



Parents and schools

Research studies have looked at the parent/school relationship from numerous different angles. Some have endeavoured to identify the most favourable family educational styles for success at school and have even raised the issue of educating parents. Others have focused on the relationship between the school and the home, stressing the extent to which parent/teacher dialogue can be hampered by various differences but also showing that more fruitful relationships can be initiated. Institutional programmes to improve this relationship have even been developed by several governments. Collective involvement by parents in the school system is also sometimes seen as a way of encouraging a more "civic duty" type approach. This can lead to significant tensions, as parents are encroaching into an area that is implicitly the domain of professionals. Although the term "parentocracy" is commonly used in certain countries, it is perhaps still too strong for France. Nevertheless, analyses show that parental strategies with a view to choosing or avoiding specific school establishments are already to a certain extent creating a school 'market' in numerous regions and towns where the school proposal is becoming one of the principal criteria in choosing where to live for certain social categories!

In this newsletter, we provide an outline of these different approaches on the basis of results from several recent French and international research studies.

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The parent/school relationship has been a constant source of debate for all those involved in the educational sector. Historically, the school and the family have been clearly defined as entities that fall either side of the instruction/education dividing line. Over the years, schools have evolved from being a "sanctuary of knowledge" to being "open" – by choice or obligation – to society. As a result, families now help nursery school teachers, join in with certain activities at primary school level and play a consulting role at secondary school level. But the tight-knit integration of the school establishment into society has also modified the expectations of different partners with regard to a single joint objective: successful development of the child and pupil.

The role played by parents in achieving success at school

"The idea that it is essential for families to be involved, if the pupil is to be successful at school, now seems to be fully accepted. This would not have been acceptable in the Thirties, however, when the role of the school system, whatever the extent of the child's difficulties, was to provide every child of the Republic with basic skills" (Durning, 2006). As Paul Durning stresses, parental contribution to the schooling aspect of a child's overall education is now fully accepted by the consensus. Numerous studies carried out since the Sixties have highlighted the extent to which social and cultural background (as well as a family's specific actions and values vis-à-vis education) can facilitate or hamper school performances.

A new area of research in family education, extending beyond the boundaries of school education, was also developed at the end of the Sixties in the Anglo-Saxon countries, and twenty years later in French speaking regions. Readers who are interested should refer to the genealogy outlined by P. Durning (in Beillerot & Mosconi, 2006).

Efficient family practices?

A special report entitled "Family educational practices and schooling" by the *Revue française de pédagogie* (published in 2005) focused on the ways in which parents educate their child at home and the repercussions that this has at school.

Its introduction outlines the principal research trends in this area (Bergonnier-Dupuy, 2005), specifying the objective, i.e. an analysis of family educational styles, an analysis of parental aid with schooling and, for the youngest pupils, an analysis of the educational practices and parent/child interactions linked to learning (problem solving, language interactions and the different approaches to reading).

The question raised is as follows: what are the family socialisation and education factors (based on the age of the child) that directly or indirectly favour high achievement and successful school integration or, conversely, are likely to lead to adaptation

problems?

The research results generated in the different fields are relatively consistent and highlight the benefits of a family education approach based around improving a child's level of autonomy and personal fulfilment.

The combination of available affection and encouraged autonomy always has a positive impact on a child's behaviour and achievements, notably in school.

Is this assertion valid, however, whatever the social background? The hypothesis that not only the influence of family education on school performances is not independent of the socio-cultural background, but also that family educational styles have varying impacts or importance according to whether they characterise family education in working-class or non working-class environments, was put to the test ([Tazouti, Flieller & Vrignaud, 2005](#)). **It is possible that the school performances produced by children from working-class backgrounds are primarily dependent on the specific influence of the school itself, whereas those of children from privileged backgrounds are more influenced by their family education.**

A literature review for the English Department of Education and Skills ([Desforges & Abouchaar](#)) observed in 2003 that numerous, solid research studies have been carried out on the relationships between pupil success at school and the spontaneous participation of parents in the education of their children.

Having analysed this research, it seems clear that parental involvement in education has a significant impact on children's behaviour and achievement levels, even when the influence of other factors, such as social background or the size of the family, has been neutralised. It should be stressed, however, that parent involvement levels are closely correlated to their social background (i.e. their level of involvement increases in line with their social position).

The report reveals several examples of signs of parental commitment or involvement:

- Efficient monitoring of pre-school children at home, notably in terms of safety, intellectual stimulation and self-confidence;
- The maintaining of a family model that aspires to education and civic values (visits to museums, use of the library etc...);
- Meetings with teachers to understand the school's rules, procedures, curriculum, homework and evaluations;
- Participation in school events;
- Involvement in school activities etc (supervision of excursions etc);
- Participation in the management and administration of the school.

Parents' positive values with regard to education and their interest in schooling are integrated by children. This helps boost their level of motivation, even if this influence decreases with the child's age and progression through school.

Another significant conclusion of the study is that parental involvement at home is a great deal more efficient than it is at school, and that variations in results linked to the level of parental commitment are greater than the variations caused by the characteristics of the school establishment itself.

