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Research shows that differences in parental involvement are important for explaining differences in educational preferences, aspirations and achievements among pupils. In this article the aim is to show that Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and capital can serve as a theoretical basis for understanding differences in parental involvement among different groups of parents. Encounters between schools and parents are regarded as cultural encounters where different forms of cultural capital are activated, and differences in cultural capital between different groups of parents and schools may result in varying conditions of interaction. Parents from lower social backgrounds fail in their interactions with schools because their cultural capital differs from that assumed and favoured by the educational system.

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# School as an arena for activating cultural capital

## *Understanding differences in parental involvement in school*

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The input of capital into the Norwegian educational system is among the highest in the world. Despite this, national and international research shows that Norwegian schools attain mediocre to poor results on a variety of measures of school quality (Lie, Kjærnsli, Roe & Turmo, 2001; OECD, 2001; Solheim, Tønnesen & Oftedal, 2002). The PISA report<sup>1</sup> demonstrates that the differences among Norwegian pupils are greater than in most comparable countries, and that many Norwegian pupils are poorly skilled. In addition, the learning environments of Norwegian schools are among the weakest in the OECD regarding disturbance in the classroom and lack of motivation and discipline among pupils. The problems are worse in lower secondary schools (Grepperud, 2000; Hovdenak, 2001; UFD, 2002).

In Norway, it is well established that there are also significant differences in educational achievements, preferences and careers among pupils from different social and cultural backgrounds (e.g. Arnesen, 2003; Bjørnson, 1996; Colbjørnsen, 1987; Karlsen, 2001; Raam, 2003; Severeide, 1988.). For in-

stance, research has shown that pupils from high social backgrounds achieve better marks in school than those from low social backgrounds, and appear to get a higher return from their abilities. The PISA report also points to the backgrounds and home environments of the pupils as important factors explaining differences in achievement, and the relationship between the socio economic background of the pupils in Norway and their achievements is, according to the report, like the average for the rest of the OECD countries (Lie, Kjærnsli, Roe & Turmo, 2001). Thus, it is safe to say that the Norwegian unitary school system has not succeeded in compensating for differences in the home environments of pupils.

Differences in educational achievements, preferences and careers have been explained in a variety of ways and with reference to factors like values, culture, economy, norms, traditions, intelligence, cognitive skills and school characteristics. Some of these explanations acknowledge the importance of parents and home background in the sense that parents pass on to their children values, culture, material resources etc. However, parents are not only important for what they pass on to their children. They are also important for their direct involvement in the education of their children and their interaction with schools. This interaction may take place as direct, face-to-face encounters between parents and school staff, such as in individual parent-teacher appointments, general parent-teacher meetings, phone calls, or notes passed between parents and school staff. The interaction may also take place in a more indirect manner through, for example, assistance with homework or when parents respond to, or follow up, messages or instructions from the school.

Research shows that parents' direct involvement in children's schooling has a positive effect on their school-motivation, well-

being in school and school achievements (Epstein & Sanders, 2000; Nordahl & Skilbrei, 2002; OECD, 1997; Stacy 1991). Nordahl and Skilbrei (2002) claims that school-home cooperation is a means of establishing good learning environments for pupils through improved knowledge of, and mutual respect between, teachers and parents. According to Epstein and Sanders (2000), parental involvement even proves to be more important than family background in determining the educational development and success of pupils. However, the degree and quality of parental involvement varies between different groups of parents. Parental involvement is influenced by the educational level of the parents, and families with more formal education are more apt to take part in school-home cooperation than those with less education (Epstein, 2001, 2002; Lareau, 1997, 2000, 2003; Useem, 1992). Mothers are more active than fathers in school-home cooperation (Nordahl, 2000). Furthermore, several studies demonstrate that immigrant families have a problematic relationship to the Norwegian school (Arneberg, 1995; Ericsson & Larsen, 2000; Loona, 1995).

