

Challenging Parental Behaviour in School: Communication Strategies for Teachers

Bachelor Thesis

Isabel Drexel (1474835)
09.06.2019

Abstract

This case study examined teachers' experiences with using effective communication strategies to prevent and overcome conflict situations with parents who show challenging parental behaviour. The data for this research project was collected through questionnaires (N=18) and interviews (n=6) amongst 18 teachers in a British international primary school located in a Southern European city. Previous research has shown that conflicts in parent-teacher partnerships and continual exposure to challenging parental behaviour may have a negative impact on teachers' well-being and work. As teachers are frequently confronted with situations where they have to communicate with excessively worried, reluctant, critical or angry parents, this issue needs to be taken seriously. Educators and schools need to find ways to coach teachers to develop effective communication strategies to build a positive and trusting relationship with parents. The main aim for this study was to establish a guide for all teachers who intend to develop and expand their communication skills and to overcome challenges that may occur when communicating with parents who are linguistically and culturally diverse. Overall, this guide provides information about effective communication strategies that can be applied when handling parent confrontations and coping with parents who display challenging behaviour.

List of Contents

Abstract.....	1
1.0 Rationale	5
1.1 Objectives	6
1.2 Motivation.....	6
1.3 Research questions.....	7
1.4 Significance.....	7
2.0 Theory: Literature Review	8
2.1 Characteristics of 'Parents with Challenging Behaviour'	8
Hard-to-Reach Parents.....	9
Critical Parents.....	9
Angry and Hostile Parents	10
2.2 Reasons for Challenging Parental Behaviour in International Schools	10
Parents in Fee-Paying International Schools	10
Child Related Factors	10
Anger and hostility	12
Linguistic and Cultural Factors	12
Passivity and Reluctance	12
2.3 Effective Communication Strategies to Prevent or Overcome Conflict Situations with Parents.....	13
Communication Model.....	14
Listening and Body Language	15
Involvement of Hard-to-Reach Parents.....	16
Responding to Critique, Anger and Hostility	16
Support from School.....	17
3.0 Research Design	18
3.1 Participants and Context	18
3.2 Research Methods and Methodology	19
Self-Administered Questionnaire	19

Semi-Structured Interview	20
4.0 Results	21
4.1 Quality.....	21
Validity	21
Reliability.....	21
4.2 Ethics	22
4.3 Data Collection and Processing.....	22
4.4 Description of Data and Analysis.....	23
Characteristics of Parents with Challenging Behaviour.....	24
Reasons for Challenging Parental Behaviour.....	26
Impact of the Year Group	26
Reasons for Critical, Hostile and Angry Behaviour	28
Child related factors	29
Personal Issues and External Factors	30
Fee-Paying School Factors	30
Linguistic and Cultural Factors	30
Reasons for Reluctant or Passive Behaviour.....	32
Effective Communication Strategies to Prevent or Overcome Conflict Situations with Critical, Hostile or Angry Parents.....	34
Effective Communication Strategies to Involve Parents Who Show Passive or Reluctant Behaviour.....	36
Guide: Effective Communication Strategies to Cope with Challenging Parental Behaviour 37	
Support from School	39
Suggestions for Improvement.....	40
5.0 Conclusion.....	43
5.1 Research Conclusion	43
What behaviour from parents do the teachers in school X consider to be challenging to cope with?	43
What are reasons for challenging parental behaviour in school X?	44

What effective communication strategies do teachers use to prevent or overcome conflict situations with parents who show challenging behaviour in school X?	44
How does school X provide support for teachers to cope effectively with challenging behaviour from parents?.....	45
5.2 Discussion and Recommendations	46
5.3 Limitations	48
6.0 References	49
Appendix 1: Consent Forms for Research Participation.....	52
Questionnaire Participation	52
Interview Participation	54
Appendix 2: Questionnaire	57
Section 1	57
Section 2.....	60
Section 3.....	62
Section 4.....	66
Appendix 3: Interview Questions	67
Interview 1: Teacher	67
Interview 2: Teacher	68
Interview 3: Teacher	69
Interview 4, 5, 6: Members of the Leadership Team.....	70
Appendix 4: Results	71
Impact of the Year Group: Questionnaire Responses	71
Reasons for Critical, Hostile or Angry Behaviour: Diagram	71
Effective Communication Strategies: Interview Responses.....	71

1.0 Rationale

“If you really want to get to know me, look inside. I may smile when deep inside, I’m worried. I may get angry when deep inside, I’m scared. I may be passive and rarely come to school, but I want you to know that my child means so much to me. ... Help me to feel that I am not in this alone, that I have a partner in you. Help me, and you help my child. And together, we can make great things happen” (Appelbaum, 2009, p. 114).

This is an extract of a parent’s plea that aims to help teachers see how important it is to build a trusting and supportive parent-teacher partnership. It gives insight into parents’ thoughts and shows how crucial it is that teachers understand their concerns and points of view. Many researchers are profoundly convinced that parents’ views play an important role and need to be acknowledged and respected by teachers (Ward, 2009). Teachers and parents need to build trusting partnerships in order to meet children’s individual needs and provide optimal support for their learning and social-emotional development (Jones & Jones, 2010). In the parents’ plea it is also evident that parents sometimes show behaviour that does not align with their true feelings or thoughts. While some parents seem to be reluctant to get involved due to personal reasons, others may behave angrily or hostile toward the teacher because they are scared or concerned about the well-being of their children. For many teachers, however, this kind of behaviour is considered to be challenging to cope with and they often have difficulties to communicate effectively with those parents in order to prevent and overcome conflict situations (Appelbaum, 2009).

According to Grant and Ray (2013) there are some challenges that may occur in regard to communication in parent-teacher partnerships. Especially in an international school setting, these challenges may be characterized as different expectations and attitudes of parents and teachers regarding children’s learning and development or difficulties with effective communication due to linguistic and cultural differences (Grant & Ray, 2013).

In order to gain more insight into effective communication strategies that can be used to cope with challenging parental behaviour and to prevent or resolve conflicts with parents in an international school setting, this case study will focus on teachers’ experiences in a British international primary school located in a Southern European city. Throughout the research the term ‘parents’ will be used as an umbrella term for all types of primary caregivers or family units who have full responsibility for the children.

1.1 Objectives

The main objective of the research project is to provide schools and teachers with information about effective communication strategies that can be applied when handling parent confrontations and the overall communication with parents who are critical, angry or hostile towards the teacher or who seem to be reluctant to collaborate or get actively involved in their child's education. With the help of questionnaires (N=18) and interviews (n=6) the study aimed to examine teachers' experiences with using effective communication strategies in conflict situations and how their school provides support for teachers to cope effectively with challenging parental behaviour. As this research project has been conducted in an international school, the findings will help to gain a deeper understanding of possibilities to overcome challenges that may occur when communicating with parents who are linguistically and culturally diverse and experience a high-mobility lifestyle.

The outcomes of the study serve as a guide and provide recommendations for all teachers who intend to develop and expand their communication skills in order to build a trusting and supportive partnership with parents in an international school setting. Additionally, the school leadership team's insight and teachers' suggestions for improvement concerning the school's support could be valuable for the school in which the case study has been conducted as it provides an impression on what needs to be improved and in what respects the school needs to provide better support for their teachers.

1.2 Motivation

Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2010) stress that conflicts in parent-teacher partnerships can have a negative impact on teachers' well-being and work. Trust is the base for a positive, collaborative partnership. "Therefore, experiencing that one is not trusted by the parents, that they are critical, or that cooperating with parents is difficult may be a serious strain on teachers with negative impact on self-efficacy and burnout" (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010, p. 1061). In order to prevent this, a number of researchers advise teachers to overcome conflicts and build positive relationships with parents. As teachers are frequently confronted with situations where they have to communicate with critical or angry parents, the researcher is highly motivated to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges and strategies to overcome these. Thus, the main motivation for planning this research project was that the findings would contribute to the researcher's professional development as a future teacher.

1.3 Research questions

The main question of the research study is:

What communication strategies are considered to be effective when coping with challenging parental behaviour according to primary school teachers' experiences in a British international school?

The following sub-questions will crystallise the focus of the investigation and take a leading role in the research:

1. *What behaviour from parents do the teachers in school X consider to be challenging to cope with?*
2. *What are reasons for challenging parental behaviour in school X?*
3. *What communication strategies do teachers in school X consider to be effective to prevent or overcome conflict situations with parents who show challenging behaviour?*
4. *How does school X provide support for teachers to cope effectively with challenging behaviour from parents?*

1.4 Significance

A study that has been conducted in the Netherlands by Prakke, Van Peet and Van der Wolf (2007) examined 212 elementary school teachers' perceptions of their own ability to handle challenging parent behaviour. The outcomes of the study show that the majority of "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" (Prakke, Van Peet, & Van der Wolf, 2007, p. 36). As their research reveals that continual exposure to challenging behaviour from parents has a major impact on occupational stress, this issue needs to be taken seriously and addressed for the sake of the children and the entire school community. Educators and schools need to find ways to help teachers cope effectively with challenging parental behaviour. Prakke et al. (2007) point out that the effects of stress on the teacher can be reduced by helping teachers to develop better coping skills so that a positive partnership with parents can be established. One of the most important aspects of building positive partnerships with parents is effective communication (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016). "Unfortunately, many teachers are not specifically trained in the skills they need to communicate effectively with parents" (Graham-Clay, 2005,

p. 118). This view is also supported by Flynn and Nolan (2008) who state that there is a need for improvement of training and services in teacher-parent communications.

Despite the fact that there are a number of researchers, including Dyches, Carter and Prater (2012), Whitaker and Fiore (2016) and Appelbaum (2009), who focus their work on effective parent-teacher communication and strategies to cope with challenging parental behaviour, there is a need to provide a guide and recommendations based on teachers' views and their experiences with communication strategies that are most effective and applicable in practice. Due to the specific context of this project, its outcomes help to gain a better understanding of other factors, such as cultural and linguistic differences, that may act as a barrier and need to be considered when communicating and resolving conflicts with parents. Therefore, the study product may help to improve practice of primary school teachers and leaders in international schools who aim to provide better support for their teachers in effective parent-teacher communication.

2.0 Theory: Literature Review

2.1 Characteristics of 'Parents with Challenging Behaviour'

There are no set characteristics of 'parents with challenging behaviour' as every individual perceives behaviour differently. Every teacher has a different perspective on what kind of behaviour from parents is challenging to cope with. However, there are some types of 'parents with challenging behaviour' that are referred to most frequently in theory. Most of these parents have bad attitudes and make teachers feel frustrated, anxious, upset, angry, inferior or negative (Appelbaum, 2009). A number of researchers, including Whitaker & Fiore (2016) and Appelbaum (2009), use the term 'difficult parents' or 'hard-to-handle parents' to describe parents whose behaviour is chronically difficult and causes difficulties for others on a frequent basis.

A table has been created and adapted to Appelbaum's (2009) theory in order to provide a broad overview of the different types of challenging parental behaviour (see **Table 1**). What needs to be stressed, however, is that parental behaviour is entirely dependent on the situation and environment they are in. Critique towards the teacher or worry about their child can easily morph into anger or aggression in a conflict situation. Therefore, what is described in the table may not be generalised.

Hard-to-reach parents	Critical parents	Angry or hostile parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> do not come to the school seem to be reluctant to get involved in their child's education have little or no contact with the teacher 	<p>The 'know-it-all' parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> act like they know more than the teacher act like they are experts at everything <p>The 'blamer' or 'defensive' parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> blame teachers for the problems of their children do not want to be at fault for anything think the teacher is not fair think their child does no wrong make excuses for everything their children do <p>The 'helicopter' parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> are excessively worried are overprotective want to make sure that everything is just right for their children make 'unreasonable' and 'unworkable' requests 	<p>The 'backstabber' parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> gossip or do things behind the teacher's back <p>The 'aggressive' parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> attack the teacher verbally or physically

Table 1. An overview of challenging parent behaviour. Amended from *How to handle hard-to-handle parents*, by Appelbaum, 2009, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin

Hard-to-Reach Parents

The term 'parents with challenging behaviour' does not only describe those who are overbearing or overly involved, it also encompasses those who seem reluctant when it comes to collaborating with teachers and being involved in children's learning and school matters (Whitaker & Fiore, 2013). Ward (2009) characterises these parents as 'hard-to-reach' parents. She explains that 'hard-to-reach' parents rarely come into school which makes it challenging for the teacher to reach out to them and keep them updated about their child's progress and development.

Critical Parents

As it is apparent in **Table 1**, the umbrella term critical parents may include parents who act like they know more than teachers, blame teachers for the problems of their children or accuse them of not being fair. Critical parents may also include those who are demanding and excessively worried about their child's well-being and academic success.

Parents who can be characterised as 'helicopter parents', also may be very critical towards the teacher. They are usually overprotective and go to great effort to support their children in all respects. "These are parents who want to sweep away any possible problems their

children may ever experience” (Appelbaum, 2009, p. 51). Despite the fact that many teachers would describe ‘helicopter parents’ as ‘difficult people’, it is not appropriate to generalise and label them as such. Although their protective behaviour may be very stressful and distracting for teachers as they regularly receive ‘unreasonable’ requests from these parents, teachers need to bear in mind that the parents are the child’s first educators and their requests could also be very helpful and beneficial for the child (Appelbaum, 2009).

Angry and Hostile Parents

According to Appelbaum (2009) the exceedingly angry or hostile parent is perceived as one of the most intimidating types of parents, whom a teacher occasionally has to work with. As it is described in **Table 1**, there are parents who are hostile towards the teacher in a hidden and sneaky way. Thus, while some parents may show their hostility towards the teacher openly, others gossip and do things behind the teacher’s back. Some may also get aggressive and attack the teacher verbally or physically. If this is the case, teachers often get frightened and do not know how to react properly to diffuse the situation (Appelbaum, 2009).

2.2 Reasons for Challenging Parental Behaviour in International Schools

Parents in Fee-Paying International Schools

The main purpose of establishing international schools was to cater to the needs of globally mobile expatriates; thus “...educating school-age students away from their home country and home education systems, often moving between countries and schools at relatively frequent intervals as a result of the parents’ occupation” (Hayden & Thompson, 2016, p. 1). Nevertheless, international schools are also authorized to accept the country’s local children whose parents favour the form of education offered in international schools. Hayden and Thompson (2016) indicate that the majority of parents in international schools usually have to pay school fees themselves and therefore place high value on quality education. Due to parents’ high expectations of their children and the school, international school teachers frequently come into conflict with demanding and critical parents (Hayden, 2006). Moreover, many international school parents want to be involved in making educational decisions and expect to have a stake in the school, which may be heightened by the high fees that parents have to pay (Allen, 2000)

Child Related Factors

For many expatriate parents stress is often a major factor in the way they interact with their children’s teachers; as many of those families experience a high-mobility lifestyle where they

move from one country to another frequently, parents as well as children are constantly faced with the challenge of adjusting to new environments, culture shock and language barriers (Hayden, 2006). Due to that, the parents often find themselves under a lot of pressure being their children's primary source of emotional support (Hayden, 2006). This phenomenon of having to adapt to new surroundings on a frequent basis is especially observed in Third Culture Kids (TCK). According to Pollock and Van Reken (2009) "a Third Culture kid (TCK) [is] a person who has spent a significant part of his or her developmental years outside the parents' culture" (p. 13). Most of the children who attend international schools are TCKs who often have difficulties to develop a strong sense of personal and cultural identity because of the varied cultural influences and transitions they go through (Pollock & Van Reken, 2009). Therefore, many parents fear that "their decision to move overseas will have a negative or even destructive impact on the lives of their children [and] this guilt may become educator directed" (Hayden, 2006, p. 26).

Children's age, performance and behaviour at school can also be an influential factor for challenging parental behaviour and conflicts with teachers (Hornby, 2011). Dyches et al. (2012) point out that "[m]any families who raise children with disabilities have extra challenges that are not often faced by other families" (p. 9). They further explain that parents of children with learning difficulties or behavioural problems are often very stressed and worried about their child's well-being and future prospects. They also may be worried that teachers do not see the good qualities in their child and do not really understand their child in order to provide optimal support. Families of children with disabilities often have feelings of fear or disappointment because they know that their children may not have the same opportunities or gather the same experiences as other children (Hudson, 2018)

In general, the majority of parents, not exclusively those of children with difficulties, might be scared that their children will make negative experiences or have difficulties making friends. Grant and Ray (2013) argue that especially parents of pre-school children tend to be more anxious or worried as children need more physical support. Due to that, parents might be hesitant to entrust the teacher with full responsibility for their children (Ward, 2009; Appelbaum, 2009).

