

Parents of students who struggle in school: are they satisfied with their children's education and their own involvement?

Åshild Askeland Johnsen* and Irene Velsvik Bele

Faculty of Humanities and Education, Volda University College, Volda, Norway

(Received 30 March 2011; accepted 13 March 2012)

This study addresses parent involvement in school as experienced by parents of children who struggle in school. Data is based on a survey of 818 parents of children in 3rd, 6th and 9th grade in 26 Norwegian schools. Results demonstrate that parents of children who receive special education experience closer, more positive relationships with teachers than do other parents, and feel they have a real influence on their children's education. Less than one third of all parents feel they can influence the teaching. Parents who report that their children need special education without receiving it stand out from other parents with significantly more negative experiences of parent-school cooperation, indicating that these parents are overruled in their concern for their children's development and academic performances. Up to 26% of parents of children who struggle are afraid of expressing their opinions for fear of sanctions against their children, and are significantly more uncertain than other parents about what the school expects of them.

Introduction

The parents' role in school is the topic of this study, with particular emphasis on the experiences of parents of children who struggle in school. Through the Norwegian Education Act every child has a legal right to an education in cooperation with, and in agreement between home and school. The Norwegian National Curriculum Reform of 2006, known as the Knowledge Promotion, states that parents should be involved in the learning environment and are given a joint responsibility to influence their child's education. This refers to a mutual responsibility where the school, as the professional part, has to include the parents and make it possible for them to have an influence on the education. However, the law states nothing about how this shall be done. Parents, regardless of social class, gender and ethnic origin, want their children to succeed in school and to achieve good results (OECD 1997; Epstein 2001; Bæk 2007). At this fundamental level there are no major differences between parents in terms of social class and background. However, different mechanisms seem to make the cooperation between home and school difficult, and make involvement and influence more challenging for some parents than others.

Primarily, the term 'children who struggle in school' here refers to children who have the right to special education, i.e. those '...who either do not or are unable to benefit satisfactorily from ordinary teaching' (Education Act, § 5.1). Traditionally,

*Corresponding author. Email: ashildaskeland@hotmail.com

these are children who have been offered a segregated education in smaller groups or one-on-one with a teacher (Solli 2005, 2008). In the present study, children who struggle in school also include children who do not receive special education as a legal right, but who still need an extra adaptation of their education. These children belong to a grey area; neither do they receive special education, nor do they have the abilities to benefit fully from ordinary education.

Adapted education is an overarching principle for all education in Norwegian schools, i.e. an adaptation to the capabilities and the abilities of each individual pupil (Education Act, § 1.3). The Knowledge Promotion emphasizes that the education shall be adapted to the student, the main goal being to increase the quality of the learning outcome. This reflects a shift in focus from the community to the individual (Bachmann and Haug 2006), partly explained by the PISA results, where the learning outcome of Norwegian students is reported to be below average or average (Kjærnsli, Lie, et al. 2007; Kjærnsli and Roe 2010).

When students need special education this implies a need for an extensively adapted cooperation between parents and school (Ravn 2007), and a flow of information will be a prerequisite for a good adaptation of the education for the students (Nordahl 2003; Heen 2004) to increase the learning outcome (Nordahl 2003; White Paper no. 14, (1997–98) *On parental involvement in compulsory school*). Through dialogue with parents and an effective cooperation between home and school, the teachers will gain knowledge about their students. Griffith (1996) documents a positive correlation between parent involvement and student achievement and academic performance.

Previous research

Different levels of parental involvement and participation

The term collaboration is championed through the Knowledge Promotion, but there is no common definition of the expected outcome of the cooperation between parents and school (Ravn 2007). The purpose of cooperation differs according to different situations and changes in political agenda. It is left to the schools and teachers to define and practice, and this indistinct definition causes misunderstandings, mistrust, conflicts and unrealistic expectations (ibid.). In Sweden, Erikson (2004) historically describes parent-school relations in four principles (separation, partnership, user-participation, free-choice), each related to superior concepts in the relationship. Hence, 'parental involvement' is a multi-dimensional construct, and different terms are used interchangeably to describe the relationship between parents and school (Erikson 2004; Bouakaz 2010).

Westergård and Galloway (2010) distinguish between different levels of cooperation at which parents may be involved in their children's education without necessarily being participants, as involvement not necessarily means participation. Partnership refers to keywords such as sharing of power, mutuality, responsive dialogue between parents and school, shared aims and goals based on a common understanding of the educational needs of the children, and a commitment to joint action in which parents, children and teachers work together (cf. Cuttance and Stokes 2000). However, partnership empowers both teachers and parents, and requires active two-way cooperation between parents and teachers, enabling the one to learn from the other (Westergård and Galloway 2010).