Experiments

Aware that parental attitudes oscillate between resignation, delegation, ambivalence and partnership, researchers at the Geneva Research in Education Department carried out various qualitative studies (surveys, interviews etc). Going beyond the initial observations and replies, such as better communication, creating a social link and a better division of roles, they attempted to determine what schools needed to do in order to help families with a child in difficulty (by way of aid, boosting confidence and providing support). They considered that it was necessary to go beyond the straightforward family/school relationship issue and look at the question from a global perspective, i.e. from a social capital point of view and its role in a child's school career (Favre, Jaeggi & Osiek, [2004](#) and [2003](#)).

The studies clearly showed that the educational team is the driving force behind all forms of co-operation with parents. It must initiate this co-operation, put in many more hours than normally expected and above all play a social role vis-à-vis families taking more of a back seat.

At the *Foundation of France* seminar in 2004, the 22 primary school experiments presented revealed that pupils are still the principal beneficiaries of the bond of trust and confidence that can be created. This is a form of reconciliation that leads to changes in the pupil's behaviour, which in turn generates less absenteeism, more respect and attention, and a desire to learn. Faced with similar expectations, the pupil discovers an educational coherence. **Despite the fact that school success is not always ultimately guaranteed, parental/teacher co-operation nevertheless helps prevent negative attitudes and provides a better balance for the child.** The resources implemented can be fairly diverse and can include initiatives such as family activities linked to the school or involving teacher/parent co-operation (or involving parents in the school in one way or another). Whatever the method, better communication is the key ([Fondation de France, 2004](#)).

M. Millet and D. Thin evoke the concept of "school capital" to try and understand the reasons for failure at school. The higher the school capital of the members of the family, the more likely it is that the "informational and cognitive resources mobilised in the school environment" will be in phase with the school requirements and consequently (and conversely) the deeper the feeling of abandon and relegation, which will speed up the process of failure ([Millet & Thin, 2005](#)).

In his most recent book, entitled *Échec scolaire : travailler avec les familles* (Failure at school: working with families), D. Verba focuses closely on the place where school failure takes place, i.e. the junior high. He distinguishes two types of parent: i) parents who are "removed" from the school institution, either through lack of interest or disillusion, and ii) parents who are "involved", i.e. co-operative or critical ([Verba, 2006](#)). His approach re-positions the parent-teacher relationship in a historical context (i.e. role of the school establishment in society, strong ideological context, school culture and the role of the middle classes). The fight against failure at school should not be fraught with obstructions; it requires places of constructive exchange, focusing on mutual trust, abolishing stigmatisation and generating more constructive mutual respect. These centres of dialogue must be combined with the concept of community, presented lower down.

To what extent does the education of parents rely on their own skills?

It is now generally agreed that the participation of families in school education is both essential and accepted. For parents to be involved in the learning process, motivation is an essential component, but not sufficient on its own. For R. Deslandes and R. Bertrand, parents decide to participate in the schooling of their child if they consider that they have right skills. This is in

any case the conclusion drawn by the authors on the basis of their analyses, based on a sample of 1,227 primary school pupils.

Parental participation is only possible if they are invited to participate by teachers, and if these teachers understand the parental role ([Deslandes & Bertrand, 2004](#)).

Results show that whilst the objective consists of directly influencing school results and the learning process, **the school establishment and the teachers must give particular priority to the parents' assessment of their own skills.**

Parents are motivated to participate if they believe that their involvement will make a difference to the child's success and learning. This requires that someone explains the teaching programmes and approaches to them, which are occasionally very different to what they would have experienced as pupils! Furthermore, teachers must not only provide the information, they must also think about activities that will enable parents to exchange with the teachers and with other parents, and consequently benefit from positive experiences (i.e. providing concrete aid that is clearly visible in the child's development).

J.M. Miron looks at this problem in an article published in the journal *Recherche et formation* (Research and training). Parental skills can be defined as a combination of knowledge, know-how and 'savoir-vivre', tailored to the situations encountered by the parents. Furthermore, there is a type of mistreatment on the part of institutions and society with regard to families, in the sense that they will consider parents to be incompetent without taking into account the economic and social conditions that hamper the skills concerned, and without taking into account the conflicts of interest or values between the child's personal development and the political and economic stakes. Moreover, in addition to the fact that value judgements are often abrupt, teachers will usurp these skills by deciding on a project for the pupil in the name of the school. Going a step further, J.-M. Miron asks the question: "is parental construction possible in a suspicious environment?". In response to this question, parental groups are now organised in the form of discussion groups designed to give parents the feeling of being qualified (*empowerment*). It is then a case of comparing the training of parents with the training of professionals in the construction of "action knowledge" ([Miron, 2004](#)).

The problem is acute in the case of immigrant families who know little about the educational system in their host country. A survey carried out in Great Britain concerning Asian families (from Bangladesh and Pakistan) shows that **all parents, whatever their ethnic or sociocultural origins, want to see their children succeed, and see education as important.** Contrary to certain misconceptions, there are no cultural obstacles linked to certain religions. However, parents are poorly informed as to the way the school system operates and their children's school 'careers'; information for parents is rarely translated into foreign languages and parents sense, through their children, low levels of expectation on the part of the teachers ([Crozier, 2004](#)).

Numerous countries have implemented more extensive parental education programmes, often with specific attention paid to family educational concerns within social programmes that are not restricted to the school sector.

