

## Types of parents and school strategies aimed at the creation of effective partnerships

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In order to expand parental participation in the education of their children, teachers should be equipped with some basic and possibly new skills for communication and cooperation purposes. Schools host a very diverse population of pupils, and the purpose of the present study was therefore to attain a better understanding of what various groups of parents expect of education and the school in order to develop a framework for school strategies to involve different types of parents. The research included a review of the literature, consultation with three expert panels, a web survey of 500 school leaders, an interactive focus group, 20 case studies to identify promising practices and the identification of strategies to expand parental participation. The results showed parents in 'white' schools to support teachers during activities (*parents as supporters*). Non-minority parents and certainly those from higher social milieus were accustomed to having a say in school matters (*parents as politicians*). In schools with many disadvantaged pupils, in contrast, little or no attention was paid to having parents have a say in school matters. A bottleneck in 'white' schools was that parents do not have time to participate due to their work (*career parents*). A bottleneck in 'black' schools is that parents do not perceive themselves as qualified to participate (*absentee parents*). It is further shown that strategies which parallel the different types of parents can be identified for school teams to realize effective partnership relations.

### Introduction

Internationally, the notion of *partnership* is often used to refer to the significant cooperative relations between parents, schools and communities (Epstein, Sanders, Simons, Salinas, Jansorn & Van Voorhis, 2002). Partnership is construed as a process in which those involved aim to provide mutual support and attune their contributions to each other to the greatest extent possible in order to promote the learning, motivation and development of pupils (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The initiatives for a partnership must come from the school. Parents are generally interested but adopt a 'wait and see' attitude. The core elements in the development of a cooperative relationship between parents and school are: parental involvement and parental participation (Smit, Driessen, Sluiter & Brus, 2007). In the present paper, the results of a Dutch study conducted on the various types of parents and the manner in which the school can react to this diversity are reported on. More specifically, a typology established on the basis of not only the theoretical notions around parental involvement and parental participation but also the results of a large-scale empirical study of 500 primary schools and a number of case studies of so-called promising practices are presented.

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### Definitions of involvement and participation

In the literature, the notions of *parental involvement* and *parental participation* are often not clearly operationalized (Feuerstein, 2000). The description of 'parental involvement' has been expanded from participation of parents at school to include involvement of parents in the education of their children at home (Smit et al, 2007). Desforges (2003), for example, distinguishes two forms of parental involvement/ participation, namely 'spontaneous' versus 'planned.' Whereas the first is bottom-up, the second is more top-down and typically concerns interventions or programmes aimed to solve the problem of insufficient or no parental involvement.

Further differentiation of parental involvement/participation could take the following form: (1) home involvement: a. home discussion of—among other things—school activities; b. home supervision or, in other words, monitoring of the child; (2) school involvement: a. school communication or parent-school contact; b. participation of parents in, for instance, school activities or organizational matters.

For purposes of the present study, the concept of *parental involvement* was defined as the role of the parents in the support of their own child, both at home (e.g., reading out loud) and at school (e.g., discussion of marks with teacher). The concept of *parental participation* was defined as active participation of parents in school activities. With respect to the latter, a further distinction is made between non-institutionalized forms of parental participation (e.g., lending a helping hand) and institutionalized forms of parental participation (e.g., parents' council, advisory board or school administration membership).

### Objectives of involvement and participation

The objectives underlying optimalization of the relations between parents and school concern, in the case of *parental involvement*, the attunement and optimalization of how pupils are treated at home and at school (i.e., a pedagogical objective) and better preparation of pupils and parents (i.e., a preparatory objective) (Smit, Driessen, Slegers & Teelken, 2007). In the case of *parental participation*, the objectives concern the encouragement of parental contributions to the course of things at school (i.e., an organizational objective) and the decision-making of the school (i.e., a democratic objective or, in other words, political-social objective) (Smit, 2005).

### Effects of involvement and participation

Despite the fact that the relevant research results were found to strongly diverge as a consequence of conceptual differences, many of the results point to a positive relation between the *involvement* of parents and the school development of their child (Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2003). According to Desforges (2003), the most important factor is 'good parenting at home' with the following characteristics: the provision of a safe and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, the conduct of parent-child discussions, the functioning of parents as constructive role models who propagate the value of education and provide signs of high expectations for their children. The following elements are also of importance: the maintenance of contact with the school for the exchange of information, participation in school activities and the conduct of activities at the school and within the school administration (Carter, 2003). Carter points to the direct effects of parental involvement in addition to the more long-term effects.

