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The School-Family Relationship in Socially Divided Swedish Lower Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This article examines the school-family relationship in order to understand what significance the family has for teachers, students, and head teachers. Drawing on theory by Reay (2004), this article deploys family and school habitus to analyse two Swedish lower-secondary schools with different social structures. The data consist of interviews and observations. Results indicate that one of the schools has a *compatible* habitus – that is, similar values among its families about education – which simplifies the relationship and allows it to be used to strengthen and develop school practices. The other school has a *diverse* habitus – that is, different values among its families about education. Therefore an equal relationship is more difficult to facilitate, because the families have different abilities to take on this responsibility. This article concludes that developing a pedagogy that fully integrates and acknowledges students' ideas and life experiences is a potential force to change a school's habitus, diminish the importance of the family habitus in schooling, and ensure that students receive equivalent education.

Introduction

Today, students' family background¹ is a factor that teachers have to consider in their exercise as pedagogues. Research indicates that Swedish lower-secondary teachers today are constantly petitioned by families with demands concerning individual teachers' competence and organizational matters (Sjögren 2011: 195, Lärarnas Riksförbund 2011: 17). The change in the family's attitude towards teachers accentuates the changed status and role of the school at large. Results from international research indicate that families today are encouraged to become consumers and active agents in the production of educated children (Reay 2005: 23). Families with high educational attainments, however, are likely to be more in-

involved in their children's education in numerous ways, such as attending parent-teacher conferences, attending programs that feature students, and engaging in volunteer activities (David et al. 2003:29, Lee and Bowen 2005: 194, Vincent 2012: 339). Consequently, students' family background has a huge significance for their educational trajectories (Pimlott-Wilson 2011: 113). Families' educational experiences influence, to a significant extent, their degree of involvement in their children's schooling, especially their effectiveness in communicating with teachers (Reay 2005: 26). Sweden implemented a nationwide school choice reform in the early 1990s (Skolverket 2012a: 72) which decentralized the responsibility for education from the central government to the municipalities (Bunar

2010: 2, Lundahl and Olson 2013: 3). A school system that is built upon freedom of choice, such as the Swedish one, accentuates the “weight” of the family in education. Research stresses that middle-class families are most conscious about the importance of education and, through their presence and demands, most strongly influence school practice (Erikson 2004: 29, Bæck 2010: 551). Therefore, it is mostly students from well-educated families who understand and benefit the most from the possibilities that school can offer in relation to educational opportunities (Broady and Börjesson 2008: 29).

The change in the family’s attitude towards teachers accentuates the changed status and role of the school at large.

Swedish lower-secondary schools are facing declining academic achievement, school segregation, and a lack of educational equivalence in comparison with those of other European countries (Skolverket 2013: 6, OECD 2013: 4). This development in society accentuates the family’s importance for students’ school success (Erikson 2011: 236). Englund (2011: 209) has remarked that the school social structure thus becomes homogeneous according to families’ education levels. Few studies, however, examine the outcomes of the relationship between school and family in different school contexts in Sweden (Erikson 2009: 9). This article addresses the family’s role and significance for head teachers, teachers and students in everyday school practice. It also accentuates how socioeconomic preconditions affect schools’ abilities to navigate within their relationship to the family.

The following questions are posed: (1) What, according to head teachers in two

schools with different socioeconomic structures, characterises the relationship between school and the family? (2) How is the school-family relationship reflected in teachers’ notions of pedagogical possibilities and restraints in school practice? (3) How can the relationship between the family and school be understood in relation to students’ rights to equal education?

Method

This study has an explicit interest in examining how school practices are affected by demands related to students families with different social backgrounds. For that reason, this study utilizes data from two lower-secondary schools (students aged 14–15) in a large city in Sweden with divergent social demographics.² Two classes in each school were studied and also the teachers that these classes had in the daily school work. Furthermore, all head teachers in the schools were interviewed.

Each school has 600 students, and both are public schools. The first school – *City school* – is located in the centre of the city. Many of the students come from well-educated families: 80% of their parents have a post-secondary education. City school is popular and successful in the number of student applicants. The student population is stable, with about 65–70 students in year 9 (age 15) over a five-year period (2007–2012). City school is also successful in students’ results. City school’s students’ average merit rating is 14% higher than the average rating for all Swedish lower-secondary-school students (Skolverket 2012b).

