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Building strong parent–teacher relationships in primary education: the challenge of two-way communication

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates which subjects teachers talk about with parents in parent–teacher conferences and other contact moments, and how they communicate with regard to these subjects. Fifty-five in-depth interviews were carried out with teachers from special education schools, at-risk schools serving low socio-economic status children and mainstream primary education schools in the southern part of the Netherlands. The results illustrate that (1) two-way communication is used the most in at-risk schools, (2) teachers find it difficult to involve parents in the decision-making process concerning special care for the child, and (3) the teachers' attitude towards parents is best when it comes to difficult discussion topics. When situations are really difficult, teachers stand alongside the parents instead of addressing them from their expert role, asking them 'How can we solve this together?'. Teachers should be more aware of this quality, and not be afraid to address difficult subjects or conflicts.

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Introduction

Parental involvement in a child's school career is extremely important for children's development, especially in primary school (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Lee & Bowen, 2006). This holds specifically for children of lower socio-economic status (SES) and children with academic problems and/or social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). These children benefit even more from a stable school–home environment that is interconnected with a good parent–teacher relationship (Fantuzzo, MacWayne, & Perry, 2004). Teacher reports showing strong parent–teacher relationships are associated with higher levels of children's adaptive functioning and lower levels of externalising behaviour (Kim, Sheridan, Kwon, & Koziol, 2013). Children regarded as disruptive by teachers may particularly benefit from high-quality parent–teacher relationships (Thijs & Eilbracht, 2012).

However, research findings on inclusive education practices suggest that it is a greater challenge for parents of children with special educational needs to establish a working relationship with the school, than for parents who do not have children with

special needs (Elkins, Kraayenoord, & Jobling, 2003; Peetsma, Vergeer, Roeleveld, & Karsten, 2001). High-quality parent–teacher relationships in the case of pupils with special needs are an exception. The study of Gwernan-Jones et al. (2015) points towards the common attitude of teachers, which is making requests or giving advice as professionals, rather than having a discussion with parents. Parents are more likely being told what to do rather than having a two-way conversation with the teacher of their child.

Theoretical framework

Effective communication between teachers and families provides the two parties with a deeper understanding of mutual expectations and children's needs. This enables both parties to effectively assist children and to establish a basis of cooperation (Conderman, Johnston-Rodriguez, Hartman, & Kemp, 2010; Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Building a trustful relationship between parents and teachers is conditional for cooperation. A genuine interest in the child, approachability of the teacher and openness of the school are known to be conducive to building connectedness and trust between parents and teachers (Lasky & Dunnick Karge, 2011; Wellner, 2012). Informal conversations and unscheduled visits are important parent involvement practices in this matter (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak, & Shogren, 2011), providing additional opportunities in which teachers and parents gain insight into one another's perspectives (Denessen, Bakker, & Gierveld, 2007).

However, when it comes to formal ways for achieving oral school–family communication like parent–teacher conferences, teachers and parents tend to keep to their respective roles of teachers as advice givers and parents as advice seekers. As a consequence, only the teachers' expertise is acknowledged, whereas the parents' expertise is largely unrecognised (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011). Parent–teacher conferences are too often 'dominated by issues of academic progress and/or behaviour rather than allowing for a genuine dialogue as to how school and family might work together to support pupils', as Mutton, Burn & Thompson (2018, p. 12) put it. Even though many schools attempt to facilitate two-directional communication, it is more likely that communication and its content is controlled by the school (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Epstein & Sanders, 2006).

A parent–teacher relationship is seen as a one-way process if teachers inform or instruct parents (Tett, 2004), and the parents' role is that of the passive receptors of expert advice (Cheatham & Ostrosky, 2011; Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). Parents, however, are much more likely to participate if frequent, clear, two-way communication is present (Bakker, Denessen, Dennissen & Oolbekkink-Marchand, 2013; Tett, 2004). When teachers are responsive towards home language and respectful towards parents' role conceptions, parents feel more strongly connected to school (Denessen et al., 2007).

