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### 'We are the professionals': a study of teachers' views on parental involvement in school

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## **‘We are the professionals’: a study of teachers’ views on parental involvement in school**

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The study examines teachers’ attitudes and experiences regarding home–school cooperation. Teachers constitute a powerful group in school compared with parents, and this relationship is interpreted through Bourdieu’s concept of social field, as a power relation. The empirical analyses are based on a mixed-methods approach with survey and qualitative interviews among teachers in Norway. The results show that while teachers experience the interaction in a positive way, they try to limit parents’ influence through emphasising their own professionalism, thus leaving parents with the role as supporters. Teachers who relate to well-educated parents are especially conscious of maintaining a distance towards the parents in order to keep them in their place.

**Keywords:** parental involvement; teachers; professionalism; mixed methods

### **Introduction**

The aim of this study is to examine lower secondary school teachers’ attitudes towards and experiences with home–school cooperation. In Norway, official government policy documents as well as the Education Act itself emphasise that the responsibility to arrange for good home–school cooperation lies within the school (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research 2008). In practice, the term ‘the school’ usually means ‘the teachers’, since parents for the most parts relate to their children’s teachers. *Teachers therefore play a significant role in home–school cooperation and constitute the premise providers for the relation between home and school.* As pointed out by Davis (1999), teachers are in a position to either destroy or maintain the traditional barrier that exists between home and school, and teachers’ interest, attitudes and competence regarding home–school cooperation is crucial for its success. In Norway, home–school cooperation has recently been put higher up on the political agenda. The background for this is research revealing 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, and many Norwegian classrooms are characterised by noise and disturbance and poorly motivated and undisciplined pupils (Lie et al. 2001; OECD 2001). 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

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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 (Norwegian Ministry of Education, Research and Church Affairs 1997). Also, parents' formal rights have been strengthened through parent representation in cooperative and decision-making bodies in school.

It is a well-known assumption that schools are imprinted with the culture of the middle classes, and that middle-class children and parents therefore feel more at home in school than those with other backgrounds. Lareau (2000), for example, points out that teachers' expectations are coloured by the social and cultural experiences of certain intellectual and economic elites, where particular standards count, certain types of achievements are awarded and certain social conventions are accepted. Some groups of parents are closer to these standards than others, and may thus feel more at ease in interaction with teachers. Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is central in this regard. The concept is defined as a form of knowledge that controls actors' empathy for or valuation of different cultural expressions (Bourdieu 1984). The dominant culture is referred to as 'cultural capital' because it can be exchanged in wealth and power through the educational system. According to Bourdieu, the cultural capital that constitutes the knowledge base in the educational system consists of specific abstractive faculties and ability for linguistic manipulations and formal thinking (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). This is the cultural capital that the teachers represent and that parents meet when they interact with school as parents, and following Bourdieu this cultural capital is more familiar to some groups of parents than others. By implication, the relation between teachers and parents who share the same cultural capital could be characterised by a higher degree of mutual understanding than the relation between teachers and parents who lack cultural capital.

However, another distinction of relevance in the school setting may complicate this picture, and that is the distinction between two groups fighting for power on the school arena; the teachers on the one side, and the (middle-class) parents on the other. Teachers constitute a very powerful group in school compared with parents, and in the relationship between parents and teachers the power dimension may be a potential premise provider, as also pointed out by other researchers (Ball 1994; Bæck 2005, 2007; Cole 2004, 2007; David 1993; Lareau 2000, 2003; Nordahl 2007; Vincent 1996). Ball claims that, in school, teachers are the ones who decide 'what can be said and thought' and 'who can speak, when and where and with what authority' (1994, 21). Power is a central element in Bourdieu's concept of social field and the school arena can be interpreted as a social field; an arena or a battlefield for power fights between different actors, in this case between parents and teachers. A field is defined by specific stakes and interests, and the struggle that takes place within the field is about the monopoly of the specific authority that is characteristic of the field in question (Bourdieu 1993, 72). According to Bourdieu, every field holds a struggle between the newcomer who tries to break through the entry barrier and the dominant agent who tries to defend the monopoly and keep out competition (1993, 72). When we talk about home-school cooperation, the fight between parents and teachers is about what parents' position, role or business in school should be. As mentioned above, parents are given a more central role in school now than we have been used to, which can be seen as part of a larger political movement towards empowerment and increased focus on the user (consumer) perspective in the public services. Parents increased engagement in school influences the power balance in the social field of the school.

