



“Sometimes relationships with parents wear you out”. A qualitative study on teachers’ perceptions of the parent-teacher relationship in current times

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Abstract

Although parents and teachers interact frequently at school, only a few studies have investigated which aspects of their relationship are perceived as supportive or challenging by teachers and whether teachers experience possible consequences of this relationship for their well-being at work. To fill this gap, the present study aimed to explore how teachers perceive the parent-teacher relationship in contemporary times and to investigate whether they experience potential consequences on their well-being. To do so, we conducted an interview-based study with 23 Italian primary, middle, and secondary school teachers. Data was analysed through reflexive thematic analysis. Results showed that although teachers often establish cooperative relationships with parents based on trust and mutual respect, such cooperation is not always achieved. In these cases, parents are perceived as either uninvolved or overinvolved, and teachers acknowledge that managing challenging relationships may have implications for their well-being and behaviours. Additionally, teachers identified broader societal factors that contribute to the transformation of the parent-teacher relationship in current times. Overall, our results contribute to the literature by providing a complex and wide overview of teachers’ perceptions of parents and parent-teacher relationships, including a focus on teachers’ well-being.

Keywords Parent-teacher relationship · Teachers’ perceptions · Parental involvement · Teachers’ well-being · Overprotective parents

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1 Introduction

It seems increasingly common to come across newspaper articles describing parents who want to take over from their children's teachers, who are extremely demanding and disrespectful (Amabile, 2018; Santin, 2024), or who send aggressive e-mails to teachers (Weale, 2022). These articles seem to suggest that parents are becoming increasingly difficult to manage in school, especially when they disagree with teachers' decisions. It is not surprising, then, that teachers describe such situations as challenging and overwhelming.

Recent research suggests that parents today are perceived as more involved in their children's lives, including their school lives (Doecke & Zilibotti, 2019; Faircloth, 2023; Sayer et al., 2004). In addition, parent-teacher dynamics changed consistently due to the COVID-19 pandemic. For instance, the use of email exchanges for communicating has increased, and teachers perceive this communication as either very useful or challenging (Bordalba & Bochaca, 2019). Finally, international surveys have highlighted that managing parents at school is perceived as a significant source of stress for teachers (European Commission, 2021; OECD, 2025), becoming an additional stressor among other job-related demands that may affect teachers' well-being (Viac & Fraser, 2020).

Nevertheless, research on the parent-teacher relationship has mostly focused on its effects on students' outcomes and changes in classroom dynamics (Sheridan et al., 2017, 2019), neglecting possible consequences for teachers' well-being. Therefore, it seems crucial to explore how teachers perceive their relationship with parents nowadays. For this reason, through the present study, we aimed to investigate teachers' perceptions of parents and the parent-teacher relationship. Thereby, we also explored whether and how teachers describe possible consequences on their well-being. To gain a rich description of teachers' perspectives and experiences, we set up an explorative qualitative study based on interviews with Italian primary, middle, and secondary school teachers.

2 Theoretical background

The relationship teachers create with parents is one among several relationships that characterise teachers' daily working lives. Indeed, parents and teachers interact frequently, and parents are key actors in the school system: their involvement in school influences students' learning, well-being, and behavioural skills (e.g., Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012; Lang et al., 2017; Minke et al., 2014; Sheldon & Epstein, 2001; Wilder, 2014). Parents can be involved in their children's schooling in multiple ways, including going to school to talk with teachers, asking them for information about their child's progress or sharing information about family routines with teachers (Fantuzzo et al., 2000).

How teachers perceive parental involvement and the parent-teacher relationship influences teachers' behaviours and decisions toward the students. For instance, past research has shown that, when teachers perceive to have an interpersonal connection, affiliation, trust, and effective communication with parents, they create positive rela-

tionships with students, report students' behavioural problems less often (Dawson & Wymbs, 2016), and share more effectively critical information about the child with parents (Blue-Banning et al., 2004). Further, teachers' perceptions of the quality of their relationship with parents and their goal alignment are related to teachers' ratings of students' behaviours, self-regulation, and academic skills (Stormont et al., 2013). Finally, a positive parent-teacher relationship may influence the child's social skills, increase the time teachers spend with children (Minke et al., 2014), and decrease decisions on students' expulsion (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

Complementing these quantitative results, qualitative studies contributed to a comprehensive understanding of the barriers to establishing positive relationships with parents. Among these, preschool and primary school teachers reported issues such as a lack of effective communication, mismatched pedagogical expectations with parents, and difficulties in being recognised as professionals (Leenders et al., 2019; Mahmood, 2013; Meehan & Patrick, 2018). In another study, teachers with several years of teaching experience described challenges such as negative parental attitudes towards schools or towards teachers' pedagogical decisions. These difficulties are compounded by teachers' awareness that they may themselves act as barriers by relegating parents to a passive role in the school environment (Bæk, 2010).

Additionally, in a recent qualitative study conducted in Turkey, Coşkun & Katıtaş (2021) identified a unique challenge among others expressed by their participants: teachers' perceptions of parents who are overly involved in school. More precisely, teachers who participated in their study reported that they struggled with those parents who "monitor school or teachers all the time or criticise everything the school does" (p. 242) and who act as if they are "babysitting their children at school" (p. 242), preventing children from independently engaging with the school environment. This result seems to mirror recent evidence of a shift in parenting style due to societal prescriptions, broadly called *intensive parenting ideology*, characterised by high investment in children's upbringing to guarantee optimal development and future success of their child (Faircloth, 2023; Shirani et al., 2012). These societal prescriptions shape parenting practices, leading parents to endorse practices that are not attuned to the child's needs, such as excessive control and overprotection (e.g., Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Venard et al., 2024). Therefore, parents may nowadays be perceived as overly protective, monitoring, and involved in their children's lives, including their school lives. Such overinvolvement, however, may hamper children's well-being and academic achievement (Schiffrin et al., 2014; Schiffrin & Liss, 2017; Van Petegem et al., 2020), as well as parents' well-being (Zimmermann et al., 2022).

