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From a distance—How Norwegian parents experience their encounters with school[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The study examines how parents experience the interaction with teachers and school; do they feel welcome, do they feel that they can influence what goes on in school? And, are there any differences in parents' experiences in relation to independent variables such as gender and educational background? The empirical analyses are based on a mixed methods approach that includes survey data and qualitative interviews among lower secondary school parents in Norway. The results show that even though parents feel welcome in school and in many ways are satisfied with the home–school cooperation, there are aspects of this relationship that are problematic. The relationship is often experienced as distant and parents feel excluded from the central discussions within the school setting.

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1. Introduction

National and international research has revealed several discouraging facts concerning the situation in the Norwegian school: Norwegian schools attain mediocre to poor results on a variety of measures of school quality, the differences among Norwegian pupils are greater than in most comparable countries, many Norwegian classrooms are characterised by noise and disturbance and poorly motivated and undisciplined pupils (Lie, Kjærnsli, Roe, & Turmo, 2001; OECD, 2001; Solheim, Tønnesen, & Oftedal, 2002). The problems are worse in lower secondary school (Grepperud, 2000; NMER, 2003). The Norwegian educational authorities have emphasised parents as an important partner in the struggle to improve the situation and the results, and while the link between home and school has traditionally been rather weak in Norway, several government policy documents have allocated parents a more significant position in schools, both as regards decision-making and as partners in the learning processes of their children (for example in Report No. 14 (1997–1998) to the Storting, NMER, 1997). Also, parents' formal rights have been strengthened through parent representation in co-operative and decision-making bodies in school.

One important prerequisite in order to get parents to join in on these policies is that the home–school relationship is experienced in a positive way. Studies show that this is not always the case. One element that influences how parents experience the relation between home and school is how school and teachers act in this regard. According to Epstein and Sanders' studies from the U.S. (Epstein & Sanders, 2000) schools and classroom practices influence parental involvement, and the effort of teachers to involve families is just as important as, or more important than, family background variables such as race, ethnicity and social class for determining whether, how and which parents become involved in the education of their children. Parents often find themselves on the outside of the school arena, and studies from Norway demonstrate that in

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reality parental influence is very limited (Holthe, 2000; Meland, 1991; Nordahl, 2003). Hanafin and Lynch's (2002) results from an interview study among parents in a primary school in the disadvantaged areas scheme in the Republic of Ireland indicate that if parents feel excluded from decision-making processes connected to school management or to their children's school progress, they tend to give up attending meetings or volunteer as committee or board-members. Research has also demonstrated that parents' social background is an important variable in the sense that parents with more formal education are more apt to take part in home-school cooperation than those with less education (Bæck, 2005, 2007; Epstein, 2001, 2002; Hallgarten, 2000; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Lareau, 1997, 2000; Useem, 1992; Vincent, 1996; Vincent & Ball, 2006; Vincent & Martin, 2000). Several of these studies indicate that a feeling of exclusion and separation in relation to school seem to be more pronounced among working-class than middle-class parents and that this leads them to withdraw from active involvement in their children's education. In Lareau's study from the U.S. she finds that the relations between working-class families and the school are characterised by separation, and she claims that because the working-class parents believe that teachers are responsible for education, they seek little information about the things that go on inside the school such as the curriculum, the educational process or the learning methods (Lareau, 2000).

The purpose of this article is to look more closely at how parents experience the interaction with the teachers and with school. Do parents feel welcome? Do they feel that they can influence what goes on in school? And, are there any differences in parents' experiences in relation to independent variables such as gender and educational background? The aim is also to discuss how we can understand the processes that take place in the interaction between parents and teachers on a theoretical level, and power is put forward as one important concept in this regard.

