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Messaging Apps in Teacher-Parent Digital Communication

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Abstract

The authors analyze current teacher-parent digital communication practices via school group chats and define the communicative competence of stakeholders in education in connection with the use of instant messaging applications.

The latest research in pedagogy, digital and media literacy is discussed in terms of its didactic potential regarding instant messaging apps as a 'new normal' in the learning environment.

Content analysis of 32 media texts, including articles and posts, and over 800 comments published on teacher forums, professional journals and special interest magazines reveals that the roles of teachers and parents as communicators as well as their strategies for interaction are rather controversial. There is a distinct contradiction between school administrations' expectations about developing a more open and collaborative communicative environment via messaging apps and reality. Teachers complain of increased working loads and poor ethics on the part of parents; the latter disapprove of the content and amount of the received messages. As a result, teachers tend to stick to the strategy of abandoning two-way communication in favor of one-way, thus limiting the role of parents.

New styles and strategies for communication between teachers and parents using instant messaging services should be modeled.

Keywords: messaging apps, digital literacy, online group school chats, digital communication, learning environment.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, messaging applications have become an important everyday tool in the lives of participants of the secondary school educational process since they offer a wide variety of functions as a media resource.

According to the results of a 2021 survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (known in Russia as VCIOM), a vast majority of surveyed schoolchildren over 14 years of age, school teachers and parents use mobile messaging applications (96 %, 96 % and 95 %, respectively). For teachers, they have become indispensable work assistants; for schoolchildren and parents, they are important channels of day-to-day out-of-school communication. The most popular instant messaging services in Russia are *WhatsApp*, *Telegram*, *Vkontakte* and/or *VK Messenger*, *Viber* ([Messendzhery..., 2022](#)).

In 2023, The Institute of Education of the Higher School of Economics (HSE) with the support of the education service *Sferum* conducted a study on the use of messaging apps by school teachers: 45 % of respondents noted that such services allow them to motivate students, and most of their communication – 6 out of 7 hours a week – is remote ([Pochti..., 2023](#)). 56 % use instant

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messaging applications to keep parents informed about all aspects of school life, not only grades; 35 % of teachers noted that the use of technology gave them a “feeling of being heard by parents” (Tsifrovyye..., 2023). These data confirm a steady trend towards the introduction of new information and communication tools into the practice of Russian education and identify the problem field – digital family-school interaction.

The use of instant messaging in schools, despite being widespread, remains questionable. There is no consolidated opinion on the issue. Discussions in mass media and social media revolve mainly around teacher-parent and teacher-student chats and draw attention to this form of social interaction with the school as the one shaping the image of the school and the teacher.

Another aspect of the issue of including messaging apps in the educational process concerns teachers’ competencies. Analysts note that despite the overall high digital literacy in school teachers, ICT competencies require continuous improvement, including communicative literacy, which, in our opinion, is directly related to the use of messaging apps and online group chats in teachers’ daily routine (Aimaletdinov et al., 2019: 57).

Thus, messaging apps are considered as digital teaching tools and as a communication platform for the main stakeholders in education. Nevertheless, online school chats are often perceived as private everyday communication. Existing research does not take into account specifics of communication partners and the routine of their social interaction. Neither teachers nor parents have a clear strategy for their presence in instant messaging apps and school chats. The Ministry of Education regulates official resources of educational institutions, but online group chats in popular instant messaging apps remain in the “gray” zone of school life. Russian legislation does not provide any special norms regulating interaction in social media. The launch of the educational application *Sferum* in 2023 did not solve this problem. Instead, it brought about more dissatisfaction among some teachers and parents and criticism in the media.

2. Materials and methods

The issue of school (teacher-parent, teacher-student) chats and the use of instant messaging apps has been discussed in various media environments: in socio-political media, in professional pedagogical media, and in social media among parents, students and teachers. We assume that, on the one hand, this is how public demand is formulated for the school as a social institution responsible for holding strict moral and ethical norms and values as well as ensuring a safe environment, including safe access to digital resources. On the other hand, teachers should meet requirements about their communicative and digital competencies to prove their capability of maintaining and developing these qualities within the learning environment. Strategies for the interaction of all participants of the educational process, primarily teachers and parents, become another important research question in the context of the massive use of messaging apps. In this paper, we examine these issues in the context of media and communication literacy.