In this article I aim to show that Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *capital* can serve as a theoretical basis for understanding variations in parental involvement in school among different groups of parents. I will show that differences in parental involvement can be seen as a result of processes connected with the encounters between schools and parents understood as a form of cultural encounter. Bourdieu's theory focuses on the economic, social and cultural capital which social actors (here, parents) bring with them when they enter social fields (here, school). The point made in this article is that in the same way as children meet schools with different capital, parents are also differently equipped in terms of economic, social and cultural capital in their interactions with

school, and that these differences may determine the quality and degree of their involvement in school.

## **Bourdieu's theory of habitus and capital**

### **The concepts of habitus and cultural capital**

In Bourdieu's theory, two concepts are especially important when discussing differences in parental involvement: habitus and cultural capital. Habitus is defined as a system of dispositions that monitor the actions of the actor (Karlsen, 2001). These dispositions are products of the social environments individuals grow up under. Habitus is developed during early childhood through children gaining access to knowledge about the world. As the knowledge is already structured by others, usually the parents, the child will «adopt» the world as it is perceived by his or her parents (Karlsen, 2001).

This knowledge is then internalised and transformed into dispositions. The dispositions enable the individuals to act in a meaningful way and perceive the actions of others as meaningful. The habitus structures action and the perception of action. For Bourdieu, habitus is the one uniform principle that generates all action in all situations. In this way, it integrates different aspects of the lifestyles of people and turns them into a consistent whole (Sulkanen, 1982). Thus, it is possible to recognise a certain class habitus in a number of different areas.

According to Bourdieu, social actors (agents) are endowed with a certain amount of cultural, social and economic capital. Social capital may be defined as resources connected with an actor's social relations in a social network and as a member of a specific social group. Cultural capital is defined as a form of knowledge that controls the empathy of agents for, or their valuation of, dif-

ferent cultural expressions (Bourdieu, 1984). Cultural capital of this type can only be received from individuals who themselves are equipped with the 'proper' or 'correct' system of dispositions, that is, from educated parents. The dominant culture is referred to as 'cultural capital' because it can be exchanged in wealth and power through the educational system. This evaluation of the dominant culture is 'arbitrary'. One cannot in any objective way show that it is any better or worse than other subcultures in society.

The high standing that the dominant culture has in society as a whole simply stems from the ability of those who possess power to impose upon others their definitions of reality. The dominant classes not only have the power to define which culture one should aim for, but also to establish this culture as the basis for knowledge within the educational system. According to Bourdieu, the cultural capital that constitutes the knowledge base in education consists of specific, abstractive faculties and ability for linguistic manipulations and formal thinking, all of which are characteristics of the cultural capital of the dominant classes. Thus, the educational system awards and presupposes the type of cultural capital possessed by children from high social backgrounds. Children from the dominating classes have internalised these skills and this knowledge prior to entering school, and thus possess the key to unlock the messages that are transferred in the classroom.

### **Relation to school – intimidation or familiarity**

As Cohen (2000) points out, the differences in cultural capital are much more complex than the presence or absence of pre-school coaching in letters, numbers, vocabulary and literacy given by well-educated parents. It is more important that children who have

highly educated parents learn to master the form and dynamics of teaching and learning processes that «simulate» those of the school classroom at home, thereby gaining an academic advantage over children of less-educated parents. Parents from higher social backgrounds are able to transfer to their children both the foundation for developing abilities that are important for mastering school and positive attitudes towards schooling (Karlsen, 2001). In this way, school education will automatically favour children from high social backgrounds and discriminate against children from low social backgrounds. The educational achievements in social groups are therefore directly related to the amount of cultural capital they possess.