2. Theoretical issues

Several aspects may influence how parents perceive of the interaction with school and teachers, and a common denominator is differences in power and positions between parents and teachers. Bourdieu's concept of social field describes the dynamic power relations within different societal spheres and therefore serves as a fruitful intake to understand the interaction that takes place between parents and teachers. Social fields are networks or configurations where actors have certain interests and things are at stake (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 72). In these social fields, different groups of actors fight to achieve and maintain hegemonic power; power to define what is worth striving for and what is not, what is valid currency and what is not. Bourdieu compares the social field with a game where each player has a different hand and the cards have different values according to which game they play and how the game shifts (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The card is an analogy for the types of capital or resources (economic, social and cultural) that the actors have at their disposal. In the same way as the relative value of the cards changes according to the games that are played, the hierarchy of different types of capital varies in the different fields. Cards that are valid and effective in all fields are the most fundamental types of capital, but their relative value as trump cards will vary according to the field in question and the successive conditions within one and the same field. Since the most fundamental premise is that the value of a specific type of capital is dependent on the existence of a game, a field, where this trump card can be used, what constitutes capital is that which is effective within a specific field. Capital does not exist and does not function outside a field.

The school arena can be regarded as such a social field. In the relationship between parents and teachers, teachers are the ones holding power; they constitute the dominant group holding the trump cards. The teachers are the ones who decide "what can be said and thought" and "who can speak, when and where and with what authority" (Ball, 1994, p. 21). Thus, the social setting of the school can be perceived as a "contested domain" (David, 1993), and this can colour the way interaction between parents and teachers are perceived by the parents. In this contested domain the fight over knowledge is essential. What is valid knowledge in this setting? As pointed out by Cole (2007), the teachers are the professionals on the school arena and they represent the specialised, expert knowledge on this field, while parents on the other hand possess a type of knowledge that is based on experience. Cole (2007) argues that there is tension between the public, professional space of school and the private, personal space of home. This tension reflects the differing ontological perspectives of parents and professionals in relation to what counts as knowledge and whose voice can be heard. According to Cole (2007), many professionals claim the position of "objective authority", placing themselves on the public, expert side of the home-school boundary. Because of the differences in positions between parents and teachers, parents feel that they start from an unequal position, given the language and power of professional discourses, and they therefore find it impossible to challenge the opinions of the professionals, or even to make their voices heard in encounters with them.

Teachers constitute a very powerful group compared to parents also because of their homogenous views and attitudes (Bæck, 2007). Independent of their own background, gender or which school they work in, teachers have very similar views regarding questions concerning the role of parents in school, something that probably has to do with the fact that the teachers have undergone a common socialisation process through their education and, subsequently, as teachers working together. Parents, on the other hand, are much more diversified in their attitudes regarding what their role should be, what expectations they have and how they experience the home-school relationship. This makes teachers appear as a strong and unified group in school, whereas the variations in attitudes and values among the parents make it more difficult to unify the parent group when demands are to be made on the school. The teachers are the ones holding the trump cards and controlling the game of the home-school relationship. The heterogeneity of the parents would also lead us to suspect that different groups of parents experience the interaction with school differently. As Lareau (1997) points out, the expectations of schools and teachers are coloured by the social and cultural experiences of certain intellectual and economic elites, and in this way

the standards of the schools are far from neutral. Particular standards count, certain types of achievements are awarded and certain social conventions are accepted, and so on. Some groups of parents would be closer to these standards and conventions than other parents and could thus feel more at ease with the interaction with the teachers than others. In the subsequent analyses we will see if this is the case. Other factors that may influence the relationship will also be investigated. The following research questions are pursued: (1) How do parents experience the relationship with the teachers? (2) Do parents feel that they have a say in what goes on in school? (3) Are there any differences in parents' experiences in relation to independent demographic variables such as educational background or gender, and are there other factors that influence this relationship? The analyses are based on survey and interview data which document how parents of lower secondary school pupils in Norway's experience the interaction with school and teacher.

3. Data sets, variables and methods

The analyses are based on two forms of data; a nationwide postal survey and qualitative interviews with parents. A postal survey was carried out fall 2006 among parents with pupils in lower secondary schools. 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 2490 parents, and 1169 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 overrepresentation 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 Liden (1997) (50%) and Westergård and Galloway (2004) (50%). In the statistical analyses respondent's gender and educational level are both controlled for.

