R

Desirable Parental Participation in Activities in Compulsory Schools

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Abstract

This study on parental involvement in 20 compulsory schools in Iceland reveals what school professionals, teenagers and parents think is desirable parent participation. The majority of the students want their parents to participate, but primarily only in the academic portion of their school activities. The school staff was very positive towards traditional parents' participation in social activities, but reluctant when participation touched upon their expertise in academic activities. The parents also found it most desirable to participate in social activities, and generally the more educated parents favoured parental involvement more than the parents with less education. In all groups, the interest in parents' participation declined as the students grew older. The findings are discussed in light of Epstein's family-school-community partnership model (Epstein 2011, Epstein et al. 2002), some critical perspectives, and Jeynes' (2011) meta-analytical research which claims that supporting parents in subtle ways is most effective.

Introduction

Most people believe that parents contribute to their children's success in compulsory school by participating in school-related activities. Parents and their participation do matter; however, how this participation should be supported and organised is not as clear. Parents' opinions and wishes about the home-school relationship differ widely and their participation in school activities differs likewise. Teachers and other school professionals have their own preferences regarding this relationship and so do students. Parental influence in schools has increased (Kristofferson 2009). Conflicting interests mark modern life and Marinósson (2002) remarked that it could come in handy for busy parents if schools were to expect only small interventions on their behalf.

The expectations that parents, school staff and students have concerning parents' participation is the main focus of this paper. It elaborates upon findings from research by Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir (2012) that were focused on the organization of home-school relationships, cooperation between parents and homeroom or supervisory teachers and the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the relationship. Both contribute to a research on parental involvement in schools within a larger research project.[1]

What do teenagers, parents and school professionals find to be desirable in parental participation in school activities?

Expectations about the home-school relationship are shaped by habits and traditions within schools and communities, but also by

several other factors, some of which can be influenced or at least clarified for a better understanding of parental involvement. The key question here is: What do teenagers, parents and school professionals find to be desirable in parental participation in school activities?

Home-school relationships

Empowering parents is considered to have great favourable impact on their children (Aðalbjarnardóttir 2007, Christiansen 2010, Epstein 2011, Olsen and Fuller 2008, Sæmundsdóttir and Karvelsdóttir 2008). However, not all parents do want support in their parental role (Svanbjörnsdóttir 2007). Teachers as professionals should support and encourage parents in their parental role, and homeroom or supervisory teachers play a key role in this context as the main link between the home and the school (Christiansen 2006, Nordahl, 2007). These notions, so frequently found in the literature, are clearly supported in findings from this research by Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir (2012). Two important parts of these findings are worth recalling.

Firstly, around 90% of the parents found communication with the homeroom or supervisory teachers to be easy. The ease of communication was related to the overall satisfaction with the experience of the school, which demonstrates the importance of the homeroom or supervisory teachers' role. The parents and the professional school staff agreed that working together was beneficial for the education of children. 99% of the parents and the school professionals considered parental support to be rather or very important for the academic achievement of children and 95% of the teachers found cooperation with the parents to be vital for proper behaviour in schools (Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2012).

This fits with what has been firmly established in educational research, that parental involvement in schools has a positive impact on achievement and adjustment (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, Hattie 2009).

Family involvement programs nowadays often go beyond linking children's home and classroom learning experiences to include the communities where the families live

Secondly, results on differences in home-school relationships that were related to the age of students showed that the focus of the contact seemed to change as the students grew older; the contact between parents and teachers was less frequent, but teachers used a greater proportion of time cooperating with parents about learning when the students were older. Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir (2012) interpreted this as an indicator of greater emphasis on learning and achievement, but it can also be related to teenagers needing distance from adults to develop their own identities (Kryger 2012). Therefore, Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir (2012) conclude that these changes in home-school relationships – less contact but more focus on learning – are not necessarily negative, except for teenagers that need more support.

Terms and words in use

In Iceland, the different levels of parental involvement are not clearly defined in The Compulsory School Act (2008), The National Curriculum (2011), or in regional policy documents. It seems to be taken for granted that stakeholders have some or the same idea of what the home-school relationship means. This foggy way of handling home-school relations can have consequences

such as misunderstandings between the people involved and confusion in the debate about the issue. One of the interesting findings by Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir (2012) was that it "revealed a tendency to assume that communication between parents and teachers automatically should be named participation". This serves as a warning when it comes to writing in a field so drenched with common sense.

