



UNIVERSITY OF GOTHENBURG

The Parent-Teacher E-mail Relationship

**The Effects of E-mail Communication on the Formation
and Development of the Parent-Teacher Relationship**

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Abstract

This study focused on the relationship between parents and teachers who communicate via e-mail and the effects of e-mail communication on the formation and development of the parent-teacher relationship. By interviewing parents and teachers on the subject of e-mail communication, an understanding of how relationships are formed and maintained was achieved. Parents and teachers described their experiences using e-mail to communicate with one another, as well as what they perceived were the biggest advantages and disadvantages. The interviews were analyzed using Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) which describes three different communicative phases (Impersonal, Interpersonal, Hyperpersonal) that influence how relationships are formed when communicating via Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC). After applying the three phases of CMC to the acquired interview data, it became apparent that parents and teachers often communicated from different phases. It appears that e-mail communication has a complicating effect on the parent-teacher relationship. The results from this study suggest that parents and teachers struggle to manage impressions and form relationships when communicating via e-mail. It is possible that when parents and teachers communicate from different phases of CMC, frustration and misunderstanding occurs, resulting in complications to the formation and development of relationships. It is therefore recommended that parents and teachers discuss, create, and agree upon a protocol that will serve as a standard for the type of communication they are willing to engage in. By working together to determine an appropriate e-mail etiquette, parents and teachers might have a better chance of achieving mutual understanding in their communication, thereby facilitating the formation and development of the parent-teacher relationship.

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
1. Introduction	4
2. Research Question	5
3. Related Work	6
3.1 E-mail Communication in Education	6
4. Concepts Considered	13
4.1 Relationship	13
4.2 Professionalism	14
5. Social Information Processing Theory	15
5.1.1 The Impersonal Phase	15
5.1.2 The Interpersonal Phase	16
5.1.3 The Hyperpersonal Phase	17
5.2 Limitations	18
6. Research Approach and Method	19
6.1 The Constant Comparative Method	19
6.2 Sampling Procedures and Participants	22
6.3 Data Collection Procedures	23
6.4 Data Analysis	23
6.5 Ethical Considerations	24
7. Results	25
7.1 Expectations: Availability for Communication	25
7.2 Communicating Emotion	28
7.3 Language Barrier and Misunderstanding	29
7.4 E-mail Content Management	31
7.5 Maintaining the Professional Boundary	34
8. Analysis	36
8.1 Impersonal versus Interpersonal	36
8.2 Unsuccessful Creation of a Hyperpersonal Impression	37
8.3 Impersonal Communication Becomes Unprofessional	39
9. Discussion	40
10. Conclusions	42
11. Limitations	43
12. References	44
13. Appendices	47
13.1 Release Form	47
13.2 Interview Guide	48
13.3 Summary of Results	50

1. Introduction

The study of e-mail communication over the past twenty years has developed from a basic assessment of its capabilities to investigations of the effects of its misuse and overuse (Whittaker & Sidner, 1996; Lucas, 1998; Dawley & Anthony, 2003; Mano & Mesch, 2010). Research suggests that e-mail has contributed to the growth of distributed organizations, by giving people in different geographical locations the opportunity to communicate across time and space, thereby supporting asynchronous communication (Whittaker & Sidner, 1996). Asynchronous, meaning that the sender and receiver do not have to be involved in a communicative act at the same time (Thompson, 2009). E-mail provides important benefits for an organization and for work performance, and is proven to be beneficial in many areas. Most importantly, e-mail use contributes to better use of time and fluidity of correspondence in organizational settings, and as a tool for archiving information (Mano & Mesch, 2010; Sidner & Whittaker, 1996). E-mail use at work has been reported by organizational members as helping productivity, however, when incoming e-mail arrives faster than the rate at which it can be read and responded to, e-mail overload occurs. This effect of e-mail overuse has dire effects on employee productivity (Dawley & Anthony, 2003).

Previous research on e-mail communication contributes to our understanding of its benefits on organizational efficiency, and how we might best use it as a communication tool in our daily life. A significant advantage of e-mail communication discussed by researchers is its asynchronous nature. Asynchronous communication is particularly advantageous when a sender and receiver have different working hours, or are working in different time zones (Lucas, 1998). Another significant use of e-mail is its ability to communicate person-to-person, and to broadcast (i.e. to send a message to a large group of people) quickly and reliably at a low cost (Lucas, 1998). However, the broadcast function of e-mail communication is both its strength and its Achilles heel when it comes to e-mail overload and junk mail.

A study by Mano and Mesch (2010) examined how e-mail affects work performance. For example, e-mail intensity was positively associated with work performance; when employees check their e-mail regularly, they increase the acquisition of work-related information that is critical to getting the job done (Mano & Mesch, 2010). However, increase in e-mail communication was also reported as harmful to employees' performance as they affected both work stress and distress. Receiving a lot of e-mail, while providing important work-related information, creates information overload (Mano & Mesch, 2010).

E-mail overload is an important effect of its use that may damage an employee's performance at an organization. Organizational members fight an uphill battle to manage the amount of e-mail (and information contained within their e-mail messages) in their inboxes. Participants in a study by Whittaker and Sidner (1996) reported having major problems reading and responding to e-mail in a timely manner. Those who were unable to keep up with new incoming e-mail struggled with unorganized backlogs of unanswered e-mail, which resulted in lost information and reduced responsiveness (Whittaker & Sidner, 1996). Organizing e-mail by folder is

presented as an important habit that employees should develop in order to manage the information and assignments flowing into their inboxes.

E-mail has been established as a primary mode of communication between parents and teachers at primary and secondary levels (Thompson, 2009). Research on e-mail communication between parents and teachers has been conducted with several different foci, including effects on relationship, positive-negative attitudes, and on children's behavior (Thompson, 2008 & 2009; Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Tobolka, 2006; Shirvani, 2007; Palts & Harro-Loit). E-mail has been previously discussed as having advantages over other forms of communication between parents and teachers (phone calls, face-to-face [FTF] discussion) because asynchronous communication makes teachers more accessible to parents, and vice versa (Thompson, 2009). E-mail allows parents and teachers to respond to messages at their convenience, a convenience that is not afforded in telephone conversations or FTF communication (Thompson, 2009). Thompson (2009) notes that the majority of the literature addressing parent-teacher e-mail communication has focused on its advantages, other authors promote e-mail as a method to boost parent-teacher relationships (Hernandez & Leung, 2004) and improve students' academic achievement (Tobolka, 2006).

The previous research on the subject of parent-teacher e-mail communication led to the research question posed for the purpose of this study, which focuses specifically on the parent-teacher relationship. While much attention has been paid to the advantages of e-mail communication and the effects of its use, little attention has been paid to the relationship that exists between two people communicating via e-mail. As a daycare teacher, the researcher has experienced firsthand that e-mail sent to and received from parents does not necessarily suffice for parents and teachers to form accurate impressions of each other. This domain knowledge led to the formation of the research question, and guided the study of the parent-teacher e-mail relationship.

2. Research Question

When a child starts a new school year, the child's parents and teacher enter into a relationship that includes a great deal of communication, especially during the child's formative years of education. The way parents and teachers communicate with each other has developed in such a way that both parties rely heavily on e-mail communication to stay in touch. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how that relationship develops and is maintained via e-mail communication, the following research question was posed:

RQ: How does e-mail communication affect the formation and development of the parent-teacher relationship?

3. Related Work

Research on e-mail communication in educational settings has traditionally focused on student-teacher communication. For example, Lightfoot (2006) compared students' perceptions about the amount of thought put into e-mail versus FTF interaction to gauge their awareness of the differences between the two communicative modes. Waldeck et al (2001) investigated whether or not teachers who communicated "immediacy" (i.e. individual attention) in e-mails to students would make students more likely to communicate with them. Both studies emphasized the importance of having a set of guidelines from which students and teachers could follow in order to facilitate e-mail communication. More recently, research on CMC in education has focused on parent-teacher e-mail communication. Thompson (2008; 2009; 2015) appears to be a frontrunner in this area of study. His research has outlined the basis from which this study was developed, and has covered a number of different aspects of parent-teacher e-mail communication. Firstly, Thompson's (2008) investigation into the characteristics of parent-teacher e-mail communication led to the conclusion that fostering a relationship may not be their primary goal while communicating. His (2009) study on parent-teacher e-mail strategies suggested that frequent communication between parents and teachers may have a negative impact on a student's incentive to complete their assignments. Most recently, Thompson (2015) assessed how the increased use of smartphones has influenced parents' e-mail habits. While Thompson has scratched the surface of understanding, more research is required on the subject of parent-teacher e-mail communication in order to understand how it affects parents and teachers' ability to build and maintain a relationship.

3.1 E-mail Communication in Education

3.1.1 A Comparative Analysis of E-mail and Face-to-Face Communication in an Educational Environment

Lightfoot (2006) was interested in investigating students' perceptions about the amount of thought they put into writing e-mail messages as opposed to FTF communication in an educational environment. Approximately 1200 students from a business administration college were surveyed using a 5-point scale ranging from "much less thought" on one end to "much more thought" on the other (Lightfoot, 2006). Students were asked to mark the amount of thought they perceived they put into writing e-mail to their course instructor, individual students, and groups of students in comparison to FTF communication.

The results indicated that the majority of students perceived themselves as putting at least the same amount of thought, if not more, into e-mail communication as compared to verbal communication with instructors, individual students, and groups of students (Lightfoot, 2006). Students indicated that they put more thought into e-mail communication with both the course instructor and groups of peers than that which they put into communication with individual students. Lightfoot describes this result as "consistent with the general conjecture that students realize the unique characteristics (creative non-standard spelling, excessive punctuation,

playful use of creative greetings, improvisational language, and extensive use of multiple fonts) of e-mail and rationally put more thought into e-mail written to the instructor and groups of students” (Lightfoot, 2006). As course instructors assign grades and groups of peers have the potential to judge socially, it is suggested that students put more thought into communication with these recipients in order to maintain amicable relationships (Lightfoot, 2006).

Lightfoot discovered that two factors contributed significantly to how much thought student put into composing e-mail to course instructors, individual students, and groups of students. First, the degree to which the student was comfortable with technology affected his or her tendency to put more thought into their e-mail communication. Students who were less familiar with technology were predicted to prefer FTF communication and might therefore put more thought into verbal messages (Lightfoot, 2006). Students who were more comfortable with technology were predicted as more able to concentrate on the structure and content of their messages than those who were more concerned with how to use the tools that deliver the message (Lightfoot, 2006).

Gender, the second factor, was a significant predictor in how much thought was put into e-mail messages. Males put less thought into e-mail communication with a course instructor as compared to FTF interaction, and females put more thought into e-mail communications with a course instructor than males (Lightfoot, 2006). Lightfoot describes these results as indicating that females might be more aware of the special characteristics of e-mail communication than males.

Lightfoot concludes that the majority of students surveyed acknowledged that e-mail communication is fundamentally different than verbal communication and should be used with more precaution than FTF interaction (Lightfoot, 2006). In order to make students more aware of the differences between e-mail and FTF communication, course instructors were advised to educate students about the key differences between the two modes, which would especially benefit those students who are less comfortable with technology. Drafting rules for e-mail etiquette is also suggested to instructors as potential aids for facilitating effective e-mail communication between teachers and students.

Lightfoot’s comparative study of FTF and CMC provides the student’s perspective about e-mail communication, which allows instructors to develop useful strategies for communication. The degree to which a student (or teacher) is comfortable with technology and how that level of comfort affects his or her use of the technology is an interesting aspect discussed by Lightfoot. It is possible that students and teachers assume one another as generally comfortable with using e-mail, when in fact it may not be the case. This possibility should be systematically acknowledged by teachers, students, and parents so that any anxiety about how to use a certain type of technology can be addressed and communication can flow more easily.

3.1.2 Teacher E-mail Message Strategies and Students' Willingness to Communicate Online

Another study on student-teacher e-mail communication by Waldeck et al (2001) surveyed 300 university students at two universities on the west coast of the United States to find out their reasons for communicating with their teachers via e-mail. Participants gave reasons as to why they used e-mail to communicate with teachers, as well as how proficient they perceived teachers were in e-mail communication (Waldeck et al, 2001).

