

Teachers and Parents: Partners in Education?

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Introduction

The father of the Turkish boy Enes comes to the customary ten-minute parental meeting. The teacher says to the father that Enes is very quiet and that he has no friends. The teacher states that he will apply Enes for a training of social skills. When the father wants to react on this, he hears that time is up.

This paper reports first results of a research project on communication between teachers and parents, focusing on activities and competences of teachers. The situation presented above is a typical example of bad communication between the teacher and parent. Although pupils always did have parents and schools had to deal with them, these relationships were (and are) not really an issue in teacher education. Communication and co-operation with parents is one important element in the new competency standards of teachers (SBL 2004), but it seems not to be a topic that gets much attention in implementing these standards in schools or in teacher education. The research project is carried out by the knowledge centre Integrated Pedagogics of INHOLLAND University, started fall 2004 and will take two years.

In the research project, different visions and good practices will be surveyed, analysed and evaluated. Central research question is whether schools see parents as actual partners in education and how they organise this relationship. We look at differences between community schools and 'normal' schools. And we analyse possible differences between Dutch and 'ethnic' parents. How do teachers deal with differences in culture, expectations and parental practices?

The second main question deals with teacher education and its impact on teacher-parent cooperation. How can teacher training colleges educate future teachers in collaborating with parents, taking them seriously as partners in relationship to their own pedagogical responsibilities?

The paper gives results of the first stage of the research project and is based on a literature review and some exploratory field

work. Firstly, we outline a bit more the ambiguous relationship between teachers and parents. Secondly, we analyse the policy environment with regard to parent involvement in education. Thirdly, a model for systematically dealing with the most important actors and objectives in parent involvement is presented. Fourthly, we present preliminary results of two cases, to end, fifthly, with some concluding remarks and further prospects.

Outlining the problem

Raising children to prepare them for the world of today and tomorrow is a common responsibility of parents and teachers. But it is not perceived that way by many teachers and parents. Teachers complain a lot about parents, perceiving them as actors who could make life of teachers more easy or more difficult. So teachers criticise the lack of support of parents for school activities or they blame parent's child raising strategies and (lack of) pedagogical qualities for the growing number of 'problem children'. More recently there is also a lot of fuzz about violent behaviour of parents towards teachers.

Parents, on the other hand, often complain about the way they are treated by school and by teachers. The following situation indicates this:

Ailin, a four year old adopted girl from Korea, has fear for being deserted. Because of this she is going to school only for three days. After half a year, the teacher of Ailin declares, without consulting the mother, that "the fear is over and that the child can come to school full-time". In an interview the mother of Ailin states that she felt she was not taken seriously.

Parents often are not or inadequately informed about problems, they are not involved in school policy or innovation and they feel themselves not taken seriously when (cultural) differences in views and practices in upbringing or education

occur (Smit, Driessen and Doesborgh 2004). Parents frequently find that teachers have too little attention for problems, or effectively doing too little on this, or that they are very dependent on the goodwill of a specific teacher. Both teachers and parents complain about lack of respect from the other party. Much less teachers (and parents) perceive education and upbringing as a possibly common challenge and enterprise.

There is, however, a growing need for just that awareness, as the pedagogical and educational roles of the school as well as that of parents in present individualised, multicultural and competitive society have become both more intensive and more contested (Klaassen et al. 2000, De Winter 2005, Onstenk 2005). Parents bear the responsibility for the upbringing of their child in a world characterised by uncertainties, tensions and pressures on individual choices and responsibilities, and, in the case of ethnic groups, by growing emphasis on enculturation and adaptation, combined with a lack of opportunities. Especially in disadvantageous situations parents could use support by the school, by teachers or by social work professionals. Teachers blame many behavioural problems they encounter to parents or to society at large, but experience pedagogical awkwardness in dealing with them (De Wit 2003).

Our central research interest is identifying and analysing good practices of schools (and teachers) that see parents as necessary actual partners in education and upbringing and try out (new) ways to organise and support relationships between teachers and parents.

Parents and the school

Literature and policy documents show divergent visions concerning the role of parents in the school (Vogels 2002). Three different roles are distinguished: (1) parents as constituent, (2) parents as client and (3) parents as consumer. The role of constituent refers to parents as the carriers of the cornerstone of the Dutch education system, the freedom of education. Parents are free to choose a school they like and to found one when there is none they like (and if there are enough parents who think the same). A recent example is the rise of the so-called *iederwijs* (Everybody wise) schools. On private schools parents can have a seat in the school board and thereby press influence on the interpretation of the educational policy. Only a limited number of parents can and want to take this role.