All these concerns from parents related to their children may lead to suspicious and critical behaviour towards the teacher and conflicts are more likely to emerge. It is, therefore, important that teachers are very sensitive to all families' unique feelings and circumstances (Dyches et al., 2012).

Anger and hostility

“When parents become angry, it is often because they are extremely anxious about something having to do with their child” (Appelbaum, 2009, p. 42). According to Appelbaum (2009) anger and hostility are secondary emotions; thus parents will most likely feel other emotions such as guilt, fear or disappointment, prior to anger. A number of parents who are angry or hostile towards the teacher are very protective when it comes to their children and therefore cannot bear the feeling of anything being wrong. She further points out, that for some parents it is easier to express anger than acknowledge and express their initial feelings of anxiety. “To overcome their inferiority and anxiety, they act in a superior and aggressive way” (Solomon, 2002, p. 4).

Linguistic and Cultural Factors

As international schools are attended by students from a variety of cultures, teachers need to demonstrate an open and non-judgemental cultural awareness towards their students and families. Nutbrown (2018) explains that in some cultures it may not be common practice for parents to volunteer at school or support their children with homework or reading activities on a regular basis. Parents may hold different views on children’s schooling and their role in it. Moreover, the appropriate manner teachers are expected to teach or support students may be seen differently in every culture (Nutbrown, 2018).

Working with parents who do not speak English as a first language might be a barrier and the cause of misunderstandings and conflicts with teachers as well. “Expectations about communication are influenced by one’s culture, which complicates communication between those with different cultural backgrounds” (Bodvin, Verschueren, & Struyf, 2018, p. 430). Communication barriers could be a reason for some parents to be reluctant to become involved as they are embarrassed or do not feel comfortable to talk to the teacher or come to school (Grant & Ray, 2013).

Passivity and Reluctance

Ward (2009) stresses that teachers are often prejudiced or have negative views of parents who are passive or reluctant to participate in school issues. For instance, some teachers might believe that most of these parents do not care or lack interest to get actively involved. They sometimes fail to empathise with their student’s parents and do not attempt to get to the bottom of the problems and find solutions. While some parents might not be able to engage in many school events due to their busy work schedule, others might be anxious to get involved due to personal reasons (Ward, 2009). Whatever the reason, it is important that teachers try to restrain their prejudiced views and find ways to involve the parents

nonetheless. Prejudices can affect the interaction and communication with parents, which may lead to distrust and conflicts in the partnership. Consequently, many parents may not feel acknowledged or respected by teachers and get upset or reluctant (Appelbaum, 2009).

A number of researchers, including Hornby (2011) and Alexander et al. (2010), state that many parents do not have positive attitudes towards the school or are even anxious to come to school because they have had negative experiences in their own school years. This point is also sustained by the work of 'Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families' who explain that these parents are often scared to trust the school because they expect that they will not be understood by the teachers (Anna Freud Centre, 2019).

2.3 Effective Communication Strategies to Prevent or Overcome Conflict Situations with Parents

Graham-Clay (2005) explains that in schools you can find two basic types of communication: 'one-way communication' or 'two-way communication'. In 'one-way communication' teachers inform parents about children's progress, goals of the school year or school trips in form of report cards, newsletters or websites. 'Two-way communication' requires an interactive dialogue between teachers and parents and may involve E-mail conversations, telephone calls or meetings that are either informal or formal. For instance, informal conversations may occur when parents bring their children to school or pick them up. Dyches et al. (2012), Hornby (2011) and Hudson (2018) emphasise the importance of informal meetings as it helps to establish trust between parents and teachers who are able to share information more frequently. Grant and Ray (2013) express that especially in Early Years it is very important for the teacher to have constant contact with parents and share information about how the child's day has been during drop-off and pick-up times. As parents of toddlers often worry about their child's safety and physical needs this regular communication may help to build a trusting relationship between parents and teachers (Hudson, 2018).

Hudson (2018) also points out that due to the constant interaction with parents during informal meetings, the teacher may get the chance to sense parents' concerns or worries and address them before small issues turn into larger problems. On the other hand, some parents may take advantage of the brief encounters and start long conversations with the teacher and express their concerns which also may not be appropriate to discuss in the presence of other parents or the children. Dyches et al. (2012) suggest that if this situation occurs, it is important for the teacher to be assertive and arrange a formal meeting with the parent at a convenient time. For formal meetings it is very helpful if teachers are well

prepared and know what they are going to ask and say to the parents (Jones & Jones, 2010).

Jones and Jones (2010) suggest that it often helps to prevent problems if teachers inform parents about issues or concerns straightaway. “It is better to deal with problems when they first arise than to wait until a crisis has occurred” (p. 147).

Communication Model

There are various skills that teachers need to develop for effective face-to-face and written communication with parents. Dyches et al. (2012) stress that in face-to-face conversations, both parents and teachers can convey verbal and nonverbal messages. They explain that verbal messages involve written and spoken words whereas non-verbal messages require consideration of body language and active listening skills. If teachers and parents engage in an interactive dialogue, there is a ‘sender’, who intends to convey a message to the other person, the ‘receiver’ (see **Figure 1**). The ‘sender’ encodes information by using verbal and nonverbal language. The information is then transmitted through a channel, which involves the medium (space, electronic or paper etc.), the context within the communication takes place (informal, formal, intercultural etc.) and external and internal factors (noise from the environment, emotions and prejudices etc.) which could distort the intended meaning when decoded and interpreted by the receiver (see **Figure 1**). “A well-intended message, well coded in one culture, can have a totally different meaning, even a very rude one, when decoded in another culture. Or when transmitted through the wrong channel – for example by E-mail instead of face-to-face” (Nunez, Mahdi, & Popma, 2017, p. 19). Therefore, it is crucial that teachers bear all these interfering factors in mind when communicating with parents in conflict situations.

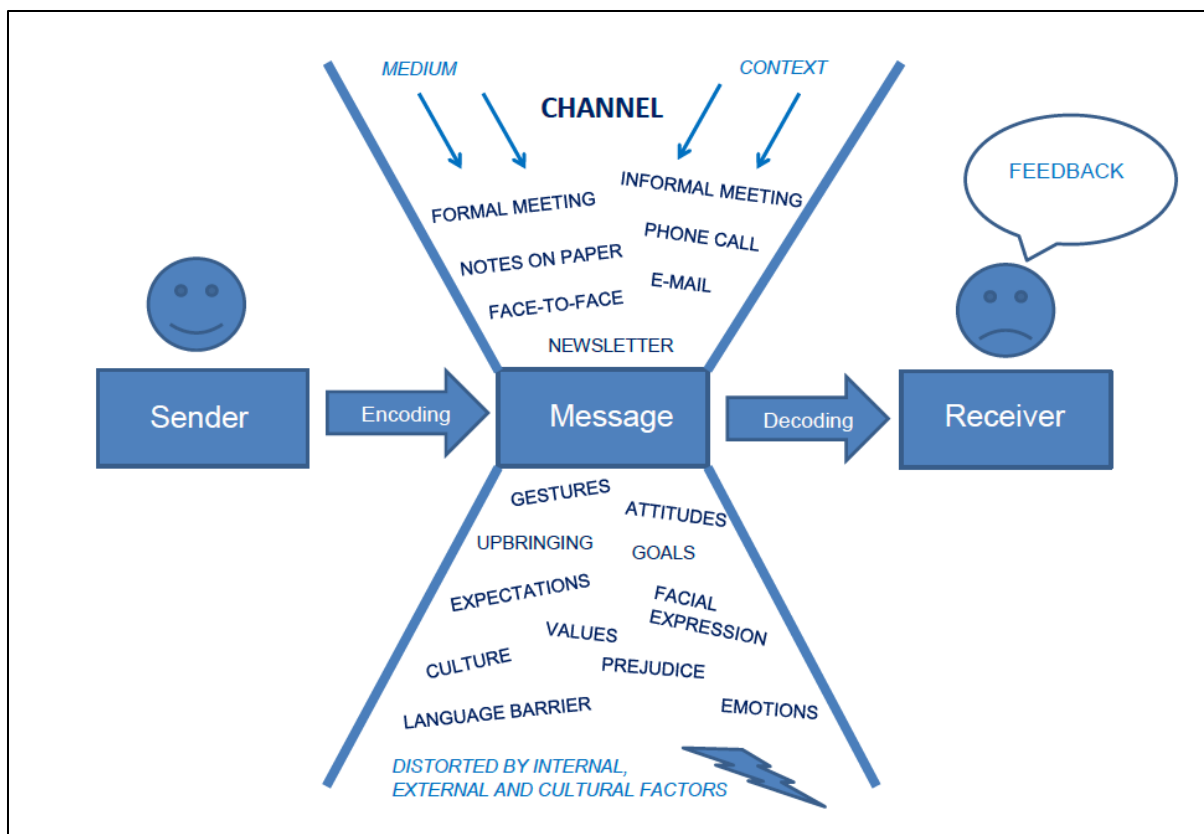


Figure 1. Intercultural communication model for parent-teacher partnerships. Amended from *Intercultural Sensitivity: From Denial to Intercultural Competence* (pp.18-19), by Nunez et al., 2017, Assen: Royal Van Gorcum BV and *A teacher's guide to communicating with parents: Practical strategies for developing successful relationships* (pp.17-21), by Dyches, et al. 2012, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Listening and Body Language

One of the most important steps towards overcoming conflicts with parents is to understand their motives and acknowledge their feelings. According to Appelbaum (2009), this can be achieved by listening attentively. She suggests teachers to take time and be aware of their body language while listening to parents. Dyches et al. (2012) explain that body language is often considered as a more accurate representation of the speakers' and listeners' true feelings and emotions. Furthermore, they claim that it involves facial expression, eye contact, gestures and use of space and its appropriate use can vary among different cultures. For instance, although in many cultures it is a sign of respect to have eye contact during conversations, "[t]here are cultures in which direct eye contact is considered offensive and intrusive" (Appelbaum, 2009, p. 67). In order to collaborate and communicate effectively with culturally diverse parents, teachers need to develop intercultural competence. Its attainment helps them to interpret other people's cultural conventions or perspectives and relate them to

theirs, enabling them to act appropriately in a variety of cultural contexts (Nunez et al., 2017). On the other hand, teachers need be very careful not to generalise as culture is extremely complex and there is a lot of diversity within each cultural group depending on several factors, such as gender, age, economic level or social status (Grant & Ray, 2013).

Involvement of Hard-to-Reach Parents

Appelbaum (2009) also suggests several strategies that teachers can use to diminish problems before they happen as well as involve parents who seem to be reluctant to get involved. Teachers should create situations in which parents have time and want to become involved. It is crucial to reach out to them, for instance by making phone calls and sending introduction letters to inform them about the goals for the coming school year and how they can be actively involved in specific activities. By showing an effort to inform and involve parents as frequently as possible, parents feel part of their children's schooling and therefore develop more positive attitudes towards teachers and the school (Appelbaum, 2009). Moreover, according to Ward (2009) it is very important that teachers try not to be judgemental about parental passivity or reluctance and get to the bottom of the issue.

Responding to Critique, Anger and Hostility

According to Whitaker and Fiore (2016), effective communication is seen as the most important part to build a positive relationship with critical, angry or hostile parents. They explain that being proactive and communicating with parents not only in negative but also positive situations on a regular and consistent basis is one great step towards preventing conflict situations and cultivating positive relationships. This view is also supported by Hudson (2018) who states that instead of only sharing negative things involving their child, it is crucial to highlight children's strengths as often as possible. For instance, teachers could send parents notes or E-mails when students are doing well; this will help parents see that teachers care about their children and try their best to support them (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016). The Anna Freud Centre (2019) advises teachers to give parents the freedom to express their feelings of anger. According to Whitaker and Fiore (2016) 'dealing with yourself first' is another effective strategy that helps teachers handle difficult situations. They believe that teachers should never react the same way as an aggressive parent would do. If teachers behave in the same inappropriate manner, it will be more difficult to resolve conflicts and build a trusting relationship one day. On the contrary, some teachers might tend to get intimidated by critical or angry parents and do nothing to defend themselves, which in turn teaches those parents to continue to act the same way (Appelbaum, 2009). Therefore, if angry parents catch teachers off guard and want to discuss an issue in the classroom or on the hallway, it would be advisable to schedule a formal meeting for another time. This may

have the effect that parents have the chance to calm down and teachers are able to prepare for the meeting (Dyches et al., 2012).

The researcher summarised some of the previous mentioned strategies and created a table in order to show which strategies are considered to be effective when resolving conflicts with critical, angry or hostile parents according to theory (see **Table 2**). Nevertheless, Appelbaum (2009) emphasises that the suggested strategies might not work for everyone.

LANGUAGE USE	NEGOTIATION	ACT INSTEAD OF REACT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be assertive (confident in your positions in a respectful way) • State your point directly without backing down under pressure • Express that you feel sorry that the parent feels upset • Do not argue (it would escalate the situation) • Do not patronize parents (express that you are collaborators in their child's education) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find areas of agreement • Still abide by school and policies • Back up your statements with data or viewpoints from administrators • Offer choices (it empowers the other person and helps to diffuse the situation at time) • Acknowledge that the parent has a point, but that you have a point too (reach a mutually agreeable decision) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If parents catch you off guard ask for time to think (schedule a formal meeting) • Stay in charge of your own emotions (remain calm and empathetic) • Do not get angry or offensive • Detach from taking the verbal attack or critique personally (get to the bottom of the problem) • Move to a private area (e.g. office), but stay safe if you are frightened (e.g. solicit the assistance of the school leadership team) • Use open and positive body language

Table 2. Strategies to overcome conflict situations with parents. Amended from *How to handle hard-to-handle parents*, by Appelbaum, 2009, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin and *A teacher's guide to communicating with parents: Practical strategies for developing successful relationships*, by Dyches et al., 2012, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.

Support from School

Hornby (2011) explains that it is crucial for schools to have a clear policy for parental involvement. He stresses that the policy needs to encompass clear guidelines on how parents are allowed to contact teachers and when it is appropriate to come into school and talk to them. According to Hornby (2011) and Anna Freud Centre (2019), school leaders and teachers should ensure with the help of an 'open-door policy' that parents feel entitled to contact the school and teachers to talk about concerns at any time during the year. Hornby (2011) also advises schools to facilitate different communication options for parents to contact school staff, e.g. informal and formal meetings, E-mails, notes, telephone calls, so that parents can choose what they are most comfortable with.

However, according to Grant and Ray (2013) some schools have gates and security as a safeguard. They argue that most of the time parents are not allowed to enter the school building beyond the gate which creates a physical barrier and may turn parents away.

Especially in international schools differences in language may act as a barrier and lead to miscommunication between teachers and parents. Therefore, it would also be helpful if schools provided translators for parents who do not speak any English (Grant & Ray, 2013).

Ward (2009) emphasizes that the school leadership can support teachers effectively by implementing sound supervision procedures. These supervision procedures may involve that teachers keep record of their meetings and conversations with 'difficult parents' so that the senior leadership team or other professionals, such as special needs specialists, get an insight and may be proactive in stepping in or dealing with potential problems (Jones & Jones, 2010; Hudson, 2018).

3.0 Research Design

3.1 Participants and Context

The British international school is located in a Southern European city and there are 38 teachers who work in the Early Years and primary school department. The school is attended by students with around 40 different nationalities. The study has been conducted towards the end of the school year and the researcher sent out 21 questionnaires to members of the leadership team of Early Years and Primary and at least three teachers of each grade level including Early Years and year one to year six. After that, individual interviews have been conducted with three members of the leadership team, including the deputy head and head teacher, inclusion and English as an Additional Language (EAL) leader and three teachers of the previous participant sample whose indications in the questionnaire gave rise to further investigation (n=6). It was requisite that all teachers who gave consent to fill out the questionnaire and participate in the interview, recently had to cope with challenging parental behaviour (preferably within the current or last school year).

Bearing in mind that experiences of teachers with challenging parental behaviour and suggested communication strategies may vary significantly with gender, culture, year group and years of teaching experience, the researcher ensured that there is at least one participant in the study representing each area of interest. Thus, teachers of different gender who teach in different year groups and have varying years of teaching experience have been surveyed. This non-probability sampling method is called dimensional sampling. Cohen,

Manion and Morrison (2018) stress that the dimensional sampling method is often used to increase the representativeness of a sample. “A good sample size or an adequate representation of the target respondents help secure balanced information from a reasonable number of people” (Menter, Elliot, Hulme, Lewin, & Lowden, 2011, p. 37). For instance, the responses from teachers who teach in different year groups may be helpful to find out in what way parental behaviour towards the teacher may vary among different year groups of children.