The survey also gathered information from students about whether they were more likely to communicate with teachers online who employed strategies which simulate "immediacy" behaviors. Immediacy is described as "the degree of physical and/or psychological closeness between communicators" (Waldeck et al, 2001). In terms of the student-teacher relationship, typical behaviors that indicate closeness include eye contact, gesturing, smiling, using students' first names, being responsive to student involvement, and appropriate self-disclosure (Waldeck et al, 2001). Students perceive immediate teachers as "more approachable, communicating more positively, liked more, and evaluated more highly" (Waldeck et al, 2001). In order to achieve immediacy via CMC, the researchers hypothesized that teachers should use similar immediacy strategies to those used in the classroom, for example, "using students' first names, inviting students' participation in the e-mail exchange, individualizing e-mail messages, engaging in appropriate self-disclosure, or using pronouns 'we' and 'our' when referring to the class and assignments" (Waldeck et al, 2001). The researchers hypothesized that teachers who follow these strategies in e-mail communication may contribute to students' heightened perceptions of teacher immediacy.

The results highlighted three main reasons why students communicated with teachers via e-mail. The first, which students communicated with teachers most frequently about, was for procedural or clarification reasons. For example, students asked teachers for course or task direction, guidance, information, and feedback (Waldeck et al, 2001). The second most frequently reported, efficiency reasons, concerned students' desire to avoid wasting their own or the teacher's time and to minimize FTF or telephone contact (Waldeck et al, 2001). The third, personal or social reasons, included self-disclosing, discussing personal feelings and ideas, learning more about the teacher, and impressing the teacher. The researchers also found that students were more likely to communicate with teachers via e-mail if teachers employed message strategies that simulated immediacy behaviors (Waldeck et al, 2001). The researchers were able to conclude that CMC between students and teachers can be immediate, and therefore elicit similar positive outcomes to FTF teacher immediacy behaviors (Waldeck et al, 2001).

Armed with this knowledge, teachers may be better prepared to meet student expectations for online interaction. Studying the effect of immediacy behaviors in e-mail communication was an interesting focus. To study the effect of immediacy in parent-teacher e-mail communication might also result in similar communication strategy-forming conclusions. Similar to the conclusions in Lightfoot (2006), teachers might work to establish classroom rules or norms for the types and frequency of task-related questions they are willing to engage in via e-mail. By

warning students not to over-rely on e-mail communication, teachers might also make students aware of the continued importance of FTF interactions (Waldeck et al, 2001).

3.1.3 Characteristics of Parent-Teacher E-mail Communication

Thompson (2008) conducted thirty interviews with parents and teachers and analyzed 341 parent-teacher e-mail messages to uncover the dominant characteristics of parent-teacher e-mail communication. Thompson used Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) as a framework to “help explain the relational characteristics in parent-teacher e-mail exchanges as well as how asynchronous communication affects parent-teacher communication” (Thompson, 2008). He endeavored to find out what topics are most common in parent-teacher e-mail exchanges, the frequency of these exchanges, who initiates contact, and the types of outcomes that typically result from parent-teacher e-mail communication (Thompson, 2008).

A list of topics was compiled and organized into six categories in order of frequency, including grade, scheduling, health, behavior, and social issues (Thompson, 2008). The primary topics communicated between teachers and parents helped identify areas previously unaddressed in the literature on the subject of parent-teacher e-mail communication. For example, students’ grades were the primary topic of communication, as opposed to learning, which Thompson stated as a cause for concern, as it suggests that e-mail makes parents more aware of a child’s grades than the child’s educational process itself (Thompson, 2008).

Thompson discusses how CMC has made teachers more reachable and communication more convenient, which has increased the frequency of parent-teacher communication over the past decade. However, teachers reported that they only communicated with a few parents frequently via e-mail and communicated with a larger percentage of parents infrequently throughout the school semester (Thompson, 2008). SIPT predicts that, for relational communication to develop, CMC users must communicate over an extended period of time (Walther, 1992). Thompson had conflicting findings when applying this tenet of SIPT to the results. While some parents who communicated with teachers consistently developed interpersonal impressions, most teachers and parents did not communicate regularly enough via e-mail to develop a relationship. Thompson concluded that e-mail may not improve the quality and quantity of parent-teacher relationships (Thompson, 2008). Thompson uncovered that parent-teacher e-mail exchanges were instrumental rather than relational in nature, and that relationship-building was not the goal of their communication. Parents’ and teachers’ primary goal when communicating was to help students with their academic success rather than to develop a relationship (Thompson, 2008).

That parents and teachers’ goals for communication are instrumental as opposed to relational is understandable, as a student’s academic success trumps the importance of a parent-teacher relationship. However, it is unclear whether or not the parent-teacher relationship can develop via instrumental e-mail communication. The conclusions in Thompson (2008) also do not make clear how *much* time is required for relational communication to develop. These two

inconclusive findings exemplify the ways in which e-mail communication has the potential to complicate the development of the parent-teacher relationship.

3.1.4 Parent-Teacher E-mail Strategies at the Elementary and Secondary Levels

Using the same data set as Thompson (2008), Thompson (2009) set out to understand the types of problems that arise when teachers and parents communicate via e-mail, and the strategies they have developed to address these problems. The problems and strategies uncovered were based on parent-teacher e-mail communication that focused on students struggling at school (Thompson, 2009). Four primary problems are described as a result of parent-teacher e-mail communication: misinterpretation; parent and teacher concern that e-mail has replaced FTF communication with parents; teacher concern that e-mail communication with parents resulted in them becoming involved with student punishment at home; and teacher concern that students depended on their parents to keep track of their schoolwork (Thompson, 2009).

Misinterpretation was the most significant problem described by both parents and teachers during interviews (Thompson, 2009). Misinterpretations were described as stemming from e-mail messages that conveyed an unintended emotion. For example, e-mail messages that a teacher described as sounding “angrier than [he/she] intended it to” (Thompson, 2009). Teachers and parents developed three strategies to reduce the possibility for misinterpretation. The strategies included: careful proofreading to regulate the tone of e-mail messages; switching from e-mail to FTF or phone communication if they believed a misinterpretation had occurred or they felt unsure how to interpret a message; and getting to know one another better (Thompson, 2009).

Parents and teachers expressed concern that e-mail was replacing FTF communication, and that e-mail communication has a “de-humanizing” effect on relationships (Thompson, 2009). Teachers experienced decreased attendance at parent-teacher conferences and expressed concern that newly trained teachers who exclusively used e-mail to communicate with parents might compromise themselves professionally by communicating in a casual manner (Thompson, 2009). In order to combat this issue, teachers’ strategies included combining or using multiple channels of communication and using e-mail as a follow-up for a FTF meeting. Parents expressed their preference to discuss behavioral issues via FTF or phone and that to discuss grades via e-mail was acceptable (Thompson, 2009).

Teachers who had frequent e-mail communication with parents reported developing too much of a relationship, which resulted in their involvement in student punishment at home (Thompson, 2009). Teachers felt tempted to favor students who they knew would lose privileges after e-mailing parents their grades or behavior reports. Teachers tried to monitor themselves and not give students too much individual attention in as a strategy to manage this problem (Thompson, 2009).

The final problem, that students depended on their parents to keep track of their schoolwork, is described by Thompson as a result of “helicopter” parents, who “hover” over their children, e-

mailing teachers excessively about their performance (Thompson, 2009). Children of these parents were reported as completing their homework due to pressure from teachers and parents rather than their own motivation (Thompson, 2009). Teachers and parents gave students the opportunity to handle issues themselves before contacting each other, and only used e-mail as a backup strategy (Thompson, 2009).

As parent-teacher communication was analyzed in Thompson (2009) specifically in cases of students struggling at school, the reader is left wondering about the effects of parent-teacher e-mail communication when students are not struggling. The research seems to focus on one specific type of parent and the way that e-mail communication affects the relationship with his or her child's teacher. A broader focus might achieve a better understanding of the different ways e-mail communication can affect the parent-teacher relationship.

3.1.5 The Changing Nature of Parent-Teacher Communication: Mode Selection in the Smartphone Era

A more recent study on parent-teacher communication focuses on parents' preferred mode of communication for communicating with teachers, and how the increased use of smartphones has affected these preferences. Thompson and Mazer (2012) developed the Parental Academic Support Scale (PASS), which "measures the frequency of parent-teacher communication across communication modes (FTF, e-mail, phone, written communication, Skype/FaceTime, text messaging) along five factors, which describe various topics discussed between teachers and parents" (Thompson et al, 2015). The factors include: academic performance, classroom behavior, preparation, hostile peer interactions, and health (Thompson et al, 2015). The frequency at which parents communicated about each factor with teachers was assessed as well as parents' perception of their importance to a child's academic success. In the final stage of PASS, parents responded to open-ended questions explaining their choice for specific modes of communication over others for communicating about specific issues with their children's teachers (Thompson et al, 2015).

The results indicated that just under half of the 1349 parent participants preferred using e-mail to communicate with their children's teachers, and convenience represented the primary reason for selecting e-mail (Thompson et al, 2015). Aspects of e-mail communication that parents contribute its convenience included its capability to communicate asynchronously, which enabled them to read and respond to teachers on their own time. One parent commented: "I don't want to take a lot of the teacher's time for less important issues, or issues easily communicated through e-mail" (Thompson et al, 2015). Parents indicated that they received the most immediate response from teachers via e-mail, and also referred to the timeliness of the response (i.e. that the response occurred at a favorable time) rather than the ability to see or hear feedback instantly. Parents believed that they would receive a timelier response via e-mail as opposed to other, synchronous modes (Thompson et al, 2015).

The researchers found that the increase in use of smartphones had an influence on the communicative mode parents chose to contact their children's teachers. Parents' use of

smartphones supported their preference for e-mail, as they could read and respond to e-mail using their smartphone, making e-mail communication very convenient (Thompson et al, 2015). Text messaging as a mode of parent-teacher communication also emerged as a useful and convenient option for parents, who valued its quickness and effectiveness for brief messages (Thompson et al, 2015).

A smaller percentage of parents preferred synchronous communication via FTF (89 of 1349) or telephone (8 of 1349). They believed the additional visual and auditory cues led to better understanding of the communicative situation, and that FTF was more convenient when a larger amount of information was to be exchanged. For example, one parent commented: “a five-minute conversation is more convenient than 20 minutes to write an e-mail” (Thompson et al, 2015). Parents who preferred FTF communication over e-mail believed that it worked more effectively to build relationships with teachers, establish rapport, and thereby have more meaningful conversations about serious topics that were urgent, highly sensitive, or complicated (Thompson et al, 2015).

Synchronous modes of communication were preferred by few parents in the study by Thompson et al (2015), while using e-mail on a smartphone trumped all other mode preferences due to its convenience. E-mail provided more immediate feedback through timely responses due to its accessibility via smartphones as opposed to the ability to immediately react and adapt one’s communication (Thompson et al, 2015). Convenience is therefore a dominant factor in the modes parents select, and the rise of smartphones is posited as facilitating the increase in parent-teacher e-mail communication due to the accessibility of the device (Thompson et al, 2015). The exploration of the influence of the smartphone provides insight into how the complicating effect of e-mail communication on the parent-teacher e-mail relationship.

The direction of this study has been influenced by the related research, as the topics previously covered led to the development of the research question. The related research has provided a solid background of information from which to compare and contrast newly acquired data in order to make new conclusions about how e-mail communication affects the parent-teacher relationship. Specifically, this research seeks to take inspiration from the work done by Thompson (2008; 2009; 2015). While previous research has discovered the subjects which parents and teachers communicate about, as well as their preferred channel of communication, research that explores *how* this channel of communication (e-mail) affects the parent-teacher relationship is lacking. Thompson (2008) concluded that e-mail communication may not contribute to the fostering of the parent-teacher relationship. This research seeks to explore how and why e-mail communication has this complicating effect. In the next sections important concepts are considered, Social Information Processing Theory is described and its application in this study is explained.

4. Concepts Considered

Two concepts that are important to consider for this research are the concepts ‘relationship’ and ‘professionalism’, as these words can have different meanings depending on the context in which they are used. It is important to reflect on how the concepts of ‘relationship’ and ‘professionalism’ can be connected in this study, as it can be argued that parents and teachers enter into a “professional relationship” the moment their children walk the threshold into their classroom. However, parents’ and teachers’ perception of the type of relationship they enter into with each other is likely different depending on who you talk to, thus, to try and label their relationship is futile. A brief discussion of ‘relationship’ and ‘professionalism’ will provide some insight as to what the words actually mean, with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding the effect of parent-teacher e-mail communication in relation to these concepts.