The second school – *Suburban school* – is located on the outskirts of the city. The school’s social structure is diverse. Here, 46% of parents have a post-secondary education. The application rate to Suburban

school indicates a negative development. The number of students in year 9 (age 15) has dropped from 147 to 78 students over a nine-year period (2003–2012). Suburban school students' average merit rating is 4% lower than the average rating for all Swedish lower-secondary-school students (Skolverket 2012b).

Data illuminating the relationship between school education and students' socio-economical family background were collected through transcribed in-depth interviews with 17 teachers, 37 students, 5 assistant head teachers, and 2 Chief Executive head teachers ($N = 62$). Interview length varied from 20 minutes to more than one hour. Interviews with students were, in general, a little shorter than interviews with the teachers and head teachers. The interviews are recorded in 642 pages of transcribed data (City school 275 pages, and Suburban school 367 pages). Interviews concerned seven themes: (a) educational background and living conditions; (b) past and present experiences about school; (c) pedagogical organisation: notions about the purpose of education; (d) professional role or student role: self-perceived understandings of tasks; (e) interpersonal relations in classroom: communication and interaction in classroom; (g) pedagogy in classroom: comprehension in teaching and learning practices; (h) future educational and working-life expectations: aspirations in education and labour market. The questions were adjusted to each interview group, for example not posing questions to students that stressed pedagogical organisation or pedagogy in the classroom. The interviews were constructed to be able to theorize the relation between different social groups and the school.

Students' and teachers' actions in the classroom comprised approximately 54

hours of audio-recorded observations that were taken down in 90 pages of transcribed protocols (City school 41 pages, and Suburban school 49 pages).

The data were exposed to a conventional content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005: 1279, Schreier 2012: 6). Data from each school were read closely for an initial sense of tendencies in the material. After this examination, data that dealt with similar issues were derived into codes. For example, families' possibilities for participating in schools' activities were constructed into one category. Codes that to some extent transcended each other were thereafter constructed into main categories.

To ensure that analysis from each school was empirically valid, interview and observation data were used as interacting materials to understand what head teachers, teachers, and students said in relation to classroom practice (Boolsen 2007: 188). Furthermore, a comparative context analysis (Stake 2006: 77) between the school practices shed light on similarities and disparities that emerged when the two schools' contexts were contrasted.

Theoretical framework

The concept of *habitus* makes it possible to analyse how the internalization of living circumstances embodied in social agents – individuals, families, or institutions – at school generates both opportunities and constraints (Bourdieu 1977: 73, Bourdieu 1984: 471, Manton 2008: 51). *Habitus* emphasises that objective living conditions cause a significant socialization that to some extent is unconscious. Thus, in school the socialization is visible and expressed *through* individuals' actions in the classroom and statements about phenomena (Bourdieu 2002: 47). The initial formation of *habitus*

occurs in the family (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 133). The concept of *family habitus* is a theoretical tool that empowers an understanding of students' actions as agents but also as representatives of family socialisation with certain values that are visible in students' ways of speaking and studying, as well as their attitudes toward school (Vincent et al. 2012: 432). Family habitus stresses that students, through their families, develop expectations of education: a sense of what is acceptable for "our" kind in view of family legacy (Reay 1998: 526). Families with experiences of higher education are more likely to understand the requirements and expectations that schools put on students (Reay, David and Ball 2005: 62). Family habitus, then, is generated through family background, geographical location, and social class: thus, according to Ingram (2011: 289), students who share similar life experiences "acquire dispositions in line with those of the family and neighbours". In other words, family habitus stresses socialisation within social groups that "generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions" (Bourdieu 1984: 170, as cited in Vincent et al. 2012: 342).

The socialisation of habitus in the family is evidently still a key factor to the reproduction of social class and social inequalities in school (Lidegran 2009: 39, Pimlott-Wilson 2011: 113). The habitus that students embody through the family can create restrictions in education; depending on how the school meets the capital generated in students' family habitus, it becomes a matter of whether they have the "right currency" (Reay, Crozier and James 2011: 28). Thus, a school's impact on students lies in its power to both enhance and restrict social mobility in relation to family habitus. Through schooling, students' habitus can be transformed and transcend social positions and

social trajectories that "enable conditions of living that are very different from initial ones" (Reay 2004: 435).