Our approach to the development of school teachers’ media competence is based on the research done by the scientific school headed by A.V. Fedorov (Fedorov, 2007; Fedorov, Chelysheva, 2007). We also rely on the concept of digital literacy and ICT competencies proposed by the Office of Financial Research (OFR) Analytical Center based on international and Russian experience (Aimaletdinov et al., 2019), and a large-scale study “Competencies of Russian teachers: digital literacy, soft skills and the ability to develop functional literacy” (Kompetentsii..., 2020: 10).

Results of the empirical study were obtained by analyzing texts describing the use of online school chats in school-related communication. The 2020-2024 publications of media and news agencies, including sources specializing in education and upbringing, provided material for textual analysis. 22 articles and 10 posts were selected from open sources, including comments on them (in cases where there was a commenting function provided). We analyzed 800 comments including discussions in open thematic groups on the social networking website *VKontakte*. Authors of these posts and comments talk about their own communicative experience, which allows us to regard this material as empirical. Moreover, teachers writing these comments do this with an intention to consolidate their experience in the public field and find solutions to the problems associated with the use of messaging services.

When analyzing social media posts and discussions, we use techniques designed for media discourse analysis and qualitative content analysis. We consider common teacher-parent communication issues and mutual expectations of teachers and parents as a wider context for online school chat discussions and the basis for their involvement in comments.

3. Discussion

Media communication scholars note a change in the nature of social interaction between participants of communication due to a massive spread of messaging applications. P. Kolozaridi and A. Ilyin write about the changing practices of the use of technology which is connected with its increasing mobility. They single out the following properties of new technologies: synchronous mode of communication, intimacy, total disappearance of boundaries between the online and offline spheres, and unpretentiousness. “Immediate archiving is being replaced by presence here and now, synchronous communication, constant presence on air without cutting or censoring” (Kolozaridi, Ilyin, 2015: 133).

Instant messaging platforms make a global contribution to communication processes (Kosorukova, 2018). Researcher of digital topoi E. Kozhemyakin highlights technological characteristics of digital platforms: “the ability to store information, the multimodal nature of messages, immediacy and simultaneity, accessibility and controllability” (Kozhemyakin, 2021: 787). Physical presence guarantees neither full inclusion in communication processes nor participation in problem solving, a significant part of which is resolved in the digital space.

T.V. Grebelnik and M.L. Lapteva note a wide variety of chat features in messaging applications, which ensures establishment of effective interpersonal relationships and social interactions. Owing to the informative, contacting (phatic), commissive, directive, declarative, emotive (expressive), as well as coordinative, manipulative and other functions (Grebelnik, Lapteva, 2021), messaging apps contribute to the development of communication practices and achievement of goals in various industries, including education.

Researchers around the world emphasize increasing use of digital applications to document schoolchildren’s experiences and support parent communication (Huang et al., 2023; Kuusimäki et al., 2019; Nathans, Brown, 2021; O’Byrne et al., 2022; Stratigos, Fenech, 2021).

Kyrgyz researchers assessing the Community Engagement for Better Schools project in Kyrgyzstan in 2017–2022 argue that WhatsApp groups organized by class teachers help to improve teachers’ engagement with parents/caregivers. However, “parents/caregivers noted that WhatsApp groups require better moderation since it may cause some arguments among parents/caregivers, making them leave groups and demotivate in the interaction with school and other parents” (Jailobaeva et al., 2023: 18).

However, parents are against shifting all communication online. A recent research on self-evaluation in Turkish schools notes that generally parents are satisfied with the organization of communication between teachers and parents through telephone calls and in-person meetings and only agree to posting of important announcements about the educational process “through the internet via the school website and e-mails” (Kurum, Cinkir, 2022).

A.I. Shutenko believes that in connection with educational informatization a new didactic concept of “educational communications” has emerged. It is understood as “a set of methods, channels, techniques, modes and formats for transmitting necessary educational and sociocultural information directly related to the teaching content” (Shutenko, 2021: 81). According to the researcher, development of such communication promotes interpersonal relations between the participants in the educational process. This concept is developed by A.B. Poplaukhin (Poplaukhin, 2018), L.V. Sardak and A.V. Borshchenkova (Sardak, Borschenkova, 2018), and O.N. Manapova (Manapova, Podin, 2021). The authors note that owing to messaging applications, “school communication involves all three parties – teachers, students and parents,” develops new styles and strategies such as joint creation of digital content and promotes a practice of pedagogical cooperation.

