Challenging parents, teacher occupational stress and health in Dutch primary schools

Bette Prakke
University of Professional
Education, ,
Utrecht, The Netherlands

Arie van Peet
University of Professional
Education, ,
Utrecht ,The Netherlands

Kees van der Wolf
University of Professional
Education,
Utrecht , The Netherlands

Continual exposure to challenging behaviour, i.c. from parents, can seriously deplete the teacher's emotional and physical resources, leading to self-doubt, loss of satisfaction from teaching, impulsivity, rigidity or feelings of anger and guilt. Research on teacher stress has largely focused on environmental and contextual factors while ignoring personality characteristics of teachers. In this study, we examined teacher's *perceptions* of their own ability to handle challenging parent behaviour and to establish positive relationships as a possible influence on the quality of teacher-parent relationships. Using a canonical correlation method, we found that unsatisfied parents, overprotective parents, neglectful parents and excessively worried parents have the largest impact on teacher stress. Teachers who experience stress from challenging parent behaviour, suffer mostly from negative feelings toward parents, frustration on working with parents, loss of satisfaction with teaching and to a lesser extent health problems. The data for this research was collected in February and March 2007, amongst 212 elementary school teachers in the middle and middle-east region and urban agglomeration of Western-Holland, the Netherlands. The main aim of this research project is to identify at risk teachers (i.e. those most vulnerable to the presence of behaviourally challenging parents) so that interventions, both in initial teacher training as well as in in-service training, can be applied to help them develop adequate attitudes and coping skills.

Introduction

Students do best when parents and teachers understand each other's expectations and stay in touch with one another regarding child's behaviour and academic progress. Every school and every teacher will promote partnerships that increase parental involvement and participation in promoting the social, emotional, and academic growth of children.

Misunderstanding and conflict loom as alternative results, when teachers and parents have different, perhaps competing, perceptions of the meanings and functions of each others roles (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). Many studies have shown that there are many barriers to the attainment of ideal parent involvement and teacher-parent interaction (Chavkin, 1993).

In fact, the problem of parental (mis)behavior ranks at or near the top of many teacher stress surveys (Sakharov & Farber, 1983).

Stress is a widespread feature of work in teaching. There is strong empirical support for this belief, given the quantity of studies that investigated the determinants of teacher's psychological distress and sick leave. Recent accounts of teacher emotions and cultures of teaching have noted that unsatisfactory social relationships with adults, e.g. colleagues, head teachers, parents and inspectors, elicit hostile emotions from teachers and appear to be a source of stress in teaching. The vast and growing occupational stress literature also has established robust relationships between worksite stress and negative health outcomes (especially cardiovascular morbidity) (Guglielmi & Tatrow, 1998). Clearly, stress (and burn-out) continues to significantly affect both the process and outcome of educational efforts in every system worldwide.

Correspondence concerning this article should be adressed to Bette Prakke, e-mail bette.prakke@hu.nl

Continual exposure to challenging behavior, i.c. from parents, can seriously deplete the teacher's emotional and physical resources, leading to self-doubt, loss of satisfaction from teaching, impulsivity, rigidity or feelings of anger and guilt. In an attempt to provide the required services, work overload and hence stress are almost inevitable. In this respect, considerable strain has been placed upon the coping resources of teachers. As a result teachers may react negatively and irritated to 'problem parents'. Parents then may not receive the human contact, attention and support they sometimes need. Staff negative emotional reactions to challenging behavior might accumulate over time to affect staff well-being.

Because teachers, generally, want to have a positive attitude towards the parents, the development of a negative attitude towards a parent causes a moral conflict within the teacher: the teacher experiences guilt feelings because (s)he feels that (s)he is to blame for the negative attitude towards a parent. The teacher experiences a feeling of inadequacy. This, in turn, negatively influences self image. This is, in fact, a form of stress caused by the discrepancy between what the teacher feels he ought to be doing and what he actually does.

Researchers and policymakers have recognized the growing urgency of teacher stress and burnout by calling it one of the most critical problems facing education today. These phenomena are closely linked to subsequent teacher attrition. Studies indicate that high numbers of teachers leave the classroom every year (Vandenberghe & Huberman, 1999).