Academic achievement is rooted in a school-supportive home climate (Cabus & Ariës, 2016). When parents and teachers search for agreement on respective tasks and responsibilities, and strive for shared expectations regarding home learning activities, they can support their children in an effective way (Iruka, Winn, Kingsley, & Orthodoxou, 2011), which leads to better learning outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). When teachers share appropriate information concerning school tasks and children's development regularly and comprehensibly, this leads to an increasing sense of efficacy for parents who feel insecure,

which in turn is positively related to parental involvement (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Teachers need to inform parents of effective strategies in the home environment (Epstein, 2011), give them specific tasks to do with their children at home and make sure that parents are able to help with and talk about these tasks with their children (Bakker et al., 2013; Denessen et al., 2007).

A trustful home–school relationship is especially important for low-SES parents who have children with learning difficulties or behavioural problems (Wellner, 2012). Research on inclusive education practices shows that parents often lack knowledge about the special care system and therefore leave decision-making regarding the best education for the child to the school (Elkins et al., 2003; Turnbull et al., 2011). When teachers acknowledge that parents are usually aware of their children’s needs and difficulties and are willing to support their development, the non-optimal division of roles, e.g. teachers as advice givers and parents as advice seekers, can be overcome.

Positive home–school relationships, founded on trust and approachability, may give teachers and parents the opportunity to talk about parenting issues and home life. It is important that teachers have knowledge of the home life of their pupils since this also may avoid judgements of ‘bad’ parenting vis-à-vis parents who have a different frame of reference than the teacher (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). The teachers’ attitude herein is crucial, especially when discussing difficult subjects with parents and handling possible conflicts of interest (Conderman et al., 2010). However, teachers seem, rather, to use a conflict-avoidance strategy when confronted with low-SES parents who have children with learning and behavioural problems (Broomhead, 2014).

In a previous pilot study we interviewed 27 parents of children with special educational needs in different educational settings (e.g. mainstream schools, at-risk schools with a high level of low-SES children and special education schools) in the southern part of the Netherlands.¹ Parents were asked about the contact moments with the teachers, and if two-way communication with the teacher was present, that is: communication in which the teacher is open minded, asks for input from parents and takes their topics and concerns into account. Parents were also asked which subjects are discussed and how conflicts arising from diverging perspectives regarding the child’s needs are handled. In the current study we focus on how teachers communicate with parents, by analysing concrete subject matters they discuss with parents.

Research aim and questions

The purpose of the teacher interviews is to gain deeper insight into communication practices applied by teachers from different types of schools in respect of children’s special needs and the socio-economic status of these children. Research is conducted into which subjects teachers talk about with parents and how they communicate with the parents about these subjects. In particular, whether teachers use two-way communication with parents is examined. The research questions are:

- (1) How do teachers build and sustain a trustful relationship with parents?
- (2) How do teachers discuss with parents reciprocal expectations and ambitions concerning the child’s development and respective tasks and responsibilities?
- (3) How do teachers support parents for learning at home?

- (4) How do teachers involve parents in the decision-making process concerning special care for a child?
- (5) How do teachers discuss difficult subjects and handle conflicts arising from opposing perspectives regarding the child's needs?

In the remainder of this paper, we first discuss the research setting, the participants, the interview guide and methods. We then present the results, according to the five main themes identified in the theoretical framework. The last section discusses the findings.

Research setting

The study was carried out in the southern part of the Netherlands. In this former mining district, poverty problems are persistent. Over 20% of the children come from low-income and undereducated families and are considered low SES, compared with 9% countrywide (Statistics Netherlands, 2015). There is a persistent achievement gap in this region, where the academic outcomes of children with high intelligence from low-SES homes are similar to average-intelligent children from high-SES homes (Jungbluth, 2014). Also, the number of children in special education schools in this region is higher than countrywide: 6% compared with 4% countrywide (B&T, 2017).

Methods

Data collection

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 55 teachers (about 4.5% of the total teacher population from two participating school boards), in the school year 2016–2017. The interviews were conducted by undergraduate students in Pedagogy and Teacher Education from a university of applied sciences as part of a research specialisation semester. All students participating in the research were trained by the researchers. Each initial interview that the students conducted was supervised by a member of the research team. Throughout the data collection, the Code of Conduct for practice-based research in universities of applied sciences (Netherlands Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, 2010) was followed. Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 60 minutes.

