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Home-school relationships and cooperation between parents and supervisory teachers

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Abstract

Supervisory teachers are responsible for the home-school relationship in compulsory schools in Iceland. According to this study on parental involvement in compulsory schools, the practices in the relationship are systematic and regular, and quite similar to those in Denmark and Norway. Data was gathered using two online surveys, one for professional staff in 20 compulsory schools and another for parents of children in those same schools. Ninety percent of parents find communication with supervisory teachers to be easy. The ease of communication is related to overall satisfaction with the experience of school, which demonstrates the importance of the supervisory teachers' role. Cooperating with parents is more difficult for the supervisory teachers. Two-thirds of them said that they spend 2–4 hours per week cooperating with parents, and a major part of the cooperation is concerning individual students. The results show no difference in parental satisfaction with the cooperation in relation to the age of the child, but teachers use more time on cooperation about learning for the older students, which can indicate greater emphasis on learning and achievement. It should be considered to encourage teachers to spend more time on cooperating with the whole parent group, to increase direct contact with all parents and to be aware that parents can be vulnerable due to their child's special needs. In practice, parent participation and involvement must be encouraged in many different ways if the aim is a joint responsibility of student welfare and education.

Introduction

Parents and teachers spend much precious time discussing children in schools, not only about their achievements and well-being but also their behaviour problems and dissatisfaction¹. But what characterizes the relationship between home and school? Is it productive or are there some obstacles that need to be overcome for the benefit of the schoolchildren?

New legislation regarding compulsory schools in Iceland took effect in 2008. The general objectives in Article 2 were much debated, but a consensus was reached on this text regarding the home-school relationship:

The compulsory school shall encourage good cooperation between the school and the home, with the objective of ensuring successful school operation,

general welfare and safety for pupils (The Compulsory School Act 2008).

The policy on joint responsibility of home and school in upbringing and education of children is reinforced in the The Icelandic National Curriculum Guide for Compulsory Schools. General Section (2012).

The Compulsory School Act, the National Curriculum, and regional policy documents do not clearly define the home-school relationship or the different levels of parental involvement. Built on traditions in the Icelandic school system we have chosen in this research to use the different terms as follows. *Communication* refers to exchange of information including *contact* via phone calls, emails, etc. *Cooperation* refers to discussion between parents and teachers or other school staff about issues regarding a student and it includes the parents' *participation* in events and school work. *Parental involvement* refers to the level of cooperation, that is to which extent a joint responsibility on student welfare and education has been reached. The terms *communication*, *cooperation*, and *parental involvement* are in line with Nordahl's (2007) description of levels in home-school cooperation where he defines the following three stages: 1) exchange of information; 2) meaningful discussion; and 3) shared responsibility of pedagogical decisions.

Parents' support of their children comes in various shapes and sizes. Their involvement in schools is strongly influenced by social class of families including economic status, educational level of the mother and psycho-social health, single parent status, and to a lesser degree ethnicity (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003). Studies have shown that parents commonly cease participation in their children's life

as the children become teenagers (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, Nordahl 2007). This affects teenagers' lives in many different and sometimes undesirable ways. It has also been well established in educational research that parental involvement in schools has a positive impact on achievement and adjustment (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, Hattie 2009). The question remains how parents' participation can be sustained throughout their children's adolescent years. The answer is probably anchored in different cultural and social premises, but it is widely accepted that schools must nurture the cooperation and aim at involving all parents.

The School Council

Every single compulsory school in Iceland is now required to have its own School Council with two parents as representatives (The Compulsory School Act 2008). As before, every school district has a single school board for all the compulsory schools in the community and the parents' association elected one representative to take part in its activities (The Compulsory School Act 1995).

Parents' obligations have increased as well as their possibilities to influence school practices as stated in Article 8:

The School Council participates in policy making for the school and in devising and developing the school culture. The School Council shall discuss the school curriculum guide, annual operational schedule, financial plan and other plans regarding school activities. The School Council shall have a saying regarding any plans for major changes to school operations and activities before a final decision is made thereof. The School

Council shall monitor security, conditions and general well-being of pupils (The Compulsory School Act 2008).

The role of the Parent Council has also changed as defined in Article 9 “to support school activities, encourage pupils’ welfare and promote the relations between school and home.” Articles 8 and 9 together grant significant possibilities of influence for parents in their children’s schools. New legislation and associated regulations are indicative of the educational policy, which aims to increase the impact and responsibility of parents.

Both educational-political and pedagogical arguments support this emphasis on the role of parents and their influence within schools (Finnbogason 2009). But parent representatives in school councils are facing complicated tasks since parents are never a homogenous group. In a Swedish study about parental involvement through local school boards, Kristoffersson (2009) finds that parental influence has increased, but she is concerned if it really has had a positive effect on local democracy as intended.

The supervisory teachers’ role

Every parent has legal rights regarding his or her own child. Parents have the right to choose a compulsory school for their children in accordance with the regulation of the municipality and to have special needs of their children met at that school. They also have the right to information about school activities and their children’s education. It is affirmed by the new legislation that the contact person for parents is the supervisory teacher who is often the home-room teacher for a group or class of students. The supervisory teacher role is described as follows:

Supervisory teachers shall follow closely their pupils’ studies and their personal development, their condition and general welfare, they shall guide their pupils in their studies and school work, provide assistance and advice regarding personal matters and thus strengthen the cooperation between school and home (The Compulsory School Act 2008).

The special role of the supervisory teacher as a link between school and home, and as students’ special guardian and advisor, is well known and verified in different ways in the Icelandic society. This status is for example affirmed at the official website for *The Office of the Ombudsman for Children* (2012), where it is stated that the supervisory teacher should always be the first person to consult when students encounter some kind of problem that affects their studies and well-being at school.

The supervisory teacher role in a class is rewarded with a wage increase in teachers’ contracts (The Association of Teachers in Primary and Lower Secondary Schools 2011). The definition of full-time work for a teacher under the age of 55 includes the following three main components: teaching 26 lessons corresponding to 17.33 hours; preparing and processing instruction, 10.67 hours; and work managed by the school principal, 9.14 hours, which 4.14 of those hours can be scheduled for meetings and group work. It is interesting to see that the tasks to be prioritized within the 9.14 hours are listed in the contract in the following order: “Cooperation between professionals within and out of school, cooperation with parents, registration of information, supervision and control of classrooms, and student interviews.”