It appears important for the head teachers that families are satisfied with the school and also participate in the school's development.

Like the family, such institutions as schools influence individuals' educational opportunities and trajectories (Reay 1998: 524, Reay, David and Ball 2001, Reay 2004: 434). School and family are intertwined in a relationship that shapes "the habitus and practices of individuals through the organizational forms and collective practices" (Burke et al. 2013: 165). Individuals' habitus can be transformed by a general disposition, a "cultured habitus", provided by the school (Bourdieu 1967: 433, as cited in Reay 2004: 434). The school, from this point of view, is "another layer to add to those from earlier socialisations" (Reay 2004: 434). School habitus stresses a process of socialisation whereby students' habitus is structured in accordance with the school's conceptions about education, through head teachers', teachers' and classmates' ideas about education (McDonough 1997: 106, Reay, David and Ball 2001, Reay, David and Ball 2005: 36). This socialisation is, or can be, visible in students' actions, speech, body language, and physical movements (Poromaa, Holmlund and Hult 2012: 57). School habitus allows an analysis of "the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organization" (Reay, David and Ball 2005: 36). The theory accentuates that the relationship between school and family must be understood as a product of historical, social, and cultural meetings and actions (Bourdieu 1977: 82).

Results

The presentation of the results follows an arrangement in which the research questions are dealt with in a chronological order. The first section illuminates Chief Executive head teachers' beliefs and thoughts about what role family background plays in school practice. The second section highlights teachers' notions of the family's impact on pedagogy, with attention on possibilities and constraints. In the last section, the family's role is related to students' notions of pedagogical practice and consequences for their chances at an equal education. Observations are used to illustrate classroom practice and to relate it to head teachers', teachers' and students' notions.

Head teachers and schools' families

The significance of the family for school practice appears as an important phenomenon for head teachers' views about their own schools. In City school, families are able to influence the school's pedagogy through a family council. There is a tradition of engagements and involvement in school practice. Statements from its head teachers – for example, “it is through participation that students can be involved” – indicate that participation is a fundamental ideal. Another aspect of the relationship between school and family is its presence outside City school. Head teachers and families have opportunities to meet, because they all live in connection with, or close to, the school:

I live next to the school and I don't think it is a disadvantage. I like to work with and meet people; meetings with people are the best. I meet students and families, both old and new, who work and

live here, in private and in my spare time, in shops, etc.: there's no problem, it is only fun. (Head teacher Lisbeth, City school)

Observation sequences show how City school enhances and acknowledges the importance of family by welcoming students and families. For example, every morning, one representative – usually a head teacher – from the school staff sits in the reception area before the start of classes and welcomes and initiates conversations with family members. This organisation renders a simple, yet effective contact that builds personal relations between families and school staff.

It appears important for the head teachers that families are satisfied with the school and also participate in the school's development. Head teachers also express an awareness of the importance of fulfilling the families' requirements for school success and security. The interviews evince a customer-producer aspect to the relationship between families and the school:

We have good results both when it comes to security and well-being in general and also knowledge-based results. It is a matter of reputation; the school's reputation is something that people talk about, in parks, in nursery schools. (Head teacher Lisbeth, City school)

In City school, the family is present, both through councils but also through social relations between the school and families in and outside school. Statements made by City school's head teachers in interviews depict the family as an integrated phenomenon in the school's pedagogy. The school and its families value and understand the impor-

tance of family for the school's reputation and achievements. There seems to be coherence between City schools and its families' ideals. In other words, the school's and families' habitus likely share similar notions of how education should be conducted (Thomas 2002: 431).