For the qualitative interviews 56 parents from seven lower secondary schools in Norway were interviewed. The seven schools were selected in order to get as wide a selection of schools as possible. We therefore took into account school size, school location relative to industrial structure, geographical location, degree of urbanism/ruralism, social class environments (schools dominated by middle-class versus working-class pupils), and degree of non-native versus ethnic Norwegian pupils in the pupil populations. Three of the schools were big city schools in the southern part of Norway. One of them was located in a suburban area in a predominant working-class environment and had approximately 250 pupils. Another was also located in a suburban area, but in a middle-class environment and had approximately 580 pupils. The third of these schools was an inner-city-school where more than 90% of the 300 pupils had minority backgrounds. Two other schools were located in smaller towns in the northern part of Norway with a population of approximately 60,000 inhabitants. One of these schools was located in a middle-class area and had 550 pupils while the other was located in a working-class area and had 330 pupils. The last two schools were located in rural settings in the northern part of Norway. Both schools had pupils from primary and lower secondary school. One of these schools was located in an area dominated by agriculture and had 100 pupils on the lower secondary level. The other one was located in an area dominated by fisheries and had 30 pupils on the lower secondary level.

Structures and support for parental involvement in all the schools included annual parent–teacher meetings (twice a year), parent–teacher conferences (twice a year), parent representative, Parents' Council Working Committee (Norwegian abbreviation FAU) and board of management representation. Other than this, communication between home and school was usually by means of a note informing parents of school activities, etc. At the time of the interviews four of the schools also used classfronter, which is a web-based Learning Management System that is used as a support in the learning process between teacher and pupil. Parents had access to classfronter and could keep themselves updated on the web.¹

An initial contact was made with parents by means of a written note sent home with the pupils. In this note the research project was described and the parents were informed that some parents would be asked to take part in an interview. We went through the class-lists with the teachers in order to map the parents' educational and professional backgrounds. We wanted a variety of parents in the sample, and parents from different backgrounds were approached for interviews. Even though the sample of interviewed parents cannot be regarded as representative for all parents in Norwegian lower secondary schools, the sample represents a good mix of different categories of parents, with different backgrounds, from different places and with different outlooks on parental involvement. The overall majority of the parents we approached agreed to let us interview them. The time and place for the interviews were adjusted to whatever the parents wanted, so interviews took place in cafes (9 interviews), at workplaces (13 interviews) and in private homes (34 interviews). We interviewed 30 mothers and 26 fathers.

We used structured interviews with an interview guide. Since the interviews were carried out by different interviewers we sought to minimize potential bias by keeping the interviews as structured as possible. The parents were interviewed once

¹ Classfronter is a combined electronic bulletin board and mailbox that can be used among other things to replace paper. In the virtual classroom papers, assignments, timetables, etc. are kept and one can at any time post academic or other material. It is also easy to post mail to the whole class. Each pupil has their own unique room inside classfronter.

and the interviews lasted between 1 and 3 h. The interviews were taped and transcribed. The interview guide covered a wide range of topics, including curriculum matters, their own educational experiences as pupils, their child's social and academic life in school, the relationship between the teachers and them as parents as well as their thoughts and opinions on their role in their child's schooling.

3.1. Mixed methods approach

The empirical foundation of this study stems from a mixed methods approach where quantitative and qualitative research methods are used in order to examine the same research problem. One reason for choosing a mixed methods approach is that when findings are derived from more than one method of investigation we can exhibit more confidence in the findings (Bryman, 1996). In the present study the combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques provided broadly consistent data and mutual confirmation, and there were no incongruent findings. Thus, combining qualitative and quantitative data in the study served to enhance the validity of the conclusions and provided stronger evidence for the conclusions. Another reason for choosing a mixed methods approach is that using multiple research techniques can add insight and understanding that might be missed when only a single method is used (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004).

