Parental Involvement Practices in Formalized Home–School Cooperation

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The topic for this article is parents' participation and willingness to participate in formalized home–school cooperation. The analyses are based on a nationwide survey among parents in lower secondary schools in Norway. A main finding is that parental involvement practices differ according to parents' level of education in the sense that parents with more formal education are more active than less educated parents. Also, the results indicate that parents with low formal education are insecure about their knowledge regarding academic matters, and that this works as a barrier for their participation in formalized home–school cooperation.

Keywords: parental involvement, home–school cooperation

The topic for this article is parental involvement among parents in lower secondary schools in Norway. More specifically the focus is on parents' participation and willingness to participate in the formalized part of home–school cooperation, such as attend parent meetings and parent–teacher conferences, volunteer as parent representative, or become a member of co-operative or decision-making bodies open to parents in school. School and home have traditionally been regarded as separate arenas in Norway, and parents have not been very visible in the educational system. The educational system has, however, changed from being a rather closed system to becoming much more open towards society (Holthe, 2000). Educational authorities in Norway have stated that parents shall figure more prominently in the educational system and be consulted when decisions are to be made, as well as be important partners in the learning processes of their children (for example Norwegian Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs [NMERCA], 1997). Parents' formal rights have been strengthened, among other things through parents' representation in co-operative and decision-making bodies in school, and studies show that parents to a large degree are satisfied with the home–school cooperation that they take part in (Bæck, 2007; Lidén, 1997; Nordahl, 2000; Nordahl & Skilbrei, 2002; Vestre, 1995). However, at the same time, researchers have pointed out that, in reality, parental influence is still very limited in Norway (Holthe, 2000; Meland, 1991; Nordahl, 2003).

Parental involvement in school includes a variety of different things, such as participation in parent meetings and parent–teacher conferences, helping with homework, organizing a good workplace at home, showing an interest in what goes on in school, emphasizing

the importance of education, etc. Nordahl (2007) distinguishes between three forms of cooperation between home and school: representative cooperation, direct cooperation, and cooperation without contact. Representative cooperation means that single parents are elected to represent the rest of the parents, for example in committees. The direct cooperation is cooperation formalized through direct meetings between parents and teachers, parent–teachers conferences, and parent meetings. Cooperation without contact goes on in the everyday life of families through conversations, encouragement, and other forms of support related to school and schooling. This kind of cooperation is, however, not very visible *in* school, but is, according to Nordahl, a very important part of home-school cooperation. Macbeth and Ravn (1994) distinguish between two different roles that parents have in relation to school: the administrative role and the educational role. The administrative role refers to parents' representation in different co-operative and decision-making bodies, their participation in voluntary work or on school excursions, as well as other initiatives in relation to school. Usually only a few parents will have an administrative role. The educational role is, among other things, practiced through parents' direct teaching of their children, through being a role model or through creating learning situations for their children. This is also the form of parental involvement that is most emphasized in government policy documents (for example NMERCA, 1997; Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research [NMER], 2003a, 2004, 2006, 2008). When research shows that parental involvement and successful home–school cooperation help to improve the grades, attendance, and well-being of pupils in school (Catsambis, 2001; Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005a, 2005b; Simon, 2004), the focus is on what Macbeth and Ravn (1994) call the educational role of parents and Nordahl (2007) sees as cooperation without contact. However, Norwegian educational authorities also highlight the importance of parental involvement through the administrative role or through representative cooperation, and state that parents should also represent more of a decision-making authority in the future (NMER, 2003b). A demand on parents to participate in the formal arena presupposes actual decision-making power, and the Norwegian Royal Ministry of Education and Research (2003b) states that this especially regards aspects that have significance for the learning and development of the pupils and for how the school can arrange for parents' fulfillment of the educational role.