According to Bourdieu, the dominant agents are inclined to conservation strategies (doxa); they fight to keep the power balance as is, while the newcomers are inclined towards subversion strategies (heresy). Heresy functions as a critical break with doxa and is often associated with a crisis, Bourdieu says, and this is what brings the dominant agents out of their silence and forces them to produce the defensive discourse of orthodoxy that is aimed at restoring the equivalent of silent assent to doxa (Bourdieu 1993, 73). Relating these outlines to the educational system and the relationship between teachers and parents, we may say that the current focus on increased parental involvement brings with it a potential for a levelling out of the power balance between teachers and parents. In Bourdieu's words, this is the crisis that may threaten the structure of the field and therefore teachers' monopoly, and thus forces teachers to produce a defensive discourse of orthodoxy.

Several researchers have shown that the increase in parental involvement in school has the potential to turn the school into a battlefield because many teachers view this development as a threat towards their positions and their profession (Addi-Racah and Arviv-Elyashiv 2009; Blasé 1987, 1991; Davis 1999; De Carvalho 2001; Malen 1995; Mawhinney 1998; Ogawa 1998). Parents' engagement stretches over to areas within the school that used to be teachers' sole domain – for example, the pedagogical area – and this is especially true when it comes to the engagement of highly educated and resourceful parents (Lareau 2000; similar findings also presented in Borg and Mayo 2001; Crozier 1997; Hallgarten 2000; Hanafin and Lynch 2002). As pointed out by, among others, Eden (2001) and Friedman (1999), the educational system allows a high degree of autonomy for the teachers when it comes to pedagogical questions. Within certain boundaries the pedagogical autonomy given to the teachers means that the system does not intervene in teachers' acts and assumes they are fully competent in their work (Eden 2001). Parents' increased involvement in such questions may constitute a threat towards teachers' pedagogical autonomy. Another central question has to do with the right to define what should pass as valid knowledge; the professional, specialised, expert knowledge of the teachers or parents' experience-based knowledge (Baker and Keogh 1995; Cole 2007; De Carvalho 2001; Lareau 2000; MacLure and Walker 2000).

I now move on to present results from a survey and an interview study conducted among lower secondary school teachers in Norway. The survey and interview data document teachers' experiences with and attitudes towards home–school cooperation. The following research questions are pursued:

- (1) What are teachers' attitudes towards home–school cooperation?
- (2) In teachers' view, how can parents contribute to their children's schooling?
- (3) How do teachers experience home–school cooperation and the encounters with parents?

## The study

### *Datasets*

The analyses in this article are based on two forms of data collected among contact teachers in lower secondary schools in Norway; a nationwide survey and qualitative interviews. For the telephone survey a random sample of 446 of the 1196 lower secondary schools in Norway were selected (this includes both combined primary and lower secondary schools and standard lower secondary schools). One ninth-grade

teacher at each of these schools was asked to take part in a survey carried out over the telephone in fall 2005. Three hundred and fifty-five teachers agreed to participate and this gives a response rate of 80%. Because of the high response rate we can be fairly confident that the sample is not flawed by any serious non-response bias.

Forty contact teachers (27 women and 13 men) from seven lower secondary schools in Norway were interviewed during spring and fall 2005. The teachers were interviewed once and the interviews lasted between one and two hours. The interviews were taped and transcribed and were then analysed. The seven schools were selected in order to get as wide a selection of schools as possible. School characteristics that were taken into account were 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 located in big cities 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 (four female teachers were interviewed). Another was also located in a suburban area, but in a middle-class environment and had approximately 550 pupils (two female and two male teachers were interviewed). The third of these schools was an inner-city school where more than 90% of the 300 pupils had minority backgrounds (three female and three male teachers were interviewed). Two other schools were located in smaller towns in the northern part of Norway with a population of approximately 55,000 inhabitants. One of these schools was located in a middle-class area and had 500 pupils (four female teachers were interviewed), while the other was located in a working-class area and had 300 pupils (six female teachers and one male teacher were interviewed). 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 (two male teachers were interviewed). The other school was located in an area dominated by fisheries and had 30 pupils on the lower secondary level (one female teacher and five male teachers were interviewed).