The dominant view of the Dutch government is nowadays to see schools as professional organisations and the role of parents as clients. Teachers are professionals who deliver services and who have to respond to demands. Parents have the right to file complaints when they don't, but in the main parents are supposed to trust the professionalism of school leaders and teachers.

More recently, parents also have been defined as consumers. Schools are approached as companies and parents as consumers who will choose for a certain school. Educational results and other quality characteristics of schools are made public and parents are supposed to make a well-founded choice for a qualitative good school. Schools are seen as competitors who have to compete for students and to present themselves to parents. In the consumer approach parents and school have a reciprocal involvement. When a school does not satisfy, another school will be searched (Bronneman 1999).

Both client and consumer roles have some inherent contradictions, as the 'product' of education is a combined result of activity of the teacher, the pupil and the parents themselves. Parents are part of the production process: they deliver a 'semi-finished product as material for the school. Schools see parents primarily as the 'suppliers' of children, the

basic material for the educational production process (De Wit 2003). And they hold parents responsible for delivering the material in good order: well fed and well bred.

One problem of all roles (but especially as client) is the difficulty which parents have to be accepted as equal and serious partner. Parents have the most influence when choosing a school. Parents attach value to distance and environment, to reputation and the 'colour' of the school and to the feeling of the child about the school. Only a small number of parents takes educational quality into account (Smit et al. 2004). After making the choice, the 'voice' (to use a term of Hirschman 1970) of parents is in most schools very limited or only available by participating in formal institutions (like a parent council). The prototypical consumer role where parents change to another school by dissatisfaction (the 'exit'-option) is not very popular, as consequences for the child can be great.

Parents differ in their degree of involvement in school (Vogels 2002). There are more active and more passive parents. Some active parents act as partner of the school, while others are, when asked, willing to assist in school activities. These last group of parents (mostly mothers), are often the most popular with teachers, as they assist in getting things done. But it is the kind of involvement which is most vulnerable to growing labour market participation. Then there are more passive parents, who are not involved in actual educational practice, but do worry about the foundations of the school (i.e. the religious character). And there are invisible parents, who seldom visit school. Each school has all types in a variable combination. A new type, seemingly growing in size, consists of parents that actively participate in an unexpected and unwanted way: they come to school to complain aggressively about grades, disciplinary measures or 'low' school advice.

Differences in participation and involvement coincide largely with socio-economic status. Active partner parents are mainly found under parents with a high level of education, high income and (surprisingly) when both parents are working. Schools with many pupils from disadvantageous situations or poor socio-economic background mostly have few active parents. The lack of participation in formal school bodies can be a consequence of own (negative) experiences in education. Or these parents feel themselves subordinately to parents who are higher educated. Schools with many pupils from ethnic groups have even more difficulty getting parents involved. That is partly a result of language problems and isolation of ethnic families and their own problems in parenting (Kleijwegt 2005), but not necessarily the fault of those parents alone. Schools often have great difficulty to bridge cultural differences. Ethnic parents often feel they are not taken seriously as educator, whereas they are often very interested in the school success of their children (Herweijer and Vogels 2004, Smit et al. 2004). It remains to be seen if a categorisation of parents as active or passive is only resulting from parent characteristics, or that also the way schools and teachers are dealing with parents does influence kind and level of parent participation.

Parent involvement can be split up in two levels; on school level and on group level (Smit 2000). At school level parents can be involved at policy development and governing of the school through a school board, co-administration council and/or parent council. Although legal possibilities have been slowly extended, in general parents have only limited influence, and only a very limited number of parents is participating. Didactic and pedagogical issues are hardly discussed.

The participation of parents as a group has not been regulated legally. Most schools organise group parent evenings and supply (some) written information to involve parents in the school process. For an optimum involvement of parents on school- and group level is the way in which people handle each other very important and the degree in which

both parents and teachers are prepared to enter a process of partnership (Smit 2000). There are many discrepancies between what government, school and parents think is important (Vogels 2002, Herweijer and Vogels 2004), both with regard to didactics and to the pedagogical role. The government imagines ideal parents who help to guard and improve the quality of education. The school thinks about parents who help to reach school objectives, from giving breakfast to helping with home work. They worry much less about a possible role of the school to the educational and upbringing role of the parents. They are not looking for real two-way communication with parents (Klaassen and Leeferink 1998, Smit et al. 2004). When asked, parents express a need for communication with school and teachers concerning pedagogical responsibilities and activities (Herweijer and Vogels 2004, Smit et al. 2004).

Parent involvement: a model

Smit et al. (2001) developed a model of parent involvement in schools, which we slightly adapted. Different actors have different interests and possibilities in regard to parent involvement in (primary) education (Figure 1). The instruments in the empirical research are derived from this model.