Home-school relationships in the Nordic countries

The Nordic countries all have long traditions of home-school cooperation and the importance is unquestioned, at least officially. In Denmark, for example, several political campaigns, programs and pedagogical measures during the last 30–40 years have emerged to strengthen the home-school relationship. These actions have been grounded on the rhetoric that this is in the child's best interest, and that cooperation between home and school is good – the more the better (Dannesboe et al. 2012). Dannesboe, Kryger, Palludan and Ravn are critical towards “the more the better” rhetoric and argue that it is time to shift the focus and pay attention to the quality of the relationship. In newly published studies, they focus on students and parents, and on the social significance of the home-school relations in everyday life, with a special interest in the impact of the prevailing practices of cooperation. They find the practices surprisingly similar from one school to another, and describe it as follows:

The basic elements are to be found in very different schools, from early childhood to graduation. The standardized basic elements are one or two home-school conferences per year, where parents and teachers – and sometimes students – talk about the student, and one or two common parent meetings. Added to this are some letters with information, communication through information systems on the Internet, individual development plans and various social events (Dannesboe et al. 2012).

The features of the cooperation in Norway are described in a similar way. The direct contact between teachers and parents is limited to participation in one common parent meeting and in one parent-teacher conference for 30 minutes per semester (Nordahl 2007). The child is normally present during the conferences. Of the parents, 53.2% say they have had contact with the teachers by telephone; and Nordahl points out that only half of the Norwegian parent group has had a direct conversation with the teachers where solely adults were present, restricting possibilities for real dialogs. The majority of teachers, interviewed by Nordahl, report that they seek contact with parents only when needed, often meaning just when something negative has happened at school. This can easily have negative consequences for the relations between teachers and parents. Nordahl (2007) finds it rather noteworthy and unfortunate that schools and teachers do not focus more on cooperating with parents, and he states that there is a long distance between the ideal and the reality in this matter.

Parental involvement decreases as the child grows older

Epstein (2007) and Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) express that the extent of parental involvement diminishes as the child grows older. A comparison of parents' experiences of their cooperation with the schools shows, according to Nordahl (2007), that it becomes qualitatively worse as schoolchildren become older. Parents receive less information, have fewer dialogs with teachers, their influence becomes weaker and their knowledge of curriculum and textbooks decreases. Nordahl (2007) discusses that this may be

an expression of the schools and the teachers becoming more autonomous as the students grow older, and less influenced by parents. Yet students' influences do not seem to increase significantly.

Kryger (2012) researched ninth grade students' own stories about their interpretation and meaning of the home-school relationship. Kryger concludes that the established forms of cooperation between home and school leave very little space for students' perspectives. He states that it is especially important for teenagers, developing their own identity, to find their own way to deal with the parent-teacher cooperation.

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) point out that lessening parental involvement as the child gets older is strongly influenced by the child taking an active mediating role. A possible explanation for the dwindling contact may be that teenagers simply need to distance themselves from adults, parents and teachers, and need more space as they mature.

Supporting parents

In the literature about home-school relations one can frequently see that empowering parents is considered important and beneficial for the children (Aðalbjarnardóttir 2007, Christiansen 2010, Epstein 2001, Olsen and Fuller 2008, Sæmundsdóttir and Karvelsdóttir 2008). The professional teacher should support and encourage parents in their role as parents (Christiansen 2006, Nordahl 2007). The good intentions are very clear, but how to go about managing the delicate task of support and empowerment is not as clear.

Parents with more capital and capacity, who have experience of success in school

and highly value education tend to be better able to tackle home-school relationships (Dannesboe et al. 2012). Birna María Svanbjörnsdóttir (2007) researched whether parents wanted support in their parental role or not, and asked parents of children aged 4–12 years in Iceland. Almost 70% of respondents would like support in their parenting role but parents who considered themselves well competent to raise a child wished for less support than others. One has to wonder about the 30% in the group that does not want support and what differentiates them from the parent group in general.

Birte Ravn writes about *the compensatory rationale*, as the view of a particular group of parents as being unable to socialize their own children (Dannesboe et al. 2012). An example from 2010 of this rationale is the allocation of 56 million Danish kroner to strengthen the home-school cooperation with immigrant parents (Dannesboe et al. 2012). The danger of teachers patronizing parents is apparent despite all of the good intentions, and it may explain why some parents turn away from school when their children get older.

Monika Vinterek (2006) has analyzed how school practices in Sweden have been influenced by the concept of individualized learning, and developed through several phases since the 1960s. Vinterek states that students today are expected to take more individual responsibility and can therefore have more influence on their learning, but the responsibility has partly been moved from the school and onto the students and their parents' shoulders, thereby sometimes accentuating the vulnerability of students with lack of resources.

A model of partnership

Joyce L. Epstein has been researching and advising on how to build partnerships with parents, using the NNPS Partnership Model. The model consists of the following six keys or types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein 2002). The communicating key is described as: "Two-way communicating activities keep families informed about and involved in school programs and students' progress." The partnership framework has its version for middle and high schools so "schools can create programs that enable all parents to remain engaged with their teens and their schools." Epstein (2007) states the following:

Studies are accumulating that show that family involvement through high school is important for student success. The growing literature yields three main conclusions:

- Parents want more and better information to guide their students through middle level and high school
- Students benefit from family and community involvement in high school
- Educators in middle level and high schools must take responsibility for developing goal-linked partnership programs that reach all families and that help students succeed

It is clear that in the NNPS frameworks, the school professionals have the responsibility of initiating and facilitating two-way communication. This view on the responsibility is revealed in many writings about parental

involvement and home-school relations (Nordahl 2007, Christiansen 2010). Maybe it is to counter the fact that many middle level and high school teachers report that the only time they contact families is when students are in trouble (Epstein 2007).

