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Teachers' and parents' experiences of using parents as resources in Swedish primary education

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1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, an education for every child, based on democratic values, has been a major objective of Swedish educational policy. School should "promote all children's and pupils' learning and development" and "communicate and establish respect for the fundamental values of democracy the Swedish society is based on" (Education Act, 2010). In spite of these efforts, children's gender, social and cultural background still affects their educational progress. This is confirmed by research (i.e. Björnsson, 2005; Wernersson, 2006), and referred to in state documents based on statistics (i.e. SOU:2010:99, 2010). A growing body of international research is currently highlighting changes in western societies and educational policy that emphasize the importance of the democratic rights of parents to influence primary education through home-school cooperation. For a half-century, laws and national policy documents relating to Swedish compulsory school have viewed parents as resources in primary education, and currently maintain that teachers should "cooperate together with parents in order to develop school content and school activities" (Education Act, 2010, p. 14; Lgr11, 2011). In addition, "school should support families in their responsibility for the children's upbringing and development" (Lgr11, 2011 p. 7).

(Widding, 2012) shows that since the Turn of the Millennium, there has been little research into asymmetrical home-school power relations that take into account gender, social and cultural backgrounds. A great majority take these asymmetrical power relations for granted and if gender, social and cultural background are represented at all in research, these categories most often reflect an essentialist view that will likely repeat rather than challenge asymmetrical relations, systems and structures. In those cases that highlight asymmetrical power relations, more stress is often put on class, race and ethnicity, rather than gender. There is a cluster of research especially prevalent among British scholars that explore relationships between social and family change and issues of mothers' practical and emotional work in education. They use intersecting theories in their analysis of power and local contexts (M. David, 1993, 2003; M. E. David, 2005). Mothers, in particular, are considered as having a key role as agents of social reproduction and are therefore, responsible for the care of their family (Crozier & Davies, 2003; Reay, 2006). Notions of 'partnerships' justify home-school cooperation models that seek to control the behavior of parents and their children (Lightfoot, 2004; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). Beside these British examples, there is Forsberg's (2009) thesis on the strategy of 16 Swedish mothers and fathers to manage time and their children's care and education. Gottzén (2011) has made an analysis in a U.S context, Los Angeles, about how fathers are counted out in home-school cooperation. All things considered, there is an especial lack of gender research focusing on home-school cooperation. Further, more research is needed in other contexts to analyze if, how and why, parents are brought in as resources in school work. Further studies in Sweden could be of interest as democratic values, equality, gender equality and home-school cooperation have been a prominent feature of educational laws and national policy documents ever since the 1960s.

The current national curriculum states that primary education should "convey equality between women and men" and "have a responsibility to counteract traditional gender patterns" (Lgr11, 2011 p. 4). As this is a concrete example of what the curriculum means by "school content and school activities" (Lgr11, 2011 p. 14), the school should also cooperate with the parents on this point. Although these statements represent goals schools are to achieve, the practical ways of doing this are left to school professionals in cooperation with parents. We have reason to believe that symbolic values are at stake when parents are brought into primary education as resources, complicating home-school cooperation and presumably laying the ground for conflicts.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how teachers and parents experience using parents as resources in primary education, with a special focus on teachers' expectations of "ideal" mothers and fathers, parents' expectations of "ideal" primary school teachers; and how these expectations harmonize and conflict with each other and with Swedish educational policy goals regarding home-school cooperation.

2. Methodology

This is an explorative study using inductive qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 33 teachers and parents in a mainstream district in northern Sweden. The study was approved in 2010 by the Regional Ethics Review Committee. According to Swedish research ethics, the site of the study and all participating informants are anonymous, and any names used are fictitious.

