Parents’ Participation in Their Child’s Schooling
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The present study set out to survey Finnish parents’ participation in their child’s schooling and related experiences. The subjects were a nationally representative group of academically and vocationally educated fathers and mothers (N = 391) who had a child on the fifth grade. A great majority of the parents reported that they attended the parent evenings and saw them in a positive light. Most parents helped their child in her/his schoolwork, though some of them were doubtful of their own competence for it. The choice of schools, which was considered mainly by urban parents and academically educated parents, seemed to introduce a new private element into parental participation without changing the existing communal forms of participation.

Keywords: parent participation, parent’s gender and education, choice of school

As was proclaimed by Mr Tarjanne, a Finnish pedagogue, at the beginning of the twentieth century, “the home and the school are social educational factors, which we would so like to see cooperating to produce a new generation, better than ours. But in practice the home and the school have mostly remained more distant from each other, more uninterested in each other’s ways and methods than a consistent and wholesome education of our youth would permit” (Reima, 1933, p. 117). Whilst the forms of parental participation have varied historically, parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling has always been considered to play an important role in children’s academic performance (e.g. Epstein, 1995). The present study set out to survey in what ways Finnish parents participate in their children’s schooling, how they experience this participation, and in what ways the participation is dependent on the parent’s education and gender.

As can be inferred from Mr Tarjanne’s words, cooperation between the compulsory school and the home has proved to be difficult to attain from the beginning. This is a complex issue of division of responsibility for education. Symptomatically, Reima (1933) cites a teacher’s comment from the early twentieth century regarding the possibilities of cooperation between the home and the school: “Talk to the homes, that’s where the main culprits are, and that’s whose educational efforts are a thousand times more important than the school’s.” The tense relationship between the school and the home is reflected, among other things, in the argument that parents and teachers are each other’s “natural enemies” (Waller, 1976). In practice, it has been mainly the school that has defined the agenda of
appropriate cooperation. As a consequence, some parents have found it easier than others to respond to the call for cooperation.

From a theoretical point of view, our investigation was conducted in a positional framework. A social position tends to generate shared experiences and modes of interaction, which also reflect the relations to the environment constructed by that position (Lorenzi-Cioldi & Clémence, 2003). For instance, parenthood of a school-aged child includes more or less shared experiences and perceptions concerning the functioning of the child’s school, relationships with teachers and other parents, interrelations amongst the pupils, and such factors as the ethos and atmosphere, the resources, and the academic results of the school.

For an assessment of the within-group differences amongst parents, their educational position is a major source of their attitudes and appraisals. It locates a parent in the educational hierarchy and thus “measures” his/her social-psychological distance from the school (Räty & Snellman, 1998). The higher the parent is in the educational hierarchy, the closer s/he is to the notions and valuations of the school. As Bourdieu argues, the standards are not neutral in any school; the school’s requests for parental involvement may be laden with the social and cultural experiences of the intellectual and economic middle and upper classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Drawing on Bourdieu’s theory, Lareau (1989) maintains that social class provides parents with unequal resources for complying with teachers’ requests for parental participation. Her findings, derived from the US context, indicated that due to their modest educational skills, working-class parents tended to leave the responsibility for education to the teacher. Middle-class parents, in contrast, with their acquired academic skills and occupational prestige that matched or surpassed those of the teachers, tended to see education as a shared enterprise and therefore scrutinized, monitored, and supplemented the school experience of their children. In terms of economic, social, and cultural capital, then, parents are differently equipped for interaction with the school.

In an ethnographic study conducted in the Finnish context, Metso (2004) found that a school situated in a middle-class neighbourhood laid expectations on the parents to appreciate education and to share the values of the school. In its activities, too, that school took the parents into consideration, actively making room for cooperation and the parents’ own initiative, whereas a school situated in a working-class neighbourhood was more passive in relation to the parents and left less room for their own initiative (for parallel results in the Norwegian context, see Karlsen Baeck [2005], and in the British context, Grozier [1999]).

The present study set out to examine the contribution of parents’ educational position, operationalized as a comparison between academically and vocationally educated parents, to the shaping of their participation in their child’s schooling over the child’s first few years of school. Drawing on the notion of social-psychological distance from the school, we expected the academically educated parents to show a higher level of overall participation in their child’s schooling than the vocationally educated parents.

