

# Primary School Teachers' Practices of Collaborating With Parents on Upbringing

*Mirjam Stroetinga, Yvonne Leeman, and Wiel Veugelers*

## Abstract

This study addresses teachers' practices of collaborating with parents on upbringing. It was inspired by the understanding that teachers contribute to upbringing in their day-to-day interaction with students and by the renewed interest in the upbringing-related goals of education in Western societies. The study aimed to learn more about the topic and collaboration practices that emerge from primary school teachers' narratives about collaborating with parents on upbringing. Teachers' practices of collaborating with parents on upbringing are under-researched, and the topic is not often taught in teacher education. Narratives of 34 teachers about practices of collaborating with parents on upbringing were collected in the Netherlands through the method of letter writing. The narratives show a variety of topics: the interwovenness of care, upbringing, and teaching in teachers' practices and views; and a school-focused approach to upbringing goals in education. In this research, three characteristics of teachers' collaboration practices on upbringing were distinguished: (1) teacher–parent equality; (2) a reflective attitude; and (3) commitment to parents. The results show that practices of *collaboration*, *limited collaboration*, and *no collaboration* can be distinguished. Consequences for teacher education are discussed.

Key Words: primary school teachers, parents, elementary students, upbringing, collaboration, care, teaching, perceptions, reflection, Netherlands

## Introduction

This article aims to shed light on primary school teachers' practices of collaborating with parents on upbringing. Upbringing is defined here as adult support of children's societal, social, and personal development. Teachers, like parents, interact with children and, in doing so, contribute to their upbringing (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Whether consciously or not, teachers contribute to children's upbringing through what they teach and the way they teach (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977; Veugelers, 2010).

Current developments in Western societies, such as globalization, increasing individualism and diversity, and decreasing social cohesion, renew the call for the upbringing goals of education. In the European Union, ministers of education have placed citizenship education and "teaching common values" on their agendas (Veugelers et al., 2017). In the classroom, teachers see themselves confronted with a greater diversity of parenting practices. Where values differ, teacher–parent collaboration on upbringing can become increasingly complex (Christie & Szorenyi, 2015; Darmody et al., 2016; Deslandes et al., 2015; Mahmood, 2013). Primary school teachers in the Netherlands find that certain topics related to upbringing are difficult to discuss with parents, for example, bullying and behavioral problems related to children's social/emotional development; learning problems, such as not listening; early puberty issues; and alarming issues at home such as divorce, abuse, and poverty (Leenders et al., 2019).

In the past decades, many studies have shown the importance of teacher–parent collaboration. Benefits have been demonstrated for children's learning results and their social development (e.g., El Nokali et al., 2010; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Jeynes, 2005). With the growing evidence for the benefits of parental involvement on children's learning results, Dutch educational policy has increasingly encouraged teacher–parent collaboration, especially regarding parental involvement in school activities and the home-based support of children's learning (Denessen, 2020). A review study showed that few studies have concentrated on teacher–parent collaboration on upbringing (Stroetinga et al., 2019). A limited number of studies address the practices of teacher–parent collaboration on upbringing in primary education. This empirical research aims to offer insight into this timely aspect of teacher–parent collaboration. The central question of this study is as follows: *Which topics and collaboration practices emerge from primary school teachers' narratives about collaborating with parents on upbringing?*

## Research Literature

### Upbringing

Upbringing is aimed at some concept of “the well-bred person,” who has developed well, socially and personally (Tagunova et al., 2016). Two aspects of the upbringing process can be distinguished. Upbringing supports the child to become familiarized with the existing world and, to some extent, adjust to existing regulations, rituals, and habits. It also supports the child’s development as an individual, ensuring the child can speak up in a unique voice. These two upbringing aims demand different upbringing roles of the adults involved. Arendt (2006) explains how in education, on the one hand, adults are to introduce the young into the existing world and, on the other hand, to offer the young the freedom to renew this world, to add something to it. The work of Mollenhauer (2014) emphasizes that upbringing is value-laden and identifies two questions that are crucial for adults who support children’s upbringing: “What are the valuable cultural contents to pass on?” and “What is perceived as ‘good’ adult life?”

In educational practice, it is not always clear when upbringing is taking place and how it differentiates from other educational goals and activities. The natural entanglement of the teaching and upbringing goals of education is analyzed in the work of both Feiler et al. (2008) and Broström (2006). Broström (2006) describes how upbringing is present in education, within the “unity” of care, teaching, and upbringing. Broström offers the following practical example from the context of early education, and he explains the interconnectedness within this unity and the distinction of each of the three educational goals:

A three-year-old boy grasps the child-care worker’s hand. She interprets the boy’s intention, which is to watch the birds at the playground. We call such educational activities care. In this interaction, the child and the child-care worker may also touch upon some values and norms, for example, not frightening the birds. Or the child may just have an experience of being treated in an appreciative way, which influences him and, in the long run, will support the development of some particular norms and values. We call such educational activities upbringing. At the same time, the child-care worker and child also have a shared content: they look at the birds, and they talk about them, for example, their names and what they eat. Because the activity opens up appropriation of new knowledge and skills, we call the child-care worker’s activity teaching. (Broström, 2006, pp. 394–395)