Despite this evidence, to the best of our knowledge, only a few studies have explored teachers' perceptions of parents and their relationships with them, focusing specifically on overly involved parents. Indeed, the previously documented shift in parenting may also have implications for the parent-teacher relationship, making it more difficult for teachers to manage these interactions. Investigating teachers' perceptions of parents is also relevant in light of the possible biases and stereotypes that teachers may hold regarding parents. A great deal of research has shown that teachers' explicit expectations and implicit biases influence students' learning, academic beliefs and outcomes (DeCuir-Gunby & Bindra, 2022). Psychological dynamics, such as self-fulfilling prophecies (Merton, 1948), explain how teachers' expectations

may shape their behaviours towards students, ultimately influencing their learning path (Wang et al., 2018). The same mechanism could also apply to the parent-teacher relationship, since teachers also may have expectations and biases towards parents based on specific characteristics or beliefs.

In addition, most of the studies on the parent-teacher relationships focus either on students' outcomes and classroom dynamics changes (Sheridan et al., 2017, 2019), or on identifying features of this relationship (e.g., Dawson & Wymbs, 2016) without exploring what teachers report in terms of the impact on their well-being. This is surprising since social relationships at school are important predictors of teachers' well-being. Among these relationships, a positive relationship with parents is related to increased well-being (Hascher & Waber, 2021). At the same time, however, teachers may perceive that addressing parents' concerns and requests may become a source of stress (European Commission, 2021; OECD, 2025). The parent-teacher relationship can therefore be seen as a characteristic of teachers' working environment that can influence both positively and negatively teachers' well-being. Here, we refer to the concept of occupational well-being, defined as teachers' cognitive, social, and emotional responses to conditions related to their profession (Viac & Fraser, 2020). In line with workplace well-being theories, such as the Job Demands-Resources model (Bakker et al., 2023), elements of the working environment, including social relationships, can significantly shape teachers' well-being. Yet, to the best of our knowledge, no studies have investigated whether and how teachers reflect on the parent-teacher relationship as a factor related to their well-being at school.

Further, it is important to consider that the parent-teacher relationship changes throughout school levels. During the early stages of schooling (i.e., preschool), parents and teachers engage in a co-caring relationship, sharing child-rearing ideas and communicating very often (Herman & Reinke, 2017). Throughout primary education, parents continue to interact regularly with teachers, and their relationship generally benefits from mutual trust and open communication (Wei et al., 2019). When adolescents enter secondary education and become more autonomous, parents and teachers usually interact only when the child encounters problems at school (Barger et al., 2019). Although the parent-teacher relationship tends to be less relevant throughout the school years, teachers and parents still have space for meetings and should communicate effectively until the end of the child's educational path. Unfortunately, most studies on teachers' perceptions of parents and their relationships with them have focused on preschool and primary school contexts, leaving a lack of evidence for secondary school contexts.

3 The present study

To address the aforementioned gaps in the literature, the present study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of their relationships with parents and the possible consequences of these relationships for their well-being. Accordingly, we formulated the following research questions:

RQ1. How do teachers perceive their relationship with parents nowadays?

RQ2. What are teachers' perceptions of the possible consequences of parent-teacher relationships on their well-being?

To fulfil these aims, we conducted an explorative study based on semi-structured interviews. We considered a qualitative study to be more useful for capturing specific, underexplored issues related to parent-teacher relationships. Additionally, semi-structured interviews are a useful tool for delving into teachers' perceptions and experiences, capturing the nuanced and interconnected meanings they express. Finally, the study was conducted in Italy, including primary, middle, and secondary school teachers, to provide a comprehensive perspective on parent-teacher relationships across school levels in a context where such an investigation has not yet been conducted.

4 Method

4.1 Sampling procedure and participants

The sampling procedure was based on a snowball sampling approach, starting with personal contacts of the research team. Participants were invited to suggest other names of possible interested colleagues working in other schools. The final sample comprised 8 primary ($M_{\text{age}} = 46.00$, $SD = 7.58$, 8 women), 7 middle ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.80$, $SD = 10.03$, 4 women, 3 men), and 8 secondary school teachers ($M_{\text{age}} = 45.86$, $SD = 9.59$, 4 women, 4 men), for a total of 23 participants. The overall sample comprised teachers with 3–32 years of experience ($M = 19.09$, $SD = 9.39$).

The data collection took place in March 2023 after approval of the Ethical Board of the third author's university (Protocol number: 0026480, 02/02/2023). The teachers were informed about the overall contents of the interview, namely, the relationship with parents and teachers' well-being. The teachers were interviewed by the research team, composed of one Italian postdoctoral fellow in psychology and expert in qualitative research, and two Italian master students in School Psychology trained to conduct interviews. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 min, were carried out online and in person, and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by the three researchers.

4.2 Interview protocol

A semi-structured exploratory interview protocol was created based on the research questions. The protocol was then discussed among the three interviewers and pilot-tested with one middle school teacher (who was not included in the final sample). Since the interviews were semi-structured, the research team adhered to the interview protocol (Table 1) to collect the same information from all teachers, while also allowing participants to elaborate further on certain topics during the interview.

Table 1 Research questions and interview schedule

Research questions	Interview schedule
Demographics and general information ^a	Personal and professional information How do you usually meet parents at school? What are the reasons teachers ask parents to meet them? What are the most common reasons parents ask teachers to meet?
RQ1: How do teachers perceive their relationship with parents nowadays?	In your opinion, what should the ideal relationship between teachers and parents look like? Could you describe some characteristics this relationship should have to be functional? What are the major issues you find in the relationship you have with the parents of pupils?
RQ2: What are teachers' perceptions of the possible consequences of parent-teacher relationships on their well-being?	Do you think these issues may impact your well-being and teaching practices?

^aThrough the first part of the interview, we gained information on how teachers and parents meet in schools in Italy. The responses were not analysed but rather used to provide a deeper understanding of the Italian context (see Sect. 4.4 “Parents and teachers meetings in the Italian school context”).

4.3 Data analysis

Transcriptions of interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, a flexible tool that allows researchers to identify patterns in the dataset without adhering to an a priori coding scheme (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Before starting the analysis, the research team coded the pilot interview to test the coding procedure. Codes were interpreted as analytic units that refer to a single, meaningful facet of the phenomenon (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The three researchers discussed the results of this preliminary analysis to ensure the comparability of their coding strategy. Then, all the researchers familiarised themselves with the complete corpus of data (i.e., the 23 interview transcriptions) to have an overall overview of the interviews' content.

After this step, the interviews were randomly assigned to the three researchers to implement an efficient (i.e., less time-consuming) coding procedure, given the large number of interviews. The coding strategy was purely inductive, namely, the researchers did not follow any a priori coding scheme, but rather inductively identified codes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2020). The researchers coded the interviews, trying to understand the meaning of participants' reports through the lens of the research aims and questions. The three researchers agreed on focusing on the semantic meaning of the data during the coding process, following a more “essentialist/realist” epistemology focused on participants' inner perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 85).