C. Barras, B. Terrisse, H. Desmet and J.-P. Pourtois ([2006](#)) outlined a genealogy of these programmes and a framework for the concept of parental education at an international level. Parental education was originally essentially part of the compensatory education trend observed in the Sixties, notably in the United States (the [Head Start](#) project), that came about with a view to preventing problems at the primary level (i.e. intervention within the family at the earliest age possible).

Parental education programmes often need to be considered in conjunction with the concepts of *empowerment and enabling*, which aim to help parents appropriate knowledge and skills. This is therefore not solely a case of teaching parents (experiencing difficulties in their educational role) what they need to know in order to better bring up their children, but also of helping them to **acquire greater confidence in their educational capacities.**

One could mention the abundant amount of literature that targets parents with young children, designed to help them with pre-school education and accompany their children as they take their first learning steps, especially as far as reading is concerned. But these good recommendations should not be allowed to hide the other approaches designed to exclude parents from any expert advice concerning the learning to read process, stressing their responsibilities prior to the child starting school and then subsequently excluding them on the grounds that they don't have the right skills. In the words of Roz Stooke: if they repeat too many times to parents that "having more than one pair of hands makes life easier but that too many cooks spoil the broth", teachers should not be surprised if parents with the right attitude become increasingly difficult to find ([Stooke, 2005](#)).

Constructing knowledge between the school establishment and the home

Numerous studies, notably in North America, recommend that the role of education at home should be given more attention with regard to school learning. In view of the international surveys concerning the (mediocre) results produced by American pupils in maths, Epstein and Sheldon advocate, for example, greater co-operation between the school and the parents in order to improve maths learning, basing their conclusions on various experiments whose results would seem to suggest that the impact of involving pupils in maths exercises and games "at home" is immediate ([Epstein & Sheldon, 2005](#)).

A project was carried out as part of an English programme entitled "*Teaching and learning*", with the objective of creating exchanges between the school establishment and the family home (focusing on knowledge), in order to examine the effects on the players involved (pupils, parents and teachers) and on the teaching process itself ([Greenhough, Huges, Andrews et al., 2004](#)). The research was carried out in schools in Bristol and Cardiff, and was based around basic literacy and numeracy skills.

- **The first part of this research project focused on transferring school knowledge to the home.** Videos showing pupils during reading and writing lessons in class were, for example, distributed to families, with titles such as "Helping your children to write at home". The objective was to provide information on the approaches and methods used by the school and to offer parents the chance to bring them into the home. Overall, parents expressed a great deal of interest in being able to watch their children in a school context for the first time, and expressed a much higher degree of esteem for teachers and their work.
- **The second part of the project focused on family contributions to the construction of knowledge.** Various studies have shown that collaboration is often part of a general move by the school to "colonise" the home, in the sense that the exchange of knowledge is always considered to be one-way, i.e. from the classroom to the home (with a view to reinforcing school requirements). In order to develop exchanges in the other direction, various initiatives have been launched based around daily household activities, which present literacy or numeracy learning opportunities. Educa-

tional games were consequently introduced at school, thereby providing a legitimate school context for using "home" practices for the mathematical calculations useful for these games.

Numerous conclusions were drawn from this experiment, but the researchers considered it particularly relevant to make the distinction between learning via acquisition and learning via participation, in order to distinguish the home from the school establishment.

If one wishes to favour learning as a socialisation process within a certain community, it is important that these two learning modes can function together. **Exchanges between school and the home must now be two-way, and, in particular, the school is authorised to accept and integrate domestic knowledge into the global learning process.**

□ And also

- Kherroubi Martine, Millet Mathias & Thin Daniel (2005). *Classes relais et familles: accompagnement ou normalisation*. Paris : La Documentation française.
- The bibliography compiled by the Alain Savary Centre: [School/family relationships in underprivileged zones](#).
- The report entitled "[School/family/community: forming a team in order to be successful](#)", *Vie pédagogique*, n° 133, Nov.- Dec. 2004, p. 10-46.

The parent/school relationship – from 'users' to 'partners'

Parents may be considered, in their relationship with the school, in different ways according to whether they are seen as the person responsible for a specific pupil, as a member of a community of families, as a beneficiary of the educational service provided by the establishment or even as the representative of a social group

Difficulties in finding a common language

According to L. Symeou, the results of the international research studies show that, in the majority of cases, the exchange of information between the school and family flows one-way, i.e. from the former to the latter. Furthermore, schools are often quick to remind parents of their responsibilities (i.e. monitoring of homework, ensuring that the child leads a healthy life, supplying books and other necessities etc...) but are reluctant to share information on the other fundamental aspects of schooling such as programmes, working practices and curricula (Symeou, 2003).

The research presented here analyses the information exchanged during the institutional parent week at six primary schools.

An analysis of the content shows that the exchanges essentially focus on the issues of school results and the behaviour of the child in the school, with **numerous differences between the parent perceptions and those of the teachers**. As a result, when the child is in difficulty, despite the fact that the teachers are clearly trying to outline the type of support that is possible, parents have the impression that the entire interview is dominated by a suggestion of failure and a resulting negative spirit; the other aspects of the meeting are consequently rejected and overlooked. Numerous parents draw attention to the anxiety and nervousness felt by their children with regard to school, whereas teachers declare that they have not detected this stress in their pupils.

