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### **Parent–teacher relationships in school micropolitics: beginning teachers’ stories**

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#### **Abstract**

The article discusses parent–teacher relationships in school micropolitics based on beginning teachers’ stories. We employ a narrative approach and investigate how micropolitical conditions and strategies are portrayed in beginning teachers’ stories of parent–teacher relationships. The research material consists of narrative interviews with seven Finnish primary school teachers in the first and second years of their careers. The findings indicate that micropolitical processes play a part in constructing parent–teacher relationships. These micropolitics both enable and limit these relationships and influence how beginning teachers learn to cope with parent relationships. The findings reveal various micropolitical strategies that beginning teachers use to enact and construct parent–teacher relationships. Furthermore, the findings show that parent–teacher relationships do not necessarily include just parents and

teachers, but are multidimensional, encompassing several intertwined relationships that micropolitically condition parent–teacher relationships. The implications for pre- and in-service teacher education and school leaders are considered.

Keywords: beginning teachers, micropolitics, narratives, parent–teacher relationships, teachers’ work

## **Introduction**

This research focuses on parent<sup>1</sup>–teacher relationships as portrayed in Finnish beginning teachers’<sup>2</sup> stories. Finland’s Basic Education Act states that schools must co-operate with students’ homes (National Core Curriculum 2014, 2016). According to the Core Curriculum, guardians’ co-operation and opportunities for involvement in schoolwork and its development are at the centre of school culture. The Core Curriculum also states that guardians must be kept informed on children’s learning and growth, and that the key issues related to the organisation of teaching must be discussed with guardians. In practice, modes of co-operation are diverse, but usually teachers and students’ parents do not daily meet face-to-face.

Parent–teacher relationships are important for students’ growth and for improving school communities (Rogers et al., 2009). While numerous previous studies have focused on beginning teachers (Avalos, 2016), beginning teachers’ stories or experiences of parent–teacher relationships remain underexplored. Although school micropolitics have been studied before (Achinstein, 2002; Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a, 2002b; Kelchtermans, 2007; Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017), the focus has rarely been on how micropolitics play out in parent–teacher relationships from the viewpoint of beginning teachers. This article aims to bridge this gap by asking how are micropolitical conditions and strategies portrayed in beginning teachers’ stories of parent–teacher relationships.

The article contributes to the theoretical discussion of parent–teacher relationships in schools and particularly examines how issues of power and interests emerge in beginning teachers’ experiences of those relationships. The article has theoretical and practical implications for addressing parent–teacher relationships as an aspect of schools’ micropolitical realities, which can provide pre- and in-service teachers with a more nuanced view of these relationships.

### **The micropolitical perspective on parent–teacher relationships**

Earlier research on parent–teacher relationships has focused primarily on aspects such as home–school co-operation/collaboration, interaction, partnership, parental involvement and (digital) communication (Barnard, 2004; Hirsto, 2010; Kuusimäki et al., 2019). The emotional dynamics and politics of teacher–parent interactions have also been explored (Hargreaves & Lasky, 2005; Lasky, 2000). Rather than interaction or collaboration, we apply the concept of parent–teacher relationships, since we understand teachers’ work to be moral in nature, with its core in human relationships (Hansen, 1998). Kelchtermans (2017) identified the “professional core relationships” for teachers in the school as an organisation: with colleagues, principals, students, and students’ parents. These core relationships are structurally related to the teachers’ work, and teachers cannot but engage with them (Kelchtermans, 2017).

In this research, we build on the micropolitical perspective (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991; 2005; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a, 2002b; Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017) to investigate parent–teacher relationships. The micropolitical perspective stresses the role of power, influence, and interests in schools and examines how these affect teachers’ work. Kelchtermans argues that teachers have ideas about what constitute the desirable or necessary working conditions that will both yield the envisaged educational outcomes and provide the

actors with job satisfaction. As such, these desired working conditions will operate as professional interests and, when they are absent, threatened, or abolished, teachers will engage in micropolitical actions aiming at establishing, safeguarding, or restoring them (Kelchtermans, 2017; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a, 2002b; Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017).