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 (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, and so forth.

### *Mixed-methods approach*

The empirical foundation of this study stems from a mixed-methods approach that can be defined as an approach where the researcher combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study (Johnson and Onwuegbuzie 2004). There are several reasons for choosing a mixed-methods approach. One reason is that when findings are derived from more than one method of investigation, we can exhibit more confidence in our findings (Bryman 1988). In our study the combination of techniques provided broadly consistent data and mutual confirmation, and there were no incongruent findings. Thus, in our study this served to enhance the validity 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 and Onwuegbuzie 2004). This became very clear in our study. In the survey we were not able to distinguish between schools based on the social backgrounds of the pupil body. Asking the teachers in the survey to evaluate the schools according to this variable did not seem feasible since the majority of Norwegian schools have a diversified body of pupils. In the selection of schools for interviews, on the other hand, social class environments were taken into account and we were able to select schools that had a relatively clear middle-class profile and schools that had a relatively clear working-class profile (understood as the social background of the parents). In the analysis of the interview data, the statements made by different teachers were related among other things to the social background of the parents they talked about. And of course, in the interviews we could explicitly raise the issue of parents' social background and home-school cooperation. In our study, the quantitative and qualitative components had equal status and the research phases were largely overlapping. The interview data's function was not just to put 'flesh on the bones' of the statistical findings, as is often the case when survey data and interview data are used together (Bryman 1988). Through these data we were able to add to the findings; for example, through complementing a questionnaire that was not designed to highlight social class differences.

Our experience with the mixed-methods approach shows that it can produce more complete knowledge. A reservation to our application of the approach, however, is that our qualitative component is not entirely true to all characteristics connected to qualitative research and thus would perhaps not pass as truly 'qualitative' by, for example, advocates of the phenomenological perspective. Five different interviewers interviewed teachers in seven different schools, which meant that a substantial degree of standardisation had to be imposed through the use of a detailed interview guide, in order to ensure that the same issues were addressed in a comparable way. Also, as pointed out by Bryman (1988), 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 were very significant in order to becoming aware of contextual nuances, as will be shown in the article.

### ***Survey variables***

A battery of survey questions constitutes the dependent variables of the survey study. In the first group of questions the teachers were asked to evaluate the importance of different tasks that parents can do with regard to their children's schooling according to a scale from one to five, where one equals 'not important' and five equals 'very important'. In the second group of questions the teachers were asked to evaluate a number of assertions concerning their attitudes and experiences when it comes to home-school cooperation according to a scale from one to five, where one equals 'disagree' and five equals 'agree strongly'. The responses to these survey items are used both as is and in a factor analysis. Factor analysis was used in order to reveal patterns in the survey items and for data reduction purposes. The goal was to identify a smaller number of factors that could explain as much of the variance that was observed in the 13 manifest variables as possible. Four factor variables were generated, as shown in Table 1. The variable *need more support* has to do with whether the

teachers express a lack of support from school when it comes to managing the home–school relation. Teachers who express a need for more training in managing the home–school relation, teachers who miss a joint and superior strategy from the school on this area, and teachers who often feel lonely and insecure about what is expected of them when it comes to home–school cooperation score high on this variable. The variable *discomforting parent encounters* explicates how teachers experience the actual contact with parents. Teachers who feel discomfort and feel that parents meddle too much in the things that go on in school, who feel that they and the parents do not understand each other and who do not like to be contacted by the parents outside of working hours score high on this variable. The variable *the importance of home–school cooperation* concerns whether the teachers feel this is an important part of their job. Teachers who report that parental involvement can increase their own efficiency as teachers and that it is important for pupils' achievements and who regard it as important for lower secondary school parents to be involved score high on this variable. The variable '*parents wanted*' has to do with whether the teachers are satisfied with the level of parental involvement at their school. Teachers who report that they wish parents were more involved and that parents got more in touch with them score high on this variable.

