

Young people's representations of school and family relationships in Belgium

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Introduction

School and family relationships are currently the stake in convergent political and social interests. Studies carried out about school show that parents' involvement in the child's school-life is a deciding factor in the young people's success (Macbeth, 1989; Rochex, 1994; Royer, Saint-Laurent, Bitaubeau and Moisan, 1996). These findings are a strong argument for educational policies which are currently developing a decentralization of the school system management, inviting parents among others to manage in collaboration the school and its projects.

The involvement of parents in the educational system has become a national reality. The O.E.C.D. report (1997) attests to the growing presence of parents in the school. This will be also seen in the recent decree setting the missions of primary and secondary education in the French-speaking Community of Belgium. This decree aims at making local actors directly or indirectly involved in the educational system aware of their responsibilities. Among these actors we find the parents who are currently taking part in the management of the school's pedagogical project.

Parents and teachers are currently undergoing a transformation of their pedagogical role. In this changing context, we wonder how young people

view school and family relationships. How do those young people, who are in the middle of academic preoccupations, live school and family relationships? What are, according to them, the final aims of these relationships? Our study shows that young people have very different points of view about these issues.

Indeed, the 'go-betweens' that are pupils between school and family (Montandon and Perrenoud, 1988) give us contrasted opinions about the relationships between both institutions. Studies in educational sociology which analyze the young's point of view on socialization processes they live are rare. However in the present situation, the reading of pupils' representations has taught us several things for the application of a new policy transforming school and family relationships: the young tell us their experiences and their expectations concerning these relationships. The young's different points of view show at a certain extent the way they and their family will anticipate the new policy in school and family relationships. The application of any political project must take into consideration the point of view of the actors it involves. The current study partly meets these requirements.

School and family relationships.

The success in education is in the centre of school and family relationships. We see that the

child allows itself to learn when the family enables him to do so (Cloutier, 1994). The interiorization of the educational project by the child goes through an acknowledgement of this project by his family. That is why the family is considered as a partner for school which cannot be ignored.

Since the seventies, there have been a lot of attempts to involve parents in the educational system (Ravn, 1996; O.E.C.D., 1997). According to J. Epstein (1992), six forms of parental involvement can be distinguished. They range from a weak level of involvement to the ultimate stage that is partnership. Each of these kinds of parental involvement develops its own idea about school and family partnership:

1. The school helps the family in its duties towards the child;
2. An informative relationships links the school to the family. The school assures sufficient conditions for this communication;
3. The family is involved in the school for functional tasks;
4. The parents are involved in home-works. The school helps the family in its supervising role;
5. The parents take part in school management;
6. The educational project is the result of a partnership which involves parents, school, enterprises and the community.

The partnership is a pattern supported by the community of educational research workers (Macbeth, 1989; Bouchard, Talbot, Pelcaht et Boudreault, 1988; Pourtois et Desmet, 1997). The politician also supports this philosophy. Most European countries have wished to begin an educational policy focused on partnership (Bogdanowicz, 1994). However, the evaluation of parental involvement in the European school system shows that it is often reduced to a participation in the management of the school

system. In this case, the parents are invited to give their opinion and make decisions about the school project, the calendar, the recruiting of employees, the disciplinary system... The parents are thus not considered as real partners of the educational act. It appears that the only pedagogical formulas focused on school and family partnership are exclusively experimented in some privileged places and for a limited time.

Moreover, research in educational sociology has shown that the relation to school changes with the social background of the families (Montandon, 1994). Parents who develop a collaboration or a partnership with the school are mainly issued from privileged backgrounds and are a minority. On the other hand, a large group of parents prefers to delegate powers or to mandate the school. They come mainly from the working-class and are characterized by a desinvolvement in front of the school stakes. As far as the executive families are concerned, a style of contribution inside the school system is preferred. They are ready to be involved in precise and punctual tasks in the school.

School and family partnership is far from being a reality, but it is still an ideal to reach which is encouraged by many governments making use of a policy bringing together school and family (O.E.C.D., 1997).