In Suburban school, the family is not as visible in school practice. Here, decisions – organisational or pedagogical – are primarily made by head teachers or teachers; there are, for example, no councils through which families can have a dialogue with school staff about their interests. Head teachers express the importance of family, but this expression seems to be related to a desire to attract and receive school vouchers for students:

If you don't have a reputation of unity, that we as a school have a common goal, then you cannot operate a good school. Then we will not have students; but if we are united and have a positive approach and listen to parents, and want the best for all, then it becomes a positive spiral in many ways. (Head teacher Peter, Suburban school)

The relationship between Suburban school and its families is described and equalised through communication that provides families with information about the school's activities. The interview sequence below pinpoints a tendency in Suburban school to strategically advertise the school's advantages and to keep problems hidden from the public:

I think it is important to communicate the positive things that the school stands for in different contexts ... We shall not publicly raise things that do not work, we solve those issues our-

selves, and if you are not of that opinion, then you should think over if you should work here. (Head teacher Peter, Suburban school)

The view accentuates a school-family relationship that appears rather limited in regard to families' being a part of the school practice. It appears as if the family is not seen as a partner of the school. Rather, the school and the family are considered to have different tasks in relation to students' socialisation: "I regard the school's assignment as [giving] students knowledge. To bring up students is an assignment for families and the home. We can contribute with our structure and our rules, but I don't see this as our main task." Another thing this interview highlights is that the school's relationship with some families is problematic and that contacts with new social groups are important: "We want those students with well-educated parents, they have not been here for several years, but now they are starting to come back." Thus, relations with some social groups are more desired than others. For example, several members of the school staff express dissatisfaction with student groups that have weak results:

Even if we could put more resources into the weaker students, this would mean that we could not create this wonderful, positive environment that is created when you have strong students that can pull the others forward, which is so important to have. (Head teacher Peter, Suburban school)

This statement indicates that families, who do not have experience with education, are to some extent seen as a problem. For head teachers, building relationships with families is focused on increasing well-educated

social groups. These relationships are regarded as better investments because they create a good reputation for the school and, presumably, a more easily taught student population.

The significance of family for teachers' pedagogy

In City school, students and families expect teachers to deliver a pedagogy that gives students school success. This demand seems to have the consequence that several teachers feel pressure. According to teachers, students are conscious of their power. It is not uncommon for students, in the event of a dispute with a teacher, to go directly to school management to express their dissatisfaction rather than to talk to the individual teacher:

The head teacher can be rather soft on these issues and has a tendency to fold and listen to only the students' side of the story before consulting the teacher to hear his or her opinion. It is very, very customer-oriented. Students and families are always number 1, and sometimes you feel that you don't have so much support from the school management. (Teacher Oskar, City school)

The interviews illuminate that teachers feel that they have to satisfy the requirements of students. At some extent these requirements seem to be directed toward teachers' pedagogy.

Nowadays parents affect school very much, much more than previously. They do it individually, and they also find their own channels: for example, any parent can write to other parents if there is anything they want to address. ... There

is always pressure on you to be alert and accessible. (Teacher John, City school)

According to several teachers interviewed, it is not uncommon that families contact each other and then act together to affect teachers' pedagogy through complaints.

In Suburban school, interviews with teachers highlight that relationships with families are diverse. Some families are highly engaged in their children's schooling, whereas other families take an inactive approach toward school. According to this teacher, these relations between families and the school are related to the parents' commitment to their children:

It [family engagement] can vary from 0 to 100%. It is really a huge difference. I was visited by a super-good father last week ... he is very capable, very present as a parent. He has demands but is also there to listen. But then I know that there are kids who don't have parents like that. There are weak parents who never have the guts to tell their kids off. (Teacher Anna, Suburban school)

Teachers' statements stress the absence of (some) families in the school and a desire to have more dedicated families. Teachers seem frustrated with the fact that the school lacks the resources to support students who do not receive help with schoolwork at home. The high turnover of staff indicates a working situation for teachers which is filled with demands that, given the school's resources, cannot be met and satisfied. Like the teachers in City school, teachers in Suburban school experience requirements within and outside school as pressing issues that influence their practice as pedagogues. At Suburban school, however, these demands seem to come mainly from the

head teachers and not from students and families. Interestingly, the teachers connect head teachers' demands – for example, to have an excellent pedagogy – to head teachers' aspirations to be an attractive school for well-adapted student groups. Thus, the demands at Suburban school are closely related to the competitive, fast-changing education market within which Suburban school is operating (Dahlstedt, 2009: 194, Lundahl et al. 2010: 47, Carlbaum 2012: 7). Thus, the school-family relationship indirectly, through the requirements of head teachers, places pressure on teachers.