After the first coding procedure, the research team discussed the different codes that were created to ensure the quality of the analytical process. Then, they started developing initial themes, that is, multi-faceted and complex topics (Braun & Clarke, 2020), grouping similar codes. This theme-creation procedure resulted in an ongoing revision of the initial themes developed by the three researchers in synergy, revising codes and initial themes considering the research questions and new insights derived from the discussion. At the end of the theme elaboration, the three researchers agreed on the final codes-themes outlook (Table 2). Since we performed reflexive thematic

Table 2 Coding scheme resulted from the analysis. Themes, sub-themes and codes are shown.

Research questions	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
How do teachers perceive their relationship with parents nowadays?	1. Supportive parent-teacher relationship	Sub-theme 1: Adequately involved parents	Good relationship with the majority of parents Present parents who support children's learning adequately Parents who are present when it is needed
		Sub-theme 2: Cooperation as a key factor in creating a supportive parent-teacher relationship	Cooperation Mutual respect for each other's role Bi-directional communication Trust
			Understanding parents Parents who are not interested in their children's education
	2. Challenging parent-teacher relationship	Sub-theme 1: Parents perceived as uninvolved	Parents who do not show up despite the teacher needs them Overly high achievement expectations Parents who protect their children in the face of problems Parents who criticise the teacher Parents who justify their child
		Sub-theme 2: Parents perceived as overinvolved	Parents who do not respect the role of teachers and the school Migrant and low-SES parents Difficult family situations Social devaluation of teachers' role Social and parenting changes Increase in digitalisation and communication Lack of teachers' professionalism and high turnover
	3. Causes of a challenging parent-teacher relationship	Sub-theme 1: Causes of parental uninvolved	
		Sub-theme 2: Causes of parental overinvolvement	

Table 2 (continued)

Research questions	Themes	Sub-themes	Codes
What are teachers' perceptions of the possible consequences of parent-teacher relationships on their well-being?	4. Changes in teachers' behaviour and decreased well-being	/	Increased teachers' stress Sense of heaviness in adjusting habits to face parents Behavioural changes with students Teaching experience
	5. Protective factors for teachers' well-being	/	Acknowledging that parents are an aspect of the job Increased performance anxiety
	6. Decrease in children's well-being and autonomy	/	Decrease in children's autonomy Children look abandoned

analysis, coding reliability was ensured through researchers coding the same interview and elaborating a shared coding strategy, rather than calculating an inter-rated reliability (Braun & Clarke, 2020).

4.4 Parent-teacher meetings in the Italian school context

The Italian education system is divided into primary (for pupils aged between 6 and 11), middle (for pupils aged between 11 and 14), and secondary (for students aged between 14 and 19) schools. Each school level is characterised by specific features regarding the schedule, the subjects, and the organisation of daily activities. In primary school, teachers start a cycle of education in the first year and usually accompany the same pupils (and thus the same parents) for five years. At this school level, one single teacher teaches the main important subjects (e.g., math, Italian literacy), spending more hours per week with the students, whereas other teachers teach secondary subjects (e.g., music), spending fewer hours with the students. Sometimes, the continuity of the teachers' team is not guaranteed due to relatively high teacher turnover.

In middle and secondary school, teachers have different numbers of classes depending on the subject they teach. Some may have two to three classes per school year with a higher frequency of lessons (e.g., six hours per week with the same group of students), whereas other teachers may cover the teaching of the same subject in all classes of the school (e.g., one hour per week with ten different groups of students).

At all school levels, teachers and parents meet during two different types of formal meetings. The first are general meetings, where teachers are available to meet all parents of the classes they teach. This type of meeting takes place twice a year, at the end of the two school terms, in January and June. The aim is to report to parents on their children's academic achievements and behaviours throughout the term and to hand in the final evaluation form. In addition to these two general meetings, teachers are obliged by law to have one hour of their working week available for meetings with parents, who can book appointments with teachers. Teachers may ask parents to meet during this hour. According to the teachers interviewed, parents request meetings with teachers for the following reasons: to obtain clarification about specific events during class, to discuss their children's academic performance and understand the reasons for low grades, and to communicate potential difficulties within the family. Teachers, on the other hand, tend to request meetings with parents only when necessary, such as when they need to better understand the student's well-being (e.g., whether family problems may be involved) or to discuss behavioural or academic performance concerns.

Since 2012, all teachers have had an institutional e-mail address through which parents can contact them, and daily school-family communication primarily takes place via the electronic register. Parents are directly notified of any communication concerning their children (e.g., grades, disciplinary notes) as soon as such communication is entered into the electronic register (Italian Law 95/2012). During the COVID-19 pandemic, school digitalisation has become even more prevalent, forcing parents and teachers to meet online. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, some teachers continue to conduct parent-teacher meetings online, while others have

resumed in-person interactions or combined both formats. This largely depends on school-specific regulations.

5 Results

A total of 6 themes related to the two research questions were elaborated through reflexive thematic analysis. Table 2 offers an overview of the themes, sub-themes, and codes.

5.1 RQ1: How do teachers perceive their relationship with parents nowadays?

We identified three broader themes that together provide an overview of teachers' perceptions of their relationship with parents. Theme 1 and Theme 2 encompass codes related to how teachers describe positive and challenging relationships with parents, respectively, whereas Theme 3 includes codes that identify possible reasons why parents may become overly involved or not involved in their children's schooling.

5.1.1 Theme 1: Supportive parent-teacher relationship

Theme 1 encompasses two interconnected sub-themes. Sub-theme 1, *Adequately involved parents*, includes all excerpts from the interviews in which teachers reported positive relationships with parents and, thus, parents are perceived as properly involved in their children's school life. It is important to note that primary school teachers tend to describe parents as adequately involved when they balance between being present but not too intrusive, as this teacher reports: "*Fortunately there are those parents who are balanced, and with them you work really well, in the sense that they are present... these parents accompany their children in the learning process, as it should be.*" (Female, primary school).

Conversely, middle and secondary school teachers consider adequately involved those parents who are responsive and show involvement in the specific case when there are problems at school, as this teacher said:

"[...] as the student is doing well and has no problems, they [the parents, ed.] have no reason to come to school. For example, there are parents I haven't seen for years, parents of students who have good results, whose parents I haven't seen for years." (Female, secondary school).

