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Early Childhood Development: Practice and Reflections

Making the road as we go

Parents and professionals as partners managing diversity in early childhood education

Fuusje de Graaff and Anke van Keulen

Bernard van Leer Foundation

Cover: A teacher (left) receiving a child from a parent at De Kleihut childcare centre in Amsterdam, the Netherlands.
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October 2008

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Anke van Keulen is a social pedagogue, trainer, developer and partner in Bureau MUTANT. She is a specialist in pedagogical quality in early childhood centres, diversity and cross-cultural child raising. She played a leading role in designing the Parents and Respect for Diversity research project, and the 'I am me, you are you', 'Partnership between parents and professionals' and 'Persona Dolls' projects. She has a number of national and international publications to her name and was coordinator of the European DECET network (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) from 2004 to 2007.

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Most of all though we must thank the many educators, childcare centres, childcare organisations and others who enthusiastically took part in and helped make the Parents and Diversity project and its associated research the success it has been.

- The authors

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Foreword

It is a privilege to introduce this publication on the many achievements and experiences of the Parents and Diversity project and its associated research. Much of what is reported here was first published in Dutch. This report in English conveys the experiences of this exciting piece of work to a wider international audience. It tells how the project (carried out in the Netherlands by the consultancy and training company Bureau MUTANT) and its research have given many insights into the Dutch childcare system amidst the changing cultural contexts of this particular European country. It also interestingly shows how the research and the project's implementation activities were closely interlinked.

The main author, Fuusje de Graaff, worked closely with Anke van Keulen on the project. The other contributors have also brought valuable perspectives to bear, including Jannet van der Hoek and Trees Pels, who talk about working in partnership with immigrant parents (Chapter 2) and Glenda MacNaughton and Patrick Hughes, who reflect on parents, partnerships and power in Chapter 6.

The translator from the Dutch, Judy Kahn, is to be congratulated for her efforts not only to translate the language but to convey the meaning that the various authors sought to communicate. It has indeed been a rewarding process to work with them to try and fully understand the meaning and significance of the Dutch text so that it can be more widely shared and understood.

The report aims to achieve the following inter-related aims:

- to introduce the research on involving parents in childcare centres and integrating diversity in how the centres are run;
- to set the research in the context of the wider project;
- to link the work of the project and the researchers to the wider field through a brief overview of the literature on parental involvement in childcare in the Netherlands;
- to consider how the awareness of diversity in parental participation can be quantified;
- to demonstrate that there are no standard formulas for establishing pedagogic partnerships with parents in childcare;
- to discuss the relationships between parents and professionals in childcare in terms of emotions and issues of concern;
- to identify what staff and parents talk about when they interact;
- to identify key issues in relation to the power relations between parents and educators; and
- to consider the implications for developing policies within childcare organisations for extending partnerships with parents.

This report covers a lot of ground clearly and succinctly. In particular it enables the reader to better understand the challenges facing parents and staff in their efforts to provide good care and learning opportunities for young children in Dutch childcare centres. The discussion of the literature shows that this work is not an isolated development. The question of how to involve parents more and how to integrate the growing diversity of concerns and backgrounds in early childhood education and care is a major concern of many educators and the authorities that oversee them.

One of the distinguishing features of the Parents and Diversity project that is reported is its attempt to quantify parental participation and the awareness of diversity in terms of the four concepts of 'living together' (sharing information), 'working together', 'thinking together' and 'taking decisions together'. The tool developed by the researchers provides an innovative way of assessing types and degrees of parental participation. The report describes how practitioners (educators), policy makers and researchers need to be and can be encouraged to refine their ideas and the mechanisms for promoting parental participation and their sense of involvement in childcare.

A very important aspect of these relationships is the different levels of power between parents and professionals and between professionals within their own employment hierarchies. The reader is invited to seriously consider the impact of this on the professionals' relationships with parents and the question of whose knowledge is given the greater legitimacy. It remains a challenge for many profes-sionals to recognise that their wider knowledge and experiences with many children need to sit alongside parents' in-depth understanding of their own children and their own cultural values in order to provide the best opportunities for developing each child's potential.

Finally, the report addresses the important issue of how innovative practices that show promise can be fed into the development of improved policies which can then become accepted practice across the board without being confined to narrow prescriptive guidelines. The analogy of 'making the road as we go' is usefully deployed here, identifying the ambiguities involved and suggesting the need to travel along different roads but in the same direction, and emphasising the point that the journey is and remains a shared one with all the different travellers supporting one another.

This report represents one means of taking us further along that road and it is being shared in the spirit of taking our learning forward through reading, discussion and further innovation.

Marion Flett
The Bernard van Leer Foundation
December 2007

Executive summary

This publication reports on the Parents and Diversity project and the findings and impact of its associated research. The project, which ran between 2003 and 2005, focussed on the two complementary subjects of 1) building partnerships between childcare providers and their children's parents and 2) childcare providers meeting the differing needs of the increasingly diverse population of parents and their children.

The project came about with the growing realisation that childcare professionals and parents need to work together more as partners to improve the quality of early childhood care and education. Up to now there has been a large gap with the expert trained educators' and managers' views predominating and parents often being reluctant or not having the opportunity to get involved and add their valuable insights. The building of such partnerships has become particularly important in the Netherlands as new legislation gives parents advisory powers over the provision of childcare.

The project was designed and run to encourage the ownership, adoption and implementation of its innovative approaches and methods. It did not, initially, provide a blueprint for how things ought to be done but offered a framework of types of parental participation and a number of diversity objectives around which the professionals and managers from the participating childcare providers could experiment. This approach saw innovation and implementation happening side-by-side, reinforcing one another.

One important methodology developed by the project was a tool for assessing the extent to which educators are fostering parental participation and respecting parental diversity. This tool gives them a scale against which educators can assess improvements by repeating the exercise and also provides a focus for reflection.

The new approaches and methods developed by the project have helped childcare providers give concrete form to partnerships with parents in their day-to-day contacts and to respecting the diversity among parents such that all parents feel welcome and have a voice.

A review of the literature on parents' involvement in childcare highlighted the importance of the Parents and Diversity project. It found that little attention had been given to promoting partnerships with parents as a social function of childcare. The project has helped fill this gap by putting pedagogic partnership on the agendas of the participating professionals and childcare organisations and also on the agendas of other childcare providers, educational courses, and national groups representing the interests of parents and childcare providers.

This has happened through discussions at national and European symposia and through publications from the implementing organisation, Bureau MUTANT.

The thoughts of outside experts on parental involvement are given to back up the project's theoretical basis. The paper points out how working together with parents is often challenging because educators often fail to acknowledge parents' personal views and insights and see themselves as the sole experts. It explains how critical reflection by educators on parents' perspectives on their children can pave the way for more equitable and fruitful partnerships.

The following three research studies not only brought together and recorded information for the project but also raised questions amongst the many participating educators and parents leading them to further consider and develop their perspectives on parental participation and diversity.

The research on immigrant parents found that the child-rearing styles favoured by immigrant parents vary (for instance, according to level of education and between generations), that child-rearing styles are changing rapidly, and that immigrant parents are making more use of childcare facilities and wish to participate in them on a partnership basis. The main recommendation here is that educators need to put more effort into understanding the perspectives and needs of immigrant parents and not to prejudge their intentions.

The research on the concerns of educators and parents showed contact between them to be generally positive although report meetings often did not result in good contact when they were held to discuss a child's problems. The analysis also found the concerns of parents and educators to sometimes be diametrically opposed, as for example, where educators want to get information from parents to help explain why a child's development is delayed, whilst parents mainly want to know things from educators that enable them to entrust their children to their care. The survey also looked at the specific concerns of immigrant parents and the differences between the concerns of highly educated parents and parents with only a basic education. This analysis helped show where different perspectives and priorities can hinder the formation of social partnerships between professionals and parents.

Further research identified the subjects that parents and educators mostly discuss as the centres' daily programmes, dealing with sick children, nappy changing, playing outside and the balance between stimulating development and offering children a safe environment. Although parents were mostly happy to go along with the centres' policies, on certain matters there were significant differences such as on the balance between stimulating development and safety, with educators emphasising the former and parents the latter. An important outcome of this activity was the realisation that educators need to work with parents more to get them to understand the differences between supervising children in a group at the centres and the more individual kind of child-rearing at home.

Introduction

Fuusje de Graaff

Amidst the rapidly growing provision of childcare in the Netherlands (see Box 1) the extent of parental involvement in this childcare is becoming an issue of increasing importance.

The extent of partnership-working between parents and educators is regarded as an important indicator of quality in childcare and education (Ligtemoet and Zwetsloot 2000). Such partnerships are often lacking, however, as communication between parents and educators is too often a one-way street from educators to parents (Prott and Hautumn 2005). Bringing about a more equal relationship requires educators to adopt new ways of working and new attitudes towards how they interact with parents. Moreover, parents and educators come from diverse social and ethnic backgrounds, have different styles of child-rearing and different concerns and roles – factors that often affect communication (Keulen and Beurden 2002).

Most education professionals are coming to recognise the importance of the new concept of involving parents more in childcare. Over the past few years a major Bernard van Leer Foundation-supported project has made a large contribution towards exploring and piloting how such partnerships can be built and sustained.

Background to the Parents and Diversity project

The Parents and Diversity project ran from 2003 to 2005 and was implemented by the Dutch consultancy and training company Bureau MUTANT[1]. The project supported childcare, pre-school and early education professionals (educators) to work more in partnership with parents. A key aspect of this in the project was to integrate parents' diversity of values, backgrounds, experiences and other aspects into the approach taken by the childcare institutions. The project piloted this new approach in the childcare institutions of five umbrella childcare organisations in the Netherlands.

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[1] Bureau MUTANT (www.mutant.nl and www.decet.org) is an independent training and consultancy firm that supports professionals and institutions in early childhood education, welfare and health care. Since it was established in 1989 it has been providing consultancy services, running training courses and helping partners to introduce and adopt innovative methods. MUTANT's mission is to contribute to equity in society by supporting and empowering professionals and institutions to adopt innovative methods for early childhood education, welfare and health care.

Box 1. Childcare in the Netherlands

The main forms of childcare in the Netherlands for children aged up to 5 years are those provided by childcare centres, registered child minders, playschools and VVE (Vroege en Voorschoolse Educatie – the Dutch organisation for pre-school and early education). This report uses the term 'childcare centres' to refer to all forms of childcare provision.

Levels of participation. Childcare has grown rapidly in the last 15 years. Between 1990 and 2005 the number of childcare places grew ten-fold from around 20,000 to about 200,000 places (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2007). This growth happened later than in many other European countries. It matched the increasing participation of Dutch women in the labour market. Approximately 20% of Dutch children aged 0–4 years now make use of childcare centres while about 60% of all 2- to 3-year-olds attend a playschool (Kampen et al. 2005). The number of places has increased partly because of government efforts to offer early educational programmes for children who have an insufficient command of the Dutch language. These programmes prepare 3-year-olds (and their mothers) for the children's introduction into primary education at age 4, and particularly emphasise language skills.

Organisation and finance. Childcare is not funded by the government in the Netherlands, but is provided by businesses that operate in the free market and are subject to the Childcare Act, 2005. This act regulates the cost and quality of the childcare provided. Parents who are working or studying receive a government grant towards the cost of childcare with the level of these grants dependent on their incomes. In addition, some employers subsidise the costs of childcare.

Quality. Educators are required to have a professional qualification – a four-year tertiary non-university qualification for managers and a two- to three-year secondary vocational education qualification for other staff. Childcare providers are supervised by municipal health services and must take into account municipal policy on special target groups, young people and children with special educational needs. The Childcare Act also lays down that parents have a formal right to advisory powers and can help determine childcare organisations' policies (see Box 2). It also stipulates that every childcare location has to have a parents' committee.

Between 2004 and 2007 the Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research[2] (NIVEL) – an independent research institute – carried out a literature review and action research related to the Parents and Diversity project. This associated research was mainly based on three rounds of interviews-cum-surveys with sample groups of educators and parents carried out in November–December 2004, May–June 2005 and November–December 2005. Called 'Parents and Respect for Diversity', this research is reported on in Chapters 1, 3, 4 and 5 of this publication.

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[2] *The Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research (www.nivel.nl) is an independent research institute based in Utrecht, the Netherlands. The institute carries out research at the national and international level on all aspects of health services for governmental bodies, scientific research organisations and organisations representing health care professionals, consumers and insurance companies. An important basis for this work is NIVEL's responsibilities for maintaining national health databases and information systems.*

The Parents and Diversity project built on Bureau MUTANT's experiences implementing the programme 'Ik ben ik en jij bent jij' (I am me and you are you: Education without bias) (Keulen 2000). This programme, which ran from 2000 to 2003, helped children better understand and value the diversity of ethnic backgrounds, gender, physical ability, ways of living and styles of child-rearing to enable them to better deal with bias, discrimination and bullying.

Educators also have to deal with their children's parents. These parents come from varied backgrounds and cultures and have different styles of child-rearing, norms, values and customs. The current pedagogic policies of many childcare centres have moved over to defining parents as partners in children's education. The implementation of these policies in practice is, however, at an early stage, especially concerning dealing with and making the most of parental diversity.

The Parents and Diversity project also arose out of the increased interest in the Netherlands on improving the quality of childcare. It was becoming apparent that there needed to be more monitoring of quality as the number of childcare centres was mushrooming while research (Vermeer et al. 2005) was reporting that quality was declining.

The OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) in 2006 advised the Dutch government to improve quality with regard to:
- the coherence and coordination of services;
- the understanding of childhood and early childhood education;
- greater support to parents;
- staffing and training.

The Dutch Childcare Act, 2005, says that the quality of childcare is a joint responsibility of the government, providers and parents. The government has established national quality standards under the Act and these have been given concrete form in a covenant between the national associations of childcare providers and parents.

The 2005 Act has given parents new powers (see Box 2). Firstly, government grants for childcare no longer go to the municipalities or other organisations but directly to parents who can then decide to which centre they want to send their children. Secondly, parents have been given advisory powers with childcare organisations obliged to have parents' committees.

So the legislation requires that each childcare institution has a policy (its 'parents policy') for how it interacts with parents and how it involves them in the running of the institution. The 2005 act requires that they involve them officially.

Box 2. The Childcare Act, 2005
Article 60
Section 1. The childcare provider shall, in any case, give parents' committees the opportunity to advise on every proposal with regard to:
- the way in which article 50 [see below] is implemented;
- general matters concerning food and general policy relating to education, safety or health;
- opening times;
- the policy with regard to play and developmental activities for children;
- establishing or changing regulations on the handling of complaints and appointing a person charged with dealing with complaints; and
- changing the cost of childcare.

Section 2. Childcare providers can only deviate from advice as defined in Section 1 if they report in writing, with reasons, that the interests of the childcare centre are incompatible with the advice.
Section 3. Parents' committees are authorised to advise childcare providers, whether they are asked to or not, on the subjects listed above under Section 1.

Article 50 [as referred to in section 1] says:
Childcare providers shall organise childcare in such a way as to provide childcare centres with personnel and equipment of suitable quality, shall provide for a proper assignment of responsibilities and shall pursue a pedagogic policy in such a way that this shall all lead to, or might reasonably be expected to lead to, responsible childcare. To achieve this, childcare providers must, in any case, be seen to devote the proper attention to the number of professional staff in relation to the number of children per age group, the size of the groups, the qualifications of the professional staff and the conditions whereby, and the extent to which, professional staff can be made responsible for the welfare and care of the children.
Responsible childcare is laid out in detail in the policy letter from the concerned ministry to Parliament. This letter also discusses pedagogic planning policy.
Source: www.szw.nl

Parents and childcare institutions still have to come to terms with the challenges and possibilities opened up by the new Act. For example, parents have to apply to the Inland Revenue for the government grants. A survey by the Inland Revenue found that parents with only a basic education were having difficulties filling in the application forms, and this was restricting their access to childcare. In addition, parents have to present themselves to the childcare organisation of their choice as contractual partners, something which some parents have difficulties with.

The new Act has led to childcare institutions professionalising their management and becoming more parent-oriented (Ministry of Education, Culture and Science 2007). Some, however, look on the implementation of the parental advisory powers as a problem, although many believe that it should be beneficial. To fulfil an advisory role, parents need to be made to feel welcome and able to openly say what they think. Professionals have to give clear guidelines, take parents seriously and actively involve them in the centre's pedagogic ideas (Meer and MacDonald 2006).

Commitment to diversity and parents as partners

Previous research had revealed an urgent need to better understand how to work with parents from a diversity of backgrounds. The objective of the Parents and Diversity project was to improve the pedagogic quality of childcare institutions by positively reinforcing the relationship between childcare institutions and parents. The project's point of departure was learning how to deal actively with, and make use of, the diversity of desires, ideas, backgrounds, approaches to child-rearing and other issues among parents and professionals. The project was not aimed at improving children's cognitive abilities or academic success, things that existing programmes were already working on. It was decided that the new project would direct its efforts towards the working practices of childcare professionals and childcare institutions and in particular to reinforce their partnership with parents to benefit both the professionals and parents in their relationships with their children.

The project examined the relationship between professionals and parents from two angles. On the one hand it focused on the direct contact between professionals and parents and how to improve communication between them, and on the other it looked at the centrality of the relationship between parents and childcare institutions in the wider sense of their being partners.

The project examined the relationship between professionals and parents in terms of how to improve the direct contact and communication between them and how to build working partnerships between parents and childcare institutions. The project looked at increasing parent's participation, while taking into account their diversity.

The project therefore focused on the two aspects of 'dealing with diversity' and 'partnership with parents'. For the diversity work the project used the diversity objectives of the European Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training network (DECET, see Box 3). For the partnership objective the project used the 'partnership with parents' model (Ligtemoet and Zwetsloot 2000; Wit 2005; Keulen 2004), which embraces the concepts of 'living together', 'working together', 'thinking together' and 'making decisions together'.

The term 'parental involvement', as commonly used by governments and institutions, was not used in the Parents and Diversity project as it only presents the childcare institutions' viewpoint. Using this form of words would mean that, from the parents' perspective, the partnership would have to be defined as childcare institutions' involvement. To emphasise the mutuality of the relationship the project used the terms 'partnership with parents' and 'parents as partners' as far as possible.

Box 3. DECET and its mission statement
Stakeholder organisations from 10 European countries are involved in the European Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training network (DECET). Its mission statement is as follows: "All children and adults have the right to evolve and to develop in a context where there is equity and respect for diversity. Children, parents and educators have the right to good quality in early childhood education services, free from any form of overt and covert, individual and structural discrimination due to their race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status (in reference to Article 2, UN Convention on the Rights of the Child).

Therefore the DECET Network will empower knowledge, skills and attitudes to enable children and adults to construct together early childhood education services and communities where everyone:
- feels that he/she belongs;
- is empowered to develop the diverse aspects of his/her identity;
- can learn from each other across cultural and other boundaries;
- can participate as active citizens;
- actively addresses bias through open communication and willingness to grow; and
- works together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.

With parents this means empowering them to fully participate in early childhood services and in their communities as democratic citizens. For working with educators this means addressing stereotypical thinking and institutional discrimination."

The project took the objectives of forging partnerships between parents and educators largely in line with Wit (2005) with:
- a pedagogic objective mainly characterised by harmonisation between parents and professionals;
- an organisational objective closely linked with the practical running of childcare centres;
- a democratic objective aimed at giving people a voice, both formally and informally.

The project went ahead assuming that parents and professionals have a different role to play in such partnerships (Prott and Hautumn 2005; Keulen 2006) as their involvement with the children differs. The emotional involvement that parents have with their children can often be contrasted with the professional emotional distance that managers, teachers, and educators should try to maintain from the children under their care. This means that parents and professionals often have differing views on child-rearing and their opinions differ on what the best conditions are for a child to develop. Professionals and parents also often have very different expectations of their relationship with one another or of what they have to offer each other.

The ultimate goal of the project was professionals and parents as equals acting as partners who know and respect one another and achieving more for their children by working together.

In addition, the project clearly distinguished between parents' and professionals' responsibilities as follows:

- *Parents* are responsible for bringing up their children and are in charge of them with the childcare institutions helping parents to bring up their children by letting them know how the institution approaches this same task.
- *Childcare institutions* are responsible and accountable for organising the childcare and education they provide, but with parents having the legal right to give or withhold consent and to give advice in matters that directly affect them or their children.

The project targeted childcare professionals as the main element for making equal and supportive partnerships a reality. The childcare institutions were therefore expected to take the lead in shaping the partnerships. Childcare institutions and parents are not automatically partners but can become so for the time that parents' children attend an institution. Over time parents and professionals get to know one another. How childcare centres organise this contact often determines the quality of partnerships.

The project also realised that the diversity among parents means that partnership takes many forms. Parents are not a homogenous group but have differing concerns, perspectives, social and ethnic backgrounds, and styles of child-rearing and communication (see Chapter 2 for more on this). The ideal situation is that professionals respond intuitively to this diversity and try to do justice to all parents' needs, strengths and limitations. But dealing with diversity with respect demands more than intuition: it also demands a competence that professionals can acquire.

The project understood diversity as differences in ethnicity, gender, culture, religion, education, social and economic class and other aspects (Vandenbroeck 2004). These make up an individual's identity and play an important part in children's socialisation and the integration of new minority communities into a society. This is because all these aspects are related to power mechanisms between minority and majority groups that influence the functioning of children, parents and professionals. The project focussed much of its attention on developing methodologies and training materials to reinforce the competence of professionals to deal with diversity with respect (see Chapter 6 for more on this).

Project organisation and results

Within the project the project coordinators from Bureau MUTANT facilitated the development of new and methodologically sound forms of partnership and were responsible for guiding project activities. The project's practical work took place at various locations and at three levels: professionals working with children, the management level and the policy level (see Chapter 7 for more on this).

The following five umbrella childcare organisations were involved in the project:

- Alcides (later Partou) in Amsterdam (25 childcare centres);
- DAK in The Hague (25 childcare centres);
- Kinderstad in Tilburg (30 childcare centres);
- Korein in Eindhoven (40 childcare centres);
- the nationwide organisation Kinderopvang Humanitas (145 childcare centres).

The innovation process started in each of these organisations in one or two pilot centres (trial locations). Local project leaders were responsible for implementing the project in these centres. The manager and professionals at each pilot centre attended the national workshops and took care of project documentation and reports.

Box 4. Publications of the Parents and Diversity project

Families in beeld (Families in the picture)
W Doeleman, SWP, Amsterdam, 2006
The book and DVD support teachers' daily contacts with parents by illustrating the use of 'the family wall', and by providing an introductory handbook with photos. This material takes into account diversity among parents.

Van botsingen kan je leren (Conflict provides opportunities for learning)
F de Graaff, SWP, Amsterdam, 2006
This book teaches educators to analyse potential sources of conflict with parents, to learn to ask questions openly, to interview parents and, when required, to negotiate.

Onderzoek diversiteit en ouderbetrokkenheid in kindercentra, eindrapport (Research into diversity and parental participation in childcare centres)
F de Graaff, NIVEL, Utrecht, 2006
This research report gives an overview of the literature, explains a tool for assessing how much educators interact with parents, presents the findings of a study on the perspectives of educators and parents from different backgrounds and of a process evaluation.

Partnerschap tussen ouders en beroepskrachten. Handboek voor kindercentra en scholen (Partnership between parents and professionals. Manual for childcare centres and schools)
A. van Keulen, (Ed.), SWP, Amsterdam, 2006
This book offers childcare centre managers an overview of theoretical principles and concepts such as partnership, respect, power relationships, and parental roles. It also offers them practical experiences with different methodologies and supports them in implementing parents policies.

Verjaardagskalender 'In contact met ouders. Het hele jaar door' (Birthday calendar 'In contact with parents throughout the year')
W. Doeleman, Bureau MUTANT, 2005
A birthday calendar with a different suggestion each month for reinforcing contact with parents within the context of diversity.

The project's Advisory Council was made up of experts from universities, development institutes, professional training bodies and parents' associations. The project's national workshops, the activities these generated in the five pilot organisations and several rounds of consultations resulted in new forms of contact being developed with parents and new kinds of parents policies. MUTANT and NIVEL brought out the publications in Box 4 to pass these ideas onto others. MUTANT also, through its involvement in DECET, has been sharing the findings from the project and the research with others working on childcare throughout Europe.

As already explained, after the project's first year, research was carried out by NIVEL to reinforce the theoretical basis of the project against the relevant literature (see Chapter 1), to assess the level of achievement of the concepts (see Chapter 3) and to chart parents' perspectives (see Chapters 4 and 5).

This document gives a detailed account of these developments. The main part of the text is based on papers, most of which have been previously published in Dutch. The original extended Dutch versions of Chapter 1 (The literature on parental involvement), Chapter 3 (Assessing the awareness of diversity) and Chapter 4 (Issues of concern) are in Graaff et al. 2006. In the same way the originals of Chapter 2 (Partnerships with immigrant parents), Chapter 6 (Parents, partnerships and power) and Chapter 7 (Implementing parents' policies) are in Keulen 2006. Chapter 5 (Contacts between educators and parents), which is a result of the NIVEL research, has yet to be published in Dutch.

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Chapter 1: The literature on parental involvement in childcare in the Netherlands

Fuusje de Graaff

In 2004, the Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research (NIVEL) carried out a study of the literature on parental involvement in childcare in the Netherlands to inform the activities of the Parents and Diversity project. This research was entitled 'Parents and Respect for Diversity'.

This review found that the term 'parental participation' was used in many different ways. Loo (2004) distinguished between parental involvement and parental participation. Parental involvement means that parents feel involved with a childcare institution largely because their children are attending it, while parental participation means that parents are actively taking part in its activities. Other publications, however, use the terms 'parental involvement' and 'parental participation' interchangeably. The term 'advisory board' is also used in the literature to indicate that parents have a say in determining the policy of childcare institutions.