Information – but little influence

The quality of the parent-school cooperation seems to vary. On the one hand, there is evidence that most parents in Norway have confidence in their children's teachers, expressing the view that parents and teachers cooperate well (Westergård and Galloway 2004; Imsen 2003; Nordahl 2000; KUF 1996; Vestre 1995). Other Norwegian studies report of a distinction between the school curriculum and other governmental documents on the one hand and the real world on the other (Westergård and Galloway 2010, 2004; Ravn 2007; Heen 2004). The school often informs without inviting parental participation, which requires a more active role in the child's education (Bouakaz 2010; Westergård and Galloway 2010).

An effective partnership implies equality of access to information, but professional cultures by definition imply privileged access to information for the 'insider' (Nordahl 2000). It is also argued that a full partnership between teachers and parents is unrealistic because teachers are the experts, the role of the parents being to cooperate with them (Warnock 1985). Furthermore, teachers are not necessarily looking for partnership, but are expecting more than a minimal level of 'involvement', a finding that is also supported in a Swedish thesis by Bouakaz (2010). Lareau (2000) claims that the teachers want parents to respect their work, parents' support, and parents who show a positive attitude to school work. Furthermore, they want the parents to support their children in their homework. In other words, the teachers seem to want a certain type of parental influence and partnership, one that actually cannot be described as a partnership, but rather more a professional-client relationship (*ibid.*) and separating the roles of the parents and the school (*cf.* Ravn 2007; Erikson 2004; Bæck 2007).

Parents' educational level

In general, parents value education as important in spite of social, economic and ethnic differences and level of involvement in school (OECD 1997; Epstein 2001; Bæck 2007). However, parental involvement in school seems to be affected by the parents' educational level; highly educated parents are reported to be more involved than parents with lower education (Bæck 2007). Westergård and Galloway (2004) find that parents with low income express significantly higher levels of disillusionment with school than parents in higher income groups, while no significant differences are found in relation to parental disillusionment between parents with different educational levels. Nordahl (2007) reports that three parental factors are of great importance for children's learning outcome: *the parental level of education, parental cooperation with school, and parental support*, stating that the ideal cooperation is when parents and school are equal parties, and when parents have the opportunity to influence their child's education (*ibid.*).

Theoretical perspectives

Perspectives on power

Different perspectives on power may give us a better understanding of how the cooperation between parents and school functions. What is experienced as a good cooperation by one party can be experienced as poor by the other party (Nordahl 2003; Ravn 1995, 2007). Teachers may often define the cooperation with parents as good if the parents support the teacher in their decisions (*ibid.*, see also Bouakaz 2010).

Weber defines power as ‘one or more people’s opportunity to carry out their way in social communication even though other participants should resist’ (Weber 1971, 53). According to Foucault (Sandmo 1999) the act of power concerns the way in which some actions influence other actions. The execution of power needs to have an outcome and be the consequence of an action. This action can be an expression of an unconscious motive. Power can also be the knowledge or fear of possible negative consequences, such as when parents do not express their concern for the child’s education to the teacher for fear of possible negative consequences for their child. Searle (1969) claims that the school is founded on an asymmetric relation of power sustained by a collective agreement. The power of the school is established by the parents’ acknowledgement and will be maintained as long as the majority of parents and school share values and interests (*ibid.*).

With reference to Habermas (1984), communicative power arises when different parties come together in a discussion in which the most sensible and most convincing argument will win, and where no sanctions are needed. This perspective reflects something of a utopia as there are many conditions that must be fulfilled before it can be realized. All the participants must be equal, show empathy towards others, be able to view the matter from more than one perspective and to have the power of words at their command. However, these are skills not equally mastered by all parents. Hence, there is a power imbalance between teachers and parents, as teachers have the information that is not available to the parents, especially when the focus is on the child’s behavior or progress at school (Westergård and Galloway 2010).

Habitus and social capital

Bourdieu (2004) explains the term power on the basis of habitus and capital. Habitus is social dispositions that a child inherits from their parents through the environment of their upbringing. Bourdieu argues that ‘homogeneous systems of dispositions capable of generating similar practices’ (*ibid.*) form the basis for class habitus. Each class has different amounts of cultural, social and economic capital, which can be inherited or acquired. According to Bourdieu (2004), cultural capital is the capital that foremost can be acquired through the educational system. Moreover, Bourdieu claims that cultural capital can only be inherited from people with the ‘right’ dispositions, which makes parental education of great importance. A child’s academic performance at school will be dependent on the amount of inherited cultural capital, as a child with the ‘right’ dispositions will be successful at school and acquire higher education. Consequently, parents and children with great symbolic capital, i.e. the total amount of social, economic and cultural capital, can be met more respectfully than other parents by the teachers, who perceive these parents as more interesting to cooperate with than others.