Desforges (2003) nevertheless suggests that parental involvement works primarily indirectly by shaping the self-image of the child as learner and fostering high expectations; parental involvement also stimulates certain attitudes, values and aspirations which can function as 'pro-social' and 'pro-learning' aspects. Still other authors find a reversed direction of causality for parental involvement and pupil achievement: Involvement only takes place when the performance of the child is judged to be insufficient by the parents or the school and it thus concerns a reaction to poor achievement or negative behaviour on the part of the child (Driessen, 2003). Smit (2005) points to the positive but modest effects of parental involvement on other outcome measures such as the well-being of the child. Empirical evidence regarding the relation between parental involvement and the affective functioning of pupils at school is scarce, however. Existing instruments used to map the affective functioning of pupils at school have yet to be related to the degree of parental involvement (Smit & Driessen, 2007). Schools also tend to have fairly general and not very concrete objectives with regard to parental involvement. Furthermore, parental involvement does not have high priority in many schools and those policies actually in operation are not evaluated systematically (Epstein et al, 2002). Involvement of parents in schools does not, thus, appear to be an objective in and of itself.

The offering of opportunities for parents to *participate* in the education of their children has been found to exert a positive influence on the cognitive development and achievement of pupils (Boethel, 2004; Driessen & Smit, 2007; Epstein et al, 2002). However, a few studies show no effects of such opportunities (Mattingly, Prinslin, McKenzie, Rodriguez & Kayzar, 2002). Parental participation is also often considered one of the most important components or characteristics of effective schools (Driessen, Smit & Slegers, 2005). In addition to the positive effects of parental participation on the school achievement of children, positive effects on the social functioning of pupils have also been found in various studies. This involves aspects of the behaviour of pupils, their motivation, social competence, the relations between teachers and pupils, and the relations among the pupils themselves (Boethel, 2003; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jordan, Orozco & Averett, 2001).

#### *Variation in involvement and participation*

International research points to large differences in the manner in which and extent to which parents are involved in the education of their children. The differences have been found to be associated with, among other things, the social and ethnic background and thereby social-ethnic composition of the school population. The degree and form of involvement, according to Desforges (2003), are strongly influenced by social origin, educational background of the mother, material deprivation, the psycho-social health of the mother, growing up in a single-parent family and—but to a lesser extent—ethnicity. The opinions of the parents regarding their role and their level of trust in their ability to fulfil this role have also been found to be of critical importance (Symeou, 2001; Phtiaika, 2001). Kohl, Lengua and McMahon (2000) conclude on the basis of a comparison of 'black' and 'white' parents in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the USA that there are no differences for a number of aspects of parental involvement but definitely differences for a number of risk factors, such as parental education and single-parent family. The authors emphasize that the quality of the involvement is more important than the quantity. Driessen, Smit and Slegers (2005) conclude that the extent to which the child is open to parental involvement is the strongest predictor of parental involvement at home while parental involvement at school depends primarily on the extent to which teachers invite such involvement. Sheldon (2002) points to the importance of the size of the social networks of parents as an important predictor of parental involvement.

Dutch society has seen a major influx of a wide and very diverse set of migrant groups during the past decades. The groups differ with regard to culture, language and religion (Driessen, 2001; Smit & Driessen, 2007). And one of the tasks of Dutch education has been to take these differences into consideration although this is not always easy in practice (Klaassen, Smit, Driessen & De Vroom, 2005). Parental involvement and parental participation on the part of minority parents clearly do not equal the involvement and participation of non-minority parents. And various barriers appear to obstruct productive partnership in the case of minority parents (Joshi, Eberly & Konzal, 2005). Minority parents are often viewed as a single homogeneous group with traditional orientations for which a 'one size fits all' approach defined from a middle-class perspective is considered sufficient (Lopez, 2001). These minority parents assume that teachers do not have a high opinion of their educational support behaviour. They clearly experience the inadequate provision of information regarding the objectives and procedures of the school as a deficiency as they would like to receive more information on how they can better attune child-raising ideas from the school and home to each other. Moroccan parents consider avoidance of a criminal path for their children to be most important and would certainly like to speak to the school about this, but they report having the feeling that they are not taken seriously (Smit, 2005).

#### *The preparation of teachers*

Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider and Lopeze (1997) have pointed out that parental participation is a central goal of the American GOALS 2000 education law but that the preparation of teachers to fulfil this task falls short. Teachers need new knowledge (e.g., insights regarding advantages and barriers) and new skills (e.g., involvement, participation) in order to interact more effectively with parents. A framework for substantive areas should therefore encompass the following elements: (1) general parental involvement (e.g. information regarding the objectives of parental involvement, advantages, barriers, knowledge, skills, attitudes); (2) general knowledge of families and differences with regard to culture, child-raising, living situations; (3) two-way home-school communication; (4) involvement of parents in learning situations, also outside the school; (5) support of schools by parents both inside and outside the school; (6) support of families by the school; (7) families as agents of change with respect to particularly decision-making, policy development, curricula and programmes, training of parents and teachers, and so forth.

