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The present study explores a local initiative to develop parent support services through the school system. In focus are the discourse on home–school relations and parent support and the interplay between discourse and practical occurrences. Official documents, interviews and notes from municipal meetings and informal conversations were obtained from a local authority during 2009–2013. The results show that the education system is discursively positioned as an important player for the administration and organisation of parent support. All the same, opposing arguments are given precedence in decisions concerning what home–school relations should entail. The study explicates that parent support, when connected to compulsory education, is preferably conceptualised as part of and contingent on the forms and characteristics of home–school relations. Furthermore, it makes evident that the term school is recurrently used as a synonym of teachers. This has implications for both home–school relations and parent support.

Keywords: home–school relations; parent support; compulsory education; local authority; critical discourse analysis

Introduction

In many western countries, including Sweden, significant changes have occurred within the education system, starting in the 1980s and 1990s. The length of educations is extended, school work is more demanding, pupil and parent democracy are stressed, schools are increasingly being inspected and core subject knowledge is being measured on a national level to a greater extent than previously (Coffey 2001; Liedman 2011). The changes coexist with a new societal focus on children's educational achievements and health. According to the public and political discourse, increasing unemployment, welfare dependency, child poverty and health issues are best tackled by public health-promoting initiatives and high achievement levels. Consequently, the education system has been pointed out as a main player (Bridges 2008; Lister 2006; Watson et al. 2012). The World Health Organization (WHO), for instance, recommends an increase in health-promoting activities through the school system, emphasising that such services should involve children's families (URL 1 WHO 1997).

Since the 1930s, Swedish family policies have been based on universal public services. Besides free education, schools have provided free meals, regular health check-ups and vaccination programmes (Wells and Bergnehr 2014). During the past years, increasing concerns have been raised about evidence indicating that children have more health problems now than they did a few decades ago. The official, national report *Parent*

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support – beneficial for all (SOU 2008), explicates the political goal to stifle this trend by encouraging local authorities to develop and expand universal services directed to parents. Schools – because they bring together all children and parents – are pointed out as important actors in the enhancement of supporting initiatives.

The term parent support is broad and fluid: its discursive and practical meaning varies depending on the context, and it includes the initiatives of actors other than schools, for example those of the Social Services and the voluntary sector (Bergnehr 2012b). The national report (SOU 2008) defines parent support as a wide range of services offered to all parents with minor children that strengthen parenting, enable social contacts between parents and improve parents' knowledge of child development and children's rights. In reference to schools, the report points out the school health services as having competences suitable to work with health promotion including parent support. It is mentioned that national regulations (the Education Act and curriculum) do not oblige schools to organise parent support. All the same, further on, the report proposes parent meetings and home–school conferences as activities that could include such services. Hence, the provision of parent support in this reasoning is implicitly connected to the (supervisory) teachers, that is, to those individuals who are frequently responsible for parent meetings and home–school conferences, rather than to the school health services that by national directive are required to work with health promotion. Furthermore, schools are pointed out as suitable for organising social events for parents, offering locales for support organised by other actors, and providing information on services offered by other actors.

The national proposal (SOU 2008) stating that local authorities should develop activities through the schools that are directed specifically to parents is comparatively novel and in part controversial. The National Agency of Education (Skolverket) (2009a), for instance, opposed the official report. The agency argued that parent support, as it is defined by the report, is beyond the schools' responsibility – that such directives do not concur with educational regulations. Despite this response, the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, through the National Institute of Public Health, provided funding for local projects aimed at advancing parent support initiatives. The funding criteria were based on recommendations from the national report, and consequently the importance placed on the education system prevailed.

In the overarching goals of the Swedish curriculum for compulsory education, terms such as 'support', 'joint responsibility' and 'partnership' are used when referring to home–school relations. When specified in a paragraph, the obligations of schools are centred on facilitating parent democracy, i.e. enabling parents to have a say in the everyday organisation of schooling, and on informative measures, i.e. on recurrently providing parents with information about the child's learning, well-being and development, and, as a teacher, keeping oneself updated on the child's individual circumstances (Lgr 11, 17–18).