The example shows the entanglement of upbringing, care, and teaching in education, as teacher–student interactions of care, teaching, and upbringing

fuse in the classroom. However, the fields are distinguishable. Teaching in education refers to providing knowledge and didactics that suit the child's cognitive abilities and needs to stimulate the child's learning achievements. Upbringing in education comprises stimulating the child's societal, social, and personal development by offering a pedagogical climate and activities that stimulate the child's developmental in these areas. Care in education encompasses being responsive to the child's physical and emotional needs, such as the need to be heard and understood, the need for safety in the play yard, for food and drink, and balance in working and playing. Care in this sense is a relational term, concerning a carer (here the teacher or parent) and a cared-for (the student). According to Noddings (2012), relational care in education can be understood as the teacher's attitude of receptive listening to a child's expressions of needs. Noddings emphasizes that teachers' relational care does not only concern children's emotional and physical needs, but it includes the possibilities of the child's full development in the fields of learning and personal development. As such, the entanglement of care, upbringing, and teaching in education is once more apparent.

### **Teacher Collaboration With Parents on Upbringing**

In contrast to an instrumental understanding, this research is inspired by Kelchtermans (2009) and Noddings (2012) in understanding the profession of the teacher as relational and value-laden. Collaboration in today's diverse context of upbringing requires an interest in and recognition of the practices and views of others and the willingness to become aware of and even reflect on one's own practices and views. This understanding of collaboration does not necessarily imply consensus. Drawing on Mouffe (2005), the process of collaboration, like that of the democratic discussion in cases of conflict, does not necessarily benefit from a focus on consensus. Instead, consensus as a quick fix eliminates the opportunity to explore differing positions.

Empirical research on teacher–parent contact emphasizes the importance of two-directional communication, such as the leading work of Epstein and Sanders (2002) that distinguishes home-to-school and school-to-home information. In addition, empirical literature about teacher–parent collaboration on upbringing addresses the importance of dialogue and of building warm, trusting relationships with parents (Bergeron & Deslandes, 2011; Kroeger & Lash, 2011; Westergard, 2013). These studies show that teachers who have a friendly smile and are warm and welcoming to parents are able to instill parents' trust in the teacher–parent relationship. However, trust between parents and teachers is not self-evident, especially when value positions differ, for example, in the case of differing cultural backgrounds of teachers and parents

(Hedegaard, 2005; Mahmood, 2013). In this respect, Hedegaard (2005) underlines the importance of teachers and parents knowing and appreciating each other's practices and views on upbringing.

McKenna and Millen (2013) suggest two models that acknowledge the complexity and personal dimension of teacher–parent collaboration. The first model, “Parental Voice,” refers to the hopes, dreams, and concerns that parents have for their children and the teachers' acknowledgment of parental views, such as those on upbringing. The second model, “Parental Presence,” refers to the efforts that parents put into the child's development and teachers' recognition of these parental practices. Teachers that practice these models approach parents from an attitude of equality, recognizing parents' views and practices are as legitimate as their own: parents' views and practices matter, regardless of their similarity with teachers' own views and practices.

### **Teachers' Views on Collaborating With Parents on Upbringing**

When collaborating with parents, teachers' reflection is necessary to prevent their views from remaining unconscious (Mahmood, 2013). Eberly et al. (2007) emphasize the importance of teacher–parent dialogue because it can initiate teachers' reflections, which is an essential factor in teacher–parent contact. Reflection can occur on the level of action and the level of the underlying views (Kelchtermans, 2009). Korthagen and Vasalos (2010) outline that teachers' reflections are often limited to the level of practical problems and “quick fixes,” leaving the level of views untouched. The level of views, however, requires reflection when collaborating on upbringing, especially when upbringing practices differ from what the teacher regards as a good upbringing (Eberly et al., 2007; Mahmood, 2013).

In the broader landscape of teacher professionalism, collaborating with parents is one of many elements. Apart from the possible commitment to parents, teachers' professionalism encompasses several fields of commitment, such as commitment to school, teaching, and students (Firestone & Pennell, 1993). Firestone and Pennell (1993) emphasize the psychological bond of an individual with the object of commitment and the fact that a committed person “believes strongly in the object's goals and values...and strongly desires to remain affiliated with the object” (p. 491). A review study of the empirical literature on teacher–parent collaboration on upbringing by Stroetinga et al. (2019) revealed two tendencies in teacher views that hinder teacher–parent collaboration on upbringing. Firstly, teachers tend to hold a narrow, school-based view on parental involvement. Parents who do not attend school meetings regularly and parents who are less responsive to teachers' advice are regarded by teachers as less involved in their children's development (Kroeger & Lash, 2011; Theodorou,

2008). Secondly, teachers may have difficulty appreciating parenting practices that differ from their own view on what constitutes “good” upbringing (Eberly et al., 2007; Mahmood, 2013). Teachers who are committed to parents desire to remain affiliated with every parent, believe in parents’ goals, and, as such, acknowledge every parent’s value for their child’s development.

The research literature shows that, in particular, the concept of the unity of care, upbringing, and teaching in education (Broström, 2006) and different teacher characteristics of collaborating with parents on upbringing, such as teacher–parent equality, reflection on action and views, and commitment to parents, are relevant for our study. Teachers’ narratives were examined to illuminate their practices of collaborating with parents on upbringing.