This difference is most likely due to the expectations teachers have about parental involvement at different school levels. In primary school, parents are expected to be present and to follow their children's learning path, whereas in secondary school, parents are expected to leave the children to be the ones who are mainly responsible for their learning (e.g., Barger et al., 2019).

The second sub-theme of Theme 1 provides a deeper understanding of the features that an equilibrated and positive relationship between parent and teacher should have. Almost all teachers in the sample described a positive relationship between parent and teacher in terms of cooperation. In line with that, some of the teachers used expressions like "*We have to go in the same direction*" (Female, primary school), or

"Parent and teacher need to be a unique team that collaborates" (Male, secondary school), or *"We are on the same page because we have to work for the same aim: the kid's well-being and learning achievements"* (Female, middle school).

To make this cooperation proficient and balanced, parents and teachers have to engage in bidirectional support and communication. In addition, cooperation is characterised by mutual respect for each other's roles based on trust. Importantly, primary school teachers, who share more time and information with parents than secondary school teachers, recognised that they need to understand the difficult role of parents, as this teacher highlighted:

"If I tell parents, 'Your child never sits during activities in class', it is not the parent's fault. I don't think parents tell them 'Go to school and jump on chairs'. It is important to understand the discomfort of parents who constantly hear their child is not capable of being quiet in class." (Female, primary school).

5.1.2 Theme 2: Challenging parent-teacher relationship

Theme 2 includes all the codes that describe situations where the conditions to establish this cooperative relationship are not guaranteed, and consequently, parents are experienced as a source of difficulties leading to a challenging parent-teacher relationship. Teachers described two main problematic situations related to dysfunctional parental involvement, namely situations where parents are not involved and situations where parents are too involved. These two different situations arise when it is not possible to build a cooperative relationship, as a primary school teacher said, *"The problems arise when there is a lack of common goals, and this lack of collaboration becomes explicit either when it is difficult to reach parents or when they go beyond their role in the school becoming too involved."* (Female, primary school).

Uninvolved parents (Sub-theme 1) are described as totally absent or not interested in what the children do at school, as one teacher explained:

"It seems to me that when we talk, the parents don't listen. They come to meet you [the teacher, ed.] at school, you speak, they look at you and then leave. I would prefer a discussion to find a solution if their child is not doing well at school, instead of listening to them saying 'Yes it's OK, then we'll try to...' , then they get up, leave and things continue to go wrong." (Female, primary school).

This code has been mentioned especially by primary and middle school teachers, highlighting that those uninvolved parents may be perceived as difficult, mostly by teachers who teach at the early stages of schooling, during which parental involvement is expected to be frequent.

Sub-theme 2 encompasses all the codes that describe the second problematic profile of parents, namely, parents who are perceived as overinvolved, who are the counterparts of uninvolved parents. The first feature reported by teachers about overinvolved parents is that these parents hold too high achievement expectations towards their kids, as one secondary school teacher said:

"You have a constructive dialogue with the student: the student has not studied, and they know it and accept the negative grade, but then there are expectations from the family, and the parents would like a higher result, and they come to the school to meet with you and discuss the bad grade." (Female, secondary school).

Overinvolved parents were also described as parents who “*solve problems for their kids*” (Female, primary school). In this regard, one teacher said:

“There is this tendency of parents to make their children’s lives as easy as possible, to simplify their experience, to accompany them a lot, to remove difficulties and even prevent difficulties [...] Things should all go very well, if they do not go well we change the teacher because they shout, we change the classmates because they disturb...” (Male, middle school).

Another behaviour specifically described by middle and secondary school teachers is that of those parents who justify their children in the face of problems or failures. One teacher said, for instance:

“Parents tend to always justify their child and often refuse to consider the possibility that their child may have done something wrong, whether it’s inappropriate behaviour or a genuinely poor evaluation. They always assume such things couldn’t possibly be true about their child.” (Female, middle school).

This behaviour has been reported by teachers at higher school levels (middle and secondary) most likely because they might expect students to be responsible for their learning path and consequently be able to face school-related situations by themselves, instead of relying on their parents. Furthermore, teachers described parents who criticise everything that pertains to teachers’ responsibility, such as their teaching practices, their decisions about achievement evaluation, and their classroom management practices. For instance, one secondary school teacher said:

“When students get a negative grade, parents try to blame the teacher and then, inevitably, when you discuss with them about the student’s failing, by showing the test, it is clear that it was not my fault, but the student did not study enough or did not perform great.” (Female, secondary school).

5.1.3 Theme 3: Causes of a challenging parent-teacher relationship

In Theme 3, teachers reported their ideas on possible causes that may lead parents to engage in their children’s schooling in challenging ways, either in a low or a too-involved way. In line with that, this theme comprises two sub-themes: causes of low parental involvement and causes of over-parental involvement.

As for low parental involvement, teachers acknowledged that parents from different cultures who do not speak the local language, as well as parents who have demanding jobs or are facing family problems, such as getting divorced, may struggle to be adequately engaged in their children’s schooling. One teacher, for instance, described the profile of foreign parents:

“There are situations where it seems that parents do not care, but here it is difficult to judge. It may be a question of culture, or because they struggle because they don’t have time, or because they work a lot. It often happens with children with foreign backgrounds because their parents work all day long and struggle more than others.” (Male, secondary school).

Another possible reason reported by the teachers is that parents tend to be less involved when their children have some problems at school, both disciplinary or behavioural, reporting, for instance, that *“There is a bit of a joke among teachers: the parents of kids who are doing quite well or even have high evaluations are the*

ones who ask for meeting with us. When the student has some problems at school, it is really hard for parents to come to meetings." (Male, middle school).

Sub-theme 2 refers to causes that may lead some parents to be overinvolved. The first cause pertains to the social devaluation of teachers' roles, considered "*The bottom of the heap in society*" (Female, middle school). In this regard, one teacher said:

"The figure of the teacher is not recognised as valuable, so many parents may tend to want to overlap or want to question choices and decisions made by the teacher. I don't go to the butcher to tell him which knife he should use to cut the meat. Yet, some parents think they can enter into the merits of teaching choices. This, in my opinion originates from a socially constructed belief that anyone can be a teacher so what the teacher does can be...you can substitute teachers." (Female, primary school).