Students and equal education

The schools show some obvious differences between their respective school-family relationships, with consequences for students' participation, pedagogy, and educational and career expectations.

Participation

According to the Swedish national curriculum, students in lower-secondary schools are expected to participate actively in the development of their education, to be informed about issues that affect their schools' practice and are expected to develop a sense of future-oriented active citizenship (Skolverket 2011). Research indicates, however, that students' opportunities for participation, to a great extent, are related to their family's educational background. Students from families with experience of higher education are likely to be more active in participation – in students' council, for instance (Arnot and Reay 2007: 319, Rönnlund 2011: 12, Hjelmér 2012: 166). Both schools in this study facilitate participation, but they differ in the extent of channels through which this involvement can happen. In City school,

there are a number of councils through which students can make their voices heard:

I was involved in school council, where we could come up with proposals on how lessons should be: that was pretty good. Then there is food council, if you want to influence that, and then there is an environmental council, if you want to influence the school yard by painting or making it tidier. (Student Eva, City school)

In Suburban school, there are fewer opportunities for students to actively engage in school practice. The channels for participation are restricted to the student council. It seems that there is a will to make students' voice heard, but, according to one of the school's head teachers, this idea has to be developed further:

We have a lot to develop in this matter [student participation]. You have only to look at the surveys about participation from this school, students here express that they cannot influence things in school practice.... I think that we have to invite students to a dialogue outside student councils, and that students' wishes should be taken seriously and dealt with. (Head teacher Peter, Suburban school)

The head teacher expresses a desire that participation should happen not only in teacher-initiated forums but also as a continuous dialogue. Thus, the head teacher expresses a pedagogy that is open to change and a new way of thinking about the students' role as participants in school practice.

In City school, student participation is a part of the school pedagogy. Students here

seem to be more confident that they will be listened to and that their participation matters. A majority of interviewed students in City school are aware of their possibilities to change and affect school practice:

Interviewer: Do you feel that you can influence what is decided in school?

Student Diana: Yes, I think that we have a pretty big influence on what is decided and so on, because you can give proposals. I think that we get to decide, pretty much.

In Suburban school, fewer students express that they know which channels to use when trying to influence matters in the classroom and in the school in general:

Interviewer: Do you feel that you can influence things if you want to?

Student Robin: I'm not completely certain, it depends what it is.

Thus, students in City school seem more comfortable with discussing and pursuing their interests in school practice. Students in Suburban school express a more divided outlook on their possibilities to participate. This attitude occurs as a natural response due both to the opportunities that the school's structure offers for their participation and to their families, who supposedly do not have the same experiences of values imparted by education: argumentation, discussion, and involvement (Reay, Crozier and James 2011: 28).

Pedagogy

Observations from the classrooms highlight pedagogies that give students different access to sufficient learning situations. In City school there are few examples of classrooms in which students are given the pos-

sibility to "take over" the classroom situation. In Suburban school, many teachers control the pedagogical situation, but there are also several examples when they don't. Even though students express dissatisfaction when these episodes occur, there is a tendency not to question these behaviours, because doing so is met with adverse responses from those students who are disturbing the peace.

Thus, the students in City school, in most cases, can expect a pedagogy that is teacher-directed and creates opportunities for learning with a focus on school subjects. For the students in Suburban school, this pedagogical structure is more vague and various. One possible way of explaining these differences is related to the demands that students (and families) place or do not place on teachers in the two schools' practices. According to students in City school, teachers who do not have a sufficient pedagogy are removed from their posts after complaints from students and families:

The English teacher that we had, it felt like she did not know what she was talking about; this led to a climate in the class that was anxious and unfocused. We never behaved in that way during other lessons, it was only during her classes that everybody in the class were acting chaotic ... she was not competent enough, her ideas were insufficient and too simple for us ... I think that she was transferred from our class to primary school, to teach a class aged 8 to 9. (Student Diana, City school)

Numerous City school students seem to have the confidence to participate in and influence matters that they find important (a tendency that is strengthened in the interviews with City school teachers). Thus, the

accumulation of capital received through students' family habitus creates conceptions – in this case, that their voices are important and that they should act on issues.