The Education Act and national curricula stress the importance of cooperation between home-school, especially when students are very young. Consequently, a primary school in a mainstream district of a medium-sized town in northern Sweden that has an increasing immigrant population was selected for research. The fictitious name of the town is Middletown. The district is dominated by private homes and townhouses that were built in the 1990s and the 2000s, but there are also apartment buildings from the same period. According to a municipal statistics officer, regional data from Middletown shows a social structure quite similar to the average for all districts in Middletown (Edvall, 2012). According to statistics from Swedish National Agency for Education, (SIRIS, 2012), about 11% of the pupils in the selected school have a non-European background. By using contacts in Middletown's school administration, we gained access to a primary school where a group of teachers had a special interest in home-school cooperation, and were also interested in taking part in the project. The teachers' pupils were 9 – 10 years old. All teachers and parents of the pupils were invited to participate in interviews. All the teachers (5 women and 3 men) took part in the interviews. A total of 25 parents (14 women and 11 men) participated. In the text, the terms "MP" and "FP" refer to male and female parents, respectively. "MT" and "FT" refer to male and female teachers. The numbers that follow these abbreviations, such as MT2, help to internally identify the participants.

The majority of the parents had a European background, and most of them were Swedish born, while four fathers and two mothers had non-European backgrounds. Except for one single father and one single mother, the parents were living together in nuclear families. Most parents, regardless of gender or birthplace had a college or university education, and worked as preschool, primary and academic teachers, civil servants, private sector managers, students and nurses. Some Swedish-born parents, both male and female, had training in various service occupations, such as agency officials and retail shop assistants. According to a municipal statistician, the district is quite similar to the average for Middletown and is a "fairly mainstream area" compared to the Swedish national average for similar Swedish cities. While these are characterized by lower middle and middle class populations, Middletown is home to a university, which is most likely why the parents taking part in this study have a somewhat higher level of education (Edvall, 2012). The teachers, all of whom were born in Sweden, included preschool and primary school teachers, leisure time instructors, and special education teachers.

The interview analysis is based on a poststructuralist understanding of knowledge as "inter-relational, interwoven in webs of networks" that views a qualitative research interview as "a construction site of knowledge" (Kvale, 2007, p. 21). This study relates to the interviewed persons' understanding of ideal school and home relations where parents are used as resources in primary education. Following Kvale (2007), we have begun with an inductive content analysis of the interviews. In a post-structural epistemological interview, the experiences of various persons (e.g. their knowledge about phenomena such as home-school cooperation), is always provisional, open-ended, and relational. Therefore, contextual analyses in the form of a mapping of local conditions that surround the respondents, study documentation, and government statistics support our interpretation of the interview material.

The next step has been to focus on the effects of power in these home-school relations. When teachers and parents describe and reflect on how their negotiations toward structuring the role of parents as resources in primary school, the relations described reflect different kinds of power systems, based on gender, social and cultural backgrounds (de los Reyes & Mulinari, 2005). As a result, negotiations through language constitute people's experiences of, and knowledge about, social reality, and thus provide people with access to social

reality through discourse. Different discourses will compete to define a meaning (e.g. ideal home-school cooperation), and some of them capture a hegemonic position (Fairclough, 1989; Foucault, 1980). In this study, we have focused on how gender permeates these complex intersecting negotiating practices where documentation of our interview persons' educational and occupational backgrounds contributes to our contextual frame of reference for interpretation.

Findings

3. The mother's responsibility discourse in home-school cooperation

When teachers and parents talk about what they expect from each other with regard to home and-school cooperation in primary school, they agree on an asymmetrical power relation. Parents (i.e., especially, mothers) should become teachers' servants in carrying out teachers' demands. Even though both teachers and parents use a gender-neutral rhetoric taken from laws and policy documents, their descriptions of practical situations relating to home-school often use the heterosexual family as a metaphor in which mothers and fathers are given different tasks due to unaltered gender differences. Teachers have most confidence in mothers, and parents have most confidence in female teachers. Both fathers and male teachers are expected to be good at single well-delineated tasks, whereas mothers and female teachers are regarded as the main leaders both at home-school.

3.1.1. Ideal parents according to teachers

In home-school cooperation, the teachers position themselves as the main leaders. Teachers don't want true parental interference in teaching. They refer to their professionalism and cite laws and policy documents in one-sided ways. There are generally only two services they ask parents to do. These are communicating important information about their children, which gives teachers "a leg up" in their teaching, and helps them distinguish "good" parents "who know the logistics" from "troublesome" parents who "don't adapt" and "who ignore teachers' demands such as preparing a packed lunch" (FT27). Secondly, if they need some equipment and/or materials in their teaching, they can ask for parent support in these matters (FT30).

