



**Building strong parent teacher relationships in primary education.
The challenge of two-way communication**

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Building strong parent teacher relationships in primary education. The challenge of two-way communication

Johan de Jong^ξ, H el ene Leenders^{1ξϕ}, M elanie Monfrance^{ξϕ}, Carla Haelermans^ϕ

Abstract

This study investigates how two-way communication works for teachers in different educational contexts, and how this applies to the different subjects teachers and parents talk about. Fifty-five in-depth interviews are carried out with teachers from special education schools, at-risk schools serving low SES-children, and mainstream primary education schools in the southern part of the Netherlands. The theoretical framework is based on Epstein’s Model of Parental Involvement. 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 therefore they do not sufficiently involve them within this process, and (3) teachers’ attitude towards parents are at best when it comes to difficult subjects. If one wants to strengthen parent teacher relationships in schools, teachers should not be afraid addressing difficult subjects or conflicts. On the contrary, the adequate attitudes that teachers expose in complex situations should best be transferred to the cooperation with parents generally.

Keywords: primary school teachers, inclusive education, social class, Netherlands

Introduction

Parental involvement in a child’s school career is extremely important for children’s development, especially in primary school (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). This holds specifically for children from lower socio-economic status (SES) and children with special educational needs, such as a cognitive deficits or specific disorderly behaviour, as these children benefit even more from a stable school-home environment that is interconnected with a good parent teacher relationship (Fantuzzo, MacWayne & Perry, 2004). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the European Commission also stress the importance of school and family partnerships to fight inequalities of educational opportunities for children, for example from undereducated homes (Heckman, 2008; OECD, 2012). This is underlined by the Dutch governmental policy on investing in educational partnerships in schools.

Despite the widely recognized importance of investing in home-school relationships, about one third of the teachers in the Netherlands feel insecure about their ability to build strong

¹ Corresponding author

^ξ Fontys University of Applied Sciences, Department of Pedagogical Studies, Sittard, the Netherlands

^ϕ Top Institute for Evidence-Based Education Research (TIER), Maastricht University, the Netherlands

relationships with parents, especially with parents from ethnic and cultural backgrounds that are different from their own (Bokdam, Tom, Berger, Smit & Van Rens, 2014). International research shows that teachers feel that matters related to their pupils' home education and the child rearing practices of parents are difficult to deal with (Hirsto, 2010). They mostly discuss learning outcomes and social-emotional development with parents, not so much behavioural problems and learning difficulties (Iruka, Winn, Kingsley & Orthodoxou, 2011; Bokdam et al., 2014).

Constructive relationships between parents and teachers are considered to be powerful in supporting pupils with academic problems and/or social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). Teacher reports of strong parent–teacher relationships are associated with higher levels of child 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 with children that need special educational support to establish a working relationship with the school, than for mainstream parents (Elkins, Kraayenoord & Jobling, 2003; Peetsma, Vergeer, Roeleveld & Karsten, 2001). High quality parent teacher relationships are an exception. Concerning pupils with special needs, the study of Gwernan-Jones and colleagues (2015) points to 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.

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 state-wide (Statistics Netherlands, 2015). There is a persistent achievement gap. The academic outcomes of children with high intelligence from low-SES homes in this region are similar to average-intelligent children from high-SES homes (Jungbluth, 2014). Also, the amount of children in special education schools in this region is higher than state-wide: 6 percent compared to 4 percent state-wide (B&T, 2017).

In a previous pilot study we interviewed 27 parents with 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. In this study, parents were asked about the contact moments with the teachers, and if a two-way communication with teachers is present, that is: communication in which the teacher is open minded, asks 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 about the child's needs are handled. All parents argued that a good contact with the teacher begins by building a relationship before there are 'things to discuss'. Within a strong relationship, anything (problems and concerns) can be

discussed, and conflicts can be overcome. We also found that parents in special education and at-risk schools are more used to two-way communication, rather than parents in mainstream schools. Also, for parents in mainstream school settings it is not always clear what they can expect from teachers when it comes to the support of children with special educational needs (Leenders, Haelermans, de Jong & Monfrance, 2016).