3.2 Research Methods and Methodology

The case study is primarily qualitative in nature and uses an interpretive paradigm. In an interpretive paradigm, social research is seen as a subjective undertaking in which reality is “constructed in the minds of people and reinforced through their interactions with each other” (Denscombe, 2010, p. 121). As the study focusses solely on teachers’ experiences in this particular school context, the findings of this study may not necessarily be transferable to a different context.

Data has been collected through self-administered questionnaires and individual interviews over a nine- week period. Before conducting individual interviews the researcher has sent out self-administered questionnaires. This sequence of data collection was chosen as the findings of the questionnaires served as a basis and helped generate questions for the interviews.

Self-Administered Questionnaire

The first method of data collection used in this research study were self-administered questionnaires, which have been created with the help of the online questionnaire survey software from ‘Google Forms’ and sent via E-mail to 21 participants. Although E-mail surveys are likely to have lower response rates, they may allow a larger number of people to be surveyed. This in turn, provides a ‘wider picture’ and increases the representativeness of a sample (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2010; Wellington, 2015).

For the qualitative interpretive approach it is crucial to give participants opportunities to express their thoughts, which is why it is reasonable to give participants the opportunity to add remarks and include not only closed questions but also open-ended questions (Cohen et al., 2018). These are, however, harder and more time consuming to analyse. Therefore, the questionnaires contain mostly closed questions that elicit quantitative data, including 4-point Likert scales, checkboxes and multiple-choice grids/questions, and only four open-ended questions.

All questions were divided into four sections that are connected to the sub-questions (see **Table 3**). All closed-questions in the questionnaire included checkboxes that contained characteristics, common reasons for challenging parental behaviour and communication strategies that are considered to be effective according to theory from the literature review (see **Appendix 2**).

Questionnaire sections	Sub-questions and Content
Section 1	Background information about participants: Gender, nationality, years of teaching experience, position and number of years working in school X
Section 2	1. sub-question: Characteristics of parents with challenging behaviour
Section 3	2. and 3. sub-question: Reasons for challenging parental behaviour and effective communication strategies to prevent and overcome conflict situations with parents
Section 4	4. sub-question: The school's support for teachers to cope effectively with challenging parental behaviour

Table 3. Questionnaire design

Semi-Structured Interview

In order to get a deeper understanding of specific responses and results of the questionnaire regarding challenging parental behaviour, effective communication strategies and the school's support, six semi-structured interviews have been conducted. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as a method as they already include a specific set of questions but still leave room for the interviewer to ask supplementary questions (Walliman & Buckler, 2008).

With the help of the questionnaire responses the researcher was able to find out what kind of challenging parental behaviour the teachers had to cope with in the current or previous school year. The researcher chose to do interviews only with teachers who recently had to cope with challenging parental behaviour (current or previous school year) because if participants have to recall events that occurred a long time ago they may describe it with a

lesser degree of accuracy (Blaxter et. al., 2010). The researcher asked every participant slightly different questions based on their experiences and conflicts with parents (see **Appendix 3**, pp. 67-69) Three members of the leadership team participated in the interview and they were asked the same sample of questions mainly focussing on the school's support (see **Appendix 3**, p. 70).

4.0 Results

4.1 Quality

Validity

In order to verify the validity of information being collected, the research used methodological triangulation, which involves that two or more data collection methods, in this case interviews and questionnaires, are compared (Blaxter et al., 2010; Wellington, 2015).

During the interviews, participants could ask for clarification which helped to avoid misinterpretation of questions. Additionally, it helped the researcher to gather more accurate information and increase validity of data (Menter et al., 2011). Another way to increase credibility and validity of data is to use respondent validation, which includes that the researcher checks the findings with participants (Denscombe, 2010). Thus, after the audio recordings of interviews have been transcribed, the researcher allowed participants to read the transcripts to check whether the findings are a true representation of their views and experiences. No adaptations needed to be made as all interviewees confirmed that the transcripts are accurate.

In order to check whether the questions in the questionnaires and interviews are clear to respondents and capture the intended information accurately, the researcher pre-tested it among other colleagues. Menter et al. (2011) explain that pre-testing or piloting questionnaires and interviews gives researchers the opportunity to verify validity and modify the questions if required before sending it to the intended sample.

Reliability

In order to increase reliability and avoid distorting the findings that are obtained, the researcher had to ensure that the research methods are neutral and consistent (Denscombe, 2010). Consistency and neutrality can be achieved by ensuring that all participants are measured in the same way each time. Therefore, all individual interviews have been conducted in the school building without the presence of other school staff. The researcher made sure that the participants had sufficient time to answer questions and that there were

no interfering factors, e.g. noise interference, which could have distracted respondents during the interview. Denscombe (2010) stresses that demonstrating objectivity is also one of the ground rules to ensure reliability in social research. Researchers need to be open-minded and self-reflective in order to avoid that findings are biased by their prior attitudes and conceptions.

4.2 Ethics

As in qualitative research participants reveal their personal experiences and inner thoughts, it becomes a central task for the researcher to take into account all aspects of ethical issues (Blaxter et al., 2010). In order to respond to these issues, participants were given a consent form to sign before they received the questionnaire or participated in the interview (see **Appendix 1**). Blaxter et al. (2010) explains that the consent form should ensure the anonymity of participants and notify them that their responses will be dealt with confidentially. Information about the uses, storage and deletion of data were given. All participants had the right to withdraw from the project at any time they wished.

The researcher recorded the interviews with an audio device in order to ensure that all responses could be documented correctly and that no information got lost. However, due to ethical reasons it was important that the interviewees were aware of the recording and gave their consent to being recorded. According to Menter et al. (2011) the researcher needs to bear in mind that some interviewees might not allow to be recorded or agree to discuss sensitive topics face-to-face. Even though the researcher gave all interviewees the opportunity to choose not to be recorded, everyone agreed with being recorded (see **Appendix 1**, p. 56).

Denscombe (2010) stresses that ensuring confidentiality of those being surveyed will most likely help participants feel more comfortable to share also negative experiences. This may prove to be important in regard to questions addressing the support from school or the lack thereof. In the consent form it needed to be clear that the information that participants provide cannot be traced back to them (Denscombe, 2010).

4.3 Data Collection and Processing

As the **questionnaires** (N=18) contain closed questions that elicit quantitative data a spreadsheet program provided by 'Google Forms' analysed and summarised the numerical data in form of diagrams. The researcher used these diagrams to cluster and re-group some of the responses by identifying similarities and finding key categories.

As most of the diagrams that were created by 'Google Forms' were not entirely accurate and clearly evident, the researcher created pie charts and bar diagrams using the themes and categories identified in participant responses with the help of the spreadsheet program 'Excel'. According to Lipson (2005) a well-designed chart or graph helps the researcher and readers to make sense of the findings and identify major trends. For processing the qualitative data that was gathered with the help of open-ended questions, the researcher worked through the material and coded data in preparation for analysis. Coding involves identifying significant responses and creating a list of key categories or themes that have emerged (Menter et al., 2011).

After completing the **interviews** with a small group of participants (n=6), the researcher transcribed the audio recordings. Many of the key themes that emerged from the analysis of the **questionnaires** were elicited by coding and labelling parts of the transcript text with different colours. Then, the process was repeated for several times and themes were refined or added to as new information was gathered. During the process of analysis all responses of participants were compared to one another. Especially in regard to questions concerning the school's support, the answers from the leadership team were compared to those from the teachers in order to get an insight into perspectives from both parties.

The results of the **questionnaires** and **interviews** are organised in themes and will be presented commonly.

4.4 Description of Data and Analysis

As it was planned the researcher surveyed at least three teachers of each year group, including Early Years and year one to six. The response rate was high because 18 out of 21 teachers who gave consent to participate, filled out the **questionnaire**. Three participants are currently members of the school leadership team, six work in Early Years, three work in Key Stage 1, *Year 1 and 2* (KS1) and six work in Key Stage 2, *Year 3 to 6* (KS2). Moreover, all Key Stage leaders participated in the study.

15 out of 18 participants are female and 15 respondents indicated that they are British. Three teachers indicated to be either Scottish or Spanish. 13 participants have more than ten years of teaching experience whereas five respondents indicated that they have been working as a teacher for five to ten years. A little over 50 percent of the participants have been working for more than five years in school X.

Characteristics of Parents with Challenging Behaviour

The first set of questions in the **questionnaire** aimed to find out more about what behaviour from parents participants have experienced and consider to be challenging to cope with as well as when they had to cope with the parental behaviour in school X.

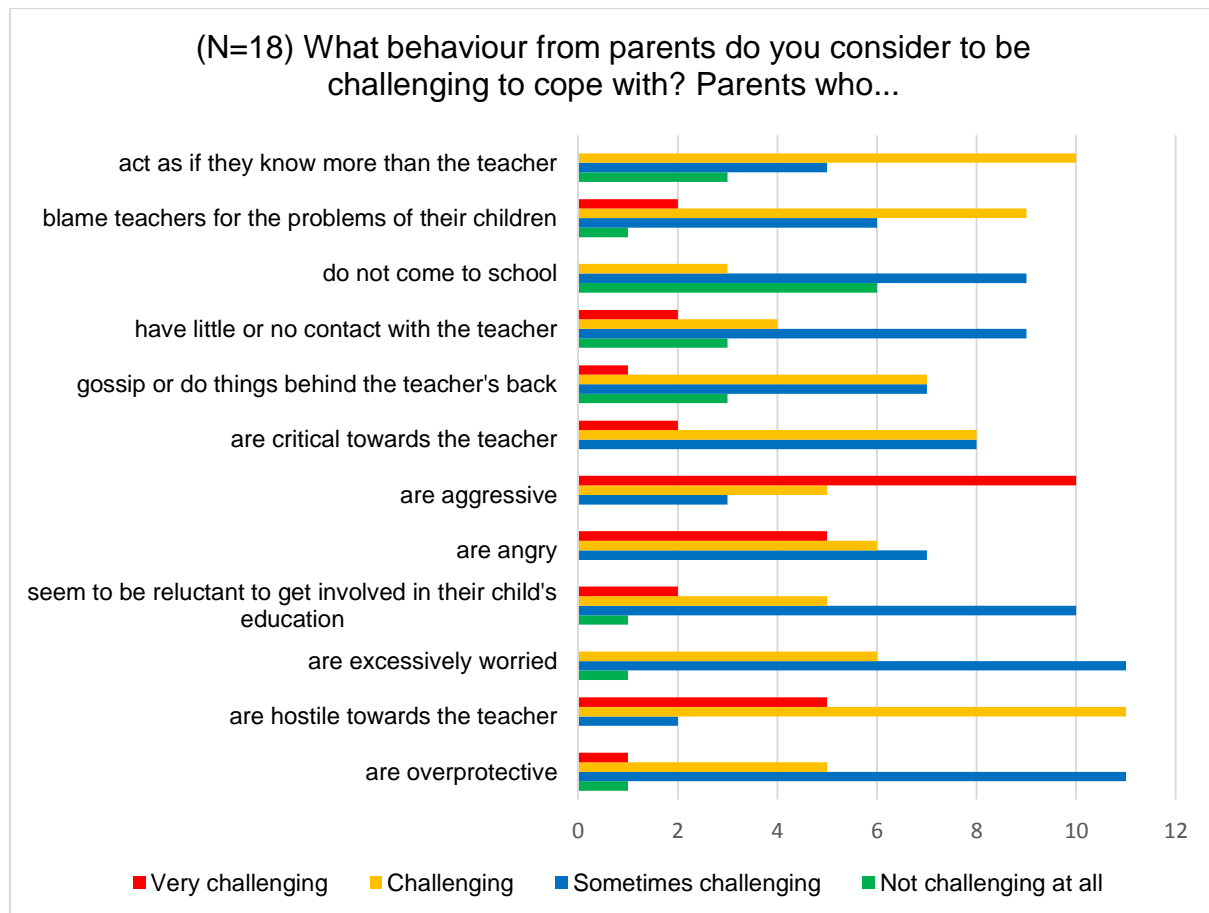


Diagram 1. Teachers' perceptions on challenging parental behaviour

As it is apparent in **Diagram 1**, parents who seem to be reluctant to get involved in their child's education are considered to be 'sometimes challenging' by ten participants, 'challenging' by five and 'very challenging' by two. These findings reflect those of Ward (2009) who also found that coping with hard-to-reach parents is often considered to be challenging according to teachers. All participants indicated that parents who are aggressive, angry, hostile or critical towards the teacher are at least 'sometimes challenging', 'challenging' or 'very challenging'. What stands out in the diagram is that aggressive, angry and hostile parental behaviour has been indicated as 'very challenging' most frequently. This finding broadly supports Appelbaum's (2009) view that the exceedingly angry or hostile parent is perceived as one of the most intimidating types of parents.

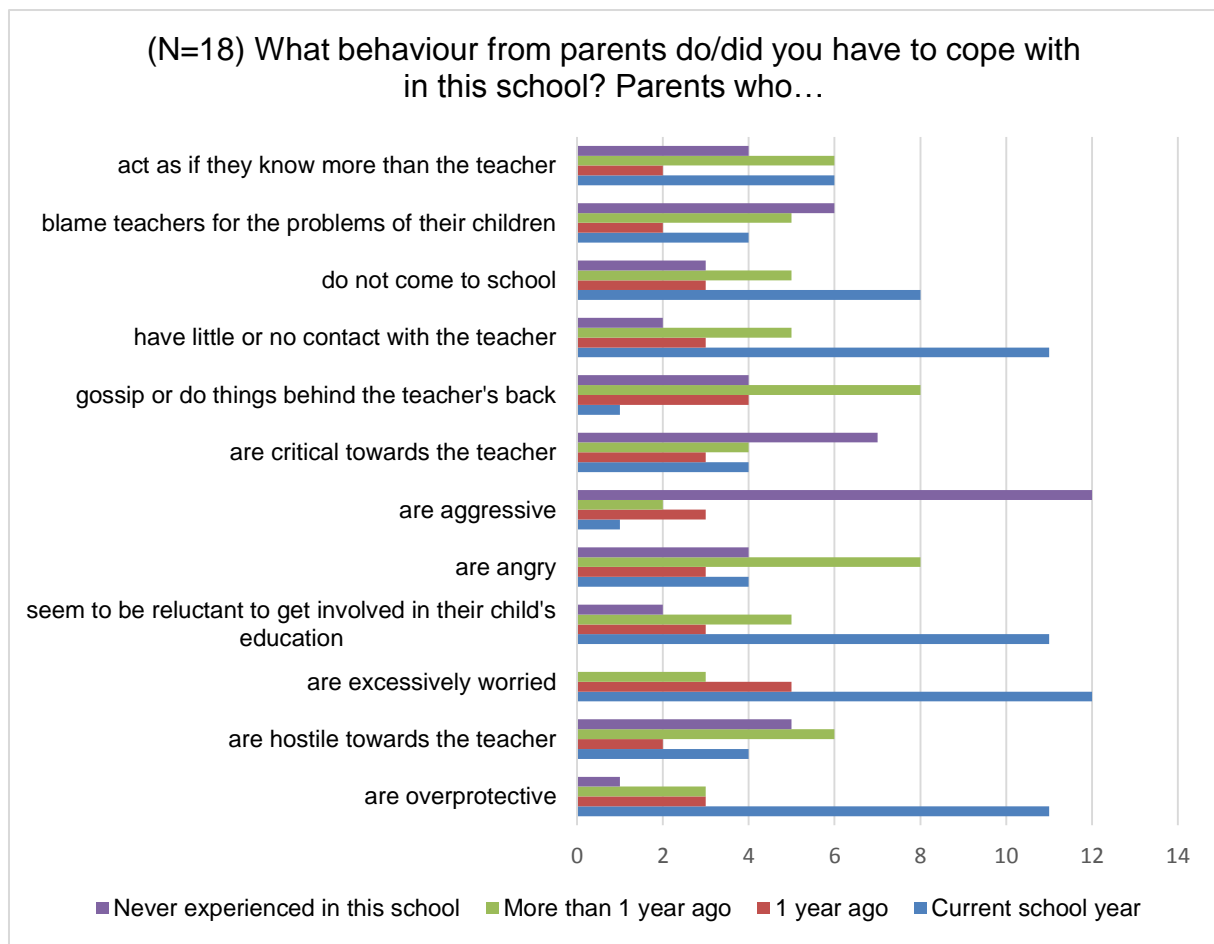


Diagram 2. Challenging parental behaviour in school X

Diagram 2 shows that 67 percent of the respondents indicated that they have never experienced aggressive behaviour from parents in this school. The parents with whom the majority of participants had to cope with in the current school year are parents who are overprotective, excessively worried, have little or no contact with the teacher or seem to be reluctant to get involved in their child's education. From the **questionnaire** indications, it is evident that all different types of challenging parental behaviour that was discussed in the literature review (**Table 1**, p. 9) were experienced recently in school X, either in the current or previous year.