Many studies refer to the composite nature of parental involvement in childcare institutions and the diverse roles they can play. The categorisation of the form, content and effects of parental participation in primary education, as used by Smit (1991), also seems applicable to childcare. He demonstrates that parental participation originates from the following three motives:

- *organisational motives,* where parents' involvement is aimed at improving the way in which the education of the children functions – **parents as service providers;**
- *socio-political motives,* where parents' involvement is aimed at democratising education and giving parents a voice in management – **parents as board members;** and
- *pedagogic motives,* where parents' involvement is aimed at improving the quality of the education provided – **parents as co-educators.**

Smit, however, was mainly dealing with parents' involvement in formal institutions in general. As the project had a wider scope, it also identified two additional sets of motives:

- *social motives,* where parental involvement is encouraged or directed for the individual or collective prevention of health problems and socially undesirable situations. This involves types of institutional support provided to, or aimed at, parents and children – although the parents or children may not have asked for

such support (Winter 1995) – **parents as a target group for social prevention and support.**
- *personal motives,* where parents become involved to enhance their own and their children's well-being by increasing their social contacts as members of a community (Dodde in Autar et al. 1996) – **parents as part of a community.**

Distinguishing between these five forms of parent involvement is useful because the different motives bring to light the relevance of other differences between parents. This chapter presents an overview of the literature drawn on by the Parents and Diversity project and categorised by these five motives. This review is mainly of literature concerning parental involvement in professional childcare although, where appropriate, we also looked at the literature on parental involvement in primary education. We examined how this literature deals with parental diversity, and what we could learn from it to develop diversity-sensitive parents policies in childcare institutions.

Parents as service providers

The role of parents as unwaged childcare assistants is mainly described in case studies of playgroups set up by parents in Wageningen in 1964, Amsterdam in 1967, Arnhem in 1968 and Nijmegen in 1969 (Clerkx and Pot 1987). Women students and graduates were involved in caring for their own and others' children, in both a managerial and a practical sense. They made their own decisions about educational policy, choosing an approach that corresponded with their own often rebellious ideas on how to bring up children. Although the reasons they gave for the approaches they chose were mainly child-centred (learning how to socialise with other children), their own needs were also an important factor. These needs included meeting others to overcome a sense of isolation after moving house or having a baby or combining motherhood and work (Clerkx and Pot 1987).

The demand for professional childcare in the Netherlands and other European countries grew after 1970 as more and more women wanted to work after having a baby. However, campaigns for subsidised childcare with paid staff had little success as long as governments and public opinion believed that mothers should care for their own children. It was not until 1990 that the Dutch government decided to subsidise childcare on a large scale (Vedder et al. 1996). Since then, the part played by parents as service providers has decreased.

There have been no recent studies on parental input to playgroups and childcare centres in the Netherlands, and hardly any quantitative studies are available on contact between childcare professionals and parent volunteers. The 1975–95 survey carried out by the Socio-Cultural Planning Bureau on time allocation (Bronneman-Helmers and Taes 1999) investigated the extent of parents' participation, for example, in helping with school trips

and supervising lunch breaks; but most of these questions were focused on the situation in primary schools. The survey showed that parental involvement was mainly viewed as 'help from mothers' with 58% of mothers but only 23% of fathers questioned saying that they helped out occasionally at school.

It is also obvious that mothers who work full-time are not able to help as much as mothers who do not work outside the house or who only work part-time. Only 18% of mothers who worked more than 24 hours a week were found to be active as service providers in contrast to 71% of the part-time working mothers and 56% of the non-working mothers. Bronneman-Helmers and Taes (1999) found no obvious relationship between parental involvement and educational level.

In short: Mothers are more likely than fathers to become actively involved in professional childcare. Mothers have played an important role as service providers since the first childcare centres and playgroups were set up in the 1960s. It is still mainly mothers, particularly those who do not have a full-time job, who are active in this way.

Parents as board members

Parents only played a limited role on the boards of crèches in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Governing boards were generally made up of politically motivated elders and charitably inclined ladies. This changed after the Second World War, and in the 1960s recently graduated students and parents formed cooperatives to provide childcare for their own and other children. As the number of officially recognised childcare centres in the Netherlands increased from 26 in 1965 to 167 in 1975 (Clerkx and Pot 1987) these organisations became larger and more professional with the work being increasingly carried out by professionals with recognised qualifications. Greater demands were also made of the management, partly because of the advent of company childcare centres in the 1980s, the introduction of quality assurance in the 1990s and the transition to market-controlled types of operation over the past decade. These trends resulted in a sharp decrease in the number of parents serving as board members.

Research into parental involvement in primary schools shows that parents have little interest in managing schools' day-to-day affairs. In 1980, 48% of parents questioned by the Socio-Cultural Council (SCR) thought that parents should have more influence, compared to 1992 when the proportion had fallen to 33% (Bronneman-Helmers and Taes 1999). A survey by Smit and Claessen (cited in Bronneman-Helmers and Taes 1999) found that parents were more willing to help with reading in class or with school trips than acting as board members.

Specific pedagogic convictions. A few parents have remained influential on school boards often serving for many years. There have also been parents who have taken the initiative to set up childcare institutions and schools that reflect their own distinctive ideas on how children should be brought up and educated. Such parents have set up anti-authoritarian childcare centres and schools dedicated to the principles of Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner. A few Iederwijs schools have been established in the Netherlands, where parents act as board members, service providers and co-parents. Here, parents' specific pedagogic convictions are the main motive for them becoming active board members.

Religious motives also play a role. Nowadays more parents are active as board members in Protestant schools than in non-denominational or Catholic schools (Smit 1991). Muslims and Hindus are also setting up their own schools. The number has grown steadily since the first Muslim school was founded in the Netherlands in 1995. The preference of immigrants for their own type of education is based on pedagogic as well as religious motives. Smit et al. (2005) found that a large majority of parents surveyed in Rotterdam wanted more influence on the way in which teachers dealt with norms, values and religion. Turkish, Antillean and Somali parents believed that schools were not strict enough in dealing with children's unacceptable behaviour.

Also, **the socioeconomic position** of parents seems to influence their readiness to become board members (Klaassen et al. 1998) with the members of school advisory boards mainly being better-educated parents. However, such parents usually do not share the same pedagogic goals as less well-educated parents. For example, parents with a lower level of education believe that schools ought to give children religious instruction and sex education, while highly educated parents tend to think that parents should be responsible for this. Better educated parents also tend to think that schools should teach children to take other people's feelings into account, while parents with a lower level of education are more inclined to believe that this is the parents' responsibility (Bronneman-Helmers and Taes 1999).

To sum up: Only a limited number of parents serve as board members, and only a few of these influence centres' educational approaches. The parents who do act as board members, or who initiate improvements in facilities, tend to be those who have definite opinions or who represent specific groups of parents.

Parents as co-educators

In the 19th Century the types of childcare and education provided to children was related to parents' socioeconomic status. Children from well-off families were taught at home by governesses, children from middle-income families were educated in schools for positions

in society and poor people's children learned a little reading and writing at Sunday schools (Dodde referred to in Autar et al. 1996). When the upper classes concerned themselves with the fate of 'poor children', as they did in Amsterdam in 1872, for example, they sent them to institutions for the poor in order to protect the city from what they saw as the unhygienic dens of misery (Clerkx and Pot 1987).

In recent times, researchers have found that a child's performance at school is often related to their parents' socioeconomic position with children from the lower social classes tending to perform less well (Jongbluth in Autar et al. 1996). Also, children from single-parent families have statistically been found to often perform less well in school (Dronkers cited in Bronneman-Helmers 1993).

With working mothers' children, children whose mothers do unskilled work generally tend to be poorer performers at school than the children of mothers who run small businesses or are farmers' wives. The ethnic origin of children also seems to be relevant with the children of parents of immigrant origin tending to perform less well than the children of non-immigrant parents (Tesser et al. 1996; Tesser and Veenman 1997). However, religious affiliation has not been found to play a significant role in children's performance. Dijkstra (cited in Bronneman-Helmers 1993) was unable to prove his hypothesis that the children of strictly observant Protestants performed better at school.

Different approaches to child rearing have been shown to influence children's performance at school. Leseman et al. (1995) found that families' cultural and pedagogic characteristics affected small children's cognitive skills. He concluded that the social, emotional and cognitively significant features of parent–child interactions and the language spoken at home were major predictors of school performance (Leseman et al. 1995). Recent research into child-rearing in the Netherlands (Bouwmeester et al. 1998; Distelbrink 1998; Geense and Pels 1998; Nijsten 1998; Pels 1998; Rispens et al. 1996) shows that the child-rearing objectives of Turkish, Moroccan and Hindustani parents differ significantly from non-immigrant parents; but that the differences lessen the longer immigrants are in their new country. The differences included differing views on the relative importance of the interests of the individual versus the interests of the group, the use of physical punishment and the level of autonomy given to children. Thus, individual development is usually given less importance in immigrant families compared to most non-immigrant families, while more importance is attached to behaviour within social and other groups. The exception here is that families from the Antilles and Surinam (often single-parent families) generally attach more importance to autonomy for both boys and girls than do non-immigrant families. In addition, all immigrant families tend to impose discipline through physical punishment, and, after puberty, girls tend to be subjected to more restrictions than boys.

An important question to consider here is how parents' differing child-rearing practices affect the cooperation between parents and childcare educators? This question was asked by Tavecchio et al. (1996). Their survey of 43 couples and the same number of professionals from 30 childcare centres found that parents and professionals both made autonomy the main objective of child-rearing, followed by promoting social responsibility, conformity and, finally, academic performance. However, within these criteria, parents appeared to assign greater importance to autonomy and performance, while professionals gave more weight to conformity and social responsibility. The study also established that:

- the well-being of children was lower if the type of child-rearing practised by professionals was less supportive than that of the parents; while
- the level of well-being was higher when parents and professionals differed little in their interpretation of authority and when there was relatively good communication between the two groups.

Surprisingly, the quality of communication between parents and teachers was found to have no significant relationship with the difference in methods of child-rearing; and the quality of childcare was not related to the quality of communication between parents and the educators.

In brief: Recent surveys on the differences between parents as co-educators have no longer concentrated on the old social differences such as those between town and country, class and social position. Current research instead looks at the new social distinctions including between working and non-working mothers, immigrants and non-immigrants, Muslims and non-Muslims, and their different approaches to child-rearing. However, most such research mainly focusses on investigating statistical correlations between the various groups and their children's academic results with little attention devoted to the question of the quality of educational institutions' contacts with all types of parents.

Clearly qualitative studies on child-rearing in immigrant families in the Netherlands are important to reveal the varying approaches to child-rearing of non-immigrant and immigrant parents. Such research can help educators better understand and take into account the diversity of parents' views on pedagogic issues and to facilitate agreement and understanding between educators and parents.

Parents as a target group for 'social prevention' and support

Swaan (1988) and MacNaughton (2006) say that an important role of schools and other educational and care institutions is to define as problematic people who do not conform to bourgeois norms, and then to try and 'civilise' them with therapy and educational sup-

port. Vandenbroeck (2004) illustrates this in his research into the motives for setting up the first childcare centres in Belgium. One of the most important reasons was to reduce child mortality. Official documents attributed child mortality not to the miserable living conditions of poor working-class families, but to working mothers' ignorance and neglect. This definition of the problem gave the authorities the remit to 'normalise' the children of such working mothers in childcare centres.

Clerkx and Pot (1987) report how childcare centres were established in the Netherlands at the end of the 19th Century. The centre managers insisted that their facilities should be hygienic and be run to provide an example to parents on child-raising. Parents were not involved in the running of these centres and were not allowed into the classrooms but were just expected to deliver their children every morning 'cleanly dressed and washed'. This approach did not change until the 1960s. At that time the demand for childcare greatly increased and a growing number of the parents were no longer from the poorest classes. At this time the patronising attitude to parents began to wane.

Winter (1995) contends that the care and education of children in the past was not only a matter of promoting hygiene and preventing disease but also of preventing social disorder through providing 'spiritual edification'. In this way parents were a target group for 'social prevention'. The view in the past was that children should develop a personality which would enable them to control their own emotions and behaviour and to be able to attune them to the constantly changing situation around them (Elias cited in Winter 1995). If parents were unable to pass these skills on to their children, then the government was expected to take steps to 'steer' such parents by means of collective and individual control and support.

Immediately after the Second World War, this type of intervention was allied to existing medical facilities (Winter 1995). The living conditions of many workers improved while advances in technology led to the expectation of higher medical standards. Improvements in medicine and psychology enabled developmental problems – in hearing, sight, language and personality – to be recognised at an early stage and, in some cases treated.
It was not only health clinics that were responsible for identifying such children – teachers, childcare centre assistants and parents were also expected to report the first signs of anything 'wrong' with a child (Winter 1986).

The general focus in the post-war years on developmental problems in children gave way in the mid-1970s to a focus on children from 'problem areas' in the big cities. The risk was no longer defined in medical but in pedagogic terms. Children in 'problem areas' were seen as having a greater chance of suffering from physical abuse, poor language skills and criminality – and so here it was felt that 'social prevention' programmes were needed.

But, though the terminology seems to indicate that problems in the area were to be dealt with collectively, the policy actually seems to have targeted individual parents who were instructed in the privacy of their homes on how to properly raise children (Vandenbroeck 2004; Winter 1995). These 'compensation programmes' were tested in the USA in schemes such as Head Start and High Scope, where very young children, particularly from immigrant families, were 'tutored' in their homes, with the intention of preventing them from becoming school dropouts, as well as to defuse racial unrest (Singer 1993).

In the Netherlands in recent times 'social prevention' has been aimed at in compensation programmes where childcare professionals tutor underprivileged children to ease their transition to primary school and act as advisors to parents. This led to the relationship between childcare centre assistants and parents undergoing a radical change. While communication between parents and professionals was supposed, on the one hand, to lead to a better understanding between the two parties, with both viewed as competent child-rearers, the professionals were, at the same time, being asked to tutor the parents in the Dutch language and on responsible parenthood and Dutch norms and values. This obviously led to unequal relationships.

Also, many of the childcare centre assistants and teachers had little idea of the child-rearing practices of the targeted and so-called at-risk groups. A survey into child-rearing in Dutch, Moroccan, Turkish, Chinese and Surinam Creole families (Pels 1998 and 2000) found that all of the parents supported their children to meet the demands made on them by Dutch society, which is characterised by progressive individualisation and technological change. It also identified differences in how they acted and what they needed in the way of support; differences which were not only defined by parents' level of social capital, but also by the context of their child-rearing situations (Pels 1998 and 2000).

In summary: Almost all the research on how family cultures can influence the well-being of children have assumed that parents whose children 'are not doing well' are failing in some respect. In the 19th Century 'needy' parents were targeted as many of their children died due to unhygienic living conditions while 'spiritual edification' was seen as necessary.

In the second half of the 20th Century the focus shifted to addressing children's developmental problems. In the 1990s the focus shifted to immigrants and the residents of problem areas – both defined as at-risk groups. This constantly shifting focus of social interventions to new at-risk groups and the rapid economic change means that it has been difficult to assess the effects of these interventions.

Parents and professionals as part of a social community

In recent years, the role of parents as competent citizens has come to the fore (Autar et al. 1996; Bronneman-Helmers 1993; Vogels 2002; Herweijer and Vogels 2004; Smit 1991; Smit et al. 1999; Smit and Doesborgh 2001; Smit et al. 2005). But only Bouwer and Vedder (1995) and Klaassen et al. (1998) have devoted any attention in their research to the relationship between parents and teachers as citizens. The social contacts between parents and childcare centres and pre-schools has been researched by a number of foreign organisations which, with the support of the Bernard van Leer Foundation, have published their findings as follows.

Bilingual discussions. Şikcan (2003, 2004), describes, how bilingual discussion groups in Berlin positively affected participation in childcare centres by Turkish parents. Previously, parents had only been invited along for a talk when there had been problems with their children. The language barrier meant it had often been impossible at these meetings for Turkish parents to discuss the differences between approaches to child-rearing at home and at the childcare centre. This led to professionals developing a negative impression of these parents. This problem disappeared when bilingual discussion groups were formed with the Turkish parents subsequently becoming willing to help with childcare centre activities.

Induction sessions. Brantz and Bruggeman (2005) tell how the staff of a kriebelhuis early education institution in Ghent ran induction sessions for new parents and gave mothers and children a three-day-long transitional period to adjust to the new situation. Other induction activities included a summer cafe run on the last Friday of every month to encourage interaction between staff and parents.

Parental contributions. Peeters (2005) describes how in France's more than 2000 *crèches parentales* (childcare centres) all parents have a definite contribution to make. This includes helping with the childcare once every few weeks or recounting their own stories to the children and other parents. These centres form a bridge between family life and society and, consequently, provide forums for parents to share their experiences of parenthood.

Intensive contacts. Draper and Duffy (cited in Pugh et al. 1987) depict the experiences at the Thomas Coram Early Excellence Centre in London. This centre emphasises the building of close cooperation between childcare centre educators and parents. New parents are encouraged to look around the centre and take part in an introductory programme where the educators visit the family home and interview parents on the child's character and development. The centre also encourages parents to come and join their children in the classes at first. There are usually enough staff present when the children are brought in or taken home for parents to be able to chat with them about their children.

These intensive contacts enable educators and parents to learn about any different views they may have on what is good for the child.

Home visits. Coneta (2002) describes the experiences of professionals, parents and the coordinators of parental participation in childcare centres in Ireland. The coordinators visit parents at home, organise meetings and training sessions for the parents and make sure that a space is set aside – a parents' room – for parents to meet one another.

Brooker (2002) gives concrete examples of the experiences of the staff of All Saints Primary in London. It was found that English parents could easily understand and appreciate what was being taught to their children and usually openly discussed any problems they were having at home with their children and how to mesh learning activities at home with those at school. In contrast, most Bengali parents never revealed anything about their home lives and so teachers assumed they were not interested.

Brooker identified certain obstacles that prevented the latter kind of parents from participating in pre-schools. These included financial problems, the fear that the children, like their parents, would have to live in poverty, poor health, an uncertain position in the labour market, bad housing and limited opportunities for playing outside. Cultural factors also played a role with Bengali parents not knowing what was expected of them (such as having to hand in library books) and the teachers not knowing what was going on in the Bengali families. To cap it all the teachers' assessments of the Bengali families as uninterested created an unbridgeable gulf.

Parent–teacher communication. Bouwer and Vedder (1995) wanted their research to promote intercultural understanding in childcare centres and said that stimulating parent involvement is important for this. The authors met educators at the childcare centres who felt that they were powerless in their contacts with parents. They said that this had not been part of their training and they tended not to listen to parents. Also, some parents tended to go over the educators to the head of the centre. In many of the centres there was no information for parents on the centre's pedagogical approach or any way of getting parents to talk about what they wanted or about their child-rearing practices. Educators thus knew little about children's home situations.

A survey of six primary schools by Klaassen et al. (1998) looked at the degree of pedagogic synchronisation between parents and teachers. They concluded that communication between parents and teachers needed improving to counteract stereotypical views of each other. The parents and teachers made a number of practical suggestions, including more frequent information evenings for each class's parents, discussion evenings just for parents,

undertaking activities in school with parents to remove any negative memories they might have of their own schooling, appointing parents as points of contact and teachers making home visits.

In short: The literature on parents and professionals as part of a community is limited mainly to case studies. These show that envisioning parents as part of a community offers an excellent opportunity to more clearly understand the diverse needs and perspectives of the many different kinds of parents. For educators, listening to parents more, dealing with language barriers, improving communication, counteracting stereotypes, taking concrete action and learning about family situations seem to be the key aspects for overcoming problems.

Developing diversity-sensitive parents policies in childcare centres

This review of the literature gives many insights into developing more diversity-sensitive childcare policies in the Netherlands. First, it shows that little empirical research has been done into the functioning of professional childcare in the Netherlands (Tavecchio and Fukkink 2005). The many studies in the educational sphere have mainly concentrated on the effect of professional childcare on children's academic achievements, something that was not a major concern of the Parents and Diversity project. In addition, it appears that the research into parental involvement in childcare has not systematically examined diversity among parents. The first large-scale study of the quality of professional childcare (Tavecchio et al. 1996) gave little attention to how much and how far parents and teachers worked together to run centres. The literature does not allow for the drawing of any conclusions about whether or not good communication between teachers and parents enhances the quality of childcare or whether this depends on the child-rearing theories of parents and teachers.

Second, case studies from other European countries show that the approach used in the Parents and Diversity project was very promising for integrating diversity into childcare provision. The point here is that if professionals learn to see parents as citizens and use this insight for further exploring diversity among 'their' parents, then this will counteract any negative stereotypes they may have about certain groups of parents.

Third, the literature highlights the limitations of the project's approach. The project, by emphasising the importance of professionals and parents 'living together' (sharing information), 'working together', 'thinking together' and 'taking decisions together' and the social inclusion of parents in childcare centre communities, did not give enough attention to the functional differences between parents and professionals.

Fourth, it seems that the diversity of parents is very relevant to their involvement in and their performance of the many roles they can take on in the childcare centres. In the case of parents as service providers at the centres, the sex of the parent and the degree to which mothers work full-time are relevant. More attention needs paying to fathers and full-time working mothers to involve them more.

The few parents who become board members usually do so because of their strong views on education or the managerial skills they have by virtue of being better-off. Other types of parents should be encouraged to join to give more representative boards.

The level of parental involvement as co-educators is closely linked to parents' socio-economic status, although other aspects, such as single-parenthood, ethnic origins and methods of child-rearing are also influential. Professionals must take such differences into account and continually check whether they can be or are being managed to encourage parental participation.

Many parents do not realise that they are often a target group for their government's social policies. Nor do professionals always realise that they are being used to serve the purposes of society. This might be to improve hygiene or to bring about spiritual edification, to identify children's developmental problems at an early stage or to compensate for social and educational deprivation. These social objectives should be explicitly spelled out to encourage 'living together', 'working together', 'thinking together' and 'taking decisions together' by parents and professionals.

In brief: The Parents and Diversity project has filled a gap by focusing on the social inclusion of parents in childcare centres. Subsequent projects should take into account the fact that differing interests and roles determine the relationship between parents and educators. There is also a clear need for more research to look into the wide diversity among parents.

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Chapter 2: Partnerships with immigrant parents – no standard formulas

Jannet van der Hoek and Trees Pels[3]

The forging of pedagogic partnerships between educators and parents is becoming an increasingly popular concept in the education and care of young children. Parents, informal childcare networks and professional bodies are busily trying to find ways of putting this into practice. This chapter examines how this relates to the growing ethnic and cultural diversity among parents in Dutch society. Immigration from other societies is adding often unforeseen complications to the crucial issue of improving communication and harmonisation between parents and educators. This chapter discusses the main issues and indicates what may be important to open up the necessary space for immigrant parents.

Partnership – the gradual road to acceptance

Most Dutch parents now regard it as normal to share the education and upbringing of their children with childcare professionals. However, the differences in the way that formal childcare is used, for example, by those parents with a higher education and those without, are considerable. This shows that views on childcare are not uniform even amongst parents of Dutch origin.

For many immigrant parents childcare is traditionally the preserve of parents and their extended networks of family members and neighbours. This is gradually changing with the increasing use of childcare facilities by immigrant parents (SCP/WODC/CBS 2005), and professional childcare has now become a high priority for some of them.

The realisation that pre-school and early education, as well as professional childcare, can be important in preparing children for school is filtering through especially to the younger generation of immigrant parents. As with non-immigrant parents, there is considerable variation in the way that immigrant parents use childcare facilities both between

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and within the immigrant groups. In this chapter, we outline some of the developments among immigrant parents including the growing number of working women from immigrant backgrounds and the rise of a second generation of immigrant origin parents born and educated in the Netherlands.

More working women

Immigrant women are increasingly working outside the home, although their participation in the labour market differs from group to group (Table 1).

Table 1. Women from immigrant groups participating in the labour market, 2003–2004

National/ethnic group	Percentage in the labour market
Surinamese	58%
Dutch	56%
Antillean	46%
From the Balkans (ex-Yugoslavia)	30–40%
Iranian	30–40%
Turkish	33%
Moroccan	28%
Afghan	10%
Somali	9%

Source: SCP/WODC/CBS 2005

Table 1 shows that it was women of Surinamese origin who most frequently worked outside the home while Somali women were the least likely to. Surinamese women were also more likely to work full-time while Turkish and Moroccan women more often had part-time jobs, which is more in accord with the Dutch model for working mothers. This indicates that cultural concepts of the role of women are partly responsible for the low level of participation of women from some groups in the labour market, although the general economic situation is also influential. Up to 2001, the participation of immigrant women in the labour market grew. Then the economy weakened and this growth stopped. This meant that even relatively highly educated refugee women who had recently arrived in the Netherlands were finding it difficult to get work.

Second generation parents

Although first-generation immigrant families are still in the majority, the number of second-generation families is growing. This generation has a different way of relating to and bringing up their children.

The second generation of Turkish and Moroccan mothers appear to be preparing their small children better for primary school than their own mothers did for them (Distelbrink and Pels 2000; Kurvers and Lemmens 1992). Contributing factors are that the families tend to be smaller, the children have more toys and they are read to more often. The reason for the increased focus on education is that the mothers, who were born in the Netherlands, tend to be better educated and better informed about the Dutch education system. Women of the intermediate generation, who grew up partly in the Netherlands, and the young women who came to the Netherlands to marry, are often less well educated. This is particularly true of Moroccans who come to the Netherlands to marry. Although it might be expected that they would be less concerned with stimulating the development of their children, it has been observed that they differ widely in their readiness to accept information about education (Jonkers 2003).

