

# Parental/community involvement and behaviour problems in Dutch secondary schools

*Kees van der Wolf, Ronald Lippens, Pauline Huizenga*

## **Introduction**

In newspaper articles, but also in magazines and through other media, we are often confronted with alarming reports about misconduct by youngsters. Especially in secondary education, but lately also in primary education, rule-breaking and negative behaviour are a source of great concern. According to some reports 25% of the students are in serious trouble. Schools of which the student population contains a large proportion of migrant students, have particularly been focused on in reports about these negative tendencies. As the problems of urban schools in this area are greater, much state money goes to the big cities. Teachers, in particular, have pointed at the increase of behavioural problems as an important source of stress. Problematical student behaviour is supposed to play a role both in teacher burn out and in the lack of prestige of a career in education. The problems are supposed to have reached the most serious proportions in the lower forms of secondary education (pre-vocational and junior general education). Schools often make a great effort to influence the behaviour of their students in a positive way: they set behavioural rules, take disciplinary measures, establish and invest in systems of counselling and guidance. Sometimes, as in the example mentioned above, they institute projects in which they collaborate with the police to fight vandalism and youth criminality.

Parental perceptions of student behaviour are sometimes reported as even more negative than those of teachers (Veugelers & De Kat, 1998).

Students in secondary education, too, are reported (Olweus, 1989; Van Hattum, 1997; Veugelers & De Kat, 1998) to have a negative view on the behaviour of and the contacts with their peers. Schuurman's study (1984) gives a more positive impression of students' attitude towards schools. This raises the question to what extent the assessment of the seriousness of the behavioural problems of youngsters should be ascribed to different ways in which the stakeholders are confronted with the problem. Another question that could possibly be relevant is the following. To what extent does the perception of the school's communication with parents and community influence or contribute to the perceptions of student misconduct? It is our hypothesis that schools that are perceived by the stakeholders as being open and welcoming want to share their resources and their information not only with their students, but also with the parents and the surrounding community. This means that they are open to outside influences, that they develop skills in communicating and interacting with parents and other adults interested or involved in the school. This could mean that such a school has more varied contacts, is able to acquire a more extensive network for discussions on how to deal with problems. It could also mean that such a school makes use of its varied contacts for student learning, student activities or in other ways<sup>1</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'School learning needs to build on day-to-day learning to enable students to identify with what goes on in school, and to help the school draw on the resources in society,' says Per Daily in his article 'Can Schools Learn?'

It might be supposed that more involvement from parents and better information to parents could lead to a greater awareness by parents of the rules of behaviour at school and promote better attuning between home rules and school rules. It could also increase the parents' insight in what the school expects from them and in the ways in which they themselves can contribute to or support their child functioning well at school. Especially for migrant parents, who may have little or no experience with and may be unaware of many aspects of the Dutch educational system and the values and behaviour expected there, this could be a factor that should not be neglected. Also, parent and community involvement in schools may be a signal to youngsters that both parents and community value the educational and the pedagogical role of the school and thereby emphasise the importance of a good performance in both areas.

That parents and teachers may hold very different perceptions about their mutual communication about student misconduct is supported by Langdon's Fourth Phi Delta Kappan Poll of Teachers Attitudes, cited in the NASSP Bulletin by Krajewski et al (1998). Teachers reportedly felt that, if they told parents their child is not working hard enough at schoolwork, the parent would probably take their side (53%), but, if they told parents their child was misbehaving, they felt that parents would be unlikely to take their side (41%), even though parents reported that they would do so. In both cases, not working hard enough and misconduct, the parent's idea of support to the teacher seemed to be very high (70% and 57%, respectively). The percentages given, indicate a great variance in perceptions between teachers and parents.

In this paper the following questions will be explored, using data gathered by the Seneca Foundation:

1. Do teachers, parents and students hold different perceptions concerning student behaviour?
2. Is there a relationship between the extent to which teachers, parents and students feel that the school succeeds in involving the parents (and the surrounding community) and their respective perceptions of student behaviour?
3. Is there a relationship between the proportion of migrant students in the school population and the perceptions of student behaviour? Is there a connection with the perceived involvement of parents and community in school and, if so, in what way?