In the present study the quantitative and qualitative components had equal status and the quantitative and qualitative research phases were largely overlapping. The interview data was able to add to the findings from the survey data, and the mixing of methods occurred when the findings were interpreted. In this way the mixing of methods produced more complete knowledge. A reservation when it comes to the mixed methods approach as employed here is that the qualitative component is not entirely true to all of the characteristics connected to qualitative research and thus would perhaps not pass as truly 'qualitative' by for examples advocates of the phenomenological perspective. Five different interviewers interviewed parents from seven different schools and this meant that a substantial degree of standardisation had to be imposed in order to ensure that the same issues were addressed in a comparable way. As already mentioned, the interviews were therefore kept as structured as possible by use of a detailed interview guide. Also, as pointed out by Bryman (1996), the multisite approach meant that the data had to be 'reduced' to comparable categories and units, thereby losing some of the richness of texture with which qualitative investigations are associated. Nonetheless, the interview data was very significant in order to becoming aware of contextual nuances, as will be shown in the article.

3.2. Survey variables

Table 1 provides an overview of the variables used in the subsequent analyses. In the analyses three different dependent variables connected to different aspects of parents' relations with teachers and school are used. These dependent variables were generated through a factor analysis of the answers to a battery of survey questions concerning parents' experiences with school and teachers. Factor analysis has been used for data reduction purposes, that is, through factor analysis a small number of factors are identified that can explain as much of the variance that is observed in a much larger number of manifest variables as possible. Three factor variables have been generated (see Appendix A). The variable *positive relations* explicates to what extent parents experience the relation to school in positive terms, and those who report that they feel welcome in school, often discuss the teaching and the learning of the children with the teachers, have good contact with their child's teachers, have the impression that the teachers welcome input from them and report that the cooperation with school functions well score high on this variable. The variable *lack of influence* has to do with whether the parents feel that they have any influence when it comes to what goes on in school. Parents who report that they wish they had more influence on the teaching, that they have too little to say in discussions about their child's social development and upbringing and that they want to be more involved in their child's schooling than they are score high on this variable. Parents who score high on this variable are also more afraid of speaking up out of fear of the consequences this may have for their children and they are more insecure as to what the schools' expectations are of them as parents. The variable *too much responsibility* explicates to what extent parents feel that they have too much responsibility for their children's schooling. Parents who report that they have too much to do with homework and schooling and that they do not want to contribute more than they already do score high on this variable.

A number of independent variables are used in the analysis. 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, as well as those who have never lived with the other parent of the child in question. Level of education 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. Two variables that have to do with the respondent's (the parent's) own experiences as a pupil are included; respondent's well-being in school and respondent's achievement level in school. Also included are three 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 and whether or not the child receives any extra tutoring in school. For all these variables five response possibilities were given: (1) very poor, (2) quite poor, (3) moderate, (4) quite good, and (5) very good.

Table 1

Overview of the variables used, $n = 1169$.

	Categories	Mean	SD	Min.	Max.
Respondent's gender	Female = 1, male = 0	0.69	0.46	0	1
Respondent's educational level	1 = primary/lower secondary, 2 = upper secondary, 3 = university/college	2.32	0.71	1	3
Siblings living at home	0 = no siblings living at home, 1 = have siblings living at home	0.82	0.38	0	1
Family type	1 = intact, 0 = divorced	0.70	0.46	0	1
Centrality	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 min 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 min 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 min (90 min for Oslo) travel from the centre of an urban settlement (central municipalities)	2.34	1.02	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	3.93	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	7.26	1.50	2	11
Child's well-being in school	1 = very poor, 2 = quite poor, 3 = moderate, 4 = quite good, 5 = very good	4.20	0.80	1	5
Positive relations to school	Variable generated through factor analysis (see Appendix)	0.00	1.00	-3.08	2.88
Lack of influence	Variable generated through factor analysis (see Appendix)	0.00	1.00	-2.58	2.76
Too much responsibility	Variable generated through factor analysis (see Appendix)	0.00	1.00	-1.97	2.73

4. Results

In order to find out how parents experience their relations with school, we asked parents in the survey to evaluate different assertions, and as already described, factor analysis revealed that these assertions represent three different dimensions when it comes to such relations.