According to Shartrand et al., teachers should thus be equipped with new techniques, methods and skills related to communication and cooperation in order to expand parental participation.

### **The purpose of the present study**

Schools host a very diverse population of pupils. In the present study, we therefore attempted to do the following:

- gain a better understanding of what different groups of parents expect of their child's education and their child's school; and
- develop a framework for teacher/school strategies aimed at the involvement of various types of parents in the school.

### **Research methodology**

The research involved six distinct phases which built upon each other: (1) a preparatory review of the literature and consultation with three expert panels; (2) a web survey of school leaders; (3) in-depth case studies of cooperative variants and an examination of most promising practices; (4) the identification of strategies for communication and cooperation with different types of parents; (5) an focus group; and (6) analyses and final reporting.

Building on previous ITS research, we undertook a review of the literature in order to identify the different types of cooperative relations between parents and schools. In doing this, we concentrated on Dutch and international projects with a relation to the composition of the pupil (and parent) population of the school. At the same time, we approached three international expert panels within the domain of parent-school relations via a policy Delphi. The panels were the European Research Network About Parents and Education (ERNAPE); the Round Table on School, Family and Community Partnerships, which involves international researchers and policy-makers; and the Developing Intercultural Education through Cooperation between European Cities forum of policy workers from large cities. The panels were presented an e-mail questionnaire with open answer categories and, in the questionnaire, information was requested with regard to: the vision of the relation between parents and school, existing policy and—among other things—the impact of existing policy and bottlenecks encountered.

For the web survey of school leaders, 3000 primary school leaders were contacted via e-mail at the end of 2006 in order to gain insight into the different forms of cooperation between parents and school.

The request for participation produced a total of 504 fully completed questionnaires. When a few of the background characteristics of this sample were compared to those for the total population of primary schools in the Netherlands ( $N=6953$ ), the sample was found to clearly reflect the population with regard to: social-ethnic composition of the school, degree of urbanization, region of the country, school denomination and school size in terms of the number of pupils. In the questionnaire presented to the school leaders, the emphasis was on characteristics of the school organization, the vision of the school with respect to the relation between parents and school, existing policy and the impact of existing policy. The analyses of the survey results were aimed at primarily gaining a picture of the policies of primary schools with few or many disadvantaged pupils to optimize parental involvement and participation in the schools. In addition, the results provided the input for the subsequent case studies.

The aim of the case studies was, on the one hand, to gain more in-depth insight into the functioning of the different forms of cooperation identified in the web survey. On the other hand, the intention was to gather good examples of the parent-school relationship for use by schools which want to devote greater attention to the optimalization of this relationship as part of their policies. The selection of the schools occurred on the basis of the results of the web survey among the school leaders. In the case study interviews with the relevant school managements, the emphasis was on the characteristics of the school organization: The management's vision of the relation between the handling of parental involvement/participation and policy regarding the design of parent participation. In the interviews with the parents in the various representative bodies, the emphasis was on the functioning of the institutionalized parental participation (e.g., bottlenecks, points for improvement) and the strong and weak points of the parental participation models employed. In the list of topics for the teachers and list of topics for the 'average' parents, the emphasis was on their experiences with parental involvement/participation.

## **Results**

### *Parental involvement*

The results of the web survey of school leaders showed almost all of the schools with many minority disadvantaged pupils to have a vision of the relation between parents and school. For schools with many minority disadvantaged pupils, the most important objective appeared to

be improved preparation of the parents and teachers with an eye to the strengthening of parent-school relations and the school career of the pupil. In schools with many non-disadvantaged pupils and schools with many non-minority pupils, the organizational objective of having the parents contribute to the course of things at school appeared to be most important.

Schools attempt to promote the involvement of parents in the education of their children at home via the stimulation of diverse activities. In this connection, the stimulation of reading and reading aloud appeared to be most important. The minority parents from a lower socioeconomic milieu are also stimulated more when compared to the non-minority parents to play with their children, visit the library with their children and make sure that their children eat breakfast.