#### **Method**

The subjects in the present study belong to a group of 20.677 individuals (teachers, students and parents) from whom CASE/IMS data has been collected since 1993. The data have been collected from 267 primary, secondary and special schools, all over the Netherlands. The sample in the present study consists of 3.909 secondary school subjects. To explore the relationship between parent involvement and student behaviour, data were used of three different samples. The first sample consisted of 898 secondary school teachers, the second sample of 1968 secondary school students and, the third sample of 1043 parents of secondary school students. Overall, 47.3% of the schools reported to have 5% or less migrant students, 43.0% reported to have more than 5% and less than, 20% and 9.7% reported to have more than 20% migrant students in their schools.

Most respondents (79.7%) were connected to schools located in cities of moderate size (from 25.000 to 150.000 residents).

#### **Research instrument**

The instrument used to collect data in the schools, CASE/IMS, is of American origin, and was later adapted for use in Dutch primary, secondary and

special schools, by the Seneca Foundation. The instrument was developed by a task group employed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) between 1982 and 1991. Beside a school principal questionnaire, satisfaction scales and various other report forms, it contains identical school climate questionnaires for teachers and parents and for students in secondary school. The climate questionnaires used in this study measure the shared perceptions of the groups involved on student behaviour, the relationship between students and parent and community involvement with the school. Thus, the respondents are used as informants. In the survey different groups in a school are asked what **most people** think about aspects of the school.

### Results

Separate correlation analysis on the kind of respondent and the various migrant school population categories show a significant association between parent and community involvement and behaviour problems in all cases. Because of the large sample size, the significance level was set more stringently at 0.001 to guard against Type 1 errors.

To be more specific, a perceived higher parent and community involvement is related to better student behaviour adjustment, and perceived student relationships. These associations were found to be significant for teachers, students, parents, and for the different migrant populations in schools.

Because it could be expected that the relation between parental involvement and both outcome variables would vary as a function of the type of respondent, and the composition of the migrant population in schools a systematic exploration took place of the interaction effects.

To clear up these effects of the relationship between involvement of parents and behavioural adjustment in school a multivariate analysis of

variance (MANOVA) was carried out.

Respondents were divided into a low and a high involvement category based on their scores on the Parent Involvement scale. The mean of the scale was used as cut-off point. Because of dealing with unequal population sizes, Method 2 (Overall & Spiegel, 1969) was used to analyse the relation between perceived parent involvement and student school adjustment. In Method 2 a hierarchy of testing effects is imposed where main effects are adjusted for each other and for covariates, while interaction terms are adjusted for main effects, for covariates, and for same- or lower level interactions.

A three-way multiple analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on both outcome variables (student behaviour and student relationships), with parent involvement (low versus high involvement), respondent (teacher, student and parent), and migrant population (3 categories) as the independent variables. Given the primary interest in perceived parent involvement and the potential effect of migrant school population, the main effects of respondent, migrant school population and parent/community involvement, and the interaction effects of respondent by parent involvement, migrant school population by parent involvement, and respondent by migrant school population by parent involvement were included.

The results of the multivariate and univariate analysis of variance are displayed in table 3.

The means and standard deviations for both dependent variables (perceived student behaviour and perceived student relationships), for each of the various subgroups distinguished here were also calculated.

Using Wilks' Lambda criterion, MANOVA showed significant overall main effects of the factor respondent, ( $F = 7.63$ ,  $df = 4,7780$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), the number of migrant students in school ( $F = 9.59$ ,  $df = 4,7780$ ,  $p < .0001$ ), and parent

involvement ( $F = 65.86$ ,  $df = 2,3890$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Furthermore, a significant overall marginal interaction effect of respondent and parent involvement ( $F = 3.37$ ,  $df = 4,7780$ ,  $p < .01$ ) was found.

Additional univariate ANOVA's revealed that the main effect of the kind of respondent only is significant on perceived student behaviour ( $F = 15.12$ ,  $df = 2,3891$ ). Tukey HSD post hoc tests show that teachers perceive student behaviour more positive in comparison to students (mean difference = .21,  $p < .0001$ ), and parents perceive student behaviour more positive than students (mean difference = .18,  $p < .0001$ ). No significant effect was found between teachers and parents on perceived student behaviour.