Following these interviews, most parents stress that they are trying to implement the suggestions made by the teachers. They share the idea that things can be improved for their children and that they are partly responsible for helping them to overcome their difficulties or behavioural problems.

A more in-depth analysis of these meetings nevertheless reveals four types of families:

- 1- Those who are indifferent, and consider that the schooling of their children is the responsibility of the school and that it is not up to them to become involved (or they are unable, i.e. they have neither the skills nor the time);
- 2- Families who have the right intentions but are powerless ("good-will but no action"). These families are happy to repeat superficially the teacher's recommendations to the child without really going any further, as the school world is generally just too foreign to them (this category often consists of parents from rural backgrounds or with little in the way of education);
- 3- Families who "do not know how to act". They repeatedly try to implement the teachers' recommendations, but they acknowledge that they lack the guidelines and practical stages required;
- 4- "Close to education" parents, often of a high sociocultural level, who transform the teachers' recommendations into practical actions tailored to suit their situation. These families do not hesitate, however, to "sort" through the suggestions or even to criticise the diagnostics or orders pronounced by teachers.

Parents in groups 2 and 3 find it extremely difficult to understand the teachers' suggestions and consider that the **recommendations made by the teachers are abstract and generalised, leaving them with too many things to decide themselves**. The teachers' instructions are rarely precise enough and are not broken down logically into stages, which would make them simpler to implement.

The teachers do not seem to be aware of this issue, nor have the skills necessary for communicating with parents who do not readily speak the "school language". This could also mean that, for the teachers, parent meetings are essentially a chance to present their view of things and to outline to parents their responsibilities.

Another case of difficult dialogue occurs when parents protest or are even aggressive. After years of a traditional distance between parents and the school, the parental role has been acknowledged in Great Britain since the Seventies and has been attributed more and more importance since the reforms of the Nineties. At the same time, the media have also attributed a degree of importance to comments and reports on the 'angry parent', who doesn't respect the school's rules, and acts in an untimely or even aggressive manner towards teachers (Ranson, Martin & Vincent, 2004).

The authors focused on a group of parents at a well-reputed junior high school where practices in terms of parental involvement could be described as "model". Overall, these parents were satisfied with the school, and with their relationship with the school, but a small proportion, at one time or other, have been upset or angered by a certain issue and have vehemently expressed themselves. The study focused on this selection of responses ("storming responses") to better understand this aspect of the parent/school relationship.

Whether responding to violence suffered by their children at school, protesting against a treatment considered to be humiliat-

ing (repeated sarcasm), complaining about excessive financial demands (financing of excursions) or protesting against a lack of explanation regarding certain negative evaluations, parents can react very strongly in asserting their responsibility and dignity. They always, however, want to communicate after their initial eruption.

Conversely, the school does not always respond in the same terms to potentially explosive events and does not always provide the conditions necessary for "[communicative action](#)" in the Habermas sense.

In terms of the child's "well-being" (bullying for example), considered to be an issue that is "private", the responses are rapid and comprehensive, and take the form of dialogue. They are often more bureaucratic or purely formal when the issue is more "public", "professional" or "collective" (such as those concerning school standards or educational procedures, for example).

Finally, the school's communication practices are heavily influenced by the parents' cultural capital and reflect the same power relationships that exist within the social environment; as a result, parents from the middle or upper classes are in a stronger position to override the social distancing that traditionally form the basis of the school/parent relationship. For Pierre Périer, this distance is an expression of a genuine difference between the school and working-class families. **The partnership is a concept tailored to the middle classes, distributing pre-defined roles and assigning an unsuitable normative context to families with a lower social capital.** Families do not share the same standardised relationship language and keep a distance that is not understood by teachers. This distancing reflects a variety of attitudes, ranging from total confidence in the school to an attitude of defensive withdrawal or even a critical attitude ([Périer, 2005](#)).

Debates on the school system, a chance for the parents to express themselves

In June 2006, a law was adopted on parental participation in **Scottish** schools. The aim of this law was to help parents become more involved in their children's education and learning processes, to be considered as active participants and to be encouraged to express themselves with regard to school education in general. As of August 2007, school committees or councils will be replaced by other structures such as "parental forums" and "parental recommendations". These new structures will increase parental involvement in their children's schools (it will be their choice as to what extent, however). The law defines an obligation for local administrations to involve parents in the education of all children, promote the definition of parental recommendations in schools, support their actions and implement a procedure to assess their duties. A document entitled [Making the Difference: Improving Parents' Involvement in Schools](#), was proposed for public access following a national debate on the school, prior to the vote on the law. It outlines the aims of this text, the initial discussions and the beginnings of the law. Moreover, the site [Parentzone](#), under the aegis of the *Scottish Executive Education Department* (SEED), is dedicated to the development of school/parent relationships.

In **France**, the Education Law of July 10, 1989 defined a broad framework for the parental role in school: "[...] parents are members of the educational community; participation in school life and dialogue with teachers and other staff will be guaranteed in each school and establishment. Parents will participate through their representatives in school committee meetings, board meetings and class meetings [...]".

Moreover, one should note that the parental role in school (secondary education) is one of the concerns expressed in the Letter sent out by the French Education Authorities (IGAENR and IGEN) ([BOEN](#), 8/09/2005).