As regards gender, our study of parents’ evaluations of their child’s first school year showed that the mothers were more concerned about problems in their child’s schooling, reporting more negative events, especially ones pertaining to home-school cooperation, than the fathers (Räty, Jaukka, & Kasanen, 2004). This pattern of evaluation suggests that mothers are still more actively engaged in their child’s everyday schooling than fathers are (Lewis & Lamb, 2003). Similarly, Metso (2004) notes that the mothers in her study
maintained contacts with their children’s schools and attended the parent evenings much more frequently than the fathers. As Metso argues, although Finnish fathers show growing interest in their children’s schooling (see Torkkeli, 2001), it is still the mother who is seen to have a customary and “natural” role in the school context, whereas the father’s role is maintained rhetorically.

Considering education and gender together, it is the highly educated mothers, then, that would be defined as the group most actively in touch with their children’s schooling. There is research evidence to support this conclusion. For the British context, Realy (1998) demonstrated “the gendered class processes” in education: while all mothers helped their children with schoolwork and talked to the teachers, it was only the middle-class mothers who had the power and the resources to act effectively to shape the curriculum offered to their children. The recent emphasis on choice in educational policies has drawn attention away from the public sphere towards the private sphere and domestic decision-making—which has also accentuated the role of mothers, middle-class mothers in particular, even to the extent that they have been blamed for “selfish” choices (Power, 2006). In Finland, Seppänen’s (2006) survey revealed that the academically educated mothers in particular were motivated to take part in “the school markets” e.g. to choose a school for their child from outside the catchment area.

Despite the changes of emphases in the Finnish discourse on educational policy (Simola, Rinne, & Kivirauma, 2002), the comprehensive-school model has been largely retained (Antikainen, 2006). Yet in Finland, too, the role played and the choices made by the parents have been emphasized. In Finland, the choice of school pertains mainly to lower secondary school (i.e. grades 7 to 9), but that choice is rather restricted, as most parents exercise their right to choose the neighbourhood school for their child’s lower secondary school, leaving few places for outsiders.

According to Seppänen’s (2006) findings, derived from data from four big Finnish cities, approximately every third of the sixth-graders’ parents applied for other than local lower secondary schools; in addition, approximately every fifth parent reported that they had considered applying for another than the local lower secondary school. At least in urban areas, then, local school markets have emerged. In rural areas, the possibilities of choice are much more limited. As the present study was based on a nationwide sample of parents, we were also able to examine the relationship between the parents’ school preference and their place of residence. Furthermore, it was interesting to look at the ways in which the parental choice of schools, which represents a private form of participation, was related to other, more established and communal forms of parental participation.

Seppänen’s (2006) survey also addressed the parents’ own accounts for their choices of schools. Local lower secondary schools were preferred because of convenience of transportation and the child’s friends. Schools outside the catchment area were preferred mainly by some middle-class parents, who explained their choices by reference to special emphases in the school’s teaching programme (e.g. art subjects or science), its good reputation, and select student body.

The traditional forms of parental participation, too, seem to have maintained their position. Besides the school festivities, class-specific parent evenings have been among the forms of cooperation in the Finnish compulsory school from the beginning. As early as 1922, the Board of Education prescribed their content in great detail, so that their programme should contain “a popularized talk on some aspect of education, singing, discussion, conversation—all so organized that the occasion will not turn into a quarreling
public meeting but a harmonious and uplifting moment of togetherness of educational actors’ (Reima, 1933, pp. 104–105). The fear of disorder arose from the justified concern that since the recent implementation of compulsory school attendance, many parents had been loudly voicing doubts about the sense of their child having to go to school (see also Rinne, 1984).

Parental scepticism has long since given way to parental faith in education, which seems to be exceptionally strong in Finland (Jauhiainen & Alho-Malmelin, 2004). Even so, the parent evenings still seem to be shaped from the starting points of the school. This is well illustrated by Metso’s (2004) observations suggesting that parents tend to perceive the parent evenings as more or less awkward teacher-led lesson situations: the parents are placed each in their child’s desk, and their parenthood becomes an object of implicit evaluation.

Parents’ possibilities of contributing to the decision-making, the planning and arranging of school events, and disciplinary issues at school have varied over the years in Finland. Nowadays the schools have cooperation committees, in which the parents of pupils of different grade-levels and the teachers are represented. Experience has shown that parents are not particularly interested in serving in these committees, and involving fathers in particular has proved to be difficult (Metso, 2004). Given that the cooperation committees provide parents with chances to establish contacts with other parents and teachers, we expected them to appeal particularly to middle-class parents, who typically form wide networks concerned with their children’s education (Lareau, 1989).

Parental behaviours also include helping the child with her/his homework and preparation for tests, which are expected to contribute to positive learning outcomes (e.g. Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994). Cross-cultural findings obtained by Tudge et al. (1999) suggest that middle-class children are more likely than working-class ones to be involved in activities most linked to future academic competence such as academic lessons, play with academic objects, and conversation with adults at home (cf. Hill & Craft, 2003). Working-class parents, with their lesser educational experience, may lack the skills needed to help their children in their studies. As Metso (2004) observed in her study, where a middle-class parent reported on the various ways s/he taught his/her child the proper learning techniques, a working-class parent might just fret about her/his inability to help even if s/he wanted to.