When it comes to parents' wishes to position especially female teachers as caring and trouble-shooting mothers (see below), the absolute majority of the teachers have a comprehensive view of all the aspects of their profession that make it an important one. "Caring and social competences in the teaching team" is just one aspect of the teaching profession and of "secondary importance. After all, we have duties to fulfill, right! We have a lot of duties!" (FT33) his attitude also makes it easier for them to uphold their superior position in relation to parents in home-school cooperation. There was only one male teacher who agreed with the parents' wishes: "Our major task is to get the kids to work together socially" (MT31). However, according to the discourse, he doesn't see himself in that position. Instead he stresses the importance of female, "pre-school teachers" as the "teaching team support" in these matters (MT31).

Teachers are aware of that national curricula make demands on teachers to promote gender equality. In accordance with these demands, teachers should ask for equal support from mothers and fathers. However, in accordance with the hegemonic "mother's responsibility discourse," mothers hold most positions of trust. "I'm quite aware of these (gender) issues, and yet I feel that it's easier to get in touch with the moms". Fathers are more playful and "they take the kids to parties while women still have all the responsibilities" (FT27). Therefore, the mothers get the blame, when things don't work. "The mother is the one children blame when something is missing in their backpack. I have never heard them say; Dad forgot to..." (FT32).

Teachers want parents to influence teachers' work as little as possible, but the converse does not hold true. Teachers are supposed to influence troublesome parents. Especially "curling parents" are regarded as dysfunctional and in need of unlearning. In a Swedish context "curling parents" are unable to set bounds to their children. "This is similar to sweeping the curling rink: adults who constantly sweeps for children, is before and after, under and behind" FT27. "They have no control, because it is easiest so. . . curling parents let the kids do whatever they think is fun, just in order to avoid conflicts" (MT26). Thus, teachers try to cooperate with the parents in order to develop parents' leadership skills in raising children with abilities to take responsible actions

both at home-school. They use counseling practices during parent meetings, development talks, weekly newsletters to influence upbringing at home. Mothers are the main target, but they approach fathers, “especially if they are single” (FT30).

Even though teachers occupy a position of power in home-school cooperation, they cannot totally ignore parents’ needs. To fulfill demands for home-school cooperation stated in national curricula, teachers resort to complex negotiations: “It is all about negotiations” (FT30). Teachers try to keep their advantage and have the best of the final decision from these negotiations. One main strategy has been to abolish an appreciated local board with a parent majority, (see below). The local board “wasn’t working – there were too much talk too little action” (FT33) and “not all parents were active” (FT28). Did they abolish the board to get all parents more engaged? It seems as if their strategy was to maintain contact with all the parents, but preferably from the top down, through one-way communication. “We are good at informing parents about our various ... as professional teachers we explain (to the parents) how we work” (FT30). Thus, the teachers don’t really want influence from parents. “You shouldn’t have to change your teaching strategies just to please the parents” (FT30). They don’t want parental influence, because parents are not always sufficiently qualified for serious negotiations. “I believe many parents haven’t checked the national curriculum. Instead, they consider schoolwork from their own personal perspective... and say: ‘These are my arguments. Accept them, or I’ll revolt.’” (MT26). “You cannot have a dialog with every parent, and each parent shouldn’t know everything” (FT 28). As a result, they never “pay attention only to ONE parent” (FT30). They stress the importance of that “we teachers supporting each other in home-school cooperation. (We should) show the parents that we (the teachers) are unanimous, that we work together with their children!” They emphasize that they have all support they need at school, implicitly saying that they don’t really need cooperation with the parents: “For that cooperation, we have special education teachers and leisure time instructors” (FT28).