We can therefore see that there are differences between the generations of immigrants as well as between mothers depending on their levels of education. Differences like these have also been observed in Dutch families with parents with higher levels of education tending to be more focused on stimulating their children's development (Groenendaal 1987; Leseman et al. 1995).

Changing child-rearing practices

Professionals working in childcare and education who want to develop a pedagogic partnership with immigrant parents are noticing significant differences not just between immigrant groups, but also between individual parents. This sub-cultural diversity finds expression in all the aspects of bringing up children including the way that parents see their children, what they understand mothers' and fathers' roles to be, which other people parents allow to function as carers, the role parents assign to schools, and to what degree and in what way they pass on religion to their children. Recent research has greatly increased the knowledge about the cultural dynamics at play in bringing up children (Distelbrink 1998; Distelbrink et al. 2005; Nijsten 1998; Pels 1998; Pels and Gruijter 2005; and for an overview see Hoek 2006). We present a few examples here.

Changing patterns of authority

In immigrant families, there is currently a perceptible and rapid transition from a strictly authoritarian form of upbringing, with children expected to unquestioningly accept their parents' views, to a more 'authoritative' form, where parents aim to convince their children through dialogue and communication. This transition from 'management by command' to 'management by negotiation' took place in Dutch families in the 1950s and 1960s and, according to immigrant parents, is also now happening in their countries of origin. Management by command is characterised by an emphasis on the direct external control of children. Parents control them with strict instructions and injunctions followed by sanctions when they do not obey. People in the immediate vicinity also play an important

part in imposing conformity by exercising social control with such people seen by parents as allies in bringing up their children. In families practising management by command, parents focus on fostering internal control within their children and bring them up to be self-directing. They give their children more freedom of movement and discussion, confident that they will be sufficiently responsible to steer their own courses. These parents are less interested in social control from outside the family.

Although immigrant parents still tend to be inclined towards a more authoritarian form of upbringing, significant changes are taking place and hybrid forms of upbringing are developing in which authoritarian and more 'authoritative' approaches go hand-in-hand. At the same time, continuity remains an important aspect. In general, parents still attach a great deal of importance to values like respect and to passing on their religion and mother tongues to their children. In order to safeguard this continuity, parents often look for support from outside the home, for example, from clubs and associations which organise lessons for children in their own language, culture and religion.

These changes are more apparent amongst some kinds of parents than amongst others. Young immigrant parents, who are usually better educated than their parents, see themselves as being less strict and authoritarian than their own parents, and as attaching greater importance to forging a personal bond with their children through more open relationships. At the same time, the relationships within immigrant families are still largely focused on the family collective and interdependence.

As child-rearing at home is mainly the job of mothers, they are the ones who are mostly the pioneers in developing more open family relationships. But this does not mean that they are always aware how to go about this. They often grapple with the question of how to give their children more space without this leading to a loss of respect for parental authority and to their children's moral decline. This often generates a great deal of tension (Pels 1997). This, in turn, gives rise to a growing desire to exchange information with other (Dutch) mothers and also, to a lesser degree, with experts (Schreurs and Pels 1997; Pels and Distelbrink 2000).

Fathers becoming more involved

A survey of Moroccan, Surinamese-Creole and Chinese fathers in the Netherlands found that most of them wanted to bring up their children differently to how they themselves were brought up (Distelbrink et al. 2005). As with the mothers, generation and level of education were the variables which led to sub-cultural differences. These variables are also responsible for differences in attitudes to upbringing among non-immigrant fathers. Immigrant fathers' desire for a different approach is part of the recent general trend among young fathers to be more involved in their children's upbringing.

Most of the fathers in Distelbrink's survey mainly attributed the different way in which they were bringing up their children to the fact that life in the Netherlands is different to the often difficult circumstances in which they grew up. In almost all cases, they had a hierarchical relationship with their fathers and were brought up strictly. These new fathers said they did not want the same distant relationship with their own children; but wanted to give them more attention and more freedom; they wanted to talk with them more openly and not to be so strict with them when they 'broke the rules'. On the other hand, these fathers said that they also wanted to pass on traditional values, such as respect for parents and behaving properly around adults. The total picture is a mixture of tradition and new values, a multicultural upbringing, partly Dutch and partly from their own cultural background.

However, most fathers admitted that this does not always work in reality. Barriers to this happening include Chinese fathers working long hours in their restaurants, some Creole fathers not living with their children and the average Moroccan father being very insistent on his role as a breadwinner. There was however a large variation in the trend amongst Moroccan fathers. On the one hand this group had the largest percentage of fathers who said they found the Dutch style of child-rearing problematic while, on the other, this group included a relatively large number of fathers who most strongly resembled the average non-immigrant father of the same age and educational level in their style of child-rearing.

A higher priority for education

In recent years immigrant parents have become more involved in their children's education and become more open about discussing it. Most parents aspire for their children to take higher education. Parental support mainly involves pressuring their children to achieve and monitoring their homework and progress at school. Uneducated parents are unable to offer much educational support and guidance not only because of their lack of knowledge but also because they have a great reverence for teachers' authority and expertise. The children of such parents, therefore, are much more left to their own devices although they often get help from other family members such as older brothers and sisters and from family networks.

Older children often play an important role in increasing the involvement of first-generation mothers as they spur them on to learn Dutch, to take education classes and to become more involved in the education of their younger children. Those mothers who have attended school want to prepare their children better and support them in their passage through the educational system. However, they are often unsure about what is expected of them (Hoek 1994; Pels and Distelbrink 2000).

One indication of the changes that have taken place is the increased participation of adolescent girls in education and their greater freedom of movement – particularly true of girls from Islamic backgrounds. In the early years of the first wave of Moroccan and Turkish immigration, quite a few parents resisted the Netherlands' predominantly co-educational system and sent their daughters to girls-only schools, meaning in the Dutch system that they attended lower vocational training. Some girls from immigrant families did not attend secondary school at all. These days, the majority of parents acknowledge the importance of education for their daughters.

However, amongst immigrant families, marriage and motherhood remain the paramount purpose in bringing up girls and such girls are under considerable pressure to conform to values like modesty. Girls who comply with the prevailing codes of behaviour win the confidence of their parents and so create more freedom for themselves for school and work. But these pressures may bring girls into socio-emotional conflicts; particularly the case for more highly educated girls.

Another trend has been the increasing number of immigrant families who put their small children into early and pre-school education. Since 1996, more and more immigrant children have been going to playgroups and making use of pre- and after-school childcare programmes. In 2002, 51% of Turkish children and 41% of Moroccan children were attending these types of programmes.

The increase in the number of immigrant children using playschools has been even larger. In 2002, nearly three-quarters of all Turkish children (an increase from 46% in 1996) and half of the Moroccan children (an increase from 25% in 1996) were attending playschools. The number of Surinamese and Antillean children using these facilities did not, however, increase remaining at 60% over the same period.

For their children to play with children of the same age was the reason most mothers gave for sending their children to pre-school and early education groups – the same reason given by most Dutch mothers. Other important reasons mentioned by immigrant mothers were to prepare their children for primary school and to learn Dutch (SCP/WODC/CBS 2005; see also Nijsten 1998; Pels 1998).

Greater demand for professional support

In their countries of origin, immigrant parents were used to sharing the upbringing of their children with older children, grandparents and their informal networks of relations, friends and neighbours. But immigration has greatly reduced this as they no longer have so many relations around and such neighbourhoods do not exist in the Netherlands. First-generation parents viewed professional childcare as a somewhat alien concept and

were surprised at the number of professional bodies formally involved in child-rearing in the Netherlands. Their countries of origin do not have such wide-ranging systems of professional childcare and educational support. So it has been mainly the younger generation who have accepted and are making use of professional childcare. They are more focused on their nuclear families and want to extricate themselves from the informal extended family ties that can be restricting.

Research by Driessen et al. (2003) found few differences between Dutch, Surinamese/Antillean, Turkish and Moroccan parents in the extent to which parents said they experienced problems with child-rearing. In all five groups, the same small percentage (3%) said they found child-rearing difficult. Between a quarter and a third said they found child-rearing 'easy'. Although most of the parents – about 75% across the ethnic and national backgrounds – said that problems with child-rearing were 'normal', they said that this did not mean that they did not want or need help with bringing up their children. Immigrant parents mainly expected this kind of help from teachers at school. In addition to help with questions concerning their children's development at school, parents also said they expected advice from teachers on child-rearing, although this differed greatly between the groups of parents surveyed.

Although these parental expectations appear to correspond with the way that educators at childcare centres interpret their responsibilities, this is not the way that teachers at primary schools see their jobs. Klaassen and Leeferink (1998) and Veugelers and Kat (1998) researched the pedagogic relation between family and school and concluded that teachers are actually more inclined to expect help from parents (see also Dieleman 2000). Neither party seemed to know much about the other's pedagogic beliefs and communication was mainly limited to teachers informing parents about the school's objectives and ways of working.

The gap between supply and demand

Research has given a number of examples of the one-sided flow of information from educators to parents failing to meet parents' needs (Mak and Pels 2005; Schreurs and Pels 1997; Van Dijke et al. 1994; Veen and Gelauff-Hanson 1994). This is true with both immigrant and Dutch parents and is therefore an error in the system. Whether it is the child healthcare centre, the Regional Institute for Mental Welfare (RIAGG) or the Child Protection Agency, there tends to be little communication with parents about the pedagogic methods professionals use and certainly not about parents' own views. This one-way traffic predominates and the objectives and methods on offer are largely decided unilaterally. This can give rise to considerable feelings of negativity among parents.

"I would like more information, but I don't want to be bothered by social workers and such-like people. I want to decide for myself what I do with the information." (Moroccan father, only basic education, 1st-generation immigrant, in Pels [2005])

The emphasis of parental support programmes is often on increasing the knowledge and skills of parents to further the development of their children. This, in turn, is based on a view of child development determined from above. There is very little in the way of help for parents for the issues and problems they themselves often struggle with. For example, immigrant parents rarely find that social workers help them to find the balance between their traditional ways and the many differing demands of the new society (Pels 2004).

Even in standard educational settings, such as childcare centres, the pedagogic dialogue with parents does not appear to be as good as it should be (Dijke et al. 1994). For example, parents report that they have no say in pedagogic policy such as the content of the daily programme. Surveys carried out at childcare centres with an 'intercultural' approach have confirmed this. Generally, discussions are held with parents about caring for their children, but rarely is there any attempt at harmonising the home/school situation. Parents are seldom, if ever, involved in decisions on intercultural objectives and methods. The researchers say that many opportunities for educators and parents to help one another are being missed (Vedder et al. 1996).

Dealing with cultural and sub-cultural diversity

We have described some developments which are making immigrant parents more heterogeneous leading to an increased variety of approaches to child-rearing amongst them. The origins of this diversity are to be found not only in socioeconomic developments, but also in the socio-cultural changes taking place within the ethnic minorities. Hence there are now differences in child-rearing practices and in the readiness to accept help between the older and the younger generations of immigrants. The differences in parents' levels of education have also led to a growing sub-cultural diversity within the groups. However, in spite of the potential for entering into a pedagogic partnership with immigrant parents, professional settings for childcare and education still fail to provide an open and flexible response to parents on matters of child-rearing.

This conclusion gives rise to a number of important focal points for the provision of childcare in the Netherlands.

- Educational and childcare settings are becoming accepted gateways for immigrant parents to access information, for sharing experiences of child-rearing and for other activities in support of their families.

- Professionals in childcare facilities should not make stereotypical assumptions about culturally determined habits and customs. The variety and diversity within groups of immigrants and the cultural dynamics are too large to allow for working only within standard views.
- It is essential that communication and the exchange of pedagogic ideas be improved between educators and immigrant parents. It would be very useful for more staff members to be of immigrant origin and for immigrant parents to sit on parents' committees and advisory boards. The increasing number of second and interim generation parents who have professional careers means that there should be enough suitable candidates.
- Educational and childcare centres can set up interaction activities in consultation with all types of parents to promote pedagogic harmonisation and more parental participation and help with child-rearing. These should be flexible enough to allow adjustments to parents' changing needs. Parents also differ greatly as to the kind of interaction they need. These can range from the fairly neutral availability of information to self-help style group discussions on subjects related to child-rearing (with or without an expert), to a range of courses. The makeup of the groups (mixed or otherwise according to ethnic origin, generation or gender) should be agreed on with parents.

In short: It is important to take into account the diversity within the various groups of immigrant parents. Making use of childcare is for them, as it is for Dutch mothers, often strongly related to enabling mothers to go out to work. Also, second-generation immigrant parents are more inclined to place their children in childcare centres than their mothers were. Among immigrant parents there is a visible change from their once rather authoritarian style of child-rearing to their present style which is based to a greater extent on negotiation and allowing children to develop their own sense of responsibility.

Research shows that immigrant fathers have become more involved in child-rearing. Also immigrant parents have (or would like to have) more contact with the educational world including with early and pre-school education and educational support organisations. At the same time, the information provided by these institutions appears to be one-sided, and often fails to meet parents' needs. In addition, educators are not sufficiently open to questions from parents on child-rearing. Professionals must relinquish their assumptions on cultural practices and talk to these parents to find out what their needs are and what support activities they would like to see at childcare centres.

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Chapter 3: Assessing the awareness of diversity in parental participation

Fuusje de Graaff

Between 2004 and 2006 NIVEL surveyed the extent to which the childcare centres taking part in the Parents and Diversity project had succeeded in establishing more parental participation in their centres' and pre-schools' work. The research was carried out by interviewing educators at these institutions. Three rounds of interviews were carried out in November–December 2004, May–June 2005 and November–December 2005.

The survey team developed a scale to assess to what extent the project had succeeded in promoting its four ascribed types of parental participation and its six diversity objectives. These concepts provided a framework of ideal principals for project participants to aim for in their work and in their interactions with parents. (See the section "Commitment to diversity and parents as partners" in the Introduction (page 5) for information on the origin of these concepts.)

The scale was developed over four sequential steps:

In **step 1** the project's *four types of parental participation* of 'living together', 'working together', 'thinking together', and 'taking decisions together', were defined. The achievement of these four promotes the inclusion of parents by enabling both children and adults to work towards a form of childcare, early education and pre-school childcare where everyone:

- feels they belong;
- is empowered to develop the diverse aspects of their identities;
- can learn from each other across cultural and other boundaries;
- actively addresses bias through open communications and the willingness to learn;
- can participate as an active citizen;
- works together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.

The above are the project's *six diversity objectives.*

Step 2 involved making an inventory of the activities or actions that can take place between educators and parents and that are likely to contribute to realising the four types of parental involvement and the six diversity objectives. (We concentrated on the activities or actions initiated by educators.)

In **step 3** the researchers investigated the relative priority given by educators to the various actions.

In **step 4** a scale was designed to quantify which actions had the largest impact on promoting parental participation and respect for diversity.

Defining the core concepts

In the first round of survey interviews, the project managers and educators at four of the project's pilot childcare centres were asked what they understood by 'living together', 'working together', 'thinking together', and 'taking decisions together', and what they understood the diversity objectives to mean and entail. There were many different interpretations. The educators found the division into four types of parental participation inspiring and this motivated them to be more aware of how they could involve parents in the centres more through their regular contacts with them. The diversity objectives were also seen as stimulating, although many educators believed that some of them were vague and some did not really apply to their work. For example, some educators said that, in practice, they did not do a great deal to promote parents as 'active citizens', and they did nothing at all on 'working with parents to challenge institutional forms of bias and discrimination.' This led the survey team to try to identify working practices carried out by educators (actions) by which they already do, or can in the future, operationalise the diversity objectives. Identifying such practices allows for the assessment of the achievement of the diversity objectives. Although the project did support the centre managers, most project activities were aimed at empowering the educators. Therefore, the survey focused on quantifying educators' commitment to parental participation. Tables 2 and 3 show the definitions developed.

Parent–educator contact

In step 2 the researchers identified when contact took place between educators and parents. The surveyed educators reported that they made contact with the parents:

- at induction interviews and at child placement sessions (often not done by educators);
- at parents' committee and parents' advisory board meetings;
- at parents meetings, usually on particular subjects;
- at outings for the children, with parents assisting;
- at discussions or progress reports when parents talk with teachers about their child's progress;
- during informal communications in open sessions;
- when children are brought to and picked up from school;
- in written communications;
- while preparing and holding parties with children, parents and educators.

Table 2. Definitions of the four types of parental participation (based on first round of interviews)

Types of parental participation
Living together is about ensuring an effective mutual flow of information (between the childcare centre and parents) to facilitate good education and care for the children. An effective mutual flow of information implies that both sides can put themselves in each others' place and recognise each others' areas of responsibility. *Note: We retained the term 'living together' as a more inspiring and active term, although the sense here is more about 'sharing information'.*
Working together involves educators and parents carrying out activities jointly to facilitate good care and education for the children. Successful joint enterprises are evident in the commitment and satisfaction of both parties.
Thinking together is the exchange of ideas and opinions on education and care and on the conditions necessary for realising the kind of care and education desired by parents at the centres. Thinking together covers both the care and education of individual children and the conditions which have to be created at the level of the organisation and the centres.
Taking decisions together is about harmonising ideas and opinions about education and childcare and on the conditions necessary for realising the types of care and education as desired by parents. Parents and educators share the responsibility for the end results of this harmonisation process.

Table 3. Definitions of the diversity objectives (based on DECET objectives)

Diversity objectives
1. Giving everyone the feeling that they belong implies that educators give parents the necessary physical, emotional and social space to help shape childcare and education within centres. For this educators must be ready to listen to the wishes of parents and to work with parents towards making their common goals a reality.
2. Having everyone feel that they are **empowered to develop the diverse aspects of their identity** sees educators valuing parents as individuals. Educators should recognise the specific in every parent including their ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, age, social background, style of upbringing, family structure, religion and aspirations.
3. **Learning from one another across cultural and other boundaries** implies that educators take active steps to acquaint themselves with the ethnicity, gender, sexual preferences, age, social background, style of upbringing and aspirations of their colleagues and parents and make themselves familiar with those aspects that parents feel are particularly valuable.
4. **Actively addressing bias through open communication and the willingness to learn** implies that educators want to and do learn from situations which show that they and parents in some cases have opposite views, working methods and opinions; but that they should strive to make such differences productive.
5. **Enabling everyone to participate as an active citizen** implies that educators make the effort to support parents in applying the participation they have experienced at the childcare centres to increasing their involvement in society as a whole, both inside and outside the centre. This would result in a working partnership aimed at combating institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination.
*Note: no definition of **'working together to challenge institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination'** is included as very few 'actions' were mentioned for this objective.*

Most of these incidents of contact were found to apply to the achievement of more than one of the types of parental participation and diversity objective. This led to the researchers merging the 'thinking together' and 'taking decisions together' types of parental participation. They also excluded the diversity objective of challenging institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination from the survey. Further discussions with 20 educators and project coordinators identified, in all, 59 contact actions for either living together, working together or thinking together/taking decisions together, and which targeted a definite diversity objective.

Scoring how much activities promote parental participation

In step 3 the researchers assessed the relative importance educators attached to the various actions. Six educators from each of the four surveyed childcare centres reported first in May–June 2005 and again in November–December 2005 which actions were important, less important and the least important for achieving the four types of parental participation. They had to assign about 20 activities as very important (score of 3), fairly important (score of 2) and unimportant (score of 1).

This scoring judged the following 10 actions as 'the most important' for achieving parental participation out of the total of 59 actions contact scored. They are given below in order of importance.

- Educators listen to what parents say, even when opinions differ.
- Educators take extra time for parents who have difficulty expressing themselves in the Dutch language.
- Educators take enough time on the first familiarisation days to welcome new parents and answer their questions.
- Educators inform parents what their child has done at the centre.
- The centre is always open for parents.
- Educators show that they experience added value in co-operating with parents.
- Educators inform parents (where appropriate) that things are going well with their children.
- Educators always check that parents understand the information they have given them.
- Educators give more than just written or verbal information by also allowing parents to see and experience for themselves how the childcare centre 'works'.
- Educators ensure that written information from the centre is comprehensible to parents.

The surveyed educators assigned the lowest priority to the following 10 actions with the least important given last.

- The childcare centre provides information to parents about services in the neighbourhood.
- Educators encourage parents to influence childcare centre policies.

- Parents' committees are given advisory powers on personnel matters and the organisation and equipping of the building.
- Educators ask parents for advice on how to organise parties and outings.
- Educators allow parents to take more responsibility for organising activities.
- The childcare centres take parental diversity into account in surveys.
- Educators ask parents at induction interviews what part they would like to play in the day-to-day activities of the centre.
- Educators tell parents that everyone has limitations.
- Educators support parents in learning from their experiences.
- Educators ask parents to become a point of contact with other parents.

The educators mostly assigned the highest priority to actions aimed at the type of parental participation of 'living together' and the diversity objective of 'empowering them [parents] to develop the diverse aspects of their identity'.

In these two assessments, educators also reported whether they had always, regularly or only seldom actually initiated the specific actions. They were asked to assign a score of either 3 (always carried out), 2 (regularly, but not always carried out), or 1 (seldom carried out) to each of the 59 possible actions.

For promoting parental participation, the surveyed educators assigned the highest priority to promoting 'living together' (sharing information), with the top five actions out of the 59 being:

1. educators informing parents about day-to-day happenings at the centre (average score of 2.9);
2. educators reporting (where appropriate) to parents that things are going well with their child (average 2.9);
3. educators taking extra time for parents who have difficulty expressing themselves in Dutch (average 2.8);
4. educators taking enough time on the first familiarisation days to welcome new parents and answer their questions (average 2.7);
5. educators listening to what parents say, even where there are differences of opinion (average 2.7).

'Working together' and 'thinking/taking decisions together' scored less.

The diversity objectives given the most importance were 'giving parents the feeling they belong', 'wanting to learn from one another' and 'addressing bias'. The least popular were those aimed at 'stimulating parents to become active citizens' with hardly any contact initiated by the educators on this (average score of 1.3 to 1.7 for the associated actions). The actions most seldom carried out were:

1. educators encouraging parents to influence childcare centre policy (average 1.3);
2. educators asking parents at the induction interview what part they would like to play in the day-to-day activities of the centre (average 1.5);
3. educators assessing how the qualities of every parent could be used for the childcare centre (average 1.5);
4. educators reporting the positive things they have learned from a parent (average 1.5);
5. educators asking which parents would like to join discussions of current issues at the childcare centre (average 1.5).

The survey tried to identify any differences between the childcare centres running on a half-day basis (Tilburg and Eindhoven) and those that operated for full days (The Hague and Amsterdam). It was found that parental participation in the full-day centres was less as many of the parents worked full-time and therefore had less time for contributing to the centres, although there was not a great difference.

Encouragingly, differences between the results of the assessment in May–June 2005 and November–December 2005 suggested that the educators had become more active in promoting parental participation and respect for diversity as at the second survey they reported more often:

- experiencing added value in co-operating with parents;
- learning from parents;
- followed recommendations from parents about organising parties;
- reacting when someone (unwittingly) made a prejudiced remark about parents; and
- informing parents at induction interviews about the placement procedure and method of payment.

A scale for assessing how much parental participation is being promoted

The final step of this exercise involved developing a tool for assessing the extent of parental contact with the childcare centres.

With this tool, first of all the number of activities was reduced from 59 to 30 by just keeping the 30 actions that happened most regularly according to the above prioritisation exercise. At the same time the diversity objective of 'using parental participation to encourage parents to be active citizens' was dropped because of the very low scores it had rated. Then, every 'cell' was filled with associated actions to which the surveyed educators had given the highest priority (see Table 3.3).

Table 4. The 30 actions judged most important for promoting parental participation and respect for diversity

Diversity objectives	Types of parental participation		
	Living together	**Working together**	**Thinking/taking decisions together**
Belonging	Educators inform parents about the daily programme at the centre (actions of contact no. 16 in the questionnaire) The childcare centre is always open for parents (no. 5) The childcare centre has a room where educators and parents can talk (no. 21)	Educators and parents organise parties together (no. 38) The childcare centre has a budget for parents' activities (no. 34)	Educators inform parents at the induction interview about the centre's daily programme and the role of the parents in this (no. 13) Educators ask parents to join the parents' committee (no. 20) Educators are careful to pass on information from parents (no. 11)
Recognising one anothers' identity	Educators take extra time for parents who cannot express themselves easily in Dutch (no 2.) Educators always check whether parents have understood the information they have been given (no. 8) The written information from the childcare centre is comprehensible to parents (no.10)	Educators ask parents after parties or outings what they thought (no. 31) Educators ask parents what activities they would like to carry out with/ for the childcare centre (no. 29) In assigning tasks (for parties or outings) educators ask parents what they would like to do (no. 32)	Educators find out how parents deal at home with current issues concerning childcare and education (no. 36) Educators find out what biases are attached to what backgrounds. They look for the added value of diversity among parents (no. 27) The childcare centre regularly checks whether or not parents are satisfied (no 35)
Learning from one another	Educators ask parents how they bring up their children (no.15) Educators encourage parents to ask questions (no. 12) Educators tell parents what the child has done at the centre (no. 4)	Educators show that they experience added value in co-operating with parents (no. 6) Educators say what they have learned from a parent (no. 37)	Educators discuss with parents how they can harmonise education at the childcare centre with children's upbringing at home (no. 22) Educators discuss with parents how parents can harmonise upbringing at home with education at the childcare centre (no. 28) Educators ask various types of parents (immigrant and non-immigrant, with or without a higher education) to join the parents' committee (no. 17) Different viewpoints and concerns are discussed openly at parents' committee meetings (no. 24)

Table 4. The 30 actions judged most important for promoting parental participation and respect for diversity

Diversity objectives	Types of parental participation		
	Living together	Working together	Thinking/taking decisions together
Dealing with bias	Educators listen to what parents say, even when there are differences of opinion (no. 1) Educators show that they also value those parents who do not have time for a chat (no. 14)	Educators give parents who do things for the childcare centre the responsibility for organising this in their own way, even if they would themselves do it differently (no. 23)	Educators react when someone (unwittingly) makes a prejudiced remark about parents (no. 18)

Conclusions

Five main conclusions arose out of this challenging task of assessing educators' commitment to the participation of all kinds of parents in running childcare centres and pre-schools.