The child’s gender is also significant for this study. Although there is relatively little research on the issue of whether parents’ involvement with their daughters is different from their involvement with their sons, there is recent evidence from the US context to show that adolescent daughters generally receive more attention from their parents than adolescent sons do; for instance, the daughters engaged in discussions on educational matters with their parents more frequently than the sons did. However, the parents were less likely to check their daughter’s homework than their son’s (Carter & Wojtkiewicz, 2000). We therefore included the child’s gender in our analyses of the parents’ helping their child with his/her homework and preparation for tests, though we did not formulate any specific hypotheses concerning it.

To recapitulate, this study set out to examine parents’ participation in their child’s schooling and related experiences in four domains: (1) sharing information (i.e. attending the parent evenings), (2) contributing to decision-making (i.e. participation in cooperation committees), (3) pedagogical participation (i.e. helping the child with her/his homework and preparation for tests), and (4) involvement in the choice of school. We were further
interested in examining the dependence of the parents’ participation on their education, gender, place of residence, and the child’s gender. Finally, we looked at the relationships among the forms of parental participation, especially the relationship of the choice of school, representing a new of type of participation, with the established forms of participation.

Methods

Participants

The present study is part of a larger research endeavour dealing with the impact of parents’ gender and education on their children’s schooling. A questionnaire concerning parents’ views of their child’s forthcoming education was sent to a nationwide random sample of parents who were judged on the basis of their current occupation to be either vocationally or academically educated and who had a seven-year-old child ready to start school in autumn 2000. The questionnaire was sent to individual parents (mothers and fathers). The response rate was 66%, providing a total of 850 responses. The mothers responded significantly more frequently (74%) than the fathers (58%). Since not all respondents turned out to clearly represent one of the two desired educational groups, we omitted, for the present set of studies, those that did not, ending up with two parent groups which were internally homogeneous in terms of their post-primary education: vocationally educated and academically educated parents, totalling 574 subjects.

These parents were contacted again, to repeat the survey, at the end of their child’s first, third, and fifth school year. The response rates were 85, 88 and 91%, respectively. In all, 68% of the parents stayed with the study till the end. Comparing the respondents who stayed (n = 391) with those who dropped out at various stages (n = 183), we observed that the mothers’ response rate (74%) was significantly higher than the fathers’ (60%); and that the academically educated parents had a significantly higher response rate (73%) than the vocationally educated ones (65%). Further, those who stayed were slightly older (M = 37.8) than those who dropped out (M = 36.9). The response rate of the parents of girls (69%) did not differ significantly from that of the parents of boys (67%).

In the present follow-up group of parents, 64% were mothers and 36% fathers; these two gender groups did not differ in terms of their child’s gender. The group comprised 57% vocationally educated and 43% academically educated parents; these two educational groups did not differ in terms of their gender or their child’s gender. Girls’ parents made up 51% and boys’ parents 49% of the group.

We carried out a detailed analysis of the regional representativeness of the present group of parents (Räty, Kasanen, & Honkalampi, 2006). On that basis we may conclude that the respondents seemed to make a nationally fairly representative group of academically and vocationally educated parents with school-aged children.

The Questionnaire

One part of the follow-up questionnaire was entitled “Experiences of the school.” The instruction read as follows: “Please answer the following questions, which concern your experiences of your child’s school and your cooperation with the school.” The parents were first asked to indicate how often they attended the parent evenings by choosing the alternative “always,” “almost always,” “occasionally,” or “rarely”; next, they
were asked to characterize their uppermost experiences of the parent evenings by choosing the alternative “positive” or “negative”; and finally, there was an open-ended question asking them to describe their experiences in a few words.

The parents were requested to report whether they were involved in their school’s cooperation committee by choosing the alternative “yes” or “no.” They were also asked to indicate whether they helped their child to prepare for tests that were announced beforehand by choosing the alternative “always,” “fairly often,” or “rarely”; next, they were requested to indicate whether they felt able to help their child with his/her schoolwork, such as doing the homework and preparing for tests, by choosing the alternative “yes” or “no”; and finally, in an open-ended question they were asked to describe the main difficulties they had experienced.

In another part of the same questionnaire the parents were requested to indicate, by choosing the alternative “very likely,” “fairly likely,” “cannot say,” “fairly unlikely,” or “very unlikely,” whether they were going to choose the local school provided by the municipality for their child’s lower secondary school. (The parents were thus requested to indicate their intentions one year before they actually made the choice.) Next, they were presented an open-ended question asking them why they were considering another school than that offered by the municipality.