Based on the parents' study we believe that is important to investigate more systematically how two-way communication works for teachers in different educational contexts, and how this applies to the different subjects parents and teachers talk about.

Research aim and questions

The purpose of the teacher interviews is to gain deeper insight into communication practices applied by teachers from schools with different populations. It is researched *what* subjects teachers talk about with parents and *how* they communicate with the parents about these subjects. In particular, it is examined whether teachers use two-way communication with parents, that is: communication in which the teacher is open-minded, asks input from parents and takes their topics and concerns into account. A parent teacher relationship can be conceived of as a one-way linear process if teachers inform or instruct parents (Tett, 2004). In one-way communication the role of parents is that of the passive receptors of expert advice (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). The research questions are:

- (1) How do teachers build and sustain a trustful relationship with parents?*
- (2) How do teachers discuss reciprocal expectations and ambitions concerning the child's development and respective tasks and responsibilities with parents?*
- (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 about the child's needs?*

In the remainder of this paper, we first discuss the theoretical framework and the related literature. This is followed by the methods. Here we discuss the research setting, the participants, the questionnaire and methods. We then present the results, according to the five main themes identified in the theoretical framework. The last section discusses the findings.

Theoretical framework

Parental involvement is considered as a broad concept from which different aspects are distinguished in the literature. Firstly, parental involvement can be defined as participation in the school such as volunteering in school activities or involvement in decision making processes. Secondly, communication between parents and schools is considered as parental involvement and can vary from

attending parent teacher conferences to reading school newsletters. Finally, educational activities at home can be considered as parental involvement and can vary from reading activities to discussing school activities with the child (Bakker, Denessen, Dennissen & Oolbekkink-Marchand, 2013). The theoretical framework of our research project is largely based on Epstein's Model of Parental involvement (Epstein, 2011). She defines six types of involvement by parents, which are the key to successful school-family-community partnerships. These six types of involvement are (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) learning at home, (5) decision-making, and (6) collaborating with the community. As in the research project we focus on the teacher-parent relationships in a school setting, the sixth type is left aside in our theoretical framework.

The first type, parenting, is indirectly taken into account. We are interested to find out if teachers and parents can discuss home situation issues and what the attitude of teachers is when handling eventual conflicts of interest.

With regard to the second type, communicating, we discovered that this type should have a different (meta) status because all other types can be considered as either one-way, or two-way communication. Epstein's communicating type of involvement concerns communication-oriented practices that bridge the gap between home and school (Epstein, 2011). From the literature, we know that parents are more likely to participate if frequent, clear, two-way communication is present (Bakker et al., 2013; Tett, 2004).

Based on the work of Iruka et al. (2015), and Lasky and Dunnick Karge (2011), we also focus on conditional aspects for building strong parent-teacher relationships such as searching for trust and agreement. This gives us the following five main themes as a theoretical framework for this paper (1) building a trustful relationship, (2) searching for agreement, (3) learning at home, (4) decision-making, and (5) handling difficult subjects and conflicts.

(1) Building a trustful relationship. Building relationships is crucial and conditional for parental involvement, that is: before there are substantial matters to be discussed with parents, there has to be a strong parent teacher relationship. From the literature, 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 to this matter (Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, Soodak & Shogren, 2011; Denessen, Bakker & Gierveld, 2007).