First, focusing on the concepts of 'living together', 'working together', 'thinking together' and 'taking decisions together' encouraged educators to identify more ways of stimulating parental participation. The same focus on the diversity objectives of 'belonging', 'acknowledging identities', 'learning from one another', 'addressing bias' and 'encouraging people to be active citizens' also inspired educators, although for many the last two objectives were felt to be outside what they should be involved in. It is possible that the inspirational effect of all these concepts is that they are identifiable goals that mainly emphasise values such as 'togetherness' and 'humanity'. All respondents could identify with these.

Second, however, many of the educator respondents/participants found some of the concepts vague. This made it difficult to work with educators and project leaders to develop norms to guide them as to what they should do to work more in partnership and to respect diversity more.

It proved quite difficult to pin down how some of the concepts could work in practice in terms of educator–parent contact. Also, many incidents of contact were seen as contributing to several types of parental participation and more than one diversity objective. Nor were the application of the working methods used and the objectives unambiguous. The way in which the incidents of contact were finally linked to one of the four types of parental participation (Table 4) ultimately received the approval of all those involved, but this division was somewhat artificial as, in practice, incidents of contact often affect more than one type and objective.

Figure 1. Questionnaire format for educators to assess the diversity of parental participation

Assessing levels of parental participation and respect for diversity

Do you and your educator colleagues want to have an overview of the efforts being made in your centre to involve parents in your centre's work? Then check which activities are being carried out always, regularly or seldom. Please assign a score to which of the 30 possible actions listed on the accompanying sheet [see Figure 2] you and your colleagues: 'always carry out' (3 points); 'regularly carry out' (2 points); and 'seldom carry out' (1 point).

The following 30 questions show how active educators are in working towards increasing parental participation as assessed by the seven different aspects of A–C and a–d.

Types of parental participation

A. Living together – to what extent do you and your educator colleagues ensure good two-way channels of information between the childcare centre and the parents in order to provide optimal care and education for children?
B. Working together – to what extent do you and your colleagues give concrete form to optimal care for children by carrying out activities together?
C. Thinking/taking decisions together – to what extent do you and your colleagues initiate an exchange of ideas and opinions with parents on education and childcare as well as on the conditions created in the childcare centre.

Diversity objectives

a) The extent to which you and your colleagues give parents the feeling that they belong and the extent to which they are prepared to listen to parents' wishes?
b) The extent to which you and your colleagues empower parents to develop their own identities, recognise what is specific to each parent, and value it?
c) The extent to which you and your colleagues want to learn from parents, and are prepared to actively learn about the backgrounds and the aspirations of the parents?
d) The extent to which you and your colleagues can actively address bias, and are prepared to learn from situations where parents have 'different' opinions and manners?

Do you [the educator respondent] want to know how you scored on these aspects?

For A: add up your scores for questions 1, 3, 7, 10, 12, 15, 20, 21, 22, 27 and 28 and divide the total by 11.
For B: add up your scores for questions 4, 6, 8, 14, 17, 22, 25 and 29 and divide the total by 8.
For C: add up your scores for questions 2, 5, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 19, 23, 26 and 30 and divide the total by 11.
For a): add up your scores for questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 21 and 22 and divide the total by 8.
For b): add up your scores for questions 6, 7, 13, 14, 15, 16, 24, 25 and 26 and divide the total by 9.
For c): add up your scores for questions 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 17, 18, 27 and 28 and divide the total by 8.
For d): add up your scores for questions 12, 19, 20, 29 and 30 and divide the total by 5.

What is the target?

The following applies to all scores. The closer you are to a score of 3 the better; the closer you are to a score of 1 then the more work has to be done on an aspect of promoting parental participation and on respecting diversity.

Comparing your scores

Compare your scores and how regularly you initiate these 30 actions with the scores recorded from the four childcare centres where this tool was first piloted. These were: A: 2.55; B: 2.00; C: 2.15; a): 2.45; b): 2.19; c: 2.20; and d): 2.14.

Figure 2. Questionnaire format for indicating how often 'actions' take place

	How often do these actions take place?	Always 3 pts	Regularly 2 pts	Seldom 1 pt
1	Educators inform parents about the daily programme at the centre			
2	Educators inform parents at the induction interview about the daily programme at the centre and the role parents are expected to play in this			
3	The childcare centre has a room where educators and parents can talk			
4	The childcare centre has a budget for parents' activities			
5	Educators ask parents to join the parents' committee			
6	Educators ask parents what activities they would like to carry out with/ for the childcare centre			
7	Written information from the childcare centre is comprehensible to parents			
8	Educators show that they experience added value in working together with parents			
9	Educators discuss with parents how they can harmonise education at the centre and their child's upbringing at home			
10	Educators encourage parents to ask questions			
11	Educators ask the different types of parents (immigrant and non-immigrant, with or without higher education) to join the parents' committee			
12	Educators listen to what parents say, even where there are differences of opinion			
13	The centre carries out regular surveys to see whether parents are satisfied			
14	Educators ask parents after a party or outing what they thought of it			
15	Educators take extra time for parents who have difficulty expressing themselves in Dutch			
16	Educators check on how parents deal at home with current issues concerning childcare and education			
17	Educators share with their colleagues what they learn from parents			
18	Educators discuss with parents how the parents can harmonise upbringing at home and education at school			
19	Differing interpretations and interests are openly discussed during meetings of the parents' committee			
20	Educators show that they also value those parents who do not have time for a chat			
21	The childcare centre is always open for parents			
22	Educators and parents organise parties together			
23	Educators are careful to pass on information from parents			
24	Educators always check whether parents have understood the information they have been given			
25	In assigning tasks (for parties and outings), educators ask parents what they would like to do			
26	Educators find out what prejudices are attached to what background; they look for the added value of diversity among parents			
27	Educators ask parents how they bring up their children at home			
28	Educators report to parents on what their child has done at the centre			
29	Educators give those parents who do things for the childcare centre the opportunity to organise this in their own way, even if they themselves would do it differently			
30	Educators react when someone (unwittingly) expresses a prejudice about parents			

Third, the process of identifying how parent–educator contact happens was a learning process for the project leaders and educator participants. They came to a better understanding of both the necessity of, and the opportunities for improving contact between parents and the centres. They realised that certain aspirations (such as addressing bias) could be linked to actions, but that these were rarely carried out in practice by educators. Also, fewer actions were suggested by the educators for 'working together' than for 'living together' and 'thinking/taking decisions together'. The educators may well have seen 'working together' as self-evident and therefore did not assign actions to it.

Fourth, it must be emphasised that the assessment tool only assesses educators' commitment to encouraging the participation of the diversity of parents at the implementation level. An effective policy for this would also involve activities with and decisions from other centre staff and from centre managers. Managers, for example, could well mention more actions directed towards the objective of 'challenging institutional forms of prejudice and discrimination'. This aspect is currently not a part of the tool. This tool only assesses the commitment of educators to encouraging parental participation in the centres and not the extent of parents' commitment.

Fifth, the assessment of the original four types of parental participation and six diversity objectives by 20 educators and their coordinators refined the number down to the most relevant seven of these ten (A–C and a–d) for assessing educators' commitment to promoting the participation of the diversity of parents. These seven were the types of parental participation of 'living together' (keeping one another properly informed), 'working together' and 'thinking/taking decisions together' and the diversity objectives of 'belonging', 'acknowledging identity', 'learning from one another' and 'addressing bias'.

Altogether, the tool is potentially very useful for mapping how much attention educators pay to forging positive contacts with parents and to respecting all aspects of parental diversity. At the same time, simply carrying out this exercise gives educators insights into how much attention they pay to working in partnership with parents and respecting their diversity. As suggested by the findings of the current case, completing this exercise in itself will lead to educators giving more attention to these issues.

The assessment tool is a very useful instrument that we hope will be used by other centres to assess their levels of parental participation and to evaluate their respect for parents' wide-ranging diversity. Ideally, the tool should be first used to establish a baseline and then to assess subsequent progress made.

Chapter 4: Issues of concern for educators and parents

Fuusje de Graaff

Introduction to the survey

The Parents and Diversity project aimed to enhance communication between childcare centres and parents by developing new forms of parental involvement in the centres' work. The objective was to enable parents and educators to work more closely together in supporting their children, by functioning as a kind of community with both sides having the experience of belonging, of having their identity acknowledged, of being able to learn from one another, of preventing or dealing with bias, and of taking an active part in their communities.

But as the project proposal recognised, "in general, it is easier for professionals to make contact with people from their own 'world' than with parents from other social backgrounds who often have different lifestyles and different styles of child-rearing." This realisation makes it very necessary for educators to be aware of their own identities and to respect parents who will often have different values and group identities.

To complement the research reported in Chapter 3 (Quantifying the awareness of diversity in parental participation), NIVEL also examined the extent to which the following assumptions, which formed the starting point of the Parents and Diversity project, were true in reality:

- It is easier for educators to communicate with parents from their own class, ethnic group, age group or other shared identity.
- For educators to become more conscious of their own identities and their similarities and differences to others will help them improve their communication with parents.
- Training about and targeting ideals and objectives can help childcare centres and their educators to improve their performance.

As Chapter 3 shows, educators potentially come into contact with parents in many different ways and at different times. The survey described in this chapter focussed on the two types of actions of when parents bring their children and collect them from school (together counted as one event) and the contact at progress report meetings. The survey took part in the same four childcare centres as the survey described in Chapter 3.
The current survey investigated:

- the emotions (feelings) and concerns of educators and parents about their interactions and contact;
- any differences in their emotions and concerns during the contact while the children were being brought in and picked up from school compared to at report meetings;
- to what extent parents' and educators' emotions and concerns were the same and whether or not the similarities form a basis for achieving the ideals of 'living together', working together', and 'thinking/taking decisions together';
- whether there were significant differences in the emotions and concerns of different groups of parents; for example, between immigrant and non-immigrant parents and between parents with higher and lower levels of education;
- what should educators take into account when interacting with parents who have a different lifestyle and different ways of child-rearing, such as with immigrant parents and for parents with only a basic education or even with very highly educated parents.

Survey methodology

This was a qualitative research exercise based around interviewing 22 parents and 25 educators. These parents and educators were asked what they felt about their contacts with each other when the children were brought into and picked up from school, and at report meetings. What emotions did these occasions evoke and why did they feel so? What were the apparent issues of importance for them? This research gave a very clear overview of the emotions that parents and educators felt during their contacts (Table 7) and the principle concerns of both parents and educators (Table 8) at these contacts. In this way the research was exploratory following the qualitative research approach of Frijda (1993) who states that people's often unconscious concerns can be explored by tracing their emotions in concrete actions.

Talking about the emotions they experienced was made easier by giving respondents 10 flashcards showing faces expressing, for example, happiness, pride, confusion, curiosity, anger and sadness. An additional blank card gave respondents the chance to add another emotion. These cards enabled educators and parents to put their personal feelings into words and discuss and discover why they felt the way they did at times of contact. The interviews were taped, typed up and analysed using a computer program.

The coordinators of the four pilot centres arranged interviews with four different kinds of parents – parents with a basic education, parents with a higher education, immigrant parents and non-immigrant parents. Table 5 shows the origin of the parents interviewed. This pre-selection meant that the results do not necessarily represent the range of parents in the surveyed centres. The childcare centres in the pilot surveys in Amsterdam and

Table 5. Origin and level of education of the 22 parents interviewed

Types of parent	Survey locations			
	Amsterdam	The Hague	Eindhoven	Tilburg
Immigrant	4 from Ghana 2 from Antilles/ Surinam	1 from Sudan 1 from Bangladesh 2 from Antilles/ Surinam	1 from Mexico 1 from Egypt 1 from Nigeria 1 from Turkey	1 from Morocco 1 from Turkey 2 from Antilles/ Surinam
Non-immigrant	0	1	0	3
Higher education	2	3	1	3
Basic education	4	2	3	4

Eindhoven were attended almost exclusively by immigrant children. At the centre in The Hague, the majority of the children were immigrants and in the Tilburg centre the majority were from non-immigrant families. In Amsterdam and Tilburg most of the parents only had a basic education, while in The Hague and Eindhoven, the centres were used by both highly educated parents and parents who had only a basic education.

At least six educators were interviewed at each of the four childcare centres. Sixty percent of the educators were of Dutch origin. At the Amsterdam centre four Surinamese and Antillean educators and one Ghanaian educator were interviewed. In Eindhoven, where the centre has taken in a number of refugee children from the Balkans, a Bosnian educator was interviewed. Of the 25 educator respondents 11, had had an intermediate vocational qualification and 11 a higher vocational qualification. Three of the educators were only educated to secondary level (see Table 6).

Survey results

The 25 educators and 22 parents were asked to identify their feelings about their contacts with one another with the aid of the emotion flash cards. They were simply asked the open question of what they felt, with no pre-defined categories to tick, although the 10 flash cards did point respondents to the most likely emotions. They did have the option of ascribing another emotion on the blank card.

Table 7 gives their responses. Note that in the table the percentages in each column add up to more than 100% as respondents could choose more than one emotion as they said that their ‘emotions’ in regard to certain actions varied from incident of contact to incident of contact. In fact the respondents were encouraged to mention the different feelings they may experience at different times for the same contact event.

Table 6. Origin and level of education of the 25 educators interviewed

Types of parent	Survey locations			
	Amsterdam	The Hague	Eindhoven	Tilburg
Non-immigrant	1	3	6	6
Higher education	0	2	7	2
Basic education	2 lower vocational 4 intermediate vocational	1 lower vocational 3 intermediate vocational	0	4 intermediate vocational

Note: All of the characteristics of the 25 educators are listed meaning that the number adds up to more than 25.

Table 7. Emotions experienced by parents and educators when parents bring children and collect them from school and during report meetings

Emotions	Contact when parents bring or collect their children (%)		At report meetings (%)	
	Emotions felt by educators (n=23)	Emotions felt by parents (n=22)	Emotions felt by parents (n=22)	Emotions felt by parents (n=13)
'Positive' emotions:				
Happy	84	82	21	15
Trusting	0	36	0	0
Neutral	40	32	34	15
Proud	32	23	21	8
Curious	12	0	4	23
Caring	12	0	21	0
'Negative' emotions:				
In a hurry	28	36	0	0
Sad	20	18	17	23
Insecure/confused	36	14	43	38
Embarrassed/guilty	48	9	0	8
Angry	0	9	0	8
Distant	16	0	0	0
Afraid	?	5	0	0
Pretending (hiding true feelings)	44	0	4	0

Following on from this the researchers investigated why these emotions were felt at these times of contact. It is well known that emotions signal that a value important to a person has been affected. Frijda (1993) explains that "emotions are changes in our readiness to take action as a result of occurrences which are of importance to the subject, or which can become so".

The research recognised that the same person can feel different emotions around the same contact event depending on the situation. Thus, one educator said that she almost always felt happy to meet parents except when she felt guilty such as when she had to inform a mother that her child had taken a fall at the centre. She felt this had undermined her wish to be able to hand back children in a state of good health to their parents.

Table 8 gives the results of the exploration of the underlying issues of importance and concern. The issues of importance are grouped into the five categories of positive contact, professional distance, interests of the children, support for parents and support for educators.

Educators' emotions and concerns

Emotions

A high percentage of educators (84%) said that they felt happy with their contact with parents when children were brought to and picked up from school (Table 7).

Another 40% said that they had become so accustomed to this contact that they characterised their feelings as 'neutral. Other positive feelings were characterised as 'pride' (identified by 32% of the educators) and 'curious' and 'caring' (both 12%).

Educators reported that they sometimes also experienced negative feelings, such as 'guilty or embarrassed (48%), 'pretending' (hiding their true feelings) (44%), 'confused' (36%), 'in a hurry' (28%) and 'sad' (20%). Two educators also reported being 'angry' on one occasion; whilst being 'afraid' and 'tired' were mentioned once.

A different picture appeared when educators were asked about their feelings during report meetings. Only a fifth said they were 'happy' at report meetings with 'feeling insecure/confused' being the most common (43%). Educators with greater experience of report meetings mostly said they nowadays felt 'neutral' (34%), although previously they had felt 'insecure'. About a fifth of the educators said they felt 'proud' at report meetings and the same proportion felt 'caring'. The emotion of caring was not on one of the flash cards and was introduced by the educators themselves.

Table 8. Important issues for educators and parents

Issues of importance (concerns)	Percentage of educators identifying this issue as important to them (n= 25)	Percentage of parents identifying this issue as important to them (n=22)
Positive contact:		
Ease of contact	84%	77%
Feeling solidarity with one another's role (educators with parents and vice-versa)	56%	0%
Supporting parents	44%	NA
Earning parents' trust as an educator	32%	NA
Receiving support as a parent (pedagogic support)	NA	33%
Receiving support as an individual (personal support)	0%	27%
Being respected as a parent	NA	23%
Professional distance:		
Avoiding difficult situations	52%	0%
Professional attitude	24%	NA
Handover ritual	0%	13%
Interests of the children:		
Happiness of the child	0%	50%
Safe environment	40%	41%
Supportive learning environment	36%	41%
Noting child development	24%	0%
Info. on day-to-day experiences	0%	45%
Support for parents:		
Combining work and school	NA	50%
Support for educators:		
Receiving support from colleagues	52%	NA
Educators' efforts being acknowledged by parents (validation)	44%	NA
Learning new things from and about parents	36%	NA
Facilities/equipment	28%	0%

Note: NA = not applicable

Issues of importance: positive contact

The educators' responses confirmed that ease of contact with parents was very important and made them feel happier and less insecure (Table 8).

> "I feel insecure when I get another new parent and we are again stuck with the language barrier. Then it's so difficult to start a conversation. What makes me happy is if parents tell me something of their own accord or ask me something and then you think it's worthwhile that you as the educator, and they as parents, can come together after all." (Educator respondent 1)

Several educators said that they tried hard to bring about easy contact, even if it was not at first spontaneous.

> "First the mother said that it was alright – at least that's what I understood – but then she went to talk to a Moroccan colleague and I guessed that it wasn't so. And so I found out and, well … then you're a bit careful. But it's getting better all the time. I asked her to stay at the centre to see how it's going. She stayed for a few hours. I have the feeling it's getting better all the time. Then I didn't have to be so careful talking about some things and it became just like with the other parents." (12)

The educators also wanted to acknowledge parents. Many of them felt a kind of solidarity with the parents as many of them are also parents.

> "… I understand the parents. I know how it feels, I'm a parent myself. I know what's going on in parents' minds [such as] ... oh, oh, oh, I'm late, sorry, sorry, sorry. Then you automatically send out a signal for them not to worry." (10)

Other educators deliberately used a shared reference to put parents at ease. In this way a Muslim educator from Surinam identified strongly with the mothers from Turkey and Morocco, while a Bosnian educator said she had shared her experiences with immigrant parents of not being able to speak or understand Dutch when she had arrived in the country.

Many educators said they took the trouble to learn about the kind of lives their parents lead. If these parents have, or had, difficult lives, then some of the educators felt a deep sense of solidarity with them.

> "I am especially sad for the parents who are refugees. The heart-rending stories of what they have gone through, and what their children have suffered… And that some people right away think they [the parents] are fundamentalists because they wear headscarves.

> I sometimes think, should I be doing this? … I'm an educator … but we talk. They want to know what I think and I want to know what it's like to live their lives." (23)

Many of the educators said they wanted to support or advise parents, especially the young single mothers. Some educators said they felt concerned and wanted to mother them.

> "We've got several single mothers here who have to do everything alone. They sometimes fall asleep when they come for a half hour long talk. They're so tired. Some of them even have two jobs and they are rushing from one thing to another." (1)

The educators said that talking about the children and their upbringing is always a good way to establish contact. But parents also often need advice and support in other areas.

A number of educators remarked that the contact that parents seek is often an expression of the trust that the parents feel in them.

> "I feel that the parents trust me. They approach me as though they have enormous trust in me … so that I feel really proud." (7)

Professional distance

On the other hand educators said they sometimes used a kind of professional distancing to avoid or help prevent difficult situations. They said this happened, for example, when they felt they were unable to smooth over a difference of opinion with a parent or because they wanted to consult their colleagues before talking to a parent.

This was rarely defined as a positive emotion and the underlying feelings were said to be usually camouflaged as 'pretending', 'insecurity', or 'confusion'.

> "I felt insecure … Imagine, I came here on Monday's early morning shift … I get in, and a mother comes to complain [about something that happened on Friday] even though I'm never here on Fridays and I have yet to read the hand-over report. This mother says that her child had a fall on Friday and had bumped her head and, well … I didn't know it had happened, or what had happened afterwards. I needed some time to talk to my colleague about it first." (9)

The educators recognised that parents have different and varying values and that you cannot please all of them all of the time. They also recognised that some parents have particular patterns of communication with, for example, some always being in a hurry while others are just temperamental. They felt that when further discussions with a parent seemed to be unlikely to be helpful then they just had to accept this as something inevitable that goes with the job. Some of the educators defined the combination of involvement and keeping a certain dis-

tance as part of their professional attitude. These educators said it was important to keep their personal lives and professional contacts apart. They also emphasised the importance of professional behaviour when a parent failed to treat them with respect.

The interests of the child

In contacts between educators and parents, the child is almost always the focal point. Educators said it was important to give their charges a safe environment. This concern emerged particularly clearly when educators felt negative emotions. Such emotions are often linked to particular incidents such as when parents had to be called in after an accident, or when the bad news had to be given to the parent when they came to pick their child up, or when the subject of accidents came up during a report meeting.

> "I feel guilty even if it's a minor incident … Sometimes it isn't even my fault. If it happens in the group, then I feel bad. It doesn't matter whether it happened with me or with a colleague." (1)

Educators said they wanted to hand their children back safe and well and said that parents had the right to expect this. They did recognise that accidents happen, but still felt responsible even for incidents that were not their fault. They felt that the news of an accident often had more effect on the parents than the accident had on the child. Also, they recognised that this can damage parents' trust that their child is being looked after in a safe environment.

> "I feel guilty that it has happened and am embarrassed that it happened. I feel guilty about the child, but I'm more inclined to feel embarrassment towards the parents. Because you know that the child forgives you immediately … he or she will just get on with whatever comes next, so you can get over your guilt, while you can't do that with embarrassment. You can talk about it with the parents, but it's still painful." (24)

Educators not only want to hand over the children safe and well; they also want to offer them a stimulating and supportive environment. Children's development and the role of educators in facilitating this is an important topic of conversation with parents. Educators have an interest in being able to say that the child is fitting in, learning, playing with the others, eating and sleeping well and they take pride in their part in these developments.

> "Actually, we tell the mothers something every day: it went well, he did this, he cut paper and he couldn't do that before and now he can do it … things like that. Most children make progress. You can see it. One example is a child who couldn't hold a pencil. And then he suddenly makes a nice drawing in different colours. It's important to tell parents about this sort of thing." (1)

Some educators said that noting children's development is an important part of their job. As educators observe and supervise a number of children at the same time, they are sometimes quicker than parents to notice developments. They want to discuss such observations with the parents, but are not always sure that their observations will tally with parents' observations. A feeling of insecurity about whether parents really want to hear about their insights and whether parents are prepared to act on them is naturally more intense when they have to report less positive developments. Therefore, when they have to tell parents about such developments, the educators said that they often planned for an extra report meeting that they could prepare for beforehand.

> "I have been working here for 12 years, so I have sometimes had to give parents unpleasant news about their children. But, in such cases, I mostly first discuss it with my colleagues … we discuss how we should approach it and whether or not we have to do it. So you're prepared. We really do prepare ourselves to give bad news. Then I feel … insecure as … [it is uncertain how] the parent is going to react." (3)

This concern came to the fore mainly in connection with emotions relating to report meetings ('insecure', 'sad', and 'caring' feelings). Educators hoped that their observations would strike a chord with parents and that they could then work together to solve the problems. At the same time they understood that parents might sometimes find the truth hard to accept.

Support for educators

More than half the educators said that support from their colleagues was very important. The intensity and effectiveness of this support varied. Some educators claimed that they were prepared to discuss everything with their colleagues, while others said they only discussed necessary things with colleagues. They said that the project had led to more directed discussions about contact with parents, with a deeper analysis of problems revealing possible solutions.

> "I think that the Parents and Diversity project has made me more aware because now we know how to ask a question and we should be ourselves and see what happens. We shouldn't try and think for the parents. It is a process of becoming [more] aware." (4)

Some educators said they felt it was important that their work and the work of the whole centre was acknowledged.

> "My last report meeting went well. Then I felt good, not proud, but good. Then you hear positive things about us. That's acknowledgement …" (2)

Nine of the educators said that they had learned new things from parents.

> "I also learn a lot from parents … like when you don't notice some things and a parent draws your attention to it. Like when a parent asked what the 'Pyramid' pedagogical programme was. We had talked briefly about it when the child started at the centre, but the parent was getting a lot of information on other things then. So I spent some time telling the parent about it. A question like that from a parent can teach you a lot about what parents do and do not know." (24)

Some educators said that 'learning new things' from and about parents was important to satisfy their own curiosity or to improve their ability to give informed advice. But most of the educators related this issue to the Parents and Diversity project. The educators said that the project's national meetings and workshops had made them more aware of the pitfalls and the opportunities for improving their contacts with parents. The educators were keen to use their new knowledge and skills.