The terms used in this research have been defined in line with corresponding terms in English and Nordic languages, as follows: *Communication* refers to an exchange of information including *contact* via phone calls, e-mails, 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 schoolwork. *Parental involvement* is a broad term and here defined as "parental participation in the educational processes and experiences of their children" (Jeynes 2005).

These terms are also in line with common usage by Icelandic parents and teachers, and fit with Icelandic research done on policy making in the field (Guðmundsson 2003, Finnbogason 2009). The terms *communication*, *cooperation*, and *parental involvement* are useful with Nordahl's (2007) description of levels of home-school cooperation where he defines the following three stages: 1) exchange of information; 2) meaningful discussion; and 3) shared responsibility of pedagogical decisions.

Epstein's family-school-community partnership model

Genuine home-school partnership is based on mutual trust, common goals and two-way communication, according to Deslandes that has compared different conceptual frameworks (2001). In the current international research on home-school relationships, there are two main approaches: one wanting to contribute to the strengthening and improvement of home-school relations, and the other marked by a more critical analytical interest (Dannesboe et al. 2012).

Family involvement programs nowadays often go beyond linking childrens home and classroom learning experiences to include the communities where the families live (Coleman 2013). These programs are meant to strengthen home-school relations.

The family-school-community partnership model by Joyce Epstein and her colleagues best reflects that contemporary comprehensive approach to family involvement (Coleman 2013). For years, Epstein and colleagues have been researching and advising on how to build partnerships with parents, using the family-school-community partnership model, which is also called the NNPS Partnership Model in their earlier writings.

As the title *family-school-community partnership model* suggests, three "overlapping spheres of influence" form the core of the model, and point out the importance of the family (one sphere), the school (a second sphere), and the community (the third sphere) working together to support children's development and education (Coleman 2013). Maximum overlap among these three spheres is reached when there is a true partnership that reflects frequent family-school-community communication and a program that is responsive to the needs of all families and children (Epstein 2011). In contrast, she says, the spheres minimally overlap when families, school, and communities operate with very little communication and mutual planning.

The model consists of six keys or types of involvement: Parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-

making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein et al. 2002). Each of the six keys can serve to encourage six types of involvement or partnerships, each of which includes multiple activities that are responsive to the needs and interests of all families (Epstein 2011, Epstein et al. 2002).

Epstein's focus on developing models aiming at raising student achievement is in line with many other researchers' models in this field in the Anglo-Saxon world (Dannesboe et al. 2012). Despite the fact that the spheres are expected to work together, school professionals have the responsibility of initiating and facilitating communication between home and school. The same view on responsibility is also revealed in many other writings about parental involvement and home-school relations (Christiansen 2010, Nordahl 2007). Teachers must be encouraged to take on this important task of building relationships and counteract the fact that many middle level and high school teachers admit that the only time they contact families is when students are in trouble (Epstein 2007). The family-school-community partnership framework has been widely used in primary schools, but has also been adapted to middle and high schools so it can be used to keep parents engaged with their teens as well as the younger ones.

The more subtle ways of support
The other main approach in current international research on the home-school relation is of a more critical analytical interest. Sociological perspectives bring in factors that affect parental involvement, such as gender, class and ethnicity, and show how these are related to child-rearing practices, views on academic performance and home-school relations (Dannesboe et al. 2012). The aims of studies with these perspectives are not to identify the ideal home-school relationship

and thereby give the recipe to the perfect relationship. Rather, they focus on revealing the social circumstances and conditions that support or limit parental opportunities for involvement in their children's education.

Nowadays, Danish research in the field is more of this kind according to Dannesboe and colleagues (2012). In their research project "Skole-hjem-samarbejde som kulturel selvfølgelighed – en multi-sited etnografisk afdækning" (e. Home-school collaboration as a cultural truism – a multi-sited ethnographic study) their aim is not to identify the defective or the ideal collaboration. Rather, they want to give research-based insights into children's and families' everyday life and thereby contribute to discussions in the field without pointing in one correct direction.