The formalized structures and support for parental involvement in Norwegian schools include biannual parent meetings and parent–teacher conferences; parent representatives; Parents' Council Working Committees (Norwegian abbreviation FAU); and board of management representation.[1]

Research on parental involvement in Norway has focused primarily on parents' satisfaction with home-school cooperation and their attitudes towards this kind of cooperation, while very few studies have focused on the more formalized side of the home–school relation, as also pointed out by Nordahl (2003). The degree and quality of parental involvement is influenced by several factors. From the international research literature we know that parents with more formal education are more apt to take part in home–school cooperation

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[1] According to the Education Act, schools in Norway are instructed to carry out at least two prepared conferences between teacher, pupil and parent each school year. Parent meetings are not directed by law or national curricula, but most schools arrange parent meetings twice a year. The Education Act also states that there shall be a parent council on each school. All parents are members of the parent council. The parent council elects a Parents' Working Committee, which then elects two representatives for the school's board of management.

than those with less education (Epstein, 2001, 2002; Hallgarten, 2000; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Lareau, 1997, 2000; Useem, 1992; Vincent, 1996; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Vincent & Martin, 2000), and the same has been demonstrated in a Norwegian setting (Bæck, 2005, 2007). Mothers are more active than fathers, both in Norway (Nordahl, 2000; Kramvig, 2007) and in other countries (Cole, 2007). Research also shows that the cooperation between minority families and Norwegian schools is often challenging (Arneberg, 1995; Ericsson & Larsen, 2000; Loona, 1995). In this article I will focus on parents' participation in formalized home–school cooperation and investigate whether such participation is influenced by parent characteristics.

It is reasonable to expect that parents with a low educational level are less familiar with work in formal bodies than parents with, for example, a university education. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) conceptualizes this "unfamiliarity" as a lack of cultural capital. Bourdieu defines cultural capital as a form of knowledge that controls actors' empathy for or valuation of different cultural expressions. Familiarity with the dominant culture is referred to as "cultural capital" because it can be exchanged as wealth and power through the educational system. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the cultural capital that constitutes the knowledge base in the educational system consists of specific abstractive faculties and ability for linguistic manipulations and formal thinking. This is the cultural capital that children meet when they become pupils and that their parents meet when they interact with school as parents, and it is more familiar to some groups of pupils and parents than others. In the kind of home–school cooperation that we focus on here, and especially when it comes to Parents' Working Committees and other committees, the interaction is even more formal than in other kinds of home–school interaction. Thus, we can assume that the setting is more unfamiliar for parents with a low educational level than for parents with higher education. Parents with a low educational level may encounter social conventions and the like that are very different from what they are used to, and they may therefore avoid taking part. In this way, the relationship between school and home can be understood as encounters between different cultures (Bæck, 2005, 2007), and participation in formalized home–school cooperation may represent one type of encounter where the differences become especially visible.

Study Aim and Research Questions

By investigating survey data collected among parents of lower secondary school pupils in Norway, I attempt to shed light on parents' participation in formalized home–school cooperation. I focus on parents' reported participation and their inclination to participate in a variety of formal bodies and activities, and I also take a look at reasons for not wanting to participate. Through taking several independent variables into account, I investigate whether such involvement differs between different groups of parents. On a theoretical level I attempt to demonstrate that the cultural capital of parents is activated in their encounters with school and that these resources serve to hinder or promote parental involvement. Hence, with the aim of gaining knowledge about these issues and with a theoretical interest in identifying aspects of social practice, three research questions guide the empirical work of the study:

(1)   To what degree do parents in Norway take part in formalized home–school cooperation?

(2)   Are there any differences in parents' participation in formalized home–school cooperation in relation to independent demographic variables such as educational background or gender? Are there other factors that influence participation?

(3)   What are the reasons behind reluctance to participate, and do different groups of parents lean on different reasons for not participating?