The responses to the open-ended questions were subjected to content analyses. We attempted to construct the coding categories on the basis of the data itself. The accounts given by the parents were then classified for the occurrence of each of the resulting coding categories by means of the dichotomous scale “0” (= not mentioned) or “1” (= mentioned). To establish an index of inter-rater agreement on the coding and classification, we had two independent raters classify ten randomly selected questionnaires. The raters achieved a 98% agreement on the classifications. We will present the classifications constructed below, in connection with each question.

We began the analysis of our data by computing the frequencies and corresponding percentages for each domain of parental participation. To ascertain the effect of the parent’s gender and education and the child’s gender on the forms of parental participation, we conducted a set of logistic regression analyses. In these analyses we first checked whether the interaction between the parent’s education and gender was significant; if not, we computed the main effects, too. The child’s gender was included in the analyses of the parents’ helping the child to prepare for tests. We also examined the association of attending the parent evenings with the positiveness or negativeness of the experiences of them. Moreover, we analyzed the association of helping the child to prepare for tests with the opinion as to how well the parent was able to help the child with her/his schoolwork. The responses to the open-ended questions were scrutinized by means of a set of logistic regression analyses to see the main effects of the parent’s gender and education. Finally, the interrelationships of the different domains of participation were scrutinized by means of correlations and a factor analysis.

Results

Attendance at Parent Evenings

A great majority of the parents indicated that they had attended the parent evenings: 40% reported that they always attended, 45% almost always, and only 15% attended occasionally
or rarely (Table 1). For the purposes of further analyses, we recoded the parental responses into two categories by combining the responses “always” and “almost always” and the responses “occasionally” and “rarely.” The logistic regression analysis showed that the parent’s education and gender had a significant interaction effect ($B = -0.79, \text{Wald} = 15.95, p < .001, OR = .45$); generally, the mothers attended (90%) more often than the fathers (74%), and this gender difference was more pronounced among the academically educated parents, for the proportions of the academically educated mothers and fathers that attended were 93% and 73%, and those for the vocationally educated mothers and fathers, 87% and 75%, respectively.

Almost all parents (93%) reported positive experiences of the parent evenings, and only 7% reported negative experiences. The logistic regression analysis showed that the parent’s education and gender had a statistically marginally significant interaction effect
(B = −.48, Wald = 3.37, p < .07, OR = .62); generally, the fathers (11%) reported more negative experiences than the mothers (6%), and this gender difference was more pronounced among the vocationally educated than the academically educated parents, for the proportions of parents with negative experiences were 13% and 6% for the vocationally educated fathers and mothers and 8% and 5% for the academically educated fathers and mothers, respectively.

As regards the responses to the open-ended question about the parents’ experiences of the parent evenings, a total of 359 comments were written, 89% of which were positive and 11% negative (see Table 2). Positive experiences, totalling 319, were reported by 214 parents. The most frequently cited positive experience concerned the sharing of information: The parents were satisfied with the information concerning the topical issues and the social relations in the school and in the class, with the expert lectures they had heard, and with the answers they had received to their questions. The other positive experiences mentioned included the relaxed and open atmosphere of the parent evenings, which made it possible to address even difficult problems constructively. Many parents cited positive group experiences provided by the joint discussions between the parents and the teachers, the sharing of experiences and the joint resolving of problems. The parents also found it useful getting to know the other parents and having a chance to talk to the teacher in person and thus influence matters. The positive comments included praise to the teacher’s characteristics such as his/her professional expertise and cooperation skills; among the miscellaneous positive comments, the chance to see the school premises was mentioned.

Table 2
Responses to an Open-Ended Question about Experiences of the Parent Evenings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Responses</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive categories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharing information</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive group-work experience</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relaxed atmosphere</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to know other parents</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting to talk to the teacher in person</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chance to influence matters</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other responses</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative categories</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time wasted on insignificant matters</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Given a passive role</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different values and discussion styles among parents</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school’s inability to address real problems</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher or head teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other responses</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Negative comments on the parent evenings, totalling 51, were written by 40 parents. The most frequent one concerned time wasted on insignificant matters, that is the regurgitation of already known, irrelevant, or uninteresting topics. Another negative experience mentioned was the passive role assigned to the parents, which hindered them from carrying on a proper dialogue and influencing matters and made the respondents feel that they were getting little respect. The other negative experiences included the school’s inability to openly address real problems, the differences among the parents in their values and styles of discussion, e.g. the dominance of some parents. Also, some negative characteristics of the teachers and head teachers were listed.