Lastly on this issue, seven of the educators said that they were disturbed about the lack of certain facilities. Some complained about inadequate physical facilities with some saying that there was nowhere to have a private chat with parents and some of the central heating systems did not work properly. Some complained about staff shortages due to the number of paid hours being cut back whilst the workload remained the same, about not enough staff being present when parents brought and picked up their children, and about other issues.

> "It's not easy when a colleague suddenly calls in sick, if a trainee is sick, or if the heating isn't working like this morning. Sometimes you're walking round the building with a parent and thinking, right, where can we go and sit down? There is not enough space in the building." (14)

Parents' emotions and concerns during contact with educators

Emotions

Parents have positive and negative feelings in their involvement with the childcare centres (Table 7). The most common positive emotions that parents reported whilst delivering and picking up their children were 'happiness' (18 out of 22, therefore 82%), 'trust' (36%), 'feeling neutral' (32%) and 'pride' (23%). The negative emotions they felt were 'being in a hurry' (36%), 'sadness' (18%) and 'confused/insecure' (14%). Some parents talked of feeling 'afraid', 'angry', 'embarrassed', but said that these were always fleeting emotions. The parents also spoke of often feeling 'happy' and 'normal' at these times.

Many parents said they felt 'trust' in the educators – a concept they added on the blank flashcard.

> "I am happy if I know that my son is doing fine. When he sees educator L., it's 'Hey!' [he's happy] Then I feel as though I can leave him there with an easy mind and a feeling of trust." (Parent respondent t)

Also for parents, emotions are a signal that they are 'affected' by something of value, such as in discussions on certain issues about their children. But the issues of concern will vary from parent to parent. A number of parents might report feeling happy because they are cheerful by nature or because they are having a good day while others are happy because of the way their child is reacting and yet others will be happy because the educators are paying good attention to them. For this reason, the survey also looked at the underlying issues relating to parental contact with educators. These results are presented in Table 8.

Not all of the interviewed parents had attended a report meeting, either because their child had only recently started at a centre or because report meetings were not viewed as a separate activity. In the The Hague centre, where they held regular report meetings, parents described their reactions to these as 'curious' or 'neutral'. In Tilburg, report meetings were mainly held when a problem was reported. This explains the relatively large number of Tilburg parents who said they felt 'insecure' or 'sad' at such meetings.

> "Before [a report meeting], I usually feel a bit insecure, just as I feel before parents' evenings. Suppose it doesn't go well? I feel insecure because of what they could say. Of course, I ask if my child joined in at the centre, because the language is new to him. They told me that he does join in with the games, and can't answer much but understands everything. So now I don't worry so much." (u)

Issues of interest: Positive contact

Most parents valued ease of contact with educators and the centre.

> "What is the contact like with the educators? Good, yes! The women parents, we go off together at 10 o' clock to chat or have coffee. I talk to the educators for 10, 15 minutes sometimes. I'm always the first to arrive and then I can talk with the teacher in peace." (n)

The ease of contact depends on a number of factors. Some parents say that contact with one educator is easier than with others and some say that the language barrier works against them.

> "Nothing special … just a chat to put us at our ease a bit. Some educators are better at that than others." (g)

But all of them experienced the educators as welcoming – more so than other Dutch people.

> "[What is the contact like with educators?] Very warm, 'hello, hello'. The teachers are very warm here. [Are all the Dutch warm?] No, no, yes, no. You have different people … not the same … also in my town, also in my country – not the same, and not here either … but the teachers are warm." (m)

Some parents seek support for bringing up their children. They expect educators to be able to give advice about child-rearing as they are professionals or because they are mothers themselves. They expect educators who are mothers to be able to see when a parent is feeling insecure.

> "I am the father of three children, but you sometimes would like to get an answer from someone else. What are you supposed to do with a child who gets really angry? I wonder what I should do. I said 'you're a professional' … what would you do?" (s)

Parents make use of educators' advice on specific child-rearing problems and know that educators can refer them for more specialist professional help.

> "Yes, they do help me even though I am not inexperienced as S. is not my first child. But S. is now going to a speech therapist. They advised me to seek this help as she wouldn't say anything and she was already 3 years old." (c)

Some parents need support on other issues such as those related to being an immigrant. Educators certainly do not need to have an answer to the problems that worry parents, but they can show that they are understanding and ready to listen.

> "I don't know [where to go for support]. I'm divorced and unemployed and have only had any reasonable sort of contact with my mother for the last year. So, if I didn't have my children, then I would be thinking, umm, what am I doing here? I haven't got a sister … nothing [she sheds tears]. I've got to keep struggling on for the children's sake. Here every morning they say 'Good morning, how are you?' You have a chat with them and that helps." (j)

Not all educators were said to be supportive; but in every centre at least one educator was found to have given personal support to parents. Some parents said that educators had given them moral support with social problems in their neighbourhoods or at work.

However, some immigrant parents reported that they felt they were being increasingly discriminated against in the Netherlands.

> "They know so little about us [the Dutch about Muslims] … and they think they know a lot. This sometimes makes me sad. I've been working [in this company] for 10 years and every year when it's Ramadan, we'll be sitting round the table and they'll ask, 'Oh, can't you drink either?'. I have the feeling that they're not interested as they've been asking the same question every year. But it's getting worse. I have the feeling that I mean nothing to my colleagues and that hurts. I can talk about it [these feelings] at the centre." (u)

Other parents said they used educators to help them get off work to care for their children when their children are sick. They do not dare ask for care leave themselves but will take their children to the childcare centre when they are sick and get the educators to call them at work, so that it is clear they are not asking for leave for nothing.

Some parents emphasised that they wished to be treated with respect, and that an enquiring attitude and a listening ear on the part of the educators helped them feel that. Thus a Turkish mother, who had recently decided to wear a headscarf, was happy that the educator had asked her the reasons behind her decision. Other Dutch people just guess; but she would rather people asked her openly.

> "I would rather they asked because I haven't been wearing a headscarf for that long. They shouldn't go thinking behind my back, oh, she's got married, or her husband has made her, when it's not true at all. Educator D. did ask and then I could explain. The Dutch know so little about us and I have the feeling that they're not interested." (q)

The interests of the child

Nevertheless, contact with educators is often not directed at the individual parent, but mainly at the children. Parents have an interest in their child feeling happy.

> "I believe it's important that the welcome we get is centred on the child. It has happened that they only said good morning to me; but it's not me coming here, it's my child. I want there to be a homely atmosphere for my child." (q)

Some parents feel guilty because they work and believe that they spend too little time with their children. Then it is even more important for the childcare centre to offer a good alternative.

> "She is in good hands, I know that. I know that she has nice educators, that she likes coming here and playing with other children, which I can't give her. I recently told educator L.. that I feel guilty. She replied that 'All mothers do' and so shared in my feelings." (i)

Parents want information to check whether all is well with their children – what their children are doing, eating, and experiencing.

> "Especially talking about the development of my child ... they give me the information. I like to get information and to talk about raising the child. I want to have information about my child. If my child is not feeling happy then I too will not feel happy to bring her to the centre." (b)

Some parents would like to get more detailed information than is available. Their child's reports help parents get an idea on their child's development at the centre. This is reinforced by what the children tell them and by parents' own observations.

Many parents said that it is important to them that their child learns a great deal and is being prepared for their future in the Netherlands. This is the issue of there being a supportive learning environment (see Table 4.4).

> "It is nice for my daughter to have more contact with other kids … she can learn and has opportunities to explore, to achieve motivation, language stimulation … she is better at Dutch than I am." (l)

In addition, it is of great importance to parents that their children are being cared for in a safe environment by trustworthy, expert educators. Parents see differences in educators, with some inspiring more confidence than others. In any case, it is important for parents to have one contact person they can trust and who they can talk to about their needs and their expectations.

> "I'm sad … Sad, yes, from time to time … I'm leaving her behind [at the centre]. Then I can see a little tear-stained face and I go to my work with an uneasy mind and I can't concentrate there. And she doesn't always like the temporary staff. Some she does, some she doesn't. And then I don't trust them either." (r)

Support for parents

For many parents the availability of childcare is a precondition for being able to work or study. In the Eindhoven centre, this concern was not mentioned although it was a basic necessity for many of the parents to attend their courses at the neighbouring regional training centre. Some parents have no choice but to study or work and some feel a sense of failure for not being able to give their children more time and attention.

> "I feel, in a way, that I am missing a lot. I am missing a large part of her development. The educators know more about her in some ways than I do because for the best part of the week I'm working and when I come home it's 6 o'clock and two hours later she goes off to bed." (h)

Some mothers also feel that their contact with the educators is usually hurried in the mornings when bringing their children to the centre because they have to rush off to work.

> "If I see the educators, I don't say anything. I am always in a hurry, as I have to go to work. Sometimes I bring him a quarter of an hour early if I have to start work sooner. I am in too much of a hurry to have much contact with the educators." (q)

But having good childcare for their children allows most working parents to happily get on with their work.

> "I am happy I can leave him somewhere so that I can work because otherwise I couldn't manage." (c)

At first it can be difficult for parents to leave their children behind. Here it can be very important for them to have something to hang on to – an explanation of what to expect from the centre and someone to answer their questions. But after that, an established pattern of saying goodbye, a kind of ritual of transition, eases the way for mother and child to make positive use of the childcare.

> "He has always been in familiar surroundings and then I had to leave him at the crèche… I didn't cry when he did, but I did have a lump in my throat. I thought that if I showed him I was sad, then how would the educators react? I think they do it very well, comforting … come to me … come and wave to Mummy, Mummy will be back soon… taking him on their laps, taking him to the window. That all makes me feel better and then I know that he's not sitting in a corner crying. They give him a lot of attention." (f)

Emotions and concerns of immigrant parents

The last subject investigated in the survey was to see if there were any differences in emotions and concerns between different groups of parents. The intention here was to indicate what educators should take into consideration when making contact with parents whose styles of child-rearing and ways of life are different to the Dutch norm, such as with immigrant parents or parents with only a basic education.

The relatively small number of non-immigrant parents interviewed meant it was not possible to directly compare the emotions and concerns of immigrant and non-immigrant parents. We did, however, examine which of the emotions and concerns expressed by immigrant parents were directly linked to their specific backgrounds and capacities.

Language and cultural differences

Many immigrant parents' limited ability to speak Dutch means that they and their children often encounter a language barrier. This barrier can make their children's introduction to the childcare centres more difficult than usual.

> "He had always been in familiar surroundings and then I had to leave him at the crèche. He cried a lot at first. I often rang to ask if he had stopped crying and then he spent the whole day sitting on the lap of one of the educators. There he was among all those strange children who spoke Dutch and he didn't feel at home." (t)

But children learn quickly – more quickly than most of their parents. Some immigrant parents feel very isolated by the language barrier but are pleased when educators try to make contact with them.

> "I feel now that they want to talk more. But sometimes I see there's a question mark. Who is this person? We have been meeting for a year, but we don't know one another, and they don't know me. I feel that the language [not knowing each others' languages] is a barrier." (k)

When immigrant parents compare their contact with the educators with their contacts with other professionals in the Netherlands, they said they felt that they had been made more welcome at the childcare centres, much more so than, for example, on the bus! Some parents actively looked for ways to 'solve' the language barrier, for example by enlisting the aid of compatriots who speak more Dutch, or by switching to English or French.

More highly educated immigrants also reported cultural barriers. Cultural differences often remain a significant problem, even when the language barrier has been crossed.

> "At first, there was miscommunication [with the educator], but we were soon able to talk things through. (How did you find this out?) This miscommunication happened with our Mum, who doesn't speak Dutch. Our Mum didn't realise this at all, but this happens if you have different cultures and mentalities. What we think of as normal can seem really rude in another culture. It was just an expression which was misunderstood. Fortunately, it was soon sorted out." (t)

Experiences of being an immigrant in the Netherlands

Immigrants also have to deal with the fact that they often have difficult personal histories which the educators do not know about. The sharing of backgrounds can deepen contacts; but parents [and educators] will not always be willing or capable to share their emotional experiences with each other.

> "No, I haven't told [the educators that I am a refugee] although I have no problems with being a refugee. I am proud that I have been able to carry on and lead a normal life after all my experiences. I don't mind them knowing, but they don't have to get involved with this, because I've got it under control. If I met someone who understood my feelings about this, then I would want to share it with them ..." (k)

Immigrant parents naturally would rather discuss their hurt feelings at their sometimes hostile reception by the Dutch with their compatriots than with non-immigrant educators.

> "If I feel that I'm being ignored, then that hurts. But I don't bother with it. I know a Turkish woman … we grew up in the same neighbourhood and also now live close by. We talk about a lot of things ... that, too. But I can talk to her ... I don't have to discuss it with the people here." (u)

But many immigrant parents do appreciate educators showing an interest and asking them questions about their home situation and personal experiences.

> "It all depends on the tone. It really is the way they say it. They're all mothers themselves, I really like that. If they're mothers themselves, then they'll know … not from all that pedagogic stuff, but from their own experience as mothers … what it's like to have children." (i)

The emotions and concerns of parents with basic and higher levels of education

Many parents with only a basic education look up to the educators for their professionalism as they have studied to get their jobs and so should be able to give good advice. Some parents with a basic education, however, avoid contact because they feel they cannot bridge the gap between them and feel that they live in different worlds. Others, although they look up to the educators, are nevertheless quite critical. The professionalism of the educators is in general important to many parents who only have a basic education.

> "Oh, when I compare this crèche and the other one – this crèche is better, because the other is private and the lady who owns the place is the boss. She can make any decision she wants … she made the children afraid … she's somebody who's not nice to talk to. The main thing is that they look after your child properly, not that you're Ghanaian or Surinamese or Dutch." (a)

Another important point is that a number of the children of the only basically educated parents have been referred to the centre as their children were judged to be in need of professional childcare for their proper development.

These parents did not choose to have their children attending childcare; it was a social worker or a health centre that convinced them to send their children.

> "It's also because I know someone who brought me here – a woman from the health centre. She comes here to have a look from time to time and she also visits me at home to see how it's going. Sometimes I call her about things. At first, my son was behind with learning to talk. She arranged for him to come to this crèche when he was two years old." (v)

The words used show that these parents felt they did not have a choice about this.

> "I have a very sweet daughter. If you say to her 'sit, stand, lie down', then she does it. And I've got one who says 'I'm going to pull the blinds down so no-one can see me.' She's really difficult, yes, very aggressive, hyperactive … that's the youngest. They don't know what to do with her. They want to send her to … the *juppas*[4] or something, that's part of the P. [local name for the mental health care department]. In three months I have to go back to the clinic and then they want to send her to the *juppas*." (j)

As only three parents with a higher education were interviewed, their views should not be seen as representative of such parents. However, as their statements do link together well and differ significantly from statements made by parents with only a basic education, they do form a basis for further investigation.

The educators are also seen by the highly educated parents in this survey as professionals, but more as professionals who are accountable for what they do and how they treat the children. Such a parent had talked to his child's educator in the following impertinent way – as he himself admitted – to test her and to know what level of education she had.

> "I asked the educator what she did – a very impertinent question. I'm a father, and my son is sometimes cross with me, too; so I wonder what I should do. I said, 'You're a professional', what would you do?" (s)

The highly educated parents are more inclined to comment on the way that educators care for their children. They can more easily point out weak spots.

> "The educators are well trained, but that's not true of the substitute staff. And what I think, I always tell the schoolmistress when I think something's not right and someone needs to do something about that. […] What I see, for example, is that when a substitute educator changes her nappies they often don't clean her bottom properly." (i)

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[4] *The speaker seems to be confusing 'De Jutter', a local centre for child psychiatry, with 'yuppies'.*

Two of the three parents were able to articulate the role they played in conversations with educators. One parent claimed that the role of a parent demanded a different kind of language and attitude from that of an adult at work where serious conversation was appropriate that would be inappropriate at the crèche. One parent said that while he was in the centre he was there just as a 'father' and so would mostly address other parents in their roles as parents. He felt that it would normally only be outside the centre that they would address each other in other roles such as their professional ones.

The perspectives of educators and parents

It is interesting to examine at which points the emotions and concerns of educators and parents overlap and at which points they conflict. In summary the survey results (Table 7) showed the following:

- When children were brought to the centre and collected, parents and educators experienced similar positive emotions. They were generally happy with the mutual contact (84% and 82% respectively). For parents, 'trust' was the second most important concern (36%), followed by 'neutral (32%) and 'pride' (23%). For the educators, feeling 'neutral (40%), 'proud' (32%) and 'curious' and 'caring' (both 12%) were the next most common feelings.
- The negative emotions experienced by educators and parents when the children were brought to school and collected showed greater differences. The emotion most often mentioned by parents was that of 'being in a hurry' (36%), while educators mentioned 'embarrassment/guilt', 'pretending' (hiding feelings) and 'insecurity' (48%, 44% and 36% respectively). The educators said they felt more negative emotions probably because they felt responsible for the contact and knew that at times this can be problematic.
- With the report meetings, there was a slight difference between the positive emotions of educators and parents. Educators mainly said positive emotions were 'normal' (34%), followed by the emotions of 'happiness', 'pride' and 'concern' (21%). Parents reported mostly feeling 'curious' (23%) as well as 'neutral' and 'happiness' (both 15%).
- The negative emotions felt by educators and parents during report meetings showed few differences. Both educators and parents reported feeling 'insecure' (43% and 38%) and sometimes 'sad' (17% and 23%).
- A notable point was that both parents and educators felt largely positive emotions when children were brought to and picked up from school, while negative emotions predominated at report meetings.

The survey response data in Table 8 on the issues of concern and importance makes it possible to compare the concerns of educators and parents.

- The educators and parents shared a number of issues of concern. Both groups wanted contact to be easy (84% and 77%), they wanted a safe environment (40% and 41%) and a learning-friendly environment for the children (36% and 41%). However, immigrant parents and educators tended to have a different outlook on these child-centred concerns. These parents were mostly concerned with results, such as that their children were learning how to live in Dutch society and were learning the Dutch language, whilst the educators were mostly concerned with the process, for example that there was a good environment for children to learn in.
- The parents and educators had different concerns about the provision of information. Twenty-four percent of the educators said it was important to report on a child's developmental progress so that, if necessary, help could be sought early on, such as by referring them to the child welfare services. The parents did not mention this concern. They usually only wanted information on day-to-day happenings concerning their children to help them feel at ease in putting their children into a centre's care.
- Some concerns complement one another. Thus, 44% of educators highlighted the importance of supporting parents, while parents distinguished between them receiving pedagogic support as a parent (33%) and personal support as an individual (27%). The parents who valued pedagogic support included those who viewed educators as having more knowledge and experience than them, including those parents for whom it was their first child attending a childcare centre.
- The provision of personal support was picked out as particularly important by parents with little or no support at home from family or friends. The educators reported that they needed to have parents' trust in this regard (32%), while parents said that in this situation they needed to be treated with respect (23%).
- Many issues of concerns were specific to either educators or parents. For example, 56% of educators believed it was important that they should express solidarity with parents whilst the parents did not mention this issue. Maybe no actual solidarity exists as educators who need support said they found it with their colleagues (52%). Moreover, half of the educators said they were concerned to avoid difficult situations (52%) and to maintain a professional attitude (24%), which sometimes meant 'keeping a professional distance' if the contact became too personal. Other important concerns for educators related to receiving individual support were being recognised for their efforts (44%), learning new things from and about parents (36%) and facilities/equipment (28%). The parents did not mention these concerns. Fifty-four percent of parents did, however, point to the issue of combining the centre's procedures with the demands of their employer.
- The survey also found that the issues of concern relating to the interests of the child were more important to parents than to educators. On average, while the educators more often mentioned issues related to their concern for having positive contacts, educators picked out more than two issues in this area whilst parents only picked out

an average of one-and-a-half. On the other hand, parents mentioned more concerns related to the interests of the children at a ratio of 1.7:1.0.

- A half of the parents saw the happiness of their child as an important issue whilst none of the educators did. This could be explained by the fact that, although educators certainly want to make the children happy, they see the child as part of their group of children, while parents think in terms of the interests of their own child as an individual. The educators were consequently more inclined to apply importance to factors such as having a safe environment.

Conclusions

The emotions and concerns of parents and educators

The survey found that educators and parents generally experience contacts between them as positive. They were usually happy to meet one another although they experienced differing emotions and concerns at times of contact. Educators and parents wanted contact to be easy so as to facilitate optimal care for the children in a safe and supportive environment. The educators had more negative emotions, such as feelings of insecurity and guilt, than the parents did as they felt responsible for ensuring good contact and realised that such contacts would not always be harmonious.

Some of the concerns, such as ease of contact and a safe and supportive environment for the children, were shared by parents and educators. Other concerns were specific to either group whilst some were highlighted by only one party, as for example where quite a number of educators said they wanted to support parents with parents wanting such advice, but the vice-versa situation was not true. Some issues of concern seem conflicting as, for example where many educators said it was important to feel solidarity with parents (84%), while 52% sought to avoid difficult situations, and 52% sought support from their colleagues rather than from parents. What is highlighted is that educators want to give solidarity to parents, but are not ready to 'receive' solidarity from them.

Many parents said they got personal support from educators whilst bringing in and picking up their children from the centres, which means that some of them allow more time for this although parents who work full-time said that they often did not have time for this as they had to rush on to work.

Contrary to expectations, progress report meetings were not generally experienced as moments when educators and parents built their relationships as they were often times when childs' problems were discussed. Educators and parents said they found these meetings less positive than the daily contacts at the start and end of the school day. However, there was a difference here between the four pilot centres. If report meetings were

held more regularly, and became more than just an occasion for giving and receiving bad news, then educators would be more likely to experience them as normal, and parents would be more likely to feel curious rather than insecure.

A basis for living together, working together and thinking/making decisions together?
The survey found that on many occasions educators and parents did not interact on an equal footing or with the same concerns. For example, on the mutual exchange of information; although both educators and parents need this transfer of information to happen, parents were more concerned with day-to-day information on their child so that they felt comfortable leaving their children at the centres. When a parent asks an educator a question about their child the educator can interpret this as either them showing an interest or as trying to control or test the educator. The latter interpretation tends to be made mainly when the parent involved is highly educated and asks questions that the educator finds difficult to answer. Educators say that the childcare centre also has a responsibility to note and report developments concerning the children. Problems may arise when an educator's remarks about a child's development clash with parents' expectations.

The survey also found that on some occasions educators avoided difficult situations by adopting a professional distancing stance, something that parents can interpret as negative and stand-offish. All the same, the parents did want to receive support about as much as the educators wanted to provide it; and so support tends to be just from educators to parents. Educators are happy to have their efforts validated by parents, but mainly look for support to their own colleagues. The conclusion is thus that even though educators would like to interact with parents as equal working partners, differences in their issues of concern tends to lead to an asymmetrical relationship.

Taking parental diversity into account
Finally, the survey showed that immigrant parents are sometimes hampered in their contacts by the language barrier, their different cultural backgrounds and their experiences in the Netherlands that they do not share with non-immigrants. However, these parents found that the centres treated them with more warmth and respect than their contacts with Dutch society in general. Parents using the centres on the advice of the social services said they appreciated the warmth and attention the educators offered them. Another significant difference was that highly educated parents tended to approach educators (and other parents) in a 'controlling' way that implicitly reminded educators about their responsibilities. Parents with only a basic education did not do this.

Recommendations

The following three specific recommendations are made based on the survey findings.

1. Childcare centres should provide more adequate and timely information on childrens' progress and not only hold progress meetings when a problem arises with children but also when their development is on track.
- This recommendation is in response to the finding that many parents said they were not kept sufficiently informed about the role of the childcare centre in reporting on children's development. Many parents felt ignorant and impotent at progress meetings.

2. Train educators to better recognise parents' emotions and concerns so as they can interact more fruitfully with parents. (See Chapter 6 for a possible initiative on this).
- This is in response to the finding that at times the educator–parent relationship was out of balance as, for example, when educators interpreted questions from some parents as 'controlling'. The educators need to be aware that parents take this approach to test that the educator is capable of looking after their children to the required standard. Other parents do not make this test as they trust the educator's professionalism. This situation makes joint parent–teacher working more difficult.

3. Establish or strengthen handover rituals at the beginning and end of children's day at the centres.
- Many parents attached significant importance to a good handover ritual while bringing in and picking up their children to make it easier for them to hand over their child and then to receive them back in good shape. The educators did not identify this as an issue of concern. The parents felt that a clearly demarcated transfer of the care of the child from parent to educator and back again increases the parents' and the children's esteem for the educator and helps lessen parents' feelings of guilt. A good ritual is probably also important for educators by offering a fixed point in their relationship with parents.

Other more general conclusions and recommendations relating to the Parents and Diversity project and its accompanying research are presented in the Synthesis and Conclusions (page 129).

References

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Chapter 5: Contacts between educators and parents – what do they talk about?

Fuusje de Graaff

The previous chapter presented the findings of a survey carried out as part of the Parents and Diversity project to identify the issues of concern for educators and parents on running childcare centres for young children. This chapter reports on the findings of a second round of interviews and discussions subsequently carried out with the 25 educators and 22 parents on the specific subjects of 'thinking together' and 'making decisions together'. This research particularly focussed on how educators and parents deal with differences of opinion. The subjects most frequently discussed were the daily programme, the way centres are organised, playing outside and safety precautions, and hygiene and sick children.

The interviews and discussions were based around the example in Box 5 and four photos to explore the parents' and educators' opinions on matters likely to concern them. The example was about a childcare centre's parents wanting to change the daily programme to make it fit better with their personal schedules. This concrete example showed that parents could have different ideas and opinions to educators and between themselves. The other subjects for discussion were illustrated with photos of a child having its nappy changed (Figure 3), a child sitting on a box (Figure 4), a child spreading butter on bread (Figure 5) and a photo of a childcare centre room (Figure 6).
The educators and parents interviewed were asked what subjects they thought were important, what their opinions on these subjects were, and how they would deal with differences of opinion. The interviews were recorded and typed out in full. The texts were then qualitatively analysed.