Purpose of the study

Parent-school cooperation is emphasized as an important prerequisite of a good learning environment for each individual student, and parents are hereby assigned a share of the responsibility. Particularly, parental involvement and close parent-school cooperation is essential to the success of children in ‘at risk’ groups (cf. Westergård and Galloway 2004). According to Norwegian White Paper no. 14 (1997–98) *On parent involvement in compulsory school*, a large number of parents are particularly

vulnerable in the contact between home and school, stating that it is a demanding task to be parents of children who struggle in school. These parents more often have negative experiences of their cooperation with the school than other parents (cf. Nordahl 2003). However, in a study of special education in Norwegian compulsory school, students who receive special education experience just as good relations to their teachers as other students (Nordahl and Synnevåg 2008).

Against this background, we want to study the parent-school cooperation by elucidating how the parents experience this cooperation, with particular emphasis on parents of children who struggle in school. The term *parents of children who struggle* here concerns both parents of children who receive special education, parents who have the opinion that their child needs special education or extra support in the learning process without receiving it, and the parents who are uncertain about whether their child receives special education or not. As for the second group, there has been a trend in Norwegian schools to 'wait and see' when children have academic difficulties, probably partly rooted in a strongly prevailing attitude that involves a fear of stigmatizing children with disabilities in Norwegian society. Other factors behind the wait-and-see attitude can be teachers' insecurity and/or a bureaucratic system in applying for extra help for the children at school. Furthermore, together with an adaptation of the education for all students as an overarching principle, there is an expressed intention of reducing the amount of special education (cf. White Paper no. 30 (2003–2004) *Culture for learning*). The third and final parental groups, the 'uncertain' parents, are included because their uncertainty may reflect an experience of a poor or totally absent parent-school cooperation. It may also indicate that these children have or have had some kind of problems at school, being in the grey area with regard to having learning difficulties. The research questions of the study are:

- First, what is the parents' evaluation of the educational provisions, included special education, classroom environment, and the teachers' competence?
- Second, what are the parents' experiences of the home-school cooperation? Does the school offer them a genuine opportunity to influence their children's education?
- And third, how do the parents experience expectations from the school? Do they have a clear understanding of what is expected from them as parents? And do they feel the expectations are reasonable with regard to their ability to follow up their own child?

For the purposes of the present study, a broad definition of the concept home-school cooperation will be used to describe parental empowerment and involvement in their child's education (including concrete meetings and contact points, i.e. parent-teacher conferences, telephone calls, notes, report cards). It also includes more vague or indirect forms of involvement, such as the parents' attitudes towards school and how parents communicate their experiences from school. The term cooperation here refers to an understanding of a relationship between people who respect each other's having different knowledge, skills, attitudes and qualities, working together towards a common goal based on their collective resources (Ravn 2007, 226).

The results will be discussed in the light of previous research and the intentions regarding parental participation as expressed in the Education Act and other guidelines.

Method

The present study is a part of the Norwegian project *Quality in Education. About adapted education* (KIO for short). The project is financed by Volda University College and The Norwegian Research Council, in the programme 'Practical directed research for kindergarten, compulsory education and teacher education-(PRAK-SISFOU)'. The main purpose has been to achieve more knowledge about how quality in education is understood, practiced and experienced in school from a perspective related to a broad definition of the term adapted education, referring to the general qualities in education that will benefit all students. The empirical data in *Quality in Education* is from classroom observations and questionnaires to teachers, students and parents at 3rd, 6th and 9th stage, and to school administrators in 26 schools. In the present article, the respondents are 818 parents of students in the three grades (response rate 79%), and the data is collected from selected questions from the parents' questionnaires.

The questionnaire

The parents respond to a number of statements in the questionnaire, reflecting their evaluation of the educational provision, including special education, classroom environment, teacher qualifications, and their experiences of the schools' expectations towards them as parents. Furthermore, the parents are asked to evaluate their experience of cooperation and influence at school concerning their own child.

The questions are formulated as statements for the parents to evaluate on a scale. In order to simplify the presentation of the results, only the results of the response categories 'agree entirely/agree partly' and the 'uncertain' categories are presented. The questionnaire does not distinguish between special education as a formal individual decision (as a legal right) or as an extra adaptation of the education without the existence of an individual decision.

