

Multi-Ethnic Schools' Parental Involvement Policies and Practices

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Abstract

Culture differences within parent communities provide challenges for schools trying to develop a successful parental involvement policy. In this study, we explore schools' practices and policies with respect to parental involvement. This study was carried out at four elementary schools in the Netherlands. Interviews were conducted with the schools' principals concerning the schools' experiences with the parental involvement of diverse groups of parents. The results of this study indicate that school administrators recognize difficulties in getting immigrant parents involved in their children's school. The two main barriers to getting immigrant parents involved in the schools were language problems and culture differences between the schools and families. The four stories of these schools reveal one basic dilemma that underlies the schools' perspective of parental involvement: should schools expect parents to comply with the schools' expectations and culture, or should the school take parents' expectations and cultures into account? Schools differ in their view of the right balance between school and family culture. It is suggested that schools share their experiences in networks that can help them to enhance the involvement of diverse groups of parents.

Key Words: parent involvement, ethnic minorities, school policies, language, culture, the Netherlands

Introduction

In this study, the parental involvement policies of four Dutch elementary schools and their respective perspectives will be considered. This study is aimed at assessing the effects of specific sociopolitical and ethnic-cultural contexts on schools' perspectives and practices. Previous studies have pointed at strong impacts of schools' contexts and their relations with various groups of parents (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000; Stanley & Wyness, 1999; Tett, 2004). Issues of power relations between parents and schools (e.g., Stanley & Wyness; Todd & Higgins, 1998) and cultural differences between schools and families (Denessen, Driessen, Smit, & Slegers, 2001; Tett) seem to be relevant for understanding the range of varieties of family-school partnerships.

Before we discuss specific problems schools face in dealing with an ethnically mixed population, we first outline the sociopolitical context of multi-ethnic schools in the Netherlands. In the Netherlands, three types of ethnic minority groups are present: (1) immigrants from former Dutch colonies, including Surinam and the Antilles, (2) so-called guest workers from such Mediterranean countries as Morocco and Turkey, and (3) refugees from countries such as Iran, Iraq, the former Yugoslavia, and Somalia (Driessen, 2001). The position of ethnic minority groups in Dutch society and in Dutch education is quite problematic. The general picture that emerges is not a favorable one when it comes to these groups' integration into Dutch society, according to the Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP, 2005). Ethnic minorities are increasingly left behind in the labor market, and unemployment and benefit dependence are rising rapidly.

Socio-culturally, little progress can be observed in the rapprochement between the different groups. Turks and Moroccans, in particular, associate primarily with members of their own ethnic groups, and this has changed little in recent years. The increase in the number of neighbourhoods with high concentrations of ethnic minorities in the large cities contribute to this... There are considerable cultural and religious differences between the ethnic minority and indigenous populations, which are especially manifest among Muslim groups. (SCP, 2005, p. 1)

Current threats of religious-inspired terrorism reinforce tensions between groups in the Netherlands. The Dutch Social and Cultural Planning Office (SCP) reports that "overall, views on the multicultural society have appeared to have become more negative, especially with regard to Muslims" (2005, p. 5). For measures to improve integration, the Dutch government has changed their perspective from a "mutual acceptance" policy to an assimilation policy,

partly because of the lack of public support for multiculturalism policies (Joppke, 2004). As a result, in the Netherlands, the policy of providing immigrant (that is, Turkish and Arab) language education has been abandoned; minority parents are forced to learn the Dutch language, and mastery of the Dutch language has recently become a prerequisite for getting immigration documents. Immigrants who plan to move to the Netherlands have to successfully pass a Dutch language test in their home country.