The micropolitical perspective has been applied in research related to school leadership (Ball, 1987; Blase & Anderson, 1995), educational change and reform (Blase, 2005), teacher collaboration (Achinstein, 2002), and beginning teachers (Jokikokko, Uitto, Deketelaere & Estola, 2017; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Hitherto, studies applying the micropolitical lens to parent–teacher relationships remain rare with few exceptions: Blase (1987) investigated daily politics in parent–teacher relationships. Dom and Verhoeven (2006) explored micropolitical relations between parents and school, especially from the viewpoints of partnership and conflict. Ng and Yuen (2015) studied the micropolitics of parental involvement, particularly the challenges inherent in encouraging parents’ participation in school education.

Earlier research has identified several conditions that significantly affect parent–teacher relationships, including physical distance, socio-cultural differences (including values and language), trust/mistrust between teachers/school and parents, willingness/unwillingness to co-operate, parents’ interest/lack of interest in school-related issues, possibilities of participating in school activities, and parents’ educational levels (Janssen et al., 2012; Ozmen et al., 2016).

Parents and teachers may have different interests and engage in attempts—formally or informally—to influence others and protect themselves; to achieve their goals and interests (Blase, 1991). Dahl (2017) concludes that power is constantly negotiated in parent–teacher relationships, but teachers’ professional responsibility may be lost when parents occupy

central positions in the collaboration. Parents may also feel disempowered. Kroeger and Lash (2011) emphasise that, if parents' resources (such as cultural practices, language, familial roles and structural differences in families) are insufficiently acknowledged in parent–teacher relationships, teachers are likely to misinterpret or neglect to understand or utilise the value of the resources that parents could bring to these relationships. Furthermore, the implicit set of institutionalised rules may keep parents positioned in particular ways. The parent–teacher relationship may include conflicts, tensions, and struggle, but also collaboration, and coalition-building (cf. Blase, 1991). Through the lens of micropolitics, becoming a teacher is a political act involving continuous negotiation of organisational power (Jokikokko et al., 2017). In this process, beginning teachers develop their micropolitical literacy and strategies (Achinstein, 2002; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002b) to understand and navigate school politics and address the micropolitical realities of schools (including parent–teacher relationships).

Rather than assuming that beginning teachers lack the expertise and experience (deficit approach) (see Johnson et al., 2014), we regard beginning teachers as active participants with various skills and modes of acting in the micropolitical situations of their school communities (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002b; Kelchtermans, 2019) and with the students' parents. Although the context of the school affects and, to a certain extent, regulates teachers' relationships with parents, we see that beginning teachers are actively searching their own micropolitical strategies to work with parents in meaningful ways.

## **Conducting the research**

We employ a narrative approach in this research focusing on parent–teacher relationships in school micropolitics. Seven Finnish beginning primary school teachers<sup>3</sup> were interviewed one to three times<sup>4</sup> during the first two years of their teaching careers (the first interview was

during their first autumn as a teacher, the second at the end of their first school year, and the third at the end of their second school year)<sup>5</sup>. All interviewed teachers worked in public schools. School size in Finnish primary schools differs greatly, ranging from less than 50 pupils in rural areas up to over 1000 pupils in the biggest ones. As often typical for beginning teachers in Finland, the interviewed teachers started working in temporary contracts after graduation (see Table 1).