The analyses

The main concern in this article is to throw light on the experiences of the home-school cooperation of *parents of children who struggle in school*. We want to study whether these parents experience a particular relationship towards the school, and if so, how do they differ from the rest of the parents? Table 1 presents the amount of special education distributed over the grades 3, 6 and 9, as reported by the parents. The parents' responses (in Table 1) form the basis for the parental groups that are compared in the following presentation.

These groups are the parental groups of children who struggle in school: parents of children who receive special education, Group A (N = 107), parents of children who according to the parents need special education without receiving it, Group B (N = 66), and the parents who are uncertain of whether their child receives special education or not, Group C (N = 57). The children of the parents in the two latter groups may be in a grey area with regard to being in need of extra support in their learning (as the parents see it). Each of the parental groups A, B and C is compared to the group of other parents (group D), i.e. the rest of the parents in the study (N = 689), who neither have children who receive special education, nor believe that their child needs such education, nor are they uncertain whether their child receives special education or not.

Table 1. The extent of special education as reported by the parents in the three grades.

	Grade 3	Grade 6	Grade 9	Percentage of all parents
Parent Group A: Norwegian/Mathematics/English/ one or more other subjects	10% N = 26	15% N = 42	14% N = 38	13% N = 107
Parent Group B: Does your child need special education without receiving it	8% N = 18	8% N = 22	10% N = 26	9% N = 66
Parent Group C: Uncertain	10%	5%	6%	7% N = 57

Table 1 show that 13% of the children receive special education in Norwegian, Mathematics, English or one or more other subjects, according to the parents. (Several of the parents had ticked for more than one subject). Nine percent of the parents report that their child needs special education without receiving it, and seven percent of all parents are uncertain of whether their child receives special education or not. In total, the percentage of children who struggle varies from 13–29%, depending on whether we also include Group B and C. There is an increase in special education at higher stages (see Table 1), which is in accordance with previous Norwegian reports on special education (see for example Solli 2005, 2008).

Statistical analyses

Frequency analyses were carried out for selected questions from the questionnaire to reveal the aims of the study. Chi-square tests are used for significance testing. P-values are presented in the tables when there are significant differences between the groups of parents of students who struggle in school (Group A, B and C) and the rest of the parental group (Group D).

Parental background

A great variation is found in the parents' educational background. There is a slight over-representation, 57%, of parents with lower education (compulsory school, vocational and general subjects in upper secondary school), while 43% have higher education (three years education or more at college or university). Moreover, there is a clear over-representation of parents with lower education in the three parental groups of children who struggle in school (67% of the parents in group A and 75% in groups B and C).

Results

Different parental groups – different experiences of the school

In the further presentation of the results we make a comparison between each of the three parental groups of children who struggle in school, Group A, B and C, and the group of other parents, Group D (cf. Table 1).

Parental evaluation of the educational provisions

In general, all the parents seem to have common attitudes towards school, independent of whether their child struggles in school or not (see Table 2). The majority of parents agree that their child receives academic challenges adapted to suit their needs. Furthermore, the majority of the parents evaluate the content of the subjects as variable and adjustable. Although a majority of the parents are satisfied with how the teaching is adapted to their child's need, the parents of children who struggle in school (Group A, B and C) are significantly less satisfied compared to other parents (Group D), from $p < .05$ to $p < .001$. Seventy one percent of the parents of children who receive special education evaluate the quality as good (not presented in a table). Thirteen percent is not content, and sixteen percent did not answer the question.

Table 2. The parental groups' evaluation of the educational provisions (in percentages). The significance levels refer to the differences between each of the parental Groups A, B or C (parents of children who struggle in school) and other parents, Group D.

	Response categories: agree entirely/agree partly			
	Child receives special education (Group A)	Child in need of special education without receiving it (Group B)	Parents uncertain (Group C)	Other parents (Group D)
The academic aspect is most important in school	2%	2%	0%	5%
The social aspect is most important in school	14%	12%	5%	10%
Both social and academic aspects are equally important	84%	86%	95%	85%
The teaching adopts varied and adaptable working methods	70%*	62%**	66%*	78%
The total academic challenges are well adapted to my child's needs	69%***	57%***	68%**	84%
The teachers are highly skilled at teaching	83%	66%***	84%	86%
My child benefits greatly from the teaching	80%***	55%***	78%***	93%
N =	106	66	57	689

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

Parental evaluation of classroom environment and teacher qualifications

The majority of the parents evaluate the teachers as being competent (cf. Table 3). Nevertheless, there are teachers who according to the parents are not able to create a good working environment and to explain difficult subject matter in a way that the students understand it. Most of the children seem to have good contact with their

Table 3. The parental groups' evaluation of the classroom environment and the teachers' qualifications. The significance levels refer to the differences between each of the parental groups A, B or C (parents of children who struggle in school) and other parents, Group D.