## Method

### Data Collection

The nature of the research question entailed gathering rich information about teachers’ practices of collaborating with parents on upbringing. Inspired by the suggestions of Connelly and Clandinin (1990) and the example of McKenna and Millen (2013), who invited mothers to write a letter to their child’s hypothetical future teacher, letter writing was the chosen method. Primary school teachers were asked to respond to the following: “*Write a letter to a hypothetical preservice teacher about your practices of collaborating with parents on upbringing. Please describe one case of collaborating with parents on upbringing, describe related thoughts, and finish with advice for the preservice teacher.*” The open request to describe one case was chosen because limited empirical knowledge is available and respondent spontaneity was intended. Therefore, no qualifications were added to the request, such as describing the most successful, dramatic, or thought-provoking experience. A similar approach was chosen regarding the upbringing topics: teachers were not asked to list all the upbringing topics they had collaborated on; neither were they asked to compile a list of all the upbringing topics they could think of. Respondents were asked to describe one or multiple topics in a one-case narrative.

The instrument design consisted of four parts: (1) an *information sheet* that provided information about the topic of teacher–parent collaboration on upbringing; (2) an *instruction sheet* with instructions about the letter writing, submission, anonymity, and due dates; (3) a *letter format* that offered a framework in which to write the letter; and (4) a short *questionnaire about personal data*, such as age, gender, and school data, such as location, size, and religious denomination. The information sheet provided four examples of upbringing-related issues in schools to explain the field of focus. The four examples orig-

inated from recent interviews with teachers and parents in a research-based curriculum development project about educating teachers on collaborating with parents, in which two researchers from the research team participated. The examples included the following: “My student’s parents are so protective, it hinders the child’s development”; “My eight-year-old student participates in Ramadan and can’t concentrate in class”; “A mother demands more homework for her child, but I think playing would be most beneficial”; and “A toddler from my class hit his mum while I was talking to her—she did not correct him.”

The first version of the instrument was used by and discussed with four principals participating in the project mentioned above. The adjusted version of the instrument was then piloted. In the pilot phase the instrument generated rich narratives and vivid and personal descriptions of practices and thoughts concerning collaborating with parents on upbringing. Therefore, this version of the instrument was used in the current research.

### Participants

The intended sample consisted of primary school teachers in the Netherlands, varying in age, gender, and years of teaching experience, and who worked in primary schools that varied in location, size, and religion (school denomination). In the Netherlands, as in many Western countries, it is difficult to recruit teachers for participation in empirical research. We decided that a *relationship* with a teacher education institute and a *shared commitment* to the education of future teachers were necessary to motivate teachers to participate. Considering the intended variety, we invited 125 primary school teachers from different networks connected to the teacher education institute, such as post-teacher-education study groups, teacher research groups, and mentor networks. The intended respondents were informed about the research and, while taking classes at the teacher education institute, were personally invited to participate. After expressing their interest in participation, the teachers received a personal email with an invitation and instructions, followed by an email reminder three weeks later. Subsequently, 34 teachers wrote a letter in the period from January 2016 to March 2017, which equates to a response rate of 37%.

The sample demonstrates the desired variety of teacher characteristics. The gender variety in the sample is similar to the gender variety of Dutch primary school teachers nationwide: 13% is male, and 87% is female. In addition, the sample shows variety in years of teaching experience: 12 respondents have five or fewer years of teaching experience, and 13 have more than 20 years of experience. The age variety within the sample is relatively similar to the age variety in Dutch primary school teachers nationwide, as teachers under the age of 30 and over the age of 50 are over-represented (Onderwijs in Cijfers, 2016b).

Sample variety is also present concerning school characteristics. The variety in school size within the sample is somewhat comparable to the size variety on the Dutch national level: nearly two-thirds of the respondents teach in primary schools with 100–300 students, and a quarter teaches in a school with more than 300 students. Small schools are slightly under-represented but are—similar to the national numbers—the smallest group. In the sample, schools in rural areas (nine) and urban schools (eight) are represented. All of the urban schools within the sample are located in the city of Utrecht, which is one of the four largest cities in the Netherlands.

The Netherlands has, besides public schools, schools of different religious denominations. These schools are state-subsidized. This is a result of the Dutch educational tradition of “freedom of education” regarding religious and moral goals and pedagogical approaches within a predominantly centralized curriculum (Nieveen & Kuiper, 2012). Roughly, one-third of Dutch primary schools are Protestant, one-third are Catholic, and one-third are public (Onderwijs in Cijfers, 2016a). Teacher education institutions in the Netherlands, too, can have a religious denomination, but they educate teachers for teaching in all schools. Corresponding to the Protestant denomination of the teacher education institute involved, the sample shows an over-representation of Protestant primary schools: 60% of the respondents teach at a Protestant school. Similar to national percentages, 30% teach in a Catholic primary school. Public schools are under-represented in the sample: only one respondent teaches in public education.