4.1 Relationship

The concept ‘relationship’ must be connected to communication for the purposes of this study. Dindia discusses the idea that to maintain a relationship, those involved must communicate with each other. As long as they communicate, they have a relationship, and the relationship ends when they stop communicating. In order to maintain a relationship, one must therefore maintain communication (Dindia, 2014).

Dindia describes four definitions of “relational maintenance” that eloquently describe the basics of the concept of ‘relationship’ in a way that is applicable to this study. The first definition of relational maintenance is to keep a relationship in existence. That is, a maintained relationship is not a terminated relationship, and, according to Dindia, is the most basic definition of the word on which other definitions are based (Dindia, 2014). The second definition of relational maintenance is to keep a relationship in a particular condition or capacity. For example, from a stage perspective (Knapp & Vangelisti, 2000), the stage of the relationship and its related characteristics would be maintained. To maintain a relationship is not just to preserve its existence, but to maintain the closeness, trust, commitment, and liking; failure to sustain these elements results in failure to maintain a relationship (Dindia, 2014). While a relationship might be maintained and stable, it might not necessarily be maintained at the level it was in the past. The third definition of relational maintenance, according to Dindia, is to keep a relationship in a satisfactory condition. She differentiates a satisfactory relationship with a maintained relationship, positing that one can maintain a dissatisfying relationship (Dindia, 2014). The fourth definition of relational maintenance is to keep a relationship in repair; Dindia describes “repair” as implying that something in the relationship is flawed and needs fixing. She relates this last definition to the first, that to keep a relationship in repair is also to keep it from de-escalating or terminating (Dindia, 2014).

These definitions of relational maintenance will contribute to the understanding of the differing perceptions teachers and parents might have of their relationship with one another. Furthermore, the effect of e-mail communication on these perceptions might be more clear, as Dindia makes obvious the fluidity of the concept of ‘relationship’ through her discussion of the

definitions of relational maintenance. These definitions could be applied to the interview data from parents and teachers to find out if they are using e-mail to perform relational maintenance.

4.2 Professionalism

Research on the concept of 'professionalism' reveals a rather fluid understanding, similar to the concept of 'relationship'. An appropriate definition of this concept for this study is found not in studies of the field of teaching, but of medicine. Much research on the concept of professionalism as related to the medical profession has been carried out. In particular, research has analyzed the transition from medical student to doctor. One particular study found five major themes that were associated with professional identity formation in medical students. These themes can be easily applied to the teaching profession, and will therefore serve as the definition of professionalism used for this report.

The authors of the study describe identity as the understanding of who one is that is "developed from an interplay of meaning-making from self and others" (Wong & Trollope-Kumar, 2014). The important aspect of this initial definition is the reference to the self and others, which implies the important role communication plays in the development of one's identity. The authors state their preference for Lesley Scanlon's process of "becoming" as opposed to "being" emphasizes professional identity as evolving throughout one's career rather than reaching a specific endpoint (Wong & Trollope-Kumar, 2014).

The five major themes discovered by Wong and Trollope-Kumar as important to the formation of medical students' professional identity include: 1) prior experiences, i.e. personal and professional experiences that contributed to the student's identity prior to medical school; 2) role models, i.e. the positive and negative influence of role models on students' developing professional identities; 3) curriculum, i.e. formal learning curriculum and "hidden" curriculum, which covers "unwritten" rules of conduct, power imbalances, and ethical dilemmas; 4) patient encounters, i.e. encounters with patients that have taught students something that contributes to the construction of their identity (for example, witnessing birth and death); 5) societal expectations, i.e. the influence of society on students' understanding of their roles as professionals (Wong & Trollope-Kumar, 2014).

These themes will help explain how and why teachers feel their professionalism is challenged in e-mail communication with parents, as they make clear that communication plays a leading role in the development of professional identity. The fact that professional identity is also constantly under negotiation is also important to remember, as it explains how a teacher can feel challenged professionally. A teacher may have developed a confident professional identity, however, this identity is subject to change with every communicative encounter a teacher engages in. Furthermore, expectations society has for teachers are also under constant negotiation, and may have a large effect on their professional identity as well as the choices they make when communicating with parents.

5. Social Information Processing Theory

Research for this study is theoretically grounded in Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT) theory and literature. Developed by Joseph B. Walther, SIPT explains how people create and manage relationships online without the help of nonverbal cues. SIPT has been used to “help analyze characteristics of parent-teacher e-mail exchanges, and presents a framework to help explain the relational characteristics of these messages as well as how asynchronous communication affects parent-teacher communication” (Thompson, 2008). The theory posits that communicators interacting online are “just as motivated to establish and maintain interpersonal relationships as those involved in FTF interactions” (Walther, 1992). Previous studies have examined the differences between CMC and FTF and their effects on interpersonal relationships. For example, one study examined how CMC might neutralize the negative effects of social anxiety in initial interactions (High & Caplan, 2009). Another study compared requests made via e-mail and voicemail to investigate whether e-mail users could create politer speech than those using voicemail (Duthler, 2006). SIPT has also been used to analyze theories developed on self-disclosure and relationship-building in online dating (Gibbs et al, 2006).

SIPT is part of Walther’s study of CMC, in which he defines three different phases of computer-mediated communicative relationships people can enter into: 1) The *Impersonal Phase* describes computer-mediated interactions where impersonal communication can be advantageous; 2) the *Interpersonal Phase* describes computer-mediated interactions where communicators are “build interpersonal relationships via CMC, albeit more slowly than through FTF interactions”; 3) the *Hyperpersonal Phase* describes how CMC can be manipulated in order to inflate the perceptions communicators have of each other. An understanding of these phases is important for the purpose of this research as their application to the data helps explain the complicating effect e-mail communication has on the parent-teacher e-mail relationship.

5.1.1 The Impersonal Phase

Walther discusses the Impersonal Phase in CMC as an effect of communication lacking in nonverbal cues. He states that “the absence of these dimensions, which typically relay personal and emotional information in FTF interactions, affects users’ interpersonal impression formation, their perception of the communication context, and constrains their selection and interpretation of messages” (Walther, 1996). While these effects, on the one hand, can be seen as a disadvantage for relationship-oriented communication, they have a potential advantage for task-oriented communication, in which more impersonal interaction is valued (Walther, 1996). Walther refers to the process of group decision-making as a benefactor of impersonal CMC: “Socio-emotional concerns such as conflict or relationship management take time and effort away from task resolution, thus, removing these concerns should enhance the efficiency of a group’s efforts” (Walther, 1996). Another effect of impersonal CMC is its ability to “democratize” communication. Whereas communicators with higher status tend to maintain a larger portion of floor time in FTF interactions, “participation equality” is reported while using CMC (Walther, 1996).

The Impersonal Phase of CMC is relevant to this research as it helps to explain task-oriented communication tendencies used by parents and teachers in e-mail communication. By analyzing how parents and teachers initiate and/or participate in task-oriented communication, the researcher is able to make an assessment about how this type of communication affects the development of the parent-teacher relationship.

5.1.2 The Interpersonal Phase

The Interpersonal Phase presents another consequence of CMC. Whereas the Impersonal Phase describes a lack of relation-building through CMC, the Interpersonal Phase describes relations built through CMC, but only after “sufficient” time has elapsed (Walther, 2008). The phase is built around two arguments: First, that in CMC, impression-bearing, emotional, and relation-managing information usually expressed nonverbally is translated into verbal and textual symbols online. Second, that the messages exchanged using this translation are not as efficient or quick as FTF, and that the medium of CMC itself is typically slower than speech (Walther, 2008). The rate at which impressions are formed and relations are developed and managed are therefore affected in CMC.

In contrast to the tenet of the Impersonal Phase which describes a lack of nonverbal cues resulting in depersonalized communication, the Interpersonal Phase asserts that “while nonverbal cues are unavailable, the remaining communication processes are used to do the work of those missing” (Walther, 2008). Communicative cues which are nonverbal in FTF become verbal (i.e. typed) in CMC (Walther, 2008). SIPT posits that “language and writing are interchangeable with nonverbal cues, and just as useful as nonverbal cues in the development and management of relationships” (Walther, 2008). A study led by Walther (2005) sought to demonstrate this exchangeability of verbal and nonverbal cues between CMC and FTF interactions. Pairs of unacquainted people had conversations about a moral issue. Half the conversations were held FTF, and the other half used an online chat program. One member of each pair was asked to act as if he or she really liked her partner, or to act as if he or she grew to dislike his or her partner. Partners in FTF interactions conveyed liking and disliking through variations in tone of voice, followed by nonverbal communication such as body relaxation, smiling, and gaze (Walther, 2008). In CMC, a variety of verbal cues were used to communicate liking and disliking. Examples included explicit statements of affection (“I like you”) or ignoring a partner’s idea and offering an alternative in response. Walther’s study concluded that the amount of attitude conveyed through language in CMC interactions was equal to the amount conveyed nonverbally in FTF (Walther, 2008).

The Interpersonal Phase of CMC is relevant to this research as it helps to explain why teachers and parents may or may not express themselves emotionally in e-mail communication and why they might struggle to build relationships with each other in the time they spend communicating via e-mail. Applying this phase of CMC to the acquired data enables the researcher to gain a better understanding of whether or not parents and teachers believe fostering a relationship is possible via e-mail communication.

5.1.3 The Hyperpersonal Phase

The Hyperpersonal Phase occurs when CMC has “surpassed the level of affection and emotion of parallel FTF interaction” (Walther, 1996). Hyperpersonal communication is described as “CMC that is more socially desirable than one ordinarily experiences in similar FTF interaction” (Walther, 1996). The lack of social cues in CMC leads users to “build stereotypical impressions of their partners without qualifying the strength of these impressions in light of the minimal information on which they are built” (Walther, 1996). Whereas the Impersonal Phase predicts CMC users will not form impressions or build relationships, the Hyperpersonal Phase predicts users will form inflated impressions.

Walther (1996) refers to Goffman’s discussion of the presentation of the self in any setting as a performance designed to achieve a particular impression, that the nature of self-presentations is typically socially favorable (Walther, 1996). Walther coined the term “selective self-presentation”, positing that the selection and dissemination of favorable impression may be enhanced in CMC. Reduced social cues and asynchronicity are two key aspects of CMC that enables participants to enter the Hyperpersonal Phase of CMC according to Walther’s (1992b) research. He noted:

One was not bound by the cues to personality others infer from physical appearance or vocalic attributes. They were better able to plan, and had increased opportunity to self-censor. With more time for message construction and less stress of ongoing interaction, users may have taken the opportunity for objective self-awareness, reflection, selection, and transmission of preferable cues (pg. 229).

The absence of physical presence in CMC provides an opportunity for the user to control and edit the impressions users form by manipulating verbal messages to suit the image they want to convey. The information one gives about oneself is “more selective, malleable, and subject to self-censorship in CMC than it is in FTF interaction because only verbal and linguistic cues – those that we hold under most control – are our displays” (Walther, 1996).

The Hyperpersonal Phase of CMC is relevant to this research as it explains why teachers and parents may develop inaccurate impressions of each other while using e-mail communication. Applying this phase of CMC to the acquired data enables the researcher to uncover instances when a teacher or parent’s inflated perception of another affected their ability to build or maintain a relationship.

The three phases of CMC are used as an interpretive lens when analyzing parent-teacher e-mail exchanges in order to find out whether or not parents and teachers are communicating from one or all of the three phases. An analysis and discussion of the implications of communication from differing phases will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the application of this theory to the collected data.

5.2 Limitations

It should be acknowledged that, contrary to the assumption of SIPT, people may not always be motivated to develop impressions and relationships with each other via CMC. Thompson (2008) discovered that the goal of parent-teacher e-mail communication is often instrumental rather than relational, which may discourage the formation and development of a relationship. It is therefore important for the researcher to keep in mind the goals for communication that parents and teachers have when communicating via e-mail. In order to apply this theory, the researcher must take into consideration the possibility that parents and/or teachers may not want to build a relationship, and the implications this possibility entails. That CMC requires more time in order to achieve higher levels of intimacy is another challenged tenet of SIPT (Walther, 2008). It is unclear how *much* time is required for CMC users to achieve the level of intimacy required to begin to build an interpersonal relationship. More research into this aspect of SIPT would allow the researcher to form a stronger argument concerning parents' and teachers' struggle to form a relationship using e-mail communication based on the time they spend communicating.