	Response categories: agree entirely/agree partly			
	Child receives special education (Group A)	Child in need of special education without receiving it (Group B)	Parents uncertain (Group C)	Other parents (Group D)
Most teachers are good at making my child interested in the subject	73%**	59%***	83%	83%
Most teachers are able to maintain discipline in the classroom	74%	58%*	83%	72%
Most teachers are able to get my child to understand what to do	84%*	68%***	79%**	91%
Most teachers are not able to explain so that the children understand	34%*	42%**	36%*	24%
Most teachers are good at their profession	83%	68%***	81%	89%
The teachers are concerned about my child's academic progress	89%	83%***	91%	94%
The teachers are concerned about my child's wellbeing	89%	79%***	90%	93%
The teachers adapt the learning environment to allow the children to develop their self-esteem	74%	55%***	69%*	81%
It is easy for my child to talk to the teachers	81%	73%*	83%	85%
My child has poor contact with the teachers	12%	23%***	17%	9%
The students are taught how to be considerate towards one another	88%	82%**	86%	93%
The students learn how to express their opinions and respect the opinions of others	79%	75%*	75%	85%
N =	106	66	57	689

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

teacher, but still about nine percent of the parents in Group D (parents in general) report that their children do not. This increases to 23% amongst children whom the parents consider to need special education without receiving it (Group B), significantly more than in Group D ($p < .001$). Furthermore, parents in Group B are significantly less satisfied than those in Group D with the teachers' ability to create interest for learning (59%), to maintain discipline in the classroom (58%), and to give understandable explanations (68%), $p < .001$, $p < .05$ and $p < .01$, respectively. Furthermore, there are also significantly fewer parents in Group B than in Group D reporting the teacher to be competent in making their child understand what to do in school ($p < .001$). Significantly fewer (about 73%) parents in Group B compared to Group D experience that their child can easily talk to the teacher ($p < .05$). Moreover, about 23% in Group B report that their child has a poor relationship with the teacher, significantly more than in Group D ($p < .001$). In general, this indicates that Group B evaluates the teachers to be less competent than do the rest of the parent groups, significantly so with regard to all the respective variables compared to Group D, from $p < .05$ to $p < .001$, respectively (cf. Table 3).

Table 3 shows that a majority of the parents experience that the students learn to be considerate, to express their opinions and respect the opinions of others. This is also expressed by a majority of the parents of children who receive special education. However, there are significantly fewer in Group B than in Group D who believe this to be the case, as only 55% of Group B agree that the teachers adapt the learning environment for the children to develop self-esteem and to become considerate towards one another (75%), $p < .001$ and $p < .05$, respectively.

Parental experiences of parent-school cooperation

Most parents' experience that the teacher listens to their points of view on their children's learning and development (cf. Table 4). This is experienced equally both among parents of children who receive special education, Group A, and parents in general, Group D. However, on this question the remaining parent groups, B and C, differ significantly from the Group D, as fewer in these two groups (25% and 30%, respectively) share this experience ($p < .001$ for both Group B and C).

Parents of children who receive special education, Group A, discuss teaching methods with the teacher significantly more often (49%) than Group D (18%), $p < .001$ (cf. Table 4). The parents who report that their child is in need of special education, Group B, are in an intermediate position here (36%), but discuss teaching methods significantly more often than other parents (Group D), $p < .001$. This might indicate that a dialogue exists between parents and teacher concerning the individual child, reported by the parental groups A and B. However, only parents in Group A experience being able to actually influence their child's education (see Table 4). This parental group also seems to be in a special position to influence their child's teaching plan (50%), significantly more so than parents in Group D, ($p < .001$).

In general, about one third of all parents report having the opportunity to influence the behavioral rules at school (see Table 4), indicating a division between home and school and between education and upbringing with the possible consequence of conflict between different values and interests. About half of the parents in Groups A, C and D experience having access to information about their children's teaching plan (cf. Table 4), while Group B has significantly less access to information than parents in general (Group D), 33% and 54% respectively, $p < .05$.

Table 4. The parental groups' experiences of the parent-school cooperation. The significance levels refer to the differences between each of the parental groups A, B or C (parents of children who struggle in school) and other parents, Group D.