### **Analysis**

The data analysis aimed to describe the commonalities, variations, and nuances within teachers’ upbringing topics and practices on collaboration with parents. As the first step in a process of analytic structuring, the data was coded using *Atlas.Ti*. In this process, upbringing and collaboration practices were sorted. The second step consisted of coding all pieces of text about upbringing, using the codes of upbringing, care, and teaching. All the pieces of text about collaboration used the codes of equality, reflection, and commitment. In the process of open and deep reading and researchers’ triangulation, the findings were discussed, sharpened, and agreed upon. An example is the categorization of the letters about children arriving at school late. These three letters all concern young children who are unable to get to school by themselves. Therefore, the upbringing topic of arriving late was subsequently not categorized as discipline, but as care: according to the three teachers, the parental care does not meet the child’s need for benefits of arriving on time, such as a calm arrival, welcoming words of the teacher, and being present during instruction. During

the process of triangulation, differences in interpretation of the researchers were discussed and resolved, and full agreement was achieved.

As a third step, in a process of deep and open reading and researcher triangulation, important themes and connections within and between code-groups emerged. For example, the discovery *within* a code-group concerns the code-group of commitment in collaboration: quotations acknowledging every parent's value for the child's development explicitly showed an emphasis on parents' *added* value for their children's development *at school*. Connections *between* code-groups emerged, which resulted in clustering the practices in narratives of collaboration, limited collaboration, and no collaboration.

## Findings

### Topics

Most letters contain one description of a collaboration practice concentrated on one topic, which may be a consequence of the invitation to describe *one case* of collaboration on upbringing. A few narratives contain additional, unelaborated topics. Only the 34 elaborated topics were included in the topic-analysis, which enabled us to include teachers' reasoning and views concerning the topics.

#### *Topic Diversity*

Teachers were asked to write about collaborating with parents on upbringing. The broad range of topics found in the letters relate to upbringing (15), care (12), or teaching (7). Of the 15 letters with a topic focused on upbringing, 13 concern a child's undisciplined behavior at school, such as physically or verbally hurting other children, destroying objects, or cursing and yelling. Teachers write, "He had difficulty obeying the rules, and he was often verbally and physically aggressive to other children," and "R. was very restless in class. She did lots of things that were not allowed." In several of these letters, teachers link the problematic behavior to an upbringing challenge, such as learning to resolve conflicts, learning to share toys, to wait for one's turn, or to obey school rules. These challenges focus on the child learning to behave at school. A teacher writes, "K. expresses his emotions often in a too intense way, drowns in frustration, and needs a break to calm down. He solves conflicts by imposing his wishes on other children in a physically dominant way." Emotion regulation and conflict solving are the upbringing challenges pointed out by the teacher. Another teacher writes, "From the start, it was clear that this boy has a hard time sharing things and playing together....He expresses this mainly physically, by hitting or kicking or crying loudly." The child's physical expression of frustration is the main reason for the teacher contacting the parents.

The teacher identifies learning to share things and to play together as related upbringing challenges.

In the two other letters with topics concerning upbringing, developing as an individual is the central upbringing challenge. A teacher relates that a student barely expresses himself: “In the first weeks, I mainly went looking for L.’s true self. . . . Because he hardly showed emotions, I wanted to regularly check his opinion and whether that matched his expression.” This teacher searches for ways to support the child to develop as an individual. The other teacher, too, describes how she supports the child’s process of developing as an individual: “S. is an insecure girl. . . . I try to give her space and take her seriously and dare her to improve her ability to solve problems by herself.”

Twelve letters demonstrate a topic related to care. A few of these letters are about alarming home situations, such as domestic violence or divorce. Examples of other care-related topics are a child unable to dress himself properly after gym class, a child with unpleasant body odor, children arriving at school late, a 10-year-old boy who is treated like a toddler by his mother, and problems with saying goodbye. For example, “J. arrives with his mum. It goes wrong. J. cries, doesn’t want to stay, and mother immediately says, ‘This doesn’t work; he’s coming with me.’ She is resolute. ‘It really doesn’t work,’ she says, lightly panicked. Mother leaves with J.”

In seven other letters, the topic is related to teaching. The topics include a teacher experiencing a child’s hyperactivity, which negatively influences the child’s learning achievements; parents who demand higher-level learning material for their child; and parents who wish to keep their child with low IQ in regular education. The teacher mentioning the last topic writes, “The parents very much want for the child to stay in our school, because the girl is happy here, has friends, and it is close to home. I personally had a hard time accepting this. After all, we want to teach the child something! You want a child to go to school and use and develop [his/her] talents.” In this narrative, upbringing aspects of developing as an individual—being happy and having friends—in-termingle with teaching aspects of using and developing one’s talents.

### *Topic Interwovenness and Teachers’ School-Focused Upbringing Scope*

For the 34 teachers, the interwovenness of upbringing, care, and teaching is obvious. Only the teacher writing about keeping a child with low IQ in regular education marks the interrelatedness: “This letter was more about learning results, but also a bit about upbringing. In the end, upbringing also is about letting your child learn things in a suitable school.” Apart from this single citation, the interwovenness is not discussed. The topics of upbringing, care, and teaching, thus, seem naturally interwoven in the respondents’ practices and thinking.