Educational and career expectations

Students, through their teachers, classmates, and school practice, acquire information about, and expectations of, possible educational trajectories (Reay 2004: 434, Reay, David and Ball 2005: 36). In the examined schools, however, this transmission of educational opportunities affects the school's respective practices differently. In City school, the upcoming choice of upper-secondary school is a stressful issue that the majority of students acknowledge and to which they relate. There seems to be an ongoing discussion in the class that stresses the importance of choosing the right school and programme and also of using higher education strategically to obtain attractive jobs. The school choice also seems to create a competitive spirit: the students with high grades are envied by those who have not received similar test scores. Thus, there is a competitive aspect related to what opportunities individual students' grades can generate as far as choosing attractive upper-secondary schools:

There is a race going on: if a student gets the best grade, then it's easy to think: "Oh, you fucking mugger!" But then again you cannot think like that because this student probably needs those scores to be able to get into the desired school.... We talk about upper-secondary school every day; everybody is super-nervous because there is pressure on us. (Lisa, City school)

The relation between school and family also influences students' views of their future ca-

reer possibilities. In City School, students express that they discuss at length which school they should choose. They also say that their families help them make the "right choice". Thus, the school has a practice that places high expectations on students' work efforts and a culture of schooling that allows the discussion of possibilities and restraints related to education. In Suburban school, fewer interviewed students talk about the importance of school. Students here are less able to receive help with schoolwork at home and likely have more unclear aspirations regarding educational options (Ball et al. 2002: 51, Baker and Brown 2008: 68). In City school, most interviewed students have a clear idea of what profession they want to work in and which schools to choose. In Suburban school, many students have no idea what to choose, and, when talking about future work opportunities, several of them talk about careers in unskilled occupations.

Nevertheless, there are individual students in Suburban school who are aware that they can choose among several future educational and career trajectories. Gabrielle, for example, knows the importance of choosing a high-standard upper-secondary school to become an engineer. Conversely, she also expresses a concern about her classmates' possibilities to take a similar journey: "My friends they don't think that they can get in to the same schools as me; I can only hope that they can improve their grades, so we can go to the same school." Gabrielle seems to understand that most of her classmates are not going to the same high-profile school that she aims to attend.

Another aspect that presumably affects educational and future career trajectories is students' opportunity to receive homework help from their families. In City school, sev-

eral students say they receive help from their families in completing their homework. For the students in Suburban school, help with homework seems to vary:

Sometimes I fix it [homework] myself, but some things I receive help with – for example, English. My father is very good at English, so he helps me with this, and he helps me with the most. (Student Eva, City school)

I don't get help from my parents with homework; they can't help me. (Student Helen, Suburban school)

These statements portray homework as a responsibility put on families. In City school, this responsibility, to judge by statistics on students' results, gives the impression to be working accordingly; thus, homework becomes a collective task for the family to solve. But, for the students in Suburban school, this responsibility, in many cases, seems to be a task for the individual student to solve.

Discussion

The City school's habitus can be understood as a historic and present process through which common values about education enable common, legitimate practices about pedagogical ideas and ideals to be shared by the school and its families (compare Eriksson 2012: 157). The results illuminate that the schools' habitus generate two different relationships between school and family that seem to affect how head teachers, teachers, and students talk about the school and act in the school's practice. The school-family relationship at City school points to a correspondence in values about education: a *compatible* school habitus. The City

school's habitus thus creates, through its participants, a sense of we and a pedagogy with a legitimacy that corresponds to formulated and practiced expectations of education.

Most families in City school share high educational capital and similar requirements for education. The families – together with staff and students – seem to have the power to form and reform the school's disposition in accordance with educational taste (Burke et al. 2013: 167). In City school, students share a similar family habitus that socialises them into high demands on education (Vincent et al. 2012: 342). Thus, expectations are placed on the school, because it is believed that education should be conducted according to the students' standards (Reay 1998: 526).

At Suburban school it is difficult for staff to visualize the outcomes of the school-family relationship.

Students at City school live in connection with or close to the school; there are practically no students that, through an active school choice, have transferred here. The social exchanges in school occur mostly between students with similar family habitus. The time-span of the school-family relationship in some cases includes individuals and families for several generations. City school, in this sense, is not a meeting place for different interests and experiences related to education. Instead, shared interests and experiences due to social class background explain, to some extent, the conformity in City school regarding the variations in interactions and relations.