Parental involvement programs should incorporate more of the subtle components in order to maximize the efficacy of these initiatives, as Jeynes (2011) concludes after doing meta-analysis on research findings about home-school relationships. He claims that parental involvement is more complicated and broader than a set of deliberate, overt actions such as helping students with their homework or participating in social activities. Jeynes uses results from three meta-analyses to address and criticise the traditional image of good home-school cooperation, and to 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. An increasing body of research suggests 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).

It is useful to relate Jeynes' results to the more sociological critical perspectives in research on home-school relationships. Findings contributing to the knowledge and understanding of families and children's everyday life can become useful in the discussions about practice and how to understand and encourage cooperation with diverse parent groups.

Vinterek (2006) pointed out that Swedish students today are expected to take on more individual responsibility and that sometimes has accentuated the vulnerability of students who lack resources.

An Icelandic study showed that in compulsory schools where teachers had positive attitudes towards parental involvement, disciplinary problems were fewer than in schools where home-school relations were weaker (Sigurgeirsson and Kaldalóns 2006). In those schools, there was a great emphasis on keeping parents updated on what was happening and the focus was on mediating positive results and success. Parents were also encouraged to get involved in all types of school activities, not just social events. Causality is questionable; however, the findings in Sigurgeirsson and Kaldalóns' (2006) research revealed that in schools where the staff managed to blend warmth and openness into their organized cooperation with parents, this correlated with fewer disciplinary problems.

Presenting alternative and perhaps more critical perspectives on parental involvement is, of course, more fragmented than presenting coherent partnership programs. It merely emphasises that understanding the differences and unique circumstances in every school, community,

parent group and in every student group is the prerequisite to cooperation.

Several studies have shown that parents often cease participation in their children's lives as the children become teenagers (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, Epstein 2007, Nordahl 2007). This affects teenagers' lives in many different and sometimes unfortunate ways. On the other hand, this ceasing participation could be a sign of sound relationships in general as Kryger (2012) has suggested. His research on ninth grade students' own stories about their interpretation and meaning of the home-school relationship showed 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.

The review above shows that parents' participation and involvement in school activities is a complex matter. How to handle it should not be taken for granted. The question set forth in this article is: *What do teenagers, parents and school professionals find to be desirable in parental participation in school activities?*

Method and analysis

The participants in this research were the principals, teachers and other school professionals in 20 compulsory schools in Iceland that accepted an invitation to take part in the project; the parents of the children attending these schools; and students in 7th-10th grade in 14 schools, i.e. in all of those schools that had students in the lower-secondary level. 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 comprised 17% of all of the students in compulsory schools in Iceland.

The online survey software QuestionPro was used for online questionnaires, which were developed by using guidelines on survey construction from Karlsson (2003) and Þórsdóttir and Jónsson (2007). One questionnaire was developed for the parents, which included questions about the parents' background, their cooperation with school staff and satisfaction with the service their child was getting at the school. Questionnaires for the school professionals included questions about their work conditions, usage of working hours and preferences regarding home-school relationships. Questionnaires for students included questions about learning styles, their relations with the teachers and about what they preferred in parental participation in school activities. A pretest of questionnaires was conducted in a pilot study in one compulsory school. Multiple methods were used for data gathering, including interviews and notes from field observations which made it possible to triangulate the data in the research project, but findings in this article are build on the questionnaires.

Teachers and other professionals answered online questionnaires sent to their work e-mail address. They answered four questionnaires in the school year 2009-2010. The students answered an online questionnaire in the computer room in their own school when members from the research team visited the participating schools in autumn 2010. A more detailed description of the questionnaires is in the article by Jónsdóttir og Björnsdóttir (2012).

The response rate for the parents was 67% (n=3481), for the students it was 86% (n=1821) and for the school professionals it was around 82% (n=823). The response rate was high, as the response rate for surveys frequently falls below 50% (Saunders 2012).

The data was analysed with SPSS 20. Percentages, Chi-square and Spearman correlation were computed. Spearman correlation is used for variables measured on an ordinal scale and Chi-square for categorical variables.

The interest of all those participating in the research is protected by keeping all data confidential. Furthermore, the participating schools were all offered a feedback, including presentations and discussions about the results, as the intention is to contribute to research based discussions about school development.

Results

Parents and school professionals involved in this research are convinced of the importance of parental participation in school activities. Now it is time to discover what those involved find desirable in that matter. As students, i.e. teenagers, also participated in this study, it is appropriate to describe first the results of their opinions.