The use of the term 'phase' in Walther's theory may be slightly problematic, as the word 'phase' typically indicates an evolution. For example, the first definition in the Merriam-Webster dictionary for 'phase' is "a part or step in a process: one part in a series of related events or actions". The second definition, "a short period of time during which a person behaves in a particular way or likes a particular thing" might be better suited for Walther's theory. What is important in order to understand Walther's theory, is that no phase is superior or inferior to another. The three stages are not a development or improvement from one to the next. Instead, each phase is specifically suited for a computer-mediated communicative need. In one situation, Impersonal communication might be preferred over Interpersonal, and in another, vice versa. In summary, communicators may not always want to communicate Interpersonally, despite the reader's anticipation that one phase must be superior over the others.

6. Research Approach and Method

The study was carried out from a social constructivist approach, which supports the concept of the social shaping of technology (SST) (Williams & Edge, 1992). SST posits “the design and implementation of technology as patterned by a range of social and economic factors, as well as technical considerations” (Williams & Edge, 1992). In contrast to traditional approaches which only address impacts of technological change, SST examines how a range of factors, including organizational, political, economical, and cultural, affect the design and implementation of technology (Williams & Edge, 1992).

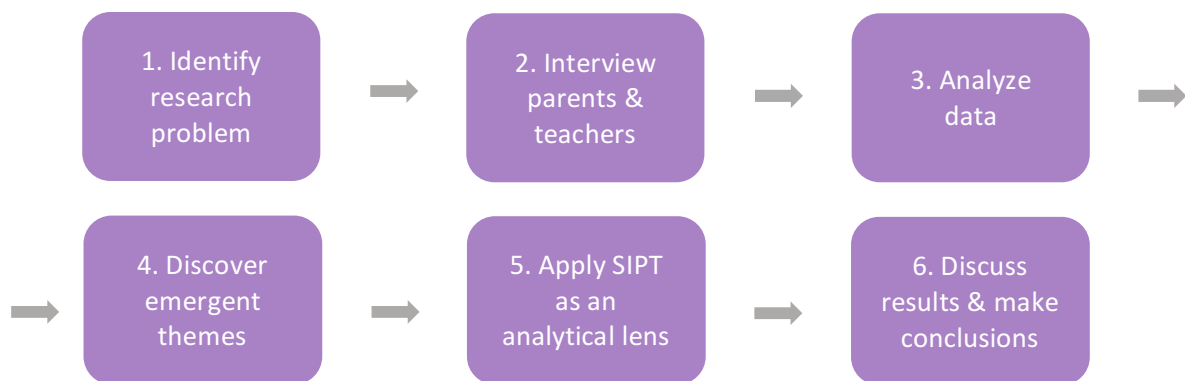


Figure 1. Six steps of the inductive research process.

Using a similar research design to Thompson (2008, 2009), with the goal of expanding on his research, the researcher approached the research design through an interpretive lens in order to identify the challenges of parent-teacher e-mail communication to building a relationship. Interpretive research is inductive, allowing patterns to emerge from the data (Patton, 1990). Therefore, an interpretive approach allowed for the challenging aspects of parent-teacher e-mail communication to emerge inductively from interviews with parents and teachers about their experiences using e-mail communication.

6.1 The Constant Comparative Method

The Constant Comparative Method (CCM) is a process used by researchers during analysis in order to discover trends in their data, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for the purpose of developing grounded theory. Glaser (1967) proposes CCM as a combination of two general approaches to the analysis of qualitative data. The first approach favors coding for analysis that will “constitute proof for a given proposition”; the second approach favors the review of empirical data for the generation and development of new theory (Glaser, 1967). A combination of the two approaches aids in generating and proposing categories, properties, and hypothesis about general problems, including causes, conditions, consequences, dimensions, or processes (Glaser, 1967). Tesch (1990) discusses the process of constant comparison:

The main intellectual tool is comparison. The method of comparing and contrasting is used for practically all intellectual tasks during analysis: forming categories, establishing the boundaries of the categories, assigning the segments to categories, summarizing the content of each category, summarizing the content of each category, finding negative evidence... The goal is to discern conceptual similarities, to refine the discriminative power of categories, and to discover patterns (pg. 96).

Applying CCM to generate and develop categories has been used for this purpose in similar research in parent-teacher e-mail communication (Thompson, 2008, 2009; Thompson et al, 2015). CCM was applied to this research in order to organize the researcher's empirical data and to assist in carving out categories that explain parent-teacher e-mail communication and its complicating effect on building and maintaining relationships.

According to Glaser (1967), CCM is carried out in four stages: 1) Comparing incidents applicable to each category; 2) integrating categories and their properties; 3) delimiting the categories and theory; 4) writing the theory. Only the first three stages of this process are described, as a new theory was not developed during this research.

6.1.1 Comparing incidents applicable to each category

The CCM process begins with coding empirical data into as many categories as possible. The categories may emerge from the data or fit into an existing category. Glaser (1967) gives the example of "social loss" of dying patients as a category that emerged quickly from comparisons of nurses' responses to the deaths of their patients. Relevant responses involving a nurse's evaluation of the degree of loss the patient was to his or her family are included under the "social loss" category, for example, "What will the children and her husband do without her?" or "She had a full life" (Glaser, 1967).

Coding may take the form of notes on a margin, but may also be done by making new pages of notes from the pages of data (Glaser, 1967). To this process, the first step of the CCM is added: "while coding an incident (i.e. an event or occurrence within the data) for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups in the same category" (Glaser, 1967). Before further coding, the researcher is required to compare an incident with others already coded into the same category. The constant comparison process aids the researcher in the development of categories (Glaser, 1967). Constant comparison facilitates "expanded thought about the categories' dimensions, conditions under which they are pronounced or minimized, major consequences, relation to other categories, and other properties" (Glaser 1967).

As the process continues, the researcher will be able to determine two types of categories: those that he or she created himself or herself, and those conceptualized from the language of the research data (Glaser, 1967). After coding for categories has been repeated multiple times, the second instruction for the CCM is added: "stop coding and record a memo of your ideas" (Glaser, 1967). This second step is important for the researcher to take the time to make logical conclusions grounded in the data. When clarity of ideas is achieved, the researcher may return to the data for more coding and constant comparison (Glaser, 1967).

6.1.2 Integrating categories and their properties

The second stage of CCM takes place as coding continues. The comparative units change from comparison of incidents to comparison of incidents with properties of the category that were revealed in initial comparisons (Glaser, 1967). In comparing incident with incident, Glaser and his research team discovered that nurses “re-calculate” the social loss of a patient as they learn more about him or her. From then on, incidents related to “calculation” were compared with “accumulated knowledge on calculating”, as opposed to all other incidents involving “calculation” (Glaser, 1967). They were then able to confirm that age and education were the most influential factors in nurses’ calculations of the social loss of a middle-aged adult (Glaser, 1967). Integrating categories and their properties contributes to a deeper analysis of the acquired data.

6.1.3 Delimiting the categories and theory

Glaser explains that the researcher will discover similarities in the original set of categories or their properties, which will allow him or her to reduce them to a smaller set of meaningful concepts. The researcher is then able to make generalizations about the data based on the delimited categories (Glaser, 1967). After delimiting the categories, the researcher’s analysis of incidents can become more concentrated (Glaser, 1967).

Theoretical saturation of the categories is another delimiting factor in the CCM process. After incidents for the same category have been coded a number of times, the researcher considers whether or not the next incident has the potential to reveal something new (Glaser, 1967). If the incident reveals new information, it is coded and compared; if it does not, the incident is not coded, as it will not contribute to the development of the category (Glaser, 1967). Achieving theoretical saturation for a category allows the researcher to move on to the next category more quickly (Glaser, 1967).

The first stage of CCM is useful to the researcher so that she may have a scientifically accepted method for discovering and creating her own categories based on the data collected from interviews with parents and teachers. This method was used for this study in order to generate as many categories as possible from the interview data and also helped to discover emergent themes. The second stage of CCM is useful to the researcher so that she may have a scientifically accepted method of discovering relationships among different properties of her categories in order to develop them so that they clearly represent the responses provided by parents and teachers. Finding relationships among properties of categories allowed the researcher to compare teachers’ and parents’ perceptions about these topics and to see where they had similar or dissimilar views. Discovering these similar and dissimilar views may have an effect on whether or not parents and teachers are able to form or manage relationships via e-mail communication. The third stage of CCM is useful to the researcher for so that she may have a scientifically accepted method of paring down the categories she has discovered which will facilitate the focus and depth of her analysis. By editing the categories from many to few,

the researcher is able to pinpoint specific aspects of e-mail communication that act as barriers to forming the parent-teacher relationship.

6.1.4 Limitations

CCM was developed by Glaser and Strauss in an effort to facilitate the development of grounded theory. The researcher must therefore consider the validity of this method for her research, as the object of this research is not to develop theory. CCM is one of a variety of qualitative research methodologies. The researcher was therefore cautious when using this method in order to achieve a greater understanding and knowledge of her collected data. In a qualitative study, the sampling plan used by the researcher can have a potential bias, and issues of managing the data and credibility are also identified as concerns (Kolb, 2012).

6.2 Sampling Procedures and Participants

The sample included teachers and parents from an English-speaking elementary school called The English School Gothenburg (ESG), in Gothenburg, Sweden to gain a perspective on the challenges they face in building relationships when using e-mail to communicate. The head teacher, the deputy head teacher, and the head of administration were also interviewed. Permission to sample schoolteachers and parents was granted from the school administrators. E-mails were sent personally to parents, teachers, and administrators to request their participation. Administrators were selected for interviews as well as teachers, as they are teachers with the most teaching experience, and are able to provide an institutional perspective about e-mail communication which is different from that of teachers. Those who were willing to participate were scheduled an interview. The majority of parents, teachers, and administrators contacted were willing to participate in the study. One teacher declined the request to participate due to the sensitive nature of the subject of the study. All interviews were conducted in person, English, at ESG. The duration of each interview varied from fifteen to thirty minutes. No interview lasted longer than half an hour.

ESG is an attractive school for Swedish families as well as expatriate families from countries around the world who are interested in providing their children with an education that prepares them for a life in a globalized world. ESG is a Swedish *friskola*, which means that it is not a private school, but is publicly funded, providing children from less fortunate families the opportunity to receive an education they might not otherwise have had. As a result, the children and parents who are part of ESG come from a wide variety of cultures and financial backgrounds. Interviewing parents from diverse cultures may have an effect on the results acquired for this study.

Participants included eight parents, six teachers, and three administrators. Participants were predominantly women (teachers = five women and one man; parents = seven mothers and one father; administrators = one woman and two men). The participants' nationalities were varied, as they hailed from a number of different countries (teachers = United States, England, Sweden,

Hungary; parents = United States, Ireland, Sweden, Germany, India, South Korea; administrators = England, Sweden, New Zealand). All teachers and administrators had a bachelor's degree, three had a master's degree; the average number of years teaching was 17. Parents were also highly educated; all had an upper-secondary level of education (i.e. a bachelor's degree or college certificate), two had a master's degree. Parents occupations came from a variety of backgrounds, including IT consulting, project management, photography, and self-employment. All participants interviewed had Internet access at work. Theoretical saturation occurred after sixteen interviews, as information gathered from the interviews became repetitive, and no new information was forthcoming (Lindlof, 1995).

6.3 Data Collection Procedures

The data collection process was carried out in a similar fashion to Thompson (2008) in order to meet the standard required for the focus of this research. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators. The first stage in data collection involved semi-structured interviews with parents, teachers, and administrators with the aim to understand the relationship parents and teachers enter into when using e-mail to communicate (Thompson, 2008). Two interview guides were created for parents and teachers, consisting of open-ended questions about their e-mail exchanges, including the topics of those messages, the initiator of the e-mail interactions, the frequency of correspondence, the advantages and disadvantages of e-mail correspondence, and time spent in e-mail correspondence in a similar fashion to Thompson (2008). The teachers' interview guide contained questions tailored to their role as teachers; the parents' interview guide contained questions tailored to their role as parents; the administrators' interview guide contained questions tailored to their role as administrators. In order to ensure the same issues were addressed in each interview, a number of the same questions were posed to teachers, parents, and administrators. The interviewer allowed participants to diverge from the guide throughout the interview in order to acquire new information, similar to Thompson (2008). The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

6.4 Data Analysis

The method for analyzing the collected data was carried out in three stages. During the first stage of analysis, the researcher analyzed interview transcripts using CCM to identify repeating patterns and themes (Thompson, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). CCM was used in this study in order to categorize empirically accumulated data and to discover trends in responses from parents and teachers about their experiences with parent-teacher e-mail communication. Data gathered from interviews with parents was compared to data from interviews with teachers to find trending responses.