Subtle ways of support

Parental involvement is considerably broader and more complicated than earlier parental involvement theories have acknowledged, states William H. Jeynes (2011) in a meta-analytic research and advises that "parental involvement programs should incorporate more of the subtle components in order to maximize the efficacy of these initiatives." Traditionally, parental engagement is viewed as a set of deliberate, overt actions such as frequently attending school events and helping children with their homework. Jeynes' results from three meta-analyses have challenged that traditional image and indicate that the most powerful aspects of parental involvement are frequently subtle such as maintaining high expectations of one's children, communicating with children and parental style. Moreover, Jeynes finds an increasing body of research suggesting that the key qualities for fostering parental involvement in schools may also be subtle:

In other words, whether teachers, principals, and school staff are loving, encouraging, and supportive to parents may be more important than the specific guidelines and tutelage they offer to parents (Jeynes 2011).

The meta-analyses done by Jeynes (2011) confirm that parental involvement is more complex and a considerably broader issue than earlier research indicated.

Desforges and Abouchaar's review about the impact of parental involvement, parental support and family education on pupil achievement and adjustment stresses:

The most important finding from the point of view of this review is that parental involvement in the form of "at-home good parenting" has a significant positive effect on children's achievement and adjustment even after all other factors shaping attainment have been taken out of the equation. In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. The scale of the impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003).

An Icelandic study by Sigurgeirsson and Kaldalóns (2006) in compulsory schools in Reykjavík shows that in those schools where teachers had positive attitudes towards parental involvement the disciplinary problems were fewer than in schools where home-school relations were weaker. There were frequent invitations for encouraging parents to get involved; great emphasis was on informing parents with newsletters and emails and the focus was on mediating positive results, successes and victories. Even though causality is questionable in this context, the findings reveal that the staff in the "problem-free" schools managed to blend warmth and openness into their organized cooperation with parents, and this correlated with fewer disciplinary problems.

The review above shows that parents' role in their children's learning and in

school practices is complex, and changes when the child grows older. Thus, the questions set forth in this article are as follows:

- How is the home-school relationship organized?
- What characterizes communication and cooperation between parents and supervisory teachers?
- What affects parent satisfaction with home-school relations?
- Is cooperation different depending on the age of students?

Method and analysis

The participants were all teachers, principals and other staff members in 20 compulsory schools in Iceland that were willing to take part in the project, and the parents of the children attending those schools. The schools were in four municipalities; 17 were selected randomly and three schools were selected because of their emphasis on individualized learning. The sample is large; for example, the students in those 20 schools were 17% of all students in compulsory schools in Iceland.

Some of the questions were answered by all the staff, but some were answered only by supervisory teachers. Of the staff members, 312 were supervisory teachers. An online questionnaire using QuestionPro online survey software was developed by the research team using guidelines on survey construction from Karlsson (2003) and Þórsdóttir and Jónsson (2007). A questionnaire was developed for parents, which included questions about parents' background, the special needs of their child, their cooperation with school staff and satisfaction with the service their child is get-

ting at the school. Questionnaires for the school staff included questions for supervisory teachers about their cooperation with parents. All questionnaires were pretested in a pilot study in one compulsory school and all reviewed by an expert in survey construction.

Teachers and other staff answered an online questionnaire that was sent to their work email address. They answered four questionnaires in the school year 2009–2010. An online questionnaire was sent to parents in April 2011 using email addresses found in school computer files. If two email addresses were on file, for example, for both the mother and the father, one was selected randomly. If a parent had more than one child in the school, the child the parents should answer for was selected randomly. To follow-up, emails were sent twice to the parents who did not respond, and the principal of the school also sent letters to parents encouraging participation. If no answer arrived from the parent and another email was on file with the school, the questionnaire was sent to that email address, with two follow-up emails encouraging participation.

The response rate for the parents was 67% ($n=3481$) and for staff it was around 82% ($n=823$). The response rate is good, but the response rate for surveys frequently falls below 50% (Saunders 2012).

The data was analyzed with SPSS 20. Percentages, odd ratio and Spearman correlation was computed. Spearman correlation is used for variables measured on ordinal scale and odd ratios are used to estimate probabilities when dealing with dichotomous variables.

Results

Parents and school professionals agreed that working together is important for the education of children. Overall, 99% of parents and school professionals considered parental support to be rather or very important for academic achievement of children. Furthermore, 95% of teachers considered cooperation with parents as being vital to ensuring proper behavior in schools. Despite almost complete agreement on the importance of parental support in the educational process, opinions were split on the parents' possibilities to influence school practices. About a quarter (26%) of parents said that parents could have little or very little impact on school practices, 39% said they could have neither great nor little impact, and 35% said they could have a great or very great impact on school practices.

The cooperation between parents and supervisory teachers

Parents were asked how easy or difficult it was to communicate with school principals, supervisory teachers, and teachers in general. Among the parents who had been in contact with those school professionals, 65% thought it was very easy to communicate with supervisory teachers, 38% thought it was very easy to communicate with other teachers, and 42% thought it was very easy to communicate with school principals (see also Figure 1). On the other hand, when supervisory teachers were asked if they found cooperation with parents to be easy or difficult, 15% said it was very easy, 62% found it rather easy, but over 7% found it rather or very difficult to cooperate with parents.

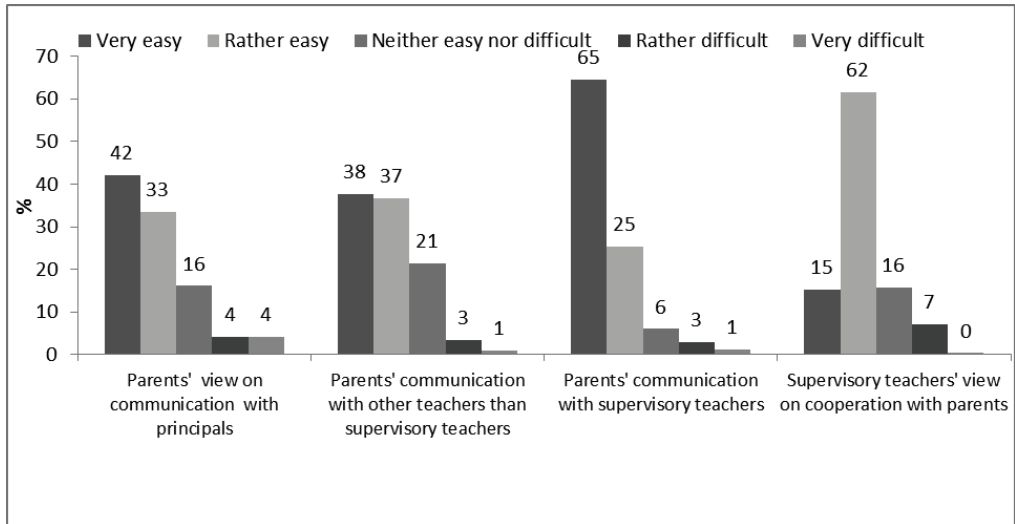


Figure 1. Parents' (n=2896) and supervisory teachers' (n=296) views on the ease or difficulty of cooperation between the groups.