According to the logistic regression analyses, the parent’s gender had a significant effect on the comment about sharing information ($B = .78$, Wald = 5.64, $p < .02$, $OR = 2.19$) and the parent’s education on the comment about time wasted on insignificant matters ($B = -1.44$, Wald = 4.03, $p < .05$, $OR = .24$); among the parents who cited positive experiences, the mothers (47%) referred to the sharing of information more frequently than the fathers (29%), and among the parents who cited negative experiences, the vocationally educated ones (63%) referred to time wasted on insignificant matters more frequently than the academically educated parents (31%).

Finally, to see whether the attendance at the parent evenings was related with the experiences of them, a logistic regression analysis was conducted between these variables adjusted for the parent’s gender and education. The analysis revealed that these two variables were significantly related to each other ($B = 1.18$, Wald = 6.95, $p < .01$, $OR = 3.26$); amongst the parents who attended the parent evenings always or almost always, only 6% reported negative experiences, whereas amongst the parents who attended occasionally or rarely, 18% cited negative experiences.

**Participation in Cooperation Committees**

About every seventh parent (15%) indicated that s/he was or had been a member of the cooperation committee (Table 1). The logistic regression analysis revealed that the interaction between the parent’s education and gender had a significant effect ($B = -.51$, Wald = 7.88, $p < .005$, $OR = .59$), showing that the mothers (18%) participated twice as often as the fathers (9%); this gender difference was somewhat more pronounced amongst the vocationally educated parents: the percentage of participation for the vocationally educated mothers and fathers were 16% and 7% and for the academically educated mothers and fathers, 22% and 11%, respectively.

**Helping the Child to Prepare for Tests**

One-quarter (24%) of the parents indicated that they always helped their child to prepare for tests, a half of them (51%) fairly often, and the rest (25%) rarely (Table 1). For the purposes of further analysis, we recoded the parental responses into two categories by combining the alternatives “always” and “fairly often.” According to the logistic regression analysis, the interaction term was not significant but the parent’s gender had a significant effect ($B = -.52$, Wald = 4.67, $p < .03$, $OR = .59$), suggesting that the mothers (78%) helped their child to prepare for tests more frequently than the fathers (68%).
Perceived Ability to Help the Child with her/his Schoolwork

A great majority of the parents (92%) reported that they felt able to help their child with his/her schoolwork, and only 8% felt unable to help (Table 1). The logistic regression analysis demonstrated that the interaction between the parent’s education and the child’s gender had a significant effect ($B = -1.13$, Wald = 9.37, $p < .002$, $OR = .32$); generally, the parents of boys (11%) reported inability to help their child more frequently than the parents of girls (4%); this gender effect was more pronounced amongst the academically than the vocationally educated parents: the proportions of perceived inability for the academically educated parents of boys and girls were 12% and 0% and for the vocationally educated parents of boys and girls, 10% and 6%, respectively.

The parents were also asked an open-ended question concerning the problems they experienced with helping their child. A total of 75 comments were written by 72 parents (see Table 3). About one-third of the comments focused on the child, who was described as not wanting the parent’s help because s/he preferred to work independently or not informing the parents about the assignments and tests in time. A frequently mentioned problem concerned the parents themselves, who felt they lacked the personal competence to tutor or motivate the child in certain school subjects. Another parent-related problem mentioned was lack of time caused by difficult working hours or their personal life situation, such as divorce. Parents also brought up school-related matters such as inadequacy of information and the teaching materials.

According to the logistic regression analyses, the parent’s education had a significant effect on the perceived inability to help the child in certain school subjects ($B = -1.32$, Wald = 4.94, $p < .03$, $OR = .26$); amongst the parents who cited problems, the vocationally educated ones referred to personal inability (41%) more often than the academically educated ones (14%).

Finally, in order to see if helping the child to prepare for tests was associated with the perception of ability or inability to help the child, a logistic regression analysis was conducted between these variables adjusted for the parent’s gender and education and the child’s gender. The analysis revealed that these two variables were significantly related to each other ($B = 2.76$, Wald = 31.06, $p < .001$, $OR = 15.79$); amongst the parents who helped their child to prepare for tests always or fairly often, only 2% felt unable to help the child, whereas amongst the parents who helped their child to prepare for tests rarely, as many as 22% felt unable to help the child.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The child’s characteristics</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived inability to help in some subject</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of time</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The school not helpful enough</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Own life situation</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Choice of School

As to the choice of their child’s lower secondary school, a great majority of the parents expected to choose the local school: 70% regarded this option as very likely, 12% as fairly likely, 10% as fairly unlikely, and 4% as very unlikely; in addition, 5% were unable to say (Table 1).