Focus of study

National regulations and recommendations – such as the Education Act, the curriculum and the national report on parent support – are recontextualised locally through (re)interpretation, negotiation, resistance and/or confirmation in a dynamic interplay between different actors and fields (Fairclough 2010). The present study scrutinises this process and its outcomes, since the consequences of state governance require continuous investigation. The local 'recontextualisation' (Fairclough 2010, 20) of national directives

as explicated in the national report on parent support (SOU 2008) is explored. In focus are the discourse on home–school relations and parent support and the interplay between discourse and practical occurrences.

The data were gathered in a mid-sized municipality (relative to other municipalities in Sweden) that was granted funding by the National Institute of Public Health for a two-year project (2010–2011). Part of the project was to develop parent support services through the school system. Previously, a conceptual analysis of parent support when connected to the education system has been conducted, based on parts of the data (Bergnehr, forthcoming).

Home–school relations consist primarily of three parties: school personnel, parents and children. The present discussion focuses on the role of the school as depicted by officials, rather than, for instance, on parental involvement (e.g. Epstein 2007) or on children's role or perspectives (e.g. Edwards and David 1997; Dannesboe et al. 2012). The data, collected at the local authority, contain information from politicians and civil servants, as well as from documents produced by these groups. Professionals working in schools, parents and children are not included as informants; these groups, however, are affected by discussions and decisions made at the local authority. This study makes unique contributions to the research field on home–school relations as well as to studies on parent support, in that the data were gathered on the municipal, political decision-making level.

Homes and schools

The importance of good home–school relations and the mutual responsibility of the state and parents to care for, foster and educate children have been points of political emphasis in the western world during the past 50 years (Dannesboe et al. 2012; Edwards 2002; Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2012). Critical research has discussed compulsory schooling as a technique to govern the conduct of parents and children (see e.g. Foucault 1978). It has been argued that, historically, the education system has been reformed and operated by those with political power – the state – with the aim to secure for the nation good workers and healthy, dependable citizens. The fostering abilities of the working classes were not trusted, and thus schools – the professional experts – were to compensate for parents' potential failures (Sandin 1986). Baez and Talburt (2008) and Kryger (2012) have discussed contemporary times. Their main argument is that the public and political discourse on learning and fostering assigns parents more responsibility, in relation to the school system, than has previously been the case. Schooling, and society as a whole, governs parents' conduct in order to achieve desired outcomes such as high achievement levels and employable citizens (Baez and Talburt 2008). Edwards (2002, 4) suggests that the home–school relation has been depicted as being founded on collaboration between the different parties, but that 'the language of partnership is becoming a more hard-edged attempt to direct and regulate family and home life for both parents and children' (see also Crozier 1998). Attempts to influence parental conduct may be reinterpreted and resisted, engendering new practices and ideas (see Fairclough 2010). Even so, Nordic research indicates that home–school relations are formed to a large extent by the premises outlined by schools and teachers. The parents (and children) try hard to comply with what is expected of them, and to maintain good relations with the school personnel (Dannesboe et al. 2012; Forsberg 2007a, 2007b).

Parental obligations towards schools have increased during the past few decades (Baez and Talburt 2008; Kryger 2012; Reay 2004), but the responsibilities placed on

schools have grown as well. Schools have been made responsible for facilitating prosperous futures for the children as well as for society as a whole in nations where higher education is increasingly required for employment, where cutbacks in public spending are frequently announced, and where the socio-economic differences between groups are growing (Bergnehr 2012a; Bridges 2008). According to Ball (2010), political expectations on the educational system are idealistic. Children's learning is largely accomplished through out-of-school activities (e.g. sports, music lessons, literacy training, homework, etc.), but this learning is facilitated or hindered by the social, economic and material resources of the family. Ball's proposal is that:

> if we want to understand and explain persistent educational inequalities and do something about them through policy, then increasingly, the school is the wrong place to look and the wrong place to reform – at least in isolation from other sorts of changes in other parts of society. (156)

Improved educational achievement and public health may be better achieved through socio-economic support to disadvantaged families than through educational reforms, Ball argues (see also Attree 2005).

