

# Teacher training on parents in education

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The success of collaboration between families, schools and communities depend on the teachers and the schools. It is still on their premises that this relationship unfolds. Nonetheless - or because of this - many studies find among a great number of teachers uncertainty and even fear of parents. Many of these also find parents willing to cooperate but not feeling welcome to do it. There is a great variety in this pattern which reflects the local and national education policies and discourses, and the ways schools and education are organized as well as what social and ethnic groups teachers are meeting. Little attention has so far been paid to how teachers acquire the facility to work constructively with parents in their particular social, cultural and economic context; what is the content and how is it organized.

This paper is an approach to line up some aspects of this scenario in order to work out a research project in the Nordic countries to study teacher training and education preparing for this relationship and to make suggestions for adjustment to life and learning in late modern society. Any comments, references and suggestions are therefore welcome.

## **Rationale**

Across the various approaches to study or practice involvement of parents in education a unanimous request is being expressed to improve teachers' preparation for developing dialogue and partnerships with parents. All results from empirical studies as well as from attempts to establish and practice partnerships put the question 'How can teacher pre-service and in-

service training programmes nurture home-school community partnership?'<sup>1</sup> The OECD study *Parents as Partners in Schooling* (1997:53) stated:

*'Principals, teachers and parents need more experience in working together - and training in how to do it, especially since some teachers find it hard to relate professionally to adults rather than children'*.

Schools and teachers are getting new educational roles in the context of changing family structures, social integration and relationships between educational and social policies at various levels. Changes in social conditions and structures from industrial to 'post-industrial' or 'information' society are characterized by reflexive modernity. This implies that roles, structures and tasks seem less definable than they were conceived of in industrial society, educational contents less predictable, and social conflicts less controllable. Teachers in late modern society are continuously being faced with requirements to explain their practice. As there is no longer any agreeable tradition or answers to rely on, teachers feel a still more heavy burden, difficult to bear alone. As a consequence, they feel unsure and vulnerable and develop an attitude of closeness and arms-length distance to the parents (fx Cederstrøm 1991, the ERNAPE conference in Copenhagen 1996, Hargreaves 1999, Sean Neill 2001).

## **Teacher professionalism**

Teacher professionalism and schools to day seem to a large extent still to be conceptualized adjusted schooling in industrial societies. Traditional thinking and behaving put the brake on changing behavior and attitudes (fx Sehested and Soerensen

(1996), Wadskjær (1996)). Many implications for teacher-parent community relationships are embedded in the whole notion of teaching-as-a-profession signifying an implicit distance between the expert and the client, and in the framework of education theories conceiving knowledge as a transfer of a body of information more or less independent of the interaction, the context, and the influence of the affective dimension on the cognitive and skills dimensions of learning.

Pauline Newport made in the nineties a qualitative study in three Australian schools (a state school, a Catholic system school, an independent school not part of any system) into the way in which teachers construct their thinking about professionalism and how this affects their teaching practice in relation to parent participation. The data gathered suggested that a strong set of beliefs, associated with teacher professionalism, act as a basis for important distinctions between 'teachers' and 'non teachers'. Although the results in general revealed that the teachers in the study were in favor of parents being in the school, this acceptance was more in the terms of helpers under guidance and control of the teachers. If parents are not believed to have the necessary background to participate in activities related to curriculum or in decision taking, it may not only hinder but also be destructive to both teachers in their teaching practice and to parents and children and to society in general. As Pauline Newport says, the idea of working with parents implies the need to *share* 'power' and this is more daunting than that of collegial work with peers. Teacher professionalism needs to include the ability to learn from parents and to be responsive to their expectations. There is a need for a political agenda for the development of teacher professionalism within a new organization and professional mode.