A Finnish study examined what content parents and teachers want to see in online communication. Parents wish to receive more messages about academic performance, behavioral and more sensitive issues such as health problems and conflict situations involving the child. Parents dislike getting messages only about children’s weaknesses; sometimes they would also like to see praise. On the other hand, some messages sound too positive and parents disbelieve them preferring to receive more realistic messages about their children. Teachers would be interested in archiving evaluation of pupils’ works and their attendance at lessons (Kuusimäki et al., 2019).

In spite of the fact that messaging applications are treated as a resource for ensuring better-quality interaction between teachers, parents and students, there are problems of their implementation and integration into the educational process (such as lack of netiquette between students, confidential information exchange, low level of messaging proficiency in teachers, etc.) (Manapova, Podin, 2021; Vartanov et al., 2021). Finnish teachers note the negative aspects of

digitalization in education associated with the increased workload on the teacher (checking and grading students' papers and filling out online reports) (Lutovac et al., 2024). The controversial aspect of using online communication channels is reported by US scholars: a certain discrepancy between parents' and teachers' opinion on communication was found in a project called "Partners in School: Optimizing Communication between Parents and Teachers of Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder. After the experiment, "Teachers reported an increase in their communication to parents. However, parents did not report an increase in their communication to teachers" (Azad et al., 2021). Thus, different perception of communication flows by teachers and parents makes establishing positive relationship even more difficult.

Over the past few years, HSE researchers have made a major contribution to the study of social networks, instant messaging and other applications used in school education. T.A. Chirkina and P.V. Osokina (Chirkina, Osokina, 2023) describe the potential of digital technologies for communicating with students' parents as positive since they make this communication more effective and help build trusting relationships.

The authors of a large-scale study "Competencies of Russian teachers: digital literacy, soft skills and the ability to develop functional literacy" focus on the efficiency and safety of using digital technologies and Internet resources, and emphasize the importance of coordinating digital communication skills in students, parents and teachers in the process of implementing a digital literacy program (Kompetentsii..., 2020: 10).

In the studies of digital skills of parents as stakeholders in education and upbringing, digital competence is assessed in four areas: working with content, communication, technosphere, and consumption (Soldatova, Rasskazova, 2020; Shugal et al., 2023). The issue of digital and media competence of parents is considered in the aspect of ICT mediation, participation in the digital socialization of children, and strategies for managing online risks. In their final study of the digital competence of children and parents, the authors record its boosting and note problems requiring further attention, in particular, lack of motivation to learn new digital skills (Soldatova, Rasskazova, 2020).

Studies have also revealed a stable correlation between the level of parental competence and their attention to children's communication (Pisarenko, Zaichenko, 2021); parents prioritize such skills as "ensuring the necessary level of security in the digital environment, the ability not to violate the boundaries of other users and a culture of mutual respect in the digital environment" (Brodovskaya et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, communication via messaging apps indicates lack of the necessary netiquette. Finnish school teachers admit difficulties in communication with parents: increased number of negative messages, aggressive and dissatisfied tone of messages from parents, not following any rules regarding the time of sending messages. Finnish schoolteachers also complain that "parents' trust in teachers and respect for teachers' work has decreased" (Lutovac et al., 2024).

In Taiwan, a smartphone application, Line, was designed to facilitate "one-to-one dialogue as well as group discussions or group chats... The communication on Line is based on written text, including emoticon-like stickers, voice messages, notes, photo and video sharing" (Lin, 2019). Despite the obviously positive intention of the designed tool, the author of the research points out that "Line chats have also become a channel to circulate misinformation and create misunderstandings. Even though teachers and parents accept some norms and rules in using Line chats, disagreements and quarrels sometimes occur" (Lin, 2019).

Canadian researchers highlight that "regarding engaging content, parents were strong advocates of keeping content volume brief" and disapproved of excessive information (O'Byrne et al., 2022).