(2) Searching for agreement. Teachers play a key-role in increasing parental involvement in school and at home (Hill et al., 2004; Lee & Bowen, 2006). For example, when teachers are responsive towards home language and respectful towards parents' role conceptions, parents feel stronger connected to school (Denessen et al., 2007). Teachers need to search agreement with parents on respective tasks and responsibilities, and strive for shared expectations about how parents can effectively support their children at home (Iruka et al., 2011). Children have the ability to learn more, when parents understand both school culture and the school's expectations regarding home learning

activities. As a result, parents can support their children in an effective way. This leads to better learning outcomes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

(3) Learning at home. An important discussion subject in parent teacher conferences is how parents can support their children's learning at home. From the literature we know that academic achievement is rooted in a school-supportive home climate (Cabus & Ariës, 2016). Teachers should design home tasks such that parents are able to help with and talk about these tasks with their children. They are expected to inform parents of effective strategies in the home environment (Epstein, 2011), to talk to parents about how they can assist their children, and to give them specific tasks to do with their children at home (Bakker et al., 2013; Denessen et al., 2007). Parental involvement in homework is even more effective than parent-child communication on school matters, but both strategies have an important significant positive effect on children's learning outcomes (Cabus & Ariës, 2016).

(4) Decision-making. This theme deals with decisions made about children's learning, school activities and school policy. At the school level, parents should be included in for example school councils and parent organizations. At the individual level, parents should be involved in decisions about the best learning path for their child, not only informed (Epstein, 2011). We know that regular, comprehensible and appropriate information about school tasks and children's development by teachers leads to an increasing sense of efficacy for parents who feel insecure, which in turn is positively related to parent involvement (Waanders, Mendez, & Downer, 2007). Research on inclusive education practices shows that parents usually are aware of their children's needs and difficulties, and are willing to support their development, but they often lack knowledge about the special educational system and therefore leave decision-making about the best education for the child to the school (Elkins et al; Turnbull et al, 2011).

(5) Handling difficult subjects and conflicts. Positive home-school relationships, founded on trust and approachability, may give teachers the opportunity to talk about parenting issues and home life. However, primary education parents indicate that in parent teacher meetings, teachers communicate mostly about academic achievement and social development of the child, not so much about learning and behavioural issues, or problems (Iruka et al., 2011). It is important that teachers have knowledge of the home life of their pupils to avoid judgements of 'bad' parenting of parents who have a different frame of reference than the teacher (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). When it comes to handling eventual conflicts of interest, the teachers' attitude is crucial. Broomhead (2014), for example, observed rather a conflict avoidance strategy used by educational practitioners when confronted low-SES parents who have children with learning and behavioural problems.

Methods

Data collection

In the school year 2016-2017 semi-structured in depth interviews were conducted with 55 teachers (about 4,5 percent of the total teacher population from two participating school boards). The

interviews were conducted by undergraduate students in Pedagogy and Teacher Education from a university of applied sciences who were trained by the researchers. Interviews ranged in length from 30 to 60 minutes.

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 and is freely accessible. 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 student population. Schools were assigned to the category at-risk schools compared to the mainstream schools when they have at least 20 percent low-SES pupils.

The sample comprised of 55 class teachers: 20 teachers from seven mainstream schools, 21 teachers from seven at-risk schools and 14 teachers from four special education schools. The mainstream school teachers had between 10 and 15 percent of children with special educational needs in their class, the at-risk school teachers between 17 and 50 percent, and the special education school teachers had 100 percent of children with special educational needs in their class. At each school about 3 teachers were interviewed. An equal distribution regarding grade and teaching experience was taken into account.

Instrument – interview guide

The research team developed the questions for the semi-structured teacher interviews based on the theoretical framework of the study. 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 conference or other, focussing 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 about 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 teachers support parents in children's homework assistance.
- (4) Decision-making. Teachers were asked how they involve parents on 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 about 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 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 codes in different ways. Text fragments about how teachers create a trustful relationship with parents were labelled and then quantified. Text fragments about 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 about 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 different types of schools.