The open-reading analysis unveiled participants' school-focused upbringing scope, which is present in the topics. Contributing to children's upbringing in primary education might be focused on the here (this classroom, this school) and now (this moment in the child's life). However, it might also focus beyond that, as in learning for society or learning for adult life. In the data set, however, without exception, the examples on upbringing all commence with a problem the teacher experiences at school, for example, children demonstrating disturbing behavior in class or not showing expected learning achievements. In addition to the fact that examples of upbringing never start with a positive experience, such as a child showing amazing behavior or a parent demonstrating impressive care, the topics' relevance seldom relates to a location or time beyond the here and now. One teacher does demonstrate a forward focus on upbringing goals of education concerning the topic of being late: "Later, in society, one cannot be structurally late, and, therefore, we begin working on that in primary school." No other broader upbringing perspectives concerning learning for adult life or learning for society are expressed in the letters. As such, a school-focused upbringing scope is identified. Viewed from the perspective of increasingly important educational goals of citizenship education or moral education, there is a prominent absence of a broader educational frame on upbringing-related goals in the narratives of these teachers as expressed in these letters.

### **Teachers' Practices of Collaborating With Parents on Upbringing**

Teachers' collaboration practices as expressed in the letters were studied in terms of the three collaboration characteristics. Before expounding on the (co-) appearance of these characteristics in the letters, expressions of each characteristic are described.

#### *An Approach of Equality in Collaborating on Upbringing*

Teachers' recognition of parental practices and/or parental views is scored under the first upbringing characteristic: an approach of equality in teacher-parent collaboration on upbringing. A clear example of recognition of parental *practices* is described by a teacher struggling with a child who is unable to dress himself properly after gym class. After another severe clash with the mother about missing items of clothing and the child's ineffective dressing habits, the teacher decides to change her approach towards the mother:

First of all, I showed the mother my sympathy: "I understand that the missing trousers bothered you." Then I showed my vulnerability, saying: "I just cannot succeed in making your son dress himself on time. How do you do this at home?"

By asking the mother about her at-home practices and vulnerably admitting to not succeeding, the teacher expresses equality in the teacher–parent relationship and appreciation for the mother’s information. Other examples of equality expressed by recognition of parental practices include, “I ask the mother what she experiences at home and how she deals with that,” “I asked the parents how they solve these situations,” and “In dialogue with the parents, it turns out they run into the same things at home.”

Teachers’ recognition of parental *views* is demonstrated in the story of a teacher confronted with an eight-year-old child relating in class how she was hit by her mother the other night and forced to sleep on the doormat. The teacher describes how the child’s story did not match the picture she has of the child’s mother and how she experienced a profound need to talk to the mother about this. After deciding on a strategy for the conversation, the teacher calls the mother. The teacher writes,

After I had told the mother the reason I was calling, she asked if I wanted to hear her side of the story. Of course I did!!! It was an open and pleasant conversation, in which the interest of her child and my student was on top of our agendas!...I still admire her openness and vulnerability during our conversation! In turn, she was thankful that I had approached her with care and openness.

The teacher’s wish to learn more about the mother’s views and the teacher’s appreciation of the provided information are characteristic of an approach of equality, which is expressed by teachers’ recognition of parental views. Narratives that demonstrate this equality characteristic typically have expressions such as the following: “After my introduction, I asked parents whether they recognized this at home, and I asked about their views,” “I invited the mother to share her worries,” and “Then I let the parents tell their story.”

Thirteen narratives demonstrate an approach of equality in collaboration on upbringing. In 21 letters, the teacher–parent contact lacks this collaboration characteristic.

#### *A Reflective Attitude on the Level of Practices and Views*

Reflection by the teacher on the level of practices and the level of views were distinguished during data analysis, as were reflection on the subject of collaboration and the subject of upbringing. It was discovered that reflection mainly concerns collaboration. Only one narrative indicates a reflection on upbringing. After asking a mother about her at-home practices when dealing with her son’s difficult behavior, the teacher states, in a reflection on her own upbringing practices, “Since that time, I often used a time-out place.” Furthermore, in a reflection on her underlying upbringing views: “Instead of reacting with emotion, it turns out that stimulating positive behavior is more effective.”

Examples of reflection on the level of practices concerning collaboration include “In hindsight, I could have been more critical to the parents about their too-high expectations for their child” and “In a next meeting, I would explain that I do not appreciate such remarks.” Reflection on the level of views concerning collaboration is found in expressions such as: “At that moment, I realized I should have done this from the beginning! Not solving everything by myself, but asking for help. And who might I better ask than his own mother?” and “From that moment on, I realized a deeper question can hide behind every question or remark of parents. I learned that it is of utmost importance to pose supplementary questions.” The reflections on the level of views that emerge from the data demonstrate teachers’ willingness to explore and adjust their own positions in dialogue with parents.

In more than one case, emotional outbursts of parents trigger reflection on the level of views, as demonstrated in the following two examples. A teacher meets a mother yet again about a child’s complex behavior in gym class. The teacher writes,

The situation in gym class came up. I expected resistance from the mother again, but instead, she started crying, saying, “Can you imagine what it is like having a child saying he wants to die? Imagine being afraid every day of what negative news the teacher has this time about your son’s behavior!” At that moment, I tried to imagine her situation and saw things from her perspective. ...Since this meeting, I try to relate to parents’ positions more.

Another teacher writes how a sudden confrontation with a mother’s emotions changes her views about collaborating with parents:

During the meeting, I was thinking so much about what I thought was good for the child that I stopped thinking about the parents...I never thought of what it would mean for the parents to listen to my opinion. I only realized this to the fullest when the mother started crying in the next meeting.

These quotations demonstrate that reflection on the level of views can lead to a deeper understanding of the parents’ position.