	Response categories: agree entirely/agree partly			
	Child receives special education (Group A)	Child in need of special education without receiving it (Group B)	Parents uncertain (Group C)	Other parents (Group D)
The teacher shows interest in my points of view on my child's learning and development	91%	75%***	70%***	91%
I often discuss the teaching methods with the teachers	49%***	36%***	29%	18%
I have the opportunity to influence my child's teaching plan	56%*	37%	29%*	43%
I can influence the rules for behaviour at school	35%	25%	29%	34%
I have the opportunity to influence the organization of my child's education (use of group teaching, individual teaching etc.)	50%***	20%	28%	21%
I have good access to information into the child's teaching plan.	52%	33%**	45%	54%
N =	106	66	57	689

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

In summary, these results demonstrate that parents in Group A have an extraordinary relationship to school in a positive way, different from that of the rest of the parents, while Group B experiences less interest from the teachers with regard to their view on their children's learning and development.

Experienced expectations from the school

It is striking that a majority of the parents feel that they communicate well with the teachers about their child's education (cf. Table 5). Especially parents in Group A agree to this statement, while this is experienced by significantly fewer parents in Group B compared to Group D ($p < .05$). With regard to expectations from the school concerning the way parents follow up homework, there are significant differences between parents of children who struggle in school, Groups A, B and C, and parents in general, Group D, $p < .001$ for each of the three parental groups. Relatively few parents in Group D experience exaggerated expectations from the school concerning different activities organized by the school. However, this is almost twice as high among parents of children who struggle in school, and

Table 5. The parental groups' experiences of the schools' expectations towards them as parents. The significance levels refer to the differences between each of the parental groups A, B or C (parents of children who struggle in school) and other parents, Group D.

	Response categories: agree entirely/agree partly			
	Child receives special education (Group A)	Child in need of special education without receiving it (Group B)	Parents uncertain (Group C)	Other parents (Group D)
The teacher and I communicate well concerning my child's education	92%	78%*	81%	87%
The school expects too much of me with regard to following up my child's homework	45%***	61%***	52%***	25%
The school expects too much of me with regard to participating in school activities (i.e. driving, entertainment, voluntary communal efforts).	22%**	28%***	27%**	12%
I am not sure what the school expects of me with regard to cooperation	41%***	53%***	55%***	25%
I am afraid to express my opinion of the teacher and the school for fear of possible consequences for my child	13%	26%**	33%***	13%
N =	106	66	57	689

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

significantly higher in these parental groups than in Group D ($p < .01$, $p < .001$ and $p < .01$ for Group A, B and C, respectively).

As many as a quarter of parents in general, Group D, are uncertain of what the school expects from them with regard to collaboration. This uncertainty is significantly higher among parents of children who struggle in school (Group A, B and C) compared to Group D, $p < .001$ for each three groups. Furthermore, significantly more parents (twice as many) in Group B and C compared to Group D are worried about expressing their opinion for fear of negative consequences for their child ($p < .01$ and $p < .001$, respectively). This indicates that parents of children who struggle are more apprehensive in their relationship with the school.

Discussion

Parents' evaluation of the educational provisions

In general, a key finding states that parents are positive in their attitudes towards and experiences with the school. They express that the teacher pays attention to their viewpoints on their children's learning and development. The majority of the parents are unanimous; they communicate well with the teacher concerning their child's

education, experience suitable expectations from the schools, are satisfied with the teachers' competence and the adaptation of the education to their children's needs. These results are in accordance with previous research, which indicates that parents in general are satisfied with their children's education. Reasonably enough, parents expect the school to provide an education that prepares their children for further education and an academic training of good quality. Parents also deem both academic and social aspects in school to be equally important.

Special education-close teacher relationship and opportunity to influence

In this picture, it is worth noting that significantly more parents of children who receive special education (Group A) report that they discuss teaching methods with the teacher, and experience having the possibility both to influence the organization of the education and the teaching plan. This indicates a positive and closer relationship between parents of children who receive special education and the teachers than is the case in other parental groups. Moreover it shows a possibility for a more symmetric relationship and partnership between home and school when the child is in obvious need of special education. This is in line with previous Norwegian research which indicates that parents of children who receive special education are more satisfied with the flow of information than other parents (Bæck 2007). In the light of research showing that parents of children who struggle in school often are more vulnerable in the cooperation with school (Nordahl 2003), the present finding is uplifting and supports the understanding that a close home-school involvement is a necessity for a beneficial extra adaptation of the education. Teachers' understanding of a close home-school cooperation and a close student-teacher relationship as characteristics of special education (compared to ordinary education) are also confirmed by other KIO data (cf. Bele 2011).

Nordahl 2003, 2004 real influence or no influence?