General characteristic of the home–school relation includes yearly parent meetings, one to two home–school conferences each term, a couple of parent council meetings every year, school letters, phone calls and additional home–school conferences regarding children with learning difficulties or children who have behaved inappropriately (Dannesboe et al. 2012; Forsberg 2007a, 2007b; Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2012; Nordahl 2007). This implies that, in actuality, home–school relations are formed by the child–parent(s)–teacher(s) relationship. However, the time allotted to supervisory teachers for communication and collaboration with parents is scarce, which causes teachers to prioritise families with children who risk school failure at the expense of general activities for the parent group (Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2012).

Parent support through schools

Although supporting services directed to parents through the school system exist, they are comparatively rare and/or not investigated. On the other hand, there is an extensive field of research on health promotion through schools, where the focus of the interventions and the research is on the child (Bergnehr and Zetterqvist Nelson, forthcoming). The role of parents is discussed in such work, but it is common to primarily illuminate how to get parents more engaged in their child's education, progress and health (e.g. Vince Whitman and Aldinger 2009; WHO 1997), rather than to study supporting services directed specifically to parents.

Documents like the Swedish national proposal (SOU 2008), which recommends services to support parents through the school system, are not unique to Sweden. In the UK, the Green paper *Every Child Matters*, published in 2003, contains similar reasoning (Featherstone and Manby 2006), and was followed by funding for projects and project evaluations. One study investigates the use of newsletters provided by the school to inform and educate parents on different topics. The study discusses possible implications of providing support through schools: school may have negative connotations for some parents, the newsletter appeared to attract mostly mothers, and non-English- speaking parents may be excluded from the information gleaned by reading the letters (Shepherd and Roker 2005). Another study explores parent counselling at the schools. It is in accordance with Shepherd and Roker (2005), in that it reveals the need for reflection over whether it is appropriate to organise parent support through the school system. First, some

parents have negative experiences that cause them to hesitate to use services connected to their child's school; second, proper resources in terms of funding and personnel must follow the initiative, but are often scarce and third, the demands placed on schools are already great, and although teachers 'are likely to welcome support services which will help them meet education priorities', they may be less pleased about assuming responsibilities for parent support (Featherstone and Manby 2006, 36). The outcomes of parent support services appear to depend partly on the characteristics of the home–school relations that are formed by interpersonal as well as by other factors.

Material and methodology

The present exploration is part of a larger research project looking at how national policies on parent support were locally formulated, decided upon and put into practice. The Swedish political system is rather decentralised, and the organisation of, for instance, basic education, childcare facilities and Social Services is the responsibility of municipal politicians (Lidström 2012). The idea to study parent support initiatives as part of home–school relations gradually developed through contact with the field and with the accumulated data. The iterative process of interacting 'with the field (…); with other social settings; with other ideas; with other disciplines' (Atkinson 2013, 57) gave rise to the focus of the present study.

Material from 2009 to 2013 was collected from the local authority responsible for around 50,000 inhabitants. The ethnographic, long-term study design allowed the research team to work closely with the politicians and civil servants responsible for the parent support project. While the researchers collected data, they were recurrently approached by the officials to discuss matters that concerned the municipal project. In addition, tentative results from the research were presented at several occasions during the years. In this way, the analyses were continuously discussed, elaborated and confirmed not only within the research team but also in relation to politicians, civil servants and practitioners. The responses of these public officials/employees were collected as part of the research data. It is possibly that the presentations influenced the politicians and civil servants in their work with the planning and organisation of parent support services. In these regards, the data and the parent support initiative were co-constructed and configured through the researchers' and the informants' continuous interaction, inter-pretations and actions (e.g. De Melo Resende 2013).

The material was gathered using purposive sampling and consists of municipal official documents, semi-structured interviews, field notes from municipal meetings and informal conversations and information taken from websites. Documents dealing with parent support and/or outlined political goals or reported activities of previous years were included. Politicians and civil servants (experts or heads of sections) who were involved with the development of parent support were interviewed in their capacity as representatives of the departments or the municipal executive office. Meetings in which parent support was discussed and/or decided upon were chosen for observation.