The expectation concerning the choice of lower secondary schools was associated with whether the parents had originally, i.e. when the child entered the first grade, chosen another school than the local one for their child’s primary school; amongst those parents who chose the response “fairly unlikely” or “very unlikely,” 62% had already chosen another school than the local one for their child’s primary school. For the sake of clarity, we excluded this group from the next analyses, in which we compared those parents (n = 323) who had originally chosen the local primary school and expected their child to continue in the local school with those parents (n = 30) who had also selected the local primary school but expected not to choose the local school for their child’s lower secondary school. For the purposes of further analysis, we combined the alternatives “very likely,” “fairly likely,” and “cannot say” and the alternatives “fairly unlikely” and “very unlikely.” According to the logistic regression analysis, only the parent’s education had a significant effect (B = .85, Wald = 4.81, p < .03, OR = 2.35), indicating that the academically educated parents (13%) opted for another school than the local one for their child’s lower secondary school more frequently than the vocationally educated parents (6%).

A logistic regression analysis was employed to explore the relationship of the parents’ place of residence with their choice of schools adjusted for the parent’s education. The place of residence had a significant effect (B = −1.27, Wald = 12.81, p < .001, OR = .28); the share of parents opting for another school than the local one for their child’s lower secondary school was 20% in urban areas, 4% in densely populated areas, and 2% rural areas. The choice of school was the only form of parental participation with which the parents’ place of residence was significantly associated.

We scrutinized the reasons that the parents gave for their choice of schools. A total of 70 reasons were written by 49 parents for either choosing or not choosing the local school (see Table 4). About one-third of the reasons referred to suitable teaching emphases, which took the child’s hobbies or competence in mathematics, sciences, languages, or arts into account, in the desired school. Many parents mentioned continuity, i.e. the choice had

Table 4

Responses to an Open-Ended Question about the Reasons of School Choice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Suitable teaching emphasis</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuity</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy transportation</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reputation of the school</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The quality of instruction</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The child’s own preference</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brother’s or sister’s experience</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other responses</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
already been made when the child entered the primary school, or their preference for a
school in which the child could move on to upper secondary school. The other reasons
mentioned included the suitability of the distance and the ease of transportation to the
school, the good or bad reputation of the lower secondary school, and the quality of the
teachers and of the instruction, including the size of the teaching groups. Also listed were
the child’s own preference and her/his sisters’ experiences, good or bad.

According to the logistic regression analyses, the parent’s education ($B = 1.79$, Wald $= 5.44$, $p < .02$, $OR = 6.03$) and gender ($B = 1.37$, Wald $= 3.58$, $p < .06$, $OR = 3.96$) had a
significant effect on the teaching emphases. Amongst the reasons cited for the parents’
choice of schools, the academically educated parents (53%) referred to the teaching empha-
ses more frequently than the vocationally educated parents (20%), and the mothers (50%) did so more frequently than the fathers (27%). The parent’s education had a statistically
marginally significant effect on the distance to the school ($B = -1.39$, Wald $= 3.16$, $p < .08$, $OR = .25$), suggesting that amongst the reasons cited for the choice of school, the vocation-
ally educated parents (33%) referred to the distance to the school more often than the
academically educated parents (12%).

Interrelationships Amongst Forms of Participation

Table 5 presents the intercorrelations amongst the forms of parental participation. On
the one hand, the choice of school turned out to represent an independent variable, for it did
not correlate with the other forms of parental participation. On the other hand, attending the
parent evenings correlated significantly with participation in the cooperation committees
and helping the child to prepare for tests.

The correlational results were further supported by a factor analysis based on the vari-
max-rotated principal component analysis, which generated two main factors. The first
dimension, accounting for 33% of the total variance, represented the traditional forms of
involvement, for attendance at the parent evenings (.81), participation in the cooperation
committees (.44), and helping the child to prepare for tests (.69) had high loadings on it. The
second dimension, accounting for 26% of the total variance, represented the choice of
school, for only the expectation concerning the choice of lower secondary school had a high
loading on it (.95).

Discussion

The present study set out to examine the participation of Finnish parents in their fifth-
grader’s schooling in four domains: sharing information, contributing to decision-making,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice of school</th>
<th>Parent evenings</th>
<th>Cooperation committee</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parent evenings</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The cooperation committee</td>
<td>−.05</td>
<td>.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping the child to prepare for tests</td>
<td>−.06</td>
<td>.26**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. **$p < .01$. 
pedagogical engagement, and participation in the choice of school. As to the first domain, the parents indicated quite a high participation rate in the parent evenings, with as many as 85% of them reporting that they attended these meetings always or almost always. Although exact comparisons are difficult to make, it seems that the level of attendance at the parent evenings has risen significantly from the early 1980s (Korpinen & Husso, 1980) to the beginning of the 2000s (also Kauppinen & Koivu, 2000).