The process of categorizing the data was iterative in order to end up with the final five categories described in this report. Categorizing data began with the audio-recordings of the

interviews, which were listened to in their entirety to gain a general sense of the data, and listened to again. This time, data-rich sections were transcribed, which involved the preliminary examination and categorization of the data to identify recurring patterns and themes (Thompson, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher examined the text and highlighted key text segments using a color-coding system to represent the initial categories. The researcher then organized the transcribed text by color to compare the categories and interpret the emerging themes (Thompson, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After the first round of analysis, seven categories emerged. Important quotations were selected from the interview transcripts and organized within the emerging themes generated. After listening to the interviews again, the number of categories was edited down to five and the thematic description of each category was confirmed. The descriptive title of each category was created based on the themes that emerged from the language parents and teachers used in the interviews.

During the second stage of analysis, the three phases of SIPT were used as an analytical lens in order to help explain the reasons why parents and teachers might struggle to form or maintain a relationship when communicating via e-mail. The interview data from parents and teachers was examined to find out if and how their experiences communicating via e-mail with each other fit into any of the three phases of CMC, Impersonal, Interpersonal, or Hyperpersonal. For example, if a parent described a frustrating e-mail interaction with her child's teacher, the researcher analyzed this account to see if the parent's description of her e-mail communication could be described as Impersonal, Interpersonal, or Hyperpersonal. The same analysis was done for a teacher with an account of a similar interaction. When the phase of communication was determined for both sides of an interaction, explanations as to why parents and teachers may experience difficulty in relationship-building via e-mail communication were developed.

During the final stage, member checks with all participants interviewed assisted in verification of the findings (Thompson, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher e-mailed all participants a summary of the findings to which they indicated that the findings reflected their experiences with parent-teacher e-mail.

6.5 Ethical Considerations

The researcher is committed to ensuring the quality and integrity of the research, and has sought informed consent from all participants, including parents, and teachers, and administrators at the school where the data was collected. Respect for the confidentiality of participants was ensured by leaving out any names or references to their own identity or the identity of their children when writing the results. All teachers, parents, and administrators volunteered their participation in the study and were aware that their contributions would be audio recorded and transcribed. A consent form was distributed and signed to confirm participants' awareness of their contribution to the study. Following the completion of data collection, a summary of the results was created and given to all participants, and their feedback as to whether or not the results reflected their opinions was requested.

7. Results

The collected data is organized into five categories according to the topics discussed by parents and teachers as the most challenging to building a relationship when using e-mail communication. The categories are as follows:

- 7.1 *Expectations: Availability for Communication.* This category discusses teachers' expectations for how much e-mail contact they are willing to engage in, while managing appropriate office hours. This category also discusses parents' acknowledgement of not flooding teachers' inboxes, and their wish for more contact with certain subject teachers.
- 7.2 *Communicating Emotion.* This category discusses the difficulty teachers and parents experience in communicating emotion via e-mail, as well as their experiences misinterpreting the type of emotion conveyed in an e-mail they receive. Teachers and parents state their preference for FTF communication when discussing sensitive subjects.
- 7.3 *Language Barrier & Misunderstanding.* This category discusses teachers' and parents' struggle to write e-mails using language that will be understood by English as a second or third language speakers, and the effects this type of language use can have on their ability to understand each other when communicating via e-mail.
- 7.4 *Content Management.* This category discusses teachers' struggle to create e-mail content that attracts the eyes of parents. Parents discuss their dissatisfaction with the way teachers compose e-mail and how time constraints affect their ability to read e-mail in detail.
- 7.5 *Maintaining the Professional Boundary.* This category discusses how the use of e-mail communication challenges teachers' professionalism. Parents discuss regretful moments when they used e-mail to challenge a teacher's professionalism.

The above categories have been broken down into sub-categories, revealing the complexities that exist in e-mail communication between parents and teachers. Quotes from interviews have served as evidence in support of these categories and provide firsthand evidence about parents and teachers' experiences.

7.1 Expectations: Availability for Communication

Teachers face a tough challenge enforcing office hours on their e-mail communication with parents. Knowing how to be communicatively accessible and available for parents without sacrificing precious personal time is a difficult balance to strike. Teachers are challenged by the fact that they are perceived as available for contact outside of their regular working hours. Teachers describe receiving e-mails from parents in the evening as an added pressure on managing their work/life balance. While parents are satisfied with the amount of e-mail

communication they receive from their children's class teacher, they wish for more e-mail contact with subject teachers. Subject teachers are described as challenging to establish and maintain contact with. Parents are aware and careful about which subjects they e-mail teachers about to avoid flooding inboxes. Since the parents and teachers had not previously agreed on their expectations for e-mail communication, their struggle to manage each other's expectations acts as a barrier to the formation and development of the parent-teacher relationship.

7.1.1 Teachers struggle to maintain office hours

The empirical data indicate that teachers experience significant challenges in maintaining a good relationship with parents via e-mail. Teachers struggle to manage parents who wish for close, ongoing e-mail contact in a professional and polite way. A teacher reported...

I used to answer them as I got them, and now I stop about eight o'clock in the evening if I'm working. Otherwise, I close my computer when I leave school at half past four, because it is very draining to be constantly bombarded. Some parents like having a lot of contact, but they seem to forget that you have other things to do as well.

The excerpt illustrates that responding to queries from parents on an ongoing basis takes an emotional toll on teachers. Teachers emphasized the importance of having a cutoff time for checking their e-mail.

7.1.2 Parents struggle to establish and maintain contact with subject teachers

Parents perceive certain subject teachers as unavailable for contact. A parent reports her disappointment in the lack of contact:

The Swedish teachers, we don't hear anything from them... For example, [my son] in the fall, he kept on forgetting to bring his [homework] home... If you don't turn the book back in, they never ask for it. And the thing is with [my son], I started slipping on his Swedish homework... suddenly I realized he hasn't turned in his homework for like two months! ...It did occur to me, like, 'Don't they notice that he hasn't turned in homework for like two months?' You would think that they would also ping me and say 'Hey, by the way, what's up with his homework?'" I find their silence, umm, that's been years. You don't hear anything from them.

This excerpt illustrates how a parent relies on and expects communication with teachers for support in managing her son's homework. Not receiving e-mail from the teacher indicates to the parent that her son may not be receiving the attention he needs.

7.1.3 Teachers want to have the information

Some teachers crave and value having a constant flow of information from parents via e-mail. Regardless of whether or not she replies as soon as she receives an e-mail, a teacher's priority is to have the information at her fingertips:

I like to know things. I'm not saying I'm replying to them at ten in the evening, but I still want to know... I want to read them, at least, at home... During the evening when I work at home I can e-mail back to them until, like nine, nine-thirty in the evening.

This excerpt illustrates how the desire for information from parents might override a teacher's ability to switch off their work e-mail at the end of the day. According to this teacher, to read e-mails from parents at home is an important duty of her profession.

7.1.4 Parents: which subjects are worth sending e-mail to teachers about?

Deciding when to e-mail a teacher and on which topic is a method used by parents to avoid flooding teachers' e-mail inboxes with mail. A parent emphasized the importance of only e-mailing a teacher about significant topics.

Then, of course, I don't want to flood the teachers with e-mails either so I try to find the balance. Okay, what is it that I really need from them, because, I mean they have so many other children to take care of, so I don't want to flood them with each and every single bit... I won't do that.

Parents are therefore aware of their potential of overwhelming teachers' inboxes. This excerpt describes the thoughtful process the parent goes through in deciding what to write to her child's teacher.

7.1.5 Teachers pick and choose which e-mails are worth replying to

A teacher admitted that she did not have a cutoff time for checking her work e-mail at home. When asked how she felt about this decision, she described the process she goes through in deciding which e-mails require a response or not.

I don't mind. If it's an annoying e-mail, like, I got an e-mail from (child's) Dad, that was just, stupid. And I'm like, well, okay, I'm not answering that now, because I'm not going to let it ruin my evening. But if it's an e-mail like 'so and so is sick, do you think we could have some [extra] work, or could you tell us what you've been doing so we can do something [with the child] at home', that's something I could reply to.

This teacher describes not having a cutoff time as having a potentially negative effect on her personal life. By choosing not to reply to such an e-mail, this teacher avoids thinking about the message and can enjoy her time off.

While teachers need to put boundaries on the amount of communication and the timeframe during which they communicate with parents, they feel pressure from parents to cross these boundaries. The fact that no official boundaries are set at the start of the school year may be the cause of many of the frustrations described by parents and teachers in the above section. A lack of predetermined boundaries for e-mail communication may therefore have an effect on parents and teachers' ability to form relationships with each other.

7.2 Communicating Emotion

Lack of FTF contact with parents may challenge a teacher's ability to communicate emotion successfully via e-mail. E-mails sent in a rush are easily misinterpreted, requiring teachers to spend time clarifying. Similarly, teachers may misinterpret the messages they receive from parents. Sweden's daycare system presents itself as an added challenge for teachers who would like to have more FTF contact with parents. To convey an intended emotion in e-mail communication can result in misinterpretation and regret. Parents realize the importance of overcoming this challenge, and state their preference for FTF communication when discussing issues of a sensitive or emotional nature. This preference for FTF should be acknowledged as an effort from teachers and parents to preserve the parent-teacher relationship by avoiding communicating emotion via e-mail.

7.2.1 Teachers misinterpret emotion in e-mail from parents

Reading emotionally charged e-mail from parents lays teachers open to the possibility of misinterpreting the message written to them. A teacher reflected that he preferred e-mail communication over FTF when responding to an e-mail from a parent he perceived as aggressive:

With one parent, it's just the way he is, quite forthright and to the point. But it did come across [in an e-mail] that he was being sarcastic and he was being quite aggressive. So, having to reply in a controlled way, even though you are quite annoyed about this person's response, and it's nothing through fault of your own. But then on the flipside of that it also stopped what could have been an awkward encounter face-to-face.

This excerpt illustrates the challenge the teacher faces in responding to an e-mail he perceived as aggressive and sarcastic. He muses on the possibility of a FTF encounter being potentially more unpleasant than an e-mail exchange.

7.2.2 Parents would rather communicate face-to-face about sensitive subjects

Parents reported preferring FTF communication when discussing sensitive or emotional subjects. A parent stated...

Sometimes... you want to talk to the person face-to-face because there might be emotions attached, or you want to express it in some way, and it's difficult to make it out in an e-mail.

The excerpt illustrates how a parent wishes to express himself emotionally in a clear way, but does not believe he is able to do so via e-mail. The parent believes that emotional expression via e-mail presents the possibility for misinterpretation.

7.2.3 Sweden's after school care program for children (Fritids) prevents teachers from having face-to-face interactions with parents

Teachers prefer FTF interaction in cases that require a prompt response. However, Sweden's after-school daycare program impedes on teachers' ability to meet the parents of their students FTF on a daily basis. A teacher compares her experience as a teacher in England to her experience in Sweden:

Out of the two [e-mail vs. FTF] I would always prefer face-to-face. I feel like it can be difficult to fully communicate what I want to say sometimes over e-mail. Face-to-face, for me, is the preferred, but you don't have, I don't have loads of contact with parents because of Fritids, in which case, e-mailing is easier than calling everyone... That's a huge difference, coming from England. In England, we wouldn't have something like Fritids, I saw all my parents on a daily basis before and after school, so I didn't write any e-mails in England at all. Everything was done face-to-face... that was a change for me when I came here, definitely.

This excerpt illustrates how a country's social infrastructure has an effect on the way parents and teachers communicate. Teachers in Sweden rely more heavily on e-mail as the channel of communication with parents as they seldom meet in person. Most children in Sweden go directly from their classroom to Fritids, and are picked up later on in the afternoon after teachers have gone home. Parents and teachers report communicating emotion successfully via e-mail as very difficult to achieve. It is likely that misinterpreted emotion in e-mail communication has had an effect on the parent-teacher relationship.

7.3 Language Barrier and Misunderstanding

Communication via e-mail is a challenge for teachers writing to parents who speak English as a second or third language. When writing e-mails to parents, teachers must be aware of the language they use to convey their messages. Teachers struggle to communicate with parents in a simple way while maintaining their own level of English in everyday use. While the challenge for teachers is to write at a level of English that can be understood from parents with varied levels of English, parents report that they struggle to understand teachers whose level of English is not high enough. It is likely that parents and teachers who are unable to make themselves understood when communicating via e-mail struggle to form relationships with each other.