The results of the interviews with the parents in the case studies show that their own child-raising experiences, their religious beliefs and a traditional culture form the most important reference frameworks for the raising of their own children. The child-raising objectives of Muslim parents strongly depart from those of Dutch parents with respect to matters of religious belief and the instillation of norms and values. Uprooted from their own traditions, many Muslims tend to impose a strict regime for their children and create their own world within the—for them strange—Dutch environment. Limited or no mastery of the Dutch language further promotes such a stance.

The absence of an orientation towards Dutch society, however, also gives rise to all kinds of conflicts. Muslim parents state that teachers do not hold a very high opinion of their educational support behaviour and that they clearly miss being adequately informed of the goals and methods of the school by teachers. They would definitely like to receive information on how the child-raising ideas of the school and the home can be better attuned to each other. Moroccan parents consider keeping their children off the path to criminality to be critical, for example, and they would like to speak with the school about this but have the feeling that they are not taken seriously when they do this.

The majority of minority parents state that they are not adequately informed about the goals and methods of the school and that they are least satisfied with being able to talk about norms and values, the child-raising strategies of the school and the extent to which teachers devote attention to religious beliefs. School teams, conversely, hold the point of view that educational success depends on not only the school but also and primarily on a stimulating home environment.

Disadvantaged schools generally have a clearly structured and well-planned (support) approach to help parents see themselves as partners with their own contributions to be made to the raising and education of their children. Most of the minority parents are also encouraged to follow a language course when they do not display sufficient mastery of the Dutch language. Parental consultations have an important function for the communication between the school and passive parents in particular. In schools with no or almost no disadvantaged pupils, 'spontaneous' parental involvement is presupposed and a core set of parents is indeed often active. The parents' council is an important body for the coordination of parental activities. The school managements, school teams and parent councils generally work closely together.

#### *Parental participation*

The results of the survey of the school leaders show parents to almost always be given the space to participate in activities on the behalf of the school within the boundaries established by the school team. In particularly 'white' schools (i.e., schools with a majority of non-minority pupils with medium to higher educated parents), parents support teachers during activities. Teachers 'monitor' their educational tasks, and parents are 'allowed' to concern themselves with various implementation and organizational tasks. Schools generally impose very few requirements on parents for participation in school activities which do not involve contact with the pupils. In village schools with few disadvantaged pupils, the school is the centre of the community and the parents' council the motor behind many neighbourhood and village activities. In schools with virtually no disadvantaged pupils, the parents participate more frequently in class activities at school than in schools with more disadvantaged pupils.

Dutch parents are accustomed to having a say in school matters, and this certainly holds for parents from higher social milieus. Most Dutch parents have been raised to negotiate (*parents as politicians*). For minority parents, the encounter with the Dutch 'polder model' via their children often constitutes a culture shock. At schools with numerous disadvantaged children, there is little or no attention to formal parental involvement and the school teams are often clearly pleased when parental contact can simply be made with regard to common issues. Minority parents notice that their children have a say at school while they, themselves, receive little or no information in order to be able to think about, talk about or decide upon school policy. Minority parents are typically not represented in decision-making bodies or school administrations.

And minority parents are not satisfied across-the-board with the extent to which they can jointly decide upon the norms and values which the school conveys. The majority of the minority parents would like to receive more information on the prevailing norms and values.

According to the school leaders, the greatest bottleneck at 'white' schools is that 80% of the parents have no time to participate due to work (*career parents*). The largest bottlenecks at 'black' schools (i.e., schools with predominantly minority children of low-educated parents) are communication problems between the school team and parents, parents having insufficient insight into their child's education and judgement of the parents as incapable of participation (i.e., 65% of the parents do not have sufficient mastery of the Dutch language, 51% of the parents do not know how the Dutch system of education works and 47% of the parents consider themselves not qualified to participate in their child's school) (*absent parents*).

### Six types of parents

On the basis of the literature, we were able to derive a long list of possibly relevant characteristics of parents in relation to the school. On the basis of the data we collected here and consultation with a focus group, the list of characteristics was next condensed into six types

of parents or, in other words, the profiles of parents in terms of two key characteristics: the extent to which the parents extend to which the parents show formal versus informal participation in their child's school and education. The distinguished types are: the supporter, the absentee, the politician, the career-maker, the tormentor and the super parent.