Finally, the Minister of National Education wanted to show, through the publication of the decree concerning pupils' parents, associations of pupils' parents and representatives of pupils' parents in July 2006, that the role of parents in school is being treated as a priority in his educational policy. In broad terms, this decree "*emphasises the right to information, the importance of the representation of parents in the different educational authorities, the necessary co-operation with the establishment heads and the role of the mediators of parents' representatives*" ([Flash newsletter](#), 2006). The [Official Newsletter](#) of August 31 specifies these options, in three sections: rights to information, rights to attend meetings and rights to participate.

A Canadian research report was produced on *The participation of parents in the process of improving schools* ([Leithwood & al., 2004](#)). This research is a compilation of case studies carried out over three years on approximately one hundred elementary schools in **Ontario**, and attempts to answer questions on the factors that most influence the nature and success of the planning and implementing of school improvement strategies. It examined the different parental involvement modes, school and school community committee meetings and the impact of the school improvement plans on pupil performances. The conclusion drawn is that it all seems to depend on the capacities of those involved, i.e. the heads, teachers and parents.

The proposals suggest that all actions require reference frameworks and tools enabling schools to evaluate the relevance of recommendations. The direct involvement of parents in the education of their children must be accompanied by an acknowledgement of parents' ideas, together with those of the local society, with regard to the priorities of the school district and the school, and their implementation after evaluation. One should give special priority to the improvement strategies that have already proved themselves rather than the linear or "mechanical" school planning models (creation of professional learning and leadership development communities, for example). The project's report, [Parents' input into education](#) (March 2005), drawn up on the request of the Ministry of Education, follows the same lines. In the appendix of this report (p.32) there is a chart of the functions that support parental involvement. In December 2005, the government of Ontario adopted a new "Parental involvement policy".

The modelling of possible partnerships

It is possible to define a typology of the different parent/school relationships.

Lars Erikson ([2004](#)) proposes four relational models according to the degree of parental involvement in the school:

- *the separation model*: based on the evident difference between the school (teachers) and the home (parents) in terms of expectations and values, involving unavoidable but potentially productive conflicts;
- *the partnership model*: primarily based on the concepts of equal opportunities, merit and academic skills, which are behind the concepts of "learning" and "efficiency". This model can be tailored to suit a more individualist society;
- *the user participation model*: parents are active citizens within a participative democracy. Participation in the school's consultative bodies, initially through structured parent organisations, becomes more "fluid" (political or apolitical) and involves a different management approach;

- *the choice model*: this model results from the restructuring of the educational systems in the Eighties, and is linked to the concept of "social mobility". The school must be part of an almost competitive market whose final consumer, i.e. the parents, choose what they consider to be best for their child.

There is also a less sociological approach, which serves as a reference for a good number of current studies. This is the theoretical model for the parent/school/community relationship defined by Joyce L. Epstein. It encompasses six types of possible partnerships or investments, from which collaboration programmes can be developed. Each model includes different practices, has different objectives and produces different results. For J.L. Epstein, this model offers a sort of guide, which each school can use to choose its own collaboration approach:

- the "parenting" mode, to help families in their support role and to help schools in their understanding of families;
- the "communicating" mode, to keep families informed on the progress of the pupil and changes to curricula;
- the "volunteering" mode, to involve families and organise support for pupils;
- the "learning at home" mode, to help families become involved in the learning process at home;
- the "decision-making" mode, to include families in the decision-making processes at school, within the administration and throughout the community structure;
- the "collaborating with community" mode, to co-ordinate resources and services for pupils, families and schools with the local businesses, services and groups, and to simplify each component of the community (Epstein, 2004).

Participating parents

In **Mexico**, the school management decentralisation programmes lead to the implementing of the AGE (*Apoyo a la Gestión Escolar*); a programme that involves parent associations in the local management of schools. A research report financed by the World Bank, *Empowering parents to improve education: evidence from rural Mexico (2006)* reveals significant results in the **involvement of parent associations in the local management of schools**. This study, which was based on more than 6,000 rural schools between 1995 and 2003, compared the failure, staying-down-a-year and leaving-school rates at schools participating in the AGE programme with those at other schools. The results of the 'other' schools show that a greater demand for education formulated by families has a significant impact on children's learning. Whilst being involved in the management of expenses and costs for infrastructures and small equipment, parents have the impression that this programme puts pressure on the establishment heads and teachers, and that as a result they are better informed and their communication with the teachers is improved.

In **South Africa**, the country's history, politics and geography have created a relatively complex educational system. The parental role varies significantly between the schools "at home", the private schools and the State schools. The *National policy on state schools* introduced the *school governing body* (SGB), consisting of teachers, parents and pupils (for secondary schools), who must decide on the admission policy, the school's language, religious practices, code of ethics and disciplinary procedures. This body must also determine its operational mode, management and administration rules, teaching hours, and the school's values and convictions, as well as defining non-academic activities, optional subjects and operational expenses and purchases (Heysteck, 2004).

The government of the **French Community of Belgium** produced a *Declaration of community policy for the years 2004-2009 (2004)*, which is a sort of contract covering several principles linked to the role of parents in school. The objective is to incite schools to sign "school/parent" contracts, with a view to better involving parents in the establishment's educational project, to improve their understanding of the responsibilities involved, to incite them to be present at the school on a regular basis, to encourage various forms of parental participation in school life and to better co-ordinate the monitoring of the child. The parents of pupils in the French-speaking community seem very present in the educational system. In addition to representations similar to those of French parents, they also participate in the [Educational system management committee](#), created in 2002. This committee examines educational reforms, the curricula, skill platforms, policies, inter-network training, evaluations, textbooks, the implementing of indicators and the verification of any issues relating to the quality and equivalence of the schools' teaching approach.