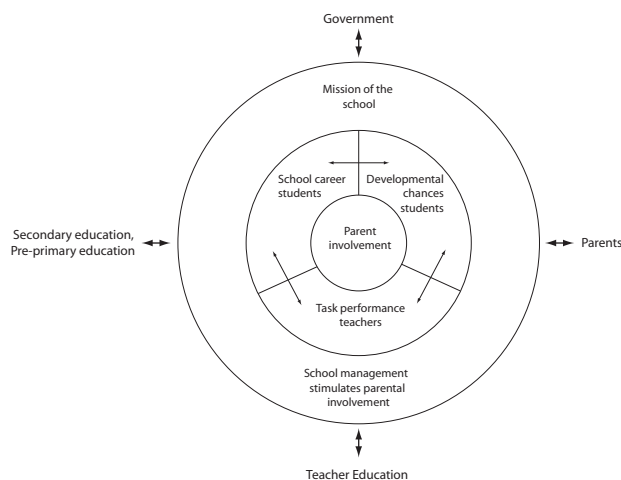


Figure 1 Actors in parent involvement in schools

The inner circle locates parent involvement in relation to the maximisation of development possibilities for students, the promotion of school careers and the improvement of teachers work. The outer circle in the model is related to factors within the school which influence parent involvement. School organisation (mission and management activities) can stimulate or hinder these forms of parent involvement. For the realisation of effective parent involvement it is important that parent involvement is an integral part of the mission of the school (De Wit 2003). The importance of parent involvement should be both in the official school mission, and explicitly stated in the school guide, but it should, more importantly, also be incorporated in school culture. Only then, a team of teachers will be committed to realise it in practice. This is essential, as it has to counterbalance some ingrained aspects of teachers' professionalism. Teachers have frequently a 'natural' inclination to turn away from parents (seen as a layman with regard to education) and to hesitate or refuse to give parents larger input with regard to pedagogical or didactic matters (Klaassen en Leeferink 1998, De Wit 2003). School leaders as well as teacher training centres could stimulate teachers to act positively with regard to increased parent involvement and to strive for more

equal cooperation. The socio-economic status of parents and the degree in which students have school problems must be taken into account.

We have added teacher (further) education as an important (possible) actor in the parent involvement model. Teacher education has a direct influence on the functioning of new teachers. It also contributes to continuing education in primary schools. It should give attention in the curriculum on the possible role of teachers and school with regard to parent involvement. In this way teachers can develop a vision as well as competences how to act in dealing with well-known difficulties in practice. Also they can be trained how to approach parents and to cooperate with them.

Case studies

In the preparatory stage of the research two case studies were done by in depth interviews and policy documents analysis in two schools for primary education. These schools were, just like the other case studies that will be carried out, selected by teacher educators identifying these schools as innovative practices in the field of parent participation. One school is a regular primary school in a commuter village and the other school a community school from Rotterdam. We present two instruments here, used by the schools to strengthen parent participation: a 'looking list' (in Dutch: 'kijklijst') and a 'guarantor plan'. In a later stage we will investigate the effectiveness of these instruments as well as the evaluation by teachers and parents.

The 'looking list'

The looking list has been developed by the school based on the vision that nurture and education are a common enterprise by school and parents. Parents know how the child develops at home and a teacher sees how a child acts and develops at school. Especially in the pedagogical area, the school looked for ways to exchange and combine this information. In this way the school can discuss with parents and stipulates how a child develops within and outside the school. The looking list focuses on three developmental components: 1) character of the child; 2) well-being and involvement of the child and 3) social skills. Moreover there is an open space where both parents and teacher can indicate points for discussion. Both parents and teacher fill in the looking list. The points which are filled in by parents and teacher and possible differences in answers form the basis for a 'looking list talk'. Such conversations aim mainly at well-being and involvement of the child. Because both teacher and parents can give their opinion about this, an open two-way and content-rich conversation can arise. A looking list conversation lasts between twenty and the thirty minutes. As a rule, the looking list is used every other year (in groups one, three, five and seven). In the intervening years, it will be checked if (large) differences in vision between parents and teacher develop. If that is the case, an extra looking list conversation will take place. For teachers, the use of the looking list means a higher time investment in preparation, implementation and possible follow up. The school states that this investment in time is certainly worth spending. Especially, because a better link between teachers and parents will be created and potential problems in the future are reduced strongly. Parents who used the looking list indicated that they were heard better and also had the feeling that they were understood better. In parent satisfaction surveys it appears that the school scores very high, even higher than the rural average. Especially the contact of parents with the teacher and school is appreciated highly. In this respect, the looking list proves to be very effective. Pupils are not directly involved in discussing the looking list.