Andy Hargreaves and Michael Fullan (Canada) have for quite some years been working on proposals for professionalisation of teachers as an urgent part of educational reforms. They see

teachers as skilled agents of improvement, teachers as agents of educational change and societal improvement. They point to a need for interactive professionalism. To Hargreaves the changing relationships with parents are one of the greatest challenges to teacher professionalism in the postmodern age.<sup>2</sup>

### **Emotional geographies of teacher-parents relationships**

Hargreaves has later been working on a study of emotions of teaching and educational change in the province of Ontario in Canada. One of his issues has been what he calls 'The emotional geographies of teacher-parents relationships'. In this study he explores the deep sources of the anxieties that the partnership with parents represent to the teachers by analyzing a number of teachers' perceptions of their emotional relationships with parents.

'Teachers experience *positive* emotion when they receive gratitude and appreciation from parents or find agreement and support from them. In line with the literature on the emotions of happiness (Oatley, 1991), they are patterns which validate or help teachers fulfill their purposes. There appears to be a moral closeness or agreement in the emotional geography of positively perceived teacher-parent relations. But a second possible source of positive emotion to which Oatley also refers - engaging in rich relationships with others - was largely missing in the accounts the teachers provided. Close relationships involve more give-and-take around purposes, more reciprocal learning among the people involved. The data suggest that teachers may find this difficult. Yet, by not seeking out and actively cultivating closer relations with parents, teachers deny themselves the very positive feedback from other adults that they most crave...'

Hargreaves finds that the deeper reasons for many teachers' damaging reluctance to build such relations with parents become clear when we look at the data on teachers' negative emotional relationships with parents:

‘...the patterns of *negative* emotion in our data are firstly, ones in which teachers’ academic purposes and expertise are challenged or questioned by parents - threatening the autonomy of their professional judgment on teaching and learning issues, and their ability to achieve their purposes by expressing that judgment without interference. This seems to be the chief reason why teachers paradoxically avoid soliciting the feedback from parents that might supply the praise they otherwise crave. More interaction and feedback might mean more challenges to their expertise and professionalism - a risk that many teachers are unprepared to take. Second, on behavioral matters, teachers want more than silent, distanced respect from parents. They need to solicit parents’ active support to get their children to comply with school attendance policies and meet approved behavioral standards. Negative emotion occurred when such support was missing - when parents were seen as failing to meet their responsibilities. A third source of negative emotion intensified the problems highlighted by the other two. Oatley (1991) argues that in addition to unfulfilled purposes, negative emotion arises when people have weak or poor relationships. The socio-cultural distance between some teachers and parents in our study made relationship-building difficult, interfered with teachers’ and parents’ ability to empathize with each other’s purposes and work more closely together, and undermined the emotional understanding on which successful partnerships depend. One further factor exacerbates these differences and difficulties even further - the professional and physical distance that often exists between teachers and parents...’

We have little research into teachers’ emotional life in teaching. Waller (1932) was the first one, Lortie (1970 and 1975) has later touched this. But, we have valuable insight into what cognitively leads teachers’ activities. It has been more ‘how’ than ‘why’. The context of teaching and the teachers as persons are, however, two key issues.

### **Affective education in a cultural context**

The context of teaching - in particular with reference to the emotional life in school ‘the affective dimension’ of teaching/learning - varies considerably across countries and cultures. This unavoidably influences the way parents are perceived - and perceive themselves - in relation to school and teachers. The next will illustrate this. It draws on a comparative study of pupils’ perception of school and learning in three European countries, England, France and Denmark (the *ENCOMPASS* study)<sup>3</sup> which I have conducted together with a team of researchers from Bristol University. Through a description of teachers’ roles in these three parts of Europe and of the way the affective dimension of teaching is being organized in the three school systems the impact of the context is obvious and has to be part of the data when making a study of teacher training for interaction, dialogue and partnership like the one we are preparing for.