Most of the responsibility for parent-teacher cooperation in Icelandic schools falls on the shoulders of supervisory teachers. On average, each supervisory teacher (n=312) was responsible for 22.0 (SD=6.62) students, and 70% of them had 18 to 26 students in their homeroom.

Almost all parents (99.5%) said that they had communicated with supervisory teachers, 89% with school principals and 85% with other teachers.

Most of the supervisory teachers (69%) had scheduled parent-teacher conferences twice each school year, where 26% met with parents three times. According to the supervisory teachers, 79% of those meetings took 15 minutes or less, and 89% said that students were always present during these conferences.

Supervisory teachers were asked how many hours per week they used for providing information to parents and on the cooperation with them. The majority, or 66%,

said they used 2–4 hours per week, 24% said they used 1 hour or less per week and 6% said they used 5–7 hours. Questions regarding the proportion of time supervisory teachers used on providing information and for cooperation revealed that a large proportion of time was used on matters concerning individual students. About 21% of the teachers said that more than half (51–75% or 76–100%) of the time was used on matters of individual student behavioral problems, and 18% said that more than half of the time was used on individual student learning (see also Figure 2).

Supervisory teachers were asked to estimate how often they communicated with parents on matters concerning individual students through phone calls, written messages or meetings. The frequency of communication is shown in Figure 3. Sending written messages to parents was the most common form (74% did so at least weekly), followed by talking with some par-

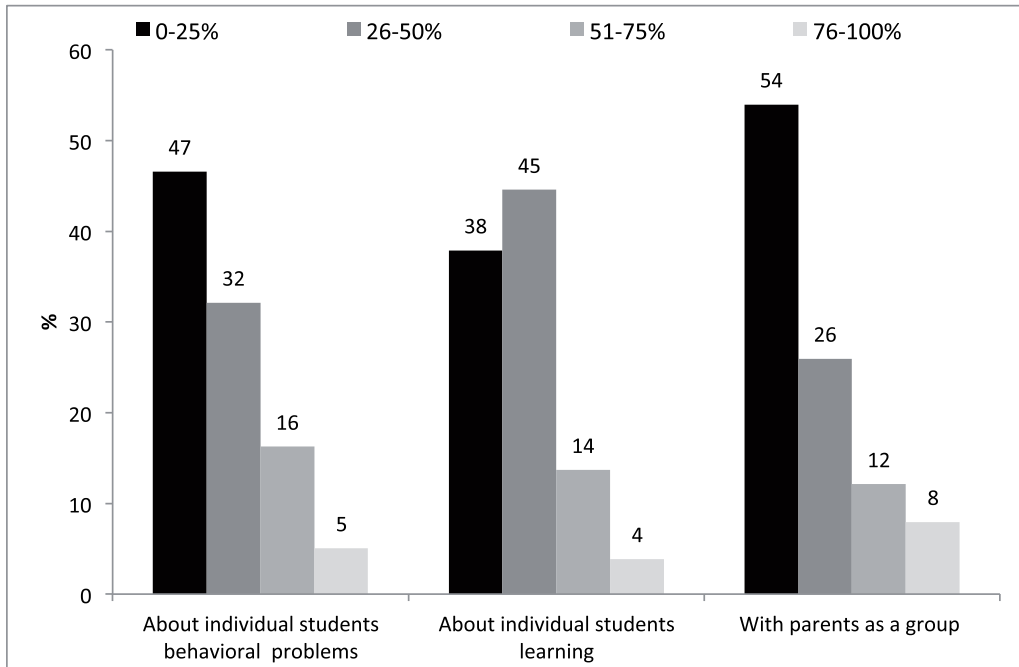


Figure 2. Proportion of time used on different topics of communication; supervisory teachers' (n=293) estimates.

ents on the phone (41%) and 13% met with some parents at least weekly.

Supervisory teachers were asked about the contents of the communication they initiated with parents. The results can be seen in Figure 4. Of the teachers, 35% said they had weekly or more frequent contact with some parents about their children's behavior, and 34% said they had weekly or more frequent contact with some parents about their children's homework. A quarter of teachers had weekly or more frequent contact with some parents about learning.

Parents were also asked about the contents of communication they initiated (see Figure 5). Of the parents, 2-3% said they had at least weekly contact with teachers about their child's learning, behavior or interaction with other students. Over half of

the parents said they contacted teachers less than yearly about their child's behavior or interaction with other students, and 28% said they contacted teachers less than yearly about their child's learning. Parents were not asked about contact regarding homework.

What affects parents' satisfaction with home-school relations?

Parents' education, child gender or age did not affect the assessment of whether the parents considered communication with supervisory teachers to be easy or difficult.