Since schools draw differently on the social and cultural resources of different members of society, and employ specific linguistic structures, patterns of authority, etc. that are closer to home for some groups of people than others, the direct interaction between school and parents will also be influenced by the social and cultural capital of the parents. Schools hold certain presuppositions and standards in their meetings with parents. The academic standards of schools are not neutral and, as Lareau (1997) points out, their requests for parental involvement may be charged with the social and cultural experiences of intellectual and economic elites. Parents who possess the 'correct' or 'desirable' cultural capital may feel more at ease in their encounters with school. They feel they can communicate with the school representatives on equal terms. Findings from Nordahl's (2000) study from Norwegian primary school confirm this. He shows that parents with low formal education are more reluctant to express their views if they disagree with school than parents with higher education. Also, he finds that parents with higher education have more knowledge of text-

books, curricula and legal framework, which contributes to their sense of closeness to school.

Parents with low formal education may have experienced difficulties in their own school-days, and as demonstrated by Berglyd (2003) such experiences may affect how they relate to school even as parents. According to Berglyd these parents believe that they do not have anything to contribute to the school. In meetings with teachers they appear predisposed, insecure and nervous (Berglyd, 2003, p. 49). Lareau (2000, 2003) shows in her studies that working-class parents are often intimidated by the teachers' professional authority. They are afraid of teaching their children the wrong things or instructing them in the wrong way. Working-class parents lack confidence in their ability to address educational issues and they believe they should leave school matters to the teachers.

Unlike middle-class parents, they seldom try to influence the school, and according to Lareau (2003), they are ideologically inclined to view family and school as separate spheres, whereas middle-class parents see them as part of the same project of educating their children. Middle-class parents monitor their children's homework, keep an eye on their teachers, and intervene when they consider it necessary, for example if the child falls behind in comparison to the other pupils. According to Lareau (2003), part of the definition of a good middle-class parent is that he or she takes action if the child faces difficulties in school. However, as pointed out by Berglyd (2003, p. 47), middle-class parents' intervention in school may also include less positive elements. Berglyd claims that some parents with higher education and prestigious work may have unrealistic expectations towards school. They emphasise the learning situation more than the social climate in the class, and they are more interested in

their child's academic result than their social life in school.

### **The importance of social capital**

Activation of social capital may also prove to be of great importance for determining educational success. Nordahl (2000) shows that the social environment between the parents in a class strongly influences how the parents experience the cooperation with the school. According to Nordahl, parents who interact with other parents and know other parent's children, are more satisfied with the information, dialogue and involvement with school. Nordahl claims that a good social environment between the parents implies that parents exchange information about school, the class and the teachers and in this way gain a lot of information and knowledge about the school (Nordahl, 2000, p. 77).

Furthermore, parents who know each other will more easily ask questions and express their views in parent meetings, and they have the potential to constitute a strong interest group. Lareau shows that working-class parents socialise less with the parents of their children's friends than middle-class parents do, and therefore miss out on the information-sharing that takes place in middle-class social networks. This information-sharing is often crucial for understanding what goes on in school and what interventions and solutions are possible when it comes to getting help for particular problems. Thus, working-class parents lack the social capital that could be a valuable resource for supporting their children's schooling. They depend largely on formal communications from the school, which seldom provide a complete or accurate picture.

### **Self-elimination**

In addition to schools presupposing specific forms of cultural capital and favouring children and parents possessing them, Bourdieu

also emphasises another mechanism related to the reproduction of social differences. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the elimination of children from lower social backgrounds from the higher educational levels takes place in two ways: Firstly, because they lack the culture of the school – cultural capital – children from low social backgrounds will often fail in examinations and the like, which may prevent them from pursuing higher education.

However, according to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), most of the pupils who are eliminated from higher education eliminate themselves before they are even examined. Therefore, the second form of elimination is a form of self-elimination which children from lower social backgrounds expose themselves to:

Thus, previous performances being equal, pupils of working-class origin are more likely to 'eliminate themselves' from secondary education by declining to enter it than to eliminate themselves once they have entered, and a fortiori more likely not to enter than to be eliminated from it by the explicit sanction of examination failure. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 153)