Thus, the researchers' view on the changes in the digital educational environment (Gálik, Oprala, 2021; Gáliková Tolnaiová, 2021; Gáliková Tolnaiová, Gálik, 2020; Kačínová, 2019; Vrabc, Odziomková, 2021) and the increasing role of instant messaging services and online school chats in the learning process has prompted our study of the nature of communication strategies and competencies used by the main stakeholders in education for the purpose of digital interaction.

4. Results

We analyzed texts related to the work of educational workers with messaging applications which were published in socio-political and special interest media, as well as messages and social media comments on them.

We take into account the fact that articles in the media create a media image of a particular social phenomenon. In our study, their analysis is significant for the understanding of how the topic of school chats is represented in the public field, how the role of the teacher and their competencies are assessed. Special interest media and discussions on teacher forums are engaged in forming competencies and communication strategies of participants in the educational process.

When analyzing the research material, we considered the following semantic components: newsworthy events or incidents spurring discussion; the role of the teacher, his/her image, characteristics of qualities and competencies; the role of other participants (parents, students, and school administration), characteristics of qualities and competencies; the nature and purpose (functions) of chats in the messaging application; and attitudes towards school chats.

The search for materials in open sources (22 articles in media and comments following them) and their preliminary review showed that online chats between teachers and students rarely become the subject matter of public discussion; they are typically mentioned in the form of recommendations and instructions. Advice is given on how to achieve trusting relationships, create an atmosphere of mutual respect (Kak..., 2023). Technical advice is also given on formatting texts in chats or establishing a “quiet mode” (Kak..., 2023).

Mel magazine addresses teachers with an intention to share knowledge about benefits of online chats and publications of methodological techniques, which can be regarded as an attempt to develop positive attitude towards using instant messaging applications in teaching and educational setting in general (Kuznetsova, 2021). School teachers often write on social networks that they are in control of the situation and do not experience any great difficulties in organizing online communication: “We created a separate chat for me and my students. I’m a homeroom teacher for a 10th-grade class. Everything is civil: we love each other, respect each other, and don’t bother each other too much”, “There was a chat with children from grades 8-11, where I published urgent news relevant to them; they wrote to me if they had any questions, shared photos, etc.” Thus, online communication in the educational setting between teachers and students via messaging applications is viewed positively; emphasis is placed on the creative use of digital technologies for the purpose of solving educational and school-related problems.

Judging by mass media and teacher forums, *online chats with parents* resonate the most. In 2020 in Volgograd, a conflict in a parent chat resulted in murder. After this tragedy, the agenda-setting dynamics shifted towards the topic of communication in parents’ chats: all types of media reported details, analyzed reasons, and discussed the rules of conduct appropriate for such online chats. The *Komsomolskaya Pravda* newspaper devoted several publications to this topic.

In one of the first reports after the murder of a schoolgirl’s father, the journalist restores messages in the online chat and makes comments about the role of the teacher: “the homeroom teacher ..., who could have stopped the mess, unfortunately came down with Covid,” then the reporter points out that the teacher had left the chat because she was in hospital on a drip (Skoibeda, 2020).

The journalist’s position regarding the role of the teacher is clear: she could have acted as a regulator in the conflict and stopped the tragedy. An extremely negative image of the parents emerges: they are aggressive and violate communication norms. Another article from *The Komsomolskaya Pravda* examines types of parents and gives advice, including calling a teacher for help, taking communication offline at the same time involving the school administration (Novikova, 2021). In *The Rossiyskaya Gazeta* article, the journalist also addresses the topic of conflicts in parents’ online chats and emphasizes the vital role of the teacher in communication (Ivoilova, 2021). Teachers’ duties include drawing up rules for effective communication and conveying them to all the interested parties as well as administering online chats.

The RBC news agency made its contribution to the development of the topic. The article called “‘Sign us up’ Annoying messages in parents’ chats” creates a negative image of parents: they have neither communication nor media literacy skills since they experience difficulties registering on new platforms, then post personal information, spam chats with uninformative messages, emoticons, gifs, pictures, advertising, and send fake messages (Akimova, 2022).

This image of parents is quite typical; their correspondence in online chat rooms is often nicknamed ‘chicken coop’. However, chats with teachers are regarded as one of the main and fast sources of school-related information. To leave them means to lose contact with the teacher and miss important information. In a number of publications containing opinions of teachers, virtual

chats are assessed ambiguously. On the one hand, they take up personal time, on the other hand, they allow to quickly solve important problems and transmit information.

