

Research on the relationship between migrant parents and primary schools

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Introduction

This research on the relationship between migrant parents and primary schools consists of three parts. Part I involves 176 parents from various ethnic groups (Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese and Cape Verdian). It analysed what these parents expect of schools and what kind of parents-school relationship they wanted¹. The second part of the research analysed what 30 Rotterdam primary schools (which fall under the Urban Education Policy on Disadvantage) are doing to improve the relationship between school and migrant parents and how they see this relationship². Part III comprises of project supervision at two primary schools. The aim of this experiment is to analyse the feasibility of developing a model on parents-school relationship in which there is a balance between the efforts of the parents and those of the school. This model would include explicit, goal-oriented strategies for improving parents-school relationship.

The research as a whole must identify possibilities for improving parents-school relationship. In our view school, as professional partner, is the initiator in this, schools must demonstrate supportive behaviour towards parents so that parents behave in an educationally-supportive way towards the school.

Interview-structure

In parts I and II of the research, information was collected with the help of interviews. We used an interview-structure with open and closed questions as a basis for talks. Open questions enable the respondent to talk about a particular experience or give an account of something. An advantage of such questions is that they are less

likely to prompt socially-desirable answers as the respondent has to tell his/her own story. Open questions also provide the opportunity to give examples. The questions were formulated in such a way that the sum of the answers provide an informative picture of the respondent's opinions. It is not important to answer each individual question; the point is that every question may prompt recipients to talk about their experiences. There are also a number of closed questions to collect more systematic information.

Interview structure for parents

In the first part of the interview the parents were asked open questions whilst the second, closed part consisted of statements about activities the primary school could undertake to meet with parents' wishes and hence to increase their involvement. Statement by statement parents were asked to give their opinion on the importance of these activities.

Lastly, parents were asked basic information about themselves: sex, ethnicity, level of education and the number of children at the primary school.

Interview-structure for schools

The aim of the first ten questions in part one, the open part was to ascertain how the schools see the parents-school relationship, what they have undertaken to improve the relationship with parents and why they endeavour to achieve a good relationship with parents (what was the objective). The first group of questions was as follows.

The second cluster of questions in the open part of the interview-structure was designed to ascertain what schools understand by 'educationally-supportive behaviour' of parents and how they can try to encourage this behaviour.

The closed part was made up of 29 statements. These were derived from the research on the parents and reflect the starting points on which the research was based and the empirical findings of the research: an image of how the parents would like the school and the relationship between parents and school to be. Schools were asked to evaluate the importance of each statement.

Outcome of the research

Part I: the parents

A basic premise of the research was that all parents were involved with their own children and hence, in principle, with their children's school. 'Involvement', however, is not the same as 'participation'. Whereas participation is easily discernible to the school, involvement is far less tangible.

To improve the relationship between parents and school it is necessary for schools to recognize and acknowledge the involvement of parents. This would be facilitated by schools providing suitable opportunities for parents to demonstrate their involvement. We feel that schools should:

- create an environment that is inviting to parents
- instigate appropriate communication channels for parents.

When both partners, parents and school, are aware of each other's good intentions and efforts, the basis for co-operation on bringing up and educating children is created. In other words, schools must demonstrate supportive behaviour towards parents so that parents behave in an educationally-supportive way towards the school. However, it is not easy for schools with pupils from a multitude of ethnic backgrounds to gauge the tone of the school environment and

communication channels appropriately. The research endeavoured to clarify these points and to make recommendations, both in general and for specific ethnic groups.

The most important elements of a school environment that is inviting to parents are:

- the care for children
- making this care visible and understandable
- accepting parents as full discussion partners
- making culturally-determined assumptions explicit
- making use of parents' expertise
- encouraging education and training of parents.

The most important communication channels named by the parents and to a lesser extent the link between communication channels and discussion topics were:

- more time for individual, personal talks about their own child by
 - * extending the so-called 10-minute chats and/or
 - * home visits and/or
 - * the introduction of a 'school surgery' which is well publicized and/or
 - * the conscious utilization of 'fetch and take' contacts
- less general parents' evenings and more ethnic-homogenous group meetings, possibly open to women only, where
 - * parents can talk to each other about their own ideas and views
 - * the group's own language can be spoken
 - * information can be given on the organization of education (including videos, cassettes and projects)
- possibly expanding, in co-operation with other organizations, the group meetings in the direction of a course or training in the field of
 - * the Dutch education system
 - * education-supportive behaviour at school and in particular at home
 - * the Dutch language.

Part II: the schools

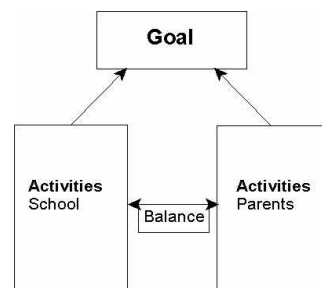
The schools that participated in the research clearly put a great deal of effort into improving the relationship with parents and employ a whole range of strategies to improve school environment and communication channels.

Schools do not, however, have a clear view of exactly what they are trying to achieve with parent-oriented activities. A great deal is done but objectives are lacking. This applies both to individual strategies and activities and to the general framework of activities as a whole. Our conclusion is that the increase in parental involvement in the schools is mainly due to efforts of parents. All kinds of activities (courses on education and bringing up children, home-intervention programmes) are principally directed at stimulating education-supportive behaviour by parents. Far less progress has been made from the other point of view, namely the involvement of school with parents and adapting 'school culture' to parent population. Or, in our terminology, schools expect education-supportive behaviour of parents but are themselves not yet sufficiently supportive to parents. The efforts of schools need to focus more on adapting school to parent population and to look for other ways of giving school life a form and content that parents can recognize and respect. These findings have led to part III of the research being set up.

Part III: balance and goals

Part III consists of project supervision at two primary schools. The aim of this experiment is to analyse the feasibility of developing a model on parents-school relationship in which there is a balance between efforts of parents and those of schools. This model would include explicit, goal-oriented strategies for improving parents-school relationship.

This is a figure of the empty model:



The experiment should result in a completed model for the project-schools and a report of experiences c.q. process of the experiment in those schools, in view of transfer to other schools.

Notes

- 1 Veen, A and M. van Erp (1995) *Stappen op weg naar onderwijsondersteuning. Deel I allochtone ouders in Rotterdam over de relatie tussen ouders en basisschool.* (Steps towards educational support. Part I: migrant parents in Rotterdam on the relationship between parents and primary schools.) Amsterdam/Rotterdam: SCO-Kohnstamm Instituut/Fonds Achterstandsbestrijding Rotterdam.
- 2 Veen, A. and M. van Erp (1997). *Stappen op weg naar onderwijsondersteuning. Deel II: basisscholen in Rotterdam over de relatie met de ouders.* (Steps towards educational support. Part II: primary schools in Rotterdam on the relationship with parents.) Amsterdam/Rotterdam: SCO-Kohnstamm Instituut/Dienst Stedelijk Onderwijs Rotterdam.

