

Coping with Emotionally Challenging Expectations: Japanese Beginning Teachers and Their Relationships with Students' Parents

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Abstract

This article examines emotionally challenging expectations in the relationships beginning teachers have with students' parents. The data consist of narrative interviews with 17 Japanese beginning teachers. Due to strong cultural and social norms prescribing appropriate social interactions, Japanese teachers have little leeway in negotiating parents' expectations. We found that beginning teachers described facing three emotionally challenging expectations in their relationships with students' parents: 1) they do not fully understand what is expected of them; 2) they are expected to turn to colleagues for help with difficult issues involving parents; and 3) they are expected to endure and learn from criticism. To cope with these emotionally challenging expectations, beginning teachers perform emotional labor. The article presents a wider understanding of teachers' work as a relational practice and offers insights that can be used to move beyond the discourse that frames beginning teachers from a 'deficit' perspective.

Keywords: Beginning teachers, emotional labor, expectations, Japan, parent-teacher relationships.

Introduction

This article examines emotionally challenging expectations in the relationships beginning teachers have with students' parents¹. Here, the term 'beginning teacher' refers to qualified teachers with less than seven years of experience. While parents figure in many studies on teachers' work relationships (e.g., Achinstein, 2006; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2005; Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017), beginning

teachers' relationships with students' parents have rarely been the focus. Nevertheless, relationships with students' parents constitute one of what Kelchtermans (2017) calls the *core relationships* in teachers' work: they are an intrinsic part of the job and, as such, constitute a structural working condition that beginning teachers must engage. Understanding them is therefore crucial to properly understanding teachers' induction. Like other core relationships, their emotional impact can be positive or negative. Parent-teacher relationships are often conceived of in terms of collaboration and how they influence students' educational outcomes (Stroetinga et al., 2019). But research has also documented that parents can be a source of stress for beginning teachers (Veenman, 1984; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). For example, recently, Gaikhorst and her colleagues (2017) demonstrated that parents with high educational and socio-economic status can be challenging for beginning teachers to handle because of their sometimes extremely demanding and critical involvement.

In line with this research, our study focuses on emotionally challenging expectations in parent-teacher relationships. Our assumption was that these expectations are meaningful for the beginning teachers and their experiences during teacher induction. We conceive of expectations as emotionally challenging when they deviate from the cultural and institutional norms or from teachers' personal educational ideals, eliciting negative emotions and forcing teachers to cope with them by, for example, using emotional labor (Hargreaves & Lasky, 2005; Lassila, 2017). Emotional labor is defined as introducing or suppressing emotions to portray oneself in a way that enables the meeting of expectations (Hochschild, 1983). The common framing of beginning teachers from a deficit perspective, i.e., seeing them as not fully competent to perform their duties as teacher, constitutes as one such expectation (see Correa et al., 2015; Kelchtermans, 2019).

To identify and understand emotionally challenging expectations, we have drawn on the narrative accounts of Japanese beginning teachers. The cultural and social norms prescribing appropriate social interactions in Japan are quite strong, leaving teachers little leeway in negotiating parents' expectations (Sugimoto, 2003; Wakimoto & Chôshi, 2015). Our research question is: what emotionally challenging expectations are there in beginning teachers' relationships with parents, and how do beginning teachers cope with them? Unravelling the often implicit and normalised expectations in parent-teacher relationships in a particular context, such as Japan, provides a wider understanding of teachers' work as a relational practice and offers insights that can be used to move beyond discourses that frame beginning teachers from a 'deficit' perspective.

Parents in the professional relationships of beginning teachers

Parent-teacher relationships do not develop in a vacuum but are rooted in historical, social, political and cultural contexts and, as such, inevitably carry particular normative expectations regarding conduct (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). In Japan, most adults hold a clear understanding of social positions and their accompanying expectations of conduct (Sugimoto, 2003), so both parents and teachers are generally aware of their respective positions. In general, relationships between Japanese teachers and parents are expected to be collaborative, polite and somewhat professionally distant. The aim is to establish a partnership between parents and teachers, including a shared understanding of what is best for the child and how to arrange practical resources for growth (Iizuka & Arimura, 2006; Porter, 2008). However, failures to communicate expectations regarding cooperation and goals often lead to ill-functioning parent-teacher relationships (Bang, 2018).