The documents consist of the plan of action for parent support (April 2009), the project plan (from December 2009), the final report of project accomplishments (published in March 2012), handbooks produced within the project and protocols (2010–2011) from the political board responsible for the parent support project. In addition, information was recurrently obtained from the municipality's website and through telephone and email contacts with civil servants (2010–March 2013). Eleven semi-structured interviews, lasting from 1 to 1.5 hours, were conducted during the

summer of 2010 with four politicians and seven civil servants. They were centred on questions dealing with what parent support entails, how the services are best developed, and how the municipal departments can best work to increase support initiatives. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Eight official meetings with politicians and civil servants were observed and notes were written down during each meeting, some in 2010, most in 2011 and one in 2012. The notes were taken on the computer or by hand.

The data were gathered by the author of the present study. When presented here, all data are translated from the Swedish. The Swedish rules and guidelines for research ethics (www.codex.vr.se) informed the design of the research project, the collection of data, the analytical procedures and the discussion of results. The material was collected with the consent of the informants. The municipality is not identified and the informants' age, position and gender are not presented so as to ensure their anonymity.

Analytical framework

The ethnographic approach has been combined with the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis (CDA; e.g. De Melo Resende 2013). The analysis, influenced by Fairclough (e.g. 2010), is based on the understanding that the meanings we make in life are socially and discursively construed, but always contingent on material and physical objects. It is a critical realistic approach, where the material world and the social world are regarded as constraining and enabling people's meaning-making and practices, at the same time as the world is transformed through the strategies people apply to make an impact on current structures. The interrelation between language and practice is pertinent to the analysis, based on the presumption that language – discourse – affects social action, and vice versa: the aim being to scrutinise in what ways and with which consequences these effects occur. Discourse, according to Fairclough (2010):

> might be seen as some sort of entity or 'object', but it is itself a complex set of relations including relations of communication between people who talk, write and in other ways communicate with each other, but also, for example, describe relations between concrete communicative events (conversations, newspaper articles etc.) and more abstract and enduring complex discursive 'objects' (with their own complex relations) like languages, discourses and genres. But there are also relations between discourse and other such complex 'objects' including objects in the physical world, persons, power relations and institutions, which are interconnected elements in social activity or praxis. (…) Discourse is not simply an entity we can define independently. (3)

Thus, the study of discourse involves the study of relations – the interplay between language, praxis and the physical world – and of structures and agents. Embedded in the CDA approach is an interest to identify discourses, the dominance and/or marginalisation of certain discourses, and strategies behind discourses and practices in the struggle to influence others. The recontextualisation of discourses as well as the operationalisation of discourses are of interest (Fairclough 2010, 20).

In the present analyses, the notes, interviews and documents are regarded as texts that contain information about the representations of home–school relations and parent support, about decision-making and practical outcomes. The data analyses involved repeated readings, categorising of the content and inter- and intratextual comparisons. The focus is on discursive representations, but included in the examination is the relationship between discourse and practice: what is said and what is actually accomplished. Although information in documents, interview statements, etc., cannot

be taken at face value, the ethnographic mapping does enable us to draw conclusions about actual praxis, i.e. about the parent support that the local authority initiated and later provided.

Advancing home–school relations through parent support

The development of parent support through schools is connected to the advancement of home–school relations. The characteristics of home–school relations will influence parent support initiatives and the outcome of these, and vice versa. This has not been thoroughly recognised or theorised in previous research on parent support through the education system.

The following sections present the local recontextualisation of the national directives on parent support. The national directives (i.e. SOU 2008) are somewhat contradictory. The school health services are pointed out as suitable to offer parent support, but concrete examples of school activities through which support can be provided are parent meetings and home–school conferences; these activities are commonly connected to the supervisory teachers. In theory, personnel from the school health services could be in charge of, or at least included in, parent meetings and home–school conferences, but such activities are in praxis, at the present and in most schools, the responsibility of the teachers. The national report (SOU 2008) wavers in its stance, by mentioning that the Education Act and curriculum do not stipulate schools to offer parent support, while simultaneously recommending the local authorities to organise parent support through the schools.

How, then, was the national discourse reinterpreted and recontextualised locally? Two contrasting themes evolved during the analytical work: schools were to develop parent support through (educating) the teachers, and, teachers were to be relieved from further obligations to support parents. In the first theme, home–school relations were to be advanced, while the second theme consisted of arguments and praxis that aimed to alleviate school personnel from additional home–school obligations. The conflict that is evident in the national directives and on the national level (The National Agency of Education (Skolverket) 2009a; SOU 2008) is reflected locally: should schools advance home–school relations through parent support or should they not?