General health is a critical factor in the context of rapidly changing organizational climate and culture of schools. Strain is defined as psychological, physical and behavioral responses to stressors. Several stressors influence the general health level of teachers. The term stressor is used to indicate the job and organizational conditions that require adaptive responses from teachers. The negative impact of strain upon the efficiency, effectiveness, satisfaction, and performance is well-documented (Cooper, Dewe, & O'Driscoll, 2001). Strain is manifested in the form of job dissatisfaction, anxiety, and depressed mood, headache, cornory heart disease, absenteeism, poor performance, turnover, etc.

The appraisal of stress to well-being is the main mechanism for mediating the experience of stress. Coping mechanisms are subsequently activated to reduce the personal threat and mediate the stress-response syndrome. Therefore, the experience of stress results from the teachers' perceptions of demands, the inability or difficulty in meeting such demands stemming from a lack of effective coping resources, and the ultimate threat

to the teachers' mental and physical well-being. This point of view is related to the transactional model of stress offered by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). This model, developed in the mid-1970s at the University of Michigan suggests that strain is the result of the mismatch between requirements and demands of the job and the person's real or perceived ability to meet those demands. Individual differences in perceptions, skills, tolerance of job pressure, and vulnerability to dysfunctional outcomes are the key modifiers of the stress-strain relationship.

Research on teacher stress has largely focused on environmental and contextual factors while ignoring personality characteristics of teachers. Believing one could control one's negative mood is associated with more adaptive outcomes for teachers. It is worthwhile to examine negative mood regulation expectancies

The greatest volume of contemporary research concerning vulnerability to teacher stress relates specifically to individual differences in coping style. Teacher stress is associated with a negative feeling and psychological distance, which in turn may lead to teachers' negative attributions of parent's behavior and low tolerance to parent's problematic behavior. Negative affect focuses attention on the problem at hand (Frijda, 1988) and is associated with specific forms of action

We examined teacher's perceptions of their own ability to handle challenging parent behaviour and to establish positive relationships as a possible influence on the quality of teacher-parent relationships. High teacher self-efficacy in general has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes. Bandura's theory of perceived self-efficacy is a usable conceptual framework for studying the impact of emotionally charged relationships on burnout (Brouwers & Tomic, 1998). 'Perceived self-efficacy refers to 'beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments' (Bandura, 1997, p. 3).

At the level of the institution, factors such as social support amongst colleagues have found to be important in affecting levels of stress. Dussault, Deaudelin, Royer & Loiselle (1999) assessed isolation and stress in 1110 Canadian teachers and, found a high correlation. Van Dick, Wagner, Petzel, Lenke & Sommer (1999) questioned 424 teachers from across all German sectors about their work stress, social support and physical illness. It was found that social support had both a direct positive effect on health and a buffering effect in respect of work stress.

In a study reported by Wearing et al. schools discipline policies was found to reduce organisational stressors (e.g. staff relations), which in turn contributed strongly to teaching

stressors (e.g. parents demands and time demands).

Given the existing literature, this study examines the predictive ability of teacher's perception of stress of challenging parental behavior in predicting psychological distance to parents, experienced time pressure, frustration, loss of satisfaction with teaching, an unsatisfactory parent-teacher match, self esteem as a teacher, negative feeling toward parents, collegial cooperation, students discipline and general health.

History of the research-project

In January 2004 a pilot study was set up to study the types of challenging parents Dutch teachers could distinguish. The items of the questionnaire were based on eleven different types of challenging parents, inspired by the work of Seligman (2000). 121 elementary teachers rated (on a 5-point Likert-scale) the incidence of different problematic parental behaviors. In a second series, making use of the same 49 items, teachers were asked to rate the perceived hinder or stress caused by this behavior. Seven subscales were found: excessively worried parents, unsatisfied parents, uncooperative parents, neglectful parents, overprotective parents, uninvolved parents and fighting parents.

In 2005 a second pilot was conducted. The questionnaire used in this pilot was extended. Besides items concerning the incidence and perceived hinder of parental behavior, items were added concerning general stress reactions, self-efficacy in relationship building and behavioral management, negative affect, burnout, support amongst colleagues and negative self-appraisal (Van der Wolf & Everaert, 2005).

Based on this pilot several items were left out, because they did not explain enough variance. Also, the UBOS Burnout Scale was replaced by the General Health Questionnaire. Finally, four open questions were added asking respondents to describe difficult parental behavior in their own words. In November 2006 the survey-instrument was brought into conformity, during an international conference (researchers from Russia, Hong-Kong, USA, Italy, South-Africa, India and the Netherlands) in Utrecht, the Netherlands.