These current shifts in the political climate of our multicultural society could also affect schools' approach toward minority parents' involvement in schools. Regarding schools' perspectives on parental involvement, Tett (2004) has made a distinction between two ends of a spectrum:

It can range from a democratic partnership at one end of the spectrum where the importance of the different focus of the educational work of parents is acknowledged and mutually constructed sets of expectations about what each group can expect of the other are developed. At the other end of the range, the relationship can be conceived of as a one-way linear process where teachers inform or instruct parents about how they can support the work of the school. (p. 268)

In this respect, a parallel can be drawn with perspectives on family literacy programs as discussed by Auerbach (1995). One perspective underlying some programs is an intervention-prevention approach, which implies the inability of undereducated parents to promote literacy in the home. Programs that have been developed from an intervention-prevention approach rest on a deficit perspective, locating the source of educational problems with deficiencies in family practices and attitudes. On the opposite side, a multiple literacies perspective can be held, where problems are defined by a cultural mismatch between home and school practices. From this perspective, parents' attitudes and practices are likely to be acknowledged as rich and relevant for children's education. Auerbach relates these two perspectives with power relations between home and school: "Where the intervention model advocates individual empowerment through self-esteem and personal responsibility, the multiple literacies perspective promotes empowerment through affirmation of cultural identity and community building" (p. 651).

For the analysis of schools' relations with parents, it seems of relevance to study schools' perspectives on this issue. According to numerous empirical studies, parents with different ethnic-cultural backgrounds appear to differ with regard to types and levels of involvement (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001; Stanley & Wyness, 1999). Van Daal et al. (2002) pointed at difficulties that multi-ethnic schools perceive in their relations with parents. They reported

some specific problems regarding ethnic minority parents: (1) Ethnic minority parents seem to lack language skills to communicate with the school; (2) ethnic minority parents seem to hold the school fully responsible for their child's education; and (3) ethnic minority parents do not seem to be interested in school matters. Ethnic minority parents thus seem to be less involved at their child's school than native Dutch parents (see, e.g., Denessen et al., 2001; Desimone, 1999). In contrast to their low levels of involvement, ethnic minority parents' aspirations for their children's education are quite high (e.g., Denessen et al., 2001; Goldenberg, Gallimore, Reese, & Gernier, 2001; Lopez et al., 2001). One reason for lower levels of parental involvement of minority parents is that these parents lack the required cultural resources to become involved (Lopez et al.; Serpell, 1997). Parents want to be involved, but they don't know how to become involved. Another reason lies in the cultural incongruence between schools and minority families. Ethnic minority parents generally do not see it as their task or responsibility to be involved in their children's education. These parents can typically be characterized by a more traditional culture in which power distance and role divisions are quite clear: Parents are responsible at home; teachers are responsible at school (see Hofstede, 1986). These parents tend to view teachers as experts (Lopez et al.; Serpell).

The interpretation of these problematic results differs according to the perspective that is held in the analysis. Tett (2004), for example, suggests that policy statements in the United Kingdom appear to use an implicit deficit model, in which it is assumed that parents from minority ethnic communities are unwilling to act as educators of their children. Evidence, though, shows minority parents strongly support their children's education by showing interest and giving encouragement, but not by relating directly to the school. According to Tett, such non-participation can be misinterpreted by teachers assuming a parallel deficit arising from differences in values between home and school.

Given group differences with respect to types of parent involvement preferred, schools face the task of addressing the customs and needs of diverse parents. Kessler-Sklar and Baker (2000) identified several different positive approaches for dealing with diversity within a school. These approaches involve special programs for minorities and training staff to reach out to diverse families. Staff training seems to be valuable, given the different values, behaviors, beliefs, and expectations of different cultural/ethnic groups (Kessler-Sklar & Baker). Stanley and Wyness (1999) argue that formal and structured approaches to involving ethnic minority families are inappropriate and an impractical means of communicating with parents. When schools hold a more informal stance towards parents, it seems to be easier to stimulate minority parents' involvement (see also Trumbull, Rothstein-Fisch, & Hernandez, 2003).

For the development of policies and practices in parental involvement, schools may seek assistance from school counseling or support agencies. Despite the widely recognized importance of parental involvement, in the Netherlands, many school counseling agencies are not well equipped for assisting schools in this respect. They often show a lack of expertise in this field. Moreover, there seems to be a lack of coordinated action, which leads to a situation in which most schools face the development of parental involvement policies isolated from other schools; schools don't seem to benefit from the best practices of other schools (Van Daal et al., 2002).