<b>Teacher (pseudonym)</b>	<b>Gender and age</b>	<b>Work experience</b>	<b>Number of interviews</b>
Laura	female, late twenties	First autumn in different schools. Then late autumn, spring and the second year in one urban school.	3
Make	male, late twenties	First and second year in the same urban school.	2
Maria	female, late twenties	First year in different positions in a large urban school. Second year in a small urban school.	3
Sanni	female, early thirties	First couple of weeks short contracts; then first and second year in an internationally orientated urban school.	3
Niina	female, early thirties	First year in pre-primary school. Then maternity leaves. Second year in a rural school.	1
Katariina	female, late twenties	During the first and second year worked longer periods in different schools. Then got a permanent position in one of these schools, in a small rural school.	2
Hanna	female, late twenties	First year in urban school. Second year in rural school.	3

Table 1. Information about the participating teachers

The interviewed teachers chose the location for the interviews, which lasted between 40 and 100 minutes each. The interviews were narrative in nature, which allowed teachers to tell about their everyday experiences as beginning teachers and to make sense of those

experiences (Riessman, 2008). In line with the narrative approach, these stories are regarded as reconstructions produced in a particular context and time and as a result of interaction between the interviewed teacher and the interviewer (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005; Riessman, 2008).

Although the interviews were conversational, the interviewer had an overall plan for the topics to be covered in each interview, focusing on different relationships in the teachers' work, their most positive and negative work-related experiences, and their thoughts about the future. For example, the interviewer asked the teachers to describe their experiences as beginning teachers and their relationships with students and the students' parents.

Interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim. Authors 1 and 2 read the transcriptions from the perspective of parent–teacher relationships, paying attention to stories in which the teachers specifically discussed the students' parents, even briefly. This first analytical phase focused both on content and the teachers' ways of telling, acknowledging them to be interrelated (Lieblich et al., 1998; Riessman, 2008). Authors 1 and 2 noted that beginning teachers discussed what co-operation with parents meant in practice, how their experiences were of the parent–teacher relationships, and how other relationships intertwined with the parent–teacher relationships. In addition, beginning teachers made categorisations of parents and considered how they themselves appear in these relationships.

The observations made by authors 1 and 2 were specified in joint discussions with other authors. In these discussions, power emerged as an important aspect in the stories about parent–teacher relationships. Hence, we next analysed the stories from the perspective of micropolitical conditions and strategies (e.g., Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a, 2002b) still focusing both on content of the stories and the teachers' ways of telling. During this second phase of analysis, the following four narrative themes were identified: (1) parent–teacher relationships as a technical duty, (2) parent–teacher relationships as a trust building process,

(3) parent–teacher relationships involving other actors, and (4) parent–teacher relationships as positionings. Several of these narrative themes could be present in one interview.

For ethical reasons, we use pseudonyms for the teachers and have omitted some personal details to protect their anonymity. For readability, we have omitted possible repetition in the citations.

## **Findings**

### ***Parent–teacher relationships as a technical duty***

A first narrative theme was parent–teacher relationships considered as a technical duty. This refers to how communication and interaction with parents was described as one of the teachers’ duties to complete and often realised online via technology. Niina describes different activities with the parents:

Interviewer: Well, what kind of co-operation have you had with parents?

Niina: [...] we had the traditional parents’ evening [...] then we use WILMA, through which we continually exchange messages, in addition to paper-based communication. Particularly important newsletters are still sent home in paper form.

Interviewer: Oh yes.

Niina: Then, of course, we phone each other, but [...] unfortunately, it is usually negative issues that are worked out over the phone. But our development discussions and evaluation discussions are now beginning, so the students and the parents are involved. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)



This story reveals micropolitical elements in establishing parent–teacher relationships: schools can have different norms and practices that are not necessarily explicit, but the beginning teachers learn them by following the practices that the school have found to be useful (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). Although beginning teachers could see these clear procedures for parent–teacher relationships as useful, strictly following them also simplified the relationships. The above story describes different ways of relating with parents, including via WILMA, a digital communication platform designed to facilitate communication between school and homes. Hence, parent–teacher relationships appear here not as establishing long-term, personal relationships, but as a formal requirement, a duty to perform. Next, Laura describes the online nature of parent–teacher relationships:

Interviewer: What about parents? Have you been involved with them?