Students want parents to join in school activities

Students in 7th-10th grade in the 14 schools with a lower-secondary school level were asked about their opinions on parents' participation in school activities. In general, the teenagers were positive towards parents' participation in school activities (see Figure 1).

Eight out of ten students found it very or rather desirable to have parents assisting them with homework, 68% found it very or rather desirable that parents participated in assessments of their academic achievement, and 63% found it very or rather desir-
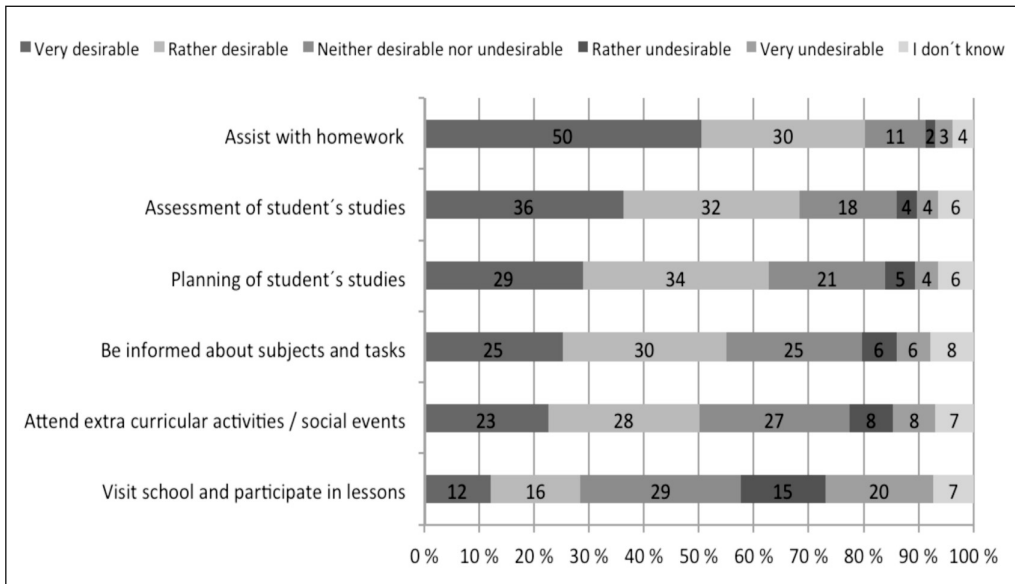
Figure 1. Student (n=1821) opinions on the desirable parental participation in school-related activities.

able that parents participated in planning their studies. The results presented in Figure 1 show clearly that students find it most appealing to have parents participating in the academic activities of school life rather than social activities. Ranking below those three statements are statements relating to the social activities of school-life, which has been the more traditional way that parents have participated. Just over half of the student group found it very or rather important that parents participate in social events in school such as class entertainment. Having parents visit the school and participating in schoolwork had the lowest ratings, but 28% of the students found that to be very or rather desirable.

The correlations between answers to those statements in Figure 1 are all positive and statistically significant. The strongest relations were between answers on participation in assessment and participation in planning of studies (r_s(df 1586)=.65 p<.01)).

However, despite these correlations, there are interesting differences of opinions within the student group, as described in Table 1.

The results in Table 1 can be summarized by three concluding statements. The students' interest in parental involvement decreased the older they were, the girls were more enthusiastic than the boys about parental participation, and those with more confidence in their learning abilities were more enthusiastic than those who felt inferior in their studies.

School professionals

The questions directed to teachers, principals and other school professionals were in line with those for the students. There were questions added that were aimed at parental participation in tasks that are of a more professional nature such as school management, internal school evaluation and curriculum development. The results are presented in Figure 2.