Table 2 summarises parents' responses to questions concerning their experience of interacting with school and teachers, organised along the three dimensions. For the dimension that describes whether the relations with school and teachers are negative or positive, the results show that while few of the parents report that they often discuss teaching and learning issues with the teachers (16% agree and 4% agree strongly with this assertion), a large proportion of the parents still experience their relations with school and teachers as positive. 56% agree strongly with the assertion that they feel welcome in school, 27% agree strongly with the assertion that they have good contact with their child's teachers and 24% agree strongly with the assertion that the cooperation with school functions very well. Fewer parents agree that their input is welcomed by the teachers, but still 19% of the parents agree strongly with this assertion. These results indicate that although many parents experience the relation to school in a positive way, a relatively large proportion of the parents are not satisfied with their relations with school and teachers.

For the dimension that describes whether parents feel that they can influence what goes on in school, the results show that a considerable proportion of the parents agree or agree strongly with the assertion that they wish they had more influence on the teaching; 23% agree and 11% agree strongly. An equal proportion of the parents agrees or agrees strongly

Table 2
Parents' evaluations on assertions concerning the cooperation with school, percentages, $n = 1169$.

	Disagree strongly	Disagree	Moderate	Agree	Agree strongly	Total n
Positive relations						
I often discuss the teaching and the learning of the children with the teachers	33.3	24.5	22.5	15.7	4.0	1141
I have the impression that the teachers welcome input from parents	11.7	13.2	20.3	35.5	19.4	1130
I have good contact with my child's teachers	8.8	13.1	17.5	33.4	27.1	1166
I feel welcome in school	1.9	3.0	13.3	26.1	55.6	1133
The cooperation with school functions very well	4.2	11.7	23.5	36.7	23.8	1155
Lack of influence						
I wish I had more influence on the teaching	14.7	16.5	35.2	22.7	10.9	1120
I have too little say in discussions about my child's social development and upbringing	20.6	15.0	31.3	22.0	11.2	1148
I want to be more involved than I am now in my child's schooling	14.0	13.4	31.1	30.3	11.1	1148
I am afraid to say what I mean	54.5	14.2	11.6	12.6	7.2	1157
I am insecure about the expectations from school	26.4	16.7	24.0	25.7	7.3	1123
Too much responsibility						
I think that parents have too much to do when it comes to homework	35.2	22.1	20.5	14.0	8.2	1157
I think that parents have too much responsibility	35.0	24.1	17.5	16.1	7.2	1153
I do not wish to contribute more	22.5	22.6	20.9	19.9	14.0	1154

that they have too little say in discussions about their child; 22% agree and 11% agree strongly. Even more parents report that they want to be more involved than they are now in their child's schooling; 30% agree and 11% agree strongly with this assertion. A considerable proportion of the parents report that they are insecure about the expectations from school; 26% agree and 7% agree strongly that they are insecure. Also, 20% of the parents agree or agree strongly with the assertion that they are afraid to say what they mean out of concern for the consequences this might have for their child.

For the dimension that describes whether parents feel that they have too much responsibility for their children's schooling, the results show that 22% agree or agree strongly with the assertion that they have too much to do when it comes to homework and 23% agree or agree strongly with the assertion that they have too much responsibility for their children's schooling. 34% of the parents agree or agree strongly with the assertion that they do not wish to contribute more than they already do.

By use of linear regression analyses the question of whether there are any differences as to how different groups of parents experience the interaction with teachers and school have been investigated (see Table 3). Are there for example any differences between parents with different educational levels? If so, this could explain why parental involvement practices

Table 3
Parents' scores on the factor variables *positive relations*, *lack of influence* and *too much responsibility* regressed on relevant independent variables ($n = 1169$).

	Positive relations	Lack of influence	Too much responsibility
(Constant)	-0.799**	2.311***	1.198***
Gender (female = 1, male = 0)	0.062	-0.117	0.026
Level of education ^a	-0.059	0.024	-0.169**
Siblings living at home ^b	-0.010	-0.060	-0.010
Family type ^c	-0.021	-0.149*	0.180*
Centrality ^d	-0.092**	-0.090**	0.018
Parents' well-being in school ^e	0.093*	-0.007	-0.006
Parents' achievement level in school ^e	-0.073	0.070	-0.080
Does the child receive extra tutoring in school (yes = 1, no = 0)	0.390**	0.060	0.270*
Child's achievement level in school ^e	0.045	-0.111***	-0.072**
Child's well-being in school ^e	0.152**	-0.326***	-0.041
R^2	0.053	0.149	0.078
F	4.402***	13.876***	6.654***

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, and *** $p < 0.001$. All coefficients are unstandardised.