Laura: Well, not much. It is probably because of working as a substitute [teacher], as nowadays contact takes place via WILMA and I don't have access to WILMA. [...]

Interview: So, you cannot write a WILMA message?

Laura: No. [...] And messages also reach the teacher via WILMA. Messages can be urgent or non-urgent. For example, one morning, one student had been late from another teacher's lesson. I had a lesson with another class. She was apparently scolded. The next morning the same girl was late and had phoned her dad to say that she was afraid to go to school because the teacher would wonder why she is late. But the dad had informed the school via WILMA, and of course I didn't get the message, and then the girl was away for the entire day. I thought she was sick, but then luckily the teacher of the parallel class told me, and we sorted it out. I personally feel that we had a good relationship with this girl. [...] I thought, 'oh no, I wish I'd known', but it is one current disadvantage to working as a substitute. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Here, WILMA is emphasised as the main—and seemingly only—form of contact with parents. Earlier research has argued in favour of digital communication platforms such as WILMA, as they bring flexibility to parent–teacher relationships and help to overcome physical distances (Kuusimäki et al., 2019). However, beginning teachers, who often work on temporary contracts, can be excluded from the use of platforms like WILMA (see Jenkins et al., 2009). As such the limited or denied access to material communication facilities for beginning teachers demonstrates how these material conditions regulate and restrict how parent–teacher relationships evolve (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). In Laura’s story, exclusion from WILMA, also affects teacher–student relationships. Later, Laura got a longer temporary contract and was granted access to WILMA:

Interviewer: How do you see being a teacher now?

Laura: Well, let’s put it that I wish it was about teaching and being present and being an adult [...] although, in reality, at least this year has appeared to be more about filling in forms and writing accounts of this or being in contact via WILMA about that, and reporting everything that it is possible to report. So, when a child falls over during a break and cuts their knee, this must be reported to the parents via WILMA just in case. It’s too bureaucratic compared to what I’d want or wish it to be. (3<sup>rd</sup> interview)

This story further demonstrates parent–teacher relationships as a technical duty, as the beginning teacher describes the need to report “everything possible” related to the children to parents via WILMA. Here, the story emphasises how reporting via WILMA micropolitically

conditions parent–teacher relationships: the teacher is expected to report, and she does so despite her opinion that it is “too bureaucratic” and against her ideal of the work.

### *Parent–teacher relationships as a trust building process*

A second narrative theme on parent–teacher relationships was the building of trust. Establishing trust in parent–teacher relationships, contacting parents with positive feedback, and informing them on classroom events are actually micropolitically relevant strategies for beginning teachers, as it allows them to approach parents more easily, particularly regarding potentially contentious issues. Maria tells:

Maria: Then the parents also write via WILMA if they have some concerns. For example, [...] one [student] had a really difficult beginning at school. This became evident at home, and I then actually invited them to the school.

Interviewer: To visit the school?

Maria: Yes. We sat down and talked. I had this feeling because there had been messaging with this parent before. I thought there might be some sort of lack of trust [towards me as a teacher].

Interviewer: Yes.

Maria: I had this feeling that I was not really trusted, so I thought that [they should] come over as maybe it would ease the concern somewhat. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

This story emphasises the interest in establishing trust in parent–teacher relationships to support the student, and the importance of face-to-face meetings with parents in achieving that. Compared to the previous narrative theme about relationships as a technical duty, the

focus here is on creating personal bonds and trust with the parents (Janssen et al., 2012). Emotions, here the sense of not being trusted, help the teacher to understand and address the parents' concerns. However, despite the feeling of not being trusted, the beginning teacher does not victimise herself, but aims to actively find ways of constructing relationships with parents (see Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002b). The beginning teacher uses several micropolitical strategies (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a) aimed at establishing trust and creating personal contact in parent–teacher relationships: the parents are invited to the school, and they sit down and talk.