When participants were asked to give an example of the most challenging parental behaviour that they have experienced in school X, ten out of fifteen participants mentioned conflicts with parents who were critical towards the teacher and school or blamed the teacher for the problems of their children. Other participants gave examples of conflicts with parents who were excessively worried, overprotective, hostile or aggressive.

Reasons for Challenging Parental Behaviour

Impact of the Year Group

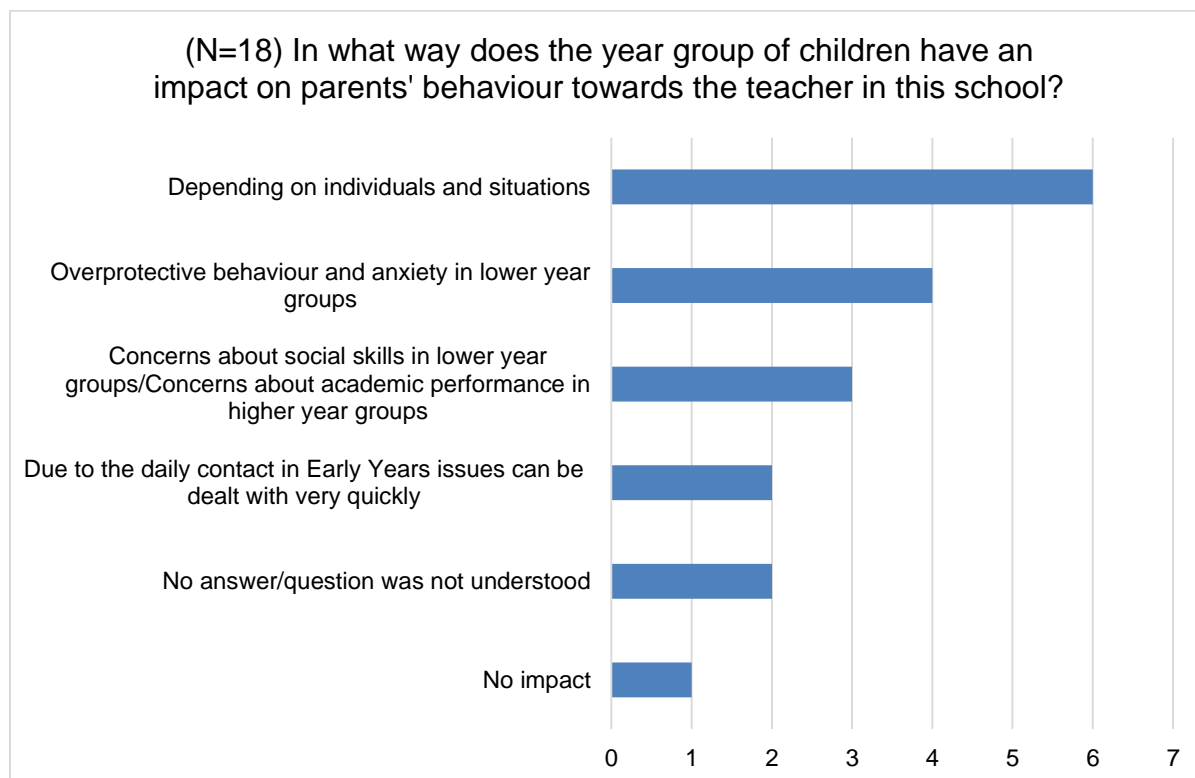


Diagram 3. Impact of the year group of children on parental behaviour

One of the open-ended questions in the second section of the **questionnaire** required respondents to explain in what way the year group of children has an impact on parents' behaviour towards the teacher. The key themes identified in these responses are summarised in **Diagram 3**.

In response to this question, a broad range of responses was elicited (see **Appendix 4**). As it can be seen in **Diagram 3**, six teachers think that challenging parental behaviour is different each year and often depends on the situation, dynamics of a class and individuals. Four participants commented that parents of younger children tend to be excessively worried, anxious and overprotective. Some argued that for many parents it is difficult to entrust the teacher with the child care. This finding can be supported by Grant and Ray (2012), Ward (2009) and Appelbaum (2009) who clarify that some parents of younger children are worried about their child's safety and physical needs and may therefore be hesitant to entrust the teachers with full responsibility of their children.

Two participants mentioned that parents and teachers in Early Years have more contact with one another than they do in Year 1 and above. In Early Years children are picked up and

dropped off in the classroom whereas in higher year groups this happens at the gate. One participant explained that “as the children get older and parental contact is less the issues can be somewhat "exaggerated" as the first the parent knows is via an email or phone call or the child.”

On basis of the **questionnaire** responses, this issue was taken up in all six **interviews** as well. All interviewees agreed that the daily contact that teachers have with parents in Early Years can be useful for minimizing issues. This view is also supported by Dyches et al. (2012), Hornby (2011), Hudson (2018) and Grant and Ray (2013) who explain that informal meetings and the constant contact between teachers and parents in Early Years is very useful in diffusing tense situations quickly.

One interviewee explained that in KS2 many parents leave a message at the reception or contact teachers through children’s reading diaries, via E-mail or digital portfolios (Seesaw) if they have a concern or want to schedule a formal meeting. Although Hornby (2011) stresses the importance of facilitating different communication options, the interviewee stressed that the use of too many communication channels often leads to confusion and issues cannot be dealt with quickly. This finding corroborates the ideas of Dyches et al. (2012) and Nunez et al. (2017) who explain that sometimes communication may be complicated when messages are transmitted through the wrong channel, e.g. by E-mail instead of face-to-face.

Another interviewee commented that despite the barrier, parents are always allowed to approach teachers at the gate. On the other hand an interviewee emphasized that it is not a private space and often too rushed and busy to discuss issues or concerns. This issue also has been recognised by Grant and Ray (2013) who emphasise that this physical barrier sometimes hinders parents to approach teachers and talk about potential concerns.

Reasons for Critical, Hostile and Angry Behaviour

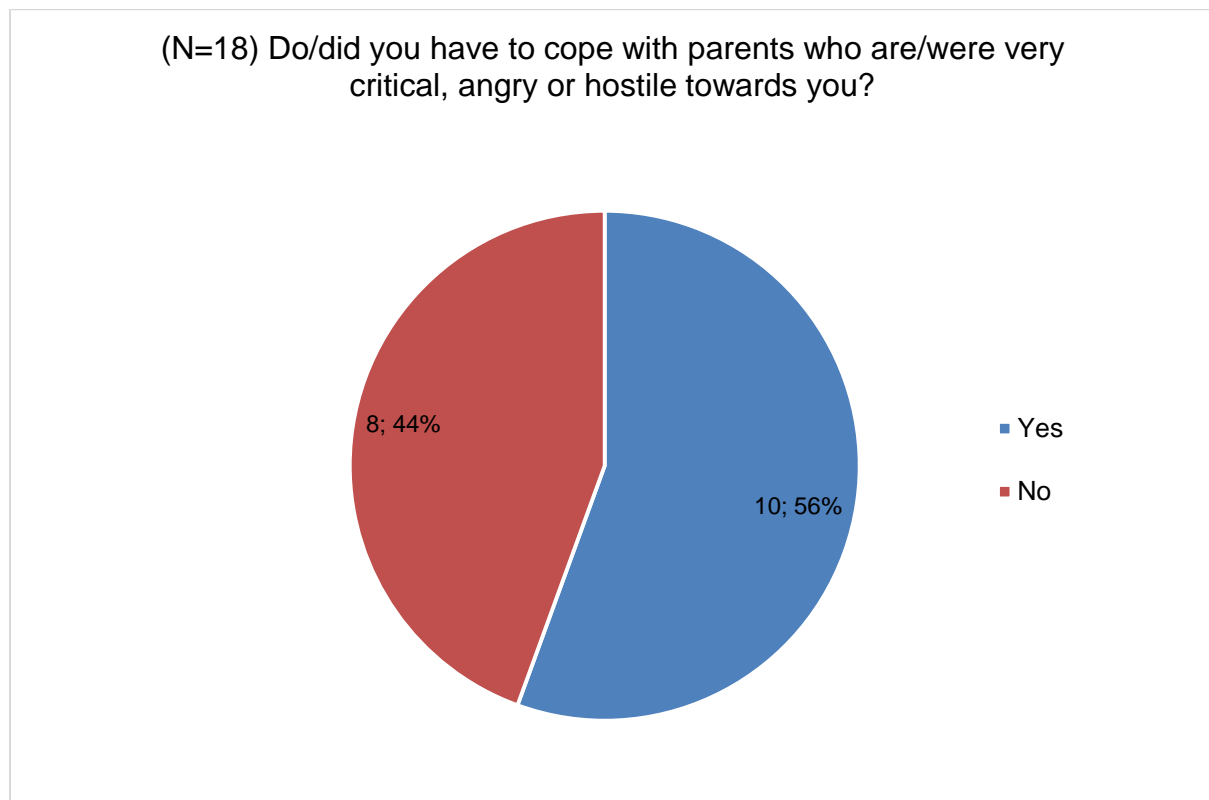


Diagram 4: Experiences with critical, hostile or angry parents

As shown in **Diagram 4** more than 50 percent of the participants stated in the **questionnaire** that they had to cope with parents who were very critical, angry or hostile towards them. All participants who ticked the box with 'yes' were asked to indicate possible reasons for parents' criticism, hostility or anger (see **Diagram 5**). The reasons that were indicated were clustered and regrouped into the following four key categories that have been mentioned in theory as well: 'child related factors', 'personal issues and external factors', 'linguistic and cultural factors' and 'fee-paying school factors'.

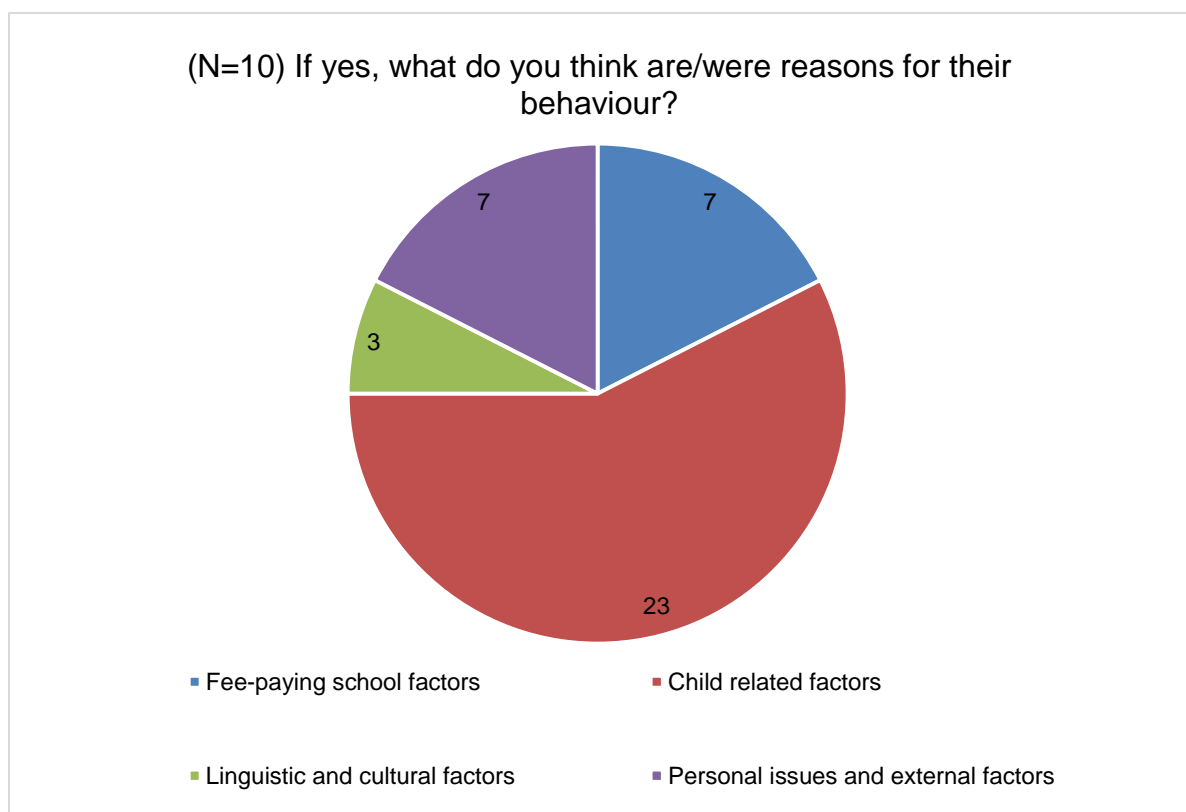


Diagram 5. Reasons for critical, hostile and angry parental behaviour

Child related factors

Diagram 5 shows that most of the indicated reasons are child-related. Whilst five respondents stated that the children had social behavioural problems, four participants indicated that the children had academic difficulties. These findings accord with Hornby's (2011) view that children's age, academic performance and behaviour at school may have an impact on challenging parental behaviour.

As it can be seen from the checkboxes that have been ticked in the **questionnaire** (see **Appendix 4, Diagram 12**, p. 71), many parents were worried about their children and scared that teachers do not understand their children. Four respondents think that in order to overcome their anxiety, parents acted in a superior way. This view is also supported by Appelbaum (2009) who states that challenging parental behaviour is often child-related and parents sometimes get upset or angry because they are extremely anxious or worried about their children.

From both **questionnaire** and **interview** responses it can be seen that a lot of parents compared their children with other children from the class. Some parents expressed that it is the fault of the school or teacher that their children are not making progress, are not as successful or as confident as other children. Another example of an overprotective parent

was given by a member of the school leadership team who mentioned that parents of children with special educational needs often tend to be more worried. She/he explains that “they are the most vulnerable parents because their children need more.” Dyches et al (2012) and Hudson (2018) also found out that parents of children with disabilities face extra challenges and therefore may have feelings of fear or often tend to be more worried.

Personal Issues and External Factors

Eight participants think that challenging parental behaviour sometimes has little to do with the school or teachers. One respondent stated: “Parents tend to be challenging if they have challenges in their own personal lives”. Six out of ten respondents who have experienced critical, hostile or angry parental behaviour believe that parents’ personal stress or guilt became teacher directed.

Fee-Paying School Factors

Another factor that was brought up by participants is that sometimes parents have very high expectations of the school and teachers as they pay fees. **Diagram 5** shows that seven out of ten respondents think that this was one of the reasons for parents to be critical, hostile or angry. One respondent explained: “As a private school where parents pay for their children’s education, they are always seeking what they deem as value for money”. Others explained that many parents question the quality and standard of the curriculum being taught, which may then be filtered down to the teacher even though they are not unhappy with the teacher in particular. This factor was also thematised by Hayden (2006) and Allen (2000) who mention that international school parents often tend to be very demanding or critical because they pay high fees and therefore have very high expectations of the school and teachers.

Linguistic and Cultural Factors

Two respondents believe that one of the reasons for critical, hostile or angry behaviour was that parents may have had varying expectations due to cultural differences whereas another participant indicated that there was a misunderstanding due to linguistic difficulties.

One of the questions in the **interviews** aimed to find out whether participants have ever experienced cultural or linguistic differences as a reason for miscommunication or conflicts between teachers and parents. Five interviewees said that sometimes expectations, views and the way people speak may vary in different cultures and it is therefore very important to develop an awareness of cultural differences. They explained that due to linguistic differences things may be misinterpreted. One participant commented that it is very hard to communicate with parents who do not speak any English or Spanish. Sometimes

misunderstandings arise because parents may not get the message the teacher intended to get across.

These findings are in accordance with theory from Nunez et al. (2017), Bodvin et al. (2018) and Grant and Ray (2013) who explain that teachers should try to develop an cultural awareness because communication between parents and teachers with different cultural backgrounds can sometimes be very challenging. They point out that due to linguistic differences, varying expectations or different use of body language, messages may be misinterpreted.