7.3.1 Teachers struggle to convey messages in English

Writing e-mail to English as a second and third language speakers in a way that can be understood is difficult to achieve. A teacher reflected on the possibility that parents do not understand the information they receive:

I think there is a higher percentage of people [parents] who don't understand than we [teachers] acknowledge, because we write predominantly in English... I think it's something that we have to be very careful about... that we have to make what we write quite transparent.

We are writing to second language learners, English as an additional language learner, so that we're not using a lot of fancy language, because people don't understand it. And even [for] the most educated Swede who, you know, can write essays in English, we still use strange terminology. So that's something that, I think, people have to be aware of, and... I write a lot more simply than I would do if I was in England.

This excerpt indicates that teachers may not want to admit that the parents of the students in their class do not understand the e-mail they receive. To write simply is not enough; a teacher needs to be aware of how the words they use will translate in a variety of languages. Working at an English school in a country that does not speak English as its first language presents additional challenges to teachers when writing messages to parents.

7.3.2 Parents struggle to read messages written by teachers in English

Parents express concern with the level of English written by teachers in e-mail communication. A parent commented:

The lack of ability to write properly in English. And that can be from non-native English speakers as well as native English speakers. Typos are one thing, misspellings are another, I'm no English expert, but just the basics of writing a sentence, I think, are important if you're teaching the kids.

This excerpt illustrates parents' worry that teachers may be teaching improper grammar and sentence structure to their children. E-mails written in poor English indicates to parents that the teacher writing them may not be equipped to teach English.

7.3.3 Teachers struggle to be direct in their e-mail while maintaining a professional tone

It is important for teachers to remember the importance of writing simply, being direct, and that to embed information in the messages they write to parents will result in misunderstanding. A teacher reflected that:

I think with e-mail communication with parents, we [teachers] need to make sure we are very clear. I think sometimes we get carried away being nice and pleasant, the information gets embedded in a whole load of stuff that it doesn't need to be... it needs to be as clear as possible. People are busy, people are speaking, maybe a third language.

This excerpt illustrates how aware the teacher is of being misunderstood by parents when writing in a "nice and pleasant" way. The teacher acknowledges the messages she writes must favor parental understanding over sounding "nice and pleasant".

7.3.4 Parents spend more time reading poorly written e-mails from teachers

A parent described how she often reads e-mail from her child's teacher more than once in order to ensure that she has understood its contents.

Everybody gets to the point. Sometimes, if you're [the teacher] not a native English speaker, there can be a lot more words. Sometimes you have to read it over again to make sure you get the point.

This excerpt illustrates that the parent requires more time to retrieve important information from a poorly written e-mail message. The parent describes how she must scan through a message with unnecessary words in order to retrieve the important information.

7.3.5 Teachers put their own use of English at risk when accommodating parents' level

Changing the way she spoke English with parents had a detrimental effect on a teacher's everyday use of English with colleagues and friends. In the end, she decided not to accommodate parents in this way in order to maintain her own level.

I dumbed down my English for a long time, and then I noticed that it started having an effect on the way that I actually wrote and the way that I talked. And so, like two years ago, after so many years, I was like, you know what, I'm gonna write the way that I would normally write because it's having an effect on my skills.

This excerpt illustrates how catering to the language needs of parents in e-mail communication is a challenge in itself, while preserving one's own level of English comes as an added challenge for this teacher.

Parents and teachers struggle to convey information to each other via e-mail using language they both can understand. Communicating in English over e-mail was a real issue for parents and teachers in this sample, which may have an effect on their ability to build and maintain a relationship.

7.4 E-mail Content Management

Another one of the biggest challenges teachers face in e-mail communication with parents is the task of discerning whether or not parents have actually read the e-mail they send out. Teachers expressed frustration in having to repeat information that was already distributed when responding to e-mails from parents. Teachers lack a method of ensuring that e-mail they send to parents is read. Parents receive e-mail from their children's teachers in addition to their own work and personal e-mail. In order to manage the amount of e-mail they receive, parents have a method of filtering which e-mails they read and respond to and when. Parents would like to be able to glean information from e-mail quickly by reading bullet points, rather than hunting through a paragraph. Parents also decide which e-mails require immediate response or action based on whether or not the e-mail was sent personally to them. Certain aspects of e-mail composition challenge parents' ability to read and respond to e-mails from teachers in an efficient way. Parents and teachers are unlikely to form or maintain a relationship with each other if teachers are continually disappointed with the number of parents reading their e-mail and if parents are uninterested in reading the e-mail content they receive.

7.4.1 Teachers are disappointed with the number of parents who read general announcement e-mails

Teachers are disappointed with the number of parents who read broadcast e-mails, that is, e-mail sent to all parents of a specific class, for example, the weekly newsletter. Children of parents who do not read broadcast e-mails miss out on special opportunities within school as a result. While e-mail sent specifically to one parent has a higher chance of being read, broadcast e-mails sent to the parents of an entire class are read less, despite the relevant and interesting information the message contains. A teacher described her frustration:

One to one, if I would e-mail them specifically, I would say, out of twenty-two students, twenty would get back to me within the next few days. General e-mails, the newsletters, and the ones from the school, they don't read as much, at all.

Last year me and [another teacher] had this Volvo video... We send out e-mails every single Friday, and in this particular one, it said the first ten children to return this slip will be in the Volvo video, and three kids returned it. So we e-mailed again and, like, maybe two more kids returned it! So we didn't even have ten kids. As soon as we told the kids about this [in person], then the parents were like, e-mailing like crazy, like 'Can my kid get in? Can my kid get in?' And that just made me so angry 'cuz I was like, this just goes to show that three of you read the general e-mail, or maybe five of you read it in its entirety and maybe did something.

This excerpt illustrates the challenge teachers face in attracting parents to read general e-mail as well as personally addressed e-mail. Reliance on e-mail seems to have backfired on this teacher, as she did not receive the response she expected after distributing information about an exciting event. She was able to get the result she wanted using FTF communication.

7.4.2 Parents feel stressed by the length of e-mails they receive from teachers

Parents discuss the emotional toll of receiving too much e-mail content. When discussing reasons why an e-mail from a teacher might not get read in its entirety, parents describe the amount of words used by the teacher in the e-mail as too many. A parent commented:

I think it's the length, really. I would appreciate more of a, kind of, bullet point. Because it's great to understand what my son has been working on throughout the week... at the same time, I think I get a bit stressed because it's so many words.

This excerpt illustrates how parents are challenged in the mental processing of the information. To receive a long e-mail is stressful for some parents. Parents perceive shorter, list-like e-mails from teachers as less stressful and easier to read.

7.4.3 Teachers struggle to find an e-mail format that is easy for parents to read

Teachers are constantly working out new ways to attract the attention of parents to read their broadcast e-mails. A teacher describes the simplicity of her new method of writing the weekly newsletter and the welcomed response she received from parents:

The way that I always used to do my newsletters was just a general e-mail format, and last year I was really getting the feeling that not that many were reading it. So this year what I've done is I've created a generic template, you know how I said, like, what's going on this week, homework sent out, and important dates coming up.

So there's a template, with literally three boxes in it. And the boxes are not that big, you know, which means that I have to do it all in that, in those boxes, and they have a label on them, so it just makes it so much easier for them to kind of look and find what they are looking for, rather than this, like, essay, which I used to do. And that, I think, has helped... because it's quick, they don't want to read this long thing.

This teacher has spent a lot of time thinking about how to format her newsletter to cater to the needs of her students' parents. She has reflected on her past attempts, which included an essay-type text, and considered the functionality of a newsletter in that format. The new format of her newsletter defines information by topic in three boxes which she hopes will entice more parents to read it. When asked if she had shared her method with other teachers, she admitted that she had not yet done so.

7.4.4 Parents lack the time to carefully read e-mail

Time pressures in parents' daily life affects the way they use their e-mail. When time is tight, parents are not able to carefully read the e-mail they receive. Instead, parents scan the messages for important dates and make it their goal to read in more detail later. A parent discussed her process:

It kind of depends on the day, really, how much time do I have? If I know that I don't have that much time and I can see, maybe, some dates on the e-mail and the dates are quite long ahead, I don't take much notice of the e-mail. And then I, maybe, take it the next day. But if the heading says 'Please read', you know, obviously I read it. So it depends on how much time I have during the day.

This excerpt illustrates the importance parents put on receiving a clearly written and easy to read e-mail. Parents are diligent about reading e-mails from teachers flagged as important, but will put off replying to e-mails they deem not as pressing.

Disinterested parents and disappointed teachers are unlikely to form or maintain a relationship with each other unless they start to work together to create guidelines for e-mail communication that they can both agree to follow. Parents and teachers need to be made aware of how detrimental this type of e-mail communication can be to their relationship and be provided with strategies to combat it.

7.5 Maintaining the Professional Boundary

Teachers are confronted by the fact that e-mail communication with parents has created a setting in which parents may challenge their position as professionals. Teachers perceive parents as avoiding FTF confrontation and hiding behind e-mails sent in criticism. E-mail written by parents with the intention of checking up on teachers' performance is perceived as a lack of confidence in their abilities. Parents are prone to impulsively criticizing teachers when upset, and have also become accustomed to teachers reminding them about important upcoming dates. As a result, parents now rely on teachers to carry out this administrative task and are grateful for it, however these behaviors may result in damaged relationships with teachers

7.5.1 Parents challenge teachers as professionals by questioning their methods via e-mail

A parent discusses an e-mail she sent over five years ago to her child's teacher. She regretted adding the head teacher's e-mail address to the message intended for the teacher. She reflected:

I remember one of the biggest regret e-mails I had, not really, but it really ticked me off at the moment and later on I'm like 'Why did I get so upset?' was when [daughter] was five, and she came home, I'm an atheist... and she came home at five and she's like 'I believe in Jesus!' and I'm like 'What?' And now I can laugh, but at that moment I had no idea that... the study of religion was already included at such a young age...

And I wrote an e-mail back and I was civil, but I felt guilty later on because I CC'd [the head teacher]. And I still feel guilt over it, because you shouldn't call someone out to their boss. I should have e-mailed her directly and allowed her a chance to respond, and then if I wasn't satisfied with the response, I should have then taken it. But it was one of those momentary oversights where you're like 'Ooh I'll just tack this [head teacher's e-mail] on', because you're so angry! ...Obviously I still regret it because I still think of it today.

This excerpt illustrates the lasting feeling of regret an impulsively written e-mail can have on a parent. E-mail communication lays people open to behave unprofessionally, possibly due to the convenience of its accessibility via smartphones. In this case, the unprofessional behavior of the parent challenged the professional boundary between herself, and her child's teacher.

7.5.2 Teachers feel that parents hide behind e-mail when voicing complaints

Teachers commented on the fact that parents have the ability to hide behind e-mail when voicing complaints. Teachers perceive parents who send complaints via e-mail would not necessarily voice them aloud in a FTF interaction. A teacher who previously worked in preschool and now teaches in kindergarten points this trend out:

There were more complaints in preschool because in preschool you would see the parents every day, so you could have that one on one talk and have a little chat and be friends. And then, sometimes, they didn't want to complain to your face, so they would just e-mail you a complaint instead.

This excerpt illustrates that teachers need to be aware of how e-mail communication gives parents the capability to criticize teachers about issues that they might not say to their face. Less courageous parents therefore take advantage of the distance e-mail communication creates and criticize teachers from afar.

7.5.3 Parents rely heavily on teachers to help them keep up with important dates

Teachers send out reminders to parents so systematically that parents have come to rely on it. A parent discussed:

It's because we are all too busy! Everybody's too busy! So, all of a sudden, everybody needs to be reminded. You're grateful for it, even if some people think, 'Oh, God, another e-mail' But I'm sure most people who have busy lives think, 'Oh ya ya ya, good that they sent that reminder so now I have to get on it.' And then you forward that e-mail, I forward it to [my husband] and say, okay, remember we have to do *this*.

This excerpt illustrates how grateful the parent is to receive reminder e-mails from her children's teachers. She acknowledges that receiving reminder e-mails will potentially flood parents' inboxes, but seems to accept it as a necessary evil so that she and her husband can keep up with their children's school schedules. The reminder e-mails are shared between spouses in an effort to then remind each other about upcoming important dates.

