

Culture differences in education: implications for parental involvement and educational policies

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Parental involvement is one topic in an expanding list of components that research and practice suggested would improve schools and increase students' success (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). As a consequence, more and more, the importance of a fruitful co-operation between schools, the local community and the parents for children's development is emphasized (Smit, Moerel & Slegers, 1999).

In the Handbook of the Sociology of Education 2000, Epstein and Sanders discuss a theory in which they state that three contexts - home, school, and community - act as overlapping spheres of influence on children. Parental involvement is seen as an important factor for stimulating a certain degree of congruence between school, home and community. Congruence between these three spheres of influence is said to be of importance for children's development (Laosa, 1988).

In this paper, we will focus on the relationship between parents and schools. We will address issues of culture differences between parents (especially minority parents) and implications of these differences for parents' educational attitudes, which may lead to different types of parental involvement.

As will be shown, current approaches of parental involvement contain some assumptions for parent-school relations. One of these assumptions is that parents and schools should act as partners in education. In this paper, we will question this assumption. Especially parents of minority students see school more as experts than as

partners. We will argue that insight in parents' cultural background is needed for educational policies on parental involvement. First we will present Epstein's commonly used typology of parental involvement in order to present a frame of reference for discussing culture differences in education in the context of parental involvement.

Epstein's typology of parental involvement

The results of many studies and activities in schools, in districts, and in states contributed to the development of a framework of six major types of involvement that fall within the overlapping spheres of influence theory (cf. Epstein, 1992; 1995). Epstein (1992) has formulated a popular framework of six major types of involvement in a family/school partnership.

Type 1: *Basic Obligations of Families*. Families are responsible for providing for children's health and safety, developing parenting skills and child-rearing approaches that prepare children for school and that maintain healthy child development across grades, and building positive home conditions that support learning and behavior throughout the school years. Schools help families develop the knowledge and skills they need to understand their children at each grade level through workshops at the school or in other locations and in other forms of parent education, training, and information giving.

Type 2: *Basic Obligations of Schools*. The schools are responsible for communicating with

families about school programs and children's progress. Communications include the notices, phone calls, visits, report cards, and conferences with parents that most schools provide. Other innovative communications include information to help families choose or change schools and to help families help students select curricula, courses, special programs and activities, and other opportunities at each grade level. Schools vary in the forms and frequency of communications and greatly affect whether the information sent home can be understood by all families. Schools strengthen partnerships by encouraging two-way communication.

Type 3: Involvement at School. Parents and other volunteers who assist teachers, administrators, and children are involved in classrooms or in other areas of the school, as are families who come to school to support student performances, sports, or other events. Schools improve and vary schedules so that more families are able to participate as volunteers and as audiences. Schools recruit and train volunteers so that they are helpful to teachers, students, and school improvement efforts at school and in other locations.

Type 4: Involvement in Learning Activities at Home. Teachers request and guide parents to monitor and assist their own children at home. Teachers assist parents in how to interact with their children at home on learning activities that are coordinated with the children's classwork or that advance or enrich learning. Schools enable families to understand how to help their children at home by providing information on academic and other skills required of students to pass each grade, with directions on how to monitor, discuss, and help with homework and practice and reinforce needed skills.

Type 5: Involvement in Decision Making, Governance, and Advocacy. Parents and others in the community serve in participator roles in the PTA/PTO, Advisory Councils, Chapter 1

programs, school site management teams, or other committees or school groups. Parents also may become activists in independent advocacy groups in the community. Schools assist by training parents to be leaders and representatives in decision-making skills and how to communicate with all parents they represent, by including parents as true, not token, contributors to school decisions and by providing information to community advocacy groups so that they may knowledgeably address issues of school improvement.

Type 6: Collaboration with Community Organizations. Schools collaborate with agencies, businesses, cultural organizations, and other groups to share responsibility for children's education and future success. Collaboration includes school programs that provide or coordinate children's and families' access to community and support services, such as before- and after-school care, health services, cultural events, and other programs. Schools vary in how much they know about and draw on community resources to enhance and enrich the curriculum and other student experiences. Schools assist families with information on community resources that can help strengthen home conditions and assist children's learning and development.