However, this is not the entire picture. Although the intention of the Knowledge Promotion (2006) is to include parents in the learning environment and give them responsibility to influence their children's education, the present study demonstrates that less than one third of *all* parents experience having real influence on the education, ie. to influence on the activity in school. This indicates that the school does not succeed in giving the parents the possibility to influence its activities. These parents do experience an asymmetric relation where the school is the powerful part. In general, these findings confirm previous research which reports that parents receive information from the school, but are not given a real possibility to influence the education (Nordahl 2003; Westergård and Galloway 2004, 2010; Bouakaz 2010). Both Vestre (1995) and Nordahl (2003) found that parents were satisfied with the information they received about school, but that parents had little influence in school.

Studies have documented that the teachers do not necessarily want partnership, but are more interested in involvement from the parents (Bouakaz 2010; Westergård and Galloway 2010), for example by supporting their children's homework or somehow persuading the child to behave better at school (ibid.). Many teachers seem to want the parents to have a positive attitude towards school and support the teachers' work (Lareau 2000). However, partnership requires an active two-way

cooperation between parents and school. Parental disillusionment is likely when parents' expectations of the degree of partnership are greater than teachers are willing or able to offer. Disillusionment can also arise when teachers' expectations of involvement are greater than parents feel able or willing to offer (Westergård and Galloway 2010). However, the literature is very clear that when families get involved in their children's education, the students achieve more, stay in school for longer and engage more completely (see e.g. Henderson and Mapp 2002). For example, teacher outreach to parents results in strong, consistent gains in student performance (ibid.).

Students in the grey area – left behind?

However, parents who report that their children are in need of special education without receiving it (in the following referred to as Group B), are significantly less satisfied with their children's educational provisions (teacher competence, working methods, adaption of the academic challenges and teachers' relationship to their child) than parents in general, in ordinary education (Group D). As for having real influence on their child's education, Group B and Group C (the latter being those who are uncertain about whether their child receives special education or not), also express that the teacher pays significantly less attention to their viewpoints on their child's learning and development than Group D. These results indicate that mistrust in and disillusionment over the parent-school cooperation is significantly larger in Group B than in Group D. Trust is important in creating collaborative relationships between parents and schools to promote children's learning (Westergård and Galloway 2004), while mistrust indicates a lack of foundation for an equal cooperation between parent and school (Ravn 2007). Previous research states that parental involvement may reduce mistrust, and teachers who work with the parents may develop a better understanding of their students (see for example Westergård and Galloway 2004; Henderson and Mapp 2002). Parents of children with social or academic problems worry a lot about their child's development and future in school, and often feel ignored by the school themselves (Nordahl 2003). In general, these are parents who really would need the opportunity to develop a secure relationship with the teacher, and to be invited to become involved and influence their child's education. However, they may easily be understood as troublesome by the teachers (ibid.).

The results demonstrate that Group B clearly stands out from the rest of the parental groups with its particularly negative experiences of the parental involvement in school, indicating that these parents are overruled in their concern for their child's development and academic performance. Some parents, such as those who have less or different types of cultural capital, are culturally and linguistically different from the teachers in school (Bourdieu 2004). Parents might have other notions of what 'being involved' in their children's education might entail, that this involves different aspects than those seen as relevant by the teachers (see e.g. Ferguson, 2008, Westergård and Galloway, 2010).

Parental background in a power perspective

Parents of students who receive special education (Group A) seem to be in a special position in their relationship with the school and their ability to have real influence on their child's education. Nevertheless, in the present study, as in many other

studies, low-educated parents are over-represented among the parents of children who struggle in school, and feel more disillusionment with the school. This implies a serious and difficult situation for the many children who struggle in school, as the educational achievement and development of these children actually depend on a good dialogue between parents and school, to establish well adapted educational programmes for the child. It is here relevant to use Bourdieu's perspective on power based on habitus and capital, where parents and children with 'the right' symbolic capital seem to be met more respectfully by the teachers (Bourdieu 2004). Holthe (2000) also argues that highly educated parents can pose a threat to teachers and make them feel insecure in their teaching. Furthermore, Lareau (2000) states that low-educated working class parents tend to draw a more distinct boundary between what happens at school and what happens at home, where school represents something else than the home (cf. Bourdieu 2004). Middle class parents do not draw this distinction, regarding school and home as more connected spheres and more equal institutions with a common interest (Lareau 2000). These arguments may have relevance to our findings. However, the present results demonstrate that Group B and C of the parents of children who struggle in school also are less satisfied with their involvement with the school. Teachers' perceptions of parents and families seem to be partially influenced by factors such as parents' education, socio-economic status, or marital status (Westergård and Galloway 2004; Epstein 1990), and better-educated parents were rated higher on parental involvement (ibid.). However, Westergård and Galloway (ibid.) find no significant difference between parents with different educational levels in relation to parental disillusionment, while parents with low incomes report higher levels of disillusionment than those with higher incomes. It is also claimed by Westergård and Galloway (2010) that when the parent or the teacher perceives the opposite party in the cooperation as intimidating based on perceived cultural capital, this often results in a locked cycle of poor communication. Our data do not give us explicit information of the quality of the communication. However, the cooperation between parents and school is not equal for all parents, since only parents of children with special education experience having the opportunity to influence their education. This may indicate that communicative power (Habermas 1984) is not a banner that is held equally high for all groups of parents in Norwegian schools today.