There was a positive correlation between how easy communication with the supervising teacher was and parental satisfaction with school in general ($r_s(2851)=0.34, p<0.001$). This means that

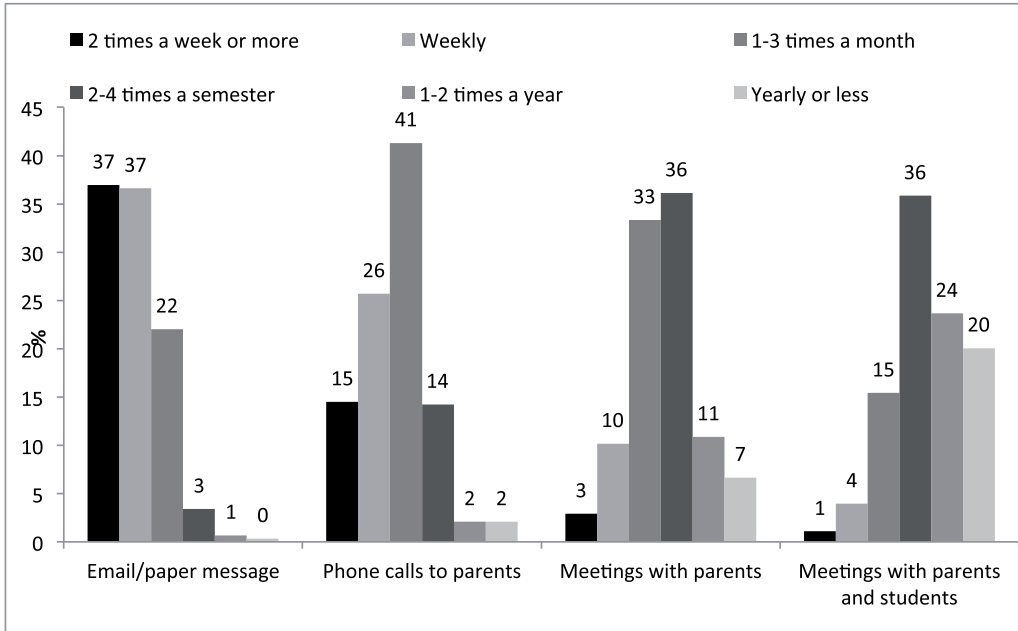


Figure 3. Frequency of communication with parents; supervisory teachers' (n=293) estimates.

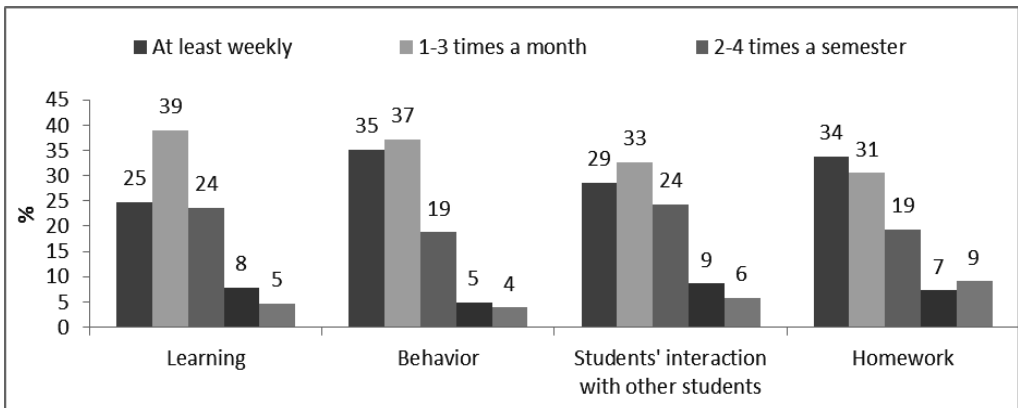


Figure 4. Frequency of supervisory teachers' (n=290) initiated communication with parents regarding different issues.

easy communication with the supervisory teacher has a tendency to go hand-in-hand with overall satisfaction with the experience of school. There is a similar correlation between the overall satisfaction with

school and the easiness of communication with other teachers and the principals.

In general, parents were satisfied with the school but the attitude of parents toward the services their child received at

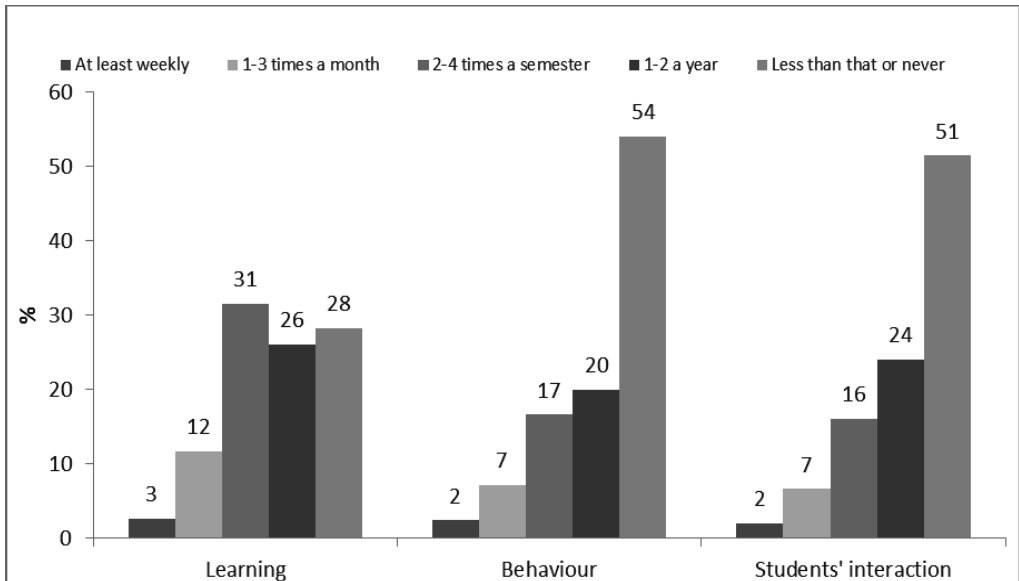


Figure 5. Frequency of parents' initiated communication with teachers; parents' (n=2885) estimates.

school seemed to be related to the assessment of how easy or difficult it is to communicate with supervisory teachers (see Figure 6).

This means that easy communication with the supervisory teacher has a tendency to go hand-in-hand with overall satisfaction with the experience of school.

According to the parents, a total of 26% of the children were considered to have special needs that affected their schooling. The two largest groups of children had learning disabilities and/or behavioral problems. Those accounted for 95% of students with special needs. Of parents, 22% said their child had learning disabilities and 8% said their child had behavioral problems. More

than half of parents in both groups believed the child did not receive sufficient assistance at school.