Depending on where the locus of power is situated, Porter (2008) argued that parent-teacher relationships accord to the four key models set out immediately below.

- 1) *The professionally driven model*: the teachers' voice is decisive.
- 2) *The family-allied model*: parents provide support to teachers.
- 3) *The family-centred model*: the responsibility for education is equally shared between teachers and parents; both parties have equal status, and specific responsibilities are negotiated between them.
- 4) *The parent-driven model*: teachers are educators assisting and supporting parents in teaching and their child's upbringing (the inverse of Model 1).

The *family-centred* model is most common in Japanese schools. Homeroom teachers visit students' homes once a year, conduct parent-teacher conferences, organise school visits and communicate with parents through various media. For teachers who do not oversee homerooms², there may not be many occasions to encounter parents, apart from mandatory afternoon clubs for students, or unless problems arise (Shimahara, 2002).

However, the highly competitive nature of Japanese society, with its strong focus on meritocracy, increasingly leads many parents to assume a consumerist position towards schooling, especially in bigger cities (Wakimoto & Chôshi, 2015), which resembles Porter's (2008) parent-driven model. As a result, the parent-teacher relationships become characterised by non-cooperation and even greater professional and emotional distance. If teachers then have difficulties dealing with students' behaviour, resulting in poor grades, parents are often found to harshly criticise teachers' capabilities (Kudomi & Sato, 2010). Recently, increasing parental criticism based partly on seeing teachers as

providers of educational services has been identified as an important source of teacher attrition during the induction phase (Struyven & Vanthournout, 2014; Wakimoto & Chôshi, 2015).

Teachers have to perform emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) to handle the social and cultural expectations regarding appropriate emotional displays. These emotional displays are often expressed through professional norms (Zembylas, 2004). Teachers are expected not to react emotionally even towards strong parental outbursts but to take a calm and understanding approach to solve the situation. Beginning teachers have limited possibilities when dealing with parents who hold a socially superior position which is the case for example in Japan. This shows in how beginning teachers are expected to assume a lower posture defined by high self-control and subdued opinions and actions (Lassila, 2017; Sugimoto, 2003). Instead of explaining to parents that they have misunderstood something, teachers are expected to take the blame and apologise for poor communication, thereby trying to create a second chance and restoring harmony (Wakimoto & Chôshi, 2015). All these are examples of situations where emotional labour is required.

We emphasise that relationships in education are not only dyadic, such as that between a teacher and student or a teacher and parents but are meaningfully intertwined with other relationships (Baker-Doyle, 2012; Lassila & Uitto, 2016; März & Kelchtermans, 2020). Interacting with colleagues is one core relationship for teachers, constituting a significant daily work condition that influences other relationships, including the parent-teacher relationships (Ahn, 2016; Kelchtermans, 2017; Lassila, 2017; Shimahara, 2002; Vangrieken et al., 2015). Teachers expect their colleagues to support them and their principal to act as a buffer against parents to ensure they can concentrate on their work (Lassila et al., 2017). In return, teachers are expected to interact with parents as the representatives of the school and other members of the school team (Iizuka & Arimura, 2006). This can mean that beginning teachers get reprimanded by colleagues or their principal for behaviours that may harm their school's reputation, which may once more require the beginning teachers to perform emotional labor.

The beginning teachers' position in parent-teacher relationships is complex in many ways. Despite being qualified – although with a somewhat limited pre-service education³ – Japanese teachers become full members (*'ichinin-mae'*) of their schools only after completing in-service training and gaining sufficient teaching experience and seniority. Beginning teachers in many countries are seen as *'formally qualified, but not yet fully capable'* (Kelchtermans, 2019, p. 86) and as lacking the competencies to carry the full responsibilities of a classroom or change common practices at their schools (Correa et al., 2015). Because of this deficit perspective, they are treated as novices in need of guidance (Shimahara, 2002). Prior research has argued how in-school activities and senior teachers'

guidance and experience are more important than pre-service education for teachers' professional development during induction (Ahn, 2016; Howe, 2005). Japanese schools claim to operate under an ethos of equality among teachers, but in reality, respect for seniority often overrides this ideal. However, at the same time, beginners are also assigned tasks and responsibilities beyond the classroom and into managing the school, including dealing with parents, just as is the case for full teachers (Howe, 2005).