We distinguished three types of schools: mainstream schools, at-risk schools and schools for special education. To differentiate between mainstream and at-risk schools we used the Dutch National Education Data, which provides data on school level and is freely accessible (DUO, 2016). In the Netherlands, schools can receive additional funding based on the socio-economic composition of a school. This additional funding is also known as weighted student funding. Based on parental education level children are allocated a certain weight and the funding is based on the total weight of the pupil population. Schools are assigned to the category of at-risk schools compared with the mainstream schools when they have at least 20% of pupils with a 'weight'.

The sample comprised 55 class teachers from 18 primary schools: 20 teachers from seven mainstream schools, 21 teachers from seven at-risk schools and 14 teachers from four special education schools. Teachers in the mainstream schools had between 10% and

15% of children with special educational needs in their class, the at-risk school teachers between 17% and 50%, and the special education school teachers had 100% of children with special educational needs in their class.² At each school about three teachers were interviewed. An equal distribution regarding grade and teaching experience was ensured.

Instrument: interview guide

Based on the theoretical framework of the study the research team developed the questions for the semi-structured teacher interviews. In the first part of the interview, demographic data were gathered such as teachers' gender, age and years of experience. In the second part of the interview teachers were asked to give examples of their relationship with parents and how they communicate with parents, in parent–teacher conferences or other contact moments, focusing on the following themes:

- (1) Creating a trustful relationship. We asked teachers how they build a trustful relationship with parents, what contact they have with parents and how they stay in touch with them (approachability).
- (2) Searching for agreement. We asked teachers how they discuss the child's development with parents and how they come to agree on reciprocal expectations and ambitions concerning the child's development. Teachers were also asked how they discuss their respective tasks and responsibilities with parents.
- (3) Learning at home. We asked the teachers about how they support parents in children's homework assistance.
- (4) Decision-making. Teachers were asked how they involve parents in child-related decisions, especially concerning children with special educational needs.
- (5) Themes and conflicts. Teachers were asked which other subjects – apart from the aforementioned themes – they discuss with parents, which subjects are difficult to discuss and how conflicts arising from opposing perspectives concerning the child's needs are handled.

Methods and analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the students. Transcripts were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). ATLAS-ti (www.atlasti.com) was used in the analysis process, both to develop codes and to re-code data. This coding procedure made it possible to continually return to the interview data and to corroborate whether statements of the responders matched with the themes and, if necessary, to adjust them. Multiple sequences of analysis involving coding and recoding were conducted by two researchers. Peer debriefing sessions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with colleagues from the research team helped to clarify the interpretation of the data and to discuss alternative explanations.

Interview fragments belonging to the five themes were labelled and coded in different ways. Text fragments regarding how teachers create a trustful relationship with parents were labelled and then quantified. Text fragments regarding reciprocal expectations and ambitions and agreement on respective tasks and responsibilities, support for parents' learning in their children's homework assistance and decision-making when children

have special educational needs were coded into ‘one-way’ or ‘two-way communication’, and then quantified. Text fragments regarding difficult subjects, taboos and conflicts were labelled first, then coded into one-way or two-way communication and finally quantified.

Results

Below we describe the results for the five main themes of this study. For each theme, we first present our findings in general. Next, we discuss whether the answers to the interview questions were different between the three types of schools. Occasionally, we use the information from the parent interviews (Leenders, Haelermans, De Jong, & Monfrance, 2018) to compare our findings with the experience of parents.

Creating a trustful relationship

Almost all teachers declared that they have a trustful relationship with all parents. When asked about how they build such a relationship, teachers from all three school types refer to the openness of the school, the possibility to have informal contact with parents and their own outreaching behaviour such as directly inviting parents into the school and the classroom. The active teacher’s role in making informal contact possible is mentioned most (52 times). Only in at-risk schools, however, do teachers purposefully use these strategies on a daily basis.