According to Hayden (2006) international schools are often attended by children of expatriate parents who may show challenging behaviour because they are scared that their decision to move to a different country may have a negative impact on their child's life. Surprisingly, this issue was raised by only one interviewee who recently had to cope with a critical and demanding mother who was worried that the academic level received in school X does not comply with the academic level in her home country. She asked the teacher to challenge the child more because she was scared that if they moved back to their home country their child would not be on the same academic level as the other children. This example also shows that some parents may have different expectations or attitudes regarding children's schooling due to their cultural background (Nutbrown, 2018).

Reasons for Reluctant or Passive Behaviour

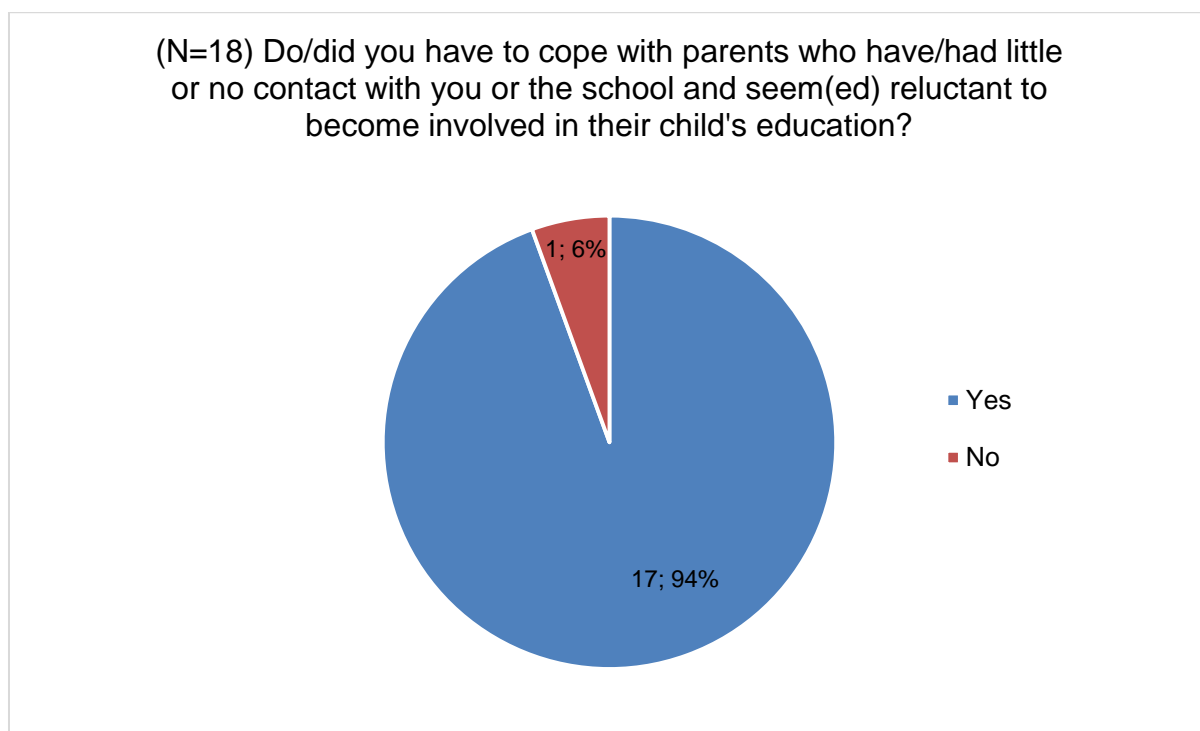


Diagram 6. Experiences with reluctant or passive behaviour

What stands out in **Diagram 6** is the high rate of participants (94%) who indicated that they had to cope with parents who had little or no contact with teachers or the school and seemed reluctant to become involved in their child's education.

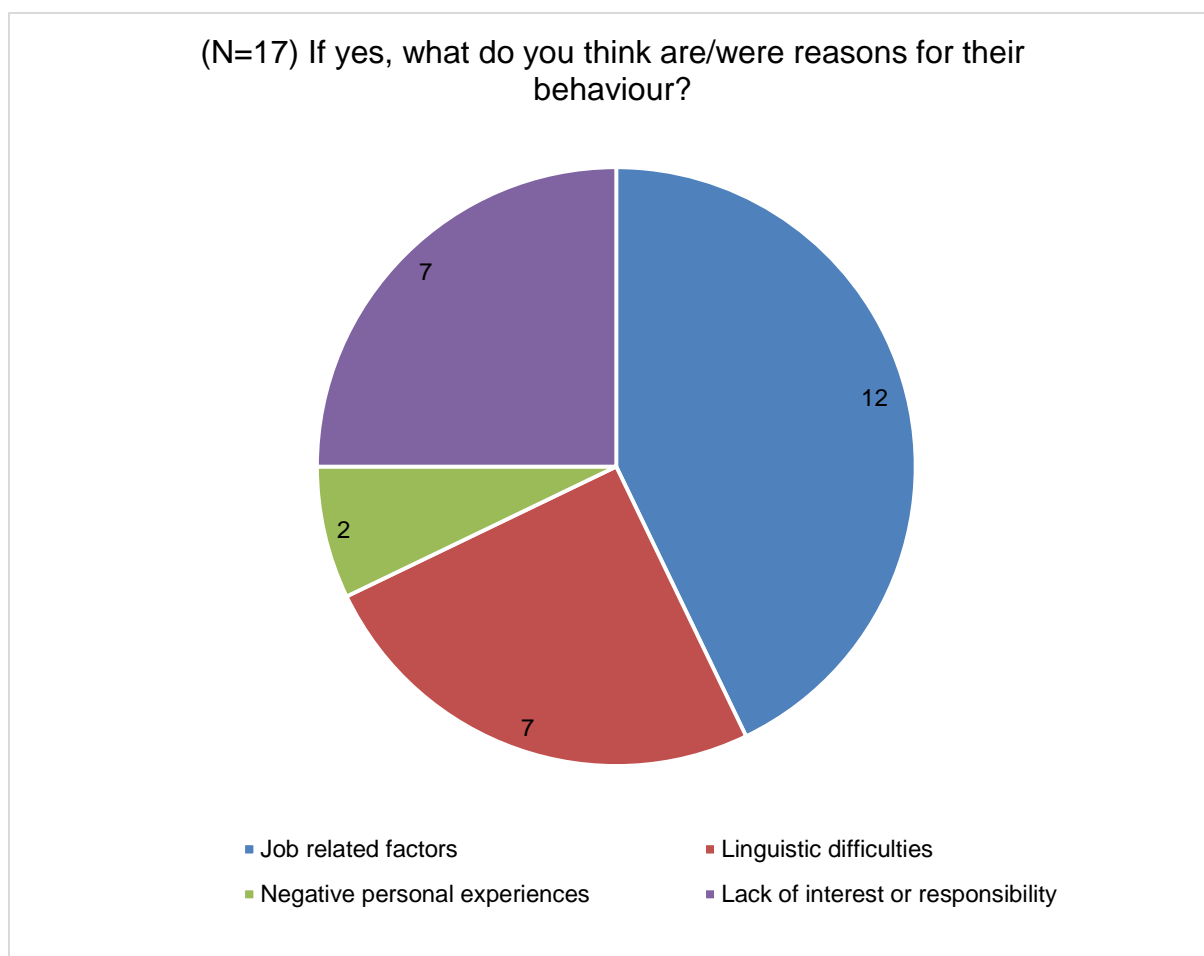


Diagram 7. Reasons for reluctant or passive parental behaviour

As it can be seen in **Diagram 7** the reasons that were indicated for reluctant and passive parental behaviour were ordered into four key categories: ‘Job-related factors’, ‘linguistic difficulties’, ‘negative personal experiences’ and ‘lack of interest and responsibility’. The most frequent indicated reasons for reluctant or passive parental behaviour are job-related. Eleven participants think that many parents do not have much time due to their busy work schedule. Another respondent pointed out that “certain high-profile parents are unable/unwilling to attend due to the nature of their job”. Seven of those who responded believe that some parents are not interested or “feel it is the responsibility of the school to solely educate their child”. According to Ward (2009), however, teachers who think that parents are not interested to get involved sometimes fail to empathise with the parents and do not get to the bottom of the problem. She points out that teachers should try to restrain their prejudiced views as it can affect the communication with parents and may lead to distrust and conflicts in the partnership.

Two out of 17 respondents think that the reluctance stems from negative personal experiences that may have happened during parent's own school time or in a school their child was previously going to. These results corroborate the ideas of Hornby (2011), Alexander et al. (2010) and Anna Freud Centre (2019), who stress that therefore some parents may have negative attitudes towards the school and teachers and distrust them.

One respondent commented that some parents are unable to communicate easily with the teacher and have difficulties to complete information slips or reading with the children due to lack of English. Six teachers assume that some parents are embarrassed or do not feel comfortable to talk to the teacher or come to school due to linguistic difficulties. These findings are consistent with Grant and Ray's (2013) research which implies that linguistic difficulties may be a barrier and the reason for parents to be passive or embarrassed to come to school or get involved in their child's education.

Effective Communication Strategies to Prevent or Overcome Conflict Situations with Critical, Hostile or Angry Parents

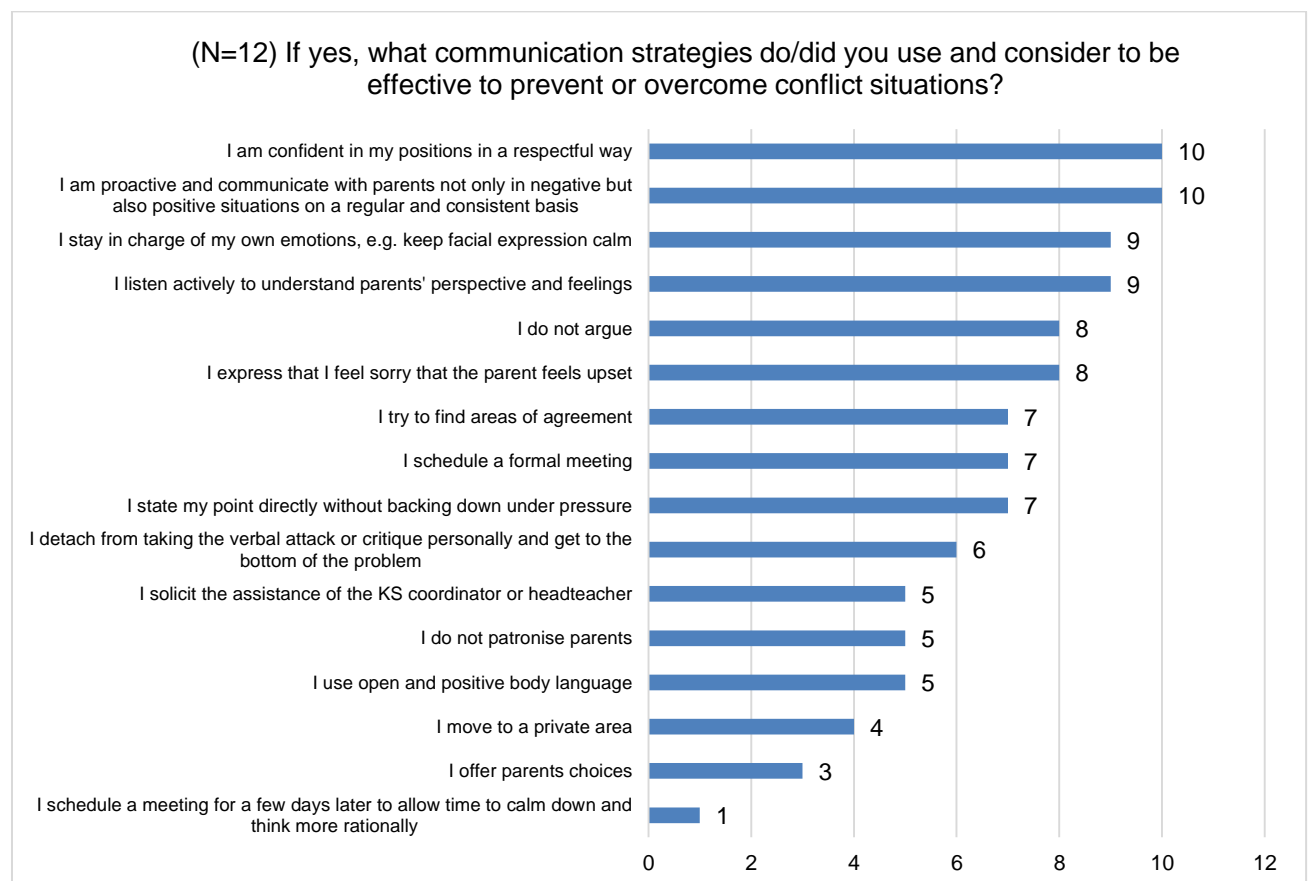


Diagram 8. Effective communication strategies for critical, hostile or angry parental behaviour

The third section of the **questionnaire** required participants to tick the communication strategies that they consider to be effective and have used to prevent or overcome conflict situations with critical, hostile or angry parents. As it is apparent in **Diagram 8** the checkboxes contain communication strategies that are considered to be effective according to theory in the literature review (see **Table 2**, p. 17). **Diagram 8** shows that the most frequently used communication strategies involve teachers displaying confidence in their positions in a respectful way and being proactive to communicate with parents not only in negative but also positive situations consistently (Appelbaum, 2009; Hudson, 2018).

Two of the non-verbal strategies that nine teachers use and consider to be effective involve controlling their own emotions, keeping their expression calm and listening actively to understand parents' perspectives and feelings. This finding is consistent with that of Whitaker and Fiore (2016) and Appelbaum (2009) who argue that listening attentively and acknowledging parents' feelings is one of the most important steps towards overcoming conflicts with parents.

What is striking about **Diagram 8** is that all communication strategies that were given in the checkboxes are considered to be effective and have been used by at least three or more participants. Another strategy that was added by one participant is that she/he schedules a meeting for a few days later to allow time to calm down and think more rationally. This view is also supported by Dyches et al. (2012) who add that it also gives teachers time to prepare for the meeting. On the other hand, as stated by two interviewees, it is sometimes helpful to let parents express their anger. This experience accords with research from the Anna Freud Centre (2019) that advises teachers to give parents the chance to express their emotions.

In the **interviews** all participants have been asked to give examples of different communication strategies that they used to overcome and prevent conflict situations with parents (see **Appendix 4**, pp. 71-72).