If the child had no learning disabilities, 3% of the parents said the communication with the supervisory teacher was rather or very difficult. If the child had learning disabilities and received the service he or she needed, only 0.7% found communication difficult; but, if the child had a disability and the parents judged the service as insufficient, 13% found the communication with the supervisory teachers to be difficult. In other words, parents of a child with a learning difficulty, and who perceived their child's service as inadequate, were 4.5 times more likely to find the communication difficult (OR 4.5 CI-95% 3.0-6.7) than parents of a child with no learning difficulties.

The same pattern can be seen when viewing the responses of the parents of

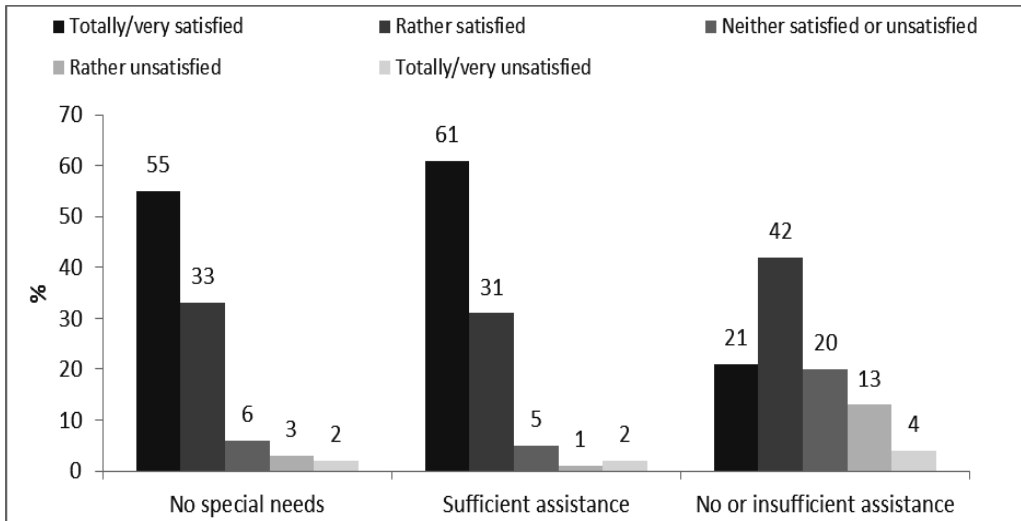


Figure 6. Parental (n=3243) satisfaction with school by special needs and services provided.

children with behavioral problems. Of those that were not satisfied with the way the school responded, 18% said the communication with supervisory teachers was difficult, compared to only 1% of those who said the school responded in a satisfactory manner. Parents who were not satisfied with the services were 6.2 times more likely to judge the communications as being difficult than parents of children without behavioral problems (OR 6.2 CI-95% 3.7-10.5).

These results show that when parents of children with learning or behavioral problems feel that their needs are not met at school they perceive the communication with supervisory teachers as difficult and are dissatisfied with the school in general. What is surprising is that if parents feel the special needs of their child is met, then they are more satisfied and find the communication to be easier than parents that have children with no disabilities.

Home-school relations and age

When comparing responses by the age of students, the following categories are used: young (6–9 years), middle (10–12 years) and teenagers (13–15 years). There is no difference in how easy or difficult parents find communication with teachers and principals, or how much influence they think parents can have on school practices, based on the age of the children.

However, when looking at how frequently parents contact the school, there is a difference (see Figure 7). About 65% of parents of teenagers contact the school less than yearly about their child’s behavior, and 47% of parents of the youngest students have so little contact. A similar pattern emerges about student interaction with other students: 42% of parents of the students in grades 1–4 have less than yearly contact, and 68% of the parents of teenagers. No difference was found in the frequency of contact concerning the child’s learning.

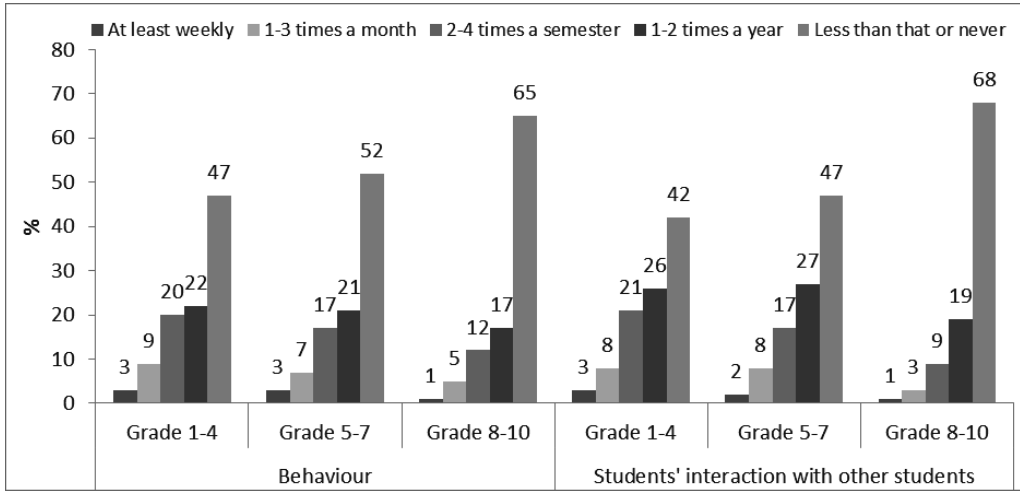


Figure 7. Frequency of parent contact with the teacher by student's grade; parents' (n=2867) estimates.