Creating a trustful relationship

Almost all teachers indicated in the interviews that they actually have a trustful relationship with all parents. When asked about how they build such a relationship, teachers of all three school types refer to two strong practices. Firstly, the openness of the school and the related possibility to have informal contact with parents. Secondly, teachers refer to their own outreaching behaviour such as directly invite parents into the school and the classroom, and actively and constantly seek for contact with parents. Only in at-risk schools teachers purposefully use both strategies on a daily basis.

With respect to the first strategy, teachers mention the possibility to have informal contact the most (56 times). This varies from parents walking into the classroom before or after the school day, and talks with parents in the hallway. With respect to the second strategy, the active teacher’s role in

making informal contact possible is mentioned 52 times. This role holds for instance directly inviting or addressing parents, and actively making contact with parents and persist in this.

In addition to these, often the degree to which the teacher can be reached by or is available for the parents is mentioned (29 times), sometimes in combination with low-threshold activities organised by school (13 times). For instance, 7 teachers in 5 mainstream schools indicate that parents 'can email or call whenever they want' or 'are welcome at any time' which is conditional for building a trustful relationship with the parents. In these cases, however, no concrete low-threshold activities to meet parents informally are mentioned.

The situation in schools for special education is rather different. Here teachers compensate for the fact that they cannot meet parents 'in between' because children go to school by (taxi)busses. 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 2 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).

In at-risk schools, the possibility for parents to walk into the school is common practice. As one teacher says: 'actually, I am always talking to parents'. In addition, 11 teachers in at-risk schools provide examples of low-threshold activities (e.g. breakfast for both parents and children) that these schools organise to get parents into their school, thereby reinforcing the connection with parents and/or neighbourhood at the same time (Christmas market, bingo night, school and neighbourhood festivities, reading breakfast).

Searching for agreement

Regarding the reciprocal expectations and ambitions concerning the child's development, and how teachers and parents share their respective tasks and responsibilities we find that teachers in all schools types mostly apply two-way communication when asking parents for input about the child. In general, they ask parents about how their child is doing and actually take this information into account. However, it is not common practice at all to discuss reciprocal role conceptions and ambitions with parents, let alone make agreements about what teachers and parents can expect from each other.

The first topic discussed in the interviews was if and in what manner teachers ask the parents input about their child. On this topic, in all schools there is two-way communication. 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. From the interviews it appears that in this manner they lay the foundations of a trustful relationship with parents. Much less examples are found in which teachers only out of 'politeness' or as an opening for the conference ask the parents about their child (one-way communication).

Looking at the second subject discussed in the interviews, that is: how teachers talk about the learning outcomes of the pupils and how they make these comprehensible for the parents, we found

that in both mainstream schools and schools for special education mostly one-way communication is used. The development of the child is only exemplified by explaining and informing, or with respect to the advice on which secondary education by explaining, clarifying, convincing. In at-risk schools, however, two-way communication is used the most. Before the conference takes place, teachers already provide the parents with both their child's results (school report) and a talking paper. They check whether parents understand the results of the child and when necessary, spend more time to discuss it with parents. A strong practice mentioned a few times is the involvement of the child in the conference. The same pattern appears with respect to the school advice on secondary education.

With respect to a third topic discussed, that is the making of concrete agreements with parents about what the school does and what the parents do with respect to the development of the child at the beginning of the school year; this does not seem common practice in primary education. In mainstream and special education schools hardly any examples are mentioned (1 in mainstream, no in special education). And if examples are given then mostly in at-risk schools (8). In the introductory meeting parents are asked what their expectations are with regard to the coming school year and some general mutual agreements are made about how to approach the child during the year. These agreements are revised in case they are not effective.

A final topic discussed concerns how teachers handle parents who differ substantially from the teacher, for example in regard of frame of reference or parents with a different mother language. In the examples teachers give their approach is remarkably 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 at that moment. 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. Teachers who do discuss it, make use of one-way communication (e.g. only informing the parent) primarily. We found 8 examples of one-way communication in 5 different schools against 2 examples of two-way communication in 2 different schools.