The study

The research context

The data consist of interviews with 17 beginning teachers. Participating teachers were recruited via the first author's professional academic network, and university professors acted as go-betweens. The so-called snowball sampling was also used in which participants suggested other teachers for interviews. Many participants (see Table 1) came from 'K-school', a lower secondary school where the first author conducted fieldwork. The aim was to recruit participants with a variety of backgrounds and work environments. The participating teachers had completed four-year programmes in universities to obtain a teaching licence. These programmes provide basic skills on pedagogy, guidance and subject knowledge, but due to limited exposure to the lived realities of schools (only a three-week practicum), graduating teachers' skill levels can be low (Howe, 2005).

The participating teachers worked in primary or lower secondary schools.⁴ They came from both major urban and rural areas. Their schools ranged from mid-sized (300–500 students) to large (over 600 students). Katase-sensei⁵ and Kusari-sensei worked at private schools. All other participants were employed in public schools on tenured or temporary contracts. All had graduated from universities providing teacher licences. The teachers' ages ranged from 23 to 35 years. Research permissions were orally acquired from the participants during the interviews, and an ethos of ethical, high-quality narrative research was followed (Josselson, 2007).

[Table 1 here]

Data collection

The first author, who is proficient in Japanese, conducted narrative interviews at places of the participants' choosing (Lassila, 2017). What characterised the conducted narrative interviews is their discussion-like nature, open-ended and wide questions and the role of the researcher as an active participant (Riessman, 2008). The first author began the interviews by inviting the participants to

recall what motivated them to become teachers and elaborate on the professional issues they faced. Relationships, emotions and their entanglement were the themes that guided the interviews. He also asked participants to recall and reflect on at least three positive and negative experiences concerning their work, eliciting this way stories about specific relationships (e.g. parent relationships) and emotionally significant experiences when they did not naturally emerge. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 1 hour and 40 minutes; the average length was around one hour. Due to time constraints, nine participants were interviewed twice and the rest once. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed in a Word file of 160 pages of single spaced 12-point font.

Analysis

In line with the narrative paradigm, storytelling is seen as a means of understanding both the world and one's experiences (Spector-Mersel, 2010). Stories do not simply describe or reflect social reality; rather, they are constructed through a process of narration. As mediating tools, they enable the examination of the social, cultural and political contexts in which they are produced (Spector-Mersel, 2010; Riessman, 2008). The first author read first all the interview data related to parent-teacher relationships. He worked as much as possible with the original language, referring to the Japanese transcripts for increased verisimilitude. Next, he condensed participants' stories about relationships with parents and translated them into English. Based on these translated versions, we then conducted a categorical content analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998, pp. 112–113) to answer our research question: what emotionally challenging expectations are there in beginning teachers' relationships with parents, and how do beginning teachers cope with them? In this analysis smaller stories were extracted from the interview texts to identify thematic similarities and differences, and these stories also read against cultural stories in teaching (Riessman, 2008). We paid attention to emotive words in the beginning teachers' stories, such as '*shocked*', or expressions, such as: '*getting under the skin*'.

As a result of the analysis, we found that beginning teachers described facing three emotionally challenging expectations in their relationships with students' parents:

- 1) they do not fully understand what is expected of them,
- 2) they are expected to turn to colleagues for help with difficult issues involving parents and
- 3) they are expected to endure and learn from criticism.

Findings

Beginning teachers do not fully understand what is expected of them

The uncertainty of not fully understanding what is expected from beginning teachers regarding parent-teacher relationships makes these expectations emotionally challenging. This has to do with how beginning teachers are expected on one hand to take full responsibility for different tasks, but on the other hand still get some leeway as beginners going through induction. In general, the parents can be quite strict on beginning teachers, and after the first year, they can be direct and harsh in their criticisms of beginning teachers' mistakes. During the first year, teachers are officially on probation as they are still in the process of completing the compulsory in-service training, and acknowledging this, parents often refrain from criticising them (Wakimoto & Chôshi, 2015). Sumikawa-sensei described his first year of teaching:

The attitudes of the parents are typically, 'Wonder if this young teacher can perform his work properly.' But the parents of my class have greeted me with warmth and encouragement. I am in a quite blessed situation right now. Possibly, their style will change next year, but all I can do is keep trying my best.