### Types of parents and school strategies

In closing, a typology is presented with regard to types of parents and schools strategies aimed at the creation of effective partnerships. The starting assumption here is that an equal number of strategies on the part of school teams to realize effective parent-school relations can be distinguished for the six types of parents. The strategies are oriented towards the following core points: development of a vision of parental participation; expansion of the visibility and approachability of the school team via the creation of contact moments; attention to the concerns of parents; connection to what parents find interesting and have an affinity with; an eye for the quality of the communication between school and parents; stimulation of creativity and initiative; and giving parents time to learn something from the school team. See Table 1, Appendix.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Types of Parents and School Strategies**

<p><b>THE SUPPORTER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education: low/medium</li> <li>• Characteristics: satisfied and involved, prepared to help with practical matters, willing to work, an excellent helping hand, pleasant partner, active, available on demand, has sufficient time</li> <li>• Key words: helpful, nice, solid, friendly, creative, sympathetic, joint thinker, harmonious, supportive, enlightening, willing to serve, naïve, well-adjusted</li> <li>• Suited for: lending a helping hand, parent committees</li> <li>• Not suited for: school advisory board or school board without first following one or more training courses</li> <li>• How to approach: appeal to sense of solidarity, existence of an alliance, partnership with shared goals</li> </ul>	<p><b>THE ABSENTEE</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education: low/medium</li> <li>• Characteristics: does not consider him/herself suited to make a contribution, may only participate when asked explicitly, moderately dissatisfied, uninvolved. School has no priority (anymore), leaves choice of school up to chance, impossible to contact, introverted, unapproachable</li> <li>• Key words: loner, quitter, has (almost) no contact with other parents, no friendship relations with the school, uncommunicative, wrestles with cultural gap due to different cultural background</li> <li>• Suited for: school support network, can serve as a bridge to other absentee parents or group of parents</li> <li>• Not suited for: school advisory board, school board, or parent committees without first following one or more training courses</li> <li>• How to approach: look for contact, show interest, enter to discussion of cultural background and children, show empathy, see where you can help, win trust</li> </ul>
<p><b>THE POLITICIAN</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education: medium/high</li> <li>• Characteristics: desire to help make decisions, exert influence, and be involved; satisfied as long as parent can participate in meetings; critical consumer; extroverted; pays attention to 'democratic' quality of the choice of school</li> <li>• Key words: critical, precise, optimistic, desire to inspire, persuasive</li> <li>• Suited for: school advisory board, school board</li> <li>• Not suited for: actual conduct of helping-hand services</li> <li>• How to approach: appeal to desire to influence school policy, be heard, and hear oneself speak; in order to fully utilize the capacities of this parent, ask him/her to participate on the behalf of parents in the school advisory board or school board</li> </ul>	<p><b>THE CAREER-MAKER</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education: medium/high</li> <li>• Characteristics: places responsibility for child raising, child care, and education on the school; one-stop-shopping approach; satisfied as long as school takes on all tasks; critical with regard to choice of school; has attitude of 'school is for the parents' and sees teachers as an extension of parents</li> <li>• Key words: aloof, "no news is good news", businesslike, basically all take and no give</li> <li>• Suited for: school advisory board or school board, provided this fits the individual's career prospects</li> <li>• Not suited for: time consuming helping-hand services</li> <li>• How to approach: enter into conversation about work, career, education: mention the functions of school advisory board and school board, interesting people participating in these, and what such participation could mean for career</li> </ul>
<p><b>THE TORMENTOR</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education: high</li> <li>• Characteristics: feel offended and misunderstood as a result of the school's attitude and own educational experiences; denounces errors on the part of the school as a critical consumer, is an unguided missile for the school team; is only satisfied when the school cringes and takes responsibility for suboptimal functioning</li> <li>• Key words: know-it-all, cold, insensitive, aggressive, conflictual, fighter, theatrical, impatient</li> <li>• Suited for: school advisory board, school board</li> <li>• Not suited for: helping-hand activities, parent committees</li> <li>• How to approach: show real interest in the motives of this parent and his or her (new) ideas regarding child raising and education; be professional but see that the parent remains comfortable; keep your goals in mind; be well-prepared; pose good questions; send a thank you note after meeting; take notes on the conversation; keep the line of communication open</li> </ul>	<p><b>THE SUPER PARENT</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education: high</li> <li>• Characteristics: feels responsible for child raising and education together with the school; is prepared to support the school alongside a busy job; is willing to invest in the school relation; thinks critically along with the school; contributes good ideas; is prepared to utilize own networks; is satisfied when the school does its best for the performance and well-being of own child and other students</li> <li>• Key words: loyal, ambitious, strengthener, innovative, communicative, inspiring, walking encyclopedia, grows</li> <li>• Suited for: thinking about problems, finding solutions, handling crises, acquisition of funds, school board (chair)</li> <li>• Not suited for: supportive school network</li> <li>• How to approach: show a warm interest in the opinions and expectations of the parent with regard to child raising and education, gauge the need for (greater) involvement, be open to ideas of this parent</li> </ul>