3.1.2. Ideal teachers according to parents

The parents position themselves in the “mother’s responsibility discourse” built on gender differences in home-school cooperation. “Well, it’s part of women’s nature, you know, to handle the logistics“(FP20). This is valid, even though some parents are aware of state demands in national curricula on gender equality. “In reality I don’t have the overall responsibility, because we have a good amount of gender equality. In spite of that, I am the one who take responsibility and manages” (FP20). Men willingly agree on this matter: “Mothers bear the main responsibility”, because “fathers believe they have other things to do, while mothers take care of matters related to school” (MP15). The parents also accept the asymmetrical power relation in home-school cooperation and don’t want to interfere in teachers’ teaching: “if you do not have confidence in the trained professionals, the situation starts to be a bit untenable” (MP3). Parents accept the situation on condition that teachers guarantee pleasant, safe and secure classrooms and schoolyards. The ideal teacher is someone who “gets the child to thrive, first of all” (MP8) and is easy to approach; “someone the pupils feel they can approach in various ways”. It is also important that the teacher really “sees and confirm each and every child” (FP6).

Teachers’ abilities to solve conflicts and teach children to solve conflicts themselves are of utmost importance, and a teacher team is crucial: “It’s kind of like a family, doing different things to make the family work. Women and men are very different, and in a teacher-team you can probably benefit from this” (FP5). The male teachers are considered to use a more "straight" communication, so “children can feel a little more respect” (FP20). They can also function as male role models for sons to single mothers and act as a support for the mothers: “They get a different view of the problem when a man looks at it” (MP10). With their care-oriented approach female teachers are, however, the most trustworthy persons at school, because they are “like a mother” (MP21). Female teachers have an advantage because they see emerging conflicts in early on, take them seriously and are better at solving them. They are better than men, “because men may think this (an emerging conflict) is nothing, whereas women take them serious and they are real trouble-shooters” (MP13). Female teachers “work a lot with the kids and they teach them how to resolve conflicts themselves” (FP17). One concrete method used is single-sex groups: “She let the girls go home, and then she had ‘boys talk’ together with the boys, because she was convinced that my son was sad because bad things happened among the group of boys. She regarded the situation as acute. She solved the problem on the spot in the right way!” (FP7). Consequently, the parents attribute to female teachers an ability to take an overall responsibility over their children’s schooling.

They therefore protest against what happens in the higher grades of primary school where there are more men in the teaching staff. Parents experience “a tougher, more rigid attitude” among teachers. The whole school environment is less caring, because “they (the teachers) do not take into consideration the social context” (FP2). They also react when teachers are too focused on teaching school subjects per se at the expense of more democratic values such as; “how to behave towards others, and learning public speaking” (MP8). Obviously, the parents continuously try to restore the ‘mother’s responsibility discourse’.

This great confidence in those teachers who have more care-oriented abilities, argued through an essential gender discourse, makes it possible for female teachers, especially, to interfere in some parents’ upbringing and contribute to an re-learning more in line with teachers’ requirements. Parents seem to accept that female teachers help parents handle the situations and ensure that their children take responsibilities for both homework and leisure activities. One mother who can represent the parent group stated, “When the ski training season starts for my daughter, her teacher is happy to put together a schedule for us to give us a structure and timetable for both homework and training. She (the teacher) told me: ‘I’m happy to help’. She likes to get everything together” (FP20).

3.2. Discontents and opposition of the mother’s responsibility discourse

The ‘mother’s responsibility discourse’ is very strong in this context. There are almost no traces of discontent or opposition. As we have stated above, parents seem to accept a subordinated position in relation to teachers as long as there are teachers who take overall responsibility for their pupils’ well-being. However, the parents protested when a reorganization was instituted that abolished the local board with its parent majority. The parents objected, because they lost a position from where they could have influence on schoolwork if they so desired. The reorganization also made more visible the asymmetrical power relation, in favor of teachers, in home-school cooperation. The previous board was regarded as “very strong and committed” and was “providing all parents with many important insights” (FP2). Without this platform, the parents experienced that their participation in home-school cooperation changed from a position from where they could “possibly attack and negotiate” to a position where they just were able to get informed and “support” already adopted strategies (FP14). They described how parents have become passive during parental meetings and “just sat there and nodded and received (information)” (FP2). They described how some parents tried to get more influence by joining together; “I’ve actually been to the principal, me and some mothers, to demand more resources” (FP12). To fulfill demands for home-school –cooperation, these mothers, like the teachers, use a one-way information strategy in home-school-cooperation: “We kept X (the teacher) informed during the whole process. She got the information about our demands” (FP12).