This extract illustrates beginning teachers' expectations towards parents: the parents can have doubts about the beginning teacher's capacity to properly perform their duties. However, the teacher described how parents' attitudes towards him had been surprisingly positive. Like Sumikawa-sensei, many beginning teachers anticipated the situation to change once they have finished their formal training, starting with the second year on the job.

Kusari-sensei, on the other hand, spoke about a second-year change in parents' attitudes towards her as a beginning teacher:

Even during the second year, from the parents' point of view, I was, as one might expect, still a newbie. Somehow, through the students [what they reported at home], the parents developed an impression I had some sort of arrogant or self-important attitude.

This extract illustrates how more is expected of second-year teachers, who have already passed the induction stage. It also underlines how students act as communicative links between teachers and parents and how what happens in the classroom can be misunderstood when reported at home. As part of the structural realities of teaching, parent-teacher relationships are defined via explicitly voiced expectations of being a proper teacher. This was further elaborated by Satô-sensei:

There are voices of parents saying, 'It's no surprise, the young teacher fails to manage his job properly', and this type complaint is increasingly common. That's why I think it would be good for a new teacher to first work as a vice-homeroom teacher.

The expression ‘it is no surprise’ clearly conveys expectations of beginning teachers’ performance: they do not know how to do their job properly and are thus likely to fail. Satô-sensei also articulated the evaluating gaze with which teachers are observed and suggested that some pressure be taken off beginning teachers by having them assume the role of a vice-homeroom teacher, who acts as a support for the homeroom teacher and thus has less responsibilities. In this idea of being a vice-homeroom teacher, the beginning teacher can benefit from the co-operation with another teacher. This can diminish the beginning teacher’s worry and uncertainty in the parent-teacher relationships. On the other hand, the idea of beginning teachers as vice-homeroom teachers suggests that beginning teachers are not fit to handle parent-teacher relationships on their own and could as such further strengthen the deficit perspective. Although the beginning teacher’s situation may change greatly depending on the level of understanding from the parents’ side, the beginning teachers can pre-emptively brace themselves and perform emotional labor to handle even the uncertain parent-teacher relationships (see Hargreaves, 1998; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2005).

Beginning teachers are expected to turn to colleagues for help with issues involving difficult parents

The beginning teachers often described how they were expected to turn to colleagues when facing troubles in parent-teacher relationships. This expectation to rely on colleagues is emotionally challenging for beginning teachers, as it suggests dependency and a lack of management skills, while simultaneously exposing beginning teachers to collegial criticism. While connected to parent-teacher relationships, this expectation originates from colleagues and is centred on ideas of what beginning teachers need to do to manage the parent-teacher relationships and how to act as proper members of their school communities. Education and managing the school are collective undertakings and in Japan the ethos of sharing different responsibilities is highly emphasised (Ahn, 2016; Shimahara, 2002).

Kusari-sensei describes how difficulties in managing troubles occurring between students reverberate into parent-teacher relationships as well as collegial relationships.

There was this very dominant student who formed a habit of creating friendships through bullying. Leading a group of students, she drove them to bully another girl, who – obviously shocked and hurt – told her parents. The next thing you know, there was a call from an agitated mother: ‘What on Earth is happening at your school?! I thought your school was an environment where things like this do not happen; that’s why I enrolled

my child.' She said she had 'bought the environment', and I guess she expected the school to expel this ill-behaving student.

This extract illustrates the parents' consumerist and non-collaborative attitudes towards school and their questioning of beginning teachers' judgement. It also shows one way of collegial mediation in parent-teacher relationships. Kusari-sensei further described how, while acknowledging that parents' reaction was understandable, she tried to look at the situation from the bullying student's perspective, recognising the potential influence of this student's background on her actions and was reluctant for example to have this student expelled. She continues:

My view was not understood....The grade's head teacher and vice-principal had to step in and lend their strength – I intended to sort out the situation myself...that was the most painful experience...[voice trails off] I had to brace myself against such things, but a lot of people really helped me in the situation.

Here, the parent's expectation was clearly at odds with the teacher's ideals of trying to see the situation holistically; the parent, meanwhile, was only focused on the well-being of her child. The teacher's purposes being at odds with those of the parents signifies a great moral distance between the two parties (Hargreaves & Lasky, 2005). This conflict between the teacher's own ideals and normative views and parental expectations becomes emotionally challenging as the teacher may be forced to compromise these ideals and essentially who he or she is as a teacher (see Lassila, 2017; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). In Kusari-sensei's extract her colleagues and both the principal and vice-principal took active roles as mediators in the parent relationships. They gave hints on how to solve troubles with students and phoned parents on the beginning teacher's behalf, and the vice-principal provided opportunities to address all the parents directly.