Supporting parents through (educating) the teachers

The professional group that is recurrently pointed out as responsible for the advancement of parent support, and consequently home–school relations, is the teachers. The project plan (from December 2009), which was granted funds from the National Institute of Public Health, enumerates several undertakings, the one of greatest interest here being formulated as 'The school supporting parents – the development of parent meetings and parent councils'. The initiative, as stated in the plan, is introduced with reference to the 'collaboration between preschool/school and the homes' and the 'partnership between parents and school personnel'. The objective to increase support to parents through the school system, with the aim to stifle the trend of health problems among children, is explicated and justified as follows: 'Schools have a unique opportunity to reach all families and may evolve to become a location for internal and external actors'. This language corresponds with the formulations in the national report (SOU 2008).

In the project plan, parent meetings and parent councils are specifically pointed out as activities that could include support to parents, but without any clarifications how. Parent councils are connected to parent democracy – a forum for parents to have a say. Although

the term parent support is applied with various meanings (e.g. Bergnehr 2012b), it appears a bit far stretched to define parent councils as a form of parent support, or even as an activity that could or should include such content. This application indicates that the term parent support is difficult to pinpoint (see also Bergnehr, forthcoming). The local authorities are given little help from the national report (SOU 2008) that is vague in its recommendations and application of central concepts.

The project plan (published in 2009) refers to 'school personnel', not explicitly to 'teachers'. The final project report (published in March 2012), on the other hand, designates 'teachers' in the enumeration of project objectives and accomplishments: 'teachers' formed a group that developed and tested the content for the, so- called, engaging parent meetings handbooks; 'teachers' mapped the number of schools that had parent councils; 'the teacher' plans and organises engaging parent meetings; and 'teachers', together with staff from child-health centres, gained further education by taking part in courses on group dynamics and leadership. The discursive representations indicate that 'the school supporting parents' in actuality meant that the teachers were being made responsible for the enhancement of home–school relations, through the provision of parent support.

While the teachers are assigned the responsibility to advance home–school relations, they are not fully trusted to have the capacities or qualifications to do so. In the data, the teachers are positioned as inexperienced and/or uncomfortable, or as failing in other ways, in their communication and collaboration with parents. This is evident in documents and in other sources, such as interviews and notes from meetings. In the final project report (2012), the production of handbooks for engaging parent meetings was justified as follows: 'to support the teachers in their planning of parent meetings, and to suggest ways of creating an engaging parent meeting'. Further on in the report, it is stated that 'engaging parent meetings require knowledge of how to manage a group of parents'. According to the report, that sort of knowledge is gained through the course in group dynamics and leadership.

The argument that teachers are in need of further training in leadership and group dynamics, and in their approach to parents and children, can appear a bit peculiar. Teachers, and other school personnel, work with groups and relate to children as well as parents on an everyday basis. Nevertheless, this was a common way to reason. Failing home–school relations were used to explain why parent support through schools can be difficult to achieve. The following is one example: 'I do not believe that schools regard parent support as their prime objective. In addition, many of the personnel lack training in or possibly knowledge of how to approach and relate to families' (Interview 9, politician). In another interview, the politician stresses the need for schools to improve their supportive stance in relation to parents, and exemplifies this using the negative experiences of some acquaintances who had a child with learning difficulties: 'They did not want to attend parent meetings. They did not want to participate in anything because they felt criticized' (Interview 5).

Another way to position teachers in reasoning about failing home–school relations is to refer to societal and parental changes that have transformed the expectations placed on teachers. When represented like this, the teachers are in part excused for any potential flaws in their relations towards parents: it is the teachers who are vulnerable in the context of home–school relations, risking criticisms from the parents:

> Times have changed and the expectations put on teachers are high at the same time as parents are more individualistic, raising their children to be the same, and I think that the teachers feel insecure, many times; the parents criticize them, they have a harder times now than

> before. (…) Indeed, it's a pity, and I believe the teachers need support. (Interview 8, civil servant)

In the above quote, it is proposed that teachers need support, possibly in the form of further training and handbooks on which they can rely as the informant argues later on in the interview. All the same, this sort of reasoning supports the overall recurrent notion explicated in documents, interviews and field notes that teachers are in need of further training on how to relate to parents.