Methods and Analysis

Data Set

The analyses are based on a nationwide postal survey carried out in the fall of 2006 among parents with pupils in ninth grade in lower secondary schools in Norway. A random sample of persons born in 1990 was drawn from the national register office. The parent or guardian registered at the same address as the child at the time of the survey was asked to participate in the survey. The questionnaire was sent to 2,490 parents, and 1,169 filled it in and returned it. This gives a response rate of 47%, which is somewhat low. A non-response analysis was therefore performed through the means of univariate comparisons of demographic variables between respondents and the population of interest (as described by Kano, Franke, Afifi, & Bourque, 2008). The non-response bias analysis shows an over representation of women in the sample and a small under representation of respondents on the lowest educational level, especially for men. Other than this there is nothing to indicate that the selection of those who chose to participate is seriously biased (see also Bæck, 2007). The response rate of 47% is similar to that reported in other studies, for example Lidén (1997) (50%) and Westergård and Galloway (2004) (50%). In the statistical analyses, both respondent's gender and educational level are controlled for.

The analyses are mainly based on regression analysis. Here regression analysis is used to estimate the impact of a number of explanatory variables (as described in the next paragraph) on parents' attendance at formal school functions, such as parent meetings and parent–teacher conferences, as well as parents inclination to take part in different forms of formalized home–school cooperation, such as being a parent representative or participating in Parents' Working Committees.

Variables

Three types of dependent variables are used. Firstly, there is parents' reported participation in parent meetings, on parent–teacher conferences and other events in school (such as open day, concerts, etc.). Secondly, there is parents' inclination to participate in Parents' Working Committee or other school committees, be a parent representative, or to take part in practical voluntary work in school. The nature of the activities included in the second group of dependent variables made it unsuitable to report parents' actual participation, because these activities are by nature limited to only a small number of parents (except for voluntary work). There is always a potential gap between what individuals plan to do and what they actually end up doing, but, even so, the inclination to participate serves as an indicator for what individuals view as a part of their own register of activity. Thirdly, there are parents' reported reasons for not wanting to participate in Parents' Working Committee or other school committees, be a parent representative, or take part in practical voluntary work in school.

I investigated four groups of independent variables: (1) parent and family characteristics (gender, level of education, family type, number of siblings living at home), (2) school

experience and achievement level of the parents, (3) school experience and achievement level of pupils and whether the pupil receives extra tutoring, and (4) centrality of the municipality of residence. Table 1 provides an overview of all the variables used in the subsequent analyses. The *Family type* variable distinguishes between intact families and non-intact families. The latter category includes respondents who are divorced from the other parent of the child in question, and those who have never lived with the other parent of the child in question. The *Sibling* variable refers to whether the ninth grader has any siblings living at home. *Respondent's educational level* refers to the respondent's highest completed educational level and contains three categories: (1) primary and lower secondary education, (2) upper secondary education, and (3) education at a university level. The two variables that have to do with the respondent's (the parent's) own experiences as a pupil; *Respondent's well-being in school* and *Respondent's achievement level in school* and the two variables that have to do with their child's (the pupil's) experiences in school; the *Child's well-being in school*, the *Child's achievement level in school*, are all measured through five response possibilities: (1) very poor, (2) quite poor, (3) moderate, (4) quite good, and (5) very good. *Centrality* of the municipality of residence refers to a municipal typology developed by Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). Centrality describes the geographic location of a municipality in relation to urban settlements of various sizes. Urban settlements are divided into three levels according to population and available public services. Urban settlements at level 3 are regional centers (population at least 50,000), level 2 settlements have a population between 15,000 and 50,000, and level 1 settlements have a population between 5,000 and 15,000. Municipalities in Norway are divided into four centrality levels (0–3); the lowest degree of centrality refers to municipalities that do not meet the requirements for travel time from urban settlement (least central municipalities), the second level refers to municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 1 or are within 45 minutes' travel from the centre of an urban settlement (less central municipalities), the third level refers to municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 2 or are within 60 minutes' travel from the centre of an urban settlement (quite central municipalities), and the highest centrality level refers to municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 3 (regional centre) or are within 75 minutes' (90 minutes for Oslo) travel from the centre of an urban settlement (central municipalities).

Interaction effects have been investigated, but have not been found appropriate to include because of lack of significant interactions.