Method

The data for this study were collected in February and March 2007. Participants in this study were 212 elementary school teachers in the Netherlands (80% percent female). The average years of teaching experience was 17 years. Participants were mostly recruited in the middle, middle-east region and urban agglomeration of Western Holland.

Apart from a demographic questionnaire which included gender, ethnicity of the teacher and years of teaching experience, also several questions dealing with gender, ethnicity, SES and family situation of the parent(s) who contacted the teacher, were administered.

To measure the interaction between teacher and parent, each teacher was asked to respond to several items of a questionnaire for a parent of their choosing with "the most challenging behavior", within the current school year. Respondents rated both incidence of the behavior and experienced stress on a 5-point Likert scale from 0 to 4. We carried out a confirmative factor analyses (multiple group method) and found that the average loading of the items on the factor for which they were meant, was much higher than the average loading of these items on the other factors. The conclusion was that the seven types of stress causing difficult parents, found in the previous research, were consistent with the structure in the ratings of the 24 items. Cronbach's Alpha for the 24 items was .72 for incidence and .89 for experienced stress.

These α's are lower than found in Van der Wolf & Everaert's study (2005). This is to be expected, because constructing a scale with the reliability procedure, always capitalizes on chance, so when the same scales are applied to a new sample, lower alpha's can be expected.

Furthermore, general information concerning the background of the teacher (sex, ethnic background, teaching experience) and the teacher's relationship with parents in general were collected. Also, teachers were asked to indicate the percentage of time spent per week, dealing with difficult parents.
41% of the respondents indicated they spend 4% or less of their time dealing with difficult parents. Almost 20% of the respondents state they spend 6% or more of their time on problematic parent behavior.

A "distance to teacher" scale was added to measure the distance felt by the teacher between parent and teacher. Respondents were asked to indicate by placing an "x" on a 12 cm line between a parent and a teacher figure, how close or distant they felt towards the difficult parent.

Apart from the hinder or stress that teachers perceive of parental behavior, respondents were asked to rate 24 statements on a 5-point Likert scale, concerning the effect that the problematic parent has on the teacher and his/her work. These items were partly used in previous research, partly newly constructed.

Table 1: Seven types of problematic parent behaviour

Scale	Number of items per scale and alpha	Examples of items
Excessively worried parent	n = 4; α = 0,79	-this parent is overly concerned about the child's education -this parent is involved with the progress of the child to an excessive degree
Unsatisfied parent	n = 4; α = 0,71	-this parent says he/she thinks you are a bad teacher -this parents threatens to go to higher authorities when he/she suspects an alleged misuse of professionalism
Uncooperative parent	n = 4; α = 0,68	-this parent failed to follow through with an agreement about supervising the child's homework -this parent promises you as a teacher to help the child at home, but does not do it.
Neglectful parent	n = 4; α = 0,44	-this parent takes little notice of the child -the child of this parent looks tired and neglected
Overprotective parent	n = 3; α = 0,72	-this parent is excessively concerned about the child -this parent never relinquishes control of the child and wants to protect him/her against all dangers
Involved-uninvolved parent	n = 3; α = 0,72	-this parent hardly ever comes to school -this parent shows little initiative
Fighting parent	n = 3; α = 0,48	-this parent complains about the other parent of the child -as teacher you feel compelled to take sides with one of the parents

To measure the impact of collegiate collaboration and academic discipline, items based on the CASE-IMS-project by Howard and Keefe (1991) were added. The construct of general health was measured through the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) that measures strain and has shown good psychometric properties. This part contained 12 items like "Have your recently been able to concentrate on whatever you're doing" and "Have you recently been feeling unhappy and depressed?". The alpha of the total scale was 0,82

Table 2: Effect on work teacher

Scale	Number of items per scale and alpha	Examples of items
Frustration of working with parents	n = 4; α = 0,58	-my interaction with this parent is frustrating -this parent and I cannot agree on how to deal with the student
Loss of satisfaction with teaching	n = 3; α = 0,82	-this parent makes me enjoy my work less -this parent makes my school day less enjoyable
Self doubt	n = 3; α = 0,65	-I feel like I am not a good teacher when interacting with this parent -I should be able to manage this parent better
Positive match parent teacher	n = 3; α = 0,70	-my relationship with this parent improved as I worked with him/her -I feel that this parent and I have the same beliefs about teaching
Self esteem of teacher	n = 4; α = 0,58	-I feel confident in my teaching skills when interacting with this parent -I learned a lot from working with this parent
Negative feeling toward parent	n = 4; α = 0,66	-I do not like this parent -I am not happy with the feeling that I have about this parent