This bringing-together has led to the 'return of the parents' who had been excluded from school since its creation (Meirieu, 1997). In many respects, the arrival of parents in the school has transformed it in a service to which families apply to get the best conditions for the learning and the success of their child. Such a way of doing has led to a 'customer drift' of the pedagogical contract which links families to school: parents develop consumer strategies towards the school which itself reinforces this

consumer attitude by developing marketing of its school paths (Meirieu, 1997).

Today, some writers defend the need to build a new contract between school, family and society (Pourtois, 19997; de Singly, 1997; Meirieu, 1997). This contract would call out to all educational actors as citizens avoiding to particularize the school debate. This calling out to a school citizenship only would enable the reconstruction of a new social and pedagogical contract based on partnership.

However we cannot establish a new educational contract between family, school and society without taking into consideration the point of view of the young because he is the very link between the authorities which govern him and he needs to be given this status (de Singly, 1997).

The young are rarely observed as actors of the educational system (Montandon, 2000). Most of the studies in the fields of family and school speak about the child as the object of the pedagogical act and not as its subject. These studies generally focus on the factors of the family and school background which have an impact on the young.

Still, children are not only passive agents who internalize the socialization process they are undergoing. They are also the active subjects of these processes, they live a single experience which should be taken into consideration. That is why we have asked the young to express their representations of school and family relationships.

Aim of the research

In order to understand the young's point of view about school and family relationships, a population of pupils in their 5th year of secondary school have been interviewed. This

investigation was aimed at their expressing their own experience and their ideal conception of school and family relationships.

The types of relationships defended by the young should enable us to see different political profiles given by students about the relations between school and family. With these profiles, a typology of the young could be established. We hoped to be able to characterize the different groups of pupils according to some school and background indications.

Population and methodology

This study was carried out with 201 pupils in their 5th year of secondary school: 77 (38%) in the general education; 57 (28%) in the technical education and 67 (33%) in the professional education (vocational training).

The investigation was led in five schools which are representative of the teaching organized by the French-speaking Community in the province of Hainaut in Belgium. These schools were chosen among a representative group of 35 cities.

The investigation was led thanks to a varied questionnaire. It includes open questions the subject answers as he wishes and closed questions. Thirty questions in total were asked the pupils.

Besides identifying questions about the young and his family, the questionnaire includes a number of interrogations about school and family relationships. In order to understand the way pupils live, view and ideally imagine school and family relationships, four open questions were asked. Here they are:

1. Are there school and family relationships?
2. What do you think of school and family relationships in general, even if they don't exist?

3. If there were school and family relationships, how would you imagine them?
 4. According to you, ideally, what would be the best kind of school and family relationships?
- Answers to these questions have been analyzed in order to have a limited number of categories for answers. In total, twenty-five categories have been accepted (annex 1).

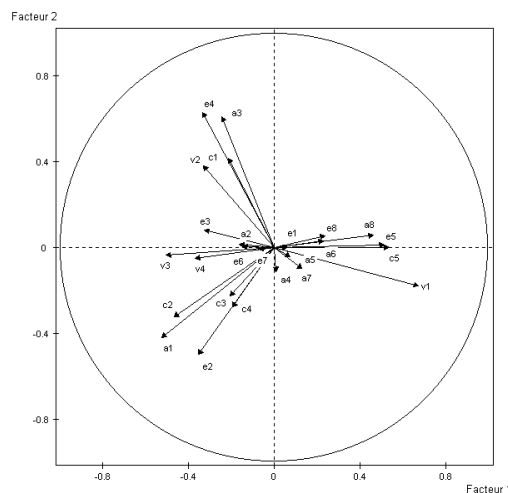
In order to examine the links between answers given by the young to the four questions, the methodology of the analysis in main components has been chosen. The application of this methodology to the obtained information should enable us to bring out the coherence of the answers. We could thus highlight the dynamics of the young's different positions as far as school and family relationships are concerned.

Analysis in main components.

The analysis in main components is a variant of the factorial analysis. It is a technique of representation of a multiple information characterizing a group of individuals. This type of analysis can be used without any reference to pre-established hypothesis or particular pattern.

The methodology used enables a graphic representation of the twenty-five possible answers we have studied. This projection can be realized according to several axis. In this case, we keep the two first axis. These axis are factors which allow us to understand how these variables are organized on the graph. Each factor is defined according to the position of variables at each end of the axis. A table of the correlation of variables helps to group the variables or to oppose them. Once it is defined, the factor enables to give sense to the different possible groups of variables. The graphic projection takes into consideration the two first factors. Here it is:

Picture 1 - Projection of the variables according to axis 1 and 2



The first factor opposes on the horizontal axis two groups of variables.