^a 1 = primary/lower secondary, 2 = upper secondary, 3 = university/college.

^b 0 = no siblings living at home, 1 = have siblings living at home.

^c 1 = intact, 0 = divorced/separated/not living together.

^d 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 min 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 min 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 min (90 min for Oslo) travel from the centre of an urban settlement (central municipalities).

^e 1 = very poor, 2 = quite poor, 3 = moderate, 4 = quite good, 5 = very good.

differ according to parents' level of education in the sense that parents with more formal education are more active than less educated parents, as shown elsewhere (Bæck, 2007). The regression analyses in Table 3 show that the educational level of parents is not a significant variable for explaining differences in how parents experience cooperation with schools in terms of positive relations and lack of influence. The most important variables for explaining how parents experience these kinds of co-operative relations are connected with the situation of the child in school. His or her academic achievements had an effect in that parents whose children did less well in school scored higher on the variable *lack of influence*. The same was found in parents who reported that their child had a lower degree of well-being in school. In addition, parents with such children also scored lower on *positive relations*. At the same time, parents with children who received extra tutoring were found to have a more positive experience of the contact with the school than other parents. These parents felt that their children were seen and their needs were taken seriously.

The regression analyses also show that parents' educational level is a significant variable for explaining differences in whether parents feel that they have too much responsibility when it comes to their children's schooling, in the sense that parents with less education feel more of a burden than parents with more education. The child's achievement level is also an important variable for explaining how parents score on this variable. Parents whose children did less well in school scored higher on the variable *too much responsibility*.

What does this mean? Why does the home-school relationship seem more positive for parents' of children who are receiving extra tutoring? Why do parents who have children who are struggling in school, both academically and socially, feel a lack of influence? The interviews could shed some more light upon these questions.

5. The interviews

The issues raised in the survey were also problematised in the interviews with parents. From the interviews, it is evident that the parents viewed the contact between home and school as vital. However, as the survey data also showed, not all parents felt that it was easy to get in touch with the school when they felt the need, and they experienced limitations or difficulties when trying to approach school. The limitations the parents spoke about were not very clear and explicit, and it was more like a feeling the parents got when interacting with the teachers. The feeling was based on a lack of encouragement from the teachers when it came to getting in touch and being involved. In one interview, a mother reflected on what she felt was a gap between an ideal situation where initiating contact with the school is easy and reality where it is in fact experienced as quite difficult:

I think it is important that school and home are in touch, and that we have the opportunity to get in touch and that one feels that there is room for getting in touch. That one can with confidence approach a teacher or principal or whoever it might be, and that there are no barricades. That one feels welcome to do so. But one does not get in touch if it is not something really, really serious!

Many of the parents we interviewed talked about the value of knowing the teachers better, and the way they saw it they did not get the chance to do so because the teachers made the relation to them, as parents, a distant one. One father said:

I feel that I know the teachers a little bit, but not really and not well enough. I wish I knew them better, of course that would be an advantage. But I cannot see how that could happen.

Consistent with findings from the survey data many parents expressed concern as to whether the school and the teachers really wanted them to be active and to get in touch more. "Well, they haven't really said it out loud", one father commented on this matter. The parents felt that apart from the regular parent meetings and parent-teacher conferences they themselves had to initiate contact. Parents also said that the teachers, even though they sometimes requested feedback and input, did not seem to take these contributions very seriously. They seldom experienced that their feedback and input had any consequences for anything that had to do with everyday life in school. On the other hand, they had the impression that it was more appropriate for them to express opinions on social issues than on academic ones. One father touched upon this problem when commenting on how he experienced parent meetings. This father experienced parent meetings as a one-sided exchange of information from school to parents where he was not given the chance to influence what goes on in school. He said:

I do not feel that we have any influence at all. We have a good relation to school in the sense that there is hardly any relation at all – except from the parents meetings where we are given some information – and that sums up my relation to school.