The social devaluation of teachers' role would be related to changes in the larger society and parenting attitudes in society. For instance, one teacher reported:

"I think it's a change of society, a change of the children, of the parents also. Because parents have become customers nowadays...it's horrible what I'm saying, but they have become customers [...]. The customer is always right, this is the law of the market, you have to please a customer, but school is not about pleasing someone, that's how I see it." (Female, secondary school).

Conversely, another one said: *"Parents are changing a lot; they are always very anxious about the fact that they do not have everything related to their children under control."* (Female, primary school).

The digitalisation of communication in school, related, for instance, to the use of institutional e-mail, has been described as a possible cause of parental overinvolvement, as one teacher reported:

"If I call a student out of the classroom because something has happened, I know that some parents will send me an e-mail in the afternoon, in the sense that sometimes they don't wait for a meeting in person, but they write to let you know their point of view about the thing you told the student. Before COVID it was the teacher who chose to give a reference e-mail, whereas now we all have an institutional e-mail anyway." (Female, secondary school).

Besides e-mail communication, another effect of digitalisation on parent-teacher dynamics is the use of parents' and students' chat groups. They are perceived as obstacles to genuine and fluid communication between parents and teachers, as this teacher reported:

"One thing that negatively affects trust in teachers was the creation of the WhatsApp groups of parents, because what you read in the groups is shameful: what you read about teachers is horrible. Every day parents intervene to say something on the quantity of homework, on the quality of teaching, and so on..." (Male, middle school).

These two aspects related to digitalisation were reported mainly by middle and secondary school teachers. This is likely because parents tend to be less directly involved in school life, visit the school less frequently, and prefer to use technology-mediated communication to obtain information and interact with teachers at these educational stages.

Finally, the last reason is that some teachers are not competent at dealing with parents, and they convey negative feelings and create difficult relationships with them.

One teacher said, for instance: *“There are kind parents who are really concerned because sometimes there are teachers who impose themselves and mortify and humiliate students.”* (Male, secondary school).

Coming back to our research question, our findings suggest that teachers tend to view their relationships with parents as satisfactory when they cooperate. This cooperation is rooted in trust, effective communication, and mutual respect for each other’s roles. Conversely, either the absence or the excessive involvement impedes the creation of a cooperative alliance. On the one hand, uninvolved parents are absent and difficult to engage in school, which poses a problem for teachers who need to talk with them about children’s school issues. On the other hand, overinvolved parents are extremely present in a way that is considered demanding. Societal changes, shifts in parenting, and a lack of competencies of some teachers have been highlighted as possible reasons why the relationship with parents may become challenging.

5.2 RQ2: What are teachers’ perceptions of the possible consequences of parent-teacher relationships on their well-being?

The second aim of this study was to explore teachers’ perceptions of how the parent-teacher relationship may affect teachers’ well-being. Delving into the possible consequences of challenging parent-teacher relationships, teachers reported effects not only on their well-being but also on students’ well-being. Theme 4 emphasises the potential negative effects of difficult relationships with parents on teachers, whereas Theme 5 includes codes on possible protective factors that help teachers face this challenging relationship. Finally, Theme 6 refers to the negative consequences teachers see in their students (Table 2).

5.2.1 Theme 4: Changes in teachers’ behaviour and decreased well-being

A consequence teachers reported pertains to the increased feelings and experiences related to stress. For instance, some teachers reported that a *“Difficult relationship with parents is something that can really break some people down in the long run.”* (Female, secondary school), or *“This relationship with this [overinvolved, ed.] mother was a source of enormous tension for my colleague.”* (Female, primary school), or again, *“I know colleagues who have serious problems sleeping at night because of these negative relationships.”* (Male, middle school). This sort of exhaustion is expressed both when parents are described as uninvolved, *“I won’t hide the fact that the first few days of school, I cried every time I came home because parents were so disinterested that they didn’t even sign the home-school communication report.”* (Female, primary school), as well as when they are too involved, *“Sometimes relationships with parents wear you out, one feels invaded. It feels like there are no more boundaries.”* (Female, secondary school).

A second consequence is expressed in what we call a sense of heaviness in dealing with parents, because of the continuous adjustment of the working habits that are necessary to face challenging parents. As an example, this teacher reported:

“[It is necessary to] arrange meetings with witnesses to avoid leaving colleagues alone with some parents, you have to warn the school director about some meetings

you are going to have... it's all very tiring, and although in my experience it hasn't happened to me many times, it can happen." (Female, secondary school).

The last consequence refers to changes in teachers' behaviours towards their students during daily activities, as this teacher reported:

"We are humans, and the risk could happen that the teacher is no longer neutral, but when they enter the classroom, they are a bit stricter with the child of the parent who sent them an arrogant e-mail the day before; hence, blaming the child if the parent is rude. Unfortunately, this could happen, and it is absolutely wrong." (Male, secondary school).

5.2.2 Theme 5: Protective factors for teachers' well-being

While replying to the question about possible effects of challenging parent-teacher relationships, teachers also mentioned possible protective factors for their well-being. More precisely, some teachers, especially those in primary school, explicitly reported that *"the teaching experience helps you to live difficult situations better"* (Female, primary school) and that:

"Over the years, I have learnt to manage these situations, and above all, to understand parents. [...] You can be a little shielded, which does not mean taking care of the situation, but it means taking care of it without thinking about the pain and the harm that these difficult relationships can do to you [the teacher]. I have learnt to deal with it." (Female, secondary school).

Another protective factor mentioned by teachers is to acknowledge that dealing with parents is part of their job. Normalising these negative situations with parents may help teachers to better deal with the demanding situations, as this teacher reported:

"It is obvious that, as in other workplaces, we, teachers, do not choose the people we work with, and when we enter a new classroom, we know that we will be dealing with children, colleagues and parents we did not choose. Teachers already know from the moment they start working that they have to be able to relate to parents who are a bit more difficult." (Female, primary school).

5.2.3 Theme 6: Decrease in children's well-being and autonomy

Theme 6 is composed of codes that refer specifically to consequences on students rather than on teachers. Teachers reported that overinvolved parents may create anxiety problems for children when they hold too high expectations, and a decrease in children's autonomy when they tend to substitute themselves to the child. One primary school teacher said, for instance, *"I have seen thousands of children suffocated by their parents' demands or who felt they had to achieve an image that their parents had imposed on them."* (Female, primary school), whereas one secondary school teacher emphasised:

"Some children really have a great need for autonomy and independence, which is being held back by their parents for fear of losing them, and instead, they need to grow up and grow up gradually." (Female, secondary school).