On the left side of the axis, we find a political dynamics of the opinions expressed about school and family relationships. Here, the young defend the existence (e2, e3, e4) and the use (a1, a2, a3) of relationships between the school and the family. In the ideal conceptions and formulas they express, the young want to live a transformation of school and family relationships (v2, v3, v4). They wish these relationships were more involving (c1), integrating (c2, c4) and efficient (c3).

On the right side of the axis, we are mainly confronted to opinions which reject a policy of school and family relationships. These relationships are considered either as non-existing (e5, e8), or useless (a6), or even harmful (a7). Family and school are here considered as different environments (v1). In this case, the young do not defend any other conception of school and family relationships (c5).

So, the first factor can be understood as the expression of a political dynamics a political versus of the opinions related to school and family relationships.

Moreover, the vertical axis enables the introduction of a supplementary distinction among the variables being studied. The vertical axis that defines the second factor distinguishes on the one hand a group of variables found in the upper part of the graph and, on the other hand, a group of variables found at the bottom of the same graph.

At the top of the vertical axis are opinions which support the active involvement of parents in the school (c1). Here, the young aim at bringing together family and school based on the acknowledgement of the school as place of involvement for the family (e4, v2). This

bringing together would enable a better comprehension of the school life by the parents (a3). At the bottom of the vertical axis is a more strategic conception of the school and family relationships (e2). The links that exist between both institutions should aim at a better school life for the student and even at his success (a1, c3). So, the second factor enables us to see two kinds of synergies between school and family. On the one hand, it is an involving synergy which is favorable to the effective bringing together of the school and the family. On the other hand, it is a strategic synergy which the student makes profitable. It is focused on the improving of his school course without forgetting the social interaction and the communication that can be stimulated between the family and the school (c2, c4).

Thus the analysis in main components has allowed a graphic projection of twenty-five variables related to the point of view of pupils on school and family relationships. The two first factors resulting from this analysis have been chosen in order to understand the organization of variables on the orthogonal axis. Indeed, the percentage accrued and that explains the total variance for both factors is not very high (18.95%). However the graphic configuration allows the following understanding: the first factor distinguishes a political versus an a political link of the school and family relationships. The second factor discovers the will of some young to develop a synergy between school and family which would be mainly strategic. Here it is important to pay attention to the profits the student could make out of school and family relationships.

The first axis reveals an opposition which has already been underlined in studies on school and family relationships. We find the involvement

attitude opposed to the disinvestment (Montandon, 1994; Epstein, 1992). On the one hand, there is a will of stimulating the bringing together of family and school. On the other hand, the young defend the idea of a strict separation between school and family because both institutions belong to different worlds. The second axis opposes a conception of involving collaboration to a strategic dimension of school and family relationships. This opposition meets the critics P. Meirieu (1997) addressed to the consumer relationship that links the family to the school system. This type of relationships lead to strategic operations, notably by parents who try to improve the child's results or his learning conditions. At the opposite of the strategic dimension we find a representation of school and family relationships which comes from the philosophy of partnership and from a new pedagogical contract as many authors wanted it to be (Meirieu, 1997; Bouchard, 1998; Pourtois et Desmet, 1997).

The observations we have just made allow us mainly to see the general trends in the answers

given by the students. On the other hand, they provide us a special help for the rest of our analysis.