Results

Parents' Attendance in Parent Meetings, Parent–Teacher Conferences and Other School Events

Our data show that Norwegian parents are very conscientious when it comes to attending parent–teacher conferences and parent meetings. Of the parents in our survey, 67% report that they attend every parent meeting and 77% report that they attend every parent–teacher conference. The attendance at other school events, such as pupil concerts, shows, or open days, is lower, but even for such events 36% of the parents attend every time while 42% attend most times.

There are, however, some differences between different groups of parents regarding self-reported attendance (Table 2). Table 2 summarizes regression analyses of the attendance of parents and a number of relevant background variables. The analyses show that

Table 1

*Overview of the Variables Used (*n *= 1,169)*

Variable	Categories	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Respondent's gender	female = 1, male = 0	0.70	0.46	0	1
Respondent's educational level	1 = primary/lower secondary, 2 = upper secondary, 3 = university/college	2.33	0.70	1	3
Siblings living at home	0 = no siblings living at home, 1 = have siblings living at home	0.71	0.45	0	1
Family type	1 = intact, 0 = divorced	0.82	0.38	0	1
Centrality	0 = least central municipalities, 1 = less central municipalities, 2 = quite central municipalities, 3 = central municipalities	2.31	1.03	0	3
Parents' well-being in school	1 = very poor, 2 = quite poor, 3 = moderate, 4 = quite good, 5 = very good	3.91	0.92	1	5
Parents' achievement level in school	1 = very poor, 2 = quite poor, 3 = moderate, 4 = quite good, 5 = very good	3.94	0.84	1	5
Does the child receive extra tutoring in school?	yes = 1, no = 0	0.14	0.35	0	1
Child's achievement level in school	1 = very poor, 2 = quite poor, 3 = moderate, 4 = quite good, 5 = very good	7.28	1.14	2	11
Child's well-being in school	1 = very poor, 2 = quite poor, 3 = moderate, 4 = quite good, 5 = very good	4.21	0.78	1	5
Parents' reported participation in parent meetings	1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most often, 5 = every time	4.61	0.64	1	5
Parents' reported participation in parent–teacher conferences	1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most often, 5 = every time	4.69	0.70	1	5
Parents' reported participation in open day, etc.	1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most often, 5 = every time	4.10	0.90	1	5
Parents' inclination to participate in Parents' Working Committee	1 = no/don't know, 2 = yes, maybe, 3 = yes, definitely	1.79	0.78	1	3
Parents' inclination to participate in school committees	1 = no/don't know, 2 = yes, maybe, 3 = yes, definitely	1.63	0.72	1	3
Parents' inclination to be a parent representative	1 = no/don't know, 2 = yes, maybe, 3 = yes, definitely	2.12	0.78	1	3
Parents' inclination to participate in voluntary work	1 = no/don't know, 2 = yes, maybe, 3 = yes, definitely	2.39	0.70	1	3
Parents' reasons for not wanting to participate in Parents' Working Committee	1 = lack of time, 2 = lack of knowledge, 3 = lack of interest, 4 = other	2.39	1.27	1	4
Parents' reasons for not wanting to participate in school committees	1 = lack of time, 2 = lack of knowledge, 3 = lack of interest, 4 = other	2.26	1.04	1	4
Parents' reasons for not wanting to be a parent representative	1 = lack of time, 2 = lack of knowledge, 3 = lack of interest, 4 = other	2.51	1.36	1	4
Parents' reasons for not wanting to participate in voluntary work	1 = lack of time, 2 = lack of knowledge, 3 = lack of interest, 4 = other	2.45	1.42	1	4

Table 2

*Regression Analyses of how Often[a] Parents Attend Parent Meetings, Parent–Teacher Conferences and Other School Events (*n = 1,169)