Four of the six Epstein categories are things that the families do, or are responsible for, either at home or at school. The two 'at home' types (Types 1 and 4) concentrate on the child's basic needs, creation of a positive environment, parent-initiated learning activities and child-initiated requests for help. Types 3 and 5, 'Support for School Programs and Activities' and 'Decision Making, Governance, and Advocacy' are the two 'at-school' categories. Type 2, 'The Basic Obligations of Schools,' is one of two school roles, and this type deals primarily with communications. The other school role, 'Collaborations and Exchanges with the Community,' refers to the partnership between

the school and the community. Despite a varying degree of role division concerning certain types of involvement (family, community or schools), a strong notion of congruency between these three spheres is assumed for optimal parental involvement. Furthermore, it is often assumed that parental involvement can improve school and students' learning, when parents and schools act effectively as partners in education. So, improving the nature and quality of the relationship between parents and schools is often considered an important factor to improve schools as well as children's development. This assumption implies that parents are willing to become partners in education and get involved in schools.

Sociocultural differences in parental involvement

Research shows that parents from lower classes and from ethnic minorities tend to be less involved in their child's education (Lopez 2001; Chavkin, 1993). As a headteacher of a school

with almost 100% ethnic minority pupils put it: 'This is an integral part of these parents' culture where there is a strict division between responsibilities: the family is the responsibility of the parents, the school of the teachers, and the street of the police' (Driessen & Valkenberg, 2000). This is, of course, a very generalistic view.

In a large-scale study by Driessen (2002) nearly 9000 parents of children at more than 600 Dutch schools answered a number of questions regarding their involvement. In Table 1 the answers are presented broken down by ethnic group. In the Netherlands some 15% of the pupils in primary education are of foreign descent. In the big cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague and Utrecht, however, more than half of the pupils are ethnic minorities, mainly Turks, Surinamese, Moroccans and Antilleans. The questions refer to Basic Obligations of Schools (Type 2) and Involvement in Learning Activities at Home (Type 4) as types of parental involvement.

Table 1 - Differences in parental involvement by ethnic group (in %)

| | ethnic group | | | | total | Eta | p |
|---|--------------|--------------------------|---------|----------|-------|-----|------|
| | Dutch | Surinamese/ Antillean | Turkish | Moroccan | | | |
| % frequently help with homework from mother | 50 | 51 | 23 | 15 | 37 | .33 | .000 |
| % frequently help with homework from father | 22 | 31 | 27 | 11 | 22 | .17 | .009 |
| % always attend parent meetings | 73 | 67 | 50 | 49 | 60 | .21 | .000 |
| % talk with teacher more than twice a year | 26 | 38 | 42 | 31 | 34 | .13 | .001 |
| % talk about school every day | 82 | 74 | 51 | 51 | 66 | .29 | .000 |
| % long schooling important | 29 | 63 | 62 | 68 | 55 | .31 | .000 |
| % school-appropriate behavior important | 35 | 66 | 73 | 74 | 62 | .33 | .000 |

The table shows considerable differences among the four groups. With regard to helping the children with their homework, this is much more

often done by Dutch parents than by minority parents. The percentage Turkish and Moroccan parents who always attend parental meetings is

much lower than the percentages for the Dutch and Surinamese or Antillean parents. With respect to contact with the teacher, the differences among the four ethnic groups are rather small. With respect to talking about school, however, differences are again observed. This occurs considerably less in the Turkish and Moroccan families than in the other families. The findings with regard to the importance attached to attending school as long as possible are quite noteworthy: While the three minority groups virtually do not differ in this respect, the Dutch parents score particularly low. Also with regard to the importance attached by parents to school-appropriate behavior ('conformity'), no great differences were observed among the three minority groups: They all consider school-appropriate behavior to be quite important. Dutch parents, in contrast, attach considerably less importance to such behavior.

A number of reasons can be given for these differences. First of all, many of the Turkish and Moroccan parents have little or no education. Most of them came from rural areas where there often were no schools or schooling was not considered to be important. In some instances schooling was seen as something which was imposed by the central government and therefore was viewed with distrust. In addition, given their occupations (mostly small farmers), schooling was not seen as a means of social mobility (Coenen, 2001). For many of them this changed after they had migrated to the Netherlands and got low-paid jobs and had to perform dirty and unskilled work. Minority parents wanted their children to have a better life than they had. They all wanted them to become doctors and lawyers and schooling was seen as a way to fulfill this dream (Ledoux, Deckers, De Bruijn & Voncken, 1992). There are, however a number of obstacles which make it for most of them truly an unrealistic dream. In addition to the fact that these parents had little or no education, they also have little or no mastery of the Dutch language (Driessen & Jungbluth, 1994). Both facts signify