7.5.4 Teachers feel they go above and beyond to remind parents of important dates

A teacher who has worked for twenty-five years reflects on the development of the use of e-mail communication for her job. She describes the type of e-mails she receives, and describes the way parents challenge her profession by making administrative requests in their messages:

I get more incidental e-mails. More small things, people don't write things down and remember, they just ask instead... We get a lot of 'Oh, I'm sorry, I was busy, I didn't write it down.' That I'm an administrator as well as a teacher, I'm supposed to keep their social diaries up to date.

This excerpt illustrates how this teacher feels that her job as a teacher does not include keeping up parents' social diaries. She believes parents challenge her professionalism when making these requests. Despite this belief, the teacher still carries out administrative requests for parents.

It is possible that teachers who feel that parents who lack respect for their profession by over-relying on their ability to perform administrative tasks via e-mail will be less likely to be able to form a relationship with one another. Parents need to be more aware of how teachers feel about this aspect of e-mail communication, and consider the damaging effect an administrative request can make on the relationship with their child's teacher.

8. Analysis

The empirical data gathered was analyzed by applying SIPT as an analytical lens to help explain how and why parents experience challenges to relationship building in e-mail communication. The empirical data suggest that teachers and parents communicate from different phases of CMC, resulting in clashes in their communication styles, preventing relationships from developing. To develop a relationship via e-mail communication is much more complicated than what SIPT predicts.

Teachers make considerable effort to maintain impersonal communicative methods in order to establish boundaries in their availability for communication. These efforts have an adverse effect for teachers in situations when an e-mail response from parents is required, as parents report being much more likely to respond to a personally addressed e-mail. Parents wish for more impersonal, task-oriented e-mail from teachers as they report having little time to read long e-mails in detail. Teachers may form undesirable impressions of parents who write critical e-mails, putting a developing relationship at risk.

Clashes in communication from the three phases of CMC and unsuccessful communication within a particular phase act as barriers to the formation of the parent-teacher relationship. Three main problems emerged from the data, and SIPT helped explain why these barriers to relationship-building occur in parent-teacher e-mail communication. The first problem emerged as a result of a clash between Impersonal and Interpersonal phases communication. This problem occurred as a result of teachers who tried to establish communication boundaries by choosing how and when to respond to e-mail from parents, and from parents' conflicting expectations for the type of e-mail they want to read versus the type of e-mail they are likely to read. The second problem emerged as a result of parents and teachers who created inferior hyperpersonal impressions of each other when communicating emotion. The third problem emerged as a result of parents who took advantage of democratized impersonal communication and unprofessionally communicated criticism to teachers. The following paragraphs analyze and discuss these problems and their damaging effects to the parent-teacher relationship.

8.1 Impersonal versus Interpersonal

Clashes in phases of CMC between parents and teachers have an adverse effect on their ability to build and maintain relationships with one another. A clash in CMC phases was experienced by teachers who, in an effort to maintain office hours, chose not to respond to e-mails late in the evening. Teachers perceive parents who send e-mail after hours and expect an immediate response as wishing for interpersonal communication intimacy that they do not wish to reciprocate. A teacher described of her method to manage office hours reflects the Impersonal Phase of CMC:

Most parents, the vast majority, treat it [e-mail] as a one off, they just need to know a piece of information, they don't expect an immediate response, they don't expect that you will give a lengthy, essay-like answer. Some people do expect an almost constant one to one dialogue... For me, I tend

to say that ‘If you want to discuss this then we’ll book a meeting’, because otherwise it gets over the top. And also, I tend to not reply instantly to those long ones.

By not replying to e-mail right away or picking and choosing which e-mails to respond to, teachers depersonalize their communication with parents. A teacher’s decision not to reply right away supports Walther’s (2005) conclusions about the interchangeability of language and writing with nonverbal cues. Ignoring a communicative partner’s contribution conveys dislike, which unfortunately, does not foster a relationship between communicators. Teachers are therefore stuck with the task of forming professional relationships with parents who they perceive are overly intimate in their e-mail communication.

Parents reported a wish to receive more direct, task-oriented e-mail. A teacher took this request into account and changed the format of her weekly newsletter acknowledging that “it’s quick[er], [because] they don’t want to read this long [e-mail] thing.” When asked if she received feedback about her initiative to change the newsletter format, she reported that parents thanked her, saying that her newsletter was easier to read and easier to retrieve the information they needed from it. This parent’s response reflects the findings in Thompson et al (2015), that convenience is an important deciding factor for the type of mode parents choose to communicate with teachers. While this teacher’s effort satisfies the assumption that impersonal e-mail facilitates task-oriented communication (Walther, 1996), teachers experience a catch-22, as parents report they are less likely to read an e-mail that is not personally addressed to them. In other words, teachers are faced with the challenge to write e-mail that is impersonal enough that parents can easily glean information, but just personal enough to capture parents’ attention so that they *will* read it. A parent admitted:

If it’s from [child’s teacher] or if it’s from [head teacher] personally to me... then I would read them, because if it’s not just a normal newsletter, obviously I would read them directly.

Teachers therefore face a difficult task of writing e-mail for parents who have complicated expectations for the type of e-mail they want to receive. A conflict exists between the type of e-mail parents want to read and the type of e-mail they are more likely to read. Parents’ complicated expectations combined with teachers’ efforts to accommodate these expectations make it very difficult for the two groups to form relationships. Walther’s (1996) SIPT assumes that the Interpersonal Phase of CMC contributes to the forming and maintaining of relationships; however, based on the results of this research, it is difficult for both parents and teachers to arrive at this phase together during communication in order for a relationship to blossom.

8.2 Unsuccessful Creation of a Hyperpersonal Impression

When parents and teachers need to communicate about sensitive subjects, both parties struggle to do so via e-mail communication. Teachers are apt to misinterpret the emotion communicated in e-mails written by parents, and vice versa. Whereas the Hyperpersonal Phase assumes that a

lack of physical presence and other social cues conveyed in FTF interaction enables a user to modify the impression they make on another, the findings suggest that people are not always successful in modifying their impression or conveying an emotion in a desirable way. One teacher described his experience:

So, a lot of the non-linguistic things, the hand gestures, the intonation of voice can be lost, and you can't tell if someone is angry or if they're being sarcastic or if they're being jokey, and you have to kind of read between the lines. And that can be a bit of a problem, of how to respond sometimes if someone's being overly aggressive, they might not mean to sound that way, it might just be that they're being quite forthright, and if someone's being quite relaxed and jokey, you don't know whether to send back that way... When the person's not there and you're just responding to text on a page, it can be quite tricky to judge emotion. That can be quite problematic.

In this case, the parent might assume her or she has successfully created a desirable impression and is fostering an interpersonal relationship with the teacher, but the teacher's statement above shows that he did not perceive that desirable impression. This finding reflects that of Thompson (2009), who discovered that misinterpretations were the most significant problem emerging from parent-teacher e-mail communication. SIPT posits that it takes more time to make an impression via CMC than FTF, which might explain why the teacher was uncertain about the emotion attached to the e-mail he received from the parent. It is possible that the pair have not communicated frequently enough to understand how to convey emotion to each other via e-mail.

Parents who e-mail complaints to teachers run the risk of creating undesirable impressions and damaging the potential for an interpersonal relationship. A teacher described an e-mail she received from a parent that she believed challenged her as a professional:

I had an e-mail from a parent going, 'Yeah, I can't really understand the homework.' That is just useless, it doesn't have a point, it doesn't have a meaning, 'Oh I couldn't figure out the last page in the homework. Even a clever chap like me couldn't understand the homework!' And I'm like 'Okay, well, why are you telling me this?'

During her interview, the teacher went on to describe that particular page of homework the parent was complaining about, commenting that "it wasn't actually that difficult, so you don't have to be very clever to understand it." The Hyperpersonal Phase of CMC assumes that a person's physical absence in communication enables the sender to modify the impression he makes of himself to be more desirable than reality; the assumption therefore predicts that the parent should have been able to make a favorable impression that would contribute to the building of a relationship (Walther, 1996). Unfortunately, this parent did not succeed and, based on the teacher's comments, rather embarrassed himself instead. Using e-mail communication to voice complaints or challenge a teacher's professionalism, more often than not, has a damaging effect on building and maintaining relationships.

8.3 Impersonal Communication Becomes Unprofessional

When parents repeatedly request for reminders about important dates via e-mail, teachers perceive this behavior as a lack of respect for their profession. The Impersonal Phase of CMC is described as having the capability to democratize communication (Walther, 1996). When parents take advantage of this capability when communicating with teachers via e-mail, it damages their potential to build an interpersonal relationship. A teacher was quite passionate in her interview when she described her disappointment with parents who take advantage of her position as teacher and make repeated requests for information they have already received.

I think it's frustrating because, for me, it shows a lack of understanding of what our job is. I don't see that [date keeping] as my job. Yes, obviously, I need to organize my class and it's my job to inform parents of things, but, actually, it's not my job to keep reminding parents. At the end of the day, it's their responsibility to remember. I'll write it in the e-mail and then I'll normally do another reminder, and sometimes even two. Past that, it's their responsibility.

This teacher's professional identity appears to have been challenged as a result of her previous experiences communicating with parents. This finding reflects those of Wong and Trollope-Kumar (2014), who discuss professional identity as developed partly from previous experience. Previous e-mail communication with parents therefore has an effect on a teacher's construction of his or her professional identity. In the above quote, the teacher seems to grapple with the pressure she feels from parents to go above and beyond her role as teacher to remind them of important dates. It is possible that she feels this pressure as a result of what she perceives the societal expectations are for parent-teacher communication at her place of work. Societal expectations are another factor discussed by Wong and Trollope-Kumar (2014) as having an important effect on the construction of professional identity. It can therefore be suggested that e-mail communication has a direct effect on the construction of a teacher's professional identity, as the research for this study has revealed that two of the five factors contributing to the construction of professional identity play a role in parent-teacher e-mail communication.

It is therefore possible that parents who communicate unprofessionally with teachers by taking advantage of democratized Impersonal communication may damage the potential for forming a relationship with their children's teachers. In this case, it is not so much a clash in phases of CMC that acts as a barrier to building a relationship, but communicating unprofessionally in a particular phase. Whereas Walther (1996) discusses participation equality as an advantage of impersonal communication, participation inequality occurs when parents abuse their right to contact teachers by making administrative requests.

All three problems occur as a result of a lack of predetermined rules for e-mail communication between parents and teachers. Acknowledgement of the previously described categories as contributing barriers to communication as well as the importance of FTF communication to set out guidelines for communication is necessary in order for parents and teachers to form and develop relationships with one another.

9. Discussion

Analysis of the data through SIPT indicates that the way parents and teachers develop and manage a relationship using e-mail communication is more complex than the theory predicts. Previous research on parent-teacher e-mail communication serves as a basis from which research into this relationship can develop, as the research done for this report merely scratches the surface of understanding. This study addressed how organizational and cultural aspects have shaped parent-teacher communication, and obtained results that suggest the use of technology is shaped by social factors (Williams & Edge, 1996). Applying SIPT to the empirical data has resulted in an understanding that reflects certain predictions of the theory, for example, parents and teachers indeed communicate impersonally when the goal of their communication is task-oriented. However, the theory does not necessarily take into account the ways in which the three phases of CMC might negatively affect the development and management of the parent-teacher relationship. This problem may be due to inadequate analysis from the researcher or serve as an indication that the theory needs to be developed. The following paragraphs will discuss the ways in which the three communicative phases of SIPT might be developed in order to better analyze and understand the intricacies of the parent-teacher e-mail communication relationship.

9.1.1 *The Impersonal Phase*

The data suggest that teachers and parents value impersonal communication for different reasons when communicating via e-mail. Teachers communicated impersonally with parents in order to establish boundaries with parents and enforce office hours during which they would respond to e-mail. Parents valued impersonal e-mail communication from teachers in order to glean important information quickly and easily without having to hunt through a large, wordy text. Impersonal, democratized communication was taken advantage of by parents who e-mailed teachers requesting they perform basic, administrative tasks, leaving teachers feeling that a professional boundary had been crossed. These findings reflect that of Thompson (2008), who discovered that parent-teacher e-mail exchanges were instrumental rather than relational in nature, and that relationship-building was not the goal of their communication. It can therefore be explained through SIPT and Thompson (2008) that teachers and parents are not always able to build relationships through impersonal communication.