	Parent meetings	Parent–teacher conferences	Other school events
(Constant)	3.330***	4.071***	2.799***
Gender (female = 1, male = 0)	.344***	.324***	.303***
Level of education [b]	.096**	.104**	.145**
Family type [c]	.170***	.029	.056
Siblings living at home [d]	.099	−.008	.081
Centrality [e]	−.003	.041	−.038
Parents' well-being in school [f]	.080**	.054	.040
Parents' achievement level in school [f]	−.031	−.024	−.043
Does the child receive extra tutoring in school (yes = 1, no = 0)	−.018	−.044	.148
Child's achievement level in school [f]	.047**	.018	.080**
Child's well-being in school [f]	.021	−.047	.034
R^2	.107	.067	.056
F	10.483***	6.271***	5.208***

Notes: **$p < .01$, ***$p < .001$. All coefficients are unstandardized

[a] 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = most often, 5 = every time

[b] 1 = primary/lower secondary, 2 = upper secondary, 3 = university/college

[c] 1 = intact, 0 = divorced/separated/not living together

[d] 0 = no siblings living at home, 1 = have siblings living at home

[e] 0 = Municipalities that do not meet the requirements for travel time from urban settlement (least central municipalities), 1 = Municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 1 or are within 45 minutes' travel from the centre of an urban settlement (less central municipalities), 2 = Municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 2 or are within 60 minutes' travel from the centre of an urban settlement (quite central municipalities), 3 = Municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 3 (regional centre) or are within 75 minutes' (90 minutes for Oslo) travel from the centre of an urban settlement (central municipalities)

[f] 1 = very poor, 2 = quite poor, 3 = moderate, 4 = quite good, 5 = very good.

mothers report more frequent attendance than fathers. A cross-tabulation of attendance and the gender of respondents shows that half of the fathers versus 71% of the mothers report that they attend parent meetings every time (chi-square test: chi = 45.898, $df = 4$, $p = 0.000$), 64% of the fathers versus 82% of the mothers report that they attend parent–teacher conferences every time (chi-square test: chi = 45.133, $p = 0.000$), and 23% of the fathers versus 41% of the mothers report that they attend other school events every time (chi-square test: chi = 29.404, $df = 4$, $p = 0.000$).

The regression analyses also reveal that the level of education of the parents affects their attendance in that parents with more formal education report more frequent attendance than those with less formal education. Furthermore, parents in intact families report more frequent attendance than parents who live separately. There is no difference in reported attendance according to how many siblings live in the household. Nor is there any difference according to mean school size or the centrality of the municipality where the respondent resides.

Parents' wellbeing in school when they were pupils has an effect on attendance of parent meetings. Parents with a higher level of wellbeing report more frequent attendance. Also,

parents who have children with higher achievement levels in school report more frequent attendance in parent meetings and other school events.

Parents' Inclination to Take Part in Other Formalized Home–School Functions

In addition to parent–teacher conferences and parent meetings, which are well-established forums attended by the great majority of parents, there are also other formal communication channels between home and school. The parents were asked whether they would consider taking part in the following forums and activities: (1) Parents' Working Committee; (2) committees that work on curricula, budgets, or school development; and (3) be a parent representative. In addition, I have also looked at voluntary work at school, that is, practical help such as tasks connected with maintaining the schoolyard, preparing social gatherings, baking for parent meetings, etc. Parents are most easily recruited for practical voluntary work—85% are willing to do this and 73% are willing to be a parent representative. Recruiting parents for school committees and the Parents' Working Committee is much more difficult, as 47 and 56%, respectively, are willing to participate.

Some groups of parents are more inclined to participate in these forums and activities than others. Table 3 summarizes regression analyses showing the inclination of parents to participate and the relevant background variables.

The analyses show that the level of education of the parents is an important variable for explaining differences in their inclination to participate on working committees and school committees or be a parent representative. Their level of education has an independent significant effect on their inclination to participate in these three forums since better-educated parents are more positively inclined towards participating than those with a lower level of education. Cross-tabulations reveal that whereas only 42% of parents with compulsory education are positive towards participating on a Parents' Working Committee, the same is true for 68% of those with university education (chi-square test: chi = 45.952, df = 4, p = 0.000). With regard to school committees, 33% of parents with compulsory education versus 59% of parents with university education are positive towards participation (chi-square test: chi = 44.793, df = 4, p = 0.000). Of parents with compulsory education, 62% are positive to being a parent representative, whereas the same is true for 82% of parents with university education (chi-square test: chi = 33.889, df = 4, p = 0.000).