a considerable problem if they want to help their children. Therefore, the most many minority parents can do is stimulate their children in a general sense. This explains the differences regarding the concrete help with homework. This also explains the differences in attending parent meetings: many Turkish and Moroccan parents are hardly able to understand what is being discussed at such meetings. The fact that Turkish parents more often talk with teachers probably can be seen as a reaction to problems their children have at school: Turkish pupils just have more learning and behavioral problems. In Turkish and Moroccan families school is a topic that parents talk about considerably less than in Dutch families. On the other hand, many more of them think long schooling is very important. The problem probably is that they have high expectations of schooling, but are not acquainted with the Dutch education system, lack the necessary information and social networks to reach their goals (Ledoux, Deckers, De Bruijn & Voncken, 1992). The last item in Table 1 gives an indication of cultural differences in child rearing practices in the family and at school. The percentages make it clear that especially Turkish and Moroccan parents attach great value to school-appropriate behavior, which stands for 'conformity'. Dutch parents, on the other hand, are more oriented towards autonomy and self-realization based on egalitarian principles (Pels, 2000). These principles are also the guidelines of the Dutch education system. For many minority parents these discrepancies between their family and school pedagogics signify a serious dilemma (cf. Ogbu's oppositional culture; Ogbu, 1994).

So, one important reason to not get involved with schools, is the fact that parents' educational attitudes differ from the current pedagogical norms and values in Dutch schools. Apparently, parents and schools differ with respect to their educational attitudes. In western societies, education policies nowadays enhance a strong student-centered approach. The emphasis on discipline and academic performance is lessened

in favor of emphasis on self-directed learning and personal and social development in education (Chandler, 1999; Pels, 2000).

In order to gain more insight in the degree of congruency between family and school as spheres of influence, insight in educational attitudes of parents can be helpful. Moreover, attitudes towards education incorporate conceptions of types of parental involvement. As Epstein suggests, families and schools should act as partners in education. This partnership could be at risk when parents differ with respect to their educational attitudes. In the following section we will address differences between parents' educational attitudes and implications of these differences in educational attitudes for parental involvement.

Attitudes towards education

The most common distinction encountered in research and theory on educational attitudes is the distinction between *content-centered* versus *student-centered* attitudes (Denessen, 1999).

Content-centered attitudes emphasize the preparation of students for a career in society, discipline and order within the classroom and the school, the core subjects, achievement, and the attainment of the highest diploma possible. The accent is thus on the *product* of education.

Student-centered attitudes emphasize the formative task of the school, active participation of students within the classroom and the school, the social and creative subjects, and both independent and cooperative learning. The accent is thus on the educational *process* (see Table 2).

Table 2 - The content and structural distribution of attitudes towards education

| Content domain | Content-centered attitudes | Student-centered attitudes |
|------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Educational goals | Career-development | Personal and social development |
| Pedagogical relation | Discipline | Involvement |
| Instructional emphasis | Product | Process |

The attitudes towards education involving three different domains of content can thus be further described in terms of two dimensions: content-centered attitudes and student-centered attitudes. Research has shown that the higher parents' social class or level of education is, the less

content-centered parents tend to be (Denessen, 1999). Especially with regard to content-centered attitudes, differences between groups exist. Van den Broek (2000) found the following differences with respect to content-centered attitudes of parents from three socioethnic groups (Table 3).

Table 3 - Content-centered attitudes of parents. Mean scores of three socioethnic groups (scales range from 1 to 5)

| | Dutch Middle class N=158 | Dutch Lower class N=287 | Ethnic minorities N=27 | Eta ² |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------------|------------------|
| Career-development | 3.51 | 3.78 | 4.28 | .07* |
| Discipline | 3.85 | 4.11 | 4.39 | .10* |
| Product | 3.17 | 3.43 | 4.08 | .12* |

* p<.01

In Table 3 it is shown that minority parents are more content-centered than middle-class parents. These findings are consistent with other research on parents' educational attitudes:

'Delpit (1986) reported that when she was a new teacher, she tried to structure her classroom to be consistent with middle-class notions that reading is a fun, interactive process. However, her African American students did not progress, and she was criticized by their parents, who wanted their children to learn skills. As she became what she called more 'traditional' in her approach, the African American youngsters progressed.' (Sonnenschein, Brody & Munsterman, 1996, p.13).

To interpret these differences in educational attitudes in terms of implications for parental involvement, Hofstede's theory of culture differences can be helpful (Hofstede, 1986; 1991). In his research he elaborated on the effects of culture differences on educational attitudes and the relationship between parents and schools.

Understanding parent-school relationships: Hofstede's theory of culture differences

Hofstede sees culture as the personal development of the members of a society, as a mental programming:

'The sources of one's mental programs lie within the social environments in which one grew up and collected one's life experiences. The programming starts within the family; it continues within the neighborhood, at school, in youth groups, at the work place, and in the living community' (Hofstede, 1991, p.4). A more customary term for Hofstede's concept 'mental program' is: culture. 'Culture is a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or lived in the same environment, which is where it was learned. It is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another' (Hofstede, 1991, p.5).