Table 1. Summary of items and factor loadings for principal component analysis using Varimax rotation with Kaiser normalisation for the question 'Do you agree with the following statements?' ( $n = 355$ ).

	1	2	3	4	Communalities
Parental involvement can increase the efficiency of the teachers	0.002	−0.141	<b>0.656</b>	0.063	0.454
Parental involvement is important for pupils' achievements	−0.039	0.099	<b>0.765</b>	0.053	0.600
I think it is very important that lower secondary school parents are involved	0.077	−0.146	<b>0.648</b>	0.086	0.455
I wish parents were more involved	0.124	0.050	0.192	<b>0.794</b>	0.686
I do not like to be contacted by the parents after hours	−0.164	<b>0.691</b>	−0.130	0.082	0.529
I wish parents contacted me more than they do	0.114	−0.096	0.013	<b>0.796</b>	0.656
Teachers need training in how to relate to parents	<b>0.594</b>	−0.015	0.257	0.064	0.424
I often feel lonely in relation to home–school cooperation	<b>0.754</b>	0.161	−0.027	0.148	0.617
I am often insecure as to what is expected of me	<b>0.596</b>	0.350	0.086	0.006	0.486
I often find it discomforting to interact with parents	0.261	<b>0.657</b>	−0.032	−0.223	0.550
Parents meddle too much in what goes on in school	0.084	<b>0.609</b>	−0.112	−0.383	0.538
Parents and I do not understand each other	0.222	<b>0.635</b>	−0.014	0.164	0.480
I miss a superior strategy from the school on home–school cooperation	<b>0.686</b>	−0.041	−0.199	0.049	0.514

Boldface indicates the highest factor loadings.

Six independent variables have been investigated: gender, age, number of years teaching, school type, school size and centrality. The school type variable distinguishes between combined primary and lower secondary schools on the one hand, and schools with only lower secondary pupils on the other. Centrality of the municipality where the school is located refers to a municipal typology developed by Norwegian Social Science Data Services and describes the geographic location of a municipality in relation to urban settlements of various sizes; least central municipalities, less central municipalities, quite central municipalities and central municipalities.

### Survey results

Table 2 presents teachers' evaluations of the importance of different tasks that parents can do with regard to their children's schooling. The teachers were asked to evaluate according to a scale from one to five, where one equals 'not important' and five equals 'very important'. The table is sorted according to mean score of importance, and, as the table shows, parents' attendance on parent-teacher conferences has the highest mean score, followed by attendance on parent meetings and talking to the child about the importance of school. Other aspects connected to the supporting role of parents are also regarded as very important by many teachers; encouraging the child to do well in school, talking with the child about what he/she is learning in school and monitoring the child's work plan. Very detailed monitoring of homework, progress in each subject or detailed knowledge about what the child is supposed to learn is regarded as less important, even though these tasks also have high mean scores between 4.41 and 4.57.

Table 2. Teachers' evaluations of the importance of parental involvement in different tasks ( $n = 355$ ), sorted by mean score.

	<i>n</i>	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Attend parent-teacher conferences	351	4	5	4.96	0.196
<i>Attend parent meetings</i>	352	2	5	4.87	0.404
Talk to the child about the importance of school	352	2	5	4.87	0.409
<i>Encourage the child to do well in school</i>	352	1	5	4.80	0.501
Talk with the child about what he/she is learning in school	352	3	5	4.70	0.529
<i>Monitor work plans, etc.</i>	353	1	5	4.68	0.629
Monitor the child's progress and needs in each subject	352	1	5	4.57	0.684
<i>Check on a regular basis that homework is being completed</i>	352	2	5	4.56	0.668
Discuss with the teachers problems the child faces at home	349	2	5	4.47	0.717
<i>Arrange for a quiet place to do homework</i>	350	1	5	4.47	0.782
Knowing what the child is expected to learn each school year	351	1	5	4.41	0.784
<i>Be a PTA-member of member of a school committee</i>	350	1	5	3.27	1.041