The specialized online media about education and upbringing *Mel* (about 300,000 subscribers) regularly addresses the topic of school chats. The publication is open to comments which gives both parents and teachers an opportunity to speak out. The main intention of the posts is an attempt to analyze and prevent problems that parents and teachers experience when using online chat rooms.

The image of the teacher is worth researching. Most often it is a married woman handling household tasks and working full-time. The teacher is an ordinary person. They are given advice on the technical skills of online chat management – how to set up messages, upload and save information, administer and moderate communication flows. They use tips on regulating communication in chats – when and how to respond, what to do in conflict situations. In this case, the role of the teacher is that of an ‘arbiter’.

In case of conflicts, it is recommended to take participants offline and use traditional forms of “negotiating at the table” – parent-teacher conferences, meetings, etc. Parents often leave negative feedback in their comments, belittling the role of the teacher and ruining their image: “The teacher, without due diligence, dumps all the students’ problems into the chat, followed by his/her indignation, value judgments with or without any explanation regarding your or your child’s personality” (Lugovskaya, 2020). Chats are often regarded as parental privacy invasion. There is an opinion that it is impossible to stay in touch all the time.

According to parents, restrictions should be introduced regarding the number of teachers’ messages, time of their publication, and content (no personal information, no criticism of schoolchildren or publication of grades in the open chat channel). In discussions, parents argue about teachers’ professionalism if they fail to comply with ethical standards and cannot adequately administer and technically manage group chats.

According to parents and teachers, the solution to many problems of school chats can be one-way communication: “Chats with students’ parents are primarily a channel of information, not communication” (Kak..., 2020).

The teacher and, possibly, several parent representatives – members of the parents’ committee – should have the right to write in the chat. This opinion is supported by the media for teachers. In the magazine *Vesti v obrazovanii* (*News in Education*), a Yandex instruction (“I am a teacher” resource) says that group chats with parents are regarded as channels of information. The teacher’s task is to organize a chat bulletin board and exclude any personal communication in the chat. To do this, the teacher needs technical skills to work with instant messaging applications and manage communication flows with parents, primarily offline but also in the digital environment.

Popular teacher forums on the social network *Vkontakte* “Overheard by Teachers” (228,000 subscribers) and “Teachers’ Night Thoughts” (29,000 subscribers) regularly publish posts about school chats. For analysis, we took 10 posts and comments on them, the number of views of these posts ranged from 10 to 100 thousand. Each post collected from 50 to 270 comments; 800 comments were analyzed.

We identified two main points for discussion. Firstly, teachers turn to the user community in conflict situations with parents that arise either during chat communication or while working out the rules for such communication: rudeness, after-hours messages, questions and requests throughout the day for any reason, flooding. Secondly, teachers turn to colleagues for advice on how to conduct school group chats and whether they are worth creating. In such posts, they seek advice, indicate that they cannot find answers in recommendations from their colleagues, and lack experience in choosing effective strategies for teacher-parent interaction.

The issue of “leaks” is discussed separately. Teachers find themselves in a situation of ethical dilemma: students and parents inform teachers what and how was discussed in their parent-children-only chats. Usually this is criticism of teachers, ridicule, dissemination of personal information about the teacher (photos, residential address, information about family, etc.). On social media, teachers share their stories and give advice whether to take any measures about this or not, whether to discuss such situations with schoolchildren and their parents.

The topic about the nature and purpose of group chats invariably arises in the comments. Several strategies are evident. The radical position implies refusal to start any group chats in mass messaging applications. Teachers emphasize that this is part of the personal, not professional digital space: “Did the school give you a phone? Does it pay for it? This is your personal gadget, not

for work.” They provide references to regulatory documents: “By the way, employment contracts and the school charter do not say HOW teachers should contact parents. That is, you don’t have to create chats or answer calls at all. I pasted the information into the diary and that’s it.” Other arguments mention poor digital communication culture in parents and teachers, ineffectiveness of group chats, and destructive psychosocial environment.