Centrality of municipality of residence is another variable that explains differences in inclination to participate in these formal bodies as well as do voluntary practical work. Parents who reside in more central municipalities are less inclined to participate than parents who reside in less central municipalities.

Furthermore, the analyses show that what parents experienced and achieved in school when they were pupils influences their inclination to participate. Whether parents had a positive or negative experience of wellbeing in school influences their inclination to participate in voluntary work in school or serve as a parent representative. Parents who experienced a high level of wellbeing in school are more willing to participate than those who had negative experiences. This suggests that negative experiences as a pupil may lead to the development of negative attitudes towards schools as a parent. Parents' achievement level in school has an effect on inclination to participate in school committees, in the sense that parents with higher achievement levels are more inclined to participate.

Table 3

*Regression Analyses of the Inclination of Parents to Participate[a] in Parents' Working Committees, Voluntary Work and School Committees, or be a Parent Representative (*n = 1,169)

	Parents' Working Committee	School committee	Parent representative	Voluntary work
(Constant)	1.068***	1.229***	.939***	1.873***
Gender (female = 1, male = 0)	.041	−.069	.199**	.094
Level of education [b]	.193***	.178***	.160***	.017
Family type [c]	.095	−.017	.065	.005
Siblings living at home [d]	−.017	.013	.095	−.020
Centrality [e]	−.097***	−.085***	−.065**	−.082***
Parents' well-being in school [f]	.041	.020	.083**	.109***
Parents' achievement level in school [f]	.039	.103**	.032	−.019
Does the child receive extra tutoring in school (yes = 1, no = 0)	−.123	−.071	−.101	−.017
Child's achievement level in school [f]	−.001	−.021	.011	.034
Child's well-being in school [f]	.032	−.020	.045	.006
R^2	0.063	.073	.079	0.044
F	5.843***	6.866***	7.460***	3.968***

Notes: ** p <.01, *** p <.001. All coefficients are unstandardized

[a] Inclination measured as response to the question of whether one would consider participating where 1 = no/don't know, 2 = yes, maybe, 3 = yes, definitely

[b] 1 = primary/lower secondary, 2 = upper secondary, 3 = university/college

[c] 1 = intact, 0 = divorced/separated/not living together

[d] 0 = no siblings living at home, 1 = have siblings living at home

[e] 0 = Municipalities that do not meet the requirements for travel time from urban settlement (least central municipalities), 1 = Municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 1 or are within 45 minutes' travel from the center of an urban settlement (less central municipalities), 2 = Municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 2 or are within 60 minutes' travel from the center of an urban settlement (quite central municipalities), 3 = Municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 3 (regional centre) or are within 75 minutes' (90 minutes for Oslo) travel from the center of an urban settlement (central municipalities)

[f] 1 = very poor, 2 = quite poor, 3 = moderate, 4 = quite good, 5 = very good.

Reasons for Not Wanting to Participate

In the survey, the parents were introduced to a number of possible explanations as to why they did not want to participate on working committees or school committees, do voluntary work, or be a parent representative. The distribution of reasons varies with the forum or activity. Lack of time was the most common reason given for being reluctant to be on the working committee, do voluntary work, or be a parent representative, whereas lack of necessary knowledge was most commonly cited for unwillingness to participate on school committees.