Levels of interest in the discussion subjects

Educators. The educators immediately recognised the daily programme example in Box 5 and all 25 wanted to discuss their related experiences. Other subjects discussed by the educators were the policy on changing nappies (discussed 17 times), dealing with sick children at the centres (16 times) and playing outside (15 times) (see Table 9). The subject of 'developing safely' focused on the dilemma of how to keep children safe without restricting the important experiences of learning from mistakes and minor accidents.

No child learns to walk without falling over now and then. Two photos were used to illustrate this subject with one photo of a young child sitting on a box (Figure 4) and one of a 3-year-old learning to spread butter on bread (Figure 5). The choice of photos meant that educators in centres with separate groups for toddlers and older children would be easily able to identify with at least one of the situations shown. Fifteen of the educators chose to discuss the subject of developing safely while only seven discussed the subject of 'child-rearing in a group being different from child-rearing at home'.

Parents. Most of the parents (14 out of 19) thought it was important to discuss the timing of meals or snacks within the programme, while the other five said the existing order should be accepted (see Table 9). The most popular discussion subject was dealing with sick children and whether or not they should be brought to the centre, and how parents were to decide in borderline cases. Many of the parents (13) also chose to discuss the dilemmas around children 'developing safely' prompted by the photos shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Views on the discussion topics

Decisions about the daily programme

The educators' views. All the educators thought that they had to respond somehow to parents' requests about the daily programme. They thought that they should not agree to the type of request in the example in Box 5, but should first consult their colleagues.

> "Yes, I would then respond the next day, because I would first speak to my colleagues." (Educators respondent 18)

They agreed, however, that if several parents made the same request then this could mean that the policy needed changing.

Table 9. Subjects discussed with educators and parents

Subject	The daily programme	Sick children	Changing nappies	Playing outside	Developing safely		Organi-sation/ group child-rearing
					Using knife	Child on box	
Times discussed by educators	20	16	17	15	10	9	7
Times discussed by parents	14	16	10	7	9	8	9

Box 5. Discussion example about parents wanting to change the daily programme (from the fictional De Kikkers childcare centre)

The daily programme. The children arrive between 08:30 and 9:30. At 10 o'clock, they sit in a circle and are given crackers, fruit and a drink. From 10:30 onwards they play with paint or paper or go outside to play. The children have a lunch of soup and sandwiches between 12:00 and 12:30. The younger ones then take a nap and the older ones play quietly to one side. The little ones wake up between 14:30 and 15:00. At 15:30, they are given another drink and a cracker with fruit. From then on they are allowed to play as they want, if possible in the play area in front of the centre. The children are collected by their parents between 16:00 and 17:30.

The parents' issues. Until now educator Tinka had been happy with this programme. Then, this week, two parents asked if the programme could be changed. But they wanted different changes. Mrs Smit said that her daughter didn't want to eat at 17:00 when she got home as she had so much to eat at the centre at 16:00. Her mother asked if they could eat earlier. Mrs Alali, however, said that her child was always very hungry when she was collected at 17:30 and asked if her daughter could have her snack a bit later?

The question. How should Tinka respond?

> "I would talk with my colleagues about [the issue] asking if it had been raised before and asking how we should deal with it and what did we think about it as there is usually a good reason for existing policies." (13)

But sometimes queries are just one-offs in which case it is important to ask the parent in question why they have problems with the existing arrangements.

> "I think I would first have a quiet talk with the parent to find out exactly what the reason was and whether or not we could make special arrangements." (6)

Many educators wanted to first explain the present rules and what factors the childcare centre took into consideration.

> "I would first explain to the parents how things were at the centre, how we sit together at the table to eat and drink, and at what times we do that and why." (19)

One argument against changing the eating time was that if every child ate at a different time the educators would be dealing with little else the all day long. They also pointed out that children like eating together. A third argument was that it is good for the school day to have a fixed structure.

However, it was agreed that it was not just a matter of explaining the existing rules. Many educators said they would be prepared, after due consideration, to depart from the existing way of doing things. Some said that they could vary the amount of food a child gets at mealtimes with one getting a bit more, another a bit less and the children who stay later getting an extra snack.

"I would keep to the set time and keep an eye on the child that had to be collected early to make sure he or she didn't eat too much. And the child that is collected very late would get something extra at five o'clock … some juice or a biscuits" (28)

The differences between the answers reflected the variations that exist in practice. In many centres, everyone eats together, and these are quiet periods in the day. In the baby groups, however, children have their own individual patterns of eating and sleeping. One of the surveyed centres provides childcare for immigrant mothers attending adult education centres, and so the children come and go at irregular times and the daily programme has to be flexible. As such children do not eat typical Dutch food at home, it has been agreed that mothers can send their own food for these children. Here, as far as possible, the children eat together at the same table, but with each child eating its own food.

The parents' views. All the parents of toddlers recognised the example involving the daily programme (Box 5.1); the parents of the babies less so. Fourteen parents discussed how they thought the situation should be dealt with. Many tried to put themselves in the place of the educators and most of them recognised that they should put the interests of the group above those of individuals.

"I would still keep to the programme because once parents start trying to change it they will keep on trying to make changes." (10)

Some parents also said that, although educators should maintain the set times, they should be flexible about the amounts of food they give to different children. They also said that parents should conform to the times set by the childcare centre and not vice-versa.

"The centre has certain customs. This is a good thing and I support it." (25)

In fact, the parents said they would generally accept the existing situation.

"No, I've never been involved in any discussion about something like that [the example in Box 5.1]. Mostly, it's already been decided. The educators say, 'On such-and-such a day, we're going there and this and that will be done' … The programme is already decided." (12)

And they said that if anyone wanted their child to eat at a different time then it should be viewed as that parent's child being difficult about food.

In short: Parents said they generally accepted their childcare centre's existing programme and its rules and did not expect anyone to consult them and would only ask for things to change if it affected their child personally. If parents are asked for their opinion it seems

probable that in most cases they would agree with the existing system. Both parties endorsed the importance of eating together both at the centre and at home.

Dealing with sick children

The educators' views. The surveyed educators categorically believed that sick children should not be brought to the centre because they could not be given the attention they needed there. When ill, a child cannot take part in the programme and even just lying on the couch is usually too much for them with all the other children playing round. The babies group all had their own little beds, but even then the educators said they could not give them enough attention. Also, the fact that some illnesses are contagious was said to be a good reason for not having sick children at the centres.

> "When we have our first introductory talk with the parents, we tell parents that it is a rule that children who are ill or have a temperature should not come to the group. Because it's very hectic, it's not good for a child lying on the couch. If you were sick and you were lying there, you wouldn't like it either, you'd rather be at home in peace and quiet." (27)

Educators think that they need to inform parents of this beforehand, but say that the whole subject comes up again as soon as a parent wants to bring in or brings in a sick child.

The educators said that a child with a high temperature (39° C/102° F) should not be brought to the centre. If any children develop this temperature during the day, then the staff would phone the parents to fetch the child home. The educators noted that some parents hid their child's illness by giving the child a suppository before coming to the centre to bring their temperature down.

> "Sometimes we get children and know that they had a high temperature the day before and the next morning it's miraculously disappeared. And then we suspect they may have used suppositories." (15)

Educators understand that a sick child creates problems for parents as, for example, employers may not understand that the mother cannot come to work, or because the parent has no more holidays left to take.

> "[Educators and parents] [t]aking decisions together is difficult, because parents often want something else. I understand that they want the ill child to be in our care and why they want this – because then they don't need to take time off work. But the child is not safe with us if it's really ill." (13)

And so, in spite of the very clear guidelines, each case was said to provoke different reactions. Sometimes an educator will blame the parent whilst sometimes she'll feel sympathetic, especially if the parent is a single working mother.

The educators said they tried to interpret the rules flexibly, because some illnesses affect some children worse than others. Moreover, they said it is easier to accommodate an ailing child in some groups than in others.

> "It used to be that children with chicken pox weren't allowed to come to the centre. But the infectious period actually takes place two weeks before the spots appear, so the bacteria are already there. So we have agreed that such children must stay home if they've got a high temperature, but once this has gone and they're feeling OK – but maybe still a bit itchy but not ill – then they can come to the centre. So that has changed." (16)

Some educators said that they can convince parents not to bring their ill children to school by saying that these rules have been laid down by the area health authorities. Also, the educators knew that they could only give children medicine prescribed by a doctor.

> "We can give medicine, but only if it's prescribed by a doctor. We are not allowed to give suppositories. We just don't do that ... or aspirin. We will give antibiotics, but only if they've been prescribed." (13)

The parents' views. All of the parents thought that sick children ought to stay at home. Some of them based this on the rules of the childcare centre, but for most it was their own opinion giving reasons like "otherwise the sick children would infect the others" or "it's nicer for my child to be at home then". (However, as shown below some parents go against these principles sometimes for their own benefit.)

> "If my child is ill, then I don't take him to the centre. First, because he ought to be looked after at home and the educator can't do that with 14 children to look after, while at home you've just got the one child. And also because he shouldn't infect the other children." (17)

Parents say that there is a grey area when children are only a little bit ill. Here, if the child wants to go then they said they would take them assuming that the educators would get in touch if their condition worsened.

> "When is a child not allowed to come? My daughter has just had ringworm on her cheeks and hands and then you're not allowed to take her … but she likes the centre so much and the condition takes a long time to clear up. I just took her to the centre anyway." (1)

Most of the parents only had a vague idea about the centre's formal policy on this subject. Some said they had been given information, either written or verbal, at the induction interview, but could not remember the details.

> "I really can't remember [whether I was given information about sick children attending the centre], but I do know that if he's not feeling well but still wants to go, then I will just take him. And if he's feeling worse, then they can always phone. And that has only happened once." (21)

Parents who have been using the childcare centre for some time realise that the children in the centre can catch things from each other. Although the parents think this is unfortunate for their child, they do accept that they have to and will contract the different childhood diseases.

In short: The parents' comments on ill children going to school were less emotionally charged than the educators'. The educators often seemed to make judgements on parents, either being sorry for mothers with sick children or thinking they weren't caring enough. The parents had no corresponding ideas about the educators or the centres and sometimes tested the boundaries.

Nappy changing

Figure 3 provided a focal point for discussions on the important issue of changing children's nappies.

Figure 3. Discussion photo 1 – nappy changing

PHOTO COURTESY BUREAU MUTANT

The educators' views. The childcare centres have clear rules about nappy changing. Educators assume, for example, that children will be clean when they are brought in and clean for going home. The children mainly have their nappies changed at fixed times, but a child who gets a dirty nappy at other times will be changed then. In the childcare centre where children arrive and leave at different times, there was no fixed time for nappy changing, and it was said to happen on demand.

Parents are informed about the policy on nappy-changing at the introductory interviews. Generally, nappies are changed every three hours.

> "We have a talk during the introductory interview with a photo album showing everything we do – even the nappy-changing policy is in there … We change every two-and-a-half to three hours. And if parents do it differently then we use their method, but we try to work towards our timing. And that can take a few weeks to arrive at but usually it works out." (15)

For older children, the nappy-changing routine is part of their toilet training. Children are praised if they 'do something' in the potty or on the toilet. Educators will discuss with parents whether their child is ready for toilet training.

A number of the educators said that that nappy changing was not a technical process to be carried out mechanically. It should be interactive, with educator and child responding to each other while the child is being undressed and dressed. In addition, the separation from the other children, the interaction and the physical contact make nappy changing a moment of intimacy that helps to create a bond between educator and child, where they look at one another, laugh together and communicate. The educators also said that they kept an eye on hygiene while changing nappies. Parents are informed about the nappy changing policy at introductory interviews, but this often only becomes an important subject of discussion after something goes wrong. If educators notice that a child has been brought to the centre wearing a nappy they have had on all night, they will point this out to the parent.

Sometimes, when a child gets nappy rash, the two sides can 'blame' each other for not changing the child often enough.

> "I have sometimes had questions [about the policy on nappy changing] from parents after their child develops a nappy rash. One mother was very shocked about the nappy rash on her child … not so much at us, but because the doctor had said that it was a fungal infection and she was shocked. She said, that's not possible … how could it happen? And the doctor had said, yes, she's had the same nappy on for too long. So, that's why, the child had only been at the centre for three days and so she asked about the policy. We sorted it out by explaining how we worked." (15)

The parents' views. The parents said that they followed the rules about nappy changing. Almost all centres ask parents to send a set of clean clothes with their child in case they wet or soil themselves. Some centres also ask parents to send an extra disposable nappy every day. Other centres supply nappies. Parents generally ask what the rules are at the beginning and accept them.

> "The first time, I didn't know how it worked – I brought food and drink and nappies. But then they told me I didn't need to bring any nappies or wipes as they had enough for all the children." (44)

On seeing the nappy changing photo (Figure 3), many parents commented on how important hygiene is. For many parents, the level of hygiene is an important criterion for choosing a childcare centre.

> "Yes, because I wasn't happy with the care at another centre. The way they dealt with the children wasn't nice. He was always dirty there." (24)

Some parents believed that they are more careful about hygiene than the educators while others thought that the nappy changing at their centre was very hygienic. Many also said that nappy changing is the perfect moment for having 'close contact' with a child.

> "I think it's important for the child that it's one-to-one then … it's quite intimate isn't it? I sing or talk to him or give him something to play with when I'm changing him, or pull funny faces." (12)

In short: The educators mainly wanted to explain to parents about their centres' nappy changing policy to get the parents to cooperate. If parents thought differently, then it was often because they were having problems with their child. Hygiene is important for parents. Also, many parents and educators see nappy changing as not just a technical process, but also as a moment of personal attention for their child.

Playing outside

The educators' views. The educators said they informed parents about why they try to play outside with the children as often as possible. They think that children learn a lot from playing outside, that they can expend their energy and it's healthier for them, even if they do sometimes get dirty.

> "Playing in the sandpit is good for their motor development and for their spatial awareness. For example, if they're filling a bucket with sand, then they discover the bucket is completely full or there's still a bit of room or …. It's not exactly hygienic, to be honest, but you can't bring up a child in a completely sterile environment and it seems that it also helps them build up resistance." (8)

The educators said that many parents had other ideas on this topic. They said that many parents did not rate the pedagogic value of playing outside as highly and tended to dwell on the disadvantages with some of them afraid that cold or wet weather would make their child ill or that it was unhygienic.

It was especially certain immigrant parents who objected to their children playing outside. They were afraid that their children could catch a cold and often dressed them up too warmly.

> "Well, we try and tell them – playing outside is nice with lovely fresh air in their lungs. But it goes very deep with some parents … fear of illness, I think with fear of them catching a cold." (14)

Some educators could not understand the parents' anxieties.

> "Some parents say that their child isn't allowed to play outside because it will make them ill. There was one recently, a very annoying, obstinate, inflexible, strict father. He was always angry if we had the windows open. Then I explained to him that we had a definite policy and rules which stated that we had to keep the rooms aired and that freshened everything up because you breathed in more oxygen and breathed out the germs. So I was able to explain to him a bit why it was a good thing and why it was good to take the children outside. Well, he was prepared to listen, but actually, he was more like – I want my own way and that's it." (13)

Playing in the sandpit is unpopular with some parents. Some do not want their children to get their clothes dirty or are frightened their children will have an allergic reaction.

> "Well, we've got a very lively child in the group who loves the sandpit – turn round, and she's in it again. You tell her that it's not allowed and she doesn't understand and she thinks it's lovely. Her mother claims it gives her a rash and she sleeps in her mother's bed so her Mum has contracted a rash too. That's understandable. But for the child … the fun she has, you can just see it." (29)

Other parents – especially parents of children with frizzy hair – complain because it is not easy to wash the sand out of their children's hair.

This problem came up at all childcare centres, but solutions varied. In one centre, the educators reported checking whether it was actually true that washing sand out of frizzy hair irritated the child's scalp. In another centre, they tried to keep children in clean clothes or with frizzy hair out of the sandpit; although they would rather not have separated these children out. A third centre's staff said they talked to parents so that they could make a joint decision on what was worse for the children – suffering an itch from playing in the sandpit or feeling excluded because other children were playing with sand and they could not. Educators said that their solutions had not always led to satisfactory results. Some parents had taken away their children because of the sandpit. In one centre, the educators had extra sets of clothing for children who were too neatly dressed, and children with frizzy hair were given stocking caps to wear to keep out the sand. In this centre, the educators were well aware that sand in frizzy hair is unpleasant as many of them had frizzy hair themselves.

Educators said that playing in the sandpit and playing outside generally entailed a great deal of watchfulness on their part, but they seldom talked to the parents about this.

> "If the sun's shining, then I think we'll go outside for a bit. But you have to be very careful. They go up the steps and half of them go down again and they can slip. You have to be alert … really it needs two of you. But it isn't usually a problem. It's more for you … you have to be very careful. It's not something to discuss with parents." (41)

Discussions do take place when going outside entails going to an outside children's farm or to the woods or the park. Parents are usually informed in advance about such outings and are sometimes asked to help. Parents rarely, if ever, have any objections.

> "We try to organise an outing with the parents twice a year in the summer. If we involve the parents, then it's one-to-one and every child has an escort. Then we can go out, to Artis or Tumfun. Parents enjoy that." (18)

Educators make sure that there are enough helpers and that they keep parents informed as some parents worry.

The parents' views. Quite a few parents (7 out of 19) commented about their children playing outside. Three of them thought it was fine, and they could see that their children liked it and that they could expend their energy. They thought it was important that the educators should be watchful and believed that the more stationary educators were more likely to catch cold than the active children.

One parent did not want her sons to play in the sandpit. She thought sandpits were unhygienic and made her objections known to the educators, but understood that her sons wanted to play with the others and that the educators could not prevent it.

One parent did not want her child to play outside in winter because he had asthma and she was afraid this would bring on an attack. She made this known to the educators who promised to watch over him. So for her, there was no problem.

Two parents emphasised the importance of adequate supervision, especially when children played outside on the slide, but also when the children were washing their hands indoors after playing outside.

A third parent thought it was important that the outside equipment was properly maintained. All three admitted, on being asked, that they had not discussed their worries with the staff.

In short: Parent-teacher interactions on children playing outside were often limited to educators explaining their centre's policies to parents, or asking parents for their cooperation. Educators seemed not to enter into parents' worries and concerns. They were mainly concerned with explaining the pedagogic values of playing outside. Quite a few educators made negative remarks about parents who were not enthusiastic about their children playing outside.

Stimulating children's development

The educators' views. Educators are very focused on children's development. Their main aim in working out the daily programme and choosing play equipment is to stimulate their children and encourage their independence.

> "You have to be aware that you have definite ideas on the subjects of furnishing the rooms, on your pedagogic policy, and I think that you have to discuss this with the parents during introductory interviews, covering what we do with the children … we've got this equipment and why. And you ask parents, 'How do you do this at home, what kinds of toys, how does your child play, does he or she play outside?'" (4)

Educators note that parents are less aware of this and educators therefore often take the initiative by informing parents about their child's development.

> "I always tell them what their child has been doing when the parents come to fetch them. He did this, played with that … I always tell them something … it's for the parent too. But they mostly say something like, 'Yes, as long as he ate some food, it's fine.'" (40)

This information is partly given in passing, in connection with planned activities or visible progress, but partly also in the context of report meetings or when a child moves to an older group. The transition from the baby to the toddlers group, or sometimes to a group of older toddlers and the transition to primary school; these are all difficult changes. Educators take this into account whilst planning their programmes.

> "When older children move to primary school, we talk to the parents and say, 'He's 3½ now, we allow him to butter the bread and cut the sandwiches. Is that all right with you? Do you do this at home?' Then we tell the parents that we think it's good for them to learn how to use a knife; but, if they don't use it properly, we take it away. That's how we deal with it." (27)

The educators say that parents are almost always pleased with their children's progress. The stimulation at the childcare centre also affects children's behaviour at home with them usually becoming more independent and acting in a more grown-up manner. Sometimes this

can cause problems, especially if parents have other ideas about rules and behaviour. Educators also note that some parents put a higher priority on safety than on stimulating their child's development. They are afraid that something will go wrong and want to protect their children.

> "I let her climb, but her mother would rather we didn't allow climbing. Actually, it's a bit of a dilemma. So I talk with the mother about it." (2)

Occasionally, this can lead to conflict with parents if, for example, a child has a fall. Parents are naturally very upset if their child is injured and this can diminish their trust in the educators. If this happens educators try to explain the circumstances and show that they were acting responsibly.

> "For parents, safety is all-important. Even if their child only gets a little scratch, some parents can be in tears and angry. Sometimes I find this very difficult. I understand it … of course you protect your child. They say, 'You are supposed to watch her.' I reply, 'Yes, that's true, but we can't see everything.' Last week something like that happened … a girl scratched another child over her eye and the mother was crying. How did we solve it? We just kept on saying that we do watch out." (42)

The balance between letting children do things on their own and helping them is a subject educators often talk about. One educator is confident that children will find their own boundaries, while another prefers to set boundaries in advance. And educators must take into consideration the fact that they are responsible for their whole group.

Letting children discover things for themselves can also conflict with the other objectives. It is often time-consuming. If there is any danger, then the educators must supervise, though they have to divide their time and attention among all the children.

> "Encouraging autonomy is very good. I notice that I sometimes forget this in my professional capacity; that I don't let them work independently enough if I'm too busy in the group. Then I say, oh, I'll do it and it's done. From a practical point of view it's easier if I do it, but it's very good if they can learn to do it." (40)

Discovering things can, however, develop into dangerous games. Educators are aware of this and set boundaries.

> "Give them a box and let them do what they want with it … it works better than toys. Give them an old newspaper and let them explore by themselves. But how far should these explorations be allowed to go? Personally, I don't like it if they make a gun from

Lego or a stick. I really dislike that. Then you could say to the child, here, make something else, a flute or a fire extinguisher, but not a gun. But otherwise, I think you should let children do their own thing." (2)

The subject of how to stimulate children frequently appears on the agenda at parents' evenings. Sometimes video recordings are made of the children at the centre to give a concrete basis for discussion. In one centre, parents can look from behind a one-way screen at how their children are playing and developing, and how the educators deal with the children.

The parents' views. Most of the parents did not see the photo of the toddler on the box (Figure 4) as representing development, exploration or stimulation. They immediately focussed on the safety aspect.

Figure 4. Discussion photo 2 – child on a box

PHOTO COURTESY BUREAU MUTANT

"I think that's a bit dangerous sitting on top of a box. I think that the educator shouldn't let that sort of thing happen at the centre. Because there are a lot of children and not many educators and I don't think they can watch all those children at the same time." (24)

The other aspect that parents were concerned about was 'protection'.[5] They said that their children also tried climbing at home, but that the home situation is different as there is more protection there per child. Parents hoped that there was enough protection at the centre for their children, precisely in the phase when children start to explore and can get into danger.

When they saw the photo of the little girl buttering bread (Figure 5), although the parents talked about encouraging autonomy they emphasised more about teaching children these skills rather than letting them discover things for themselves. The parents warned educators that children need to learn these things under supervision.

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[5] 'Protection' is used here as a translation of the Dutch word begeleiding, which has no suitable equivalent in English. Begeleiding covers many aspects of a protective relationship: protection, help, support and counselling. It has also been translated as 'supervision', but begeleiding implies a far greater degree of equality of educators and parents than the words 'protection' and 'supervision' imply.

> "How old is that little girl in the photo? I think it's a good idea if they learn to butter bread because they'll soon have to do it themselves. But someone has to be with them, the first time, because they don't know how to use a knife. She could cut her hand … I think it's scary. There should be someone there to tell them how to do it." (44)

Figure 5. Discussion photo 3 – child spreading butter on bread PHOTO COURTESY BUREAU MUTANT

In short: The educators attached more importance than the parents to encouraging autonomy, especially for the younger children. The parents were more concerned about safety. The educators said they explained their ideas to parents, but the latter did not have the impression that this was a matter of 'thinking together' and 'taking decisions together'. This may have to do with the differing perspectives of parents and educators on the balance between children exploring and being helped by adults. Another factor is that parents supervise their children in a quite protected family context while educators have to supervise entire groups, including the interaction between the children. It is not possible to discuss the value of exploring without considering the difference between individual and group supervision.

Supervising groups of children

The educators' views. The educators believed it was important to give proper thought to organising and equipping their classrooms so that they could give their children space to develop their autonomy. They said that they screened off corners so that a few children could play together away from the others and play with different kinds of toys.

> "Arranging the room … it's got a great deal to do with how much you trust the children and how much space there is for them to be private. Most of our rooms are set up with little corners screened off so that the children are sometimes able to play away from the watchful eyes of adults … so that they can play intently without being disturbed by the others running through the room." (4)

Thought is also given to the kind of toys used, and whether they can be stored so that the children can take certain things themselves while others are out of their reach. The educators said they did not discuss this much with parents.

The educators reported that parents sometimes made appreciative remarks about the way the space was arranged and the types of toys on offer.

> "I'm always pleased when I hear parents be enthusiastic about the room – that they think it's so nice …. 'Where can I buy that', and 'Don't you have a lot of toys'." (39)

The educators also recognised that supervising children in a childcare centre is different from the supervision they get at home, as it takes place in a group. Questions from parents such as "Are they all given their own dummies?" and "Do you make sure that the stair gate is properly shut?" are seen more as being questions about hygiene and safety than about the opportunities and limitations of supervision within the group.

The parents' views. The photo of the room (Figure 6), reminded parents of their initial admiration for the layout and the toys, as well as their fear that 'supervising' all those children at the same time must be impossible. Some parents said that at the centre many children had more space to play and run around in than at home.