Bourdieu and Passeron regard this decision as realistic. Attitudes connected with the educational system are part of one's habitus, that is, the understanding individuals have of the world, and part of this understanding is the knowledge that individuals from different social classes have different 'objective probabilities' of succeeding within the educational system. That is, the percentage of individuals from lower social classes who attend higher education is lower than that from higher classes. This is a fact that is intuitively felt by those belonging to different classes, children as well as parents. Hence, they have a collective knowledge of how far they are able to go within the educational system. Working-class

pupils and their parents are aware of what is in store for them and 'know' that the odds are not in their favour:

Depending on whether access to higher education is collectively felt, even in a diffuse way, as an impossible, possible, probable, normal or banal future, everything in the conduct of the families and the children (particularly their conduct and performance at school) will vary, because behaviour tends to be governed by what is 'reasonable' to expect. Because quantitatively different levels of the rates of collective opportunity express themselves in *qualitatively* different experiences, a social category's collective chances constitute, through the process of internalization of the category's objective destiny, one of the mechanisms through which that objective destiny is realized. (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990, p. 226; italics in original)

Children from low social backgrounds are more likely to 'know' that they do not have the possibility to succeed in the educational system and will therefore more readily desist from developing preferences that are attached to this system (Karlsen, 2001). In the same way, parents from low social backgrounds have the same 'knowledge' about their children's possibilities of success, and many of them will have first-hand experience with this kind of failure.

The system of values and preferences that we find in children and parents from low social backgrounds may in this way be regarded as a form of resignation to the inevitable. Parents eliminate themselves (as well as their children) from the school arenas because «this is not for them»; school knows best and they cannot see that their contributions to their children's education are valuable. In her studies, Lareau (2000) finds that the relations between working-class families and the school are characterised by separation. She says that because these parents believe that teachers are responsible for education, they

seek little information about the things that go on inside the school (the curriculum, the educational process, the methods used for learning, etc.). Their rare criticisms of the school centre almost exclusively on non-academic matters. Upper-middle-class parents, on the other hand, form relationships characterised by scrutiny and interconnectedness between family life and school life, Lareau (2000) claims. These parents believe that education is a shared responsibility between teachers and parents.

### Is education important for working-class parents?

According to Bourdieu, the differences in habitus and cultural capital and the processes of self-elimination described above do not imply that individuals from low social backgrounds do not recognise the type of values that are part of the cultural capital in a society. They do recognise them, not least because of the powerful influence the educational system itself exerts on them. They just do not recognise them as part of their own life. Or, as Willis (1977, p. 93) expresses it, their own culture makes it clear to them that «this is not for them». Thus, both Willis and Bourdieu claim that the structure of preferences is in part formed as a reaction to both failing in the educational system and having an objective knowledge that they are unable to succeed. Pupils from low social backgrounds do not form preferences that they are dependent on the educational system to fulfil and parents tend not to hold such preferences and aspirations on behalf of their children.

Research confirms these assumptions. Several researchers claim that parents from different social and cultural groups share the view that education is important for their children (Nordahl, 2000; Sletten, Sandberg & Nordahl, 2003). However, as demonstrated by

several researchers (Goldenberg, 2004; Hidalgo, Bright, Siu, Swap & Epstein, 1995; Lareau, 2000, 2003); they do not necessarily share the same opinions regarding what kind of education their children should choose, how many years should be spent on education, what grade level is acceptable or expected, or how much time should be spent on homework. In addition, according to Lareau (2003), parents from different social and cultural backgrounds construct different paths in order to reach the goal of education for their children. These paths may limit involvement in school despite the interest the parents take in their children's education.

While working-class parents tend to leave the responsibility of educating their children to the educational system, parents from high social backgrounds tend to take more responsibility themselves for their children's education. Goldenberg (2004) found that parents attributed great value to schooling and were willing to do a great deal to help their children. However, they did not engage in things outside of their own cultural repertoire. For example, they did not provide literacy activities for their children and did not engage in actual instruction, fearing they might teach their children the wrong things. As expressed by Vincent (1996), these parents do not conceive of themselves as educators. Lareau (2003) shows how working-class parents make an effort as regards clothing their children, getting them up in the morning, sending them to school on time, and trying to get them to do their homework, while middle-class parents take active part in the actual schooling of their children.