Table 1. Proportion of students (%) that found parental participation to be *very desirable* in different school activities.

|	Grade					Gender			Confidence in their learning ability		
	7%	8%	9%	10%	χ^2	Boy	Girl	χ^2	Good	Very or rather poor	χ^2
Assist with homework	65	58	46	44	63.8***	45	60	34.0***	56	45	32.2***
Assessment of student's studies	49	40	35	32	40.6***	32	45	33.9***	42	31	31.1***
Planning of student's studies	41	34	28	23	46.6**	26	35	22.1***	33	27	22.9***
Be informed about subjects and tasks	35	29	25	23	22.5*	25	30	16.7**	29	22	41.2***
Join in social events/extracurricular activities	38	28	18	16	100.2***	23	25	8.9	25	21	32.8***
Visit school and participate in lessons	17	16	9	12	42.6***	12	14	21.2***	13	12	12.8*

*p<0,05, **p<0,01, *** p<0,001
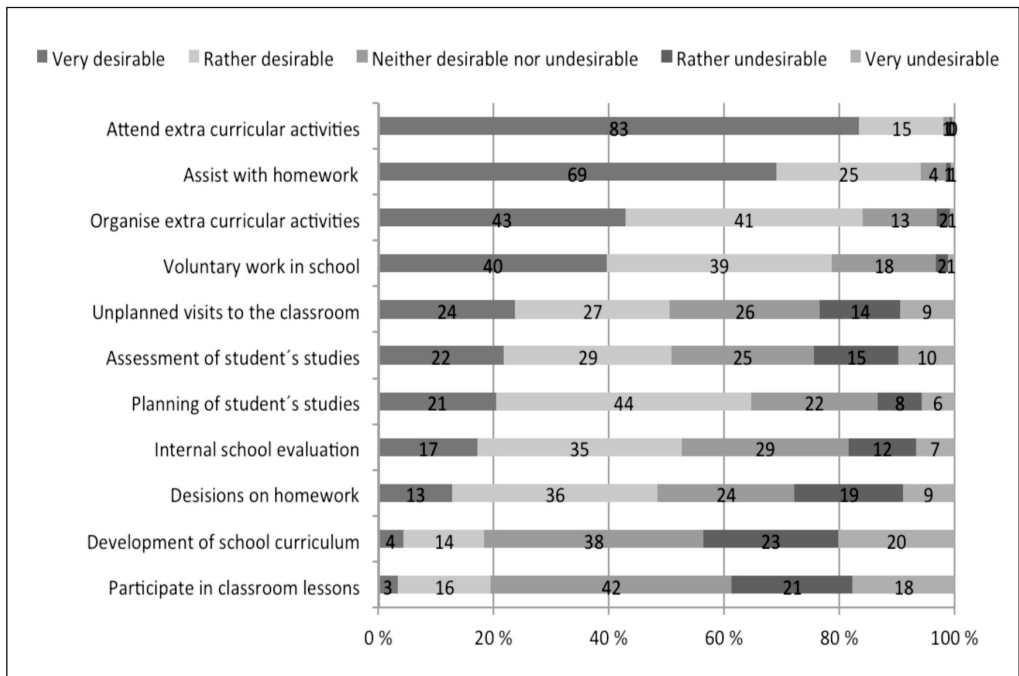
Figure 2. School professionals' (n=823) opinions on the desirability of parental participation in school-related activities.

School professionals rated the desirability of parental participation in eleven activities. They found it most desirable that parents attended social events or extracurricular activities organized at school, but 98% said it was very or rather desirable. When it came time to help with homework, 94% of the respondents felt it was very or rather desirable and 84% had the same opinion about the involvement of parents in planning social activities at school. The school-staff was very positive towards parents' participation of the traditional kind around social activities and homework. On the other hand, less than half of the respondents thought it was very or rather desirable to have parents participating in decisions about homework, 18% believed they should be involved in developing the school curriculum and 19% of school professionals found it very or rather desirable to have parents participating in the classroom lessons.

The teachers' age had no impact on their answers but there were notable differences when comparing responses by the age of the students they taught. Teachers' interest in cooperation seemed to wane the older the students were, just like parents' interest seemed to wane as their children grew older. Around 54% of teachers of students in 5th-7th grade (intermediate level) found it highly desirable that parents organise extracurricular activities, 49% of teachers of the youngest students (grades 1-4) had the same opinion but only a third of the teenagers' teachers (grades 8-10) found it very desirable (χ^2 (8, N = 375) = 21.9, p = .005). The majority of teachers at all levels considered it very desirable for parents to attend scheduled events but that also declined with the increasing age of the students; 92% of teachers in grades 1-4 considered it highly desirable, 87% in grades 5-7 and 71% of those teaching teenagers (χ^2 (8, N = 375) = 25.5, p = .001).