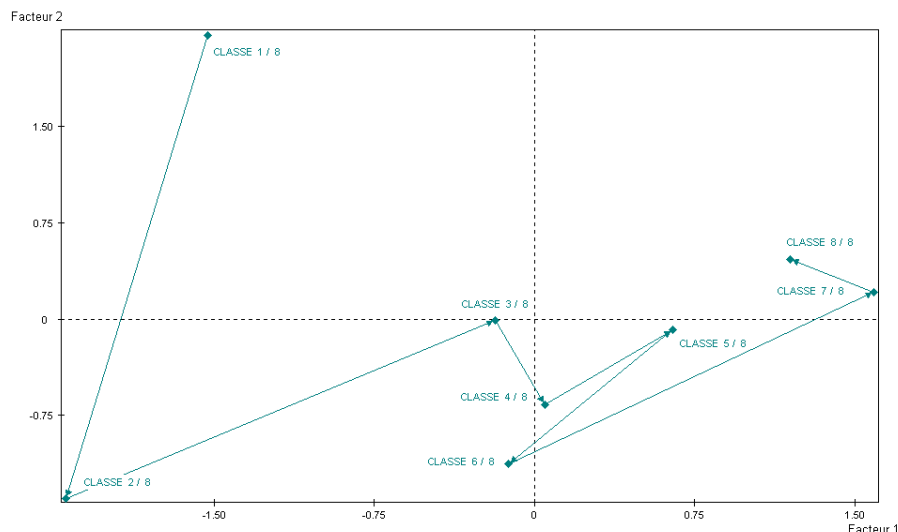
Indeed, the analysis in main components enables a distribution of individuals in groups taking into consideration the various defined axis. In this case, the factors allow us to explain the groups' position.

Distribution of individuals in groups.

On the basis of the information given by the analysis in main components, we have made an optimal distribution of the individuals involved in our study in groups. This distribution is then projected in a graphic way according to the factors given by the analysis. The formed groups can thus be studied taking into account the interpretation of the factors defined during the first step of our analysis.

We present below the distribution of the groups according to the first two factors studied. To make the reading easier, we present on the graph, the balance centre for each group.

Picture 2 - Distribution of individuals in groups



Eight groups are seen on the graph. The statistic analysis gives a series of characteristics for each group, among which the number of pupils, the variables which are determining for the constitution of a group, a hierarchy of test values for each of these variables according to their correlation, either positive or negative. The interpretation of the groups will be made on the basis of these characteristics and of the previous analysis of the factors.

The analysis we make below aims at the explanation of distinct characteristics for each of the eight groups trying to give a synthesis as the ideal weberian type.

Identity of student groups

Group 1: the defenders of a communicative policy.

This first group includes 29 students (14.4% of the population). The young acknowledge the existence of relations between the school and the family. These relations, even if there are not many, allow the integration of the family in the school. For these young people, the school is seen as a place of involvement for the parents. The pupils think that the links between school and family should be used to involve even more families in the school. The relations between both institutions are seen as useful because they open the school environment to the parents. This opening allows the parents to understand their child's school life better.

The same young people are among the most involved: they often give their opinion when questioned about the existence of school and family relationships. Moreover, they are opposed to any conception which defines family and school as two different environments.

Being involved, these young defend a political dynamics of school and family relationships in which both institutions have to develop meeting and bringing closer synergies in order to create a communicative climate of intercomprehension.

Group 2: those in favor of a strategic policy

There are 27 young people in this group (13.4% of the population). As for the first group, the pupils of the second group develop a political conception of school and family relationships. Indeed, they refuse to consider family and school as different environments and they acknowledge the existence and the utility of school and family relationships: these relationships allow the integration of the family inside the school. The conception they defend about school and family relationships focuses on a development and an improvement of the communication between both instances. The young are mainly in favor of a formula which encourages the collaboration between school and family favoring the presence of parents in educational activities, however they remain attached to the classical idea according to which the school helps the family in the education of their child. The young of the second group defend their opinion when they are questioned about school and family relationships: they generally avoid to abstain.

However, compared to those of the first group, these young develop a different policy about school and family relationships. Indeed, they defend a more strategic economy of relationships. For them, if the relationships between school and family exist, they are mainly instrumental and strategic. These relationships are used, among others, to inform and solve problems, they are useful because they are part of a strategy which supports the pupil's success.

Group 3: the separatists.

There are 14 students in the third group (7% of the population). These young are mainly interested in the assertion of their autonomy. Thus, for this group, the pupil only holds his fate in his hands. That is why, according to them, school and family relationships are useless. The separatist desire will go till the denial of the existence of such relationships in the name of the students' independence: school is a matter which concerns the student and not his family. So group 3 gathers young people who assert their independence from the family and who do not wish to see the family interfering in their school life.

Group 4: the rebels.