Such mediation, however, can also work in another direction. Kumano-sensei had a difficult fifth-grade class. Her control of the class had started to loosen, and parents became straightforward in their criticisms. Difficult discussions continued for months until parents directly contacted the principal. In a difficult middle position, the principal suggested relocating Kumano-sensei to a different school. For Kumano-sensei, this suggestion came '*as a shock and a betrayal of trust*', as she was expecting a different kind of solution, although she did understand the principal's decision from his perspective. Even though the other teachers and the principal supported and backed her up in many ways, the intense parental criticism was the final blow; she abruptly quit teaching before the school year ended. Contrasting Kusari- and Kumano-sensei's stories suggests that despite mediation and help from others, the teacher's understanding of themselves as a person and the capacity to perform emotional

labor remain important and these may ultimately be meaningful for whether or not the teachers stay in the profession (see also Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Kelchtermans, 2017).

Beginning teachers are expected to endure and learn from criticism

Beginning teachers were expected to endure and learn from parents' criticism. This emotionally challenging expectation deals with the criticism involved in parents questioning teachers' professionalism in general or attacking teachers' particular judgments or actions. Sometimes, these attacks were even physical. Participating beginning teachers with such experiences reacted to them by relying on their own means and performing emotional labor to maintain the expected posture.

According to Haru-sensei,

The parents challenge me, saying, 'Isn't what you are doing wrong?' Instead of thinking I'm being belittled, I try to take it as a learning experience and not make the same mistake again. I'm still young, which makes it easy to say all kinds of things to me really directly....It's impossible to completely avoid parents getting under your skin, but I try to think it's better to be directed than left to my own devices altogether; it's 'friendlier' [laughing].

This extract— especially the expression '*I'm still young*' – illustrates a socio-cultural position in which it is hard for teachers to defend themselves against parents. The need to perform emotional labor via masking their true emotions (possible annoyance or frustration) to maintain the assumed professional position as a junior becomes clear. Ami-sensei talked about a mother who came storming into her school:

One really hard-to-please mother came to the school after most teachers had already left, telling me that 'There's nothing wrong with my son. It was because of your poor teaching that he got the lowest grade in English, and you're a worthless piece of shit!' I was alone with another young teacher, both of us frightened by this angry parent. I couldn't defend myself from all the painful words that she directed at not just me personally but at teachers more generally. I was also angry, but in that situation, there was no other choice but to suppress that feeling.

Suddenly finding herself in a confrontational situation, the beginning teacher had to control her emotions and not respond to the parent's verbal attack. Earlier in the interview Ami-sensei described how she tried to do her best, but still struggled with teaching this student who was mostly inattentive during lessons. Ami-sensei described feeling she could have done more for the student. This partial

admission of blame may have made her hesitant to assume a stronger defensive stance. More importantly, her extract brings up how her being in lower position included the expectation to submit and be non-confrontational. Both Haru- and Ami-sensei's extracts illustrate teachers' performance of emotional labor to hide their anger in order to live up to the image of a proper teacher (Lassila, 2017) who is expected to be polite, non-confrontational and humble with parents. Taniguchi-sensei elaborates the expected subdued position when responding to parental criticism: *'The way to respond, you cannot help but to 'approach from below'. How should I put it... You try to make your posture as low as possible.'* The sometimes quite abstract expectations become concrete in confrontational situations such as the previous extracts by Haru- sensei and Ami-sensei. Because the expectations are difficult to meet, they become emotionally challenging.

Teachers are also expected to be grateful for the critique and use it to improve their work, as illustrated in this extract by Haru-sensei:

There are many situations in which you get 'educated' [by the parents] almost without noticing; I don't mean this as a complaint, but if you're being challenged with direct criticism that's a bit different. However, when I'm gently instructed by the parents, I accept it with gratitude.