On the main effect of migrant school population only a significant main effect has been found on perceived student relationships ( $F = 18.43$ ,  $df = 2,3891$ ,  $p < .0001$ ). Participants who are involved in schools with more than 20% migrant students perceive significant (though marginal) less positive student relationships compared to participants who are involved in schools with more than 5% and less than 20% migrant students (mean difference = -.12,  $p < .01$ ), and participants who are involved in school with less than 5% migrant students (mean difference = -.10,  $p < .05$ ). No difference was found between the 5% category and the 5-20% migrant students category.

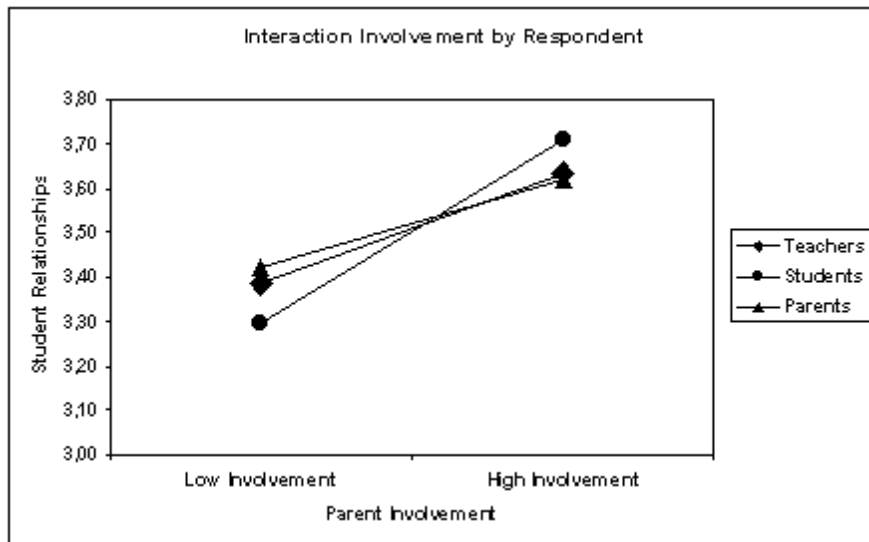
The main effect of parent involvement was significant on both perceived student behaviour ( $F = 57.67$ ,  $df = 1,3891$ ) and perceived student relationships ( $F = 115.02$ ,  $df = 1,3891$ ). These

results show, as expected, that high parental involvement is associated both with a better perception of student behaviour and of student relationships compared to low parental involvement.

A significant respondent by parent involvement interaction effect only on perceived student relationships ( $F = 5.60$ ,  $df = 2,3891$ ,  $p < .005$ ) was found. Figure 1 displays the mean scores on perceived student behaviour sorted out by respondents and parent involvement.

Additional analyses indicated that the effect of parent involvement on student relationships differs between teachers, students, and parents. They showed that there is a significant difference ( $F = 5.78$ ,  $df = 2,1842$ ,  $p < .003$ ) between respondents who perceive a low parental involvement. This effect is mainly due to students. Students in the low parent/community involvement category show a significant lower perceived student relationship score (mean = 3.30) compared to teachers (mean = 3.39; mean difference = -.09,  $p < .05$ ) and parents (mean = 3.42; mean difference = -.12,  $p < .01$ ).

On the other hand, a significant difference was found between students, teachers, and parents ( $F = 5.22$ ,  $df = 2,2061$ ,  $p < .005$ ) who perceive a high parental involvement. This effect is also mainly due to students who show a significant higher perceived student relationship score (mean = 3.71) in comparison to parents (mean = 3.62; mean difference = .09,  $p < .007$ ). No difference was found between students and teachers, or teachers and parents.



### Discussion

Some supplementary comments can be made. Once again support has been found for the proposition that an effective mutually supportive 'mesh' between home, community and school has several benefits.

Regarding the first research question, in general, we notice that teachers and parents are more positive about student behaviour than are the students themselves. Teachers often underestimate the occurrence of behavioural problems in schools, whereas parents don't have enough information at their disposal (Olweus, 1989; Veugelers & De Kat, 1998).