We find the smallest number of students in this group. They are 10 (5% of the population). They denounce school and family relationships as the reflection of inequalities born at school: the good student will see good relations between the school and his family; on the other hand, the bad student will see these relationships getting worse. Both institutions are considered as different environments by these pupils. In their ideal conception of school and family relationships, they never imagine the possibility of integrating school and family relationships; the only times for meeting they consider are those which would place school and family in situations of social interaction as during school fairs, meeting days or relaxation days.

Group 5: the outcasts.

There are 25 individuals in this group (12.4 % of the population). We find in this group young people who do not feel involved anymore. According to them, their parents do not care about their child's studies. They claim that there is no such thing as school and family relationships. This kind of relation is considered as useless. We can understand their point of view

when we see that these young's parents do not seem involved.

As outcasts, the young also fear to be the victims of school and family relationships. For this reason they wish to avoid this kind of relationships because they can always be a source of problems for the young in front of his family. Thus, these outcasts whose parents do not seem to be involved in their parental role, do not feel involved in the policy of school and family relationships.

Group 6: the pragmatics.

There are 32 students in the sixth group (16% of the population). These young are focused on the concrete and immediate profits they can make from school and family relationships. These relationships are seen as mainly instrumental and strategic. They enable the information and the solving of problems in order to ease the pupil's success.

In many ways, these young are close to those of the second group who also defend a strategic dimension of school and family relationships whose only profit-maker would be the pupil. However something makes each group different. The young of the second group develop a real policy of school and family relationships focused on communication and a better integration of the family in the school. On the contrary, the sixth group remain attached to the pragmatic comfort of the current school and family relationships: they only wish to improve the efficiency of information and problem-solving strategies which are the reason for school and family relationships. These young do not offer any structural transformation of these relations. Contrary to group 2, students of group 6 think that school and family should always be considered as different environments.

Group 7: the nihilists.

There are 43 individuals in this group. That is where we find the highest number of students (21.3% of the population). The main characteristic of the group is to deny the existence or even the possibility of school and family relationships. For these pupils, school and family do not have any relationships because they are different environments. They consider these relations as useless. The gap between school and family seems to be there forever. They do not imagine another possibility for this opposition. This group is thus characterized by the nihilism they express as far as school and family relationships are concerned: these relationships do not exist, they are useless and will never be.

Group 8: the apolitical.

The eighth group includes 21 young (10.5% of the population). They express a totally apolitical attitude: they are characterized by a very strong lack of opinion. Questioned about the experience they have about school and family relationships, what they think about them and how they see the future, these young do not have any opinion. They do not deny the existence of such relationships: they consider that they exist but in a minor way, because school and family, they say, have a mutual mistrust.

Synthesis

The distribution of individuals in groups made on the basis of the analysis in main components has enabled the distinction of eight groups. These different groups show the different attitudes adopted by the young in front of school and family relationships.

The analysis of these eight profiles shows that most young people have an idea about school and family relationships which is opposed to the impulse that most educational policy wish to give

them, inside and outside Europe. Most of the groups (the separatists, the rebels, the outcasts, the pragmatics, the nihilists and the apolitical, that is 72.2% of the pupils) are not favorable to, or even opposed to the development of school and family relationships.

The same groups (except for the apolitical) consider either that these relationships do not exist or that both institutions are irreconcilable. For the young, the family does not appear to be accepted as a real educational partner for the school.

Only a few students (group 1 and 2, 27.8%) are for a partnership between both institutions.

The young view school and family relationships as a fight for power with the pupil as a stake. Some young people adopt either strategic attitudes (group 2) or pragmatic strategies (group 6) in front of this fight for power. Others see it as a threat (the separatists, the rebels and the outcasts). These attitudes show that the pupil is far from being considered as an actor in the educational system. He should be the link between both instances which govern him but as de Singly says, 'there still is no status for that' (1997, p.56).

So, through the conceptions they have about of school and family relationships, most of the young show that the family and the pupil are neither considered, nor expected to be real educational partners.

It appears that the way the young sees school and family relationships is related to the number of school failures he has had: the more the failures, the less they wish to support an involving policy of school and family relationships. This kind of policy is mainly supported by students who have never experienced a failure. On the other hand,

the conception of school and family relationships expressed by the young is also related to the job they wish to do. Indeed, pupils who are more attracted by prestigious jobs wish to transform and improve school and family relationships.