Teachers are the largest group of professionals in Swedish schools, but the primary schools contain a significant number of staff working at the leisure time centres (e.g. recreational pedagogues and classroom assistants). In addition, counsellors, nurses, doctors and psychologists make up the school health services. The school health services are referred to in the national report (SOU 2008) as a possible provider of parent support, as well as in the municipal plan of action for parent support (April 2009) and in some interviews. A few of the interviewees stress the health services' significance in health-promoting work, although in accordance with the overall reasoning, they do not specify what parent support offered through the school health services could entail (Interview 4, civil servant, and Interview 9, politician). In the data overall, the school health services are discursively given a marginalised, inconspicuous position; that is, they are mentioned but not elaborated on. Other professionals at schools, for instance recreational pedagogues, are not alluded to. I would propose that this concurs with the societal, taken-for- granted notion that the term 'schools' connotes 'teachers' (Bergnehr, forthcoming), and that home–school relations are mainly associated with the relationship between parents and the supervisory teacher (Jónsdóttir and Björnsdóttir 2012). The dominance of this configuration may limit initiatives taken to advance home–school relations as well as to provide better support to parents. It implies a risk of excluding the resources that the school health services or the leisure time centre personnel could provide, and a risk of disregarding the possible impact of these personnel on the quality and characteristics of home–school relations.

Relieving the teachers from providing parent support

In the data, opposing arguments surface about what home–school relations should entail. The Department of Education, schools and teachers are positioned as important players in the work to improve supporting services to parents, in the plan of action, the project plan and the final project report. In this way, parent support is depicted as an integral part of home–school relations. In the interviews and notes, many informants refer to the school system as the most important arena for the development of parent support; this is justified with arguments suggesting that, e.g. parent support 'is about health and universal services' (Interview 3, civil servant), 'schools have contact with all parents' (Interview 4, civil servant), and 'the biggest potential [for the development of parent support] is within the Department of Education' (Interview 8, civil servant). Similar arguments recurrently appear at the observed meetings, in accordance with the rhetoric in the national report (SOU 2008) and of advocates of health-promoting schools (e.g. WHO 1997). But overall, there is a lack of suggestions concerning what the school system's role as a provider of parent support could entail in praxis, besides the references to parent meetings and the content of home–school relations as stipulated in the Education Act and curriculum (e.g. parent democracy through parent councils).

Frequently brought up in interviews and at meetings is that schools are unaware of their own potential to develop parent support (e.g. Interview 3, civil servant, Interview 4,

civil servant, Interview 8, civil servant, Interview 9, politician, Interview 10, civil servant; plus notes). But there are also examples of reflections over whether a school is the proper location for parent support services. One civil servant brings up the idea that some parents may have negative experiences from their own schooling that may stop them from making use of the support provided by the school (Interview 11, civil servant). One official affirms the notion that schools are suitable for providing support because 'schools have contact with all parents', but also contradicts the idea. Limited resources and the requirement to fulfil tasks of greater importance with regard to the Education Act and curriculum make the extension of responsibilities difficult, the same informant argues (Interview 6, civil servant). Another informant (Interview 2, politician) refers to the school system as being in need of assistance with regard to home–school relations and health-promoting work, for instance from the Social Services. Similar reasoning is found elsewhere. A civil servant briefly alludes to this by saying: 'I believe we have great resources within the Social Services. The Department of Education could use these resources' (Interview 8, civil servant).