Effective Communication Strategies to Involve Parents Who Show Passive or Reluctant Behaviour

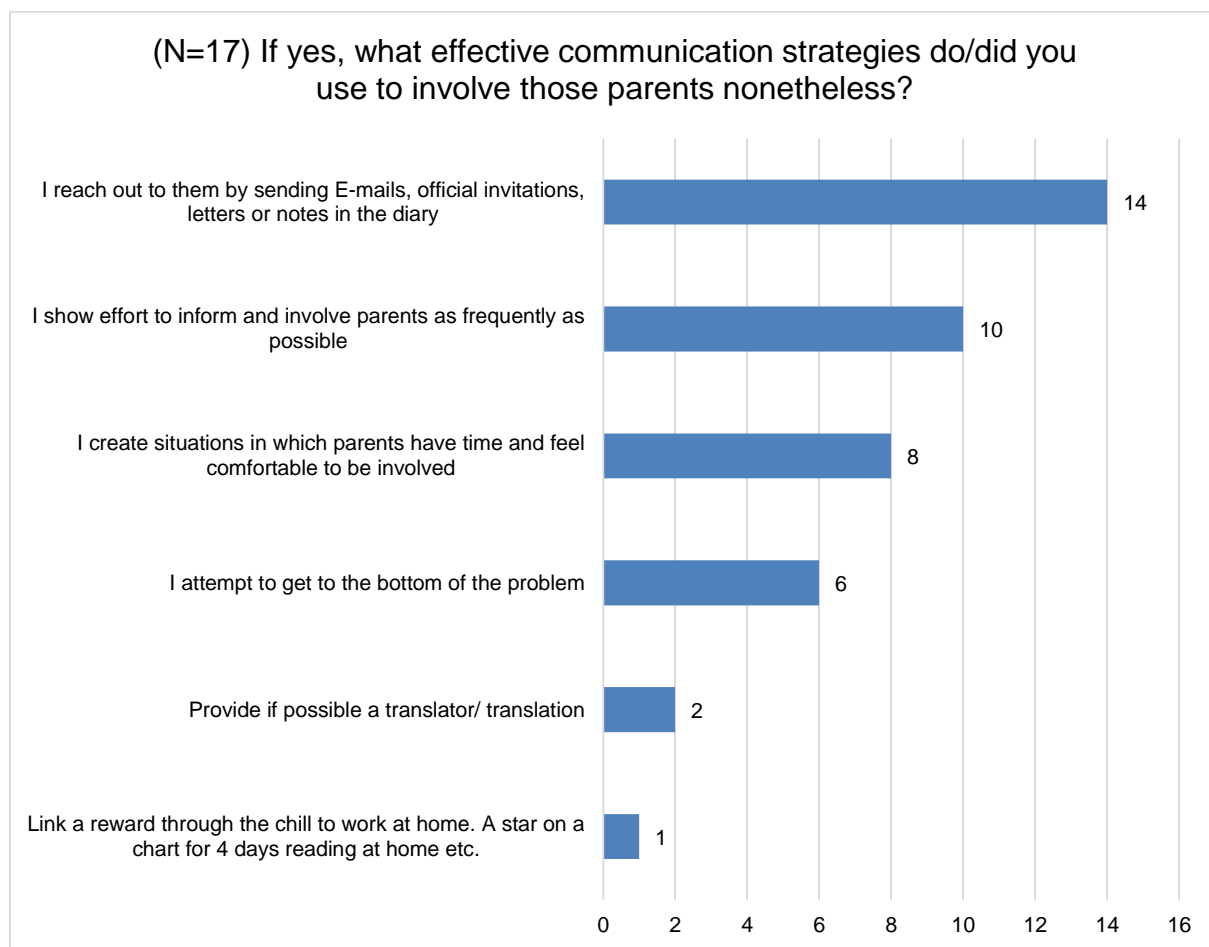


Diagram 9. Effective communication strategies to involve parents who show passive or reluctant behaviour

Diagram 9 provides an overview of different communication strategies that teachers use to involve and communicate effectively with parents who show passive or reluctant behaviour. From the chart, it can be seen that by far the most commonly used strategy is 'reaching out to parents by sending E-mails, official invitations, letters or notes in the diary'. Ten teachers show effort to inform and involve parents as frequently as possible and eight participants create situations in which parents have time and feel comfortable to be involved. Surprisingly, only a minority of participants indicated that they attempt to get to the bottom of the problem. The strategy to offer translation for parents who have difficulties to understand or speak English was suggested by two participants in the **questionnaire** and all participants in the **interviews**.

Guide: Effective Communication Strategies to Cope with Challenging Parental Behaviour

A guide (see **Table 4**) was created in accordance with participants' responses from the **interviews** (n=6), **questionnaires** (N=18) and theory from the literature review (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016; Dyches et al., 2012; Appelbaum, 2009; Hudson, 2018; Anna Freud Centre, 2019). This guide provides information about effective communication strategies that can be applied when preventing or overcoming conflict situations with parents who show challenging parental behaviour.

Get ahead of the curve	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to anticipate parents particular challenging needs • Inform parents straightaway if something has happened that the child could be upset about • If you don't have a shared language provide translations or a translator so that parents are able to express their worries • Be prepared: Know what you are going to say and offer • Create situations in which parents have time and feel comfortable to become involved
Consistency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show effort to inform and involve parents as frequently as possible • Introduce a home-school book to communicate with parents • Be proactive and communicate with parents not only in negative but also positive situations regularly • Give parents access to children's online learning journal, e.g. Tapestry or Seesaw • Reach out to parents by sending E-mails, official invitations, letters or notes in the diary
Solicit assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule meetings with parents and a special educational needs specialist/ psychologist etc. • Ask the inclusion department to get involved in order to get their professional advice • Ask members of the senior leadership team (SLT) for support • If you feel demeaned or threatened go and get another adult to come into the room with you
Act instead of react	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use open and positive body language • Detach from taking the verbal attack or critique personally and get to the bottom of the problem • Don't get angry or offensive • Stay in charge of your own emotions, e.g. keep facial expression calm • Schedule a meeting for a few days later to allow time to calm down and think more rationally • Move to a private area if required

Language use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be assertive - be confident in your own positions in a respectful way • State your point directly without backing down under pressure • Do not argue • Do not patronise parents
Negotiation & Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schedule formal (one-to-one) meetings • Find areas of agreement • Give parents strategies to support their children at home • Write a list of actions with parents and schedule follow-up meetings to share results • Acknowledge that the parent has a point, but that you have a point too • Offer choices
Empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen attentively to parents • Try not to be judgemental • Look at it from their perspective and try to understand what they feel • Develop an awareness of cultural differences • Get to the bottom of the issue/try to understand the reason of their behaviour • Give parents the opportunity to express their feelings • Validate and respect parent's feelings • Express that you are sorry that they feel that way • Show parents that you take their concerns seriously
Honesty & Equality for all	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limit the time: Be specific with how much time you give in a meeting • Make parents aware that you have to pay the equal amount of attention to every parent and child in the class • Be honest and make sure that parents have realistic expectations of their children

Table 4: A guide for effective communication strategies to cope with challenging parental behaviour

The first part of the guide describes communication strategies that may be helpful for teachers to diminish problems before they arise. The strategies that were suggested by participants reflect those of Jones and Jones (2010) who also point out the importance of teachers being well-prepared for meetings and knowing what they are going to say in advance. They also agree with the preventive strategy to inform parents about incidents and concerns straightaway so that small issues do not become larger problems. An important finding that emerged from the **questionnaire** and **interview** responses is that teachers should try not to get angry themselves or take verbal attacks or critique from parents personally. These findings reflect those of Whitaker and Fiore (2016) who state that teachers should never react in the same way as an angry or aggressive parent would do.

Support from School

The first question in the last section of the **questionnaire** required respondents to lay out how the school leadership team provides support for teachers to cope effectively with challenging parental behaviour. The majority of participants mentioned that either the Key Stage leader, member of the inclusion team or a member of the senior leadership team (SLT) offers to support teachers in parent meetings if requested or if a situation may pose a threat to the teacher. If necessary the SLT steps in and has meetings with the parents themselves. Six participants indicated in the **questionnaire** that the leadership team is always available to talk to about challenging parental behaviour and gives advice and suggestions for strategies to communicate effectively with parents.

Four participants mentioned in the **interviews** that in school X, there are certain parents who have a history and are known to show challenging behaviour every school year. They stated that SLT would always provide support and help teachers prepare for the meetings by rehearsing things they are going to discuss and pre-empting a conversation that may arise.

The current study found that school X operates an 'open-door policy'. In agreement with research from Anna Freud (2019) and Hornby (2011) the school's understanding of an open-door policy is to ensure that parents feel entitled to contact teachers to discuss potential concerns or their child's progress at any time during the year. Even though school X has scheduled meetings thrice a year, parents may leave a message at the reception, contact teachers through children's reading diaries, via E-mail, phone calls or digital portfolios such as 'Seesaw' or 'Tapestry'.

The SLT members explained that there are certain procedures that should be adhered to. Thus, before parents can have a meeting with the head teacher they will make sure that they had the opportunity to address the issue with the class teacher and Key stage leader first. Another procedure involves that teachers have to record their meetings and upload it in a SharePoint folder. This procedure is consistent with the ideas of Jones and Jones (2010) and Hudson (2018) who advise schools to keep record of meetings with 'difficult parents' as it will most likely help senior leadership to keep track and be proactive in dealing with potential problems.

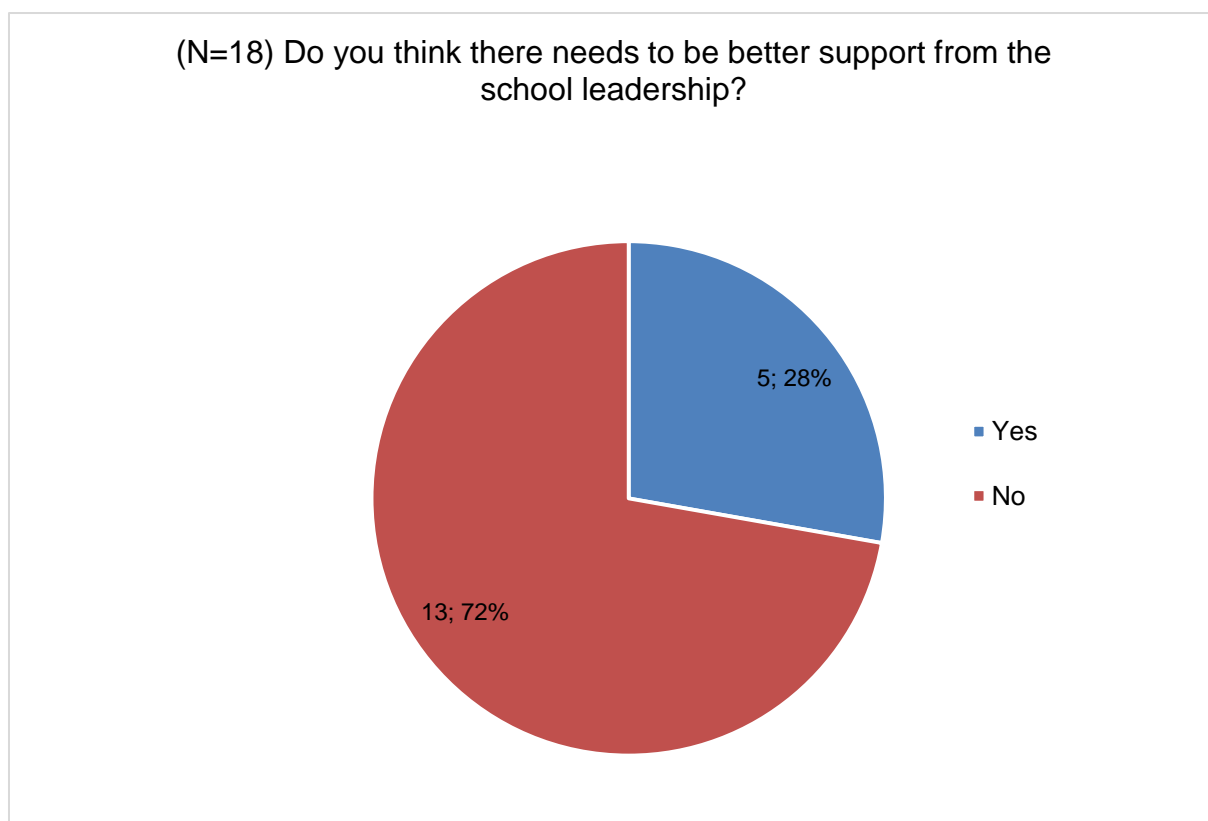


Diagram 10. Improvements for support from school leadership

The next closed-question in the **questionnaire** asked participants to indicate whether they think there needs to be better support from SLT or not. From **Diagram 10** it can be seen that 72 percent do not think there needs to be better support from SLT.

Suggestions for Improvement

28 percent of the respondents who ticked the box with 'yes' were asked to explain in what respects SLT needs to provide better support for teachers. In general, the majority thinks that SLT is very supportive towards staff and they feel secure that their side of the story is always listened to. One participant commented: "I know that they will support me and back me up if a parent goes to see them if I have already informed them of a situation." However, this view was not echoed by all participants. There are two teachers who think that the leadership team needs to trust and listen to the teachers more. They said that SLT should try to back them up "rather than trying to appease and please fee-paying parents". From three comments it can be seen that a minority of teachers have not felt entirely supported by SLT in the past. They experienced that the side of the parent has been taken and they had to apologise for something to the parents that did not seem fair or justified. Another respondent argued: "It often feels like SLT will automatically support parents and force teachers to justify our actions without trusting our professional judgement."

Another SLT interviewee stated that they would never be making a teacher apologize to a parent when the parent was in the wrong. Moreover, they explained they would never take sides with the parent if it's a breach of the rules or guidelines. However, as they explained it sometimes depends on the situation and if the reasons behind the decisions are well justified, parents are listened to. Another SLT member explained that it is a very difficult balance and that "they always need to consider the needs of the child and sometimes what is best for the child is that their parent is happy and feels that the school is doing the right thing." Thus, she/he explained that occasionally the side of the parent is taken but only when they have discussed the reasons behind the decision with the class teacher.

Two questions in the **interviews** with the SLT aimed to find out whether they prefer to have meetings with the class teacher and parents together or separately and how they deal with parents who go directly to the leadership team and complain before talking or resolving conflicts with the teacher first (**Appendix 3**, p. 70, question 5 and 7). From the responses it was apparent that generally they always try to involve teachers in the meetings. However, there are occasions when the SLT members have separate meetings with the parents because they have requested it. As it was apparent from the **interview** responses, SLT tries to be transparent and honest about what is being said. However, one participant experienced that parents complained and went directly to the leadership team and she/he has not been informed about what transpired at the meeting. She/he thinks that there needs to be more transparency among all parties involved and suggests that "no promises should be made by the leadership team that will be the responsibility of the teacher without speaking to the teacher first."

Another interviewee expressed that the school should hire translators for the formal parent meetings as there are many parents who do not speak any English or Spanish. This finding is also supported by Grant and Ray (2013) who point out the importance of providing translators for non-English speaking parents. Three other interviewees are in accord with this suggestion as the school only offers a Spanish translation service. Currently, there are members of staff who speak Russian or Spanish and translate for teachers. For any other language parents are asked to bring their own translator. However, there are issues surrounding confidentiality, as translation done by people without specific training may not always be accurate. In contrast, one interviewee thinks that the school should not be obliged to hire translators as parents chose to send their children on an English speaking school and are always entitled to bring their own translators.

Another **interview** question aimed to find out if there is something that needs to be improved regarding the provision of support for teachers. One participant suggested that it would be

useful if teachers got the chance to sit in a meeting where it is potentially difficult as “sometimes just listening and being part of a difficult situation and seeing it being resolved is quite a useful strategy for members of staff.” Another useful area to develop would be offering a training or workshop for those who struggle to cope effectively with difficult situations because teachers normally do not get any training in it.

This view is also supported by another interviewee who commented that “they don’t do enough for that in teacher training” and teachers need to be taught how to deal with parents who get upset or respond effectively to a difficult situation. These findings reflect those of Prakke et al. (2007) Graham-Clay (2005) and Flynn and Nolan (2008) who stress the significance of helping teachers to develop strategies and skills to cope effectively with challenging behaviour from parents. A member of the SLT also pointed out that the downside of them being present in the meetings with the teachers and parents is that it “sometimes can belittle the teacher because the teacher then doesn’t have the voice. So maybe what we need to be doing is coaching them into how to manage that situation better”.

The last question in the **questionnaire** asked participants whether they think there is a need for a training or workshop on effective communication strategies that can be used to cope effectively with challenging parental behaviour. How it can be seen in the chart below two-thirds of the participants feel that there is a need for training whereas one-third of the respondents don’t think it is necessary (see **diagram 11**).