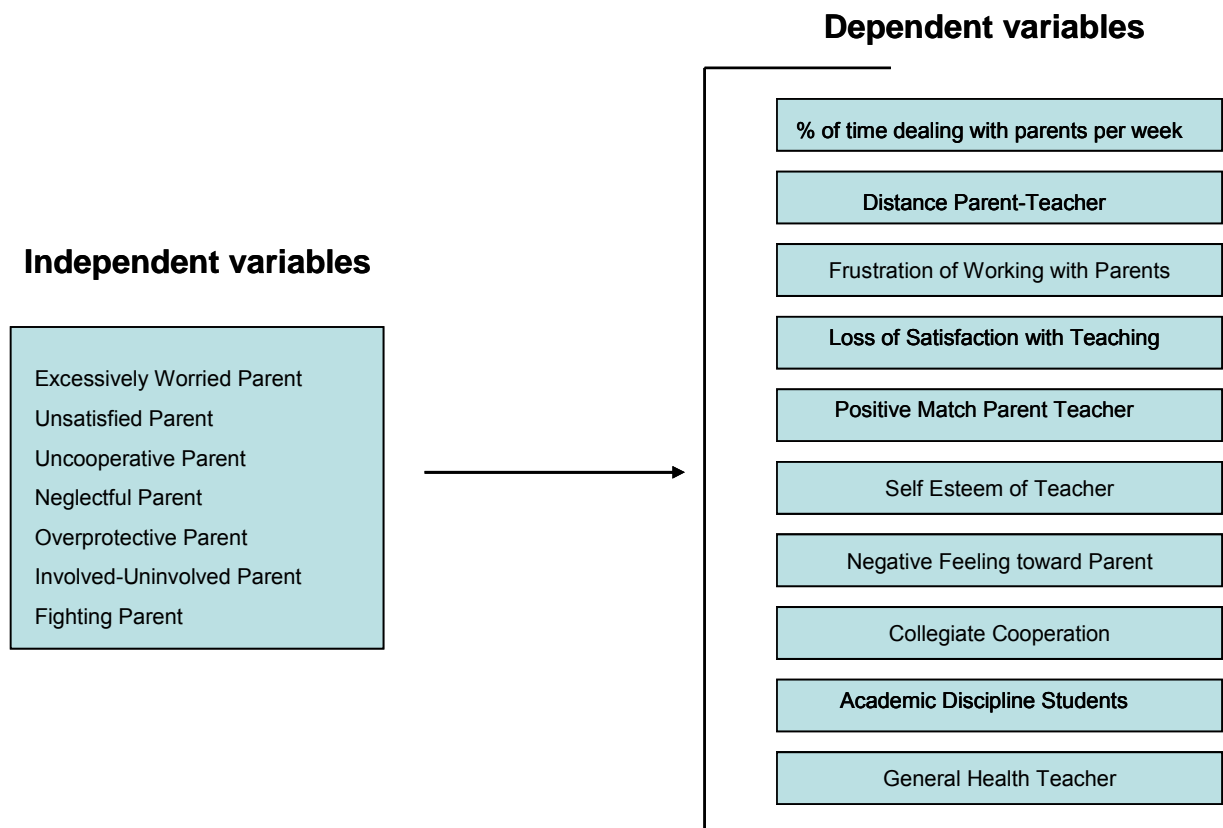**Table 3: Impact of collegiate collaboration and academic discipline**

Scale	Number of items per scale and / alpha	Example of items
Collegiate collaboration	n = 5; α = 0,84	-the quality of your relationship with co-workers -the extent to which your co-workers encourage you and support you in your work
Academic discipline students	n=4; α = 0,89	-The extent to which students are motivated to learn - Your overall level of satisfaction with student discipline in your school

Results

We shall now focus on the relations between the seven types of difficult parents on the one hand and the ten aspects of the work of the teacher on the other hand, by carrying out a canonical correlation analyses. Canonical correlation analyses is an exploring method for the study of the relations between the two sets of variables we have in this article. It does so by constructing pairs of linear combinations of the two sets of variables in such a way that the (canonical) correlation between them is at maximum. After constructing the first pair the variance explained is removed in the two sets and a second pair of linear combinations is constructed. This second pair is uncorrelated with the first pair. Because we have seven types of difficult parents (= the smaller number of variables of the two sets) seven pairs of linear combinations will be constructed en there will be seven canonical correlations.