A reflective attitude occurs in 13 narratives. Reflection on the level of views (8 letters) predominantly appears in combination with an attitude of equality. Conversely, reflection on the level of views rarely appears when an attitude of equality is absent.

### *Teachers’ Commitment to Parents*

In the analysis, commitment orientation towards parents, students, and colleagues is distinguished. Expressions of concern with the parents’/students’/

colleagues' position and the wish to remain affiliated with parents/students/colleagues were coding criteria for commitment. As such, commitment to parents was identified in 11 letters; commitment to students was found more often—in 18 letters; and commitment to colleagues was present in one letter. Examples of expressions of commitment to parents include the following: “Now that I am a mother myself, I understand very well that it is not nice to hear something negative about one's child. Parents need time to process something,” “What would be the story of this mother?” and “It is important to be involved with children and parents.”

Nine of the 11 letters that contain a commitment to parents demonstrate acknowledgment of every parent's value for their child's development. Interestingly, each of these 10 letters specifies this acknowledgment by recognizing every parent's *added* value for the child's development *at school*, since they emphasize that a teacher depends on the specific knowledge and experience of the parent to realize the best possible education for this particular child. For example, “Parents are experts on their child. Teachers are experts on education and know the child as a student. When teachers and parents acknowledge each other's expertise, they can learn a lot,” “Listen to parents, because they know their child best,” “I wish you would take every parent seriously. Every parent says and does things with the best intentions. They know the child best and are responsible for [his/her] happiness,” and “Parents often know their own child very well and can hand you as a teacher a lot of advice to help their child.”

Following the same process, it was discovered that five letters express the opposite and emphasize the difficulties of collaborating with a certain parent. Examples include the following: “I hope in the near future you will not have to deal with a family acting like this,” “I hope you will mainly meet parents who consider their child's needs,” “With these parents, I am already desperate after three weeks,” and “These kinds of parents, with children with problems, fall in the category of ‘difficult parents.’”

During the analysis of commitment towards parents, students, and colleagues, a fourth commitment emerged. This commitment concentrates on teachers' concern with school regulations, with varying intensity. Mild varieties comprise teachers' descriptions of school regulations that, in the teacher's opinion, parents should live up to. For example, a teacher states, “At 08h20, the doors of the school open....At 08h30, clapping or a bell in class is sounding as a sign for parents to leave....Also, in letters to parents, this is repeated regularly.” In stronger variations of commitment to school, the teacher follows these regulations, regardless of possible damage to the teacher–parent relationship. One teacher writes,

T. wanted to hand out Christmas cards to all his classmates. At our school, however, handing out cards or invitations in class is not allowed....The father got angry and called our principal to state what a lousy school this was and he himself would come to school to hand out the cards.

Another teacher writes,

School management has forced us, teachers, to give red cards to children that arrive at school too late....A girl was late in the morning, so I gave her a red card at the end of the day. The next morning, I received a nasty email from her father.

Options of questioning school policy or taking a stand against it are not mentioned in these letters—not even when following the school regulations harms the teacher–parent relationship. In every one of the 10 letters describing commitment to school, the collaboration characteristics of equality and reflection of the teacher are painfully lacking. However, letters expressing teachers' commitment to parents and teachers' acknowledgment of parents' added value for children's education are strongly connected to teachers' approach of equality in collaborating with parents on upbringing, as well as to teachers' reflective attitude on the level of views.

### *Three Groups of Narratives on Collaboration*

Table 1 shows the degree of collaboration by providing an overview of the presence of the collaboration characteristics in each of the 34 letters. The process of deep reading and combining data resulted in the distinction of the three groups of teacher narratives of collaborating with parents on upbringing, as presented in Table 1. The three groups differ in the number of collaboration characteristics they include, that vary from no, to limited, to multiple characteristics. In 14 letters, no collaboration characteristics were identified. In 20 letters, collaboration is present, half of which are in an intensified form and contain multiple collaboration characteristics. These teacher stories are characterized by the recognition of practices and views of parents, which demonstrates an approach of equality in collaborating with parents on upbringing. The stories contain teachers' reflections on the level of views, commitment to parents, and acknowledgment of every parent's added value for their child's education. A one-sided commitment to school and emphasis on the difficulty of collaborating with a certain parent are absent.

The other 10 letters demonstrate limited collaboration. These letters contain only one of the collaboration characteristics. The letters of limited collaboration more often demonstrate a reflective attitude on the level of practices and a commitment solely to students. Practical advice on how to best collaborate with parents is common in these letters. Certain teacher attitudes and

techniques, such as being open, good listening, clear planning, and asking colleagues, are being recommended. These recommendations include the following: “It goes for all difficult conversations that you should discuss things face to face, in order to understand one another better;” “Make sure to always have an open and interested attitude towards parents;” “What is important in a meeting with parents, is to listen carefully, make clear agreements, and plan your next meeting;” and “In consultation with the principal or a specialized colleague, you often reach more. Do ask for help if there is something you don’t know.” Noticeable in this respect is the fact that, in five letters (three of no collaboration and two of limited collaboration), teachers openly express how they use their recommended techniques instrumentally to get parents to do as the teacher pleases. These techniques are elaborated as follows: “When you point out the things you like to see more in children and parents, be clear, positive, and give many compliments. This will stimulate the desired behavior in children and parents,” and “When I talk to the parents, my goal is to make sure P. takes his medication at home....By also mentioning P.’s positive qualities, asking parents their story, and asking how they go about it at home, I reached my goal.” Instrumental use of collaboration techniques is only present in letters lacking a reflective attitude.

