

# Relationships between parents of ethnic minority children, schools and supporting institutions in the local community - some ideas for the future

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Inspired by the ecological model of Bronfenbrenner (1986) researchers emphasize the cooperation and complementarity of schools and families, and encourage communication and collaboration between these two institutions (Deslandes, 2001). In the Netherlands, schools become convinced that good partnerships between parents and communities are necessary in behalf of the optimization of the students' developmental opportunities, the enhancement of the students' educational careers and the improvement of the teachers' task performance (Smit 1991; Smit, Doesborgh & Van Kessel, 2000). The last few years have shown an increasing tendency for middle class parents to wish to get more involved in their children's experiences during classes and their children's learning at home. Parents from lower classes and from ethnic minorities tend to be less involved in their children's education (Chavkin, 1993; Driessen & Valkenberg, 2000). On the other hand: many parents from higher classes consider schooling to be too important to leave it to professionals only (Klaassen & Smit, 2001). The Dutch authorities have opted for exercising less control and granting greater responsibilities to those directly involved by way of introducing new ways of administrating education systems such as deregulation, decentralization, marketization and parental choice (Van Langen & Dekkers, 2001; Smit, Van Esch & Slegers, 1998).

In the big city of Rotterdam, more than a half of the pupils are ethnic minorities. Rotterdam seeks to set up a high quality education system for all ethnic minorities, mainly Turks, Surinamese, Moroccans, Antilleans and KapeVerdians. Most of the Turkish and Moroccan parents have little or no education and they have little or no mastery of the Dutch language. Both facts signify a considerable problem if they want to help their children with their homework (Driessen & Jungbluth, 1994). The partnership between these parents and school could be at risk because they hardly get involved in matters concerning school (Pels, 2000). The lack of parental participation is taken as an indication of parental disinterest in the education of their children (Van der Veen, 2001). To this end the city of Rotterdam has developed a policy of community-empowered schools in which the schools' pedagogical task is supported by other activities in the community. The goal of this policy is to improve the collaboration between parents of ethnic minority children and schools and supporting institutions in the local community. This will have implications for the thinking about education and the way schools, families and communities shape the school environment (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996). Townsend, Clarke & Ainscow (1999) suggest the following changes might characterize the move from 'second millennium schools' to 'third millennium schools'

<i>Second Millennium Schools</i>	<i>Third Millennium Schools</i>
Schools provide formal education programs which students must attend for a certain minimum amount of time.	People have access to learning 24 hours a day, 365 days a year through a variety of sources, some of which will be schools.
Schools offer a broad range of curricula to prepare students for many varied life situations.	School offer a narrow curriculum focusing on literacy, numeracy, and generic technological and vocational skills.
Teachers are employed to 'know'. The learner fits in with the teacher.	Teachers are employed to match teaching to the needs of the learner.
Schools are communities of learners, where individuals are helped to reach their potential.	Schools as learning communities where everyone (students, teachers, parents, administrators) is both a learner and a teacher, depending on the circumstances.
The information to be learned is graded in a specific way and is learned in a particular order. Everyone gets a similar content, with only limited differentiation based on interest.	Information is accessed according to the learner's capability and interest. The information will vary greatly after basis skills are learned.
Schools are still much the same in form and function as they were when they were first developed.	Schools as we know them have been dramatically altered in form and function or have been replaced.
Schools have limited or no interactions with those who will employ their students or the people from the community in which the school resides.	Communities will be responsible for the education of both students and adults. Business and industry will be actively involved in school developments.
Schools are successful if they fit their students into a range of possible futures from immediate employment as factory hands and unskilled workers to tertiary education for training a professionals.	Schools will only successful if all students have the skills required to work within, and adapt to, a rapidly, changing employment, social and economic climate.
Formal education institutions are protected from the 'market'.	Formal education institutions are subject to 'market' forces.

(From: Townsend, Clarke & Ainscow, 1999: 361-362)

If schools want to make a positive effort to recognize and validate the culture of the home in order to build better collaborative relationships with parents they have also to pay attention to ethnic and social issues like discrimination and racism, alcohol and drugs, criminality and violence in the (local) community (Braster, 2001). Paramount is, of course, that schools have

knowledge of and react adequately to cultural, linguistic and religious differences between the school and home situation.

Incorporating the community at large in matters concerning school in fact offers a horizontal perspective. In addition, a vertical perspective can be discerned, namely lifelong learning. Important principles for the promotion of lifelong learning

through active cooperation between schools, parents of ethnic minority children and supporting institutions in the local community are:

- the recognition that the family has equal importance with the school as a place, where (lifelong) learning can be instituted and protected (Woods, 1993);
- the acceptance of help, advice and resources from cultural, ethnic and religious organizations in the community that themselves have a strong part to play in promoting life long learning (MacGilp, 2001).

According to Goldring & Rallis (1993) and Smylie & Hart (1999), principals and teachers must collaborate with parents and communities to

develop and support the mission of the school (Davies, 1999). Culture management which guides behavior in schools (Claus, 1991) and successful policies that support schools in creating partnerships with parents of ethnic minorities and communities school leadership (Smit & Driessen, 2001) results in community-empowered schools in which all members of the community - administrators, teachers, school staff, students, parents, and members of the local community at large - participate in efforts to achieve a school's goals of improving student performance (Burke & Picus, 2001). That means creating two-way communication, enhancing learning at home and at school, providing mutual support and making joint decisions (Swap, 1993).

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