Figure 1: Independent and dependent variables

Dependent variables

% of time dealing with parents per week

Distance Parent-Teacher

Frustration of Working with Parents

Loss of Satisfaction with Teaching

Positive Match Parent Teacher

Self Esteem of Teacher

Negative Feeling toward Parent

Collegiate Cooperation

Academic Discipline Students

General Health Teacher

Independent variables

Excessively Worried Parent

Unsatisfied Parent

Uncooperative Parent

Neglectful Parent

Overprotective Parent

Involved-Uninvolved Parent

Fighting Parent

Table 4: Multivariate tests of significance

test name	value	sig. of F
Pillais Trace	1,01	0,00
Holtellings T	1,61	0,00
Wilks Lambda	0,29	0,00

The first question that has to be answered is whether there is a significant degree of relationship between the two sets of variables at all.

Wilks' s Lambda is 0,29 and so the multivariate effect size is 1-0,29 = 0,71 and that can be regarded a middle large effect. There is an overall effect and we can proceed with the next question that has to be answered: do one or more of these pairs of linear combinations yield a significant canonical correlation?

The first two canonical correlations are significant. So, there are two pairs of linear combinations (variables) that have significant canonical correlations. What variables play a part in characterizing each variable? The next table gives the correlations between the dependent variables and their (two) canonical variables.

These correlations can be looked upon as loadings. The higher the loadings, the more is the variable involved in the essence of the linear combination or canonical variable.

In the first variable are the highest loadings for negative feeling towards problem parents, frustration working with parents, loss of satisfaction with teaching. The loading of percentage of time dealing with difficult parent and Health are somewhat lower. So, this first canonical variable can best be described by loss of satisfaction with teaching, negative feelings toward parent, as well as time spent managing difficult parents and health problems.

The second variable can be described as follows. The highest loadings are for distance to parent and positive match parent-teachers. This variable is best described by 'Distance to teacher' and by low scores on 'Positive Match Parent-Teacher' . This variable regards a low feeling of affiliation with problematic parents. The other variables are not significant, so their loadings are not reported here.

The first variable explains 23,8% of the variance of the ten variables and the second explains 11,2%. We can now calculate the redundancy-index for both variables. The first squared canonical correlation was 0,499 and so the redundancy-index for the first variable is 0,499·23,8 = 11,9%. For the second variable the redundancy-index is equal to 0,238·11,2 = 2,7%. The redundancy-index for both variables together is 1,46%. So, 14,6% of the variance of the ' seven types of difficult parents' is explained by the first two variables of the ten dependent variables.

We can now look at the seven independent variables, the seven types of difficult parents. We first present the correlations between these seven types and the first two of the canonical variables.

Table 5: Eigenvalues and Canonical Correlations

Root nr.	Eigenvalue	Pct	Cum.Pct	Canonical Correlation	Squared CC	Sig. of F
1	0,997	62,0	62,0	0,71	0,50	0,000
2	0,312	19,4	81,4	0,49	0,24	0,002
3	0,156	9,7	91,1	0,37	0,14	0,238
4	0,089	5,5	96,6	0,29	0,08	0,754
5	0,027	1,7	98,3	0,16	0,03	0,964
6	0,022	1,4	99,6	0,15	0,02	0,924
7	0,006	0,4	100,0	0,08	0,01	0,913

Table 6: Correlations between DEPENDENT and canonical variables

variable	function no.	
	1	2
Time spent	0,45	0,15
Distance	0,31	0,49
Frustration	0,75	0,37
Loss of satisf.	0,71	-0,45
Positive match	-0,28	-0,53
Self Esteem	-0,07	-0,05
Negative feeling	0,85	0,13
Discipline	-0,23	-0,13
Colleagues	-0,01	0,35
Health	0,41	-0,31

All seven types play a substantial role in determining the essence of the first variable, but unsatisfied parents, neglectful parents and overprotective parents have the highest loadings.

The second variable is difficult to interpret with a number of negative loadings and one high loading on uninvolved parents. The interpretation can be that teachers experience distance and a negative match with parents who don't show interest in their children's school career.