Currently, some local governmental agencies in the Netherlands, such as the Multicultural Institute Utrecht, have taken the initiative to develop school counseling programs. For this study, which is the result of collaboration between the Multicultural Institute Utrecht and the Radboud University Nijmegen, school policies and practices have been investigated from a small sample of four multi-ethnic schools. This study served two goals. First, we aimed at increasing our knowledge of schools' perspectives and practices in dealing with diverse groups of parents. Second, the knowledge obtained may help school counseling agencies to develop programs for assisting multi-ethnic schools in improving their parent involvement policies.

Method

Participants

Interviews were conducted with principals of four multi-ethnic schools in the Netherlands. Principals were interviewed because the focus of the study lies on school perspectives on parent involvement. At one school (Central Elementary), the principal suggested we interview the person who was given the responsibility for parental involvement policy at that particular school.

Setting

All four schools in our study are elementary schools located in the province of Utrecht, which is in the center of the Netherlands. The schools vary in their percentage of ethnic minority pupils, ranging from 20% to 100%. Most of the minority families are Muslim families of Turkish or Moroccan origin. Among the four schools, two schools were public schools, one school was of Roman Catholic denomination, and one school was of a Protestant denomination. In the Netherlands, public and denominational schools receive equivalent central funding, and the number of denominational schools is quite large (approximately 70% of the total number of primary schools, mostly of Catholic and

Protestant signature). Despite increasing levels of secularization in the Netherlands, these numbers have stayed unchanged over the past decades. The large numbers of denominational schools in an increasingly secularizing society implies that parents choose denominational schools for non-religious reasons (Dijkstra, Dronkers, & Hofman, 1997). Moreover, for reasons of convenience, the quality of education, or reputation, even non-religious parents may choose a religious school for their child (Denessen, Driessen, & Slegers, 2005).

The schools contacted by the Multicultural Institute Utrecht agreed to participate in this study. In Table 1, a short characterization of the schools and their respective communities is provided. (Note: school and principal names used throughout this article are pseudonyms.)

Table 1. Schools and Community Composition Characteristics

| | Appelhof | Bolster | Central Elementary | Dukendonck |
|-------------------------------------|---|-------------------------------------|--|---|
| <i>Denomination</i> | Public | Public | Protestant | Roman Catholic |
| <i>School Size and Composition</i> | 123 pupils, 45 native Dutch and 78 from ethnic minorities | 120 pupils, no native Dutch pupils. | 200 pupils, 160 native Dutch and 40 from ethnic minorities | 192 pupils, 142 native Dutch, 50 from ethnic minorities |
| <i>Composition of the Community</i> | mixed (50 % native Dutch, 50% ethnic minorities) | almost entirely ethnic minorities | mixed (60 % native Dutch, 40% ethnic minorities) | mixed (75 % native Dutch, 25% ethnic minorities) |

The population at Appelhof, a public school with 123 pupils, consists of approximately 65% minority pupils. The school has been relocated twice: from a mixed neighborhood to a totally “Black” neighborhood and back to their original location after a couple of years. This means that the oldest and the youngest groups are more mixed than the middle groups, which consist of 90% ethnic minority pupils. The population at Bolster, a public school with approximately 120 pupils, consists of 100% ethnic minority pupils. The school is located in a mixed community, but the native Dutch pupils in this community attend a Protestant primary school that is located close to Bolster. In the case of the Netherlands, schools with a religious affiliation can legally limit the number of non-Protestant, ethnic minority children from entering the school. The Protestant school refers these children to Bolster. Bolster’s population is mixed, with minority pupils from varying countries of origin (mostly Turkey and Morocco). Central Elementary is a primary school with a Protestant denomination with approximately 200 pupils. The school has set a limit for immigrant pupils

to 20%. If more immigrant pupils enter the school, the religious affiliation of the school is said to be in danger. Therefore, the actual percentage of minority pupils is at the 20% limit. Dukendonck is a primary school of Roman Catholic denomination, with 192 pupils, of whom 50 are ethnic minority pupils. According to the school's principal, Mrs. David, the ethnic composition of the school population does reflect the ethnic composition of the neighborhood well. Most of the ethnic minority pupils attending the schools in our study are from Turkish or Moroccan origin. A small number of pupils are from other ethnic regions, such as the Antilles, Surinam, the former Yugoslavia, and Somalia.