Unclear expectations from the school

Parents of children who struggle in school report feeling insecurity with regard to the school's expectations of them, such as the premises of the cooperation from the school. As many as a quarter of the parents in general (Group D) are uncertain of what the school expects of them with regard to cooperation. However, significantly more parents of students who struggle are unsure of this, indicating that the content of the term cooperation is too vague (Ravn 2007). Many of these parents feel too high expectations with regard to following up their children's homework. This may indicate that the school expects more involvement from these parents, or that these parents have more demanding tasks when it comes to the following up, e.g. homework and participating in school activities. At the same time, many schools state that they struggle to get parents to come to meetings and events and are often dissatisfied with 'parent involvement' (Ferguson 2008). This is well illustrated by

Westergård and Galloway (2004, 191), who describe the concept of partnership between parents and teachers as at best complex and at worst muddled.

Furthermore, it is a very serious finding that a rather large group of all parents (13%) fear sanctions from the school towards their children, most in Group B (26%) and C (33%). Nordahl (2003) reports that as many as ten percent of all the parents actually fear the school and the possibility of sanctions towards their child. These parents do not trust the school and feel inferior. This was experienced in Pinkus' (2005) study of parents and professionals in special education working in partnership. Pinkus reports that parents often feel powerless towards the school. Hence, this raises the question whether parents' actually have the possibility to be honest in their communication with the teachers, and whether the school takes notice of parental views in its adaptation of the teaching to suit the children's needs. This represents a serious problem for the school, and reflects Foucault perspective of the act of power where certain actions influence other actions (Sandmo 1999).

Closing reflections

There is an obvious power imbalance in the meeting between parents and teachers, as the teachers are the professionals (cf. Searle 1969), and the real power lies in school and with the teachers. This implies that particularly for some parental groups there is a clear inconsistency between the national goals claiming that parents and teachers should cooperate about the children's development (cf. Education Act), as the home-school cooperation cannot easily be based on mutuality and equality. However, experiences from group B shows that it is possible to obtain a more symmetric relation in the home-school cooperation. This is an important goal as we know that when families become involved in their children's education, the students achieve more, stay at school longer and engage more completely (see e.g. Henderson and Mapp 2002). Supporting more involvement with school from all families, from all income and education levels, and from all ethnic and cultural groups may be an important strategy in addressing the achievement gap (ibid.).

According to the present study, both parents in general (of children in ordinary education) and parents of children who receive special education are rather satisfied with their children's education. Nevertheless, the results indicate that the parents of a relatively large group of children have no real opportunity to influence their children's education. These are the children who are in the grey area with regard to receiving sufficient help and support in their learning. It must be regarded as a serious existential problem and challenge for school as a system that they are not able to meet the parents' expectations of participation and influence on their children's needs and education, particularly for the students who require extra educational support, but without it being based on an individual decision or assessment. Although the intent is to close the gap between different social and economic parental background (cf. White Paper no. 16 (2006–2007) . . . *no one left behind*), the Norwegian educational system seems to value cultural capital, and children who are brought up with a cultural capital different to that represented at school, are at a disadvantage here. This implies that despite the good intentions, some basic aspects seem to be missing in the realization of the educational provisions for students who struggle in school (cf. Erikson (2004), separation model). However, Erikson (2006) points to a general movement towards closer ties between parents and schools, and

argues for further development of the inter-subjective and dialogical aspects that are now emphasized in the discussion about parent-school relationships.

One highly important factor in turning this trend is to empower parents, emphasizing that the individual's own experiences are valued as valid competence, not only for parents with challenging children, but also for parents of children without significant problems. Empowerment in the cooperation between parents and teachers is more likely to be achieved when the communicative power between the various parties is realized. Communicative power is not the possession of the school, but it is the power that is acknowledged by the people involved in the communication (Habermas 1984). For children who need extra support and help in their education, a relationship between parents and school in an effective two-way communication will be a basic supporting factor for the children's learning achievements, and particularly important for children who experience problems in school. In this picture, the importance of developing the teachers' understanding of their professional role in their communication with parents must be underlined.

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