This denial of the existence of behavioural problems can be damaging to vulnerable children, who need teacher support to overcome problems like bullying or ignoring by classroom-mates. They are dependent on teachers' active diplomacy in the classroom. Van Hattum's research (1997) established that teachers don't perceive bullying in their classrooms as a serious problem, even though, in general, they consider it as damaging for pupils. The research assumes that the feeling of being unable to influence the

situation makes teachers 'believe' that bullying is not such a problem.

As to student relationships, they are of course of greatest importance to students themselves: they are faced with them all day, in contrast to teachers, who (in secondary schools) meet students only for some hours a week. Parents are even further removed from school life and children don't tell them everything about their school experiences.

Arriving at the second research question: students' perceptions of reciprocal relations are significantly related to parent and community involvement, whereas this does not apply to parents and teachers. A similar indirect relationship of parent involvement as perceived by students is reported by Keith and Keith (1993), this time on students' achievement. Apparently, perceived parental and community involvement has a positive influence both on youngsters' behaviour and their academic achievement. It could be worthwhile to investigate this relationship in further research. Obviously students profit from family/community oriented and 'open schools'. Due to the design, it is only possible to speak of *associations* and

*relationships*, so we are not certain about the direction of the mentioned relationship. All things considered, an alternative explanation could be that active and supportive parents and communities make teachers feel esteemed, which, in turn, motivates them to propagate a positive school 'ethos', that is beneficial to student relations and behaviour. Possibly this positive reinforcement by parents and community could counteract feelings of powerlessness and stress. With regard to the third research question it is important to notice that in schools with more than 20% migrants the perception of the relationship between students is less positive. Dutch research (Teunissen & Golhof, 1989<sup>2</sup>) has shown that (at classroom level) the climate deteriorates when the proportion of migrant children is raised up to 40%. One explanation could be that 'Dutch naturalness' disappears and teachers have to

accommodate to the changed circumstances. This brings about uncertainty, both at teacher and student level. When the proportion reaches about 70% it was found that problems decrease, because migrant students find themselves acknowledged and their parents tend to negotiate more on school-policy. We can not illustrate this phenomenon with our data, because our secondary school sample does not contain enough schools with a very high percentage of migrant students.

We had expected that, if schools managed to involve migrant parents/communities, the effect on behaviour and student relations would be positive, but this assumption is not supported in this research. Again, maybe this can be attributed to the rather small number of pupils in schools with a larger proportion of migrant children (378).

## References

- Dalin, P. (1996), *Can Schools Learn? Preparing for the 21st Century*, NASSP Bulletin, (80), 576, January 1996, 9-15.
- Hattum, M.J.C. van (1997), *Pesten (Bullying)*. Academisch Proefschrift. Universiteit van Amsterdam.
- Keith, P.B. & Keith, T.Z. (1993), *Does Parental Involvement Influence the Academic Achievement of American Middle School Youth?* In: F. Smit, W. van Esch & H.J. Walberg (Eds.) *Parental Involvement in Education*, 205-209. Nijmegen: Institute for Applied Social Sciences.
- Krajewski, B., Denhem Martinek, P. & Polka, B. (1998), *Designing Creative Discipline: Tough, But Well Worth It*. NASSP Bulletin, 82 (596), March 1998, 7.
- Olweus, D. (1989), *Bully/victim problems among schoolchildren: basic facts and effects of a school based intervention program*. In D. Petler & K.H. Rubin (eds.), *The development and treatment of childhood aggression*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Overall, J.E. & Spiegel, D.K. (1969), *Concerning least squares analysis of experimental data*. Psychological Bulletin, 72 (5), 311-322.
- Schuurman, M.I.M. (1984), *Scholieren over onderwijs: verslag van een studie naar houdingen, percepties en welbevinden van leerlingen in het voortgezet onderwijs*. Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor Praeventieve Gezondheidszorg TNO.
- Teunissen, F. & Golhof, A (1989<sup>2</sup>), *Etnische minderheden en speciaal onderwijs*. In K. Doornbos & L.M. Stevens *De groei van het speciaal onderwijs, Deel A*, 166-179. 's-Gravenhage: SDU.
- Veugelers, W. & Kat, E. de (1998), *Opvoeden in het voortgezet onderwijs*. Assen: Van Gorcum.