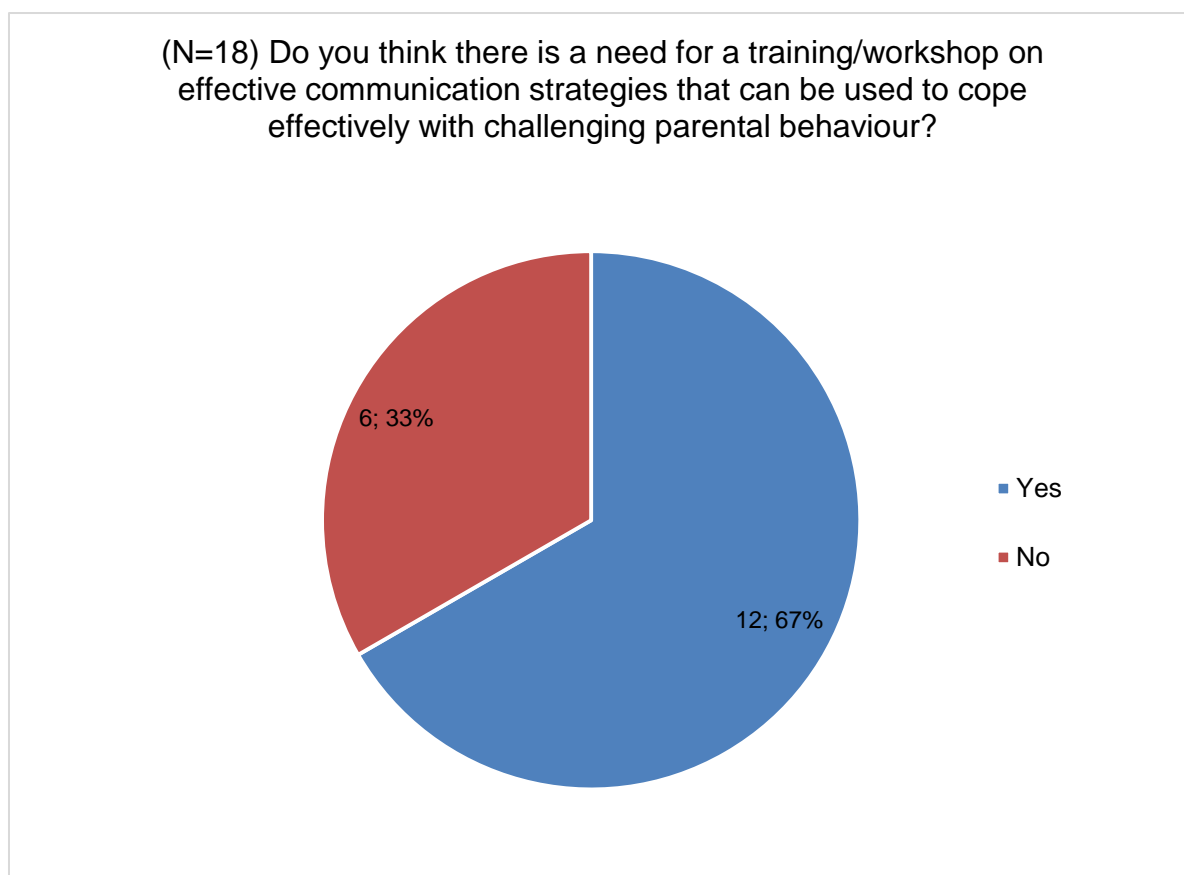


Diagram 11: The need for training on effective communication strategies

5.0 Conclusion

5.1 Research Conclusion

What behaviour from parents do the teachers in school X consider to be challenging to cope with?

As mentioned in the literature review every teacher may have a different view on what kind of behaviour from parents is challenging to cope with. According to Appelbaum (2009) and Whitaker and Fiore (2013) 'parents with challenging behaviour' may include those who seem to be reluctant to get involved in their child's education, are critical, hostile or angry towards the teacher. According to them, some critical parents may be excessively worried and overprotective which can be very stressful for teachers at times. These views reflect those of many teachers in this study. When being asked to give examples of the most challenging behaviour they had experienced, teachers described the same qualities as Appelbaum (2009) and Whitaker and Fiore (2013). Seventeen participants consider parents who seem reluctant to get involved in their child's education to be at least sometimes challenging

(n=10), challenging (n=5) or very challenging (n=2). This view accords with that of Ward (2009) who adds that this behaviour makes it challenging for the teacher to reach out to parents and keep them updated about their child's progress and development.

What are reasons for challenging parental behaviour in school X?

Based on participant responses and theory in the literature review, this study found that parents who show critical, hostile or angry behaviour are often worried about their children, have high expectations of the school because they pay high fees or have issues in their own personal life which may become teacher-directed.

One of the most significant findings to emerge from this study is that children's age, academic performance and behaviour at school may have a huge impact on parents' behaviour toward the teacher. Especially in Early Years, parents often tend to be extremely worried and seem hesitant to entrust the teacher with full responsibility of their children (Grant & Ray, 2012; Ward, 2009; Appelbaum, 2009).

In accordance with theory from Nutbrown (2018) and Grant and Ray (2013) the case study found that according to teachers, parents from different cultures sometimes have varying views, expectations or attitudes regarding children's schooling and their involvement in it. Moreover, the study found that parent-teacher communication can sometimes be difficult because some parents do not have sufficient command of English which can lead to misunderstandings, parental passivity or reluctance. Some parents may be embarrassed to come to school or talk to the teachers, whereas others are not able to get involved in their child's education, such as completing reading with their children, due to lack of English. Some teachers think that parents are not interested or feel responsible to get actively involved although there may also be other reasons behind it. Some of these reasons may include that parents are unable to get involved due to the nature of their job (Ward, 2009) whereas others may have had negative personal experiences in their own school years and therefore are hesitant to trust the teacher or school (Hornby, 2011; Alexander et al., 2010; Anna Freud Centre, 2019)

What effective communication strategies do teachers use to prevent or overcome conflict situations with parents who show challenging behaviour in school X?

The main objective of this study was to provide teachers and schools with practical guidelines for effective communication strategies that can be applied when handling parent confrontations and coping with parents who display challenging behaviour. These guidelines

are presented in form of a table and divided into eight main categories: 'Get ahead of the curve', 'Consistency', 'Solicit assistance', 'Act instead of react', 'Language use', 'Negotiation & collaboration', 'Empathy', 'Honesty & Equality for all' (see **Table 4**, pp. 37-38). The summarised strategies in the guide serve as recommendations for all teachers who intend to develop and expand their communication skills in order to build a trusting and supportive partnership with parents in an international school setting

Summarising, the study has identified that showing empathy by listening to parent's concerns and validating their feelings is one of the most effective strategies to prevent and overcome conflict situations with parents (Whitaker & Fiore, 2016; Appelbaum, 2009). Another important strategy that is perceived as helpful by participants and Whitaker & Fiore (2016) is refraining from taking the verbal attack or criticism personally and staying in charge of your own emotions. The present study has also confirmed the findings of Dyches et al. (2012), Hornby (2011), Hudson (2018) and Grant and Ray (2013) which found that consistent communication and daily contact is very effective and often helps parents and teachers to build a trusting relationship. It also may help teachers to forego the emergence of bigger issues.

Ward (2009) also points out how important it is that teachers try to investigate the reason for parental passivity and reluctance. However, this seems to be seldom the priority of the teachers in this study even though the results of the **questionnaires** reveal that 94 percent of the participants have/had to cope with parents who seem reluctant to get involved in their child's education. According to Appelbaum (2009) it is very important that teachers show effort to involve and inform hard-to-reach parents as frequently as possible and reach out to them by using various communication tools. In the **questionnaires** it was evident that these strategies are most frequently used by teachers in school X.

How does school X provide support for teachers to cope effectively with challenging behaviour from parents?

In general SLT supports teachers by assisting them in the parent meetings if requested and always being available to give advice and suggestions for strategies to communicate effectively with parents. They also help teachers prepare for potentially difficult meetings by pre-empting a conversation that may arise. Moreover, teachers are asked to record their meetings to help senior leadership keep track and be proactive in dealing with problems if necessary (Hudson, 2018; Jones & Jones, 2010).

The school's implementation of an open-door policy is consistent with Anna Freud's (2019) and Hornby's (2011) research which indicates that parents should be entitled to contact

teachers and discuss concerns or their child's progress at any time during the year. The outcomes of the study reveal that due to the fact that parents in Year 1 and above are asked to pick up and drop off the children at the gate, some parents may be hindered to approach teachers and discuss issues (Grant & Ray, 2013).

All in all, the study found that 72 percent of the teachers who participated in the study are satisfied with the school's support whereas 28 percent think there is still room for improvement. The majority of participants said that the SLT is very supportive towards staff and they feel assured that their side of the story is always listened to. Although the school has a certain hierarchical approach which involves that parents are asked to discuss issues and concerns with the class teacher and Key Stage leader before they contact the leadership team, some parents do not adhere to that procedure. A minority of teachers mentioned that there were occasions when they had not been informed about what transpired at meetings with those parents or the side of a parent had been taken. Despite these contradictive views, one can conclude from the findings that the SLT is trying to find a balance between 'having teacher's back and showing a united front to the parents' and 'appeasing and pleasing parents' for the sake of the children. It sometimes appears to be challenging for SLT to find an appropriate middle ground for teacher's as well as parental demands.

Bearing in mind that the British international school is attended by children with 40 different nationalities another suggestion for improvement that emerged from the study is that it would be helpful if the school hired trained translators for the different languages that are represented in school X (Grant & Ray, 2013).

5.2 Discussion and Recommendations

The findings of the study suggest teachers should generally try to empathise with parents because in most cases parents show challenging behaviour because they are upset about something having to do with their children. Sometimes conflicts between parents and teachers emerge because they have varying opinions or attitudes or there may be misunderstandings on either side.

Overall, this study strengthens the idea that educators and schools need to find ways to coach teachers to develop effective communication strategies to build a positive and trusting relationship as many teachers struggle and have never been taught how to respond effectively in difficult situations (Prakke et al., 2007; Graham-Clay, 2005; Flynn & Nolan, 2008).

A further research project based on the findings of this study could examine the impact of a series of workshops on effective parent-teacher communication. The findings of the current study could be helpful to get an overview of teachers' pre-knowledge about effective communication strategies to prevent and overcome conflict situations with parents who show challenging behaviour and can serve as a basis for the workshop design.

The potential steps for further research are outlined in **Table 5**.

Steps	Process
Step 1	Use the findings as a basis to design the first set of workshops
Step 2	Give workshops (information about different types of challenging parental behaviour and effective communication strategies to overcome and prevent conflicts)
Step 3	After the first term parent-teacher meetings send out questionnaires to teachers in order to investigate if their practice has improved and in what areas they need more support
Step 4	Analyse questionnaire responses to plan follow-up workshops
Step 5	Conduct interviews with a small group of teachers after the second term parent-teacher meetings and plan the last set of workshops based on their experiences and suggestions for improvement
Step 6	Third term parent-teacher meetings and final round of questionnaires to see if the whole series of workshops was effective according to teachers' perceptions

Table 5. Steps for the research design

Moreover, further research should be undertaken to explore the viewpoints of parents regarding the effectiveness of parent-teacher communication in school X. Their insights and suggestions for improvement could be very valuable and helpful for the school to improve their practice.

5.3 Limitations

Due to the fact that online surveys were to be completed in absence of the researcher, there were a number of limitations; foremost the lack of possibilities to ask clarifying questions. According to Cohen et al. (2018) participants may misinterpret questions and thus answer them inaccurately or not at all. However, participants had more time and less pressure to complete the **questionnaire**, which may also have led to more detailed and accurate responses.

Due to the fact that all interviewees have been audio-recorded there is a chance that some participants did not feel comfortable to discuss sensitive topics or express negative experiences. Moreover, in the **questionnaire** surveys participants had to indicate their names. Although they signed the consent form which ensures the researcher's confidentiality, some participants may have been hesitant to be entirely honest to share negative experiences. For instance, they may have been scared that the information could be traced back to them (Denscombe, 2010).

6.0 References

- Alexander, R., Armstrong, M., Flutter, J., Hargreaves, L., Harlen, W., Harrison, D., & Utting, D. (2010). *Children, their world, their education final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. (R. Alexander, Ed.) Abingdon: Routledge.
- Allen, K. (2000). The international school and its community: think globally, interact locally. In M. Hayden, & T. Jeff (Eds.), *International schools & international education: improving teaching, management & quality* (pp. 124 - 139). London: Kogan Page Limited.
- Anna Freud Centre. (2019, June 1). Retrieved from Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families: <https://www.annafreud.org/media/9165/supporting-schools-to-engage-with-all-parents-and-carers-booklet.pdf>
- Appelbaum, M. (2009). *How to handle hard-to-handle parents* (1st ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Blaxter, L., Hughes, C., & Tight, M. (2010). *How to research*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Bodvin, K., Verschueren, K., & Struyf, E. (2018). School counsellors' beliefs regarding collaboration with parents of students with special educational needs in Flanders: Parents as partners or opposites? *British Educational Research Journal* , 44(3), 419-439.
- Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2018). *Research methods in education*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Denscombe, M. (2010). *Ground rules for social research: Guidelines for good practice*. Berkshire: Open University Press.
- Dyches, T. T., Carter, N. J., & Prater, M. A. (2012). *A teacher's guide to communicating with parents: Practical strategies for developing successful relationships*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Flynn, G., & Nolan, B. (2008). What do school principals think about current school-family relationships? *NASSP Bulletin*, 92(3), pp. 173-190.
- Graham-Clay, S. (2005). Communicating with parents: Strategies for teachers. *School Community Journal*, 1, pp. 117-129.
- Grant, K. B., & Ray, J. A. (2013). *Home, school, and community collaboration culturally responsive family engagement* (2. ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Inc.

- Hayden, M. (2006). *Introduction to international education* (1st ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Hayden, M., & Thompson, J. (2016). International Schools: the developing agenda. In M. Hayden, & J. Thompson (Eds.), *International Schools: current issues and future prospects*. Oxford: Symposium Books Ltd.
- Hornby, G. (2011). *Parental involvement in childhood education: Building effective school-family partnerships*. New York, NY: Springer Science + Business Media.
- Hudson, M. E. (2018). The primary school years. In V. A. McGinley, & M. Alexander (Eds.), *Parents and families of students with special needs collaborating across the age span* (pp. 194 - 221). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Jones, V., & Jones, L. (2010). *Comprehensive classroom management*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education.
- Lipson, C. (2005). *How to write a BA Thesis: A practical guide from your first ideas to your finished paper*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Menter, I., Elliot, D., Hulme, M., Lewin, J., & Lowden, K. (2011). *A guide to practitioner research in education*. London: Sage.
- Nunez, I. C., Mahdi, D. R., & Popma, D. L. (2017). *Intercultural sensitivity: From denial to intercultural competence* (1st ed.). Assen: Royal Van Gorcum BV.
- Nutbrown, C. (2018). *Early childhood educational research* (1st ed.). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Pollock, D. C., & Van Reken, R. E. (2009). *Third culture kids: Growing up among worlds*. Bosten, MA: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.
- Prakke, B., Van Peet, A., & Van der Wolf, K. (2007). Challenging parents, teacher occupational stress and health. *International Journal about Parents in Education*, 1(0), 36-44.
- Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2010). Teacher self-efficacy and teacher burnout: A study of relations. *Teaching and teacher education*, 26(4), pp. 1059-1069.
- Solomon, M. (2002). *Working with difficult people: Revised and expanded*. New York, NY: Prentice Hall Press.

- Walliman, N., & Buckler, S. (2008). *Your dissertaion in education*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Ward, U. (2009). *Working with parents in Early Years settings* (1st ed.). Exeter: Learning Matters Ltd.
- Wellington, J. (2015). *Educational research: Contemporary issues and practical approaches*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Whitaker, T., & Fiore, D. J. (2016). *Dealing with difficult parents* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.

Appendix 1: Consent Forms for Research Participation

Questionnaire Participation

Study Title: International Teacher Education for Primary Schools

Student Researcher: Isabel Drexel, isabel.drexel@student.stenden.com

I am a student at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences in Meppel, the Netherlands. I am in my fourth year at the university and I am currently working on my bachelor thesis. I am doing my teaching practice at (...) for 9 weeks. For my dissertation I am planning to conduct a field study. This form contains important information about the aim of this study, instructions for participating in this study and the way I will use and store the collected data.

What is The Aim of the Study?

You are being asked to participate in this research study to share your experiences about challenging parent behaviour at (...). The outcomes of the study will serve as a guide and recommendations for all teachers who intend to develop and expand their communication skills in order to build a trusting and supportive partnership with parents in an international school setting.

With the help of questionnaires the study aims to examine teachers' experiences with effective communication strategies that have been used to prevent and overcome conflict situations with parents who show challenging behaviour. The study also focusses on how the school leadership provides support for teachers to cope effectively with challenging parental behaviour.

What Will I Do if I choose to Be in this Study?

You will be asked to take part in a self-administered questionnaire that will be sent to you via E-mail.

The questionnaire will be answered in approximately 10-15 minutes, depending on how detailed participants wish to answer the questions.

I will keep the results of questionnaires in files on my personal password saved laptop; they will only be analysed by me and read by my first and second assessor from the NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences.

I may quote your remarks in my dissertation. But initials will be used to protect your identity.

What are the Possible Discomforts?

If you are uncomfortable with some of the questions and topics you are free to not answer, to skip to the next question, or to stop the questionnaire.

How Will You Protect the Information You Collect about Me and How Will that Information Be Shared?

Results of this study will be used in the dissertation for university purposes only. Your study data will be handled confidential and saved until the end of the study in a file on my password protected laptop. Individual names and other personal identifiable information will not be used.

What are My Rights as a Research Participant?

If you have read this form and have decided to participate in this project, please understand your **participation is voluntary** and you have the **right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time** and you will not be penalized in any way for deciding to stop participation. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study will be presented in the dissertation for university purposes only. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all written data resulting from the study. All personal information will be anonymised at all times.