The reasons respondents gave for not being willing to participate varied according to their level of education (Table 4). Only voluntary work revealed no significant difference in relation to level of education. For parents with a university education, lack of time was the most important reason for their reluctance to participate in the various forums. The picture

Table 4

*Responses of Parents to the Question of why They do not Want to Participate in Parents' Working Committees, Voluntary Work and School Committees, or be a Parent Representative; Total Percentages and Percentages According to the Level of Education of the Parents (*n = 1,164)

	Lack of time	Lack of knowledge	Not interested	Other	Total
Parents' Working Committee [a] ***	**37.9**	**15.6**	**15.0**	**31.5**	**546**
Primary/lower secondary	23.9	33.0	11.4	31.8	88
Upper secondary	37.2	18.0	15.5	29.3	239
University/college	44.3	5.9	16.0	33.8	219
Total	207	85	82	172	546
Voluntary work [b]	**47.1**	**1.1**	**10.7**	**41.0**	**261**
Primary/lower secondary	34.1	2.3	9.1	54.5	44
Upper secondary	46.1	.9	12.2	40.9	115
University/college	53.9	1.0	9.8	35.3	102
Total	123	3	28	107	261
School committee [c] ***	**25.5**	**41.9**	**13.3**	**19.4**	**542**
Primary/lower secondary	12.0	66.3	10.9	10.9	92
Upper secondary	22.0	44.7	14.2	19.1	246
University/college	35.8	27.5	13.2	23.5	204
Total	138	227	72	105	542
Parent representative [d] *	**41.0**	**5.3**	**14.7**	**39.1**	**361**
Primary/lower secondary	33.3	9.7	12.5	44.4	72
Upper secondary	39.4	6.9	17.5	36.2	160
University/college	47.3	.8	12.4	39.5	129
Total	148	19	53	141	361

Notes: Percentages in boldface indicate total percentages

*p < .05, *** p <.001

[a] chi-square test chi = 39.692, df = 6, *p* = .000

[b] chi-square test chi = 6.394, df = 6, *p* = .381

[c] chi-square test chi = 45.867, df = 6, *p* = .000

[c] chi-square test chi = 13.246, df = 6, *p* = .039.

is somewhat different for parents with compulsory education, of whom one third report lack of necessary knowledge as the most important reason for not wanting to be on Parents' Working Committees, whereas this is true for only 7% of parents with university education. Participation on school committees appears to be the activity that intimidates the largest number of parents, and the principal argument for not wanting to take part is lack of necessary knowledge, with 28% of parents with university education reporting this as the most important reason, while the same is true for as many as 63% of parents with compulsory education. The reasons respondents gave for not being willing to participate did not vary according to centrality of place of residence.

Discussion

Norwegian parents are quite conscientious when it comes to attending parent meetings and parent–teacher conferences, as well as other school-related events such as open days or

school concerts. This is coherent with findings from other Norwegian researchers (Lidén, 1997; Nordahl, 2000; Nordahl & Skilbrei, 2002; Vestre, 1995). The analyses presented demonstrate differences in reported participation according to independent variables such as gender, parents' educational level, and family type. Mothers report more frequent attendance than fathers, parents with more formal education report more frequent attendance than other parents, and parents in intact families report more frequent attendance than parents who live separately.

Previous studies have shown that there is no reason to believe that such differences are derived from differences in how important one believes education to be (Goldenberg, 2004; Nordahl, 2000; Sletten, Sandberg, & Nordahl, 2003). However, even though parents from different social and cultural groups share the view that education is important for their children, as demonstrated by several researchers (Hidalgo, Bright, Siu, Swap, & Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 2000, 2003; Goldenberg, 2004), parents from different social and cultural backgrounds do not necessarily engage in their children's schooling in the same way. Lareau (2003) claims that parents from different social and cultural backgrounds construct different paths in order to reach the goal of education for their children, and that these paths may limit involvement in school despite the interest the parents take in their children's education. While working-class parents tend to leave the responsibility of educating their children to the educational system, parents from high social backgrounds tend to take more responsibility themselves for their children's education, and this will include participation in formal committees, etc.