### **Different teachers’ roles**

In *Denmark* most teachers in the *folkeskole*<sup>4</sup> have a combined academic and pastoral responsibility for a single group of pupils (a class) for the entire period of their schooling (i.e. from grade 1 to grade 9/10). Class teachers co-ordinate teams of three or four teachers who, between them, cover the spread of the curriculum. They also have the major responsibility for links between home and school which being constant for this span of years, build up a relatively close relationship with the parents. Typically, teachers also spend some of their time teaching additional subjects to pupils in classes throughout the age range, as part of other class teams. This helps to integrate the various groups within the school. In this study, the classes normally consisted of approximately 18 -20 pupils of mixed ability and a great emphasis was put on the cohesion of the group and its ability to work together, academically as well as socially. Use of the ‘class hour’<sup>5</sup> as either a separate time-tabled period or integrated into other lessons, enabled the class teacher to build up close relationships with their pupils and to

investigate issues of concern, but many class teachers felt compelled to use some of this time for catching up on teaching matters under pressure from international comparative studies which had concluded that Danish pupils were behind pupils in other countries, at some stages. Policy initiatives meant that teachers were under pressure to develop cross-curricular project work and provide for a differentiated curriculum within the class group. This created quite a lot of difficulty for some of the teachers. Teachers, generally, felt free to interpret the national curriculum framework in a way that supported the needs of their pupils by introducing themes that had a direct relevance to their lives outside school.

The *English* teachers in our sample were subject specialists, teaching classes of pupils throughout the age range. They worked with other teachers within the school who taught the same subject and with whom they had regular 'departmental' or 'faculty' meetings. To a certain extent this allegiance to a subject gave them a particular identity which differed depending on the subject which they taught. They were supervised by a departmental/ faculty head who was usually part of the school's Senior Management Team. In addition to their subject teaching responsibility, many of the teachers had a pastoral responsibility, the Personal, Social and Health Education (PSHE), as group tutor for a particular class of pupils. In theory, this role was to look after pupils' social and emotional well-being and to be the initial contact with parents and home. However, evidence from the project suggested that this role was being reconceptualized as a learning support role in an effort to raise standards, and constrained by a highly prescriptive curriculum. In practice, the short periods of tutor time at the beginning of both the morning and afternoon sessions were usually taken up with registration and administration, which left little time to explore issues or build up relationships. Some teachers accepted this situation; others considered it a missed

opportunity. Tutor groups were of mixed ability but the pupils usually spent most of their time, grouped by attainment, in subject lessons. Teachers found themselves under increasing pressure to raise standards and meet government targets. This, together with an intense inspection system, left many of the sample feeling overworked and stressed.

*French* teachers in the sample demonstrated a more restricted perception of their role in line with their civil service status. Typically, they maintained a certain professional distance from the parents of their pupils. Their focus was their subject teaching and their aims concentrated around encouraging pupils to be inspired by their subject and by ensuring that they got as many pupils as possible to the correct level for the following year. Teachers were generally clear about where their professional role ended and where the school's non-teaching staff should take over with regard to the social and emotional needs of their pupils. There was no special time set aside for the role as *professeur principal* (kind of class teacher). It was normally carried out during one of the subject teacher's lessons. The role was officially seen as one of being an intermediary between home and school, but by the teachers, it was mostly perceived as an administrative role. Its function was perceived as that of introducing and reminding pupils of the school rules, liaising with other teachers and guiding pupils in their school trajectory. However, this traditional role was changing, firstly, due to policy initiatives and secondly due to the type of school population with which *collège* teachers in difficult areas had to deal. Some teachers were beginning to have a more extended concept of their role, which included an affective dimension. They were generally in favor of the national curriculum, which they did not consider to be over-prescriptive and which they considered provided all pupils with the same knowledge and experience. They were generally not in favor of selection. Time, space and educational ideas and priorities, thus, provided different opportunities for teachers

to meet the parents in what could develop into a partnership and real dialogue. This was further confirmed by the fact that a key difference between the three educational systems turned out to be the way which the affective dimension : personal, social and democratic education was taken care of in the three systems.