In addition, teachers often mention the degree to which they are available for parents (29 times), sometimes in combination with low-threshold activities organised by the school (13 times). Here we see differences between school types. For instance, seven teachers in five mainstream schools indicate that parents ‘can email or call whenever they want’ or ‘are welcome at any time’. Nonetheless, no concrete activities to meet parents informally are mentioned in these cases. According to the parent study, informal contact is conditional on building a trustful relationship. Mainstream school parents indicate that they miss ‘the little chat’ with the teacher, since they are not allowed to walk into school without an appointment, and teachers are not in the courtyard after school either.

The situation in schools for special education is rather different, which is in line with the parent study. Special education school teachers compensate for the fact that they cannot meet parents outside of the regulated meetings for a short chat before or after school because the children go to school by bus. Instead, teachers use a little take-home notebook in which parents and the teacher write about how the child is doing, or have contact by phone or email. In two of these schools, activities are organised in which both parents and teachers, and parents mutually, can meet each other in an informal way (e.g. talent scouts, winter fair, autism week). According to the parent interviews these activities are important for parents.

In at-risk schools, the possibility for parents to walk into the classroom is common practice. As one teacher states: ‘Actually, I am always talking to parents’. On top of that, 11 teachers in at-risk schools provide examples of low-threshold activities (e.g. Christmas market, bingo night, school and neighbourhood festivities, reading breakfast), which are organised purposefully by the school to reinforce the connection with parents and/or

neighbourhood at the same time. Parents highly appreciate the approachability of the teachers and the frequent informal contact, according to the parent study.

Searching for agreement

Teachers in all school types mostly apply two-way communication when asking parents for input on the child. It seems common practice in all schools that teachers in their first interview with parents and in the parent–teacher meetings ask parents how their child is doing and take this information into account. From the interviews, it appears that in this manner they lay the foundations of a trustful relationship with parents. Many fewer examples are found where teachers only out of ‘politeness’ or as an opening for the conference ask the parents about their child (one-way communication).

However, it is not common practice to discuss with parents reciprocal role conceptions and ambitions concerning the child’s development. Even less so do teachers make agreements with parents on what they can expect from each other. Hardly any examples of concrete arrangements with parents concerning what the school does and what the parents do in respect of the development of the child are mentioned by mainstream and special education school teachers. Only eight at-risk school teachers give genuine two-way communication examples in which they explicitly ask parents what their expectations are with regard to the coming school year, make some general mutual agreements about how to approach the child during the year and revise these agreements in any case in which they appear to be ineffective.

Parents are much more specific with regard to this point, especially parents with children in special education schools. According to these parents, a balance is found between teachers’ and parents’ ambitions because teachers explicitly pay attention to the acceptance of having a disability and discuss the feasibility of academic goals. This approach is considered valuable by these parents.

Looking closer into how teachers talk about the learning results of pupils and how they make them comprehensible for parents, we found that in mainstream schools and schools for special education one-way communication is mainly used. The development of the child is exemplified by explaining and informing, or, in respect of the advice on which secondary education level is appropriate, by explaining, clarifying and convincing. In the study of the parents it is mainly the mainstream school parents who explicitly complain about the way the academic development of the child is discussed in parent–teacher meetings. These parents indicate that they do not know what test scores mean and the school’s advice on secondary education often comes as a surprise to them.

In at-risk schools, two-way communication is used most. Before the conference takes place, teachers provide the parents with both their child’s results (school report) and a conference sheet for parents in order to prepare for the conference. During the conference, they check whether parents understand the performance results of the child and, when necessary, spend more time discussing it. There are no discrepancies with the parent study here. Interestingly, low SES-parents know very well how the school system works and grasp the full implications of working together from the beginning of the child’s school career. Parents are ‘allowed to ask silly questions’, they say, which stimulates their participation in the child’s school career.

A final topic discussed is how teachers handle parents who differ substantially from the teacher, for example regarding the frame of reference or parents with a different mother tongue. Remarkably, in the examples teachers give, their approach is always by two-way communication, irrespective of school type. Teachers acquaint themselves with the background and home life of the parents concerned and try to be non-judgemental. As a teacher says: ‘Sometimes you have to leave the parents in peace about what they should be doing at home because they are not able to do it. Instead you say to the parent: “I will take this burden from you, I will take care of your child”’.