The same decline can be seen in teachers' interest in parental involvement in homework. Figure 2 shows that, in general, 69% of the school professionals find that very desirable. Just 55% of the teachers of teenagers had the same opinion, considerably fewer than the 82% who felt it very desirable at the youngest level and 72% who thought it very desirable teaching at intermediate level (χ^2 (8, N = 376) = 27.6, p = .001). Although a minority of the teachers deemed unexpected visits of parents highly desirable, there were even fewer teachers of teenagers (16%) of that opinion, than that of the other levels or 27% in the intermediate level and 31% in the youngest level (χ^2 (8, N = 376) = 28.1, p = .010).

Parents' desires for participation in school

Parents found it most desirable to participate in school activities by organising extracurricular activities such as class entertainment. Figure 3 shows that and parent opinions about the other six alternative ways of collaboration.

Figure 3 shows that 73% of the parents thought it was desirable for parents to participate in organising extracurricular activities. Over half of the parent group also thought it was desirable for parents to participate in internal school evaluations, volunteer at the school, and participate in planning students' studies and in academic assessment. Only 20% of the parents thought it was desirable for parents to participate in classroom lessons.

Parents' interest in participation in school activities declined as the children grew older. At the youngest level, 29% of parents thought it was very desirable that parents participated in organizing extracurricular activities. About a quarter of par-
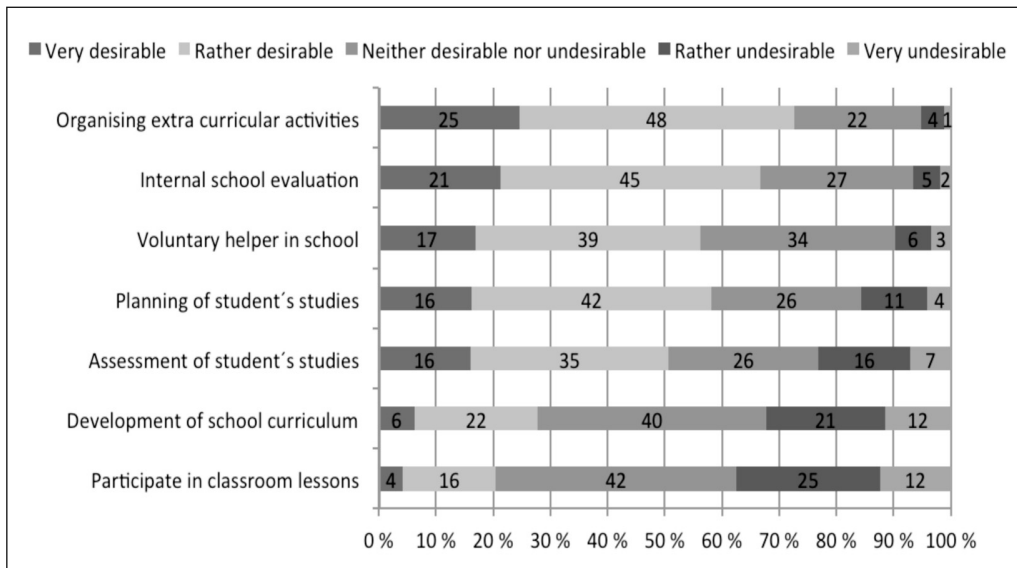
Figure 3. Parents' (n=3481) opinions about the desirability of parental participation in school-related activities.

ents of children in grades 5-7 said the same and 18% of parents of teenagers agreed (χ^2 (8, N=2978)= 66.9, p<.001).

The majority of adults, parents and school staff, favour the more traditional kind of parental participation which primarily involves social activities

More parents at the youngest level (19%) than at the intermediate level (13%) found it very desirable to participate in planning their child's studies, but opinions of parents of teenagers (15%) were in between and not different from the other groups (χ^2 (8, N=2925)= 18,5, p=.018). There were relations between student age and how desirable parents found it to participate in internal school evaluation (χ^2 (8, N=2792)= 39,4, p<.001) and in the assessment of their child's academic performance (x^2 (8,

N=2911)= 28,6, p<.001). Around 17% of parents of teenagers said it was very desirable to participate in school evaluation; 20% of parents of students in 5th-7th grade, and 26% of parents at the youngest level agreed. Participation in assessment was very desirable to 20% of parents at the youngest level but 13-14% of parents of older students agreed to that.