Procedure and Analysis of the Interviews

Between October and December 2004, the interviews were held at each respondent's school. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on two major topics: (1) What are the schools' experiences with respect to ethnic minority parent involvement? (2) What are the schools' perspectives and policies regarding ethnic minority parent involvement? The interview guide is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Interview Guide

- What is the composition of the population at the school and of the local community?
- What are the school's experiences with parent involvement, especially of ethnic minority parents?
- What goals does the school aim to reach concerning parent involvement?
- How does the school communicate with parents?
- What are the types and levels of parent participation at the school?
- What problems does the school face in getting parents involved in the school?
- How does the school cope with these problems?
- What policies have been developed to increase levels of parent involvement?
- What are the arguments underlying the school's policies with respect to parent involvement?

The interviews lasted approximately one hour. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and split into fragments concerning one of the aforementioned major topics. As a means of achieving a more accurate representation of respondents' perspectives, member checking was used (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). Interview fragments referring to the two major topics have been summarized and are presented in the results section below.

Results

Schools' Experiences with Respect to Ethnic Minority Parent Involvement

All four schools emphasize the importance of parent involvement, although respondents indicate that parent involvement does not have a high priority in the school. All interviewees indicate that their schools face difficulties in getting ethnic minority parents involved. Contacts between teachers and parents are scarce, and schools indicate that a lot of their initiatives to invite parents to become involved are left unanswered. Applehof's principal, Mrs. Apple, fears that an increase in the number of minority pupils negatively affects the relations between the families and the school: "When the school becomes a totally Black school, it will be very difficult to get the parents into the school. There will be a larger tension between the school and the families." At all schools, ethnic minority parents seem less involved than native Dutch parents. The two main barriers to getting ethnic minority parents involved in the schools are language problems (many ethnic minority parents don't speak Dutch) and cultural differences between schools and families.

Language Problems of Ethnic Minority Parents

To cope with language problems of ethnic minority parents, two schools, Central Elementary and Dukendonck, make interpreters available for non-Dutch speaking parents. Mr. Croes, principal of Central Elementary, points out each parent's right to become informed about school matters. The two schools see making relevant information accessible in parents' own language as their responsibility. Each week on Wednesday there are open hours at Central Elementary for parents. Parents can come to school and have a drink while some teachers and an interpreter are present. In this way, the school aims to create stronger links with ethnic minority parents. At the other two (public) schools, Appelhof and Bolster, it is stressed that mastering the Dutch language is important for parents to get involved with their children's education. In fact, Mrs. Apple indicates language problems as the most important reason for low levels of ethnic minority parent involvement: "parents who don't speak Dutch do not show up at meetings at school, in contrast to those who speak Dutch. When they speak their language appropriately, there is no difference in our approach. Definitely not." All the schools have developed a practice that each child is visited at home on a regular basis. The interviewees indicate that this is

a successful way to communicate with all parents, and that it is worth the large amount of time that these visits take.

Communication with Parents

With regard to communication with parents, all interviewees indicated that formal, written communication does not work, especially for ethnic minority parents. The respondents reported frustration that parents hardly read the schools' newsletters. The interviewees indicated that unanswered initiatives to get ethnic minority parents involved may also lead to frustration. As Mrs. David puts it: "When a teacher organizes a meeting with the parents and puts a lot of effort in organizing a nice meeting and has arranged an interpreter, and when only four parents come and the rest of the parents are absent without notice, that can be very demotivating." It is the shared experience of all the respondents that a personal approach by oral, informal communication is far more fruitful. According to Mr. Bloem, Bolster's principal, it is habitual at Bolster to address parents when they are bringing their children to school. Also, at two schools, Appelhof and Central Elementary, so-called coffee mornings are established to enhance parent-school contacts. At Bolster, reports are not sent home with pupils, but parents are obligated to collect them from the school: "By this, we force parents to come to school." The following quote from the interview with Mr. Bloem illustrates how Bolster has developed communication strategies with ethnic minority families to cope with communication problems between the school and families:

When an appointment is made with a health care worker, we receive a note. The day before the child has to see the health care worker we tell the child: "tomorrow you will see the health care worker. Would you remind your mother of this appointment?"

Finally, to some extent, all schools have brought food and drinks in for their meetings with parents. When parents are invited to provide foods and drinks for activities at school, the attendance of immigrant families is very high. An example at Bolster: "with Christmas, we had a huge buffet. Previous years, the school provided the food. This year the mothers took care of it. They prepared the most wonderful dishes. Great!"