Here, Haru-sensei makes a distinction between different types of comments coming from parents, some of which may be less emotionally difficult to deal with and can be met with appreciation. Kusari-sensei's extract echoed this same sentiment of trying to learn from the parents' critique as she said, *'I'm determined that a teacher has to think about many things from multiple perspectives. I think I may have become a bit stronger; these kinds of experiences are important for a teacher.'* Even when she got help from her colleagues, parents did not stop repeatedly questioning her work during that year, which triggered strong and negative emotions. Her words can be interpreted in two ways: she performed emotional labor to present herself as a proper teacher or she tried to see her experiences as instances of professional learning, a mental coping strategy for difficult experiences that has been documented in prior research as well (e.g., Lutovac, 2020).

Beginning teachers were also expected to take blame for difficulties in parent-teacher relationships. In his extract, Taniguchi-sensei talks about particularly demanding type of parents:

I have to mention the 'monster parents'⁶ that have increased in number recently, you hear a lot about them. Some may be quite incredible [in a negative sense] from the

start, but I've heard people talking about how 'teachers create the monster parents themselves'.

Taniguchi-sensei's extract suggests that most problematic parental behaviour would originate from teachers themselves, because of for example poor planning or insufficient communication skills. In addition to implying a general attitude of seeing the beginning teachers from a deficit perspective, Taniguchi-sensei's description also relates to the discussion on how beginning teachers often see themselves as being wrong, even when the responsibility is not theirs to bear (Kudomi & Satô, 2010). This suggests that the beginning teachers sometimes internalize the parental critique. From their lower position, they cannot directly shift blame to others, and the expectation thus becomes for beginners to take the blame. This expectation is emotionally challenging, as it requires adjusting the inner experience of innocence to the admission of the guilt placed by others, which requires performing emotional labor.

Earlier, Ami-sensei described how the parent continued confronting her. She went to the teachers' end-of-year party after the situation with the parent had passed and she had finished her tasks. She related the event to colleagues, explaining how she hoped for comfort, cheer and advice for the future. Her colleagues, however, operated under a different logic.

When I told the story to my colleagues, they told me my actions were the reason the student lost all his faith in me. It wasn't just the mother calling me dirty names; my colleagues also used similar language to criticise me.

This extract illustrates a Japanese cultural expectation calling for perseverance and acceptance of responsibility (Lassila, 2017; Sugimoto, 2003). It reinforces the deficit idea, implying these teachers cannot manage the realities of the work that the senior teachers have overcome, possibly leading them to dismiss beginners' worries as needless complaining (Kudomi & Sato, 2010). The extract also illustrates the influence of colleagues on beginning teachers' approach to collegial relationships. Expectations are conflicting as while being expected to rely on colleagues, there is also an expectation for beginning teachers to handle such situations by themselves. Furthermore, when other teachers step in to help, the beginning teachers have to perform their own role according to their beginner positions, which involves many culturally expected actions and postures. These illustrate how the relationships and expectations between beginning teachers and their senior colleagues are filled with conflicting expectations resulting in tensions (see Lassila et al., 2018).

Conclusions

The findings illustrate various emotionally challenging expectations in beginning teachers' relationships with parents. First, beginning teachers do not seem to fully understand what is expected of them, which creates discomfort. Second, they are expected to rely on colleagues for mediation and help, which is emotionally challenging (because it implies that they cannot handle situations themselves) and exposes them to criticism. Third, they are expected to endure and learn from criticism. To cope with these emotionally challenging expectations, the beginning teachers need to perform emotional labor to bring their emotional display in line with cultural and organisational expectations. The findings show that beginning teachers perform emotional labor in their relationships with parents in many ways. Sometimes the beginning teachers act according to the expectations that they are in lower position than parents. They try to look at the situation from the parents' perspectives. On other occasions, they deal with the situation by themselves, or decide to turn to their colleagues seeking collaboration. A final strategy is to try and frame their encounters with parents as learning opportunities.

The emotionally challenging expectations participants described were connected to wider socio-cultural and organisational ideals and norms. However, the findings show that not all of the expectations originate from parents. They may also be voiced by colleagues, and some are connected to ideas concerning how one learns about being a teacher via everyday shared practices. The findings are in line with previous research, which has shown colleagues as highly influential in parent-teacher relationships (e.g. Kelchtermans & Deketelaere, 2016; Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017; Lassila & Uitto, 2016). How colleagues acted both a source of and release from the emotionally challenging expectations similarly points to emotionally complex nature of relationships with colleagues (see Hargreaves, 2001). The findings suggest that there is an image of a proper teacher that beginning teachers strive to embody and that this aim requires them to perform emotional labor in parent-teacher relationships. This bears resemblance to how student teachers have been found to align one's being and actions according to normative beliefs on being a teacher (Lanas & Kelchtermans, 2015).