Supporting parents in children’s homework assistance

Some teachers in mainstream schools indicate that they do not discuss homework with parents at all and teachers who do primarily make use of one-way communication (e.g. only informing the parent). We found eight examples of one-way communication in five different schools against two examples of two-way communication in two different schools. The parent study clearly shows that home learning support is considered insufficient by mainstream school parents. The major problem seems to be that homework is discussed only during the parent evenings and report card meetings. There is too little time to provide guidance and support, parents stated, and it is too easily assumed that they will understand.

In contrast, special education school teachers make more use of two-way communication, investigating specifically what the child needs and what parents can and want to do. Parents are provided with strategies tailored to their particular situation. We found nine examples of one-way communication in three different schools against 14 examples of two-way communication in all four special education schools.

Teachers from at-risk schools provide the most examples of two-way communication on the homework topic: 17 examples in six different schools. They actively take into account what a parent needs and try to help parents who feel insecure by providing them with guidance and support such as additional explanation or allowing them to come and practise in the classroom themselves during or after school time. From the parent study we concluded that parents with children in special education and at-risk schools describe the same strong practices as the teachers do. However, should be noted that in all three school types parents feel the need for more support to align their home-based learning activities with the foci of the school programme.

Decision-making

The interviews show that all teachers find it difficult to involve parents in the decision-making process concerning special care for the child. Therefore, they do not involve them sufficiently in this process. There are, however, some noteworthy differences between school types.

In mainstream and special education schools parents are mostly only informed about the special care system and possibilities to provide extra care (one-way communication) while teachers in at-risk schools also try to ascertain whether parents really understand the special care system (two-way communication), even if it takes extra effort. These teachers actively

investigate whether parents understand how the special care is organised and which options are possible. They also take into account how parents deal with the child's issues at home.

Due to the Dutch education policy of supporting the inclusion of children with special needs within mainstream schools, all teachers in our study have children with special needs in their class. However, only half of the teachers we interviewed are able to give examples of coordinated home-school efforts for children with special needs. Only six (out of 20) teachers from mainstream schools are able to give examples of such coordinated home-school efforts, against six (out of 14) teachers from special education schools and 12 (out of 21) teachers from at-risk schools. These teachers acknowledge that the needs of these children can best be met if parents and teachers agree on the treatment of the problem, and align it between home and school while evaluating and adjusting this process regularly.

Further analysis reveals that, in mainstream schools, parents who have a child with special needs are almost disregarded, which is supported by the parent interviews. It is too easily assumed that parents will understand the care system. Also, it is not common to ask how parents deal with problems at home. Opportunities for the coordination of care and parental expertise are not fully used. The parent study is way more informative on this subject. Parents with a child with special educational needs in mainstream schools point to the problem that, because their child has a new teacher every year, they have to explain the needs of their child over and over again. They are never sure if special support will be continued in the next school year. On top of that, the two formal contact moments they have with the teacher are too short to discuss effective strategies in the home environment.

From the teachers' interviews we know that in at-risk and special education schools the situation is different. In these schools parents are sometimes overruled if it is in the child's interest. Some parents do not acknowledge their children's problems and some lack the competence to be fully involved in the decision-making process, so it is argued.

Obviously, the involvement of parents in decisions concerning children with special needs is an area of concern for all school types. Interestingly, from the parents who are satisfied with the home-school coordination concerning special educational needs, we know how it works for parents. The argumentation of high-educated and low-SES parents is the same: the bond between parent and teacher is crucial for them to feel supported. Home-school coordination is an ongoing process of sharing information and working together from the beginning of the child's school career, according to the parents.

Difficult themes and conflicts

Teachers were asked what subjects they talk about with parents, other than the aforementioned themes. The main subjects mentioned in the interviews are: socio-emotional development (named 13 times), specified in bullying, behavioural problems and sexuality; educational questions and problems (21 times), varying from difficult behaviour at home and dealing with puberty issues, to not listening and being irreverent. Alarming issues at home (mentioned 25 times) concern a long list of subjects: divorce, physical and sexual abuse or incest, neglect, debt and poverty, sickness of a parent, alcoholism, refusal of medication. Teachers from all three school types mentioned subjects from these three main themes.