The guarantor plan

In the second example, the guarantor plan, pupils are involved. It is a plan, developed by the community school, where parents, school and child make agreements with respect to the pedagogical climate. All parties make clear their reciprocal expectations and wishes and there is an agreement about working method to be used and individual arrangements. It is important that the expectations of both parents and school are described clearly. The guarantor plan offers the possibility of making agreements on developmental areas of the individual child. All three parties sign the agreement. By their signature, all parties speak out the intention to commit themselves to realising the described expectations and appointments. It is, however, no document which establishes legal rights. Through the guarantor plan possible miscommunication between parents and school will be prevented.

Table 1. Examples of expectations and arrangements in the guarantor plan

Parents	Child	School
We ensure primary life needs and offer a safe educational climate for our child	I come on time and commit myself to listen to the teacher	We are prepared to optimally develop the talents and possibilities of the child
We respect the main points and working methods of the school	I stick to the rules and appointments which exist within the school	We want to teach the children rules of life, social skills and standards and values
We are prepared to think actively with the school concerning the development of our child	I treat other children just the way I would like to be treated by other children	We inform the parents adequately and in time at problems on developmental areas
We know the school rules and agreements and want to ensure that our child respects them.	I commit myself to work seriously with the offered learning materials and to ask questions and indicate problems	We are prepared to search with parents for the best solution for each problem
If at home developments occur that impact the functioning of the child we will inform the school of this	I treat the school building and material with care	We want to cooperate positively with parents

Table 1 describes some examples of expectations and arrangements parent, child and school can make in a guarantor plan. The guarantor plan starts from a vision which puts the child in the middle and organises society (family, school, nursery, environment, and neighbourhood) around the child. Everyone has its own bit of responsibility for the child. The school has its cognitive and pedagogical responsibility. By means of the guarantor plan the school wants to align its pedagogical and didactic vision with that of the parents. Teachers must consider parents as a full partner. An important aspect is to achieve a feeling of solidarity rather than distance, indifference or competition between parties.

Concluding remarks

There are a lot of discrepancies between objectives of government, school and parents. Governments think about ideal parents helping to guard educational quality. Schools and teachers see parents as delivering preconditions for their own job: teaching. So they complain about parent for not feeding their children properly, for letting them get too tired to keep awake at school, for not learning them to behave properly. They think much less about their role in helping parents in reaching pedagogical objectives. Parents focus on the interests of their children, be it sometimes from a distance or with a lack of pedagogical competence and sometimes too close and aggressive. Parents have to make tough choices when deciding to be critical about school. Position and motivation

of parents can rise if schools and teachers learn to listen to parents. Children don't learn only at school. Teachers must not always take a role as 'expert'. Schools and teachers should have open pedagogical (and didactical) communication. They should be open and realistic about their limitations with regard to time, competences and problem dealing capacity. They should also be aware of not blaming the parents too easily. They rather should realise that raising a child in modern time is a difficult job, which could be done better in cooperation and shared responsibility. Schools should be clear about their own educational and pedagogical role, and about cooperation with parents. Schools and teachers can make this possible by stimulating active partnership. Parents should realize that their interest, commitment, participation and cooperation is necessary for a good development of their child. When needed, parent support, from teachers making house calls to pedagogical community work (De Winter 2005, should be available. That is not only a responsibility of the school, but also of local and national government that should take care of funding this.

However, we emphasised that this also requires different attitudes and competences of teachers. Teachers often see themselves primarily as instructors, organisers and guides of cognitive learning and development processes, although their tasks include other functions like pedagogue, organizer, innovator, external relations, partner of parents and member of a school team. It appears that teachers feel themselves more experienced and confident in didactic and pedagogical tasks than in the other functions (Ryckaert 2005). In handling emotions of parents, having a recognising attitude without avoiding disagreement, having a constructive conversation are examples where a teacher need other skills than in daily lessons. Schools analysed in the research contribute to this by working out explicit policies and instruments with regard to parent involvement, and by making it an explicit theme in professional development.

In teacher education the importance of good communication between school, teachers and parents should be stressed. A starting teacher must be sensitive to shared pedagogical responsibilities between teachers and parents and have the competence to act accordingly. In the long run, that could be more effective than short term solutions like giving teachers self defence courses against aggressive parents. Teacher education nowadays does not give much emphasis on the importance of good communication between schools, teachers and parents. Students only meet the parents in their practical periods and in many cases even not then.

We recommend that the growing amount of workplace learning in schools as part of teacher education curriculum could and should also be used to improve this. That implies that the quality of policies and practices on parent-teacher relations should be one important criterion in choosing suitable training schools. Or, that designing and performing effective relationships could and should be a common objective of school development in cooperation with teacher training colleges. This opens many interesting development issues about how, who and when this should be done. We trust that our research project contributes to more effectively addressing these problems.

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