Parent Participation

With respect to formal and informal parent participation at the schools, interviewees indicate that it is very hard to create enthusiasm among ethnic minority parents to become involved in school policy matters. At Appelhof, Bolster, and Dukendonck, ethnic minority parents do have the opportunity to take a seat on the so-called "participation council," but no immigrant parent

has taken this opportunity at any of the schools. The membership of the participation council is made up of several school staff members and parents of pupils, who are chosen in elections held once a year. Before deciding important items such as education matters within the school or regulations for staff members, the administrators have to gain the advice and consent of the participation council. The respondents suggest that immigrant parents do not see it as their task to be active on the participation council. Their formal distance to the school seems to be quite large. At Central Elementary, there is no opportunity for ethnic minority parents to become a member of the participation council. Because of its Protestant denomination, the school does not want parents from other religions to take a seat on the participation council. Since the majority of the immigrant parents are Muslim, they are deliberately excluded from formal involvement at the school. At all four schools, a small number of ethnic minority parents are involved in informal ways. At Appelhof and Dukendonck, one or two ethnic minority parents are active in ethnically mixed parent committees. The parent committee assists with various school events and consists of parent volunteers. At Central Elementary, there is an ethnic minority parent committee that operates apart from a native Dutch parent committee. This group initiates and coordinates parent involvement activities especially for ethnic minority parents. This group, which consists of ethnic minority fathers, is able to reach other parents within the ethnic minority communities. At Bolster, there are separate mother and father committees. One father at Bolster has been given the responsibility for getting ethnic minority parents involved; he has been asked to write a plan for the future. With these activities, Bolster and Central Elementary aim to benefit from the social cohesion within ethnic minority communities. The ethnic minority parent involvement experiences of the four schools are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Ethnic Minority Parent Involvement Experiences of Four Schools

| | Appelhof | Bolster |
|---|--|---|
| <i>Language Problems Approach</i> | no translations or interpreters; school expects parents to learn Dutch | no translations or interpreters; children obliged to talk Dutch; parents are prompted to talk Dutch with their children |
| <i>Communication Concerning Pupils</i> | yearly home visits; weekly newsletters | yearly home visits; oral, informal communication |
| <i>Creating Links with Minority Parents</i> | coffee-mornings, personal approach | personal, oral, informal approach |
| <i>Formal and Informal Ethnic Minority Parent Participation</i> | two ethnic minority fathers in parent committee | separate parent committees for mothers and fathers |

(Table 2 continued on next page)

(Table 2, continued)

| | Central Elementary | Dukendonck |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Language Problems Approach</i> | school acknowledges that not all parents speak Dutch; interpreters available at school | parents are expected to master basic Dutch; incidentally, interpreters are arranged; newsletters are translated |
| <i>Communication Concerning Pupils</i> | monthly newsletters; informal communication | separate meetings for ethnic minority parents; weekly newsletters |
| <i>Creating Links with Minority Parents</i> | coffee-mornings, personal approach | personal approach |
| <i>Formal and Informal Ethnic Minority Parent Participation</i> | ethnic minority parent committee; ethnic minority parents are purposefully excluded from formal participation council | one ethnic minority mother on parent committee |

Schools' Perspectives and Policies Regarding Ethnic Minority Parent Involvement

The schools do not seem to have clear goals for ethnic minority parent involvement. In general, all schools stress that good contact between school and parents is important for children's development. At Bolster, Mr. Bloem states that his school tries to align the parents' and school's practices because "...raising children at home and educating them at school should be seen as one shared activity."

The four stories of the schools reveal one basic dilemma that underlies the schools' perspective on parental involvement: Should schools expect parents to comply with the schools' expectations and culture, or should the school take parents' expectations and cultures into account? This dilemma follows the spectrum as depicted by Tett (2004): Schools can either invest in their communication with all parents to contribute to a democratic partnership, or they can take a more distant position towards parents and formulate rather harsh expectations of parents based on school-defined values. Schools varying positions on this question determine the group specificity of policies and activities. Their position may also lead to relative inactivity in their approach to parental involvement.