The construction of an educational community

The aim of the "human scale education" movement was to reduce the distance between the school and parents, notably in the more underprivileged communities, by developing a project (financed by the English government) in which 'parent councils' are not so much used to represent the parents but rather to provide a place for communicating with the educational team (Carnie, 2006). The project involved four schools (two primary schools and two secondary schools) in difficult zones.

In a school consisting largely of parent from Asian Muslim communities, for example, a gathering was organised (coinciding with the Eid el-Kebir festival), to enable parents, teachers and children to meet. Two parent representatives were appointed per class on the initiative of the educational team (one speaking Bengali and the other Urdu), in order to ensure that communication with all the parents was possible. Their tasks covered a fairly broad scale and could be summarised as a global interface between the school and the parents. Ministerial funds were used to compensate them to the extent of one hundred pounds per year. A "telephone tree" was created, making it possible to rapidly contact all the parents by telephone to keep them up to date with school information.

On the request of the Parents' Forum, another secondary school (covering the 11-18 age-group - 21 languages spoken) published the establishment's curricula on its web site, followed by a whole series of information and means of communication between parents and teachers.

According to the author, time and effort are required over a period of several years if parents and staff are to change their relationship mode (depending on the situation) and a new culture is to be introduced. **Parents must appropriate the idea that their opinions are wanted and they are partners in their own right with the school for the education of their children.** The staff must be prepared and trained in working with adults as well as with children, without, however, being given the impression that their professionalism is being called into question.

In the United States, the [Harvard Family Research Project](#) (at the *Harvard graduate school of education*) is examining all the issues linked to family participation in education, and the evaluation and improvement of school/parent relationships. It is working on the professional development of these relationships through the observation of those who are in direct contact with children and young people. The latest published studies reinforce the idea of an additional apprenticeship

([complementary learning](#)), taking the form of a network of support, encompassing young childhood, obligatory school, further education, out-of-school activities, the family environment and the community (health, social services, business, etc.).

As an example, it is interesting to take a closer look at the article published by the three HFRP researchers, entitled *Intermediary Organizations as Capacity Builders in Family Educational Involvement*, which reports on a survey carried out over three years on the administrators of organisations, and which focuses on three levels of parental involvement: individual, relational and organisational, as well as on coaching or consulting. The authors aimed to evaluate the impact of the different actions carried out by these organisations on parents' involvement in the school and concluded that the intermediary organisations – very present in the American system – should not solely propose action programmes but also construct strategic models (communication, alliance etc) and help circulate them ([Lopez, Kreider & Coffman, 2005](#)).

The concept of an educational community involving parents can be institutionalised, as is the case in **Australia**, where the *National Family-School Partnerships Framework* was initiated in 2004 by the *Australian Council of State School Organisations (ACSSO)*, the *Australian Parents Council (APC)* and the *Federal Department of Education, Science & Training (DEST)*. Even if there is little in the way of methods for evaluating the efficiency of these links between the home and the school, a similar analysis to the one carried out in Ontario (see above), shows the importance of parents' behaviour and attitudes towards the school, and conversely the attitudes of the teachers towards families with regard to the well-being of the pupils, whilst at the same time putting the results into perspective in view of the low level of parental involvement in the public schools studied ([Macgregor, 2005](#)).

This study was presented at the latest conference on *European research network about parents in education*. One of the twelve sessions was dedicated to the policies and actions designed to guarantee efficient and democratic dialogue and co-operation through social partners, in order to promote links between the home, school and society ([ERNAPE, 2005](#)).

In the journal *Principal magazine*, J. L. Epstein and N. Rodriguez Jansorn present the conclusions and observations of the [National Network of Partnership Schools](#) and notably the means for establishment heads to boost parental involvement, by participating in the *Action Team for Partnerships (ATP)*. This action involves communication zones designed for parents, pupils and teachers, sufficient budgets for putting together projects within a partnership, the creating of guides facilitating the implementing of projects, and studies carried out in conjunction with the administrators of other schools within the sector ([Epstein & Rodriguez, 2004](#)).

Olivier Maulini refers to these same dialogue and communication zones in a conference on the theme "[School, families and educational values](#)", and Laurent Ott makes the same reference in his work [Working with families](#). For the former, a genuinely interactive educational approach requires that pupils are properly instructed and that parents are kept informed. It is even more effective when the two are combined: the child explains the validity of the learning approach to his parents. The second favours the creation of open and convivial environments, where the parents are the real social players, moving towards a "sustainable educational development", thereby bringing an end to the recurring confrontation between the parents and the school.

R. Birt criticised the ambiguousness of the policy to improve the partnership between communities, parents and the school, considering that different rationalities underlie this idea of partnership, both at a micro level (confusion between individual and collective involvement) and at a macro level, where three different types of partnership can in fact become intermingled:

- the educational partnership, which is based around responsible parents involved in the educational system and the results and behaviour of their children;
- the democratic partnership, which is based around responsible parents, faced with the way society handles the functioning of schools;
- the consumerist partnership, which requires that teachers are responsible in the way that they handle the parents ([Birt, 2005](#)).

