Experiments with the role of parents in primary education in the Netherlands

Frederik Smit, Hans Moerel, Peter Sleegers

Background

The research concerns the participation of parents (or other care-takers of children) in activities at primary schools in the Netherlands. In most cases, parent participation refers to the situation in which parents actively participate, or will participate, in their children's education. Some thirty years ago, parent participation was started on the basis of the idea that good contacts between the school and the parents would be in the interest of the child. It would benefit the pupils if also parents would be welcome at school. Besides 'participating', parents also wanted to have a say in what their children learn and how education is given shape (Smit & Van Esch, 1993).

The Educational Participation Act (1992) and the (New) Primary Education Act (1985, 1998) have been in effect as the statutory regulation of parent participation in the Netherlands. The Educational Participation Act provides a structure for both parents and teachers to be a member of school participation councils, as well as to be able to monitor and influence the school governing body's policy. The Act also allows parents to establish their own parents' council. This council has the authority, whether requested or not, to advise the school governing boards, the head teacher or participation councils. Article 44 of the Dutch New Primary Education Act stipulates that the proper authorities must enable the parents of pupils to conduct supporting activities on behalf of the school and education. This Article also stipulates that parents, in conducting said activities, are bound to follow the instructions of the school principal and other teaching staff, who remain responsible for the state of affairs. So teachers and parents themselves are able to determine how they will give form and content to parent participation.

Very little empirical research has been conducted on the concrete functioning of parent participation (Smit & Van Esch, 1996). In this paper, results of research into the implementation of parent participation in primary schools are reported. More specified in this paper the different ways schoolteams in primary education started to implement parent participation in behalf of the optimization of pupils's development opportunities, the enhancement of pupils' education careers and the improvement of teachers' task performance, are described.

Parent participation in primary education: a model

In scheme 1 we present a model for the field of force around parent participation. On the outside of the circle we mention: the (national, local) government, the parents, secondary schools, early childhood education programs, parent empowerment programmes. The national government has stimulated the promotion of principles of *'dynamic schools'* and of parent participation in various ways. Dynamic schools are schools that take charge of change. Rather then reacting to and being driven by the forces impacting schools today, or pretending such forces do not exist, the dynamic school seizes them as opportunities to improve itself. Thus numerous changes occur in dynamic schools. These schools constantly learn and grow with an aim toward improving. They respond; they

choose innovation and activities to address the needs they see and feel.

In a dynamic school, boundaries between the external and internal worlds are breaking down. In primary education parents - and sometimes representatives from community business and agencies - participate in decision making processes and offer variety of other inputs. Parents can play different roles as regards to parent participation. In primary education contact with secondary schools, early childhood education programs, parent empowerment programmes play an (important) role.

School teams in primary education can differ in the way they implement parent participation in behalf of the optimization of pupils' development opportunities, the enhancement of pupils' education careers and the improvement of teachers' task performance. These aspects are within the circle. As mentioned above the way primary school teams implement parent participation is the central focus of the research reported in this paper.

Within the team of teachers a main factor for introduction and implementation of parent participation is the support for this idea within the team. From theories about the learning organisation we know that it is very important for an organisation to have a clear mission and that most of the members share this mission. In this context, it is important that principals promote teacher leadership in schools. Teacher leadership is expected to reinforce teacher motivation in contributing to school improvement. Crucial tasks for principals in facilitating leadership falls in the areas of motivating teachers for involvement, developing authentic participation in decision - making forums, enhancing teacher communication and contact, providing rewards and incentives for teachers, and mobilizing resources (Sleegers, 1999).

For parent participation to be effective it seems to be very important that it is part of the mission of the school and the different units. If parent participation is part of the mission then the management is more or less obliged to stimulate that this part of the mission is realised.

Scheme 1 - Field of force around (implementation of) parent participation
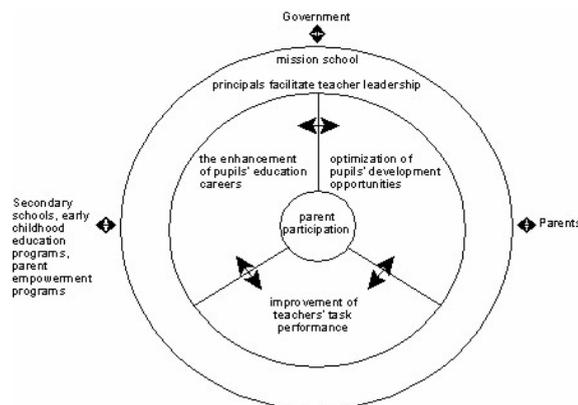
In the Netherlands schools must have a school guide providing interested parents with information on the school's objectives, educational methods, care, and performance. The school guide should help parents in making well-informed decisions in favour of a particular school. Parents should be able to derive from it explicit expectations about the school's offer, while the school is being held accountable. It is very important that the dimension of parent participation is part of the school guide. This gives a certain guarantee that management stimulates the implementation of parent participation.

Research question and method

The leading research question of the study reported here, is:

To what extent are experiments with parent participation in primary education in the Netherlands successful?

To answer this question qualitative methods are used. First, we analysed literature on parent participation in primary schools in the Netherlands the last ten years concerning the mission of the schools and parent participation; goals, targets, promotion of expertise, creation of

a base of implementation of new developments. Second, we gathered qualitative data by means of case-studies. The selection of seven research parts was based on a number of types which emerged through analysing literature on parent participation. In this respect, special attention has been paid to the proper diversification of schools (different pupil/teacher/parent characteristics, and differences in the degree to which parents have acquired skills in parent participation activities). For the case studies, written sources have been used. We analysed these data using case-comparisons and controlled comparisons (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

Types of experiments with parent participation

On the basis of the qualitative analyses, we distinguished seven types of experiments with parent participation. To describe this distinction between different experiments we used four characteristics: 1. description of reasons, 2. targets, 3. strategies and 4. obstacles they have to deal with.