In October 2011, politicians accountable for the municipal departments and the development of parent support initiated a meeting with heads of sections to discuss the future of parent support. As in other meetings that the researcher observed, the civil servants from the respective departments argued against further obligations, which they justified with a lack of resources or the fact that universal parent support is not a prioritised part of their ordinary organisation. However, during the course of the discussion, a mutual understanding emerged concerning the great positive impact the free counselling service provided by the Social Services had had during its two years of operation. More and more parents had taken the opportunity to present their various worries about their child and parenting to a social worker over the phone or in face-to-face counselling. Furthermore, officials from the Department of Education brought up the noticeable effects of the service, as experienced by school personnel: the service assisted the teachers in their work by decreasing the number of parents seeking support through the school and by providing the opportunity for teachers to direct parents to the counselling service when the need arose. The discussion continued by taking up how they could secure further funding for the service. Representatives from the Social Services said it would be impossible to prioritise the free counselling given the current demands for major budget cuts. This was followed by a civil servant from the municipal executive office proposing that the departments share the cost for financing the service for the coming year. The result of the meeting was an agreement between the Social Services and the Department of Education to share the cost during 2012, the Social Services being responsible for personnel and administration. Representatives from the Department of Education justified the commitment by referring to the teachers' experience of relief, which had enabled them to focus on their main responsibilities – educational achievement and children's well-being at school. At the end of 2012, the agreement was renewed for 2013, allowing the continuation of the counselling service (notes, protocols, website and informal conversations).

One objective in the plan of action and in the project plan was to increase intra-municipal collaboration on parent support services. The development of such a position – that was to administer and fund the service – was a continual topic at the observed meetings, but it resulted in no consensus or decision-making that led to any practical outcomes. It was sometimes and by some actors argued that a collaborating position was best run by the Department of Education. Others refuted this proposal; at one meeting (June 2011) a representative for the Social Services argued that the municipal office was

best suited to administrating that kind of position (notes). At the end of 2012, almost a year after the project ended, a decision was made to place the position at the municipal office (telephone conversation and website). Thus, the practical consequence was that the operationalising departments (e.g. the Department of Education and the Social Services) were relieved of any further responsibility, assisting these departments rather than expanding their area of expertise and obligation. Consequently, the municipal office partly discharged the Department of Education of parent support, while the Department of Education, by co-financing the free counselling service, came to assist the teachers (and perhaps other school staff) in their relations with the families.

Concluding discussion

The present study illuminates discrepancies between discourse and practice in the process of recontextualising the national directives. While parent support is primarily connected to and assigned as the responsibility of teachers, schools and the Department of Education in the discourse, these actors are largely discharged of any further obligations to advance home–school relations through parent support services in praxis. The question at stake is whether schools, i.e. the education system, are responsible and suitable for providing parent support. The contradictory positioning of schools' obligations concurs with the national level, where the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs, through its national report (SOU 2008), proposes the advancement of home–school relations through the provision of parent support, while the National Agency of Education (Skolverket) (2009a) refutes this proposition.

Parent support, when connected to compulsory education, is preferably conceptualised as part of and contingent on the forms and characteristics of home–school relations. Different professional groups have different relations to parents and children. At school, the school nurse may be responsible for yearly health check-ups, while the psychologist and the special needs teacher primarily meet parents of children with learning difficulties or deviant behaviour. The (supervisory) teachers have regular contacts with the homes, through school letters, email, telephone conversations and through parent meetings and home–school conferences. The leisure time personnel meet parents on a daily basis when the (younger) children are picked up, and may also communicate through letters and email. However, the present study shows that, in the discourse of the local authority, parent support is predominantly tied to teachers and to activities commonly associated with teachers' relations to the parents. This has certain implications. First, if 'the school' connotes 'teachers', there is a risk of not using resources provided by other professionals – professionals with skills and resources that may favourably affect the development of parent support. In addition, other professionals may be excluded from the conceptualisation of what home–school relations entail. These actors may have a great impact on children's and parents' experiences of schools, and of the relationship with the schools, and should be regarded in any initiative or research on home–school relations. The local discourse mirrors the national discourse, as explicated in the national report (SOU 2008). The school health services, for instance, are mentioned, but their potential is left without elaboration. Other professionals are not referred to. This implies that the term school is synonymous with teachers in the discourse on parent support through compulsory education, nationally and locally.