The most common strategy is to create a group chat for parents in the form of an “information board”, with limited options to reply. “It’s better to disable the option to write to all participants in the chat. Just do that. Put all the information in there, and let them ask questions directly in a personal message to you.” Such is typical advice from forum participants. Communication with parents is moved from the group chat to personal messages; there are recommendations to use telephone calls, face-to-face meetings, and communication in official resources – internal email and messaging systems, *Sferum* platform, and electronic diaries. It is also acceptable to delegate the function to inform to one of the parents. Thus, public contact with parents, where feedback is possible, is minimized.

Participants in the discussion also note poor media culture in parents and their disregard for communication norms: “from my experience, discussing the rules does not work. Everyone believes that they are an exception from the rule, so I do not let parents comment.” Moreover, the situation may be the opposite – parents do not respond to messages or do not give any feedback when expected.

Parents’ opinions in their comments to teachers’ posts are controversial. They ask for the right to communicate and give feedback: “And we, parents, are against such information boards, bulletin boards... if you have created a group, then be kind enough to communicate with the parents there.” Parents also demonstrate protest reactions: they write about the need to abandon group chats and use only traditional offline forms of communication. Delegation of rights to the parents’ committee is generally disapproved and regarded as a violation of the principle of equality in pedagogical interaction.

Creation of group chats with an equal opportunity for everyone to engage in communication has been criticized. Almost unanimously, teachers urge not to participate in group chats with parents: “Should they need another chat – let them create their own,” “A chat for chatting? Ugh! It doesn’t make any sense to me. Let the parents hang out in there,” “I would delete such group chat in principle. What is it for? You have a chat administered by one person. All notifications go there. Questions in PM. And then everything will be fine. If they need another chat, let them create their own.” Parents write about their fatigue from the number of group chats and the need to search through endless messages for the necessary information.

5. Conclusion

In mass media and social media, parents’ chats are presented as a “risk zone” with a high potential for conflicts, semantic noise, and excessive communication. Teachers are considered mainly responsible for the outcomes and quality of communication in group chats, even if they do not participate in the chats. The teacher must regulate and control digital communication, as well as act as a judge and, if necessary, a lawyer to resolve conflicts. At the same time, the image of a teacher is created as of an ordinary person with their own problems and concerns. On the one hand, society has high expectations of teachers. On the other hand, people admit a need to develop strategies for using messaging applications based on the Russian school reality.

Our analysis of teacher forums showed that strategies for teacher-parent communication in the digital environment are being developed by trial and error. Partially, they are found in recommendations in various professional publications. The strategy of abandoning two-way communication in favor of one-way communication is assessed as successful. It is recommended to use group chats in messaging applications for informational purposes only. Teachers’ skills such as organizing private communication online and offline, in more traditional forms – calls, personal messages, and meetings – are becoming important. The digital environment in this case is perceived as auxiliary and monofunctional.

The agency of parents as participants in digital communication is limited. The solution to the problem is also seen in regulation – transition to officially approved digital resources directly involved in the educational process – electronic diaries and special platforms. In this case, group chats move out of the gray zone of personal/private interaction. It is worth noting that the strategy of one-way communication in messaging applications does not correlate with the expectation of a more open and collaborative three-way communication between parents, teachers and children,

as formulated in multiple researches (Manapova, Podin, 2021; Poplaukhin, 2018; Sardak, Borschenkova, 2018).

Teacher-student group chats and communities in instant messaging applications do not provoke public discussions. In our opinion, this is due to the fact that the traditional pedagogical model of the relationship between teachers and students is transferred to the digital space: educational digital platforms, online group chats, etc. Certain experience has been accumulated in solving problem situations during distance learning. Responsibility to develop and improve ICT competencies in students is assigned to the Federal State Educational Standards School. This promotes a constructive approach to various digital resources.

The teacher-parent interaction in online group chats is reflected in the context of professional and personal competencies. Teachers resolve conflict situations based on the knowledge of their rights, the school charter and labor legislation. They should be able to keep and maintain dignity and personal boundaries. Organization of digital public communication with parents is quite challenging. It is assessed as necessary and useful for the educational process, but “unofficial”, unregulated, and hard work. The main focus of the discussion shifts from technical skills in working with instant messaging services to the value and motivational attitudes of the teacher. In the future, it is necessary to model new styles and strategies for such communication, as well as improve digital, media and communication literacy of both teachers and parents.

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