Furthermore, the parents’ evaluations of the parent evenings turned out to be mainly positive, for over 90% of the respondents reported positive experiences. The most frequently mentioned positive experience was the obtaining of versatile information on both the functioning of the school and how the child was doing. The parents’ comments also conveyed positive experiences of sharing, doing things, and making a difference together, accompanied with a feeling of the pleasant atmosphere of the school. The parent evenings, a hundred-year-old institution, seem then to represent a fairly well-appreciated communal form of parental participation.

Cooperation is perhaps the term that best describes Finnish parents’ preferred manner of participating in their children’s schooling. This approach is based on the parents’ view of the division of labour, shared with the school, where the upbringing is seen mainly as the home’s job and the teaching mainly as the school’s job (cf. Metso, 2004). The parents are engaged in what they see as the “Educating our child” project, which they look at fairly positively and optimistically, at least during the child’s primary school years. Admittedly, this parental view is different from that of pupils, who may even feel discomfort (Linnakylä, 1996) and hold negative experiences of the school (Räty, 2003).

Though the Finnish compulsory school has come a long way from the old country school’s authoritarian attitudes and traditions of emphasizing the teacher’s position (Reima, 1933), a few echoes of the past were still discernible in the critical comments put forward by the parents. The most frequently made negative comments referred to the perception that the school had not dealt with issues that the parents regarded as important, and that it had denied them full authority in matters concerning their child’s schooling. These perceptions derived from the parent evenings are of significance because the parents with negative experiences tended to attend less frequently than the parents with positive experiences.

One noteworthy observation was that the criticism of time wasted on irrelevant matters was put forward significantly more often by the vocationally educated than the academically educated parents. Likewise, the vocationally educated fathers cited negative experiences more often than the other parent groups. Is the school’s mode of discourse—such as the changeable, fashion-like terminology used to talk about the curricula—just foreign to the less-educated parents, or is there a deeper “habitus gap” between the academically educated female teacher and the working-class father? In further work it would be interesting to carry out a more detailed investigation of the interaction situations out of which the negative perceptions of the vocationally educated parents arise. Grozier (1999), for instance, concluded, on the basis of his findings in the British context, that even if the teachers’ strategies to promote parental involvement may have been the same for all parents irrespective of class “because they took no account of the different needs, experiences of parents and because they were essentially constructed from their own perspectives and value positions, then this does nothing to encourage the greater participation of working-class parents” (p. 327).

The cooperation committees being representative bodies, only a relatively small proportion of the parents can take part in them and thus contribute to the decision-making in the
school. In the present study about every seventh parent reported that s/he had participated in the cooperation committee. As in the case of the parent evenings, participation in the cooperation committees, too, was structured according to the parent’s education and gender, so that the highest participation rate (22%) was shown by the academically educated mothers and the lowest rate (7%) by the vocationally educated fathers. The cooperation committees provide an arena on which the parents can make contacts with other parents and teachers. In the light of the present findings, the academically educated mothers were particularly keen to use this opportunity (cf. Lareau, 1989).

As to the parents’ pedagogical participation, a great majority of them (75%) reported that they helped their child to prepare for tests always or almost always; the mothers seemed to participate in their child’s tutoring more often than the fathers. As many as 92% of the parents indicated that they felt able to help their child in his/her studies, such as the homework and the preparation for tests. We made the interesting observation that it was the academically educated parents in particular that still seemed to have problems with their sons. Could it be that the problems of the vivacious and active boy, so prominent in the school discourse, partly reflects the loudly vocalized experiences of middle-class parents?

In their responses to the open-ended question, almost every fifth parent brought up some tangible problem they had faced when tutoring their child (which is, indeed, easier to do than saying that one is incapable of helping). A tendency towards self-serving attributions was also evident in the parents’ comments, in which they ascribed the reasons for their tutoring problems mainly to factors outside their control, such as the child, the school, or their own pressing or otherwise problematic life situation. Although we did not observe the phenomenon, noted in many other studies, that highly educated parents tend to engage in their children’s academic tutoring more intensively than less educated parents (Tudge et al., 1999), we did note that the vocationally educated parents in particular indicated that they felt unable to tutor their child in certain specific subjects—a finding which was also obtained by Metso (2004). We further noted that the parents who experienced the most problems in helping their child also reported that they helped their child the least. It would be quite useful if the school could help the parents in tutoring their child, for this issue is always topical as long as the course contents keep being revised as fast as they do nowadays.