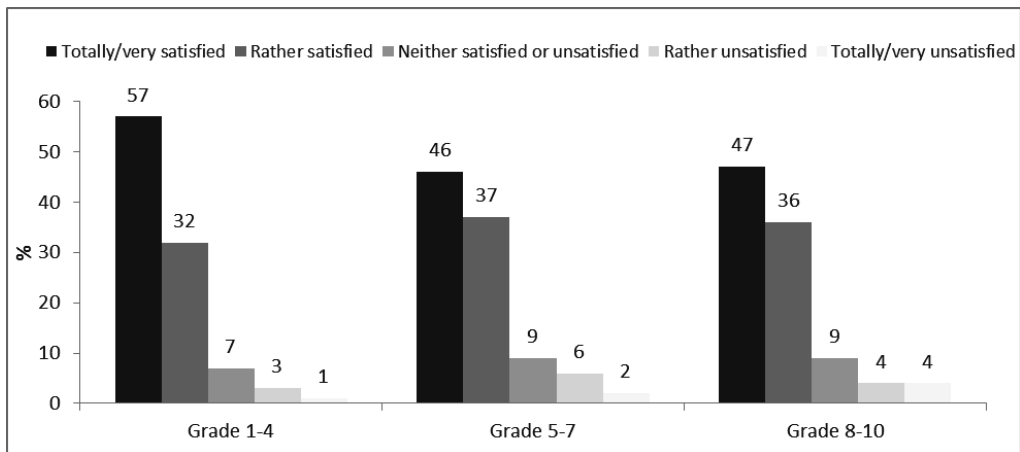


Figure 8. Parental (n=3431) satisfaction with school by students' age group; parents' estimates.

Parental satisfaction with school in general is lower in the middle age and teenage group than in the youngest group (see Figure 8). There is no difference in satisfaction with the services provided for children with special needs; but, the difference in the percentage of students that parents consider to have learning or behavioral difficulties is quite striking. In the youngest

group it is 19%, in the middle group 29% and in the teenage group it is 28%.

Supervisory teachers were asked about the proportion of time they used on cooperation with parents as a group, as well as with individual parents. There was no significant difference in the proportion of time spent on cooperation about individual students' behavioral problems, or giving infor-

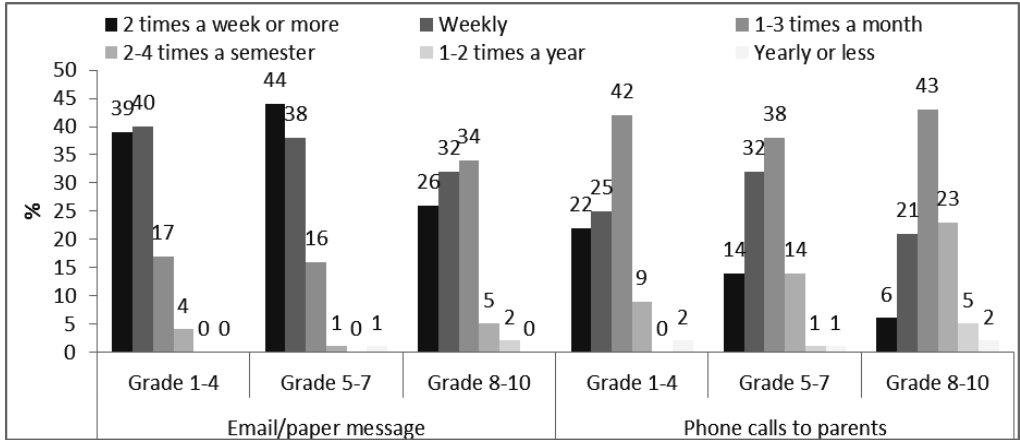


Figure 9. Frequency of communication with parents outside of scheduled meetings by grade level; supervisory teachers' (n=266) estimates.

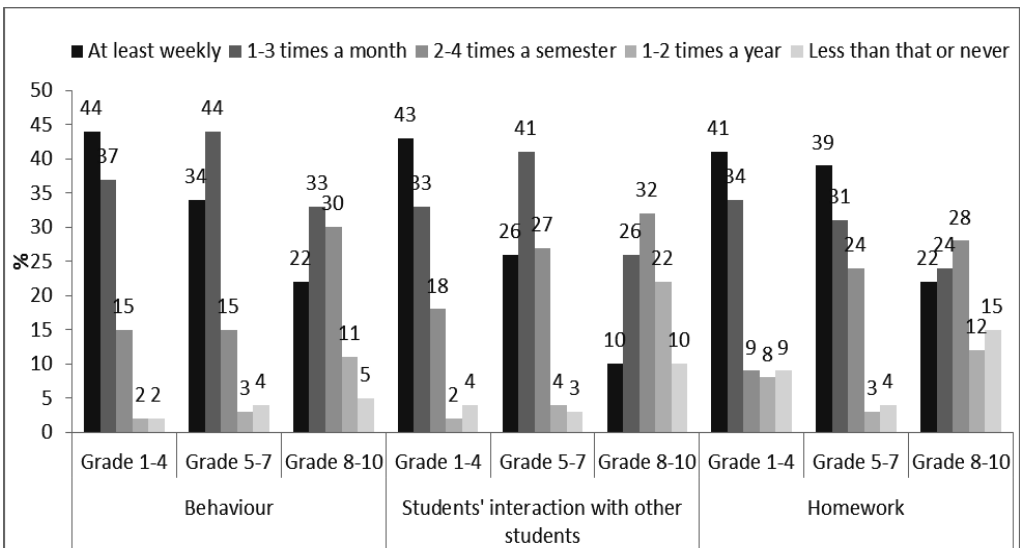


Figure 10. Frequency of communication with parents outside of scheduled meetings by grade level; supervisory teachers' (n=268) estimates.

mation to parents as a group by grade level. But more time seems to be spent on cooperation about individual students' learning the older the student is: 10% of supervisory teachers in grades 1-4, 22% in grades

5-7 and 24% in grades 8-10 said they use more than half of the total time used for cooperation on this task.

There is no difference in frequency of meetings with parents by grade level. On

the other hand frequency of email/paper message and phone calls decreases as the students get older (see Figure 9).

The contents and frequency of communication between teachers and parents by grade level can be seen in Figure 10. As the students grow older the teachers are less likely to contact parents about behavior, students' interaction with other students and homework, but there was no difference in frequency of communication about learning.

Discussion and conclusions

The findings show that both parents and school professionals find parental involvement in compulsory schools to be essential. The home-school relationship rests mostly upon the contact between parents and the supervisory teachers of their child. But what do those findings mean? The parental involvement is a young research field in Iceland and the relevant terms are not clearly defined in official documents such as the National Curriculum or in this research project. When writing about this research it became apparent that it is necessary to clarify the terms in use and link them to concepts in Nordic and international discourse. For example, there is no clear or common distinction between communication and cooperation as terms in discourse about parents in education in Iceland. When answering the research questions on the home-school relationship and parental involvement, the study conducted here tries to clarify the terms in use.