The empirical results in this article give some other indications as to why parents with low formal education are less willing to participate in formal bodies and forums. The results indicate that parents with low formal education are insecure about their own knowledge regarding academic matters, and that this prevents them from participating in different kinds of school forums, especially those that are perceived as presupposing a certain level of knowledge or ability. Goldenberg (2004) found that although parents from low social backgrounds attribute great value to schooling and are willing to do a great deal to help their children, they will not engage in things outside of their own cultural repertoire. Parents' Working Committees may seem alien both in form and content to parents with a low educational level who are less used to formal settings, and taking part in this kind of formal body therefore may be regarded as being outside of their cultural repertoire. Lareau (2003) shows that working-class parents are often intimidated by the professional authority of teachers. They lack confidence in their ability to address educational issues and they believe they should leave school matters to the teachers. To say it in Bourdieu's words, parents who possess the "correct" or "ij" cultural capital may feel more at ease in their encounters with schools. They feel they can communicate with the school representatives on equal terms. As we recall from the results presented in the empirical section the same is not the case when it comes to voluntary work, where another kind of ability is required. In more practical contexts, the capital possessed by parents with little formal education is valuable and can be activated.

The differences between mothers and fathers that I have documented here are also pointed out by other researchers (Cole, 2007; Nordahl, 2000; Nordahl & Skilbrei, 2002). Attendance at parent–teacher conferences and parent meetings can be understood as part of the role of the care-giver, and therefore of the mother. We may say that attendance at parent–teacher conferences and parent meetings is part of a woman's cultural mandate across social backgrounds, and this mandate is still an important premise provider for women in Norway (Bæck, 2006). There is no difference between mothers and fathers when it comes to their inclination to participate in Parents' Working Committees, do voluntary work, or be

members of other kinds of school committees. As described in the opening section of this article the administrative role is held by only a few parents and it is by no means expected that parents should take part in this kind of work, and this is not an expectation in relation to the mothering-role. The difference between members of intact families and parents who live separately is true only when it comes to parent meetings. It is reasonable to assume that parents who live separately take turns in attending parent meetings, while parent–teacher conferences are viewed as more obligatory and therefore are attended by both parents. The analyses also revealed that parents who reside in more central municipalities are less inclined to participate in formalized home–school cooperation than parents who reside in less central municipalities. At the same time none of the reasons for not wanting to participate that were listed in the survey showed significant differences between parents according to centrality of place of residence. These findings are hard to interpret based on the data presented here, and the relationship between centrality of place of residence and participation in formalized home-school cooperation therefore needs further investigation. However, it may be reasonable to assume that schools in less central areas are smaller than in more central areas, and that the barrier towards participation is therefore smaller.

The encouragements or 'invitations' to get parents involved in Norway are directed at all parents, as opposed to directed at specific groups of parents, for example based on ethnic background, social class, or gender. The findings suggest that participation in formalized settings in school is dominated by a specific category of parents, since more educated parents are more inclined to participate, and the voices of other less resourceful groups of parents therefore are more rarely heard. Hanafin and Lynch (2002) describe in their research a situation where in practice it is the middle-class parents who are most involved and therefore most visible in school. As pointed out by Borg and Mayo (2001), lack of participation on the part of subordinate groups leaves the door open for dominant groups to lobby for their own agenda, and equipped with the cultural capital legitimized by the dominant discourse in education, the middle classes are very vocal and deeply involved in the educational system (also Crozier, 1997). Hallgarten (2000) (as cited in Hanafin & Lynch, 2002) finds that parental involvement is less of a protective barrier than a lever to maximize the potential of the already advantaged. It is therefore fair to question whether parental involvement, in its current form, is in fact a good thing, as other researchers have also done (Crozier, 2000; Hallgarten, 2000; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; McGrath & Kuriloff, 1999; Reay, 1998; Vincent & Martin, 2000). Exercising the educational role as parents has a positive effect on children's grades, and since parents with higher education are more apt to exercise their educational role than parents with less formal education, parental involvement becomes a mechanism for social reproduction, and more of the same will only serve to enhance the differences between pupils from different social and cultural backgrounds. In addition, as shown in this article, parents with more formal education are more inclined to place themselves in positions where they can influence the school system, for example through participation in formal bodies open to parents in school. It is therefore my view that the requests from the educational authorities for more parental involvement and the discussions on increased decision-making authority for parents need to be clarified and balanced according to the results presented here.

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