Correlations were also examined between parents' own education and their opinions on parents' participation in school activities. In general, the trend was that parents with more education favoured parental involvement more than parents with less education. This applied to volunteer work in the schools, 19% of parents with a university degree find participation very desirable but 13% of parents with vocational education and 10% of parents with primary education agree (χ^2 (12, N = 2659 = 40.6, p <.001). The pattern was similar regarding parents taking part in planning their child's studies;

18% of parents with higher education felt it very desirable but only 9% of parents with primary education (χ^2 (12, N = 2697 = 57.4 p <.001) agreed. Participation in curriculum development was very desirable according to 8% of parents with higher education, but only 2% of parents with primary education (χ^2(12, N=2664= 66,6 p<.001) agreed. Taking part in internal school evaluation was very desirable according to 24% of parents with higher education, a significantly larger group than the 17% of parents with vocational education and 10% of parents with primary education sharing that opinion (χ^2 (12, N=2571= 89,0, p<.001).

Discussion and conclusions

This research reveals a split in opinions between groups or even generations. The majority of adults, parents and school staff, favour the more traditional kind of parental participation which primarily involves social activities. However, teenagers have other preferences and really show an interest in relating parental participation to their academic activities.

The strongest opinions appear in the answers from school staff, as 98% found it to be rather or very desirable to have parents attend extracurricular activities such as social events in school, and 85% wanted parents to participate in organising these activities. Parents were almost as eager to contribute to social activities as 73% thought it was desirable to participate in organising them. Just over half of the students in 7th-10th grade found it desirable to have parents attend social events or extracurricular activities; however, the opinions of the younger students might be somewhat different.

This preference for parental participation in social activities over participation in academic activities raises questions about how to interpret the fact that 99% of the very same parents and school professionals considered parental support to be rather or very important for the academic achievement of children (Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2012). Is it possible that the adults believe that the home-school relationship is very important for achievement and think it is best served by parental participation in extracurricular activities and social entertainment? Why do they hesitate in speaking for parental participation in all activities? This can be a question of time, or rather of lack of time, as Marinósson (2002) pointed out, because parents must spend precious time on collaboration and it may be helpful for the busy parents if schools do not demand too much of them. This can also be associated with the fact that 90% of the parents were satisfied with their cooperation with homeroom or supervisory teachers and that related to their overall satisfaction with the experience of school (Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2012). Parents that are satisfied may also feel little need for stepping out of secure grounds and adding to their traditional social supporting role some new roles more related to their child's studies; and teachers may also feel little need for opening up their field of practice.

It is interesting that parents in this research found participation in internal school evaluation and voluntary work at school preferable to participation in planning and assessing students studies. Epstein's (2011) theory on overlapping spheres of influence can be useful in interpreting this. My suggestion is that parents may find it easier to take part in activities concerning the school as an institution in the community, than to take steps towards the core of the school-sphere, namely the activities that could challenge teachers' professional practices

like planning and assessing a student's studies.

It is worth considering that genuine home-school partnership is based on mutual trust (Deslandes 2001). The findings show that school staff was reluctant when participation touched upon their expertise in traditional academic activities. Teachers were, however, more positive about having parents participate in planning and assessment than the parents were themselves. Roughly half of the parent group and half of the teacher group deemed cooperation on assessing students' studies to be desirable, and also nearly half of the parent group (48%) found participation in planning students' studies desirable along with 65% of the school staff.

We can have different opinions about whether these groups of adults with positive attitudes are small or big enough; the findings concern the delicate relations between parents and school-staff. It brings attention to research findings about the importance of supporting parental participation in subtle ways, for example the school staff being loving and encouraging to parents (Jeynes 2011). Teachers that have positive attitudes towards parental involvement and encourage parents to become involved in all types of school activities harvest fewer disciplinary problems (Sigurgeirsson and Kaldalóns 2006). These findings can also serve as a reminder that someone has to take the initiative to contact and collaborate and the traditional view is that the school professionals have the responsibility of igniting and facilitating cooperation between the home and the school (Christiansen 2010, Epstein 2002, Epstein 2011, Nordahl 2007). That responsibility must be acted upon but it is equally important for school staff to bear in mind the diversity of the families involved and that overt tutelage could be a two-edged sword (Jeynes 2011).