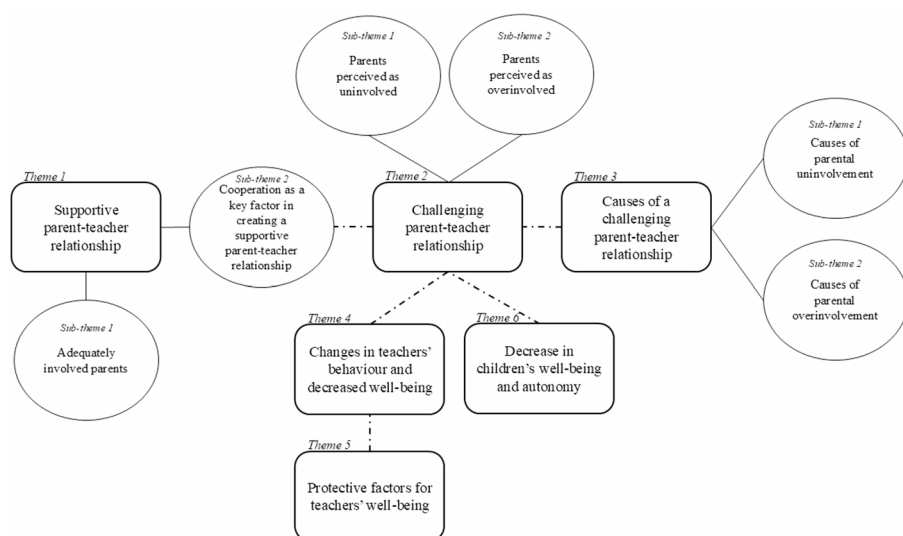


Fig. 1 Graphical representation of the themes and sub-themes and their relations

Different from overinvolved parents, uninvolved parents may risk not caring enough for their children's school-related needs. One teacher reported, for instance: *"Children of parents who are absent never have the material they need, they run out of exercise books and write on the sheets for three days because the parent doesn't realise the notebook is finished."* (Female, primary school), whereas another one said, *"Those children are left to their own, in the sense that they have to fend for themselves for everything in their life"* (Male, secondary school).

To sum up, according to our findings, a problematic relationship with parents may become burdensome for teachers, increasing their stress levels and influencing their behaviours. It is important to note that not all the teachers reported consequences on their well-being, but mostly on students' well-being and behaviour. This last aspect conveys the idea that teachers are sensitive and attentive to their students and that they rely on their students' well-being to evaluate if something is wrong with parents.

6 Discussion

This study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions of parents and the parent-teacher relationship. We specifically investigated the supportive and challenging aspects of this relationship and examined whether teachers perceive potential repercussions for their well-being when the relationship is described as challenging. We interviewed 23 Italian primary, middle and secondary school teachers and analysed the data through reflexive thematic analysis. A total of six themes were elaborated (Fig. 1). In what follows, we discuss the main contributions of this paper, highlighting connections with previous literature and the new nuances and meanings our results add that can inform teachers' training on handling parents at school.

6.1 Breaking the cooperation: from a supportive to a challenging parent-teacher relationship

The first contribution of the present study is to shed light on teachers' perceptions of dynamics that may lead to challenging parent-teacher relationships. When speaking about their relationships with parents, some teachers reported that they often create good and supportive relationships. The key ingredient for such a relationship is cooperation based on mutual trust, respect for each other's roles, and bi-directional communication. Indeed, cooperating means working together towards the attainment of mutual or complementary goals by helping each other and facilitating each other's efforts to reach a shared goal (Butera & Buchs, 2019; Johnson & Johnson, 2005). Accordingly, teachers acknowledged the important role of parents in school: when they cooperate, teachers improve the quality of their teaching and work better with students. Concepts like cooperation have already been described in previous studies on the parent-teacher relationship, such as the idea of *joining* developed by Vickers & Minke (1995), which includes feelings of affiliation and support. Cooperation is also considered one of the most important aspects of building an effective family-school-community partnership (Epstein, 2018) and, for this reason, it has been the target of several family-school engagement interventions (Smith et al., 2022).

Additionally, our results showed that when parents and teachers cooperate, teachers perceive parents as adequately involved, and this perceived adequacy varies by school level. Indeed, primary school teachers described adequately involved parents as engaged in their children's educational path and willing to talk and discuss with them. Secondary school teachers, who consider students responsible and accountable for their learning, perceived parents as adequately involved when they are present to help address students' learning and behavioural problems. These different perceptions across school levels are linked to progressive parental disengagement from school-based involvement (Barger et al., 2019) and highlight the need for targeted interventions to enhance the quality of parent-teacher relationships based on teachers' perceptions and expectations at different school levels.

Further, our findings suggest that when this cooperation is not met, teachers and parents do not engage in satisfactory relationships. This situation can happen when, according to teachers, parents are either absent, and thus, there is no common ground to communicate and share goals, or when they are too present, and thus, there is a lack of trust and respect for the role of teachers. As for the first situation, parents are perceived as uninvolved, very difficult to reach, and not engaged in their child's school life. Uninvolved parents have been described more often by primary school teachers as challenging. These teachers most likely expect parents to engage in ongoing communication with them to actively support their child's learning. This result mirrors previous studies that have already provided evidence of primary school teachers' negative perceptions of parents who are not involved (Stormont et al., 2013), which may influence teachers' behaviours and relationships with students (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019).

Additionally, teachers of our sample also described parents who are perceived as too involved. According to teachers, overinvolved parents are overly worried about their children's academic results, overly critical of teachers, and overly protective of

their children. These parents tend to hold too high achievement expectations, justify their children in front of every problem and be disrespectful towards teachers' professionalism and school governance. In their qualitative study, Coşkun & Katıtaş (2021) found that teachers described parents as too intrusive at school and, consequently, not perceived as effectively involved in their children's education.

Going a bit further in interpreting our results, we argue that these features reported by teachers correspond to overprotective parenting practices, which refers to parents who are excessively protective and involved in their children's lives, given the children's level of development (Holmbeck et al., 2002). The concept of overprotection encompasses various facets of parents' attitudes and behaviours toward their children. It includes parents' premature problem-solving and infantilisation, as well as external attribution of children's failure and excessive praise (Brenning et al., 2017; Chevrier et al., 2023). Overprotection is also related to some extent to parental over-evaluation, that is, the belief that your child is more special and entitled than other children (Brummelman et al., 2015). All these features are mirrored in what teachers reported: Parents solve children's problems, criticise teachers, justify their children, and hold excessively high expectations.