Some parents had the impression that the teachers did not really care about the pupils. The way they saw it the teachers emphasised the academic part of their job, and some parents perceived this as meaning that the teachers did not want to take responsibility for the social part. The parents interpreted this as lack of concern. This was raised as an issue during interviews with parents in a school where most of the pupils come from very able families. According to the parents, the teachers were very good academically, but they had a very one-sided focus on learning goals and good results for the school. "This school is more concerned about attaining the ideal goals than taking the pupils into account", one parent said. The parents were concerned that the child as an individual would not be visible in school, where focus was on curricula and marks. Another parent was concerned because he did not feel that the teachers knew his daughter well enough. "The teachers know too little about my girl!", he said, "and they don't seem to be too interested in getting to know things either."

During the interviews with the parents it became evident that many parents experienced a kind of intimidation and distance in their encounters with the school and the teachers. Many said that they felt that the teachers were too distant. One mother, a sociologist with a master's degree, was asked whether she felt that the teachers cared about her child. Her immediate response was: "No, no, not at all!" This mother referred to the parent–teacher conference as her being allowed an "audience" with the teacher as if he were a royal highness. She often felt that she was using or misusing his sacred time. She experienced a clear distance towards the teachers, maintained by the teachers. She often felt that the teachers viewed the parents as a trying group that they were forced to interact with once in a while. This mother felt great concern that the teachers seemed so indifferent with regard to the parents since they had such an important role in the life and development of her children. Parents with children who were struggling in school, either academically or socially, were the ones who most frequently brought up issues connected to distance and lack of influence. The mother with the master's degree fitted this pattern. She was the mother of two boys who were low achievers and who had social difficulties in school, and along with many parents in the same situation she was very dissatisfied with her interaction with school.

The experiences and attitudes described above seemed to be irrespective of the educational background of the parents. Thus, this confirms the findings from the survey analyses which showed that parents' educational level was not an important variable for explaining differences in whether parents experience the relation to school in positive terms and whether parents feel that they have any influence when it comes to what goes on in school.

6. Discussion and conclusions

This article has examined how parents in lower secondary schools in Norway experience their encounters with schools and teachers. Even though most parents feel welcome in school and in many ways are satisfied with the home–school cooperation, there are still aspects of this relationship that are problematic. *Distance* is a term that brings together many of the issues highlighted in this article. The sense of distance can be seen as the result of the specific power-dynamics in the home–school relationship. As outlined in the theoretical section the school can be described through Bourdieu's concept of social field, and one of the struggles that takes place here is between parents on one side and teachers as the representatives of the school-system on the other. In a number of different ways parents are outmanoeuvred, and the sense of distance becomes an integral part of the fight over power on this social field. In the empirical section we saw that the main task of the school, the teaching and learning, is seldom a topic in discussions between parents and teachers. The failure to include parents in the central discussions that take place in the school setting disregards parents as equal partners in the home–school relation. Among the parents there is also a great deal of insecurity as to whether their input is welcomed by the teachers. Parents who do give input and feedback to the teachers seldom feel that their contributions are taken seriously in the sense that they have any consequences for what goes on in school. Hence, they do not feel that they have any real opportunity to influence what goes on in school, and they therefore experience a feeling of resignation and powerlessness. This is confirmed in Hanafin and Lynch's study where they found that this feeling of exclusion would lead parents to decrease or even give up their involvement in school (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002).

As we recall from the theoretical section the dispute over claims to valid knowledge is an important part of the struggle for hegemonic power within the social field of the school. By use of the playing card-metaphor from the theoretical section, we can say that the cards held by the parents include knowledge about their own child as a person, about the environment that their child live in etc., while the cards that the teachers hold include knowledge about the pupil's performance in school, knowledge about test scores and knowledge about how the pupil behave and act in the classroom. Even though the cards held by the parents have some value in a school setting, these are not the cards with the highest value. The cards held by the teachers on the other side represent the trump cards that control the game. Other researchers have also emphasised the fight over knowledge that takes place within the school setting. Baker and Keogh (1995) show how teachers' use of 'closed' knowledge about pupils' test scores, reading scores and examinations creates a division between teachers as professionals and owners of professional knowledge and the parents. MacLure and Walker (2000) show how teachers maintain knowledge differentials during parent–teacher conferences through their use of specialist vocabularies and professional registers, while downplaying parents' deployment of their own privileged knowledge of the pupil. They therefore interpret these conferences as a power game in which the odds are stacked against the parents. The teachers claim, and are awarded, the right to speak first, and at some length, and MacLure and Walker claim that this serve as an advantage which allow the teachers to define what count as a 'legitimate' conversation about the pupil. In this way parents are made to be passive receivers of pre-packaged information and advice concerning the child (MacLure & Walker, 2000). These and other mechanisms serve as instruments that maintain the teachers' upper-hand.