Group-Specific Policies

The aforementioned dilemma points at the extent to which ethnic minority parents are seen as a specific group of parents for whom the school has to formulate specific goals and policies. Some respondents indicated that there should

be a uniform parent involvement approach for all parents. Appelhof does not have different expectations of involvement of ethnic minority parents. Mrs. Apple indicates that her school expects parents to learn the Dutch language themselves, in order to be able to communicate with the school. The school doesn't translate newsletters and no interpreter is available for parent-teacher conferences. This approach leads to low levels of involvement of immigrant parents, but the school holds the parents responsible for their own involvement: "we hope we can expect the same from all parents, but in practice it doesn't seem to be possible."

In contrast, at Central Elementary and Dukendonck, specific activities for ethnic minority parents have been developed. At these schools, an interpreter is available at parent-teacher conferences and important newsletters are translated into Turkish and Arab. These schools aim at reaching all parents, although they are disappointed in the low levels of Dutch language skills of the parents and their unwillingness to improve their language skills. According to Mr. Croes of Central Elementary, the school wants to meet ethnic minority families' needs, but he emphasizes that when the school puts forth effort to create links with the parents, the parents should show willingness to do the same: "The ethnic minority fathers indicated that their wives were afraid to come to school, because they didn't know Dutch. We immediately reacted by saying we wanted to meet the mothers and arranged an interpreter. We expected the fathers then to prompt their wives to visit the school."

Bolster as well as Dukendonck focus on the cultures of ethnic minority families. Mr. Bloem reports:

This year the teachers will receive training in communication with ethnic minority parents. For example, in some cultures it is impolite to look each other in the eyes during conversations. Teachers have to be aware of these cultural differences to be able to reach out to ethnic minority parents.

The two denominational schools, Central Elementary and Dukendonck, face difficulties with dealing with Muslim parents when religious meetings are organized. At Central Elementary, Christian festivities were usually celebrated in church. The ethnic minority parents, though, refused to let their children celebrate Christian festivities in a church. The school therefore has decided to relocate those celebrations away from church, to give ethnic minority pupils the opportunity to attend these activities. The Roman Catholic school, Dukendonck, also celebrates Christian festivities at church, and still continues to do so, although Mrs. David is aware of the fact that ethnic minority parents may not allow their children to go there:

After the opening of the year celebration in church, one mother was a little angry because her child had joined the celebration. I said: “you haven’t told us that your child was not allowed to.” She reacted: “Yes, but you know that we would never allow that.”

These two examples of dealing with multi-religious populations illustrate the different stances of Central Elementary and Dukendock towards ethnic minority families.

Bolster and Central Elementary also capitalize on the specific gender differences in immigrant families. They started meetings for ethnic minority fathers and mothers separately. Mr. Bloem of Bolster said: “you cannot ask mothers and fathers to participate in one joint group. Some mothers are not even allowed by their husbands to leave the house.” Also, Mr. Bloem asked the female teachers to take care of the communication with mothers. At Dukendonck, group-specific activities have been organized as needed: “We have organized a meeting about children’s social-emotional development. Because of the absence of immigrant parents, we have arranged a separate meeting for ethnic minority mothers.”

Apparently, schools are facing the difficult task of setting boundaries to their adaptation to ethnic minority cultures. Mr. Bloem said he still wants his school to be a Dutch school, so there are some limits regarding compliance with foreign cultures and some expectations of steps towards assimilation. Mr. Bloem gives the example that many parents have satellites installed on their roofs: “They mainly watch Turkish or Moroccan television. I told parents to buy another TV for their children so that they can watch Dutch television.” Mr. Croes also points to the mutual responsibilities of school and parents: “I educated the parents. I told them that when they are going to miss an appointment, they should call to inform me about that. I used to see it too much from their perspective.”

These experiences, perspectives, and policies of four elementary schools reveal some problems schools face with ethnic minority parent involvement. Also, differences between schools can be interpreted in terms of schools’ positions towards the relation between the school and the ethnic minority communities. Next, we will discuss the results of this study.