□ And also

- [Parents in education](#), newsletter of *Parents in Education Research Network* (Dundee University).
- [Il ruolo dei genitori nelle scuole in Europa](#), a report by the Italian Eurydice unit (Indire, 2004).
- A report by the *Revue internationale d'éducation-Sèvres*, "[Parents and school](#)", published in November 2002: partnerships in Brazil, community participation in West Africa, Italian over-cautiousness...
- [Key Data on Education in Europe 2005](#). OCDE, 2005. See pages 24, 15-117, 297, 333 et 364.

Parental strategies and school markets

For more than ten years now, numerous sociologists have been examining the growing role of parents as a way of regulating what can sometimes appear to be almost a school 'market'. Initially somewhat the exclusive domain of the Anglo-Saxon countries, the analyses of a possible rise in "parentocracy" ([Brown, 1990](#)) are today covering a much broader geographical area, even if the different situations vary enormously from State to State; ranging from a straightforward parental desire to be more involved as parents in local school life to the development of choice strategies that create a permanent state of competition (with varying degree of 'officialness') for the schools to become the "most popular".

Parents in school – to what extent?

A study carried out in Flemish-speaking Belgium sheds some interesting light on the different configurations that can occur with regard to schools and organised parents ([Dom & Verhoeven, 2006](#)).

In 2004, a law extended the responsibilities of school councils and created a parent council, which is not obligatory unless 10% of the parents at a given school formulate such a request. The authors examined the case of four primary schools (where this law was being applied), focusing on the question of the relationships between the parent associations and the schools' professionals (teachers and establishment heads).

The authors examined the idea **that, in each school, there is an almost visible "dividing-line" between the affairs that only the school's staff are authorised to handle and those for which parental input is accepted or encouraged.**

With this study, they were keen to highlight any negotiations entered into with regard to this dividing-line, and the way it is handled by each school, looking closely at the partnerships or conflicts between the players in each specific case.

1- In the first school, categorised as a **“dissension school”**, the parent association organised a petition in accordance with the “10%” clause, with a view to obtaining the implementation of a parent council. This crystallised the latent conflict between the parent association and the school team.

There was a clear contradiction between the headmistress (supported by her teaching staff), for whom the school is a professional organisation that does not accept the professional regulations, and the opinion of the parents, who were keen to look after their children in school and wanted to be able to express themselves on issues such as school discipline. The school was located in a district that was becoming poorer, but the association nevertheless still consisted of parents from the upper social strata.

De-stabilised both by the social deterioration of the district and by the high level of resources that the parents in the association could mobilise (including awareness of the ministerial administration’s doctrines), the school team initiated the dispute with the parents to protect their position.

2- In the second school, qualified as a **“consensus school”** and located in a poor district, the parent association is also run by parents from the middle classes.

After various clashes with the successive and unstable management teams, the association fought to obtain a stable establishment head and won their case. The new head now co-operates with the association and uses parental involvement at all levels (on material and educational issues) as a lever for improving the school. This includes creating other levels of implication, such as the “group of mothers”, which targets families of foreign origins. Most of the teachers share the opinions of the management and a consensus has been found between the parents and teachers with regard to their respective roles.

The new law does not seem to be a problematic or even important issue, in the sense that the parents are already present at all levels; no-one has asked for a new council to be set up.

3- In the other two schools, characterised by a **‘domain-specific partnership’**, the collective action of the parents is generally limited to organising gatherings designed to collect funds for the school and a formal legal parent representation, without any intention to intervene in the educational procedures or other issues concerning school life.

The parent/school relationships are consensual in the sense that the two parties agree that there should be a minimum degree of effective co-operation, with a very tightly protected dividing-line between the roles. In both cases, the new statutory regulations were met with little enthusiasm, but with no resistance either, and were seen as a simple administrative formality to be integrated into the existing routines.

Despite the fact that there are clear-cut internal differences at each school with regard to the teachers’ approach towards the parents, one can observe more general behavioural differences in the teachers from school to school.

In the four cases in question, the establishment head seems to be in the best position to explain the differences between the schools. The establishment heads who are stable and relatively sure of themselves, and who agree to share the different aspects of controlling the school, are in the best position to form partnerships with the parents and to ensure that their schools develop into a more efficient school model.

In each situation, the middle class parents play a predominant role in the associations and indeed throughout all the different forms of parental involvement. Even in the districts where most of the parents are from working-class backgrounds, it is still the middle-class parents that form and run the parents’ association.

The pivotal role played by middle class parents

Numerous sociological analyses carried out in Great Britain attribute a pivotal role to middle class parents in the definition (real or imagined) of school situations (see for example [Power, Edwards, Whitty & Wigfall, 2003](#)). S. Gewirtz (2001) considers that one of the dominant aspects of the New Labour educational policy is the desire to “universalise” the middle class attributes, which are seen as the most favourable qualities for ensuring success at school.

These middle class parent attributes are as follows:

- they are active consumers in the school market;
- they monitor the situation and intervene if necessary to ensure that the quality of the educational service does not fall (this includes signing a sort of [contract between the school and parents](#));
- they possess and transfer appropriate forms of cultural capital;
- They possess a high level of social capital (contacts, networks, self-confidence etc...), which enables them to exploit the educational system to the advantage of their children.