As we recall from the introduction, Lareau found in her study that the relationship between working-class families and the school is characterised by separation, and that parents in a way place themselves on the outside because they believe that teachers are responsible for education (Lareau, 2000). My findings demonstrate that it is not only a question of parents placing themselves on the outside of the school because of differences in outlook on who are responsible for children's schooling, but it is also a question of the parents, and not only working-class parents, being defined out through their loss of valid trump cards that can be used in the interaction between parents and teachers. Even though parents can possess all sorts of capital that are of high value in other social fields, as private individuals or as professionals, as long as this capital is not activated in this particular social field, they will find themselves at the lower end of the power scale.

A common assumption is that schools are imprinted with the cultural capital of the middle classes, and that middle-class children and parents therefore feel more at home in school than those with other backgrounds. The present study does not contradict this, and it can certainly be the case that parents with higher socioeconomic status feel more at home in school and therefore are more active in the home–school cooperation. However, the results of the study also demonstrate that there are tensions and boundaries between teachers and parents *irrespective* of the kind of cultural capital held by the parents. The hegemonic struggle between school and home also takes place between school and well-educated parents. Cole (2004, 2007) reaches similar conclusions, and she emphasises the differences in aims between parents and professionals, which go deep whoever the parents are (Cole, 2007, p. 167). While parents' focus is primarily on their individual child, the professionals must take the context into account, Cole claims.

To sum up, there is little in the data presented here that suggest that parents experience themselves as important partners in the education of their children. In this sense, it seems that parents and schools in Norway still have a long way to go before they can be considered equal partners, and the findings from Norway are in line with findings from other parts of Europe and the U.S. Dale (1996) states that although frequent rhetoric has been made of the immense importance of parenting, minimum practical recognition has been given to the validity and usefulness of the expertise and experience of parents. According to Cole (2007), parents can be effective partners only if professionals take notice of what they say and how they express their needs and treat their contribution as intrinsically important. Also, as shown in this article there seems to be a failure to recognise parents as the heterogeneous group it in fact is. Because of the complexity of 'parents', listening to the voices of parents will have to be a challenging task, and schools' and teachers' awareness of this is crucial for the interaction between home and school.

Appendix A

Summary of items and factor loadings for principal component analysis using Varimax rotation with Kaiser Normalization for the question for parents "Do you agree with the following statements?" ($n = 1169$).

	Components			Communalities
	Positive relations	Lack of influence	Too much responsibility	
I often discuss the teaching and the learning of the children with the teachers	.719	.134	.059	.539
My knowledge about school is limited	-.182	.312	.194	.168
I wish I had more influence on the teaching	-.032	.756	.058	.577
I have the impression that the teachers welcome input from parents	.659	-.223	.020	.485
I have too little say in discussions about my child's social development and upbringing	-.260	.580	.053	.406
We as parents have too much to do with the children's homework	.062	.206	.827	.731
We as parents have too much responsibility for the schooling	.014	.247	.830	.749
I do not want to contribute more than I already do	-.098	-.259	.772	.673
I have good contact with my child's teachers	.782	-.251	-.058	.678
I feel welcome in school	.651	-.326	-.107	.542
I want to be more involved than I am now in my child's schooling	-.110	.760	-.096	.599
I am afraid to say what I mean	-.263	.523	.270	.416
I am insecure about the expectations from school	-.398	.558	.240	.527
The cooperation with school functions very well	.699	-.457	-.090	.706

Boldface indicates highest factor loadings.

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