Interestingly, teachers mostly use two-way communication when discussing alarming issues at home, which is why we looked deeper into how they manage these difficult subjects. It appears that in cases of insufficient physical care for the child or too little or unhealthy nourishment (neglect) – a problem that is only mentioned by at-risk school teachers – the parent is always addressed, even when there is a risk that the trustful relationship with the parent will suffer. In all these cases, it concerns issues parents are not aware of or which they continuously deny. Teachers try to make the parents conscious of the problem and the need for help, and persistently ask how they can help them, while at the same time trying to empower the parents by letting them fulfil tasks at school. A special education school teacher who has to deal with a child refusing to take its medicine shows the ability to recognise the problem *behind* the problem, which is the denial of the parents. Also, this teacher helps parents to become conscious of the problem while finding a solution that fits the child, parents and home situation of this particular family.

In discussing poverty, teachers initiate the talk about this subject because parents are ashamed or choose to ignore the problem. They are persistent in trying to help and to get the cooperation of the parent to address the problem, although this effort often fails. In the case of abuse (or suspicion of) four teachers from one at-risk school show the same attitude: the problem is addressed in a proactive way and the child is taken along in this process. In a fitting way, the child is central here: the trust within the parent–teacher relationship is protected and the child is empowered at the same time.

In the previous parent study all parents indicated that ‘anything can be discussed’ and conflicts can be overcome when the relationship with the teacher is strong. The teacher study is in line with these findings. All teachers were asked how they handle conflicts arising from opposing perspectives regarding the child’s needs. Fifty-two out of 55 interviewees are able to give examples of conflicts with parents that they managed to successfully resolve together. Similar to how teachers discuss difficult subjects with parents, they also mostly use two-way communication when handling conflicts. The attitude of teachers was further analysed in the cases where parents were demonstrably angry.

Teachers in mainstream schools give five examples of angry parents. In all these cases, the teacher remains calm and gives the parents the opportunity to become calm again. Teachers are prepared to admit possible mistakes by the school, even little ones, and are sensitive to deep emotions of parents. This results in seeking a solution together. By taking the initiative and showing their own vulnerability, teachers contribute to the restoration of the trustful relationship. In one particular escalated conflict, the security of the child is guaranteed by keeping boundaries while having compassion for the personality disorder of the parent. Trust is restored by giving the parent a second chance.

A comparable way of handling angry parents is reported by teachers from the special education schools. This is illustrated by four examples where they allow the parents to blow off steam and talk to them after they have calmed down. In one case the parent is cut short (‘In this way, I cannot talk to you’) but a new appointment is made to talk it over. Comparable to teachers in mainstream schools, teachers are willing to admit their own mistakes when necessary. Most important is them being honest about the (im)possibilities of the school providing the care the child needs, thus recognising the parents’ feelings of worry. It is noteworthy to mention that this is the most important wish within all parents

who have a child with special educational needs, according to our previous parent study. School should make perfectly clear what support is and is not possible. Parents from mainstream schools were particularly unsatisfied on this matter.

In at-risk schools, when coping with angry parents (seven examples), teachers show compassion for the difficult situation of the parents ('He was angry with the situation'), are flexible ('I choose not to fight with parents all the time'. 'Pick your battle'. 'Follow the stream of the river'), while keeping the boundaries. In some cases, teachers admit to 'playing it hard', for example in case of notorious absence of the child. Teachers explicitly mention that they do not fear or disapprove of big-mouthed parents ('Barking dogs seldom bite'). Even in complex situations, teachers act in a solution-oriented and practical manner, and often find the next little step to take. Parents experience this in the same way. Several low-SES parents from at-risk and special education schools admitted that they feel very much at ease with the teacher of their child, because he or she would not mind if they show quite direct behaviour.