To sum up, this study yields evidence about teachers' perceptions of a supportive relationship with parents, characterised by cooperation, and a challenging relationship with parents, characterised by a lack of cooperation. This lack of cooperation is expressed when parents are perceived as either uninvolved or overinvolved. These two parent profiles have different features that make it difficult for teachers to build good relationships with them. Besides acknowledging the presence of these two profiles, teachers also reported possible causes and consequences related to parental uninvolved and overinvolvement in school.

6.2 Uninvolved and overinvolved parents: causes and consequences

6.2.1 Causes

The second contribution of this study lies in the information teachers provided about possible causes and consequences of uninvolved and overinvolved parents. As for uninvolved parents, the most cited cause refers to the socio-economic situation of parents as well as cultural differences between teachers and parents. Parents from low-SES and/or with migrant backgrounds fell more often in this category since teachers perceive them as parents who struggle more than others to feel connected to and understand the school system. This perception aligns with previous studies showing that low-SES and/or migrant parents seem to have less time and availability to interact with school (Hemmerechts et al., 2017) and face more problems in meeting with teachers because they may face language-related challenges (e.g., Jeynes, 2022).

Notwithstanding these potential concrete problems, research has shown that low-SES parents benefit from school-promoted activities that support children's achievement, and thus it is essential to involve them in meetings with teachers and events organised by the school (Tan et al., 2020). However, research also shows that teachers feel less comfortable with low-SES and migrant parents (Stormont et al., 2013) and

perceive them as less capable and effective in being involved in school (Kim, 2009), which may lead to discrimination and reinforce social inequalities between low-SES and high-SES students (e.g., Autin et al., 2019; Schoneveld & Brummelman, 2023).

As for overinvolved parents, teachers provided more nuanced explanations that can be understood as consequences of entangled societal changes that together influence how parents relate to teachers and schools nowadays. One explanation is that the social value of teaching has decreased in recent years, and society is permeated by the shared belief that teaching is an easy job. This perception expressed by the participants is in line with the TALIS's (OECD, 2025) results showing that only a small percentage of Italian teachers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the value of teaching is recognised by society (14% of the sample, OECD average 22%), and policymakers (6%, OECD average 16%). This phenomenon is mirrored in the increased teacher shortage and attrition, and the decreased attractiveness of the teaching profession, which are spreading across OECD countries (Viac & Fraser, 2020).

The diminished social value of teachers is linked to the perception that schools and parents have experienced ongoing changes over recent decades. On one hand, the school system is seen as overly influenced by labour-market principles, where parents are viewed as customers and schools as service providers (Dusi, 2014). In this context, some sociological perspectives argue that the role of the education system in society has developed, especially under the influence of neoliberalism, which has altered how we perceive its aims and purposes. Nowadays, the worth of education is often connected to its capacity to boost students' future earnings. When education systems fall short in this regard, public confidence in their effectiveness and purpose tends to decrease (Hastings, 2019).

On the other hand, teachers reported that parents nowadays tend to be overly anxious about their children's lives. These perceptions are reflected in some results that focused on changes in parenting over the last few decades. One recent meta-analysis, for instance, showed that parents' expectations and criticism towards children have increased over the last 30 years in Western countries (Curran & Hill, 2022). Other studies focus more on the social and economic pressures that may affect parenting nowadays. As postulated by the *intensive parenting ideology* (Novoa et al., 2022; Shirani et al., 2012), parents are expected to always prioritise the upbringing of their children with complete dedication, devoting energy, resources, and emotional commitment, putting aside their personal desires and interests to focus on meeting their children's needs. Following these social prescriptions, being a "good parent" may push parents to become extremely involved in children's lives (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020). Additionally, parents are considered the only ones responsible for guaranteeing their child's well-being, optimal development and future success (Faircloth, 2023; Venard et al., 2026). This responsibility may become particularly challenging when larger macro-level changes are simultaneously happening, such as rises in economic inequality and job insecurity, threatening the possibility of guaranteeing children's future success. Importantly, the social pressure derived from social prescriptions as well as economic difficulties has been found to relate to parents' decreased well-being (Meeussen & Van Laar, 2018) and the endorsement of overprotective and controlling behaviours towards children (Lamprianidou et al., 2025; Venard et al., 2024; Van Petegem et al., 2025).

Finally, teachers reported that these evolutions have been further fuelled by the use of technology-based school-family communication during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, teachers have reported extensive use of e-mails by parents, even outside working hours, with requests that go beyond their professional role. In addition, the creation of WhatsApp groups among parents keeps them constantly updated on what happens at school. These findings align with previous studies on technology-based parent-teacher communication. For instance, Bordalba & Bochaca (2019) found that while technology makes communication more immediate and direct, both parents and teachers experience it as more time-consuming, less useful or effective, and less beneficial for building personal relationships than face-to-face communication. Similarly, Chen & Rivera-Vernazza (2023) reported that technology-based communication makes it difficult to build strong professional relationships due to the lack of personal exchanges. Regarding WhatsApp group dynamics, our results are consistent with studies showing that communication through chat applications carries the risk of increased parental overinvolvement and excessive monitoring of school activities. Both parents and teachers find these groups overwhelming (Traeger-Soudry et al., 2025) and full of inappropriate comments, such as “alarmist information causing confusion among members [parents]” (Cino et al., 2021, p. 85). Thus, technology-based communication and applications can increase misunderstandings and may facilitate time-consuming and intrusive parental behaviours, ultimately harming the quality of the parent-teacher relationship.

6.2.2 Consequences

Teachers also reported on possible consequences on students’ and teachers’ well-being and behaviours. These findings are particularly interesting because, for the first time, they shed light on what may happen to teachers when they are confronted with a challenging parent-teacher relationship. Furthermore, teachers reported consequences not only on themselves, as proposed in the interview protocol, but also on students.