At the bottom of Table 1, the 14 letters grouped together lack all collaboration characteristics. In these letters of no collaboration, teachers’ reflective attitudes, teachers’ approach of equality in collaborating with parents, and commitment to parents are entirely absent. A commitment to school is common in these stories, and an emphasis on the difficulty of collaborating with a certain parent appears exclusively in this group of narratives.

We analyzed participants’ years of teaching experience concerning the three groups of letters. Teachers with less experience and those with more experience are found in all three groups. There are teachers with limited teaching experience who demonstrate multiple collaboration characteristics; teachers with 20 or more years of teaching experience are overrepresented in the group of no collaboration; there is an overrepresentation of starting teachers in the group of limited collaboration. Thus, it can be concluded that a collaborative approach to parents does not develop automatically as teaching experience increases, nor is it automatically present in starting teachers and is, somehow, lost along the way. Relating the topics to the years of teaching experience did not offer any remarkable finding: the topics are divided more or less equally among the groups of teachers with fewer and more years of teaching experience.

Table 1. Analysis of Narratives on Collaborating With Parents on Upbringing ( $n = 34$ )

	<i>Characteristic 1</i>	<i>Characteristic 2</i>		<i>Characteristic 3</i>	
#	Equality	Reflection		Commitment	
	Recognitions of parental....	Level	Subject	Orientation towards...	Emphasis on...
COLLABORATION (narratives with multiple collaboration characteristics)					
1	Practices	Practices + Views	Collaboration	Parents + Students	Parents' added value
2	Views	Views	Collaboration	Parents + Students	Parents' added value
3	Views	Practices + Views	Collaboration	Parents + Students + Coll	Parents' added value
4	Views	Views	Collaboration	Parents	Parents' added value
5	Practices	Views	Upbringing	Parents	Parents' added value
6	Views	Views	Collaboration	Parents	Parents' added value
7	Views	Views	Collaboration	Parents	
8	Practices + Views			Parents + Students	Parents' added value
9	Practices			Parents	Parents' added value
10	Views			Parents + Students	
LIMITED COLLABORATION (narratives with a single collaboration characteristic)					
11	Views			Students	
12	Practices			Students	
13	Practices + Views				
14				Parents	Parents' added value
15		Practices	Collaboration		
16		Practices	Collaboration		
17		Practices	Collaboration	Students	
18		Views	Collaboration	Students	
19		Practices	Collaboration		
20		Practices	Collaboration	Students	
NO COLLABORATION (narratives with no collaboration characteristic)					
21				Students	
22				Students	
23					
24				Students	
25				School + Students	
26				School	
27				School	
28				School	
29				School	
30				School	Collaboration difficulties
31				School + Students	Collaboration difficulties
32				School + Students	Collaboration difficulties
33				School + Students	Collaboration difficulties
34				School + Students	Collaboration difficulties

## Conclusions and Discussion

This study aimed to learn more about the upbringing topics and collaboration practices that emerge from primary school teachers' narratives about collaborating with parents on upbringing. Thirty-four primary school teachers from the Netherlands participated in the research, and each wrote a letter to a hypothetical preservice teacher about their experiences of collaborating with parents on upbringing. Upbringing in this study was understood as children's societal, social, and personal development.

### Topics

The concept of the unity of care, upbringing, and teaching in education by Broström (2006) was used for topic analysis. The topics that the participating teachers mention in their letters, when asked to write about collaborating on upbringing, are varied and relate to upbringing (15), care (12), or teaching (7). Topics related to upbringing mainly concern children's undisciplined behavior at school and, sometimes, children's development as an individual. Topics relating to care are, for example, children who are unable to dress themselves properly or who have difficulty saying goodbye, or topics of alarming home situations such as divorce or domestic violence. Topics relating to teaching concern, for example parents demanding for their child with low IQ to stay in regular education or asking for more homework. The fact that teachers mention topics of care, upbringing, and teaching when asked to write about collaborating on upbringing demonstrates how care, upbringing, and teaching are interwoven in teachers' practices. Only one teacher identifies that her topic is about teaching, and she points out the topic's entanglement with upbringing. Identifying the distinguishable aspects of education and the interwovenness of these aspects appears to be underdeveloped terrain for most of the respondents.

The respondents' school-focused view on upbringing goals stands out. In the letters, upbringing goals are addressed from a problem the teacher experiences in the classroom, such as a child's disturbing behavior or poor learning achievements. Moreover, the upbringing goals are mostly limited to the here and now: they focus on this classroom and this moment in the child's life. A broader relevance of upbringing goals for adult life or society is barely mentioned, and references to, for example, the current decrease of social cohesion and the growing cultural diversity in Western societies, are not made.