Figure 6. Discussion photo 4 – a childcare centre room PHOTO COURTESY BUREAU MUTANT

> "I like the way it [the room in Figure 6] is arranged. This, small children, yes … in such a big space. I think it's good to play in, to run about and so on. But, well, you have to watch out, if there's a baby and big children, or one of them pushes another one and he falls on the hard toys … then you really have to watch out!" (44)

What is more, the parents knew that the number of educators in a group is not constant and that they sometimes have to do several things at once. The parents tended to be over-anxious, especially at first. Later, they have more confidence in the 'supervision at a distance' that educators generally prefer.

> "Supervision … I do think there needs to be three educators, because if one answers the phone and the second takes a child to the toilet, then the third is still there keeping an eye on things. I don't think there should be any fewer." (1)

In short: Organising the space and supervising a group of children in this space are a central part of educators' jobs, but they rarely discussed these subjects with parents. Parents can think that educators are miracle workers to supervise so many children at the same time in such a large space. Admiration is mixed with concern. Parents do not always

express these emotions and educators rarely take advantage of any questions and remarks from parents to find out what parents think about the care in the group and the effects of this on individual children. Neither did educators ask parents if this worries them.

Other important subjects

The educators' views. Other subjects educators wanted to discuss with parents were rules on sleeping and eating.

> "I think sleeping is very important. How does a child sleep at home and when and at what time? Does he take a cuddly toy to bed with him or not? I think that there can be enormous differences between what children are used to at home and what I want them to do." (4)

In some centres, educators take into account the fact that some children cannot tolerate milk. Many Chinese and Ghanaian children do not have the right intestinal bacteria to digest it properly. But these children often want to drink what the others are drinking and then find that it gives them diarrhoea. Asking the parents will make it clear who can and who cannot tolerate milk. All centres ask about religious food prohibitions, such as no pork for Muslim children and no beef for Hindus.

Educators note that many parents are very focused on food. Some parents are very concerned about the quality of the food (is it free of pesticides?), others mainly worry whether the children are eating enough, sometimes because the parents themselves have suffered hunger in the past and sometimes because children do not seem to be putting on enough weight.

Educators consult parents about the toilet training they give their children. Many educators plan to have a chat with parents when they think a child is ready for toilet training. Then the parents can encourage this at home. Other parents want to start toilet training at an age which educators think is too early. Then the dialogue tends to become an explanation of the educator's point of view.

> "Yes, that was about the toilet training for one of the children in the group … the parents were pushing for their child to be trained. We explained that their child wasn't ready for it. The father said, 'I just don't want the child wearing nappies any more.' So we tried it for a week, and every day the child took three or four pairs of wet pants home until the parents realised that the child wasn't ready." (20)

The parents' views. The parents also mentioned other subjects they would like to discuss with the educators. Some said that the educators had given them useful tips on how to get their children to sleep or eat.

> "My youngest child cried all the time and I asked the educator what to do about it. I followed her suggestions and now my child is happy ... The educator said I should talk to my baby; but I should also get on with the cooking if I had to. She helped me a lot." (26)

The parents also expressed their admiration for the educators in being able to get all the children to sleep or eat at the same time.

> "I wonder how they put the children to bed. At home he doesn't want to go to bed. They all go to sleep at the same time at the centre, like magic. I asked them how they did it. They answered that they make a sort of game of it like, 'Hooray, we're going to bed!' It's like a ritual … it's the same everyday and so it happens automatically. That's what I think of as part of the 'crèche magic.'" (25)

The group child-rearing at the centre can also help many parents to give their own child-rearing at home greater structure and tranquillity. But many parents deliberately differentiated between the rules at the centre and the rules at home.

> "I like it that the educators explain what their rules are – what the children are supposed to do. That gives you something to fall back on at home. Sometimes you want to keep to the way they do it at the centre, and sometimes you don't." (25)

Parents noted that the group situation at the centre teaches their child to get on with other children. Children learn a lot from one another.

> "When children go to the crèche, they become more active. My daughter plays with other children very well now … it's not a problem for her and I think that's very important. She does a lot of things at home now, like singing, for example, clapping hands, dancing and games." (38)

Some parents worried about how the children function in the group.

> "[I talked to the educator] about the children when they're together in a group, that some of them feel excluded … I brought that up. It starts when they're toddlers with children bullying one another. I brought that up and I talked to my child about it." (7)

The parents mainly worried about how their own child was functioning. They asked the educators what they thought about perceived signs that their child was not developing properly. Some parents found it easy to pass their worries on to the educators whilst others did not.

> "I asked the educator if my child spoke Dutch with her educator because at home he refuses. She said, he does sing some songs. After that, I didn't ask any more. But I should have. It's good to get feedback once in a while. Of course, they see more than we do." (3)

If parents think that their style of child-rearing does not correspond with that at the centre – for example, because parents are often stricter than the educators – they prefer not to mention this to the educators. They try to avoid confrontation, even though they could give various examples and arguments as to why they keep to their own style.

A number of parents mentioned the availability of information as an important subject. These were generally parents who were dissatisfied. Some also said that they did not properly read the written information provided for them.

> "I get a note every month telling us that if we are bothered by something that we should do something or say something, or I don't know ... I just got another one, I looked at it, but I don't know exactly what it said – you mustn't forget the baskets of fruit or something. There was a lot more, but I forget what." (10)

The parents said that the written information was not any help in getting them involved in the centre.

> "They make some report, as they call it. Then we get it; but I just throw it in the waste paper basket." (17)

Most parents are more interested in information about their own child than the group activities. The parents who know parents' committee members or who have been members of it told a different story. Some were very enthusiastic, for example, because, since they were members of the parents' committee, they had got a better understanding about childcare in the Netherlands, or because it had brought them into contact with fellow parents.

> "I like doing it … I didn't know anybody in this town ... I'm a divorced woman … I'm alone. Then they said, if you don't know anybody then do join the parents' committee … it's fun. And yes, you do learn a lot from one another." (44)

But parents feel that they do not have any influence on centres' policies. They see it more as making a contribution, organising activities and events, welcoming new parents and other activities.

> "Do I have any influence? I never thought about it. I'm not really interested either." (12)

Most parents are not concerned about having any influence as long as they are satisfied with the way their child is being cared for.

> "Did I have any influence? No, but it doesn't bother me. I'm happy with the way things are." (10)

Many parents put a higher priority on friendly relations with the educators than on having a voice within the organisation.

> "No, I just sit and discuss with them, just to get some time with them, if I have enough time I can sit and discuss with them. Just to make fun, nothing else. Just to be friends." (30)

In summary: Educators discuss a range of other subjects with parents, mostly about the day-to-day practicalities of child-rearing. If differences of opinion arise, then discussions degenerate into the educator explaining their point of view. Most parents only really want to discuss their own children. They are prepared, in that context, to make a contribution when it comes to thinking about the procedures connected with advice on child-rearing and the provision of information. But good personal contact with the educators is more important to most of them than influencing policy matters.

Diversity among parents

Educators take different approaches to different sets of parents. They tend to discuss things more with one parent than another. For example, the regular nap (sleep), which is a part of most children's schedules at the centre, can be a bone of contention for one parent but not for another. This, of course, also depends on their children; and also on the educators. Although every contact is unique, there do seem to be some generalities about the image that educators have of certain types of parent.

For example, various educators commented about immigrant parents. Educators take into account the possibility that immigrant parents are not familiar with the procedures in the centres. For this reason, some centres have information booklets with photos showing the activities they carry out with the children. Nevertheless, it often happens that immigrant parents neither understand nor adequately value what happens at the centres.

> "Sometimes you can see that parents simply don't understand the situation. This morning we said the children could paint and, soon, one of the children got paint on him

> and one child had smeared paint on his arms. We see this as being positive – he's exploring something, but his parents see that he's not clean, that he's not painting nicely. They believe that paint should only go on paper." (40)

Educators regret that they cannot explain properly what has happened to parents who do not speak or understand much Dutch.

> "Yes, language is a barrier. Often, I want to ask something … then they think it's something very dramatic but I'm only asking something simple. Then I think 'Oh, leave it. It's all right.' That's difficult." (42)

Educators say that some immigrant parents worry a lot at first, especially if their child is sick or does not fit in well. Some of the educators observed that parents put a great deal of trust in their centre although the educators interpreted this as sometimes meaning that the parents were not concerned enough about what happened to their child at the centre.

> "I feel that the majority of Ghanaian parents have a great deal of trust in us. They wouldn't normally ask anything when they come to collect up their child. Because in their culture, it's customary that if you've got someone else's child, you will look after it properly." (18)

Most parents are aware of how they are different to other types of parents and remark on this. For example, some highly educated parents disapprove of other parents' child-rearing styles.

> "Some parents who aren't very well educated … they're very rigid. They say that what's right at home, ought to be right at the centre too. At the parents' evening, I think there were nine parents and seven of them didn't even know what toys were for. One of them said, 'Sand – what are they going to learn from that!' A big mouth but nothing much to say! Then I think, if you're a father or a mother, then you at least go and read up on it. Then I feel there's no connection between us, and I think, if only there was just one parent who thought the same way as I do." (5)

Immigrant parents stress the educational function of the centres. Parents with a basic education are happy that, thanks to the childcare centre, their child is learning Dutch and integrating into Dutch society. A few immigrant parents with a higher education made it clear that, in their eyes, the educational side was inadequate. They sometimes said that they didn't want to discuss this with the educators (who they felt were less well educated than them).

> "The childcare is good but the education is not so good. I think that it's better in other centres. It was different in another centre where I could talk to the educators seriously. They took note of what I said and acted on it. This is absolutely not the case here. I think it's nice that it's all so friendly. But what I would, say … criticise, is the fact there's never a serious, deep conversation – not with the children and not with the parents. Contact is always superficial." (17)

Immigrants also emphasised the safety of the centres. They believed that there was less discrimination there than elsewhere in the neighbourhood.

> "I've lived in the Netherlands for about 15 years. I haven't noticed much discrimination in the centre. Where I live, yes, there is discrimination, my neighbour, and at my work and the police – but not here. [I think this is because], apparently, they've got a lot of experience with immigrants. Maybe it's a very different target group or because it's all women. Here, you talk about pedagogic things … you're not talking to friends but to people who've also got children." (9)

In short: There are subjects that clearly need the attention of educators and other childcare centre staff in order to facilitate increased parental involvement in the centres. Besides, on some issues some educators see themselves as the guardians of norms and values. However, these norms and values are often just Dutch professional standards and as such not superior to those of immigrant and less well educated parents. The important point here is that educators should avoid judging and try to understand other perspectives on issues such as the value of children playing outside and how many clothes children wear. The beliefs on how to best stimulate children's development are not universal.

Chapter 6: Parents, partnerships and power

Glenda MacNaughton and Patrick Hughes[6]

Throughout the international field of early childhood education, good communication between parents and staff is seen as essential to the high-quality care and education of young children. This is because it can:

- improve children's cognitive and social development, increase their educational success and improve their relationships with professionals and their peers (Hughes and MacNaughton 2000);
- benefit children's development by giving parents more information on childrearing at home and in the centres, thus enabling them to improve their childrearing skills (Gelfer 1991);
- improve children's educational outcomes, especially literacy (Cairney 1997; Cone 1993; Hannon 1995).

However, the international research literature has reported consistently that relationships between professionals and parents are often strained and not always meaningful (Kasting 1994), with professionals struggling to know how best to communicate with parents (Wright-Sexton 1996), often anxious about it (Studer 1994) and reluctant to do it (Huira 1996).

Positive partnerships – the challenge

Some researchers see problems in communication between professionals and parents as the result of inadequate training in communication (Laloumi-Vidali 1997) or of cultural differences between professionals and parents (Coleman and Churchill 1997; Ebbeck and Glover 1998; Espinosa 1995; Gonzalez-Mena 1992). Other researchers trace the problems to conflict between professionals and parents about what constitutes appropriate education for young children (Hyson 1991; Rescorla 1991). For example, some researchers have found parents valuing early cognitive knowledge more than educators and have questioned the value of the play-based programmes that educators advocate (Stipek et al. 1994;

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Unteregger-Mattenberger 1995). Professionals believe that parents need to improve their skills to help children's learning (Gelfer 1991; Laloumi-Vidali 1997; Stipek et al. 1994).

Our own research has found that many of the problems in relationships between early childhood professionals and parents arise because many professionals see their developmental knowledge of the child as more important than parents' knowledge of their children. The professionals regard their expert knowledge of the child as scientific (based on developmental psychology), objective and applicable to all children; whereas they view parents' knowledge as anecdotal, subjective and applicable only to specific children. When professionals think that parents are ignorant about what and how to teach their children, they often devise 'parent involvement' programmes to rectify this.

Our research in Australia has led us to reach the following conclusions:

- Involving parents in programme design and delivery is often problematic and complex, irrespective of its form or content, because it requires professionals to equate parents' personal beliefs and understandings with their own professional and expert knowledge of the child. This equation conflicts with the professionals' self-images as experts in child development – a self-image created and reinforced by pre-service and in-service training. The more that professionals proclaim their expertise, the more likely they are to dismiss or ignore parents' untrained and unprofessional knowledge of their children as inadequate, misguided, or just plain wrong (Hughes and MacNaughton 2000).
- From that perspective, good relations between professionals and parents means professionals imparting the truth about children to people who lack it and good parental involvement requires parents to admit their ignorance. However, several professionals have experienced conflict between their professional identities as experts and their desire to create equitable relations with parents.
- Professionals prefer and rely on informal verbal channels of communication with parents because they believe that formal communication is misinterpreted more easily, with misinterpretations being hard to correct.
- Professionals recognise that good communication with parents is essential, but also that it is highly complex and problematic – and that the problems are worsened by the consistent lack of time in which to practise it.

Against this background, the building of relationships between early childhood professionals and families can sometimes be tricky. Building partnerships with parents doesn't just happen – it needs to be actively worked on over time.

Positive relationships and mutual respect

Professionals who seek to create positive and respectful partnerships with parents can draw on the anti-bias principles (e.g., Derman-Sparks et al. 1989) for support. These principles suggest that professionals need to work hard to do the following (as adapted from MacNaughton and Hughes 1999):

- offer all parents equal access to them and time with them, check their own reactions to parents for possible stereotypes, avoid discriminatory language at all times and use inclusive terms for family members such as 'parent' or 'guardian' rather than 'father' or 'mother';
- provide all parents with the same basic information about the centre and encourage them to share information with professionals while being aware that parents from a culture different to their own may not feel comfortable about disclosing personal family information. Sometimes this may require help from professionals who are able to provide information in different languages;
- ensure that all parents know about any current and planned opportunities to become involved in the centre and to make them aware that they can all participate in meetings. (This includes ensuring that meeting spaces are accessible to people with disabilities).

Positive partnerships and respect: exploring knowledge–power relationships

Professionals can also build more equitable relationships with parents by reflecting critically on the knowledge–power relationships that they establish with families. Knowledge–power relationships refer to the competition between social groups (including professionals and parents) to get their knowledge accepted as the truth (Foucault 1980).

Different groups of people compete to have their understandings of the world seen as 'the true understanding' because truth carries authority. Its authority lies in its claim to be factual and, therefore, correct. For instance, a developmental truth about a child is a statement about how a child develops that is put forwards as 'factual' and, therefore, correct. Developmental psychology is a Western social science whose truths include statements that explain and predict normal child development, thus enabling developmental psychologists to identify developmental delays and abnormal development. They carry authority because they assert that they are true, factual and therefore correct.

However, for Foucault, there is never a single truth about human beings as social beings and about our social and cultural world. Multiple truths compete for the status of being the most valid. To explore this idea, we give the example of the training exercise – 'The Truth of the Chair'.

'The Truth of the Chair' – an exercise for reflecting on truth and power

Look at a chair and what do you see? Is it a seat? Of course: chairs are things that we sit on. This is a fact. This is a truth … isn't it?
Now, consider the following statements about a chair and its truths.

1. You are the owner of a company that manufactures furniture. Your company produces this chair and it has not been selling well. Unless you stop production you are likely to go bankrupt. To you this chair is an economic disaster.
2. You are an Aboriginal inhabitant of Australia. Parts of this chair are made from steel and the steel is made from iron ore mined on your traditional land. The mine is getting deeper and larger… and as it grows, so does your pain for the land. To you, this chair represents the rape and economic exploitation of your traditional lands.
3. You are 4 years old and this chair is in your home. It is a train that you imagine you have been driving so that you can visit your grandma up north. To you, the chair is a train that takes you to see a special person.
4. You work in the car industry and you have just been laid off. You used a credit company to pay for the chair and the company is about to repossess it. To you, the chair is now unaffordable and represents the unattainable.
5. You helped to make this chair. You live in South East Asia and are paid less per year than the chair will cost to buy in the Western country where it is sold. To you, this chair is the result of your exploitation and is a reminder of the gap between rich and poor.
6. You are the owner of a furniture store that stocks this chair and you live in a large house in a leafy suburb. This chair is a best-seller in your furniture store. It has produced such good profits this year that you have decided to upgrade your car to a Mercedes. To you, this chair is 'the best thing since sliced bread'.

Now take a moment to reflect critically on the politics of the 'truths of the chair' using these questions:

- Which truth(s) are most familiar to you? Why?
- Which truth do you see as most valid? Why?
- Whose truth has most power to influence others? How?
- Whose truth is missing?
- Who benefits and who loses if we choose one truth over another?

'The Truth of the Child' – an exercise for reflecting on truth and power

Let's use the same method of critical reflection in another exercise, this time looking at a child. Here is a factual statement about child development and hyperactivity.

> Hyperactivity: hyperactive children cannot sit still; are restless and are easily distracted; have trouble sticking to any activity; fidget; cannot concentrate, cannot pay attention for long; are impulsive; have difficulty waiting their turn in games or groups; or cannot settle to do anything for more than a few moments. (KSI 2003)

Imagine that a child from an ethnic minority in your own centre or school is described as hyperactive. Reflect critically on the truth regime with regard to this hyperactive child using the following questions:

- How much do you know about this truth about hyperactivity?
- Is this truth valid for you? Why?
- Does this truth influence you in your dealings with young children? How? Does this also influence other people you know? How?
- Whose truth about hyperactivity and the child from the ethnic minority is missing here?
- Who wins and who loses if this statement about the hyperactive child is accepted as truth?
- Who is forced to be silent or marginalised by this truth about the hyperactive child?

In early childhood education, truths such as 'developmental normality or abnormality' have implications for social justice and equity. As MacNaughton (2005) explained:

> 'Normality' – like inequality – is the production of inclusion and exclusion. Children from developing countries, those living in poverty and those struggling to live amongst war and with violence do not readily fit the norms of developmental psychology and are not considered in them. Their ways of being, thinking, acting and feeling are marginalised by those norms.

Developmental truths about the child operate as a regime of truth in different ways in different places; but many children and many adults have experienced their consistently inequitable and unjust effects (Campbell and Smith 2001; Cannella 1999; Jipson 1998; MacNaughton 2001; Smith 2000; Viruru and Cannella 2001). For instance, Valdivia (1999) discussed a series of developmental skills the emergence of which, the author says, depend on responses to tactile stimulation, verbal interaction, nonverbal interaction and feeding routines. These ways of interacting are culturally specific and so it is no surprise that researchers in the USA found different responses in children from African-American, Chinese-American, Mexican-American, Hopi and Navajo families. Nonetheless, the researchers did not just confirm developmental differences in children from different cultures, but they assessed them as being characteristic of developmental delay and subsequently placed these children in programmes to redress their delays. In this way, the researchers defined the 'normal' interactions of these children and their families as problematic and denied them the opportunity to grow 'normally' within their own culture (MacNaughton 2005, p. 37).

To produce more equitable knowledge–power relationships, we must seek multiple truths. In particular, we must identify those truths that are normally associated with privileged groups in society and those truths that are normally associated with disadvantaged groups. Then we must attend to the truths of the disadvantaged groups and ask, "Who benefits and who loses by not acting on these truths?" In this way, we begin to understand and to disrupt the unfair politics of truth that create specific knowledge–power relations in our field.

Foucault (Keohane 2002) argued that truths legitimise, as it were, existing relations of power. This means that understanding how truths legitimise discrimination and oppression in, for instance, parent-professional relationships, helps us to combat them. To contest 'legitimised' relations of power, we must understand the underlying regime of truth that produces power.

Power, knowledge and parents

We have argued elsewhere (Hughes and MacNaughton 1999a, 1999b, 2002) that substantive parental involvement implies that parents' knowledge of their specific child is at least as valuable as the professionals' expert knowledge of children in general. If parents are to be really involved in their children's lives at a centre, then parents' understandings of the child and their views about what should happen to their children must carry equal weight with the professional staff's understanding and views. In other words, in the knowledge–power relations between professionals and parents, parental 'truths' of the child should be heard and valued. This directly challenges professionals' status as experts who have the 'facts' of child development to guide their work, with the latter point explaining why relationships between professionals and parents are often strained and stressful.

Early childhood professionals claim to be experts as they use systematic and theory-based models to create 'the truth' about the child. Parents claim that their anecdotal knowledge of their specific child is 'the truth' because they witness the actions and events on which that knowledge is based. Thus, understanding a particular child inevitably involves staff and parents in a local politics of knowledge: whose knowledge of the child will count as 'the truth'?

Working towards respectful and equitable partnerships

Our research suggests that childcare centres are probably the best places to build up a partnership with parents if the professionals:

- learn to give parents a real voice without feeling that this directly threatens the professionals' identity and expertise;

- learn to negotiate with parents shared meanings and understandings about who their child is and how they should be treated. These negotiations should 'work' equally well for both sides and eschew exclusive claims to 'truth';
- learn to allocate sufficient time to negotiate with parents face-to-face and in ways that rest on and continually re-create shared understandings of the child.

We can use our knowledge to exercise our power in inequitable ways that silence other people or in equitable ways that give everybody a say. We can reflect on the knowledge–power relationships that we are creating by asking the following types of questions:
- Who benefits from how I use my knowledge in my relationships with families?
- Whose voice is privileged in my relationships with families: parents', children's or professionals'?
- Which parents, children and professionals benefit from relationships as they are at present and which ones don't?

When early childhood professionals talk about parental involvement (often interpreted as building partnerships with parents), they can mean one or more of the following:
- helping with snack times or special occasions at the centre;
- contributing to the management committee;
- assisting with centre excursions and outings;
- writing and distributing newsletters;
- sharing a special skill or interest with the children.

While these forms of parental involvement can help services to work, they do not involve families in decisions about how their child is cared for and educated. They are not creating equitable relationships between partners. Partnerships imply shared decision-making and equitable knowledge–power relationships. The more that parents and professionals share decision making, the more their relationship becomes a partnership. Genuine partnerships are relationships formed to achieve a common goal with each partner making an equal but distinct contribution to achieving the common goal. For example, each partner contributes their equal but distinct knowledge to decisions about what happens to a child.

Good partnerships between families and professionals require and imply a commitment to regular face-to-face communication in which each partner seeks to understand the other's perspectives or 'truths'. This requires professionals to:
- reserve judgement about parenting styles and about parents' hopes for their children until they understand why families do things the ways that they do;
- maintain contact and create dialogue that helps them to understand why families do what they do;
- resolve conflicts through negotiation and compromise;

- offer bilingual support to parents with languages that differ from those that the professionals use;
- learn about the ways in which different cultural beliefs and values affect how we relate to children;
- support families in their efforts to feel pride in their particular ethnic and 'racial' heritage and in their parenting efforts;
- encourage families to share stories about their culture, its development and its struggles;
- work with families in small groups on specific projects, such as cultural celebrations in the centre, developing anti-bias policies and advocating equity within the wider community, so that shared understandings can be built over time.

(The above is adapted from Hughes and MacNaughton 2000 and draws on Espinosa 1995; Swick et al. 1995; and Gonzalez-Mena 1992.)

We believe that partnerships are built when partners reflect critically on the relationships between knowledge and power and seek to establish more equitable knowledge–power relationships. This means seeking not a single truth about a specific child or situation, but seeking multiple truths and evaluating each one for its equity effects. To do so, we can ask questions such as:

- In how many ways can I understand this child?
- Why do I understand this child as I do?
- What are the cultural biases in my understandings and how are my world views influenced by my membership of social features such as gender, culture, language, race, sexuality, age, ability, geography?
- Whose truths am I avoiding or unable to see?
- Who benefits from my understanding of this child?
- How else might I understand this child?
- What prevents me from listening to other truths and what might be gained if I did?

In short: Partnership between parents and educators requires more than simply keeping parents informed and asking their advice. There is often an unequal knowledge–power relationship between parents and educators. In order to think together and take decisions together, educators have to learn to get their own self-evident knowledge into perspective and to open their minds to parents' truths. They can achieve this by using critical reflection as a tool.

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Chapter 7: Implementing parents' policies in childcare organisations

Anke van Keulen

Trying out innovations in childcare is not that difficult. There is always an enthusiastic childcare centre somewhere that is keen to learn something new and where the professionals are open to experimenting and the management sees new ideas as a challenge. But transferring innovations from these early innovators, these pioneering childcare centres, to the entire professional sphere is generally a tall order. Many centres and many professionals are by no means eager to embrace yet another series of changes, yet another new method. In this chapter, we show how innovation and implementation can be linked to reach the same destination using our experiences from the Parents and Diversity project.

The problem with implementing an innovation is often that the target group does not recognise its importance and may subsequently resist it. They may not be able to see its promise as they have not been involved in developing it and were not involved in the process of brainstorming, contributing ideas, experimenting and gaining insights. A new innovation appears on the scene like an alien from outer space as something over which they have no power. It is often counter-productive to have such a gap between the development of an innovation and disseminating the results, and between thinking up changes and implementing outcomes. This gap is paralleled by the undesirable split between the producers of knowledge (scientists, developers) and the users of that knowledge (in the case of childcare, mainly educators).