The starting point for Bourdieu's theory is social class differences. However, Bourdieu's concepts are also fruitful for understanding differences in parental involvement between minority parents and Norwegian parents. This is the topic of the next section.

## Minority parents and school

The perspective that unequal distribution of capital causes differences in parental involvement is useful for focusing on minority families' encounters with schools, because in such cases the cultural clashes between school and home are often especially visible. As emphasised by Ericsson and Larsen (2000), many minority parents bring with them cultural ballast, traditions and values that are not necessarily attended to in the Norwegian school, and schools communicate culture, traditions and values not embraced by all minority parents. Even though this may be true for Norwegian parents as well, the potential for this kind of discrepancy is bigger in the case of minority parents. The cultural capital that is presupposed and favoured within the Norwegian educational system differs from that possessed by minority parents. Loona (1995) claims that there is an unequal distribution of culture-power between schools and minority parents. The way she sees it, this difference in power ensures that the school has the total social and pedagogic authority in discussions concerning school-related matters.

According to Loona (1995), the encounters between minority parents and the Norwegian school are often characterised by submissiveness and passivity on the part of the parents. Minority parents often leave the full responsibility for the education of their children to the educational system, because they believe the school knows best. Ericsson and Larsen (2000) claim that there is an asymmetrical relationship between teachers and parents where teachers set the premises for the cooperation while parents are the receivers. Linguistic barriers may have the same effect, as well as a lack of knowledge about the possibility for parents to be heard in schools. As both Hidalgo et al. (1994) and Ericsson and Larsen (2000) point out, mi-

nority families have different ideas about their relationship to schools. While some aim to retain their cultural identity and therefore wish to be recognised and respected by the schools for their differences, others aim to assimilate into the mainstream community and thus wish to avoid attention by, or special services from, the schools.

## Mothers' and fathers' involvement in school

Another significant difference in parental involvement is between mothers and fathers. Mothers are the most active partners in parental involvement (Lareau, 2000; Nordahl, 2000). In addition, the majority of teachers are women (Nordahl & Skilbrei, 2002) and girls are the highest achievers (Arnesen, 2003; Lie et al., 2001). In this sense, one may say that the educational system has become a gendered arena. The recent success of girls in schools is nevertheless often explained with reference to their conscientiousness, industriousness and adaptability, while the male under-achievement is understood as rebellion and resistance (Weiner, Arnot & David, 1997). However, it is not unreasonable to expect that the absence of fathers, and men in general, on the school arena may negatively affect the schooling of boys. Why are fathers so absent in the schooling of their children? In accordance with Bourdieu's theory, we may see this as a result of gender differences in habitus.

Caring for children has generally been the responsibility of women, and stimulation of the physiological and psychological growth of children has always been a part of this responsibility. According to Lareau (2000), mothers today are increasingly held responsible also for children's intellectual growth and cognitive development. Arranging for a good school day, helping with homework, taking part in school-home cooperation, at-

tending parent-teacher meetings, etc. are crucial parts of this job. Lareau (2003) shows in her studies that while fathers express interest in the educational process and often have considerable authority, they are generally not involved in the daily routines of their children's lives. Thus, parental involvement is an important part of the task of mothering, and the social field in focus here is not the educational system per se, but the social field of parenting.

The social field of *parenting* is closely intertwined with the gender system. The way Bourdieu (1990, 2001) sees it, gendered identity and the conception of the division of labour between the genders are constructed at the same time, and are therefore constructed on the basis of the same socially defined set of biological and social exponents. Bourdieu says that the division of labour between the sexes gives politics, the outside, the public arena, paid work outside the home, etc. to the man, whereas it assigns women to the domestic interior, unrecognized work, psychology, feeling, the reading of novels and so on (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 161).