The findings suggest that beginning teachers' relationships with parents are family driven or family centred (Porter, 2008); teachers do not seem to be treated as equals because they cannot defend themselves on many occasions. For enhanced collaboration, building an understanding of common interests regarding the learning and well-being of students is crucially important. However, the findings suggest that parents and teachers can see things differently, making communication difficult and, in some cases, limiting collaboration in parent-teacher relationships (see Bang, 2018; Holloway et al., 2010).

The expectations of many parents and colleagues can be seen as rooted in the deficit discourse, which suggests that beginning teachers lack necessary skills and competencies, making them look inferior to their more experienced colleagues (Correa et al., 2015; Kelchtermans, 2019). The findings are also in line with this previous research as beginning teachers' stories show this deficit discourse in parents' and colleagues' attitudes. The socio-cultural and organisational expectations are such that it is hard for them to demonstrate sufficient competence in dealing with parents. They cannot easily practice a more professionally oriented model of cooperation, which is more common among experienced teachers due to their seniority and experience (Shimahara, 2002). However, the beginning teachers' coping through emotional labor suggests they do have means to at least endure the situation even if it is not directly possible to overcome this position.

Limitations and implications

Although the number of participants was limited and all possible experiences could not be represented in the findings, the article is still able to show the diversity in emotionally challenging expectations of parent-teacher relationships. The social and organisational expectations and social dynamics illustrated in this article are not unique to Japan and therefore, have a more general significance. Seniority and experience have been shown to exert influence on how beginning teachers practice their work in other contexts as well (Jokikokko et al., 2017). Furthermore, the findings offer insights to all beginning teachers, those working with them and those involved in teacher education.

Teachers need time and place where they can share emotions related to parent-teacher relationships (Kelchtermans & Deketelaere, 2016). This is important because teachers are expected to maintain a polite distance and mask one's emotions via emotional labor. Because beginning teachers may have limited possibilities to (re-)negotiate their positions in parent-teacher relationships and therefore improve cooperation, parents or trustful mediators as 'diverse professional allies' (Baker-Doyle, 2012, p. 79) need to take the initiative. Furthermore, increased micropolitical literacy – i.e., understanding what beginning teachers control and what they do not – would enable them to influence the situation through interpretive negotiation instead of merely coping with emotionally challenging expectations and responsibilities (Achinstein, 2006; Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Kelchtermans & Vanassche, 2017). One key aspect is raising teachers' awareness of cultural models and ideals and developing means to negotiate them by, for example, becoming inter-actors and, in the process, finding a way out of their deficit position (Kelchtermans, 2019). Previous research has shown that pre-service teacher education does not prepare enough future teachers for parent-teacher relationships (see Thompson, 2018). Therefore, critical reflection on parent-teacher relationships is needed already in pre-service teacher education.

¹ The word ‘guardian’ (*‘hogosha’*) is used in official documents and speech, as it acknowledges that the biological parent(s) (*‘oya’*) are not necessarily in charge of the student. Participants used *‘hogosha’* in our interviews. However, we have used the word ‘parent’ to align with prior research in English.

² For elementary school, this refers to the classroom teacher’s responsibilities. In junior high school, in addition to teaching a specific subject, many teachers are also responsible for managing the non-academic matters of their designated homeroom students and communicating with the students’ parents.

³ Most teachers complete four-year programmes in universities to obtain a teaching licence. These programmes provide basic skills on pedagogy, guidance and subject knowledge, but due to limited exposure to the lived realities of schools via a three-week practicum, graduating teachers’ skill levels can be low (Howe, 2005).

⁴ Japanese comprehensive education starts at age six and consists of six years of primary school and three years of lower secondary. Public, national and private schools follow the same national base curriculum.

⁵ All names used in this article are pseudonyms and we have chosen to use the honorific title of sensei (lit. the one born before), because it carries a lot of cultural significance in Japan.

⁶ These parents make unrealistic demands to teachers and schools, requesting special attention for their children and the dismissal of ‘un-cooperative’ teachers (Holloway et al., 2010).

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