### ***Parent–teacher relationships involve other actors***

A third narrative theme was parent–teacher relationships involving other actors with various micropolitical interests. Hence, the core relationships in teachers' work (Kelchtermans, 2017)—those with students, colleagues and principals—micropolitically conditioned parent–teacher relationships. Maria tells:

Maria: and it was not just this one person [a teaching assistant], but there was this delicate questioning from elsewhere as well [...] from surprisingly many directions, this kind of age discrimination that you are so young [...] also from the parents. I went to substitute for a very experienced, very good teacher, who remained in the school but was engaged in other tasks.

Interviewer: Oh, yes.

Maria: So, I stepped into these big shoes and it was a shock for the parents when it came so suddenly that I arrived there. The previous teacher was an adult—and they, like, really emphasised that s/he was an adult—and then you could read between the lines that “you are a little girl, so why are you here”. [...] Also, the students would

comment especially at the beginning of the autumn, asking, “teacher, how old are you? Oh, ten years younger than our mum.” [...] It was a surprise to me, having studied for almost seven or, what was it, six years, I felt I was so old [...] Then, when I went there, I was a kid, suddenly a kid, and then also inexperienced. [...] I have been thinking that it can add to my credibility that I have children of my own. [...] I went to the parents’ evening and said that I wasn’t at school today because my child had been taken ill. [...] it just crossed my mind that their image about me might change then.

(1<sup>st</sup> interview)

This story reveals that parent–teacher relationships are not just shaped between the teacher and the students’ parents but are also influenced by other social relationships (also outside the school) as well as the different interests that may be at play there (März & Kelchtermans, 2020; see Janssen et al., 2012; Ozmen et al., 2016). The teaching assistant, the parents, the teacher for whom Maria was substituting and the students hinted at her age, micropolitically relating her youth to lack of experience and professionalism (Aspfors & Bondas, 2013). In the story, a distinction is made between the young teacher—“the little girl”, “the kid”—and the experienced teacher—“the adult”—who used to teach the class. Maria’s revelation to the parents that she was a mother herself might have had micropolitical relevance, because the revelation seemed to affect how she was perceived and valued by the parents. The next story further illustrates other actors involved in parent–teacher relationships:

Sanni: Then came the new and enthusiastic principal, whom I have liked very much and who has helped me a lot with heavy matters with the class, though s/he has this very unconditional and pretty strict way of dealing with the parents, and some of the parents have even been quite upset about the strictness. At times, I have been in an

awkward situation [there in the middle] when the parents speak ill of the principal. This one dad said to me when I said to him that, even if I thought that the principal was somewhat short-tempered in certain situations, I cannot say such things, I am a teacher in a temporary post. This one dad said to me that it is part of my work description to protect my students too. [...] It was a bit of an awkward situation when he tried to advise me that I should have stood up more boldly against the principal, though I didn't necessarily even think so strongly that there was any reason to stand up. (3<sup>rd</sup> interview)

The story reveals the complex social conditions of school micropolitics, as Sanni describes herself as a beginning teacher in the middle of various relationships at work, including the parent–principal relationship, the parent–teacher relationship, the students–teacher relationship and the teacher–principal relationship. The story illustrates the difficult position a beginning teacher finds herself in amidst diverse and complex negotiations of power and domination exerted by several actors (Dahl, 2017). Being in the middle of multiple relationships raises dilemmas, some of them ethical, regarding whose interests one should consider and protect, and to whom one should be loyal. In the interviews, Sanni described the parents as very active ones. Here, the father advises the beginning teacher with a temporary contract to stand up for the students, yet resulting from her micropolitical strategy in the situation the teacher chooses not to take sides nor to rebel against the principal, who eventually decides on the possible renewal of her contract (Jenkins et al., 2009; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a). The story further shows the conflicting interests that are at play: the father voices the students' interests, whereas Sanni's interests include her concern about the continuation of her work contract. Ultimately, however, the story illustrates that the beginning

teacher made her own decision, amidst the different interests, following neither the terms of the father nor the principal, and simultaneously showing sensitivity to all parties involved.