On the other hand, the kind of relationships they wish to see is also determined by the social and professional background of the young's family. So, parents who actively take part in the school life of their child stimulate the young to choose a more involving policy of school and family relationships; while parents who are not very much involved in their child's school life lead the young to grow away from any policy which would favor relationships between school and family. The young's professional environment appears to be an important element of his background which influences the way he sees school and family relationships. We notice here that the prestige of the father and grandfathers' job determines the dynamics of school and family relationships the young experience or wish to experience. The more prestigious the job is, the more the young say they are for an involving policy of school and family relationships. The less prestigious the job is, the more they prefer strategic and apolitical relationships between school and family.

These results confirm other researches (Montandon, 1994) which show the relation between the family's social background and its relationships with the school.

Conclusions

On the basis of the pupils' experience and what they wish as far as school and family relationships are concerned, a typology of the student population has been realized. This typology determines the different attitudes students have in front of the dynamics of school and family relationships; it enables the

investigation of the way students see their experience and their wishes as far as school and family relationships are concerned. Eight groups of students have been made. We summarize them here after. The first group is made of students who are for a communicative policy of school and family relationships (group 1). Another is also interested in a dynamic policy of these relationships, but in this case, the pupils mainly choose a strategic policy: school and family relationships must first of all help the child's success (group 2). A third group wants to keep its autonomy and wishes to have a distance between school and family because the students do not want their parents to interfere with their school life (group 3). The fourth group is made of rebel students who see school as the centre of an exclusive system and think that school and family relationships are the indication of this exclusion. These young are opposed to the idea of reuniting what is different (group 4). The outcasts of the educational system are in the fifth group. There we find students whose parents do not care about them and who fear the perverted effects of school and family relationships since these relationships could be harmful for the young (group 5). The sixth group is made of pragmatic students who aim at the performance and profit which result from an investment in school and family relationships whose main use is to inform and solve problems (group 6). Students in the seventh group are nihilist. They deny the very existence of school and family relationships; they hope no future change in this field because school and family will always be different environments (group 7). The last group is made of deeply apolitical students. They do not defend any conception of school and family relationships: they do not deny their existence (group 8).

Generally, the point of view the young people have about the different actors of the educational

system shows that students as well as their family are not considered as real educational partner of the school. The educational policy which are today in favor of a dynamic school and family partnership seem to meet no similar wish from the students. They still see school and family relationships as relationships for power in which the student has no place as an actor.

The variables that have enabled us to understand the configuration of the different groups mainly come from information about the young and his family background. School success has an important role in the way young people view school and family relationships. Students who do not have any problem at school encourage the development of school and family relationships. Those who often fail turn their back to these relationships.

On the other hand, parental involvement in the school life also influences the way the young see school and family relationships. The parents' involvement stimulates an active and dynamic representation of these relations in the young; conversely, the lack of involvement lead to a lack of interest of the young for school and family relationships.

The item which seems to influence the most the idea the young have about school and family relationships is undoubtedly the social and professional background of the child's family. Indeed, when the student wishes to have a prestigious job and when his family (father, maternal and paternal grandfathers) have.

prestigious jobs, the young has a tendency to defend a dynamic policy of school and family relationships focused on the improvement of the communication between both institutions for emancipatory or strategic reasons. On the other hand, students who do not speak about any prestigious jobs and when there is no prestigious profession in his family, the young is opposed to a bringing together of school and family and he wonders what kind of advantage he could get from such a close relationship.

The student's experience as well as his projects for school and family relationships are deeply influenced by his social and family background. The young thus have an idea of school and family relationships which is a reflection of their school successes, of the parents' involvement and of a certain kind of social and professional background of the young's family.

So, any educational policy that wishes to reformulate school and family relationships should take into consideration all the information we have given. The application of such a policy without taking into consideration the social and family background that defines school and family relationships would lead to the exclusion of those that it wishes to include: those who currently live a separation between school and family and who fear a bringing together of these instances will be the first to exclude themselves from a policy applied by decree. Avoiding this exclusion implies a reconsideration and a reconstruction of school and family relationships with the parents, the pupils and the teachers.

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