The circulation of school staff in City school is insignificant; most pedagogues have been working here for a long time. For

example, the head teachers were assistants to the previous head teachers. Thus, the staff in City school have, over years, established relations with the surrounding community. Families and students can expect – and are expecting – a functional pedagogy from the school. City school students' results signal a predictable learning situation in classrooms. The school's pedagogy is organised to include and enable family participation, which presumably simplifies the engagement of students' families, in turn simplifying teachers' pedagogical task, namely contacts with families. The pedagogy at City school reflects both the school's and the families' interest in a pedagogy that embraces values acknowledged to be important. The pedagogy has a compatibility built in, because there is no discussion on *the value of education*. Students in City school have vast opportunities to participate in school. Although the pedagogy values and recognizes the importance of participation it is always managed from the perspective of the importance of education.

City school's staff, as well as students and families, nurture a self-pronounced image as an educational setting with high standards for the quality of teaching and learning. A consequence, however, of this self-image is that teachers regarded as insufficient pedagogues, by the school's standards, based on this study, are replaced or dismissed. These teachers also are a threat to City school's good reputation. It seems, nevertheless, that it is in the best interest of all the participants in City school – staff, families, and students – to emphasise the qualities of City school, seeing as participation in City school works as symbolic capital.

Suburban school's habitus reflects the school's demographic composition, which has a history of transformation in relation to

students' social class. The school does not have the sustained power to attract and be valued by well-educated social groups. It is not the "natural" choice for middle-class families who live next to the school or in the surrounding neighbourhoods. The insecurity about where especially the middle-class students are heading means that the school's practice is distinguished by a spirit of adaptation to changes outside school – that is, families' preferences about what schools and pedagogies are attractive and desirable. The school-family relationship seems to express itself differently, depending on geography and social class (Ingram 2011: 189). Supposedly, it is harder to build up long-lasting relationships with families in Suburban school because the fluctuation in students is more extensive.

Suburban school is a heterogeneous meeting place where interests and knowledge from students' diverse life experiences clash (Reay 2004: 434). Here, numerous understandings and ideals appear to exist not only among teachers, students, and head teachers, but also among families, about the education/pedagogy. A multitude of ideas and ideals in circulation at Suburban school draws attention to a *diverse* school habitus (Thomas 2002: 431).

At Suburban school it is difficult for staff to visualize the outcomes of the school-family relationship. The pedagogy upheld by Suburban school expresses a perspective on education that puts the responsibility of upbringing on the family, and of the knowledge-based skills on the school. At the same time, several staff members express a desire to have a more extensive relationship between the school and its families. It may be Suburban schools' absences of resources, for example, channels in which teachers can discuss and improve the pedagogy that causes teachers to transfer

teacher responsibilities to the family. It is this “forcing reality” in the school that makes the teachers and head teachers see an expanded relationship with families as a resource and a way to solve problems that the school perceives itself unable to handle.

Conclusion

The school-family relationship is offered today as a solution to improve school practices and give students school success (Dahlstedt and Hertzberg 2011). But this relationship – to draw on this study – seems to be afflicted with different possibilities due to schools’ socio-economic preconditions. This inability accentuates the importance that the

school take the primary responsibility to educate children. If the responsibility for educating students becomes a matter for the family, students’ right to equivalent education is impoverished. Schools’ function and potential is to offering and developing a pedagogy that integrates and uses student’s life experiences (Reay 1998: 524, Thomas 2002: 441). Such a pedagogy can be a force that changes and develops schools’ habitus for the better for all students. If all schools accepted this responsibility and were given sufficient resources, it could be one way to prevent deficient educational equivalence and declining academic achievement in Swedish lower-secondary schools.

Notes

¹ The article uses family habitus as a theoretical concept to understand the socialization toward education that comes out of socioeconomic preconditions related to family background. Different family affairs are not part of the study subject.

² The study has completed an ethical review of research involving humans and found to meet the Swedish Research Council requirements. In the article, for example, individuals (and schools) have been given fictitious names to conceal the participants’ identity.

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