As a contrast, special education school teachers mostly make 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 9 examples of one-way communication in 3 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 this topic: 17 examples in 6 different schools. They actively take into account what a parent needs and try to help parents who feel insecure by providing them guidance and support such as additional

explanation or allowing them to come and practice in the classroom themselves during or after school time.

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 and that they therefore do not sufficiently involve them within this process. There are, however, some noteworthy differences.

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. In at-risk schools, teachers provide the most examples of two-way communication. These teachers actively investigate if parents understand how the special care is organised and which options are possible. They also take into account how parents deal with the problem 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, examples of coordinated home - school efforts for children with special needs are limited in all three types of schools. The needs of children can best be met when parents and teachers agree on the treatment of the problem, align it between home and school while this process is evaluated regularly and adjusted, when needed. But only a 6 (out of 20) teachers from mainstream schools are able to give examples of such coordinated home - school efforts, against 6 (out of 14) teachers from special education schools and 12 (out of 21) teachers from at-risk schools.

Further analysis reveals that in mainstream schools parents are almost disregarded. It is too easily assumed that parents will understand the care system. Also, it is not common to ask how the child is doing at home or how parents deal with the problem at home. Opportunities for the coordination of care and parental expertise are not fully used. In at-risk and special education schools the situation is somewhat different. In these schools, sometimes parents get overruled if a decision is in the interest of the child. Some parents do not acknowledge their child having a problem, or 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 schools.

Difficult themes and conflicts

Teachers were asked what subjects they talk about with parents, other than the aforementioned themes. Remarkably, we found that the socio-emotional development of the child is discussed relatively few whereas alarming issues at home are mentioned most frequently. The main themes mentioned in the

interviews are: alarming issues at home, educational questions and problems, socio-emotional development, and absence from school.

Overall, socio-emotional development is named 13 times, specified in bullying, behavioural problems, and sexuality. Educational questions and problems are mentioned 21 times, varying from difficult behaviour at home and dealing with puberty issues to not listening and being irreverent. The alarming issues, mentioned 25 times in total, concern a long list of subjects: divorce, abuse or incest, neglect, debt and poverty, sickness of a parent, alcoholism, refusal of medication. Absence was named 4 times.

Specifically, teachers are asked which subject they consider to be difficult or even a taboo as well as if there are conflicts and, if so, how they resolve these.

difficult subjects

It appears that in case of insufficient physical care for the child or too little or unhealthy nourishment (*neglect*) – a problem that is only mentioned by teachers of at-risk schools –, in all these cases the parent is addressed even when there is a risk that the trustful relationship with the parent will suffer. It could be said that in all these cases it concerns educational issues the 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, persistently ask parents how they can help them, while at the same time trying to empower the parents by letting them fulfil tasks at school.

In discussing poverty, a theme that is also only named by teachers in at-risk schools, the attitude is similar: teachers initiate the talking about this subject because parents are ashamed or do not recognise the problem. Teachers are persistent in trying to help and to get the cooperation of the parent to address the problem, although this effort often fails.

In case of (the suspicion of) mistreatment, 4 teachers of an at-risk school show the same attitude: the problem is addressed in a pro-active 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 a similar case in a special education school, a teacher who felt not competent herself acted adequately by involving an external authority.

conflicts

Fifty-two out of 55 interviewees are able to give examples of conflicts with parents which they managed to successfully resolve together. In the cases where parents were demonstrably angry, the attitude of teachers was further analysed.

Teachers in mainstream schools give 5 examples of angry parents. In all these cases the teacher remains calm and gives the parents the opportunity to become calm again. This adequate behaviour is complemented with the teacher being prepared to admit possible mistakes by the school, even little ones, and recognition of deep emotions of the parents. This results in seeking a solution

together with the parents. By taking 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 acting with angry parents is reported from the special education schools. It is illustrated by 4 examples that teachers allow the parents to blow off steam and talk to them when 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. Like 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 to provide the care the child needs, thus recognising the parents’ feelings of worry.