In order to investigate teachers' attitudes to and experiences with home-school cooperation, the teachers were asked to evaluate different assertions that had to do with their attitudes to parental involvement, their experiences of such involvement and how they experience the contact with the parents. Table 3 summarises teachers' responses, organised along the four dimensions 'need more support', 'discomforting parent encounters', 'importance of home-school cooperation' and 'parents wanted'. The responses under the heading 'need more support' show insecurity among the teachers when it comes to home-school cooperation and that more support could be useful. A considerable proportion of the teachers (44%) agree that teachers need more training in how to relate to parents, while 23.5% disagree. The teachers were also asked to evaluate whether they often feel insecure about what is expected of them when it comes to home-school cooperation, and the responses suggest that many teachers recognise the feeling of insecurity. Even though over 50% of the teachers disagree with this assertion, more than 20% agree. The majority of the teachers (66%) disagree to the assertion that they often feel lonely when it comes to home-school cooperation, while 15.5% agree. A total 15.4% of the teachers agree that they miss a

Table 3. Teachers' evaluations of the importance of parental involvement in different tasks ( $n = 355$ ), percentages.

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	Total $n$
Teachers need training in how to relate to parents	9.7	13.8	32.4	27.5	16.6	355
I often feel lonely in relation to home-school cooperation	40.5	25.5	18.4	11.3	4.2	355
I am often insecure as to what is expected of me	26.4	28.4	24.7	17.3	3.1	355
I miss a superior strategy from the school on home-school cooperation	53.3	17.2	14.0	8.0	7.4	355
I do not like to be contacted by the parents after hours	49.9	14.7	18.4	8.5	8.5	355
I often feel discomfort when interacting with parents	73.4	20.4	3.1	2.3	0.8	355
Parents meddle too much in what goes on in school	72.2	19.6	6.5	1.1	0.6	355
Me and the parents do not understand each other	68.9	23.9	5.4	1.4	0.3	355
Parental involvement can increase the efficiency of the teachers	2.0	4.6	13.4	31.9	48.1	355
Parental involvement is important for pupils' achievements	0.8	1.7	1.4	21.5	74.6	355
I think it is very important that lower secondary school parents are involved	0.3	0.3	1.1	11.0	87.3	355
I wish parents were more involved	2.3	2.0	13.7	34.9	47.1	355
I wish parents contacted me more than they do	7.1	8.5	30.1	28.4	25.9	355

common strategy from the school on home–school cooperation, while 70.5% disagree.

The next four assertions in the table have to do with how the teachers experience the actual contact with the parents. The responses show that the overall majority of the teachers experience the interaction in a positive way; more than 90% of the teachers disagree with the assertions that they feel discomfort when interacting with parents, or that they and the parents do not understand each other or that parents meddle too much in what goes on in school. Some of the teachers do, however, have a limit for how accessible they want to be for the parents; 17% agree that they do not like to be contacted by the parents after hours. Still, 64.8% disagree with this assertion. As the dimension ‘importance of cooperation’ shows, teachers report a great appreciation when it comes to the value of home–school cooperation. Almost all of the teachers agree that it is very important that parents are involved. The teachers see the benefits of parental involvement especially when it comes to pupils’ achievements; 21.5% agree and 74.6% agree strongly that parental involvement is important for pupils’ achievements. Many teachers also appreciate that parental involvement can increase the efficiency of teachers; 31.9% agree and 48.1% agree strongly with this assertion. The responses in the last dimension, ‘parents wanted’, show that many teachers would have wanted to see more involvement from the parents. Eighty-two per cent agree that they wish parents were more involved. More than one-half of the parents (54.3%) report that they wish parents would contact them more than they do.

By use of linear regression I have investigated whether there are any differences as to how teachers score on the four dimensions. Interaction effects have been investigated, but have not been found appropriate to include because of lack of significant interactions. The regression analyses in Table 4 show that teachers’ gender or age are

Table 4 Regression analyses of teachers’ scores on four factor variables ( $n = 355$ ).