Discussion

The study at hand examined the challenge of two-way communication within parent-teacher relationships in different primary school contexts. Conditional to strong parent-teacher relationships is building a relation of trust *before* there is anything substantial to talk about. In our study, we found the conditional characteristics for trust (openness of the schools, informal contact, outreaching behaviour of the teacher) to be generally adequate in all schools. Related to this, informal conversations and unscheduled visits are important parental involvement practices, which are specifically recommended for lower SES parents in international research (Turnbull et al., 2011). Interestingly, our study shows regular informal contact between parents and teachers to be part of the everyday practice in at-risk schools, which was also shown in previous research in the Netherlands (Smit, Driessen, Sluiter, & Brus, 2007). On top of that, we found no negative attitude towards vulnerable or incompetent parents in these schools. Although we are aware that we cannot generalise for all at-risk schools in the Netherlands, we can state that we found all seven at-risk schools in our study to be non-judgemental about parents. This is in clear contrast with Broomhead (2014), who reported educational practitioners becoming de-sensitised to what they perceived as the chaotic and dysfunctional home lives of the pupils and their parents. Instead, we found the teachers in the at-risk schools to be sensitive, compassionate and encouraging towards vulnerable parents. Much can be learned from at-risk schools, where two-way communication is used the most.

Difficult situations are often related to negative emotions among parents and teachers (Lasky, 2000; Van der Wolf & Everaert, 2005). However, Denessen and Raket (2016) showed that teachers in general intend to respond with understanding and empathy to challenging parents and that they put effort into building constructive relationships with these parents. Our study is in line with these findings. Teachers may consider difficult situations and subjects to be stressful, but they handle them well. Our study shows that in the way in which teachers from all school types handle difficult subjects and conflicts, adequate teacher attitudes are revealed. When situations are most difficult teachers tend to abandon their expert role. In these cases they stand *alongside* the parents, asking 'How

can we solve this together?'. They explicitly discuss parental norms and concerns when needed. In the examples teachers give, their approach is always by two-way communication. They acquaint themselves with the background and family life of the parents and try to be non-judgemental. In complex situations teachers act adequately and in a way well-fitting to the population of the school: they show a proactive and flexible attitude, protect the trustful relationship, are compassionate with the parents and keep clear and safe boundaries while protecting the child's best interests.

Much can be learned from how teachers handle difficult subjects and how they cope with parents who have a different frame of reference. Teachers should be more aware of this quality, and not be afraid to address difficult subjects or conflicts.

Our study gives reasons to believe that, when confronted with children with special needs, there is still a tendency for teachers merely to give advice as a professional (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015), rather than having a two-way conversation with parents. It is a major concern for all three types of schools in our study to better involve parents in the decision-making process concerning special care for a child. Clearly, it is *the* challenge of inclusive education to find a balance between making sure that care is well coordinated and parental expertise fully used, while in the meantime the child's interests are satisfied. There is a need for further research to improve understanding of the underlying sensitivities concerning this balance, within both teachers and parents (Denessen & Raket, 2016). For instance, it would be interesting to find out why teachers in mainstream schools collaborate with parents on difficult themes, while overruling them concerning decision-making on special educational support. There also is a need for further research that listens to the voice of children as key stakeholders in education, especially children with special educational needs (Shaw, 2017). Occasionally, student-led parent-teacher conferences were reported as a strong practice by teachers and parents in our study. However, little research has been carried out on this subject. Changing the 'classical' roles of parents, teachers and students may lead to interesting new communication patterns that are conducive to family-school partnerships.

Notes

1. In 2014–2015 semi-structured in-depth interviews were carried out with a total of 22 mothers and five fathers, eight with parents from two at-risk schools (three with a low and five with a medium education level), 11 with parents from two mainstream schools (six with a medium and five with a high education level) and eight with parents from two special education schools (three with a low, three with a medium and three with a high education level). The sample represents the parent population of each school, based on education level. We consider parents with a low education level when the highest educated parent has a maximum of pre-vocational secondary education. Parents are considered medium educated when the highest educated parent has at least secondary vocational, senior general secondary or pre-university education. Finally, parents are considered highly educated when at least one parent has a minimum of higher professional or university education (Leenders et al., 2018).
2. In the Dutch school system, children with minor learning or behavioural difficulties are included in mainstream primary schools, whereas children with learning disabilities (IQ rate 50–90) or behavioural disorders attend special education schools.

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