### Practices of Collaborating on Upbringing

Concerning collaboration, three characteristics on the side of the teacher were determined, which are based on research literature: (1) an approach of

equality; (2) a reflective attitude; and (3) commitment to parents. This study resulted in further refinement of these characteristics, for example, respondents emphasized in their commitment to parents the *added* value of every parent for the child's development *at school* and mentioned how they depend on parents' knowledge and experience to create the best possible education for this particular child. Another example of refinement concerns reflection on the level of *views*: for teachers in several letters, reflection on the level of views leads to a deeper understanding of the parent's position, and it always coincides with an approach of equality and with a commitment to parents.

Studying the (co-)appearance and absence of collaboration characteristics, three groups of narratives on collaboration appear from the data set. Firstly, there are the narratives of *collaboration*, with multiple collaboration characteristics. These teachers demonstrate an approach of equality, and they invite parents to share their practices and views while showing vulnerability towards parents regarding their own practices and views. As such, these teachers demonstrate an interest in the other person's position, which relates to Mouffe's (2005) plea to avoid focusing on consensus as a quick fix. Moreover, these teachers mostly reflect on the level of views, which leads to a better understanding of the parent's position. Commitment to parents is often found, as is the acknowledgment of every parent's added value for their child's education.

Secondly, there are letters of *limited collaboration*, which demonstrate a single collaboration characteristic. These narratives more often contain a commitment solely to students, reflection on the level of practices, and practical advice on how to collaborate with parents. Collaboration, in these stronger (multiple) and weaker (limited) varieties, is found in 20 out of the 34 letters.

Lastly, there are letters of *no collaboration*, and they lack all collaboration characteristics. Only these narratives demonstrate an explicit commitment to the school. In some of these letters, teachers are so concerned with school regulations, such as arriving at school on time, that it damages the teacher-parent contact.

Both more experienced teachers and less experienced teachers are represented in all three groups of narratives, with the overrepresentation of experienced teachers in the group of no collaboration and overrepresentation of less experienced teachers in the group of limited collaboration. Thus, teaching experience does not directly correlate to the quality of collaborating with parents. Teachers do not automatically develop a more collaborative attitude as their years of teaching experience increase, and newly qualified teachers do not all start with a collaborative attitude, which suggests that a grave responsibility rests with teacher education to educate pre- and in-service teachers into a collaborative attitude towards parents.

## Discussion

The research design of letter writing resulted in detailed narratives about teachers' practices of collaborating with parents on upbringing. The anonymity of respondents allowed the respondents to speak freely and to share their positive stories as well as their doubts and negative experiences of collaborating with parents on upbringing. This led to vivid inside stories, which varied from practices of collaboration to limited collaboration and no collaboration. The design also led to an overview and an inside view of topics teachers mention when asked to write about collaborating with parents on upbringing. As such, the study provides rich, real-life material for teacher education and teachers' professional development.

A critical note on the study design is that it lacked two-way communication, as Connelly and Clandinin (1990) suggest for the letter-writing method. The researchers did not answer the letters, and teachers, thus, did not have the opportunity to explain themselves even better in a second letter. Future study designs might consider using two-way correspondence. In addition, the study design lacked a focus on the emotional experience of the teacher, which is unfortunate because emotions might influence teachers' practices and views concerning teacher–parent collaboration. Furthermore, future research might invite teachers to share more examples and more general views on collaborating with parents on upbringing. It might also add qualifications to the requested examples to learn more about “good,” “demanding,” or “thought-provoking” examples of collaborating with parents on upbringing.

The study was conducted among a small and specific group of teachers. The sample consisted of primary school teachers who are connected to a single teacher education institute. As this institute values teacher–parent collaboration, we can expect that those teachers have a more positive attitude towards collaborating with parents than teachers who lack an active connection to such a teacher education institute. In the sample, the overrepresentation of teachers working at a Protestant school is prominent, which does not necessarily mean respondents personally have a Protestant religious orientation, and this was not asked. It is unclear to what extent this overrepresentation of teachers working in Protestant schools has influenced the findings. Since the sample only consisted of 34 respondents and the research was executed in the Netherlands only, future research might broaden the sample to a larger number of teachers and countries. In addition, it would be interesting to learn more about effective and inspiring teacher education interventions that will stimulate (preservice) teachers' approach of the unity of the topics in upbringing, their approach of equality in collaborating with parents, a reflective attitude on the level of views, and acknowledgment of every parent's added value for their child's education.

This study clearly shows that many teachers still can develop their views on upbringing in education and could make a start with practicing collaboration with parents on upbringing or improve and intensify their collaboration with parents. This study also shows that in collaborating with parents on upbringing, a commitment to parents including positive valuing of parental efforts and views, an approach of equality, and a reflective attitude on collaboration on upbringing are crucial.

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Mirjam Stroetinga is PhD student at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht. Furthermore, she works as a researcher and teacher educator at Marnix Academie, University of Applied Sciences in Utrecht, the Netherlands. Her fields of interest are teacher–parent collaboration and moral education. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Mirjam Stroetinga at Marnix Academie, University of Applied Sciences, Postbus 85002, 3508 AA, Utrecht, the Netherlands, or by email at [m.stroetinga@hsmarnix.nl](mailto:m.stroetinga@hsmarnix.nl)

Yvonne Leeman is associate professor at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, the Netherlands. In particular she studies the development of the professional identity of teachers and other professionals in education.

Wiel Veugelers is professor of education at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, the Netherlands. The research fields of his interest are developments in theory, policy, and practice of moral education and citizenship education.