Who Can I Contact if I Have Questions or Concerns about this Research Study?

If you have questions, you are free to ask me or you may contact me via E-mail:

Name: Isabel Drexel

E-Mail address: isabel.drexel@student.stenden.com

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact my dissertation supervisor at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences:

Harry Vissinga

harry.vissinga@stenden.com

Consent

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form.

Indicate **Yes** or **No**:

I give consent to answer a questionnaire during this study.

☐ Yes ☐ No

Participant's Name (block capitals)

Participant's email address (block capitals)

Participant's Signature

Date

Interview Participation

Study Title: International Teacher Education for Primary Schools

Student Researcher: Isabel Drexel, isabel.drexel@student.stenden.com

What is the aim of the study?

You are being asked to participate in this research study to share your experiences about challenging parent behaviour at (...). The outcomes of the study will serve as a guide and recommendations for all teachers who intend to develop and expand their communication

skills in order to build a trusting and supportive partnership with parents in an international school setting.

What are my rights as a research participant?

Please understand your **participation is voluntary** and you have the **right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time**. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. The results of this research study will be presented in the dissertation for university purposes only. Your individual privacy will be maintained in all written data resulting from the study. All personal information will be anonymised at all times.

Who can I contact if I have questions or concerns about this research study?

If you have questions, you are free to ask me or you may contact me via E-mail:

Name: Isabel Drexel

E-Mail address: isabel.drexel@student.nhlstenden.com

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in this research, you can contact my dissertation supervisor at NHL Stenden University of Applied Sciences:

Harry Vissinga

harry.vissinga@stenden.com

Consent

I have read this form and the research study has been explained to me. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. If I have additional questions, I have been told whom to contact. I agree to participate in the research study described above and will receive a copy of this consent form.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.

Indicate **Yes** or **No**:

I give consent to participate in the interview.

☐ Yes ☐ No

I agree to my interview being audio-recorded

___Yes ___No

Participant's Name (block capitals)

Participant's Signature

Date

Appendix 2: Questionnaire

Section 1

Challenging parental behaviour in school

You are being asked to participate in this research study to share your experiences about challenging parental behaviour at (...). The outcomes of the study will serve as a guide and recommendations for all teachers who intend to develop and expand their communication skills in order to build a trusting and supportive partnership with parents in an international school setting.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your help is highly appreciated!

***Required**

Email address *

Your email address

1. Are you female or male? *

☐ Female

☐ Male

2. What is your nationality?

Your answer _____

3. How many years of teaching experience do you have? *

☐ 1 year

☐ 2 - 5 years

☐ 5 - 10 years

☐ More than 10 years

☐ Other: _____

4. What is your position in the school this year? *

☐ Member of the leadership team

☐ Teacher in Early Years

☐ Teacher in KS1

☐ Teacher in KS2

☐ Teacher/Early Years coordinator

☐ Teacher/KS1 coordinator

☐ Teacher/KS2 coordinator

☐ Other: _____

5. How long have you been working in this school? *

☐ 1 year

☐ 2 years

☐ 3-5 years

☐ More than 5 years

Section 2

Characteristics of parents with challenging behaviour

6. What behaviour from parents do you consider to be challenging to cope with? Parents who... *

	Not challenging at all	Sometimes challenging	Challenging	Very challenging
are overprotective	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
are hostile towards the teacher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
are excessively worried	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
seem to be reluctant to get involved in their child's education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
are angry	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
are aggressive	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
are critical towards the teacher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
gossip or do things behind the teacher's back	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
have little or no contact with the teacher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
do not come to school	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
blame teachers for the problems of their children	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
act as if they know more than the teacher	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. What behaviour from parents do/did you have to cope with in this school? Parents who..

	Current school year	1 year ago	More than 1 year ago	Never experienced in this school
are overprotective	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
are hostile towards the teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
are excessively worried	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
seem to be reluctant to get involved in their child's education	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
are angry	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
are aggressive	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
are critical towards the teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
gossip or do things behind the teacher's back	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
have little or no contact with the teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
do not come to school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
blame teachers for the problems of their children	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
act as if they know more than the teacher	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

8. In what way does the year group of children have an impact on parents' behaviour towards the teacher in this school?

Your answer

Section 3

Reasons for challenging parental behaviour and effective communication strategies

9. Give an example of the most challenging parental behaviour that you have/had to cope with in this school (indicate reasons for their behaviour and effective communication strategies that you use/used to cope with it)

Your answer

10. Do/did you have to cope with parents who are/were very critical, angry or hostile towards you? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

11. If yes, what do you think are/were reasons for their behaviour?

- ☐ They have/had very high expectations of the school/teacher because it is a fee-paying school
- ☐ They are/were extremely worried about their children
- ☐ Personal stress or guilt becomes/became teacher directed
- ☐ Their child has/had academic difficulties
- ☐ Their child has/had social behavioural problems
- ☐ Misunderstanding due to linguistic differences
- ☐ Varying expectations due to cultural differences
- ☐ To overcome their anxiety they act(ed) in a superior way
- ☐ They are/were worried that the teacher does not understand their children
- ☐ Friendship issues
- ☐ Their child has/had difficulties to adapt to the new environment or culture
- ☐ Other: _____

12. If yes, what communication strategies do/did you use and consider to be effective to prevent or overcome conflict situations?

- ☐ I am confident in my positions in a respectful way
- ☐ I try to find areas of agreement
- ☐ I schedule a formal meeting
- ☐ I solicit the assistance of the KS coordinator or headteacher
- ☐ I stay in charge of my own emotions, e.g. keep facial expression calm
- ☐ I offer parents choices
- ☐ I do not argue
- ☐ I express that I feel sorry that the parent feels upset
- ☐ I do not patronise parents
- ☐ I state my point directly without backing down under pressure
- ☐ I use open and positive body language
- ☐ I move to a private area
- ☐ I detach from taking the verbal attack or critique personally and get to the bottom of the problem
- ☐ I listen actively to understand parents' perspective and feelings
- ☐ I am proactive and communicate with parents not only in negative but also positive situations on a regular and consistent basis
- ☐ Other: _____

13. Do/did you have to cope with parents who have/had little or no contact with you or the school and seem(ed) reluctant to become involved in their child's education? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

14. If yes, what do you think are/were reasons for their behaviour?

☐ They do not have much time due to their busy work schedule

☐ They are not interested

☐ Parents are embarrassed or do not feel comfortable to talk to the teacher or come to school due to linguistic difficulties

☐ The reluctance stems from negative personal experiences that may have happened during parent's own school time or in a school their child was previously going to

☐ Other: _____

15. If yes, what effective communication strategies do/did you use to involve those parents nonetheless?

☐ I reach out to them by sending E-mails, letters or notes in the diary

☐ I show effort to inform and involve parents as frequently as possible

☐ I create situations in which parents have time and feel comfortable to be involved

☐ I attempt to get to the bottom of the problem

☐ Other: _____

Section 4

Support from school

16. How does the school leadership provide support for teachers to cope effectively with challenging parental behaviour?

Your answer

17. Do you think there needs to be better support from the school leadership? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

18. If yes, in what respects does the school leadership need to provide better support?

Your answer

19. Do you think there is a need for a training/workshop on effective communication strategies that can be used to cope effectively with challenging parental behaviour? *

☐ Yes

☐ No

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

Interview 1: Teacher

In the questionnaire you indicated that this year you have experienced that parents are critical towards you.

1. What was the reason of their behaviour?
2. How did you react to their criticism?
3. What effective strategies did you use to resolve conflicts with critical parents?
4. What strategies did you use to prevent conflicts? Can you give recommendations for effective conflict prevention
5. Did you get support from the leadership team?

In the questionnaire you said that some parents had complaints and went directly to the leadership.

6. Can you elaborate what happened?
7. How can the support from the leadership team be improved?
8. Were there ever situations in which the side of the parent has been taken because they pay high fees and need to be pleased?

In the questionnaire you also indicated that this year you have to cope with parents who seem to be reluctant to become involved in their child's education.

9. What strategies do you use to communicate with them effectively?

In KS2 parents pick up and drop off their children at the gate and do not have daily contact with parents like they do in Early Years.

10. Do you think that some situations can get worse because issues/concerns cannot be dealt with very quickly – in the moment?
11. Have you ever experienced that cultural or linguistic differences between you and the parents are the reason for miscommunication and/or conflicts? Or do you feel that sometimes you have different expectations or attitudes regarding children's learning?

Interview 2: Teacher

In the questionnaire you indicated that you had to cope with a father who showed aggressive behaviour one year ago.

1. In which year group were you teaching last year?
2. Where/when did you have those confrontations with him? During formal meetings or after school?
3. What do you think was the reason of his behaviour?

You indicated that by the end of the year you had established a positive relationship with him.

4. What strategies did you use to establish a positive relationship with him?
5. How did you react to his aggression and hostility in the moment? How did you diffuse the situation?
6. What strategies did you use to prevent conflicts? Can you give recommendations for effective conflict prevention
7. How did the school leadership support you with this? Did they also sit in meetings with you and the father? What was the procedure?
8. Do you think that the daily contact that teachers have with parents in Early Years can be useful in stopping a situation getting worse because issues/concerns can be dealt with very quickly – in the moment?
9. Have you ever experienced that cultural or linguistic differences between you and the parents are the reason for miscommunication and/or conflicts? Or do you feel that sometimes you have different expectations or attitudes regarding children's learning?

In the questionnaire it is apparent that you also had to cope with parents who had little or no contact with you and seemed reluctant to become involved in their child's education

10. What strategies do you use to involve and communicate with parents who are embarrassed or do not feel comfortable to talk to you due to linguistic difficulties?
11. How do you communicate with parents whose reluctance stem from negative personal experiences? What communication strategies do you use to build a positive relationship with them?

Interview 3: Teacher

In the questionnaire you indicated that you had to cope with a parent who showed angry and aggressive behaviour one year ago.

1. In which year group were you teaching last year?
2. Where/when did you have those confrontations with the parent? During formal meetings or after school?
3. What do you think was the reason of their behaviour?
4. How did you react to the parent's anger in the moment? How did you diffuse the situation?
5. How did the school leadership support you?
6. In the questionnaire you indicated that you asked for help from SEND
7. Who is SEND? How did they help you to use effective strategies?

In the questionnaire you indicated that you have to cope with parents who are excessively worried, overprotective and hostile towards you.

8. What do you think was the reason of their behaviour?
9. What effective communication strategies do you use to resolve conflicts?
10. What strategies do you use to prevent conflicts? Can you give recommendations for effective conflict prevention
11. Did you ask the leadership team for support? How do they support you?
12. Do you think that the daily contact that teachers have with parents in Early Years can be useful in stopping a situation getting worse because issues/concerns can be dealt with very quickly – in the moment?
13. Have you ever experienced that cultural or linguistic differences between you and the parents are the reason for miscommunication and/or conflicts?

In the questionnaire you indicated that one of the reasons for challenging parental behaviour was varying expectations due to cultural differences

14. Can you elaborate what happened?
15. Were there ever situations in which the side of the parent has been taken because they pay high fees and need to be pleased?
16. What strategies do you use to communicate effectively with parents who seem reluctant to become involved in children's learning?

Interview 4, 5, 6: Members of the Leadership Team

1. You have an open-door policy in school. What does that exactly mean?
2. Are parents in Year 1 and above allowed to come and see teachers for a discussion before and after school or do they have to schedule a formal meeting?
3. Do you think that the daily contact that teachers have with parents in Early Years can be useful in stopping a situation getting worse because issues/concerns can be dealt with very quickly – in the moment?
4. Are there any guidelines on the correct procedure to deal with parents who have conflicts with teachers?
5. Do you schedule a formal meeting with the teacher and parents together first or do you prefer to have separate meetings?
6. Do you sometimes have meetings with a group of parents who have complaints? If not, why do you prefer not to do that?
7. How do you deal with parents who go directly to the leadership team and complain before talking or resolving conflicts with the teacher first?
8. Was there ever a situation in which the side of the parent has been taken because they pay high fees and need to be pleased?
9. Have you ever experienced that cultural or linguistic differences are the reasons for miscommunication and/or conflicts between teachers and parents in this school?
10. What effective strategies do you use to prevent conflicts? Can you give recommendations for effective conflict prevention?
11. What strategies do you use to involve and communicate with parents who are embarrassed or do not feel comfortable to talk to teachers due to linguistic difficulties?
12. Do you have suggestions for improvement in regard to providing support for teachers to cope effectively with challenging parental behaviour?

Appendix 4: Results

Impact of the Year Group: Questionnaire Responses

One respondent thinks that there is no significant difference and that she/he had the same issues with parents in all year groups. One respondent believes that parents may relax more as the children get older and less of these challenging behaviours may be seen, while three participants felt that parents in higher year groups are more concerned about children's academic performance. One teacher points out: "Parents care more about social skills in the lower year groups and this balance shifts gradually to the academic side as the children get older".

Reasons for Critical, Hostile or Angry Behaviour: Diagram

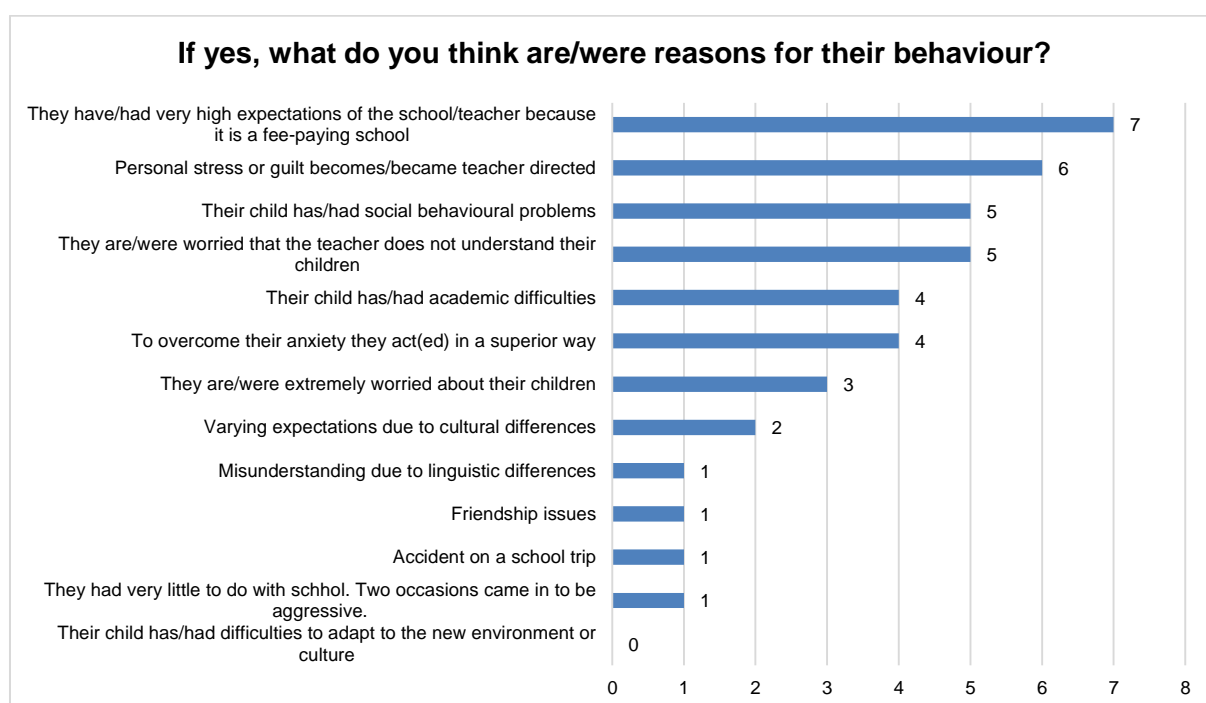


Diagram 12. *Indicated reasons for critical, hostile and angry behaviour*

Effective Communication Strategies: Interview Responses

All interviewees said that 'listening to parents' concerns' is one of the most effective strategies. In their point of view it is very important to show empathy and validate parent's feelings. One of the interviewees mentioned that especially for parents who are excessively worried and overprotective, consistency, honesty and equality for all are the most important aspects to consider when communicating with them. An effective strategy that has been suggested by an interviewee who had to cope with a critical parent is that teachers should try to anticipate parents' particular challenging needs and be prepared and know what they are

going to say to the parents in advance. Another strategy that has been suggested to help de-escalate a situation is to inform parents straightaway if something has happened that the child could be upset about. However, all interviewees stressed that the different strategies they use vary among individual parents and is always dependent on the situation.