	Need more support	Discomforting parent encounters	Importance of cooperation	Parents wanted
(Constant)	1.804***	0.677	0.589	0.244
Gender (female = 1, male = 0)	-0.180	-0.054	-0.017	-0.089
Age <sup>a</sup>	0.003	-0.025	0.051	0.093
Years teaching <sup>b</sup>	-0.237*	-0.259*	-0.072	-0.112
School type <sup>c</sup>	-0.378*	0.264	-0.196	-0.130
School size <sup>d</sup>	-0.278**	0.038	-0.281**	0.052
Centrality <sup>e</sup>	-0.103*	0.063	0.074	-0.050
$R^2$	0.077	0.058	0.025	0.014
$F$	4.626***	3.388**	1.424	0.790

Note: All coefficients are unstandardised. <sup>a</sup>1 = under 30 years of age, 2 = 30–39 years of age, 3 = 40–49 years of age, 4 = 50 years and above. <sup>b</sup>1 = less than a year, 2 = one to three years, 3 = four to nine years, 4 = 10 years and more. <sup>c</sup>1 = combined primary and lower secondary school, 0 = lower secondary school. <sup>d</sup>1 = small school (<100 pupils), 2 = medium-sized school (100–299 pupils), 3 = big school (300 pupils and more). <sup>e</sup>0 = municipalities that do not meet the requirements for travel time from urban settlement (least central municipalities), 1 = municipalities that include an urban settlement at level 1 or are within 45 minutes travel from the centre of an urban settlement (less central municipalities), 2 = municipalities that include an urban settlement at Level 2 or are within 60 minutes travel from the centre of an urban settlement (quite central municipalities), 3 = municipalities that include an urban settlement at Level 3 (regional centre) or are within 75 minutes (90 minutes for Oslo) travel from the centre of an urban settlement (central municipalities). \* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

not significant variables for explaining differences in scores in any of the four dimensions investigated. For the dimension 'need more support' I find that how long one has been teaching, school size and whether one works at a combined primary and lower secondary school or a standard lower secondary school have an effect on the score. Teachers who are new to the teaching profession express more of a need for support in home-school cooperation than teachers who are more experienced do. School size has an effect in the sense that teachers working in small schools express more need for support than teachers working in bigger schools. Also, teachers who work in combined schools express less need for support than teachers working in standard lower secondary schools.

For the dimension 'discomforting parent encounters', years of teaching is the only significant variable out of the ones I have investigated. The results show that the longer the teachers have been teaching, the more relaxed they get when it comes to the encounters with the parents and they experience the actual contact with the parents in a more positive way. For the dimension 'importance of home cooperation', school size is the only significant variable out of the ones I investigated. The results show that teachers who work in small schools find home-school cooperation to be more important than teachers who work in bigger schools. For the last dimension, 'parents wanted', none of the variables investigated give a significant result.

### **Results from interviews**

Many of the issues raised in the survey were also problematised in interviews with teachers. Other issues were not touched upon at all in the survey, but became important topics in the interviews. Thus, the two types of data collected through the mixed-methods approach complemented each other in a valuable way, and in the presentation of interview data the main focus is on the topics that stood most out in the interviews.

Consistent with the results from the survey analyses, the teachers who were interviewed claimed that in their view parental involvement and home-school cooperation are very important, as is the information parents can share with teachers. Also consistent with the survey results, I found that when teachers were asked how parents could contribute to their children's schooling, in addition to practical help, aspects connected to the supporting role of parents were emphasised. It was viewed as very important that parents expressed their support towards school and teachers in front of their children. The teachers expected the parents to take their side in school-related questions, even if this was not necessarily their child's side. Parents should withhold from criticising the teachers and school in front of the children. In other words, parents should support the mandate of the school. Several of the teachers stated that it would be very unwise of parents to make derogatory comments about school and teachers in front of their children. The teachers also emphasised how important it is that parents give their children support and encouragement regarding their school work. What teachers did not expect from the parents – and in some cases did not want from the parents – was connected to assistance with homework. The teachers did not expect parents to be too involved in the homework and they would not give the pupils home assignments that they would be dependent on their parents in order to complete. The way the teachers saw it, it was not necessarily academic support that was the most important form of support from parents, and general encouragement could in their view be more significant.