### **The affective dimension**

In *Denmark*, this dimension is to a great extent integrated in school life and the curriculum. It is partly taken care of by the class teacher, partly by subject teachers during lessons and in meeting the children outside classrooms. The headmaster and the school board (made up of a majority of parents with children at the school) are responsible for both the academic and the affective education. All parents are continuously invited as partners in their children's affective as well as academic education. In *England* the affective dimension is part of a particular curriculum or programme and also partly taken care of by the tutors. Lower secondary schools incorporate two systems: the affective or pastoral system and the academic or subject teaching system. The two systems are seen as separate but complementary. Both are taken care of by teachers. Parents only have a limited role in this respect. In *France*, the affective dimension had until recently little and no formal place in the curriculum. There are two very distinct systems. These are subject teaching, the academic aspects, and the *vie scolaire*, the affective aspects. They are taken care of by two different categories of staff. Also in France the parents have a limited role to play. They are invited if there are problems.

Teacher training was not part of the above study. It is provided for in very different ways in Europe and many teachers, even, do not have the opportunity to qualify for meeting the new challenges which now inevitably entail coping with social and cultural problems and problems of marginalization.

### **The Nordic countries**

The Nordic countries are compared to other parts of Europe quite similar with regard to educational policies and parent involvement. In the Nordic countries parent teacher co-operation has for many years been part of the school agenda and curriculum in primary and secondary schools. Teacher training courses, e.g. in education, psychology, and practising, have to some and varied extent provided an opportunity to learn about this relationship. Changing curriculum in teacher education have, however, lately resulted in a reduction of the number of courses in education and psychology for teacher students and to let more room for subject specific subjects, while, on the other hand we can observe a growing public and national recognition of the value of interaction and dialogue between teachers and parents.

In spite of the comparatively common ground of education and social policies, there are culture specific differences. A simple sentence from a Swedish researcher who has compared the welfare systems in the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Sweden and Norway where the differences are most evident: in the compulsory school, explains a significant difference: *School can in Denmark be regarded as a state supported prolongation of the home and the local society while the school in Sweden can be regarded as a prolongation of the state.* Norway is in between.

This means that although we from outside look similar to one another, the cultural context differs in a way that a comparative study of the context of teacher training might be profitable. Not to transfer models but to observe and to learn.

### **The Nordic study... into being**

The above mentioned common aspects are to be taken into consideration. Focus will be to encircle being professional (or competent) teacher in communication and interaction with parents in late modern society as

this has taken form in the Nordic democratically founded countries.

The study will be divided into a preparatory study in which documentary information will be collated, like:

- Teacher training programmes, management
- Co-operation programmes, responsibility, management - in class, school board, head of school, teacher-time

- The juridical framework/system

- School forms/types.

In the main study information will at first be gathered, analyzed from parents', teachers' children's pictures of one another and compared to the documentary information and the national and local political, educational and cultural context.

### Notes

- 1 Joyce Epstein at the Johns Hopkins University have been conducted a study of this teacher training in the USA See: Maria Mendel, *Increasing social capital: teachers about school-family-community partnerships. Results of a Study on the Orientations of American and Polish Teachers*. Paper presented at the ERNAPE conference in Rotterdam 2001.
- 2 It is interesting to learn that he as participant in the first ERNAPE conference in Copenhagen in 1996 found that it 'was very influential for his own ideas on school and community' (he referred here to his and Michael Fullan's book 'What's worth fighting out there?' 1998).
- 3 The Encompass project team: Marilyn Osborn, Patricia Broadfoot, Elizabeth McNess, Claire Planel, Pat Triggs, University of Bristol, Birte Ravn, The Danish University of Education - and Olivier Cousin, University of Bordeaux II, Thyge Winther-Jensen, University of Copenhagen. A research report is available at the University of Bristol, Graduate School of Education. A book is in print at Open University Press: *Comparing Learners Across Europe: Culture, Context and Policy*.
- 4 Primary and lower secondary school (years 6 to 16).
- 5 This is similar to the idea of 'tutor time' in England, and 'l'heure de vie' in France.

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