement, and look for ways of improvement), scheduling, health issues, behaviour and miscellaneous". The results of the present study showed that parents with low communication activity were concerned mainly about grades and health issues. They were either satisfied with being informed about the child's grades or informed the school or teacher when the child missed school because of health issues. Parents with high communication activity were actively seeking information concerning their child's overall development rather than grades. Active parents were also interested in discussing the feedback and evaluation system the teachers used and they were likely to use various interaction channels and formats (telephone, e-mail, personal conversations and group meetings). Also, the issue of grades could be seen as a negative, problem-based interaction between the teacher and the parent, or it could be a positive communication,

where the grades are interpreted as ways to motivate and support the development of the child. In this way the issues and aims of parent-teacher interaction create a third dimension of the communication patterns, but this dimension is not explicitly discussed in the study.

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence, CECT).

Address:

Karmen Palts
Institute of Social Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences and Education
University of Tartu
Lossi 36 51003 Tartu
Estonia

E-mail: karmen@palts.ee
Tel.: +372 553 0606

Halliki Harro-Loit
E-mail: halliki.harro@ut.ee
Tel.: +372 528 1843

References

- Bauch, Jerold P., ed. (1997) *The Bridge Project: Connecting parents and schools through voice messaging*. (Monograph of the Betty Phillips Center for Parenthood Education.) Nashville, TN: Peabody College of Vanderbilt University.
- Baxter, Leslie A. and Chitra Akkooor (2011) "Topic expansiveness and family communication patterns". *Journal of Family Communication* 11, 1–20.
- Boeije, Hennie (2002) "A purposeful approach to the constant comparative method in the analysis of qualitative interviews". *Quality & Quantity* 36, 391–409.
- Epstein, Joyce L. (2001) *School, family and community partnerships: preparing educators and improving schools*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Epstein, Joyce L. and Mavis G. Sanders (2006) "Connecting home, school and community". In *Handbook of the sociology of education*, ch. 12. Hallinan, M. T., ed. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers.
- Fan, X. and M. Chan (2001) "Parental involvement and students' academic achievement: a meta-analysis". *Educational Psychology Review* 13, 1, 1–22.
- Graham-Clay, Susan (2005) "Parent teacher cooperation; educational strategies; parent participation; parent school relationship; information technology; computer mediated communication". *School Community Journal* 16, 1, 117–129.
- Harris, A. and J. Goodall (2008) "Do parents know they matter? Engaging all parents in learning". *Educational Research* 50, 3, 277–289.
- Hughes, Anita and Veronica Read (2012) *Building positive relationships with parents of young children: a guide to effective communication*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

- Jennings, N. and E. Wartella (2004) "Technology and the family". In *Handbook of family communication*, 593–608. A. L. Vangelisti, ed. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Johnson, Doug (2000) "Techno-parenting". *Library Talk* 13, 64.
- Kilgore, Amanda J. (2010) *Teachers' perspectives on using e-mail to communicate with parents*. Ed. D. Dissertation. Walden University.
- Lynch, Alicia Doyle, Richard M. Lerner, and Tama Leventhal (2013) "Adolescent Academic achievement and school engagement: an examination of the role of school-wide peer culture". *Journal of Youth Adolescence* 42, 1, 6–19. DOI 10.1007/s10964-012-9833-0.
- Nichols, Susan and Phillip Read (2002) "'We never knew it was that bad': parent-school communication about children's learning difficulties". *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy* 25, 49–63.
- Oostdam, Ron and Edith Hooge (2013) "Making the difference with active parenting; forming educational partnerships between parents and schools". *European Journal of Psychology Education* 28, 2, 337–351. DOI 10.1007/s10212-012-0117-6.
- Shinn, K. (2002) "Luring high school parents onto our turf". *Education Digest* 67, 34–36.
- Shirvani, H. (2007) "Effects of teacher communication on parents' attitudes and their children's behaviours at schools". *Education* 28, 1, 34–47.
- Thompson, Blair C. (2007) *Applying social information processing theory to parent-teacher relationships*. Ph.D. Thesis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.
- Thompson, Blair C. and Joseph P. Mazer (2012) "Development of the parental academic support scale: frequency, importance, and modes of communication". *Communication Education* 61, 2, 131–160.
- Tveit, Anne Dorthe (2009) "A parental voice: parents as equal and dependent-rhetoric about parents, teachers, and their conversations". *Educational Review* 61, 3, 289–300.
- Vornberg, James A. and Shelley Garret (2010) *Instructional leaders bridge the communication gap*. Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association. Available online at <<http://c.yumcdn.com/sites/www.tepsa.org/resource/resmgr/imported/InstructionalLeader/ilsample-jamesvornberg.pdf>>. Accessed on 05.14.2015.
- Webber, Charles F. and Bill Mulford (2007) "School and community". In *Intelligent leadership*, 119–142. J. Burger, C. Webber, and P. Klinck, eds. Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Springer.
- Zhang, Qiping and April Hatcher (2011) "Cross-cultural comparison of blog use for parent-teacher communication in elementary schools". In *Engineering psychology and cognitive ergonomics*, 263–272. D. Harris, ed. Berlin and Heidelberg: Springer.