It can be argued that parents and teachers *are* in a relationship while communicating impersonally, as the primary definition of a relationship (i.e. relational maintenance) according to Dindia (2014) is one formed through communication. It is only when people cease to communicate that the relationship is terminated (Dindia, 2014). However, it may not be possible to maintain a relationship in a specified state, a satisfactory condition, or in repair via impersonal communication. The Interpersonal and Hyperpersonal phases of CMC may be more appropriate to achieve those tasks.

Task-oriented communication is discussed as the primary advantage of impersonal communication (Walther, 1996), however the theory does not acknowledge the potentially

damaging effects impersonal CMC might have on a relationship. The Impersonal Phase of SIPT might therefore be developed to acknowledge the potentially negative impact that impersonal CMC can have on a relationship, an impact that emerged from the data as a barrier to building the parent-teacher relationship. In order for impersonal, task-oriented communication to be successful (i.e. not damage the relationship between communicating partners), both communicating parties need to be aware that the communicative relationship they are entering into is task-oriented and that communication may therefore be impersonal. Parents and teachers who have received impersonal e-mail from each other may have felt frustrated or challenged professionally because neither party has agreed on the standard of communication to expect from one another. It is therefore especially important that parents and teachers establish a mutual understanding of the type of communication they are willing to engage in with each other via e-mail. Both teachers and parents would benefit from creating a set of rules for e-mail etiquette, a suggestion previously made by Lightfoot (2006) to manage the student-teacher e-mail relationship.

9.1.2 The Interpersonal Phase

Communicating emotion via e-mail was another challenge to relationship building experienced by parents and teachers. CMC was also problematic for relationship development when misunderstanding occurred. SIPT posits that CMC is no less effective than FTF interaction at developing impressions and managing interpersonal relationships, provided that “sufficient time” has elapsed (Walther, 2008). While Walther was able to prove this statement in a controlled laboratory study, the data collected for this study as well as previous studies in the field suggest that there is a specific way to communicate in order to build relationships via CMC. For example, Waldeck et al (2001), discovered that students were more likely to communicate with teachers via e-mail if teachers employed specific message strategies that simulated immediacy behaviors, which would, in turn, inspire liking. The amount of time deemed “sufficient” for a relationship to develop between partners via CMC is still unclear.

Conveying emotion and managing misunderstanding via e-mail communication was problematic for parents and teachers, who both stated their preference for FTF communication in order to express themselves clearly. E-mail communication therefore makes relational maintenance difficult, as the findings suggest that misunderstandings might not contribute to keeping a relationship in a satisfactory condition. The relationship may therefore be maintained in a dissatisfactory condition, which reflects the discussion in Dindia (2014), who posits that not all maintained relationships are satisfactory. While SIPT suggests the interchangeability of language and writing with nonverbal cues (Walther, 2008), the empirical data contradict this feature of SIPT, as parents and teachers both discussed their frustration with e-mail when communicating emotion or clarifying a misunderstanding. In order to expand the application of SIPT, it is important that the theory recognizes that partners communicating interpersonally via CMC may not always be able to express themselves emotionally in a clear way, which may lead to misunderstanding. Partners who are unable to solve a misunderstanding via CMC might damage the relationship they are trying to build with each other. It is important to acknowledge that FTF interaction plays an essential role in CMC for partners to maintain an interpersonal

relationship, especially when emotions are being expressed. Similar to the suggestions for teachers and students in Waldeck et al (2001), parents and teachers should be advised not to rely too heavily on e-mail communication, as FTF interaction is a necessary part of relationship-building.

9.1.3 The Hyperpersonal Phase

The Hyperpersonal Phase of CMC suggests that communicating partners will surpass the level of affection and emotion of parallel FTF interaction. The absence of physical presence in CMC allows a user to control and edit impressions they make by manipulating verbal messages to suit the image they want to convey (Walther, 1996). While this effect is discussed as causing communicative partners to create inflated or superior impressions of each other, SIPT does not acknowledge the potential for partners to develop inferior impressions. This finding emphasizes the fact that e-mail communication might not be the best mode to keep a relationship in repair, as discussed by Dindia (2014). The data collected for this study suggest that parents and teachers may develop inferior impressions of each other when communicating via e-mail, which may damage the relationship they are trying to build. Developing a strategy to assess parents' and teachers' level of comfort with technology may also be a contributing factor to the success of the creation of a hyperpersonal impression, a finding that was also discovered in Lightfoot (2006). Developing SIPT to include the potential negative impact that communicating in the Hyperpersonal Phase can cause will enable researchers to deepen the understanding of how relationships are built and managed via CMC.

10. Conclusions

The findings suggest that e-mail communication has a complicating role in the formation and development of the parent-teacher relationship. Parents and teachers provided their insights regarding the RQ: "How does e-mail communication affect the development of the parent-teacher relationship?", and described their struggles in communicating with each other via e-mail. It became evident after categorizing their responses that parents and teachers experienced similar challenges along five different themes: 1) Expectations for Availability for Communication; 2) Emotion, 3) Language Barrier and Misunderstanding, 4) Content Management, and 5) Managing the Professional Boundary. After analyzing these categories using SIPT, three barriers to relationship-building in parent-teacher e-mail communication emerged that helped explain how and why parents and teachers experienced these challenges: Clashes in communication from the Impersonal and Interpersonal phases; Unsuccessful creation of a Hyperpersonal Impression; and Unprofessional Impersonal Communication.

It appears that parents and teachers who communicate via e-mail have trouble forming and developing relationships due to the fact that parent-teacher e-mail etiquette has not been established. Without a predetermined standard for communication, parents and teachers struggle to understand and meet each other's expectations. This conclusion is similar to that of Thompson, (2009), who called for parents and teachers to "establish the parameters of e-mail

communication up front”. For example, if teachers and parents entered into a contract together at the beginning of every school year, agreeing to terms on frequency of communication, acceptable topics to discuss via e-mail, and topics better suited for FTF communication, both parties might be more satisfied with the type of e-mail communication they engage in in the following months. If parents and teachers are more satisfied with their e-mail communication, they might be more likely to form and develop relationships. Furthermore, if parents and teachers acknowledge that e-mail communication has the potential to damage relationships, it may motivate more frequent FTF interaction.

The goal of this study was to emphasize to the reader that e-mail communication has multiple, lasting effects on the existing and forming relationships we have with one another, as well as on the construction of our professional identity. This research can be applied not only to teachers, but to professionals in fields other than education. Awareness about the effects of e-mail on our communication habits will improve our ability to talk to one another professionally and personally, and will open up the doors to new areas of research that have yet to be discovered. Communication technology’s lightning-speed development must be followed by research in order to gain a deeper understanding of the values and expectations our society has related to relationships and communication. We must do our best to keep up with the development of these technologies and discover their implications about the way our identity (professional and personal) might be constructed through their use.

Future research should explore how the use of smartphones has influenced parent-teacher e-mail communication. Thompson et al (2015) discovered that smartphones influenced parents’ choice to communicate with teachers via e-mail. It would be interesting to investigate the effects smartphone use has on the parent-teacher e-mail relationship. Another direction to consider for research is the use of social media for parent-teacher communication. A comparative study of parent-teacher communication via e-mail and a popular social medium like Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram might provide a new perspective about the nature of the parent-teacher relationship.

11. Limitations

Time and resources limit this study; more of both time and resources would allow for a much larger sample of parents and teachers and likely a more substantiated answer to the RQ. Since the interviews have been conducted at one school only, the results will not reflect the opinions of all parents and teachers. The students and teachers from the selected school have an international background, which may affect the results of the study, as people from different cultural backgrounds may have different expectations for communication. Different expectations for communication may have resulted in varied responses from parents and teachers about their experiences with parent-teacher e-mail. Additionally, the researcher is currently employed at the school where the sample was taken, which may have affected how teachers and parents responded to the interview questions.

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13. Appendices

13.1 Release Form



GÖTEBORGS UNIVERSITET

Perceptions of E-mail Communication between Parents and Teachers at School

The goal of the research is to understand how teachers and parents perceive e-mail communication at school as part of the degree project for the Master in Communication program at Göteborgs Universitet.

By interviewing parents and teachers who are part of a school community, the researcher will be able to analyze data gleaned from interviews and provide a description these perceptions, and hopefully be able to provide insights for other schools as to the best way to communicate. In order to move forward in the research process, we need your help!

The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. If any data recorded during the interview is used in the final report, the interviewee's identity will be protected. Personal information including name, cultural background, family members, and any other related information will be made anonymous if it is included in the final report. **The interview in its entirety is confidential.**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding the conditions of this interview, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher before, during, or after the interview.

I have read and understand this letter:

Interviewee Signature

13.2 Interview Guide

Interview Outline Teachers/Admin

I want to understand your world, walk me through, help me, I want to learn more

Could you describe to me a typical day of using e-mail to communicate with parents?

How often do you use e-mail?

How much time do you spend using e-mail? Per day? Per week?

Do teachers have any pattern of e-mail communication that they share, for example, a weekly e-mail that gets sent out to parents?

Is there a structure that you follow for the newsletter? Announcement? Dialogue?

Do you think parents understand the information they receive from teachers?

What strategies do you think teachers could use to improve understanding?

How does it get sent out?

Do you have a compiled list of parent e-mails that you use?

What are the advantages of current communication structure?

What are the disadvantages of current communication structure?

Are parents able to see the e-mail addresses of other parents when they receive the newsletter?

Do you ask parents to respond to the e-mail to confirm they have read it?

Do parents respond to the e-mails you send?

Of the e-mails that you send out to specific parents, what percentage of parents respond to the e-mails you send them?

Why do you think parents do not respond to e-mails they receive from their children's teachers?

What are the main topics of e-mails that you send to parents?

Can you recall a specific experience where the e-mail communication with a parent has worked well? Not worked well?

Would you prefer to use another way of contacting parents?

What would your recommendation be to teachers at another school who wish to improve their e-mail communication with parents?

Interview Outline Parents

I want to understand your world, walk me through, help me, I want to learn more

Describe how you typically communicate with your child's teacher.

How often do you receive e-mails from her teacher?

What kind of e-mails do you get? What are the topics of the e-mails you receive? For example are the about your child, do they serve an administrative function...

How often do you send e-mails to her teacher?

Do you receive a response when you send an e-mail?

Do you read all the e-mails sent to you by her teacher?

What do you think the advantages are of the current way you communicate?

What do you think are the disadvantages of the current way you communicate?

Do you receive e-mails from people at school other than her teacher? Who? Do you read those?

Do you feel you receive all the information you need about your child and her well being at school?

Do you think it is useful to receive information via e-mail?

Do you understand the information teachers send out via e-mail?

What strategies could teachers and parents use to improve understanding?

Would you like to receive more information?

If you could choose, which method would you prefer to communicate with your daughter's teacher?

If you could give a recommendation to teachers and parents at another school, how would you suggest they communicate?

13.3 Summary of Results

Greetings parents and teachers!

Below is a table briefly describing the results from my interviews with parents and teachers. The categories were created based on themes that emerged when compiling the data. Please take a moment to read over the categories and their descriptions. I would really like to hear if you agree, disagree, or would like to comment on the way the information has been organized.

Please do not hesitate to e-mail me at t.sokolowski@theenglishschool.se or call/text me at 072 5272 033. I look forward to hearing from you!

Thank you again for your participation! I really appreciate it.

Category	Description
<i>Expectations: Availability for Communication</i>	This category discusses teachers' expectations for how much e-mail contact they are willing to engage in, while managing appropriate office hours. This category also discusses parents' acknowledgement of not flooding teachers' inboxes, and their wish for more contact with subject teachers.
<i>Communicating Emotion</i>	This category discusses the difficulty teachers and parents experience in communicating emotion via e-mail, as well as their experiences misinterpreting the type of emotion conveyed in an e-mail they receive. Teachers and parents prefer face-to-face communication when discussing sensitive subjects.
<i>Language Barrier & Misunderstanding</i>	This category discusses teachers' and parents' struggle to write e-mails using language that will be understood by English as a second or third language speakers.
<i>Content Management</i>	This category discusses teachers' struggle to create e-mail content that attracts the eyes of parents. Parents discuss their dissatisfaction with the way teachers compose e-mail and how time constraints affect their ability to read e-mail in detail.
<i>Maintaining the Professional Boundary</i>	This category discusses how the use of e-mail communication challenges teachers' professionalism. Parents discuss moments when they challenged a teacher's professionalism via e-mail.