### *Parent–teacher relationships as positionings*

A fourth narrative theme on parent–teacher relationships was beginning teachers positioning themselves and the parents in certain ways. This positioning can be seen as a micropolitical strategy: categorising parents as particular kind of group and categorising oneself as a particular kind of teacher can make relationships easier to understand and address. Katariina tells:

Katariina: I had really lovely parents [...] even active, for example, four messaged me to say “so nice, welcome” when I started [...], but there was this one mum. We had a practical professional orientation day for second graders, and the children were really excited. Well, this mum decided that it was a really bad idea. The child’s task is to play, and the school teaches them to read and count. [...] I was somehow so amazed that she took such an aggressive [stance], especially when she asked the teacher who had started her maternity leave, based on my last name, whether I was the principal’s wife, and thought, “well, somehow related, oh good, I can complain to her about everything”. So, she clearly had this attitude that, “yes, I can let fly to this girl”. But I was really proud of myself. I never met this mum, she never came to development discussions, for example. [...] I then thought that I will not be bossed around. She was a somewhat older mum, her child an only one, an afterthought, and then, of course, I am still young and inexperienced, so you often may get this inferiority complex. But I then [thought] that I won’t go into this: I wrote quite briskly why the day had been

organised and what kind of feedback children have given. [...] I also wrote that I was a bit annoyed at the tone of the discussion. I will not take that lying down, some kind of manners are still required, especially when dealing with people you don't know [...] she was known. A teacher of a parallel class said "yes, I know her". [...] the girl [the student], of course, felt bad, as she would have liked to go. (1<sup>st</sup> interview)

Katariina started by positioning parents as "lovely" and "active". However, the positioning changes as she moves to tell about one mother and positions herself as "young and inexperienced" against the "somewhat older" mother. However, the story shows the mutual nature of positioning. According to Katariina, having the same last name as the principal made the teacher, in the eyes of the mother, "a girl" to whom she could complain about everything.

The ambiguity of the relationship is evident in this story: parents are described as a supporting factor in the teachers' work, but also as a factor that challenges teachers (Aspfors & Bondas, 2013). Micropolitically, the story illustrates how the interests of the mother and the beginning teacher collide, although both parties seem to pursue the same interest: meeting the needs of the child. However, the values and ideas of the parent and the teacher/school do not necessarily align (Lasky, 2000). The story shows how the teacher's judgement and the curriculum content were questioned by the mother, provoking strong emotions in both teacher and parent (Aspfors & Bondas, 2013; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2005).

Despite how the teacher is positioned and the possibility of "an inferiority complex", Katariina relates her decision not to give in and her active search for ways to further construct the relationship with the mother. Although Katariina acknowledges that she is a beginning teacher, her interviews generally illustrate her self-confidence. This self-confidence is evident here, as she does not question her own judgement, but verbalises her emotions concerning the



situation, for example, her pride at not agreeing to be “bossed around”, and she also shares some of her emotions with the mother. To facilitate such behaviour, collegial support in school micropolitics is vital (Kelchtermans, 2017). As the colleague knew the mother, Katariina received background information, which helped her to understand the situation.

## **Conclusions**

This article offers new insights into parent–teacher relationships as one of the “professional core relationships” in beginning teachers’ work (Kelchtermans, 2017). Although parent–teacher relationships have been studied from various perspectives in several contexts (e.g. Barnard, 2004; Hirsto, 2010), they have rarely been studied from the viewpoint of micropolitics, especially from the perspective of beginning teachers. This article provides insights on how micropolitical processes in schools impact the actual development and significance of parent–teacher relationships for beginning teachers as part of their work lives. Micropolitics enable as well as limit what these relationships can look like and how beginning teachers learn to cope with parent relationships.