In Finland, the choice of school is a relatively new form of parental participation. A great majority of the parents in the present survey did not anticipate a change of schools for their child as s/he enters lower secondary school in two years’ time. In the present study, the proportion of parents not considering a change of schools (around 80 %) was clearly higher than in Seppänen’s (2006) survey, in which the subjects represented parents of sixth-graders, for whom the issue was more topical. We also noted that in the countryside the proportion of parents opting for a change of schools was almost zero. Considering also that the parents living in urban areas in our study were less interested in a change of schools than the parents in Seppänen’s (2006) study, who lived in big cities, we may conclude that in Finland the school market actually operates only in urban areas and mainly in big cities. The Finnish school markets are strongly polarised regionally, then, and the polarisation is likely to become stronger as small schools, particularly in the countryside, are being closed at an accelerating rate.

Many parents who expected to choose another than the neighbourhood school for their child’s lower secondary school had made up their minds as early as the child’s first school year. And, as expected, their exercising of this choice was connected with their education,
so that the proportion of those motivated to a change of schools was twice as high amongst the academically educated (13%) as the vocationally educated parents (6%). Contrary to Seppänen’s (2006) findings, the academically educated mothers in our study did not stand out as the group most actively engaged in the choice of school.

The most frequently cited reason for the change of schools was the teaching emphases of the desired school; this reason was most frequent with the mothers and the academically educated parents. In Seppänen’s (2006) survey, too, the teaching emphases were cited as a reason for the change of schools, especially by the highly educated parents. Whereas the working-class parent may not see the choice of school as a special issue (Metso, 2004) but, as we have observed here, as a matter of practical or economical significance at the most, e.g. the school’s distance from home, the middle-class parent may exercise the choice in order to advance the special abilities s/he sees in the child. The middle-class representation of intelligence is characterized by parents’ faith in their child’s natural giftedness and by the emphasis they place on the child’s individuality (Räty & Snellman, 1998). This representation is of educational significance, as it helps the parents in many ways to back the competencies they see in their child, which contributes to reaching the anticipated outcome; for instance, the confidence that academically educated parents have in their child’s verbal-cognitive abilities strengthens their expectation that their child’s further education will be an academic one (Räty, 2006).

We also scrutinized the interrelations amongst the forms of parental participation. Anticipation of a change of schools turned out to be independent of the traditional forms of parental participation, which correlated positively with each other. Parental activeness would thus seem to be directed to two relatively independent dimensions. One of them, the choice of school, seems to have introduced a new element into parental participation without changing the existing ways of participation. Despite the possibility or necessity of choosing amongst schools, the parents do not necessarily see themselves as clients of the school (Hughes Wikeley, & Nash, 1994). Even so, the possibility of choosing amongst schools is a significant factor in the privatization of parents’ relationship to the school. It would be an interesting topic of further work to examine just how the relationship to the school has changed amongst those parents who have exercised their possibility of choice.

To sum up, the present findings indicated that the traditional forms of parental participation have held their ground and that the choice of school has not offered an alternative for them. Most of the parents attended the parent evenings, which they regarded as positive occasions, and helped their child with her/his schoolwork, in which they had also met with problems and shortcomings of their own competence. As to the parents’ social-psychological distance from the school, we observed that the choice of school appealed mostly to urban parents and academically educated parents and that the mothers participated in their child’s schooling more widely than the fathers. The academically educated mothers and the vocationally educated fathers formed opposite groups in regard to their participation and their experiences. Given that the mothers showed higher rates of participating in the parent evenings and cooperation committees and helping their child to prepare for tests than the fathers did, we may conclude that looking after the child’s schooling and upbringing is still more of the mother’s than the father’s task (cf. Lewis & Lamb, 2003).

Our study should be interpreted in the light of the following limitations. First, our results cannot be generalized for all parents, since parents with a lower secondary education and those with only a comprehensive-school education were not included in the population we sampled. Second, longitudinal research always produces a dropping-out effect; yet the
response rates in the follow-up phases proved to be higher than 85%. The parents’ staying with the study did not seem to depend significantly on what they thought of their child’s school, for our previous analysis indicated that there were no differences between those who stayed in the follow-up phases and those who dropped out as far as their satisfaction with the functioning of their child’s school was concerned (Räty & Kasanen, 2007).

It must be admitted that because of the limitations of the survey method we used, we were able to cover only a limited number of forms of parental participation and related opinions and experiences. Our results cannot yield the kind of in-depth picture that might be obtained by means of interview studies conducted with relatively small numbers of subjects. In further studies it would therefore be important to carry out a more detailed investigation, especially of the ways parents experience the problems they face in helping their child with his/her schoolwork.

References


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