

A brief overview of the findings and output of the research project 'Different parents, different teachers. Parent teacher relationships in primary schools'

'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"' (at-risk school teacher).

Background of the project

The importance of strengthening parental involvement is high. This holds in particular for the southern part of the Netherlands, where our research is carried out. In this former mine district, poverty problems are persistent. Over 20 percent of the children come from low-income and undereducated families and are considered low-SES, compared to 9 percent 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 percent compared to 4 percent countrywide (B&T, 2017).

Building strong parent-teacher relationships requires genuine attention to the nuances of different cultural and economic conditions of the school population (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). For this a differentiated approach matching the specific parental school population is needed (Smit, Driessen, Sluiter & Brus, 2007). Also, teachers find it difficult to respond in a culturally sensitive way to parents with backgrounds, different from their own. Enhancing their culturally sensitive competencies is important (Susam, 2015).

In our project we distinguish between three types of schools: mainstream schools, at-risk schools and schools for special education. To distinguish between mainstream and at-risk schools we use the Dutch National Education Data which provides data on school level (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 have a certain weight and the funding is based on the total weight of the pupil population. Schools were assigned to the category at-risk schools compared to the mainstream schools when they have at least 20 percent pupils with a so called 'weight'.

The following research questions are addressed:

- What are the teacher perceptions on parental involvement and parent teacher relationship practices (with regard to interaction, communication, frequency, and content)?
- How do teachers and parents come to align their expectations and ambitions regarding the learning and developmental goals of the students?
- How do teachers create a trustful relationship with parents?
- How do teachers reach two-way communication with parents (which consists of the teacher asking for the parents' input, taking their input into account, and involving them in decisions)?
- How do teachers encourage parents' educational support at home and ensure that they feel sufficiently supported while making sure that both parties know what is expected from them?
- How can the culturally sensitive competencies of (future) education professionals be enhanced?

Findings and output of the 4 parts of the project

(1) The most practical part of the project is a **training for enhancing culturally sensitive competencies** which was developed by teams of primary school teachers, undergraduate students in Pedagogy and Teacher Education, and teacher trainers in schools with different school populations. The training is accepted in the Dutch 'Lerarenregister' (registration system for teacher professionalization) and is a part of the educational program for both future teachers and educators.

A short film from the training at <http://educatief-partnerschap.nl/inspiraties/13/parent-teacher-conference-with-a-withdrawn-parent> illustrates how a regulated parent-teacher conference needs to have the form of a dialogue, in which both teacher and parent bring in their respective expertise.

(2) A **teacher questionnaire** was distributed amongst all teachers of the two participating school boards (approximately 1200 teachers from 90 different schools, 850 respondents), and (3) additional **teacher interviews** were carried out with 55 teachers (about 4,5 percent of the total teacher population from two participating school boards). When bringing together the findings from the questionnaires and the interviews we see that the teachers' views on parental involvement and parent teacher relationships are positive. Teachers believe it to be important and agree that both teachers and parents are responsible for children's development and they should work together with parents. Although teachers do not make use so much of informal contact moments to communicate with parents, they are aware of the importance of being able to meet parents in an informal way to build a trustful relationship. Furthermore, it appears to be common practice within all types of schools to ask parents about how their child is doing at home, which is important for building strong parent teacher relationships.

Despite the fact that teachers are aware of conditional aspects for building strong parent teacher relationships, more effort is needed to effectuate strong parent teachers relationships. We noticed that there is a discrepancy between views and practice, especially when it comes to the teachers' support of parents concerning their children's homework assistance and their cooperation with parents of children with special needs. This appears from both the interviews and the questionnaires. Teachers often indicate that they do not include parents in the actual decision making concerning special care (Monfrance, Haelermans & Leenders, 2017)

The interviews, in general, show that teachers in mainstream schools mostly inform parents, whereas teachers in at risk schools are the most used to two-way communication with parents (ask input and align mutual expectations) and special education school teachers partly ask and inform. Teachers in special education schools are used to share effective strategies in the home environment with parents but on specific topics like the organisation and process of special care they seem to only inform. Interestingly, it is precisely the handling of difficult subjects and conflicts that reveals adequate teacher attitudes in all school types. It is noteworthy that teachers are at their best in maintaining a strong parent teacher relationship when situations are most difficult. Teachers act adequately and well-fitting to the population of the school: they show a pro-active and flexible attitude, protect the trustful relationship, are compassionate with the parents, keep clear and safe boundaries while protecting the child's best interest. When the parent-teacher relationship is strong, alarming issues at home can be discussed between parents and teachers and even resolved in case of disagreement. The adequate attitudes that teachers expose in these instances should be best transferred to the cooperation with parents in general (De Jong, Leenders, Monfrance & Haelermans, 2017).

(4) An interactive platform www.educatief-partnerschap.nl is created, to collect and share the practical knowledge from teachers in different schools. Research results, strong examples and inspiring practices from the interviews and the training, and tools from teachers and students for enhancing parental involvement are shared on this platform. The website is updated with new tools and practices monthly, and works as a **Digital manual for parent teacher relationship practices**. See an illustrative example of a strong school practice: the use of student-led conferences instead of regulated parent-teacher conferences, at <http://educatief-partnerschap.nl/inspiraties/12/student-led-conference>

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