The teachers interviewed did not want parents to have too strong opinions on grading or pedagogical questions. This should be left to the teachers, and the teachers could find it rather annoying if parents tried to 'meddle' into things that in their view were not parents' business and not their field of expertise. By extension, an issue often raised in the interviews was teachers as professionals. Schools in Norway have highly qualified staff, and the teachers we interviewed were very conscious and proud of their role as teachers. This implied that they were conscious of protecting their professional status as teachers and that they demanded respect and authority for being teachers.

The emphasis teachers put on being professionals was communicated more clearly among teachers who related to highly educated and very able parents. These teachers seemed to be more focused on maintaining a certain professional distance from the parents. This meant, for example, that they would not get too personal with the parents. Those who related to less well-educated parents did not seem to have the same need to create or maintain the same professionalism towards the parents. Well-educated parents with a high social status seemed to trigger a need among the teachers to demonstrate authority. In many cases, these parents had more formal education than the teachers, and the teachers seemed to be very aware of that. Some of them felt that parents would sometimes try to invade their sphere and put on an attitude that they knew best.

Teachers who related to less well-educated parents were obviously not in the same vulnerable position when it came to authority, since in most cases their academic superiority over the parents was unquestionable, and the teachers felt that they did not have sufficient contact with the parents. These parents were more reluctant to contact the school, and the teachers wanted the parents to be more active and to contact them more. Teachers who related to highly educated parents felt that they had sufficient contact with the parents, and even wanted them to become less involved in some issues. This aspect also revealed itself in differences in the accessibility of teachers. In Norway, it is not unusual for teachers to give parents their private telephone numbers so that they can be contacted outside school hours. Few parents will in fact avail themselves of this opportunity, but it is interesting how the teachers dealt with this issue. Teachers who related to active, highly educated parents were not particularly keen on having such contact, and did not encourage it, even though most of them said that they did not mind the occasional telephone call in the evening. Teachers who related to less well-educated and less active parents seemed to be more aware of not discouraging contact, since these parents usually were rather reluctant to get in touch.

## **Conclusions**

This study shows that teachers see the involvement of parents as very important, and that they experience the encounters with parents in a positive way. The study also shows that teachers emphasise the supporting role of parents – which means that, in addition to the practical help parents give their children, parents should express their support towards school and teachers and in this way support the mandate of the school.

Even though many parents are satisfied with being supporters, other parents want to engage more actively. As shown by Bæck (2007) and Lareau (2000), this is especially true for well-educated parents from high social backgrounds. Following Bourdieu, these parents share the cultural capital represented by school and teachers. In the school setting they therefore possess the 'correct' or 'desirable' cultural capital.

However, teachers' insistence on parents as supporters is on collision course with the way well-educated parents want to be involved in their children's schooling. More than other parents, the well-educated parents tend to intervene in school when they consider it necessary, they tend to keep an eye on the teacher and they tend to express opinions on pedagogical questions and teaching methods. The school arena can be interpreted through Bourdieu's concept of social field, as an arena for power struggles between teachers on one hand and parents on the other. Among the parents, the strongest challenges come from the active, resourceful and well-educated parents. This study shows that teachers attempt to distance themselves from parents through the insistence on their own professionalism, and that these attempts are more pronounced in relation to well-educated parents. The emphasis teachers put on their own professionalism serves to protect their position as the ones holding power and can be seen as an attempt to ensure teachers continued monopoly within the social field of the school. Teachers' emphasis on their own professionalism is part of their defensive discourse of orthodoxy, and thus serves as a conservation strategy that undermines increased involvement and influence of parents in school. The potential common ground that highly educated middle-class parents and teachers have through a common cultural capital is in fact counteracted by teachers' need to keep parents in their place in order to protect their own position.

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