He developed a four-dimensional model of national culture differences, on the basis of a large body of survey data about values of people in over 50 countries around the world. These people worked in the local subsidiaries of a large multinational corporation: IBM. They represented almost perfectly matched samples because they were similar in all respects except nationality. From country to country, differing answers were found on questions about relations to authority, the relationship between the individual and society, the individuals' concept of masculinity and femininity and his or her ways of dealing with conflicts. The labels chosen for the dimensions of the model are as follows:

1. Power distance
2. Individualism versus Collectivism
3. Masculinity versus Femininity
4. Uncertainty avoidance.

Based on the answers on several questions, Hofstede created an index score for each of the four dimensions. In Table 4 we show the power distance index (PDI), the individualism index (IDV), masculinity index (MAS) and the uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) of a selection of 8 (groups of) countries of Hofstede's study. This selection was made out of the 50 countries of Hofstede's research in order to give a clear picture of the differences in various countries.

We will first explain the meanings of these indices:

1. PDI-scores inform us about *dependence* relationships in a country. In small power distance countries there is limited dependence of subordinates on bosses, and a preference for consultation. The emotional distance between them is relatively small. In large power distance countries there is a considerable dependence of subordinates on bosses. The higher the score, the bigger the power distance in that country

2. IDV-scores say something about the extent of integration into strong cohesive groups (collectivism) or the extent to which people are expected to look after themselves and their immediate family (individualism). The higher the score, the higher is the rate of individualism in this country.
3. MAS-scores inform us about masculinity/femininity in a country. The higher the score on masculinity the stronger social gender roles will be distinct (i.e. men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life). A lower score on masculinity means that a country is more feminine, which pertains to societies in which social gender roles overlap (i.e., both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender and concerned with the quality of life).
4. UAI- scores say something about the uncertainty avoidance rate in a country. The higher the score on UAI, the more members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations.

Table 4 - Power distance, masculinity, individualism and uncertainty avoidance scores in 8 (groups of) countries (Hofstede, 1991)

| | Power distance (PDI) | Individualism (IDV) | Masculinity (MAS) | Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) |
|-----------------|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|
| USA | 40 | 91 | 62 | 46 |
| Sweden | 31 | 71 | 5 | 29 |
| Great Britain | 35 | 89 | 66 | 35 |
| The Netherlands | 38 | 80 | 14 | 53 |
| Italy | 50 | 76 | 70 | 75 |
| Spain | 57 | 51 | 42 | 86 |
| Turkey | 66 | 37 | 45 | 85 |
| Arab countries | 80 | 38 | 53 | 68 |

Lowest scores: PDI: 11, IDV: 6, MAS: 5, UAI: 8. Highest scores: PDI:104, MAS: 95, IDV:91, UAI: 112.

Hofstede's research shows that western countries can be characterized by a lower degree of power distance, and a higher degree of individualism. With respect to masculinity and uncertainty avoidance, differences are not that clear. Hofstede also found culture differences *within* western countries: power-distance scores of lower social class-cultures tend to be higher than scores of higher social class-cultures. The opposite holds for individualism scores: individualism scores of

lower social classes tend to be lower than individualism scores of higher social classes.

Culture differences between countries are also reflected by differences in education. Hofstede formulated educational aspects that are linked to the above mentioned four dimensions of culture. In tables 5 and 6, we will focus on Hofstede's suggested differences in educational attitudes related to differences in power distance and individualism versus collectivism.

Table 5 - Differences in teacher/student and student/student interaction related to the power distance dimension (Hofstede, 1986)

| Small power distance societies | Large power distance societies |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress on impersonal 'truth' which can in principal be obtained from any competent person • A teacher should respect the independence of his/her students • Student-centered education (premium on initiative) • Teacher expects students to initiate communication • Teacher expects students to find their own paths • Students may speak up spontaneously in class • Students allowed to contradict or criticize teacher • Effectiveness on learning related to amount of two-way communication in class • Outside class, teachers are treated as equals • In teacher/student conflicts, parent are expected to side with the student • Younger teachers are more liked than older teachers | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stress on personal 'wisdom' which is transferred in the relationship with a particular teacher (guru) • A teacher merits the respect of his/her students • Teacher-centered-education (premium on order) • Students expect teacher to initiate communication • Students expect teacher to outline paths to follow • Students speak up in class only when invited by the teacher • Teacher is never contradicted nor publicly criticized • Effectiveness of learning related to excellence of the teacher • Respect for teachers is also shown outside class • In teacher/student conflicts, parents are expected to side with the teacher • Older teachers are more respected than younger teachers |