Second, when justifying the initiative to increase schools' support to parents, the local discourse contains the recurrent positioning of teachers as lacking in appropriate conduct, skill and/or commitment in their relations to parents. Regarding the overall project being

dedicated to parent support, the little attention given to reasoning on why parents need support, rather than teachers, is unexpected. On the other hand, the depiction of failing teachers becomes logical in relation to previous research suggesting that the education system is increasingly being made responsible for societal improvements (Bridges 2008; Coffey 2001; Liedman 2011). Assuming that the term schools is synonymous with teachers in the common discourse, and adding evidence of the public and political emphasis put on teachers' importance for children's attainment and health (e.g. The Swedish Schools Inspectorate (Skolinspektionen) 2010), the discourse in the present data makes sense.

The positioning of teachers as a problem appears to be a predominant 'ideological-discursive formation' (Fairclough 2010, 26–27) that impacts on the local discourse on home–school relations. However, there is discursive and practical resistance to this formation, as the data illuminate. There is no explicit refusal of the notion that schools (i.e. the teachers) are suitable for providing parent support, but in some interviews and at some meetings the teachers are positioned as being exposed to strains and expectations that justify exempting them from further obligations. In praxis, this view dominates: it is *voluntary* for teachers to use the handbooks for parents meetings; they are *offered* courses in leadership and group dynamic that may provide them with suggestions on how to approach and relate to parents, and the Department of Education co-finances the free counselling services for parents provided by the Social Services, in order to, when justified, assist teachers in their home–school relations.

The Swedish schools of today are experiencing decreasing academic results on international proficiency tests, and the gap in achievement levels between different groups of children and different schools has widened (The National Agency of Education 2009b, 2010). The conclusion to be drawn from this may be that teachers are having a hard time fulfilling their current obligations (Bergnehr 2012a; Bridges 2008), a conclusion the present results support. Perhaps, in line with Ball's (2010) proposal, incentives that stimulate the child's home learning environment would be more beneficial than the provision of parent support through the school system, with regard to public health. For the Swedish schools, the obligation to work with health promotion is stressed in the Education Act. Recently the government announced supplementary funding for the school health services (The National Agency of Education 2011). It would be surprising if the extra resources were spent on initiatives aimed at advancing home–school relations and/or directed specifically to parents, but these local strategies are for future studies to investigate.

The national report (SOU 2008) defines parent support as services that strengthen parenting, enable contacts between parents, and improve parents' knowledge about child development and children's rights. Parent meetings and home–school conferences are given as examples of school activities where support to parents can be provided. But, as Featherstone and Manby have shown, for many parents, the school is not a neutral place; it may have negative connotations that stop parents from participating in school-related activities. In addition, those responsible for communication and contact with the parents, in most cases the teachers, may be less than enthused about their duties being expanded (Featherstone and Manby 2006). Universal parent support can be applied through the school system, but it is uncertain whether such services have the required effects, i.e. if they promote parents' and children's well-being and health (Shepherd and Roker 2005; see also St Leger 2004).

The present study on home–school relations and parent support is unique in that it centres on discourse and practice at the level of the local authority, that is, the data contain

voices and texts produced by civil servants and politicians from several municipal departments. Had the data consisted of only teacher informants, the naturalisation of the notion that teachers fail in their contacts with parents might have been less prominent, or perhaps even non-existent. The discourse on home–school relations might then have contained other predominating elements. The 'recontextualisation of discourse' (Fairclough 2010, 20) is never unambiguous. Discursive elements may gain dominance – influence and/ or influenced by practical and material circumstances, power relations, etc. – in one social field while being marginalised in another.

CDA (Fairclough 2010), together with the longitudinal research design involving the collection of several types of data, has enabled the present analyses of home–school relations and parent support in a Swedish local authority. The ethnographic, longitudinal data facilitated examination of the interplay between discourse and practical occurrences, and of the predominance of certain ideological formations within certain social fields (see Fairclough 2010).

The Swedish political system is comparatively decentralised, and there is variation in how the municipalities are organised and fulfil their objectives (Lidström 2012). In addition, parent support is a floating concept that may entail different activities in different contexts (Bergnehr 2012b). For these reasons, the present results cannot be generalised. They are, however, interesting and worth considering in relation to other localities and in general discussions of home–school relations, parent support and the responsibilities assigned to compulsory education. More studies are needed on parent support through the schools. Future research would benefit from illuminating and theorising the interplay between home–school relations and parent support.

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