The answer to the first research question regarding the organization of the home-school relationship is that it seems to run through conventional channels. The usual practices in the home-school rela-

tionship in Iceland are similar to those described in Denmark and Norway (Dannesboe et al. 2012, Nordahl 2007). There are two to three brief parent-teacher conferences per year in addition to communication via letters, emails and phone calls. Parents also attend various social events. The organization of communication seems to be systematic and regular, which is of key importance in empowering parents and keeping them involved in schools (Christiansen 2010, Epstein 2002, Epstein 2007, Nordahl 2007, Sæmundsdóttir and Karvelsdóttir 2008). The question arises if this traditional way of communication between parents and school staff is a necessary exchange of information or an indication of cooperation with more profound discussions regarding students in concern.

Nordahl (2007) pointed out that for each school year just about half of the Norwegian parents had direct contact with the teachers with only adults present. Over half of the Icelandic parents said that they contacted teachers less than annually regarding their child's behavior or students' interaction, and less than 28% about their child's learning. This indicates that many Icelandic parents are rather distant from the schools just as the Norwegian ones, which adds to the question whether this traditional way of communication can be interpreted as cooperation.

A major part of the communication between parents and supervisory teachers is about issues concerning individual students.

The second question concerns characteristics of the communication and cooperation

between parents and supervisory teachers. Almost all the parents had communicated with supervisory teachers and two out of three parents found it very easy and 25% found it to be easy. This indicates a comfortable relationship for the vast majority of parents. The supervisory teachers were asked about cooperation with parents and some of them found it to be difficult. That should not be surprising because much of their time for cooperation with individual parents is used for things that are most likely somewhat problematic or what has been described as seeking contact when needed (Epstein 2007, Nordahl 2007).

A large proportion of teachers' work time outside of teaching is used for cooperation with parents. According to teachers' contracts (The Association of Teachers in Primary and Lower Secondary Schools 2011), near five hours per week are assigned for other responsibilities than teaching-related tasks and scheduled meetings. Two-thirds of the teachers said that they spend 2–4 hours per week on the cooperation, which is a considerable part of those five hours. The recording of a wide variety of information is time consuming and so is work on individual development plans. A major part of the communication between parents and supervisory teachers is about issues concerning individual students. Apparently Icelandic teachers spend more time on communicating with parents about poor behavior or learning difficulties rather than on growing positive relationships with the diverse parent group or in real cooperation. Given these facts, it must be important to assess whether supervisory teachers' time on home-school relations is wisely spent.

But what affects parent satisfaction with home-school relation? According to

Desforges and Abouchaar (2003), the parents' involvement in schools is strongly influenced by the social class including economic status and the mother's educational level. In this study, parental education did not affect the assessment of whether the parents' communication with supervisory teachers was considered easy or difficult. On the other hand, the attitude of parents toward the services their child received at school seemed to influence their assessment of the relation with supervisory teachers. Parents of children with learning difficulties or behavioral difficulties were more likely to judge the communications as being difficult compared to parents of children without learning or behavioral problems. It is surprising that the group of parents that reports the easiest communication with supervisory teachers are parents of children with disabilities that feel their needs are met at the schools. Parents' educational background did not matter but quality of school services had a great impact. This may be interpreted as a sign of disappointment and the supervisory teachers take the blame. Parents communicate with the supervisory teachers and they answer for much of the school's obligations towards students according to the second paragraph of The School Act 2008, which is reflecting the educational discourse and expectations in the society.

The last research question is concerned with the difference in cooperation depending on the age of students. There is no difference in parental satisfaction about the parents' communication with the supervisory teachers in relation to the age of the child. But similar to what Epstein (2007), Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) and Nordahl (2007) found, there seems to be less contact as the children grow older.

This is alarming in regards to children with disabilities, as our findings show that parents of older children are more likely to believe that their child has disabilities than parents of younger children.

There is no difference in proportion of time used by supervisory teachers for contact about behavior problems and sending information to the whole parent group, but they use a greater proportion of time on cooperation about learning when the students are older. This can be an indicator of greater emphasis on learning and achievement and can be related to what Nordahl (2007) discusses: schools and teachers become more autonomous and less influenced by parents as the students grow older. This also relates to what Kryger (2012) stated about teenagers needing distance from adults to develop their own identities. Therefore, these changes in home-school relationships are not necessarily negative, except for teenagers that need more support.

This discussion revealed some important points. Even though parents have more options to influence school practices by virtue of the new legislation from 2008 and their participation has been encouraged (Finnbogason 2009), only 35% of the parents feel they can have a great impact on school practices. The policy of moving toward a more individualized teaching and learning has emphasized increased parental involvement (Vinterek 2006, *The Compulsory School Act 2008, Teaching and Learning in Icelandic Schools*). In this regard the practices have not changed as

much as preferred, and “the more the better” rhetoric that has been widely promoted in Iceland, like in Denmark (Dannesboe et al. 2012), sounds rather simplistic.

Easy communication with supervisory teachers is related to overall satisfaction with the experience of school, which demonstrates the importance of that role. The supervisory teacher is in a key position to nourish the more subtle ways of parental involvement such as encouraging parents to maintain high expectations of their child and communicate with their child (Jeynes 2011). Furthermore, an Icelandic study revealed that those schools that managed to blend warmth and openness into their cooperation with parents had fewer disciplinary problems (Sigurgeirsson and Kaldalóns 2006), and in developing that relationship the supervisory teachers are key figures.

The findings suggest that teachers should be encouraged to spend more time on cooperating with the whole parent group, to increase direct contact with parents and to be aware that parents can be vulnerable due to their child’s special needs. Communication is necessary between parents and supervisory teachers for cooperation to occur, but the study has revealed a tendency to assume that communication between parents and teachers automatically should be named cooperation. In practice, parents’ participation and involvement in education must be encouraged in many different ways if the aim is a joint responsibility of student welfare and education.

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Notes

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