The fact that beginning teachers often worked in temporary contracts influenced on the parent–teacher relationships (cf. Jenkins et al., 2009; Marent et al., 2020). The findings are in line with the recent research that has challenged the deficit perspective on beginning teachers’ dealings with their students’ parents (see Johnson et al., 2014; Kelchtermans, 2019). Although the teachers often positioned themselves as young and inexperienced (as the deficit approach suggests), at the same time, they claimed agency and described themselves as active participants with various skills and ways of acting with students’ parents and constructing meaningful parent–teacher relationships. In line with previous research (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002a), the findings demonstrate the different micropolitical strategies that beginning

teachers use to enact and construct parent–teacher relationships and how they trusted and relied on their own professional judgement when working with the parents. The micropolitical strategies that were visible in teachers’ stories included, for example, building trust by inviting parents to face-to-face meetings, seeking support from colleagues, avoiding taking sides in the middle of different interests, positioning themselves and parents in certain ways, and trusting in one’s own judgement.

The findings of this article reveal the different micropolitical conditions that enable and limit the construction of meaningful parent–teacher relationships. Rather than emphasising the creation of strong personal bonds with the parents, relationships could be described as technical duties to complete, including completing various forms and evaluations and communicating online. Earlier research has mainly focused on the possibilities created by digital communication platforms in parent–teacher collaboration (Kuusimäki et al., 2019), but there is also a need for a research that critically elaborates how online communication may affect and shape the micropolitical conditions of parent–teacher relationships (not only positively), and student–teacher relationships.

Prior research on parent–teacher relationships (e.g. Lasky, 2000) has paid less attention to the fact that parent–teacher relationships can involve also other actors. Our findings show that parent–teacher relationships do not necessarily include just parents and teachers, but rather are multidimensional, encompassing several intertwined relationships that micropolitically condition parent–teacher relationships. Other actors and relationships (such as students, colleagues, principals and even teachers’ own family members) as part of the school can impact teachers’ striving towards desirable working conditions and, as such, become micropolitically relevant (see also März & Kelchtermans, 2020).

This article illustrates that beginning teachers do not only describe the challenges (see Jenkins et al., 2009) encountered with students’ parents, but that the phenomenon is more

versatile. Based on our findings, we hence argue that it is important in teacher education to enable pre- and in-service teachers to appreciate parent–teacher relationships as part of a complex relational micropolitical network that includes several other actors. Thus, the micropolitical perspective can promote understanding of parent–teacher relationships and that it is not just teachers’ (or parents’) decisions and individual choices that create conditions for parent–teacher relationships (Janssen et al., 2012; Ozmen et al., 2016). It is impossible to give pre- and in-service teachers specific tools for constructing relationships with parents. However, teacher education could provide conceptual and theoretical tools and approaches aimed at helping teachers to understand the micropolitical dimension of parent–teacher relationships and to assist teachers in developing their micropolitical literacy and strategies. Furthermore, based on our findings we argue that school leaders and principals should regard beginning teachers as active participants who may clearly need support and guidance, but who also have diverse resources and ways to challenge and improve micropolitical practices, norms and rules in the school community, including those that relate to parent–teacher relationships.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> We acknowledge that students’ families can be very diverse. Instead of ‘parent’, ‘guardian’ would be a more inclusive term to use in educational contexts and schools and it is the term used in the Finnish National Core Curriculum. However, we use the term ‘parent’, as we used this term when interviewing the teachers, and the teachers themselves talked about students’ parents, moms, dads, families, or homes.

<sup>2</sup> In this article, a beginning teacher refers to a teacher with less than two years of teaching experience.

<sup>3</sup> A master’s degree is required for primary school teaching in Finland. Primary schools consist of grades 1–6 (students aged 7–12). Also beginning teachers are relatively autonomous in Finland and there is no inspection system. There is a relatively large amount of freedom in the curriculum for teachers. They can, for example, choose the teaching methods.

<sup>4</sup> Few teachers dropped out from the research.

<sup>5</sup> The interviews are a part of more extensive research material collected in the EMOT research project.

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