Table 6 - Differences in teacher/student and student/student interaction related to the individualism versus collectivism dimension (Hofstede, 1986)

| Collectivist societies | Individualist societies |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive association in society with whatever is rooted in tradition • The young should learn; adults cannot accept student role • Students expect to learn how to do • Individual students will only speak up in small groups • Large classes split socially into smaller cohesive subgroups based on particularistic criteria (e.g. ethnic affiliation) • Formal harmony in learning situations should be maintained at all times (T-groups are taboo) • Neither the teacher nor any student should ever be made to lose face • Education is a way of gaining prestige in one's social environment and of joining a higher status group • Diploma certificates are important and displayed on walls • Acquiring certificates, even through illegal means (cheating, corruption) is more important than acquiring competence • Teachers are expected to give preferential treatment to some students (e.g. based on ethnic affiliation or on recommendation by an influential person) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive association in society with whatever is 'new' • One is never too old to learn; 'permanent education' • Students expect to learn how to learn • Individual students will speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher • Subgroupings in class vary from one situation to the next based on universalistic criteria (e.g. the task 'at hand') • Confrontation in learning situations can be salutary; conflicts can be brought into the open • Face-consciousness is weak • Education is a way of improving one's economic worth and self-respect based on ability and competence • Diploma certificates have little symbolic value • Acquiring competence is more important than acquiring certificates • Teacher are expected to be strictly impartial |

Referring to the results that minority parents have relatively strong content-centered attitudes and the fact that these parents can be characterized by a relatively high degree of power distance and collectivism, we can draw the preliminary conclusion that Epstein's notion of partnership between parents and schools can be endangered by existing culture differences. Minority parents are likely to see teachers more as experts than as partners. Their distance to school is rather high, compared to middle class parents, who tend to be less content-centered and to experience a lesser degree of power distance and collectivism.

These culture differences in education should be considered in discussions on parental involvement.

Discussion: implications for schools and parents

Research on parental involvement suggests that parents of lower social classes and ethnic minority parents seem less involved than middle class parents.

In this paper, we focussed on culture difference that can be held accountable for these findings. 'Low involved parents' can typically being characterized by a more traditional culture in which role-divisions are quite clear: parents are responsibility at home, teachers are responsible at school. These parents view teachers as experts in education at school. This expert-idea is not consistent with a partnership-view of a parent-school community. This partnership-view is especially apt for middle-class parents, who indeed often see teachers as partners in education.

Sonnenschein, Brody and Munsterman (1996, p. 18) state that 'Teachers need to understand the cultural bases of different child-rearing practices. They also need to understand that parents' practices may well reflect their explicit or implicit beliefs about child development. Although this is a fairly new area of research inquiry, the limited evidence to date indicates that parents from different sociocultural groups have different

notions about how their children learn and what their children should learn. Thus, researchers and teachers alike must strive to understand these beliefs and practices.' From such an understanding we can offer suggestions for parents' involvement, and we can tailor school experiences to better reflect the diverse strengths and interests of the entering children.

When minority parents indeed are more traditional than middle class and upper class parents, schools might focus on their specific cultural needs in order to bridge the gap between schools and families. Mutual understanding and accepting different cultures is a prerequisite for successful parental involvement in schools. In a report on parental involvement of minority parents in the city of Utrecht (the Netherlands), the Multicultural Institute Utrecht suggested schools to:

- better listen to minority parents and try to develop an understanding for their specific needs;
- develop a strong emphasis on content-centered education;
- revalue a cognitive teaching approach (Multicultural Institute Utrecht, 2001).

Bridging the gap between schools and families does not imply a change of parent-behavior, as often stated (e.g. Lopez, 2001), but might also imply changing schools' policies on parental involvement. As many authors suggest, stronger effort to realize two-way communication (Epstein's Type 2 involvement) is needed for a fruitful parent-school relationship. Instead of trying to search for creative ways to get marginalized parents involved in specific/pre-determined ways, schools should begin the process of identifying ways to capitalize on how parents are already involved in their children's educational lives. Schools must make a positive effort to recognize and validate the culture of the home in order to build better collaborative relationships with parents.

In this paper, we have tried to make a first contribution in a rather unexplored field. We hope we will stimulate and inspire other researchers.

The results of future research can foster our understanding of the beliefs and practices of parents from different sociocultural backgrounds.

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