As for the effect on students, teachers described increases in students’ anxiety and decreases in students’ autonomy when considering overinvolved parents. These perceptions are reflected in recent evidence about the effects of parental overprotection in terms of children’s generalised and social anxiety (Mathijs et al., 2024), as well as achievement anxiety (Shadach & Ganor-Miller, 2013). Furthermore, these reports correspond with past research documenting how overprotective parenting limits the free exploration of children, reduces their sense of autonomy and intrinsic motivation, ultimately setting children at risk for developmental difficulties and maladjustment (Flamant et al., 2022; Van Petegem et al., 2020 ; Wang et al., 2025).

As for the effects on teachers’ well-being, teachers described that when they engage in a relationship with parents perceived as uninvolved or overinvolved, they may feel exhausted, overwhelmed and uncomfortable. They reported changes in their behaviour towards the children in the classroom, which could deteriorate their relationships with the children and potentially lead to misjudgements of students’ achievements or behaviours. Finally, they described situations where they need to adjust their routines to deal with parents or ask for support from colleagues or the school principal.

Accordingly, it is important to note that we did not ask questions about such specific aspects of occupational well-being, namely, those related to the job environment, such as job satisfaction, self-efficacy, or emotional exhaustion (Viac & Fraser, 2020). We preferred instead to leave teachers free to describe how they feel when they are confronted with a challenging relationship with parents. In that respect, it is noteworthy that the negative consequences teachers reported reflect stress-related outcomes in the workplace, such as emotional exhaustion, a component of the burnout syndrome (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2016). This aspect opens the possibility of framing parents as a feature of the school context (treated as a work environment) that might facilitate or hinder teachers' work outcomes and well-being. Indeed, like any job, teaching comprises components that may support (i.e., job resources) or challenge (i.e., job demands) teachers, thereby increasing or hampering their well-being (Bakker et al., 2023). Consequently, relationships with parents can be considered job demands for teachers when they are perceived as challenging, or job resources when they are perceived as supportive.

In line with that, one of the two protective factors reported in Theme 5, i.e., considering parents part of the job, is an emotion-oriented coping strategy based on the emotional reappraisal of a situation that is perceived as difficult to change (Admiraal et al., 2000). This strategy may help teachers counterbalance the effects of job demands on their well-being. Nevertheless, it should be noted that in our results, only two protective factors were mentioned, as this topic emerged while teachers were responding to other unrelated questions. Consequently, we were not able to explore other possible coping strategies in greater detail, such as problem-oriented strategies reported in previous studies involving teachers (e.g., Antoniou et al., 2013). Nevertheless, this theme provided interesting insights that complete the overall understanding of teachers' perspectives.

Overall, the causes reported by teachers indicate that macro-systemic changes influence how teachers and parents interact. These causes must be taken into account when proposing training for teachers and parents to increase their awareness of the issues both parents and teachers face as members of a rapidly evolving society. On the other hand, the reported consequences indicate that the way teachers and parents interact may affect not only students but also teachers' well-being. This aspect must be considered when structuring parent-teacher interaction at school and when proposing psychological support for teachers.

6.3 Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations. First, the study focused only on teachers' perceptions. Future research should include parents' points of view as well, as parents' and teachers' perspectives on parental involvement and the parent-teacher relationship may differ in terms of their interpretation of the meanings, functions and goals of their role in school (e.g., Coşkun & Katitaş, 2021; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003). Including parents' views could provide a comprehensive understanding of common points and differences in parents' and teachers' perspectives. Second, the study did not address the full complexity of the concept of well-being. Although the study aimed to allow participants to express their feelings and emotional experi-

ences when engaging with parents, it failed to better systematise the different dimensions of well-being by asking teachers more precise questions. Future studies should explore how teachers describe their well-being and which aspects may be affected by a challenging parent-teacher relationship. Third, the study did not focus on students' learning outcomes. Indeed, student learning outcomes are the primary topic of discussion during parent-teacher conferences. Future studies that aim to explore the parent-teacher relationship, both qualitatively and quantitatively, should consider the impact of students' learning outcomes on how parents and teachers relate to each other. Finally, the study relies only on interview data, which provide interesting insights into teachers' perspectives but could also be supplemented with other kinds of data. For instance, future research could rely upon different designs and methodologies, including longitudinal and intervention designs.

6.4 Suggestions for practice

Besides these limitations, our findings offer some practical suggestions for improving cooperation, communication and relationships between parents and teachers. In particular, our results suggest that teachers not only require training to foster effective cooperation with parents but also need support when cooperation is not attained. On the one hand, training should focus on enhancing teachers' communication strategies to engage families, especially disadvantaged families. This may involve raising awareness of their own potential biases and stereotypes about parents, particularly low-SES parents (Bakker et al., 2007; Lawson, 2003), which may otherwise reinforce self-fulfilling attitudes and beliefs. Additionally, teachers should be encouraged to be aware of the challenges parents face today, acknowledging that parents sometimes need support as well.

On the other hand, our results suggest that teachers may benefit from psychological support when dealing with certain parents. This support could be provided by school psychologists who may organise individual sessions or mediate difficult relationships in school (Matteucci et al., 2025). In line with our findings, such support may be particularly valuable for early-career teachers, helping them develop effective strategies to engage parents who are not involved or to manage overly involved parents.

Broadening the focus, promoting teachers' well-being at school also means implementing practices to change or better regulate some school features. Regarding parent-teacher interactions specifically, some of these practices might include ensuring that parent-teacher conferences are well-structured and in line with teachers' needs, establishing clear guidelines for the use of technology-based communication tools, and creating Parent Teacher Associations to promote informal meetings where collaboration may be created, and negative intergroup dynamics may be tackled.

Finally, effective training and interventions should not only aim to increase the frequency of parents' participation but also to enhance the quality of their involvement to build a strong parent-teacher relationship (Smith et al., 2022). To do so, it is vital to understand and consider what teachers perceive as adequate and appropriate parental involvement to make parents supportive allies of teachers, rather than opponents.

Such training should also equip teachers with the skills needed to clearly explain to parents which forms of involvement are most helpful and constructive.

7 Conclusions

This study contributes to the literature by deeply exploring teachers' perceptions of parents and their relationship with them in school. By giving voice to the teachers, it was possible to investigate their understanding of the causes and consequences of a challenging parent-teacher relationship and the features of a supportive one. Overall, our findings indicate that while cooperation with parents is often constructive, it can occasionally become challenging and, in such cases, may be perceived as a source of stress for teachers. Although these situations seem to remain exceptions, it is essential to support teachers in developing effective strategies to manage difficult interactions with parents, both through organisational resources and psychological support.

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Declarations

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