There is also some discontent expressed in regard to the gender discourse practiced at school. If the majority of the parents seem to accept the family metaphor with female and male teachers having different strengths and therefore different responsibilities, there are, however, some claims on how male teachers disregard girls’ needs and interests. This opposition came from mothers of schoolgirls, bringing examples from the schoolyard. According to the descriptions, boys and girls were usually playing different games. They seem to accept these gender differences, but they don’t accept how these differences are valued. One example: Boys were playing soccer and “there were perhaps two or three teachers on the soccer field, but almost none where most girls are. Moreover, from a gender perspective this is unfair. Boys playing football is regarded as important, these male teachers say about the girls, “well, they just walk around’. But if they had taken a close look, they would have realized that this was not the case!” (FP1).

Teachers show few signs of discontent and opposition in regard to “the mother’s responsibility discourse.” They try to keep their superior position in home-school cooperation and they keep on turning to mothers, in particular, for support. They want to position themselves as professionals in all aspects. If the parents don’t interfere in their teaching, they seem to accept “the mother’s responsibility discourse” embraced by essential gender differences and female leaders.

4. Teachers’ and parents’ experiences of the use of parents as resources in Swedish primary education

As stated above, since the 1960s, a good education for every child has been a major objective of Swedish educational policy. This objective is closely connected to democratic values, with equality and gender equality as

central aspects. According to national curricula home and school should cooperate in such a democratic atmosphere to reach this goal. The ways that teachers and parents in Middletown, a fairly mainstream Swedish school environment, have interpreted home-school cooperation, draws on what we label a hegemonic “mother’s responsibility discourse.” As stated above, the parents involved in this study are fairly well educated. This applies to the European/Swedish parents as well as the non-European parents, and to the few single parents, as well as the parents in nuclear families. The mother’s responsibility discourse is constructed within a metaphor of heterosexual nuclear families and strongly regulates how parents should serve as resources in primary education. Just as shown in (Gottzén, 2011) study from Los Angeles, gender differences underlie this discourse, consequently constructing females as responsible leaders both at home and in primary education, while more or less subordinate and / or separate men. The discourse built on gender differences makes it difficult for males to position themselves as main leaders in these spheres. Males are not expected to take overall responsibility. Single fathers are those with highest expectations in these matters. The gender discourse leave single and more marked off tasks to men, the content of which depends on the contextual situation. As reported by (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997), the possibilities for parents to become resources in primary education are regulated through an asymmetrical power relation, where teachers have the right to influence upbringing at home but parents’ influence on schoolwork doesn’t appear to be highly appreciated by teachers (See also Forsberg, 2009; Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997). Teachers, through their conduct and through one way communication, ask for the information and material support they need from parents to be able to realize professional duties. The parents’ protests against the abolishment of a board with a parent majority don’t seem to have had any impact on the asymmetrical power relation in home-school cooperation. Teachers’ superior position in this Swedish context is in line with (Walker & MacLure, 2005) findings, that home-school cooperation practices operate as a surveillance device for monitoring compliance with school values.

In spite of strong school policy efforts since the 1960s to counteract traditional gender patterns and to involve parents as resources in Swedish primary education, only some intentions in Swedish governing documents for primary school have been fulfilled in Middletown while others have not. Teachers’ rights to influence how parents raise their children have been fulfilled, while parents’ rights to influence primary education have not. There are not equal, but rather unequal, expectations on mothers and fathers, with mothers, on the one hand, having a leading position while on the other, also bearing a heavier burden with more overall responsibilities to fulfill teachers’ demands on parents. A similar inequality appears between female and male teachers at school. Female teachers have a heavier burden, because they are positioned as main leaders at school with main responsibilities also for home-school cooperation. Finally, we recommend that teachers’ and parents’ experiences are taken seriously in further strategies to include parents as resources in primary education on a more equal basis - strategies that are more in line with an inclusive and democratic pedagogy. Action research could be one such instrument (Berge 2000).

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