Gewirtz criticises the desire to share these attributes with the working classes, rather than trying to change the characteristics of the system, which objectively favours certain sections of the middle classes, such as the development of a liberal and competitive school market.

[Agnès van Zanten](#) also notes that middle and upper class parents have acquired a high degree of power vis-à-vis the institution, even if this power has not been acknowledged by the latter.

Whilst regulation of parental choices is still not really legitimate in France, the debates over the last few years on segregation or school catchment areas illustrate the increasing importance of the issues raised by parental school avoidance or selection strategies ([van Zanten, 2005](#)).

The middle classes, which have been the principal driving force behind the state school and the principal of meritocracy, have notably sensed an “invasion from below” due to the massification observed over the last few years ([van Zanten, 2006](#)). At the same time, the globalisation process may present new constraints “from above” for a section of these middle classes, whose social position up until now was more linked to national cultures, or even the public system, and who are now raising new questions with regard to professional insertion and social mobility.

These categories consequently show less delegated confidence in the school (which partly exacerbates the teachers’ qualms) and are quick to ignore the school catchment area when necessary. Furthermore, what is new in middle class and upper class parental choice strategies with regard to a given school, is that **the “effects of connivance” are less prevalent between parents and teachers than between families and school heads, who rely on the parents to promote the role and the reputation of their school.**

These practices are not purely consumerist, they also reflect a more global desire on the part of the parents to increase their level of control over the schooling of their children. Parents' individual strategies have become especially intense given the fact that their position within the school has remained problematic. Furthermore, the parent associations, whose level of representation remains weak and varies hugely from one establishment to the next, are encountering difficulties in mediating between the parental individualism and the institutional firmness ([van Zanten](#), 2004).

Establishments pushed into a 'market' environment?

Market characteristics are developing discretely (and sometimes illegally) through more intensive and more strategic usage of the private sector (one in two families uses this sector at some stage during their child's educational career and the role played by religious factors is on the decrease). The private sector is poorly regulated, has no control over the recruitment of pupils and offers no real expert knowledge on the part of the administration (on this subject, see also [Meirieu](#), 2005).

These characteristics are also developing in the public sector, but on a more restricted basis as this sector is more tightly controlled by the administration, through official requests for special dispensation from the legislation in force ([Duru-Bellat & van Zanten](#), 2006).

Some of the parents who turn to sectorisation (through conviction or need) may also aim to "colonise" the local establishments to protect their children's schooling: various actions designed to maintain the school's image and the recruitment of other families sharing the same concerns, pressure to diversify options, introduce classes corresponding to different levels and develop model educational activities etc.

Families, concerned about the role of the school, can consequently reply through various institutional or individual strategies aimed at preserving a certain social advantage:

- **Through the choice of establishment (special dispensations, moving house or turning to the private sector);**
- **By approaching the establishment and intervening ("colonisation");**
- **through interventions parallel to the school (private lessons, linguistic courses etc...).**

To summarise: firstly, middle class parents are making specific demands of the institution with regard to the well-being of their child. Secondly, they are competing more and more intensely for access to the best educational resources. Finally, their objectives and intervention modes vary enormously between the social environments and the schooling environments.

Middle/upper class parents who are "managers and professionals in the private sector", in particular, develop essentially instrumental expectations and practices vis-à-vis the school: requests for the teaching of foreign languages, the introduction of new technologies and educational renewal focused around skills, etc.

They put pressure on the school to play its selective role, with more numerous assessments and evaluations of the children's performances. They see education principally as a position-related asset and are motivated by a very competitive spirit, which tends to be transposed into school and home life (educational leisure activities, homework, linguistic courses etc...). They also tend to organise their personal life in the same way as they organise their professional life; i.e. optimal usage of time.

From a collective perspective, they should be seen in a different light to middle class parents working in the public sector. "The latter remain close to the dominant model, until recently embodied by an organisation such as the FCPE [Federation of public school parent councils], founded on major values such as equality, bureaucratic rules of functioning and co-management of the teaching system by the representatives of the administration and the teaching profession" ([Gombert & van Zanten](#), 2004).

Private sector parents, however, prefer to see educational problems as purely technical problems to be resolved on the basis of concerns for efficiency, without paying too much attention to the improvement of generalised rules or distant national procedures.

They are often more offensive than co-operative vis-à-vis the education professionals, and prefer to invest in independent associations in order to meet their expectations of reactivity, acting as a pressure group on the school institution attended by their children. It is consequently a case, through these local associations, of adapting the functioning of the school to the tailor-made demands of their users.

In more global terms, the parent's choice of a school establishment has become one of the essential components of the residential strategy.

According to a survey carried out in several districts of the Paris region by A. van Zanten, 50% of the parents questioned say that they chose their housing on the basis of the school proposal offered by the district in question.

The same trends can also sometimes be observed for a council housing estate, when the school list offers such or such a school, depending on which side of the street the housing is located on.

As a result, despite the fact that we have often spoken of the effects of urban segregation on schools (as the establishment is supposed to 'reflect' the social composition of the district), it seems that relationships are not one-way and that the **school can also play a structuring role, by attracting or conversely discouraging the arrival of families with the most active school strategies.**

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