The first variable of the seven types of difficult parents explains 41,7% of the variance of the seven variables and the second variable explains 16,0%. We can again calculate the redundancy-index for both variables. The first squared canonical correlation was 0,499 and so the redundancy-index for the first variable is 0,499 · 41,7 = 20,8%. For the second variable the redundancy-index is equal to 0,238 ·16,0 = 3,8%. The redundancy-index for both variables together is 24,6%. So, 24,6% of the variance of the ten dependent variables is explained by the first two variables of the seven difficult parents.

Table 7: Correlations between the seven types of difficult parents and their canonical variables

	Canonical variables	
	1	2
Worried	0.63	-0.51
Unsatis.	0.88	-0,27
Uncoop.	0.45	0,37
Neglectf.	0.67	0,34
Overprot.	0.75	-0,10
Uninvolved	0.56	0,71
Fighting	0.48	-0,17

Conclusion and discussion

In this study we find two significant pairs of variables: the canonical correlations were 0,71 and 0,49 respectively. The redundancy-index for the first pair was 11,9% (11,9% of the variance of the seven types of difficult parents is explained by the first variable of the ten dependent variables) and 20,8% (20,8% of the variance of the ten variables was explained by the first variable of the seven types of difficulty parents).

For the second pair of variables the values were 2,7% and 3,8% respectively.

The first pair of variables is by far the most important and can be characterized as follows:

- the essence of the variable of the seven types of difficult parents is determined by unsatisfied parents, neglectful parents and overprotective parents.

- the essence of the variable of the ten dependent parents is determined by 'loss of satisfaction with teaching', 'negative feelings toward parents' and lesser so, by 'percentage of time dealing with difficult parents' and 'mental health'.

Seligman (2000) observed that parents who are experienced as challenges may become problematic because of the teacher's reaction to them, or because the interaction between the parties is conflicted. 'Due to personality characteristics and interpersonal style, teacher a meeting with parent a might be much more compatible than if parent a met with teacher b, whose characteristics would clash with those of the parent.' (p. 226). The author is of the opinion that for teachers it is important to be aware of the factors that influence perceptions, because only through such understanding teachers will be in a better position to appraise parents' behaviour accurately.

The effects of stress on a teacher may be reduced in three ways: (1) alter the teacher's exposure to the stressor; (2) alter the meaning of the experience to the teacher, help her see it in a different way; or (3) help the teacher develop better coping skills.
It is difficult to alter the teacher's exposure to stressor. Stress is an inevitable part of the profession. It is more practical to teach teachers to perceive a stressor in a different way and develop better ways of dealing with stressors. For example, teachers might interpret problems with parents as a challenge rather than a catastrophe or personal failure.

We have come to the belief that our failure to support and nurture healthy parent-teacher relationships diminishes the quality of student learning in schools. Our instrument was developed to measure stress a teacher experiences as a function of the transaction he or she has with a specific parent. Institutionalized use of this instrument would go a long way towards identifying teachers who would profit from appropriate support. Our experience with both

parent and teacher stress suggest that those who care the most about children are often those who are the most stressed.

Our instrument was developed to measure the stress a teacher experiences by way of interaction he or she has with a specific parent. The central issues are (a) the impact of the parent's behavioral characteristics on the teacher's self-perception and health, and the teacher's perception of support or lack of support from the colleagues in the school. Therefore, the central ideas of this research are (a) to improve the quality of the parent-teacher relationship, (b) the goodness of fit between parent and teacher, and (c) the role of expectations and cognitions in moderating or exacerbating the experiences of being stressed or feeling unhealthy. Other uses of the instrument are to reduce teacher stress and to enhance teacher objectivity. It also can be used as a school-wide screening tool for providing teachers feedback regarding problems with parents, with the goal of identifying those teachers in need of support.

There have been numerous attempts to inform educators of ways to reduce stress and avoid job related health problems. The main aim of this research project is to identify at-risk teachers (i.e. those most vulnerable to the presence of behaviorally challenging parents) so that interventions, both in initial teacher training as well as in in-service training, can be applied to help them develop adequate attitudes and coping-skills.
The idea is to make an attempt towards making use of the so-called neural network technology. The idea is to strive for a situation in which teachers gain insight into their perception of problem parents in relation to their own adequate or possibly inadequate reaction patterns and health. The idea is to develop an instrument (computer-tool) that teachers can use to examine their conceptions regarding problem parents and the stress and obstruction that these conceptions cause (see further Van der Wolf & Everaert, 2005).

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