In at-risk schools, too, we found a similar attitude among teachers when coping with angry parents (7 examples). Teachers show compassion for the difficult situation of the parents (“he was angry with the situation”), are flexible (“I choose not to fight all the time with parents”. “Pick your battle”. “Follow the stream of the river”), while keeping the boundaries. In some cases, teachers admit to “play 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 solution oriented and practical, and often find the next little step to take.

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 behavior of the teacher) to be generally adequate in all schools. These characteristics are not only conditional for parental involvement (Lasky & Dunnick Karge, 2011), but they are also conducive to building connectedness between parents and teachers. Related to this, informal conversations and unscheduled visits are important parent involvement practices, which are specifically recommended for lower SES-parents in international research (Trumbull et al., 2003). 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). Our previous study among parents made very clear that all parents, irrespective of school type or educational level, highly value informal contact on a daily basis and outreaching teacher behaviour (Leenders et al., 2016).

It is a major concern for all three types of schools in our study to involve parents in the decision-making process concerning special care for a child. Research on inclusive education practices

displays that parents usually are aware of their children's needs and difficulties, and are willing to support their development, but they often lack knowledge about the special care system and therefore leave decision-making about the best education for the child to the school (Elkins et al; Turnbull et al, 2011). In light of this, it is especially troublesome that only half of the teachers we interviewed are able to give examples of coordinated home-school efforts for children with special needs, considering that all teachers have these children in their classroom. The teachers who do mention examples of coordinated home-school efforts acknowledge that the needs of these children can best be met if parents and teachers agree on the treatment of the problem, align it between home and school while evaluating and adjusting this process regularly.

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 interest is satisfied. To a certain amount our study gives reasons to believe that, when confronted with children with special needs, there is still a tendency for teachers to merely give advice as a professional (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015), rather to have a two-way conversation with parents.

Remarkably, in the at-risk schools we found no negative attitude towards vulnerable or incompetent parents. Although we are aware that we cannot generalise for all at-risk schools in the Netherlands, we can state that we found all 7 at-risk schools in our study to be non-judgemental about bad parenting. This is in clear contrast with Broomhead (2014), who underlines that practitioners reported becoming accustomed and de-sensitised to what they perceived as the chaotic and dysfunctional home lives of the pupils and their parents. She illustrates this attitude with statements like "that's just the way it is" and "that's just how it is" and "it's just how they are" (Broomhead, 2014, p. 143). Also, as Broomhead emphasises, parents are qualified by these teachers as incompetent: "they don't know how to bring up their kids" and "they leave their children on their own" (p. 142). Instead, we found the teachers in the at-risk schools to be sensitive, compassionate, and encouraging towards vulnerable parents. In addition, they are not afraid to discuss difficult themes with parents, even when parents are angry or aggressive.

Broomhead (2014) observed that educational practitioners have a tendency to avoid conflicts when confronted with low SES-parents who have children with learning and behavioural problems. We thematised more deeply how teachers handle in case of conflicts with parents and found that when there is 'really something wrong' and 'there are things to discuss', teachers from all school types explicitly discuss parental norms and concerns ('you find this difficult, is it not?'), when needed. We found no support for the assertion that teacher's judgements of 'bad' parenting are made without any knowledge of actual home life or appreciation of differences in cultural values (Gwernan-Jones et al. 2015). In the examples teachers give, their approach is always by two-way communication. Teachers acquaint themselves with the background and family life of the parents and try to be non-judgemental. 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.

Much can be learned from how teachers handle difficult subjects and how they cope with parents who have a different frame of reference. If one wants to strengthen strong parent teacher relationships in schools, teachers should not be afraid to address difficult subjects or conflicts. On the contrary, the adequate attitudes that teachers expose in these instances should be best transferred to the cooperation with parents generally.

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