Social changes such as the entry of larger numbers of women into the workforce, women's continuing participation in paid employment after having children and a decrease in the size of families are claimed to have begun to have an impact when it comes to the expectations and norms connected to e.g. parenting (Blau, 1984; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Pleck, 1987; Poussant, 1995). According to Pleck (1987), since the late 1960s we have seen the emergence of the «new» father, who is nurturing and interested in his young children and well as engaged in paid work, as opposed to the «distant breadwinner» or the «sex role model». It would be reasonable to expect that such changes may influence the preferences connected to education and occupation.

However, as Lupton and Barclay (1997) see it, even though the archetype of the new father is changing family lives and challenging traditional notions of masculinity, the new father archetype is only one of the dominant notions circulating in relation to how men are expected to fashion and present themselves. Men are still expected to participate fully in the economic sphere and act as providers for their families, and they are encouraged to construct their self-identities as masculine subjects through their work role, they say. In addition, notions of fatherhood and practices of fatherhood vary between men of different social classes, educational levels, ethnic or cultural backgrounds (LaRossa, 1988; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; McKee & O'Brien, 1982). The model of the new father has been most influential in molding the father role in middle-class families (Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, 1988; Messner, 1993).

According to Lareau (2000), the lack of involvement by fathers in their children's schooling mirrors the roles of mothers and fathers in housework and other aspects of the daily lives of their children. Their roles also differ according to social class. Upper-middle-class mothers are the most intensely involved in their children's schooling; working-class fathers are least so. Seen through the glasses of Bourdieu's concepts of habitus and cultural capital, this is not surprising. Working-class fathers have a double disadvantage in their encounters with school. Not only do they possess a cultural capital that estranges them from the educational system, they also subscribe to a form of parenting where taking care of children, including school-related issues, belongs to the role of mothering.

## Conclusions

In this article, I have argued that Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and *cultural capital* are

fruitful for understanding differences in how different groups of parents get involved in their children's education. The way parents encounter school may be regarded as a form of cultural encounter and with different forms of cultural capital the premises for interaction between parents and schools will vary. Parents who possess a cultural capital that differs from the one presupposed and favoured by schools may feel intimidated and estranged in their encounters with schools.

Norway is often claimed to be one of the most egalitarian countries in the world. However, as pointed out in this article, Norwegian research findings show that there are significant differences between different social and cultural groups when it comes to educational behavior, attitudes and achievements. A theoretical perspective that focuses on social and cultural capital is therefore fruitful even in a Norwegian context in order to understand the processes taking place.

It is important to understand differences in parental involvement among different groups of parents because it offers a great potential for compensating for differences in the home environment of the pupils. Parental involvement proves to be more important than family background for determining the educational development and success of pupils. Schools have a crucial role to play in this regard. Studies show that schools and classroom practices influence parental involvement, and that parents with less formal education and lower income become involved if schools successfully implement partnership programmes (Epstein & Sanders, 2000).

Epstein and Sanders believe that 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 their children's education. The importance of the teachers' role in successful coopera-

tion between home and school is confirmed by Nordahl and Skilbrei (2002) in their evaluation of a developmental project on school-home cooperation in two counties in Norway. Making schools more aware of the differences in cultural capital may therefore help to improve the work schools do in this regard.

Parents' rights to influence school may be understood as part of a larger political movement towards empowerment and increased focus on the user (consumer) perspective in the public services (Ravn, 1996; Sletten et al., 2003). Pupils and parents as consumers are also emphasised in official Norwegian educational policy documents (UFD, 2002). As well-educated and demanding consumers, the new generations of parents will have a different approach to the educational system than we have been used to. This will pose new challenges to the educational system and school-home cooperation as well as creating possibilities for a closer relationship between school and parents. Increased use of communication technology is an important keyword in this regard. However, this may also increase the gap between the active, resourceful parents and the passive, less resourceful ones. It is therefore highly important to develop theoretical concepts and tools for understanding such social differences.

## Note

I PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) is a comparative international project directed by the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development). The goal is to compare the knowledge and skills of 15-year olds in reading, mathematics and natural science, and their ability to reflect upon their knowledge and experience (Lie et al., 2001; OECD, 2001).

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