In scheme 2 the reasons, targets, strategies and obstacles in seven types of experiments with parent participation in the Netherlands are described.

Scheme 2 - Analysis of types of experiments with parent participation in the Netherlands

|	reasons	targets	strategies	obstacles
1	school can't do it alone: order problems lack of authority	building bridges between home and school	to be open towards parents: '*learning to know*'	fears of undesirable parental interference
2	communication is lacking between home and school	a collaborative relationship will benefit pupils, parents, school and community	to facilitate the communication between parents and teachers: '*learning to do*'	lack of integration in school policy
3	no bonds of friendship between immigrants and native pupils	intercultural communication in classroom and canteen	dialogue at local school level: parties, theatre, school paper and parent involvement (with special roles for immigrant key figures): '*learning to be*'	having the performance of teachers questioned
4	suboptimum school climate: absence, drop out, violence	changing school climate	plans including parent collaboration and optimizing home environments: '*learning to live together*'	parents take a greater interest in external quality care (accountability)
5	different approaches and aims of child rearing and distribution of tasks across the school and the family	improving the parents-school relationship	school teams demonstrate supportive behaviour towards parents: '*learning to learn*'	a Babel-like confusion about pedagogical attunement between parents and teachers
6	home environment doesn't support learning parents don't help and don't give support in the school	mutual trust and respect between parents and teachers two way home-school collaboration	attention to (early) childhood education programs and parent empowerment programs: '*learning to use resources*'	restricted support of management
7	parents are not include in school decisions and development	active parent participation in a variety of settings or committees	parental representation on school governing bodies and parent committees set up networks to link families with parent representatives: '*learning to use networks*'	lack of support of management (mission zstatement)

Successful experiments

Although a distinction in different experiments with parent participation is interesting, it does not answer the research question. To answer the research question, we have to define criteria for successful parent participation practices. We formulated the following criteria:

1. clear description of targets
2. usefulness of methods/strategies
3. the extent of influence of participants on the process of the project
4. possibilities to reach the target group
5. the progress
6. coping with obstacles
7. the functions of the experiment for pupils, teachers and the institutions
8. support of other professionals
9. the role of management
10. elements for raising standards of partnerships between home and school.

Using these criteria, we analysed the qualitative data. The results showed that successful experiments with parent participation are experiments which offer good possibilities to enhance mutual understanding and tolerance. More specified, it appeared that success depends on the following (combination of) factors:

- the quality of the approach
- the mission of primary education (subscribed by the teachers)
- the motivation/role of the participants
- communication and information exchange
- the targets/strategies
- involvement/support by the communities and business
- the role of management, parent councils, participation councils
- the consumer position of parents
- parental involvement education (scheme 3).

Scheme 3 - Successful experiments parent participation
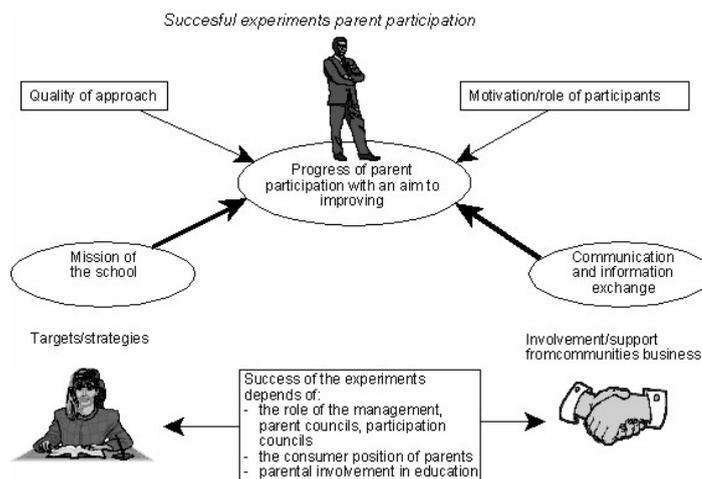
Conclusions

As mentioned above, results of research into the implementation of parent participation in primary schools were reported in this paper. The results showed that experiments with parent participation differ with regard to reasons, targets, strategies and (related) obstacles. Experiments also vary from stimulating an open relationship between parents and school, to active parent and community participation in school governance, and strong community partnerships.

Further, it appeared that different factors positively affect the implementation of parent participation. Some of these factors seem to refer to the fact that for parent participation to succeed, it is essential to have an adequate participation structure (Smit, Van Esch & Sleegers, 1998). This involves that parents' representatives make clear arrangements with competent authorities and school management team: well-defined procedures, clearly organised consultations and distinct responsibilities put down on paper. Adequate participation structures will result in an increasing willingness to participate and can also affect the quality of the approach to parental involvement.

Some factors also seem to refer to the balance between the internal (in-school community) and the external environment (parents and the community). In order to handle the link between the internal and external contexts, environmental leadership, integrating the external and internal contexts, is needed (Goldring & Sullivan, 1996). In a context of parental and community empowerment, principals can no longer serve as gatekeepers who attempt to limit parental and community involvement, but must become negotiators who utilize complex strategies to balance institutional autonomy with external participation. To encourage parental and community activism in schools, principals must operate in the community outside their schools while also bringing the community into their schools. According to Goldring and Rallis (1993), principals of 'dynamic schools' must be in charge of *building the bridges between their schools and the surrounding world* and they must bear their schools' flag across those bridges as well as welcome those who can develop and support the mission of the school.

Literature

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