Students view parental participation differently than their parents and the school staff. Eight out of ten students found it desirable to have parents assisting them with homework, 68% found that they wanted parents to participate in assessments of their academic achievement, and 63% want parents to participate in planning their studies. It is clear that the teenagers find it most appealing to have parents participating in their academic activities but just about half of the student group finds it desirable to have parents attending social events, and less than one-third wants them to visit and participate in lessons. The majority of students want parents to assist them with their studies at home and at school, and their answers reveal that they prefer parents to participate when their studies are at stake, rather than having them joining social events.

This preference can be interpreted in many different ways. For example, students may want parents to bring in additional information when teachers are doing assessments or making individualised plans; they may also want parents to become better informed about their academic performance and the enacted curriculum in school. It was somewhat surprising that students' opinions were so positive towards parental participation in school activities in general, as it is quite common to blame ceasing parental participation on students' dwindling interests or even on their presumed opposition against it. Predefined views of that kind bring attention to the need for research to focus on teenagers within the critical analytical research perspective in the field (Dannesboe et al. 2012).

Teachers' interest in home-school cooperation seemed to wane the older the students were, just like parents' interest

seemed to wane as their children grew older; these findings confirm a general notion in the literature (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003, Epstein 2007, Nordahl 2007). Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir (2012) concluded that the changes in home-school relationships – less contact but more focus on learning – were not necessarily negative, except for teenagers that need more support. Students' priority for parental participation in the academic portion of their school life can therefore also be interpreted as a sensible support of the adults strengthening their focus on learning.

The established forms of cooperation between home and school leave little space for students' perspectives but it is important for teenagers developing their own identity to find ways to deal with parent-teacher cooperation (Kryger 2012). In this research, the students' interest in parent involvement decreased the older they were; the girls were more enthusiastic than the boys about parental participation, and those with more confidence in their learning abilities were more enthusiastic than those who felt inferior in their studies. This emphasizes the diversity in the student group. Therefore, ceasing parents' participation can also be interpreted as a positive sign of respect for teenagers' need to emancipate and develop as individuals.

A comprehensive approach to family involvement goes beyond linking children's home and classroom learning experiences and Epstein's family-school-community partnership model best reflects the relations between the three spheres embracing a school child (Coleman 2013). When the findings presented here are compared to the model, it's apparent that Epstein's six keys or types of involvement are all in use in Icelandic schools. A follow up could be to use the model's practical advice on how to enhance cooperation in each of the six types of partnership. The model is of a practical nature with overt aims and strategies and can be criticised for rigid structures (Jeynes 2011). Epstein and colleagues would not agree with that; on the contrary, they emphasize that the model is responsive to the needs and interests of all families (Epstein 2011, Epstein et al. 2002).

Findings in this paper show, for example, diversity in the student group, changes in opinions related to the age of the students, and that parents with more education favoured parental involvement more than parents with less education. Sociological perspectives bring in factors that affect parental involvement, such as gender, class and ethnicity, and show how these are related to child-rearing practices, views on academic performance and home-school relations (Dannesboe et al. 2012). They make a valuable contribution to research and practice using Epstein's partnership model.

In conclusion, the findings show that parental participation in school activities is highly desirable; nevertheless teachers and parents have to make an effort to sustain their interest in participation throughout students' adolescent years. Collaboration relates to students' academic performance, it is therefore important to empower parents and strengthen trust between them and school professionals. Epstein's model can be useful in evaluating and cultivating parental involvement in schools. However, analytical critical perspectives have to be brought into the discussion as well as they emphasise the necessity of understanding diversity and the unique circumstances in every school, community, parent group and class or student group.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] *Parental involvement in schools* is one of six strands in a larger research project called "Teaching and Learning in Icelandic Schools", which deals with teaching and learning in 20 compulsory schools for age levels 6 to 15. The project's aim is to contribute to the body of knowledge on teaching and learning with a special emphasis on the development towards individualized and cooperative learning. The aim of *parental involvement in schools* is to explore the role of parents in their children's learning and the relationship between schools and their communities (Björnsdóttir and Jónsdóttir 2010, Sigurðardóttir and Hjartarson 2011, *Teaching and Learning in Icelandic Schools*).

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