Discussion

The stories of four multi-ethnic schools in the Netherlands highlight some discussion points regarding schools’ perspectives on the issue of parental involvement. First, the schools have very general and often very ill-defined goals regarding parents’ involvement. Getting immigrant parents involved seems to

be a goal in itself. However, some schools aim at congruence between families and the school for the benefit of the children. In the case of some schools, parental involvement has not been put on top of the agenda. This finding is consistent with previous studies showing that parental involvement is not a priority issue for many schools (Griffith, 1998). Also, none of the schools has a clear action plan, nor are activities evaluated. Helping schools to formulate clear goals, concrete action plans, and evaluation of the actions seems a welcome contribution to the schools' policies (Epstein et al., 2002; Martínez-González, 2001).

Second, there seems to be a lack of coordination of the policies and activities between schools. Schools do not seem to benefit from best practices of other schools; in fact, they seem unaware of policies and activities at other schools. For improving schools' practices in dealing with various groups of parents, it seems very fruitful to share ideas with colleagues. Schools could form so-called communities of practice or communities of learners on the issue of parental involvement to share ideas and experiences (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Third, schools focus specifically on immigrant parents in their approach to parental involvement. In order to reach out to parents, all the schools except Appelhof explicitly appeal to social networks *within* different groups of parents, which can be a very effective strategy of building social capital (Coleman, 1988). However, there seems to be a lack of attention to the social capital *between* these groups. At the schools in our study, little contact has been observed between native Dutch and immigrant parents and between different groups of immigrant parents (e.g., Turkish and Moroccan parents). None of the schools actively addressed this segregated situation. This may be a side effect of paying too much attention to well-defined groups of less involved parents.

Fourth, schools differ in their view of the right balance between school and family culture. Two schools in our study, Bolster and Central Elementary, seem to be very effective in getting immigrant parents involved in their school. They seriously invest in parental involvement and take the cultures of immigrant parents into account. They try to meet these parents' expectations, although they see limits to this approach. They expect parents to be committed to activities the school offers for their benefit. At the other schools, which hold a more distant position towards minority parents, the situation seems more problematic. These schools seem to have formulated rather harsh expectations of minority parents: They should learn the Dutch language and comply with the schools' values. In spite of these expectations, some initiatives were undertaken to meet differing needs of groups of parents.

Several reasons for the differences between the schools in our study can be put forward. First, the schools seem to vary along the continuum drawn by

Tett (2004). Central Elementary seems to support a democratic partnership in which the importance of the different focus of the educational work of parents is acknowledged, and mutually constructed sets of expectations about what each group can expect of the other are developed. Appelhof seems to hold a position at the other end of the range in which the relationship between school and families is conceived of as a one-way process wherein teachers inform or instruct parents about how they can support the work of the school. The position schools hold on the continuum may be affected by the current political climate in Western countries where threats of terrorism put multicultural societies under pressure, and a negative attitude towards minority families may emerge. Current detractors of multiculturalism focus on forcing immigrant families to leave behind their background culture and to embrace Western values and norms. To them, schools are seen as too responsive to immigrant cultures when they translate newsletters and arrange interpreters for ethnic minority parents. It should be noted that translations of newsletters and arranging interpreters alone probably cannot solve communication problems between parents and schools; communication problems are often due to culture differences between parents and schools at the level of values and beliefs (Trumbull et al., 2003).

One other reason for difficulties with ethnic minority parent involvement could be that the schools' staff lacks the skills for dealing with parents from minority cultures. A lot of teachers have received insufficient training to effectively engage different groups of parents (Epstein, 2003). Teacher training might be needed for the development of teachers' ability to communicate with parents. Schools can learn from the best practices of effective schools in this area (Kessler-Sklar & Baker, 2000). Furthermore, schools may have gotten discouraged or even frustrated by past experiences with uninvolved parents. When a lot of schools' invitations remain unanswered by parents, schools could lose interest in trying to get parents involved. Again, providing these schools with examples of best practices may energize and encourage schools to remain responsive to all parents.

For school counseling agencies, the results of this study may aid them in developing programs to help schools in their approach to parental involvement. A lot of work has been done in the United States, where the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) is a good example of an agency providing ways to assist schools in improving parent involvement. In the future, we will try to help schools in the Netherlands to establish networks to encourage mutual understanding and to share best practices with respect to ethnic minority parent involvement in education.

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