A theoretical model developed by Rogers' (1995) distinguishes between innovation, implementation strategies and the organisation in which an innovation is being carried out. Although this is a useful theoretical framework, in practice, it must be recognised that there are many variations between strategies and how organisations implement them (Klazinga 2003). Generally what happens is that much effort is invested into developing innovative approaches and methods, but not much is put into disseminating and transferring them into practice. In addition, in recent years the shortcomings have been recognised of introducing scientific knowledge top-down into practice without adequately considering the experiential knowledge of professionals and organisational dynamics.

This chapter recommends that innovation and implementation happen at the same time to remove these obstacles to implementation. The idea is that the foundations of implementation are laid out during the process of innovation.

Partnership is a road we make as we go

The approach taken by the Parents and Diversity project is a good example of how the gap between innovation and implementation can be narrowed. The success of this project was largely due to the substantial influence that the educators and other childcare professionals had on developing the innovative methods and products from the very beginning. This helped bring about broad-based support and generated a high level of motivation in the pilot childcare centres, the test centres, where implementation was tried out. This is the major reason why the project has been able to make a large impact at the national level (Keulen 2005).

The project went ahead by viewing innovation as a journey made by all participants, with all who were involved deciding on the best route to take to develop and implement the innovations (Terpstra et al. no date). This kind of participatory innovation assumes that those directly involved are competent to develop the innovative methods and approaches based on their experiences, ideas and suggestions. The educators within each of the childcare organisations and the outside experts worked together on what route to take and then journeyed along the road together.

All worked together to create new knowledge and to combine outside knowledge – principally from scientific insights and other projects – with the internal, existing knowledge and experiences in the test childcare centres. The project used the Spanish proverb, "Traveller, there is no road; the road is made by travelling"[7], to illustrate the process-driven joint approach.

The childcare centres involved in the project all agreed on the benefits of treating parents as partners. Their involvement in the project saw them using the same directional 'compass' of the six diversity objectives to point the way on a 'map' marked with the four types of parental participation of living together, working together, thinking together and taking decisions together, in the prime position.[8] The project thus provided this framework to guide all of the test childcare centres to give substance to developing partnerships with parents and increasing respect for diversity.

Alongside this top-down approach to developing and introducing innovations, the project made use of the test centres' existing and on-going processes which were likely to continue beyond the project. This 'bottom-up' approach collected the knowledge that

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[7] *The original Spanish,* Caminante, no hay camino, se hace camino al andar, *is a line from a poem by Spanish poet Antonio Machado*

[8] *The Parents and Diversity project's four types of parental participation and six diversity objectives are explained in Chapter 3 of this report.*

already existed, but which had never been made explicit. This experiential knowledge complements the external (scientific) knowledge and recognises the importance of contributions from all involved (Klazinga 2003). New knowledge introduced from the outside generally acts as a stimulus, raising consciousness and increasing insight. Moreover, making the existing experiential knowledge explicit serves to acknowledge and empower professionals (Weijenberg 2004).

In the project, every test centre set its own specific, measurable, acceptable, realistic and time-related SMART[9] objectives while taking its framework and its vision from the national project. These objectives were then slotted into the current situation in the individual test centres. During the project period, the professionals worked on their own objectives. In this way, innovation became part of the developments within the participating childcare organisations and their centres. This has had a deepening effect and meant that the innovations were viewed as extra ballast by only a few educators.

Travelling companions and travellers' tales

Working with the blueprints of the diversity objectives and the four types of parental participation provided support and direction for the test centres. The test centres carried out internal analyses of parental participation that allowed their organisations' weak points to come to light. They reflected on what they were doing well, on what needed extra work and on what blind spots they may have had.

A local project leader explained how this worked in practice.

> "We first saw what level we were on and distinguished between the levels of living together, working together, thinking together and making decisions together. Every centre had a different level. In some centres you saw a high degree of parental involvement with sufficient individual contacts between educators and parents. However, although 'living together' was thus happening, 'thinking together' was not as, for example, parents were not represented on the parents' committee. In other centres the reverse was true. Parents were involved in the committees that decided on pedagogic policy, but their living together – having a coffee in the group or going on an outing together – were not happening."

The general framework of the four types of parental participation and six diversity objectives provided support and direction. This worked both as a map and as a compass. It became part of the process in every test centre and every team and supplied motivation and a basis for support.

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[9] *SMART objectives are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound*

Participatory innovation also means that those indirectly involved – the professionals who do not actually carry out the practical work of caring for children – also have a role to play in innovation and implementation. Fundamental renewal demands action at all levels. The focus should not only be on 'how', but also on creating a basis of support and acceptance for new insights. Therefore, it is important to involve as many stakeholders as possible in this crucial process. This broad-based strategy facilitates an exchange between the internal of the participants in the project, and the external of the outside experts in the advisory body and at working conferences as explained in the following points.

The internal participants were those working at the following levels.

- **The shop floor level** where educators, teachers and middle management experimented with innovative methodologies. In the project, it was the professionals from the participating test centres who tried out new methods in workshops and put them into practice in their centres.
- **The management level** where the childcare organisations' managers were responsible for structuring and embedding innovations and disseminating them within their organisations. Those managers who took part in the project set up internal working groups which followed the progress of the project and were responsible for preparing to embed and implement innovations within their organisations. (These organisations ran between 20 and 125 childcare centres.) The internal working groups consisted of representatives of middle and higher management and pedagogic staff. A year after the project started, the new knowledge was disseminated from the participating test centres to other centres within these organisations creating a snowball effect.
- **The organisational policy level** where the participating childcare centres worked on modifying their parents policies. In the last year of the project the pedagogic staff of the test centres linked the insights they had gained from the project to their own organisations' policies.

External influences came from the following sources.

- **Research and development organisations** provided innovative inputs. The research and development organisation, Bureau MUTANT, contributed the intrinsic framework and disseminated new insights and methods at workshops and project meetings. The innovative ideas came from the (scientific) literature and other projects at home and abroad. The European network DECET also provided a major source of inspiration.
- **Science:** providing research and empirical knowledge.
- **Social factors:** including the fit of the partnership with parents approach with other social developments and policy programmes. One important factor was the influence of the new Childcare Act, which gives parents advisory powers.

Two roads at once

The test centres shared all of their newly developed knowledge and insights directly to inspire other professionals to take similar approaches within their organisations and beyond. Activating the implementation process from the very beginning by disseminating knowledge and insights enabled many different kinds of people and organisations to contribute to the innovation process.

The project was able to travel the two roads of development and implementation at the same time by:
- involving as many relevant parties as possible in the innovation process (which encouraged implementation to also take place);
- actively involving people at all levels in the development process to create a broad base for support for the innovations, whilst also strengthening the innovations themselves.

Travelling along these two roads at once saw innovation-resulting-in-implementation and implementation-in-innovation.

Strategies for change – the means of transport

The process of change can be seen as a journey taken using all available and relevant types of 'transport'. In supporting the process of change, we used De Caluwé's (2003) classification, which give five different approaches for bringing about change, each with its own intellectual framework and hypothesis and each with its own central question (Table 10).

The strategies for change used in the project's test childcare centres varied with the differing phases and organisations. During the project, the white- and green-print types of thinking were used in the initial phases (experimenting and learning). The metaphor of the project as a journey and the motto, "Traveller, there is no road; the road is made by travelling", are typical examples of white-print thinking.

The project began with a framework and open objectives that were necessary for participatory innovation by combining top-down and bottom-up approaches. In the latter phase, the project used blueprint thinking by formulating measurable SMART objectives.

Change agents

The project used specific methods to support the learning and experimental aspects of change. The innovation process was started in one or two test childcare centres. These centres worked on the project together with the local project leader (generally a central

Table 10. De Caluwé's five ways of thinking to bring about change

Type of thinking	Question	Approach to tackling the question
Yellow-print thinking	How can we combine different interests and concerns?	By creating a support base and negotiating on interests and concerns.
Blue-print thinking	How can we achieve results?	By making rational models and establishing results in advance.
Red-print thinking	How should the right human resource instruments be deployed?	Through intrinsic motivation, communication and team building.
Green-print thinking	How can we learn to learn?	By being a learning organisation with change viewed as a positive learning process with a direct link between thinking and doing and the concept of the teaching organisation.
White-print thinking	What is the natural course, the process?	By making the road as you go with the central points being the autonomous development of change, the limitations of predictability and the importance of experimenting with change and letting developments evolve.

level member of the pedagogic staff from the childcare organisations). They were responsible within their organisations for supervising the test centres and for implementing their organisations' policies. They acted as change agents supporting and encouraging the test centres and passing on information to them (Keulen and Doeleman 2005). At all the test centres, the managers (centre managers and branch managers) and some professionals took part in the national workshops and documented and reported the new and improved approaches for fostering parental participation.

One of the project leaders said about their role as 'change agents':

> "I think our working methods have been successful. A number of us educators attended the national workshops where we learned about all kinds of subjects and methodologies. Using these as a basis, we went on to work at the test centres at our own speeds. In this way, we have worked together to increase our knowledge, raise our consciousness, think up new ideas, and look at our own attitudes and skills. As professionals, we should act as change agents."

Klazinga (2003) emphasises the importance of the professional as a change agent. Professionals are obviously the right people to put into practice new approaches and methods so they can have a lasting impact.

The project workshops had a large impact for a comparatively small investment. The professionals who took part in them passed on what they had learned to their colleagues at work. They repeated the same exercises in their own centres and organisations. They watched the same videos and carried out assignments which were then discussed at the following workshop. It became apparent, however, that this method of working depended on the professionals' ability to transfer the knowledge and exercises on to their colleagues. Not all professionals are capable of this and this needs to be noted as requiring special attention at the start of new projects either as a criterion for selection or for upgrading skills.

Reports on the journey – examples from the test centres

The project gave a lot of attention to how the innovations it introduced could be preserved and embedded (institutionalised) in childcare organisations. The childcare organisations therefore put considerable efforts into:

- working to embed what was learned in the participating centres and in individual professionals' attitudes. The achievement of this would be evident in changes in the educators' attitudes, improvements in communication between educators and parents and the ultimate outcome of greater contributions being made by parents.
- disseminating and scaling-up the innovations from the several participating pilot centres to the other centres in the participating organisations. An intensive process was started in the test centres with them reflecting on how other centres can profit from this and how the project's diversity objectives could be accepted by other professionals.
- working to embed the results of the project in the childcare organisations' pedagogic and parents policies.

Every childcare organisation in the project followed its own change process and developed its own parents policy. They implemented the approach and the project's tools and methods in their organisations in different ways. The following shows four of the main strategies participating organisations used to achieve this.

Joint concerns-joint rewards

One childcare organisation took as its goal combining the concerns of the parents as users with a vision of them as pedagogic partners. The assumption was that the relationship with the parents would improve by improving the pedagogic partnership between parents and the organisation. Towards achieving this, they trained and coached many educators and managers in a local sub-project called 'Work and Play with Parents'. During this project's training period, the educators carried out practical assignments with individual parents and groups of parents using methods such as demand-oriented work, intercultural communication, 'families in the picture' and other training methods from the national project. The training and the practical assignments

became part of participants' performance appraisals. In a very short time many of the participating educators and managers became familiar with the ideas about forming pedagogic partnerships with parents and began to try them out themselves.

The snowball method

The snowball method was also used to disseminate what was learned. Managers at the test centres gave visual presentations at their monthly management meetings and during central parent council meetings. This led to non-test centre managers asking for these presentations to be given at their centres. In this way, the pilot centres surrounded themselves with networks of other centres to promote the new approaches. The enthusiasm of all the teams made the new approaches and methods grew and grew, snowballing as they were passed on and adopted by other centres.

The snowball effect also happened in the Central Parents' Council. The chairman of the council participated in one of the European exchange visits and then started to encourage organisations and centres to recruit more immigrant parents onto their parents' council and parents' committees.

The project leader in the Parents and Diversity project is busy incorporating his new knowledge in his organisations' parents policy. His enthusiasm is evident where he told how:

> "Diversity and parental involvement came to life as a subject for me, including the idea that children and parents are an indivisible entity. To me childcare is no longer about just working with children but it is about working with children and their parents."

Systematic and binding

The steering committee of another test centre has been systematically implementing a diversity policy for a number of years by:

- training all its staff (educators, middle and senior management) using MUTANT's methodologies and materials;
- developing a varying range of childcare reflecting the needs of the centre's diversity of children and parents;
- setting up a diversity discussion group where educators exchange experiences and ideas on diversity in parental partnership and related aspects of childcare to ensure that the issue remains live and to help embed it into practice;
- integrating diversity into pedagogic quality standards so that it is included in the organisations' annual assessment.

The project was further promoted by this steering committee developing its own in-service training and amending its parents policy.

Taking part in training courses and discussion groups is now obligatory for all of this organisations' educators. Putting a diversity policy into practice demands an effort on the part of all involved.

Joining forces in a single province
In the province of Noord-Brabant in the southern Netherlands, two childcare organisations and the regional resource centre are implementing the new project 'Parents are Worth the Effort'. All three organisations took part in the national project and are making use of the experiences they gained there. The project is being financed by the province and is based on the Parents and Diversity project. It is aimed at childcare organisations' educators and managers and for their partners within the various municipalities, the educational resource centres, the VVE (Vroege en Voorschoolse Educatie – the Dutch organisation for pre-school and early education) coordinators and schools.

Conclusion: the journey is not over

It is usually a difficult job for early innovators to transfer and disseminate an innovation widely. Therefore it is often better not to separate the development of an innovation from the dissemination of results; or the identification of possible change measures from their implementation.

Participatory innovation should be based on the assumption that those directly involved (in this case, the coordinators, educators and teachers who communicate with parents) are competent to assist in innovation. Their experiences, ideas and suggestions influence the final form of innovatory products in terms of methodology and policy.

During the project period, the professionals worked towards objectives they had formulated themselves thus allowing innovation to be slotted in to developments in their organisations. They then passed their knowledge on to their colleagues which encouraged the setting up of new processes to encourage parental participation and respect for diversity within their centres, organisations and beyond. Involving as many parties as possible in the innovation process encouraged their implementation at the same time. This has set in motion a positive feedback mechanism where childcare organisations are constantly working to improve their delivery of childcare.

By taking two roads at once, innovation becomes implementation and implementation innovation … a cyclical process whereby organisations constantly work to improve the quality of their childcare.

For sure, the journey is not over! We're making the road as we go.

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The Parents and Diversity project: Synthesis and conclusions

Synthesis

Most professionals and parents agree that their working together as partners to provide early childhood care should improve the quality of the care and education children receive. But such pedagogic partnerships rarely come about of their own accord and demand considerable efforts from professionals and childcare providers. The building of such partnerships is even more important now in the Netherlands as new legislation has redefined the relationships between government, childcare providers and parents. The new law, which was introduced to guarantee the quality of childcare, gives parents clearly defined advisory powers.

The training and consultancy agency Bureau MUTANT ran the Parents and Diversity project from 2003 to 2005 to support childcare professionals to establish their internal policies on developing partnerships with parents and respecting all parents' diversity. Along with a number of childcare providing organisations, MUTANT has developed new methods to equip professionals to communicate and work with the range of types of parents and to enable managers and management boards to give substance to this concept of partnership in their organisations' parents polices.

These methods were developed around a conceptual model which stresses the importance of parents and educators 'living together' (sharing information), 'working together', 'thinking together' and 'making decisions together'. The project used the six diversity objectives of the DECET network (Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Training) as standards for respecting diversity. These objectives call for childcare where everyone feels they belong; are empowered to develop their diverse identities; can learn from each other; can participate as active citizens; are working together to challenge institutional prejudice and discrimination, and where bias is being actively addressed.

On the basis of these concepts, the project worked with professionals from five major umbrella organisations for childcare to develop the new methodologies. The professionals experimented in their own childcare centres with the newly acquired insights. On the basis of the professionals' carefully documented experiences, MUTANT has produced a number of publications to disseminate the new ways of thinking and practical innovations to a wider audience of practitioners and other stakeholders.

The literature on parental involvement in the Netherlands

In support of the project, the Netherlands Institute for Health Services Research (NIVEL) carried out a study of the literature on the relationship between parents and childcare providers. This showed that it is important to make the distinction between parents as service providers, as board members, as co-educators, and as the target group for social prevention and support.

The study identified important differences between parents. It is mostly non-working mothers and mothers who only work part-time who act as service providers in childcare centres, while it tends to be relatively more fathers, more highly educated parents and parents with decided opinions who become board members.

Much research literature was found on parents as co-educators, mainly focusing on those parents thought less capable of fulfilling this role. In the past, parents from poorer social backgrounds were accused of not bringing up their children properly. Current research is looking at the new social distinctions including between working and non-working mothers, immigrants and non-immigrants and their different approaches to child-rearing. Some parents are the recipients of much (generally unsolicited) support and concern on the part of the government. In the past, social prevention approaches to childcare were mainly aimed at improving hygiene. Such approaches later targeted children growing up in so-called problem neighbourhoods or groups at risk. As the parents who fulfil this of this role generally will not have taken it on by choice but have had it assigned to them, this means that neither parents nor professionals will be consciously dealing with this role.

The role the Parents and Diversity project, envisioned for parents as part of a community, has so far received little attention from Dutch researchers. However, foreign case studies show the importance of childcare centres developing a sense of community with parents with a key reason being to enable more respect to be given to the range of parental diversity.

Participation by immigrant parents – no standard formulas

Chapter 2 of this report shows the crucial importance of accounting for diversity to facilitate working in partnership with immigrant and other types of parents.

Immigrant and Dutch mothers often make use of childcare centres to allow them to go out to work. Whatever the reason, many second-generation immigrant parents are more inclined to put their children into childcare centres. Among immigrant parents there is also a visible change from their once rather authoritarian style of child-rearing to one based more on negotiation and allowing children to develop their own sense of responsibility. Research shows that immigrant fathers have become more involved in young children's upbringing than before, and that immigrant parents have (or would like to

have) more contact with early and pre-school education. At the same time, the information provided by these institutions appears to be one-sided, often failing to meet the needs of the different kinds of parents. In addition, educators are often not sufficiently open to questions from all types of parents on child-rearing and so they need to relinquish their assumptions on cultural practices and talk to parents to find out what their needs are and what support activities they would like to see at the centres.

Assessing how much educators foster parental participation and respect diversity

One of the main challenges faced by the research supporting the Parents and Diversity project was to develop a systematic way of assessing how much the childcare centres were working with the different types of parents. The aim here was to provide a tool for appraising the current situation and the future progress on this.

The concepts adopted by the project – the six DECET diversity objectives and the four types of parental participation of 'living together', 'working together', thinking together' and 'taking decisions together' – were first defined. An inventory was then drawn up of the concrete activities which all educators could carry out to work with and contact parents. A second round of discussions established which actions served which purpose and to which type of 'working together' they belonged. Then the researchers assessed the various actions according to their importance and frequency of occurrence in terms of the level of priority that the educators assigned to them and how often they carried them out.

Finally, a tool was developed to assess how much the educators interacted with parents and the objectives that they had in mind when doing this. Using this tool – a series of questions for educators to reflect on and answer – gives educators insights into how they interpret living together, working together, thinking together and taking decisions together. It also shows the extent to which they are working towards the DECET diversity objectives.

Designing and administering the assessment tool was a learning experience as the researchers and respondents realised that, although the values inherent in the types of parental participation and the diversity objectives are generally accepted, the best way to achieve them is not fixed. It was realised early on that there are no guaranteed recipes for success in working together with parents. The findings also showed that it is sensible to work systematically on investigating this relationship.

The tool should be viewed as an initial attempt to assess the degree to which educators are working together with parents, as it only charts what the educators are doing and does not assess the efforts of parents and other centre staff such as the coordinators, managers, and others involved in running the childcare centres.

Emotions and concerns of educators and parents

The survey that accompanied the project interviewed educators and parents about their contacts with one another whilst children are being brought in and picked up and during report meetings. The parents and educators generally experienced these contacts as very positive as they shared many of the same concerns, such as easy contact and a safe learning environment, or because their concerns complemented one another with educators wanting to support parents and parents wanting advice from educators. However, the report meetings did not always lead to better contact, especially if they only took place to discuss a child's problems. This led to the recommendations that it could be better to hold regular report meetings where good news as well as problems could be shared. Also, parents should be informed early on about the responsibilities of the childcare centres in flagging up social prevention issues.

The analysis also found that the concerns of parents and educators can be diametrically opposed, meaning that the ambition of working together may not always be based on a symmetrical relationship. For example, the educators often want information to help explain why a child's development is delayed in some way, while the parents mainly want to know things that enable them to entrust their children to the educators. The survey also looked at diversity issues including the specific concerns of immigrant parents and the differences between the concerns of highly educated parents and parents with only a basic education. Immigrant parents and those with only a basic education were found to be more inclined to ask advice or accept it from the educators.

What do parents and educators talk about?

An evaluation was made of the subjects that parents and educators discuss with one another and how they reconcile differences of opinion. The most frequently discussed subjects were the daily programme, dealing with sick children, nappy changing, playing outside and the balance between stimulating development and offering children a safe environment. Parents appeared, in general, to accept the daily programme and the rules surrounding it. They also accepted the rule that sick children should not go to the childcare centre, but, nevertheless, some parents were found to test the boundaries by, for example, bringing their ill children in to enable them to get time off work to look after the child. In discussions about the policies on changing nappies and playing outside, the educators were more inclined to explain their organisations' policy on these matters rather than finding out parents' views. Here, the educators could be more open in recognising parents' concerns. On the balance between stimulating development and safety, educators tended to emphasise the former and parents the latter. The recommendation here is that such discussions would be more productive if the stress was on explaining and exploring the differences between the supervision of children in a group at the centres and the more individual kind of child-rearing at home.

Partnerships and power

The research carried out by Glenda MacNaughton in Australia shows that working together with parents is often challenging because educators must learn to acknowledge parents' personal views and insights and refrain from seeing themselves as the sole experts. In striving for equal partnerships, professionals must learn to critically reflect on the knowledge–power relationships between them and the parents. For example, when it comes to the development of their children, parents will have different insights to the professionals. Professionals must learn that parents' insights are also one aspect of the truth. By working through recommended practical exercises, educators can learn to recognise different kinds of truth, not just truths based on pedagogic theories, but also the truths that parents base on their experiences with their children. They can learn to recognise which parents they are favouring with their truth, and which parents they are (often unconsciously) ignoring or putting at a disadvantage. This form of critical reflection can help professionals break through the inequality in the knowledge–power relationships and work towards more equal partnerships.

Implementing parents policies

In developing new forms of partnership with parents, MUTANT introduced more than just the 'working together' model and the DECET objectives. Partnership between the project coordinators and researchers and between the professionals and managers from the childcare centres was another goal in the innovation process. At the same time, the project consciously chose a model where innovation and implementation were not kept separate, but where, from the outset, insights were shared and disseminated to others. This influence of innovation and implementation is serving to raise the quality of childcare in the Netherlands.

The project did not, initially, provide a blueprint for how things ought to be done but offered a framework and objectives within which professionals and managers could experiment. They worked together to discover new possibilities for working with parents and also for implementing these methods within the childcare provision organisations. The professionals and managers implemented the new ideas within their organisations so that these could be slotted in to their organisations' quality systems and, by so doing, develop a position where innovation and implementation reinforce one another.

Conclusions

Partnerships between parents and professionals for improved childcare do not come about automatically. The Parents and Diversity project has developed new approaches and methods for giving concrete form to such partnerships in their day-to-day contacts and by respecting the diversity among parents such that all parents know they are welcome

and have a voice. The literature shows that, until now, research has mainly focused on parents' contributions as service providers, board members, co-educators and as target groups for social interventions. Researchers have rarely considered partnership as a social function of childcare within childcare centres. In this sense the project has filled a gap by putting pedagogic partnership not just on the agendas of professionals and boards of directors of centres that participated in the project, but also on the agendas of other childcare providers, educational courses, and national groups representing the interests of parents and childcare providers. The subject is being discussed at national and European symposia with resolutions being made and laid down in the policies and future plans of childcare organisations. The project has also informed discussions about the future training curricula for educators.

Interest on the subject of diversity among parents has also been stimulated by the research into child-rearing in different home situations. This shows that the child-rearing styles favoured by immigrant parents vary (including according to level of education and between generations), that child-rearing styles are changing rapidly, and that immigrant parents are making more use of childcare facilities and wish to participate in them on a partnership basis.

Although the extent and nature of parental participation among the great diversity of parents is complex, it is possible to estimate it. The project's assessment tool serves this purpose and shows the desirability of a systematic approach to promoting pedagogic partnerships. Parents and professionals said they were generally happy about the contacts between them whilst children were being brought in and picked up and during report meetings. They were found to be happy working together on shared concerns such as ensuring a safe and stimulating environment for the children and on complementary concerns such as educators being willing to give advice and parents wanting it.

In childcare centres, professionals and parents can develop social partnerships as the contact between them is not necessarily problem-driven. This is in contrast, for example, to social work professionals who only meet parents in difficult situations where parents are often seen as being problems. This makes it difficult to create equal partnerships. 'Working together' probably received less attention in the research than 'living together' (sharing information) and 'thinking/taking decisions together' because parents and professionals regarded 'working together' as the obvious thing to do.

The educators tended to put more emphasis than the parents on the educational aspects of childcare. The care of young children has developed from the crèches of previous centuries into more educational facilities. Parents, however, also have concerns about hygiene and safety and here, too, educators and parents need to learn to combine their truths and values.

The legislation – principally under the Childcare Act, 2005 – is alone not enough to ensure parental participation. This could be seen from the resistance to partnership that the project met in some cases. Remarks like "Parents have no time; they don't want this [partnership]" were evidence not only of the distance between professionals and parents, but also of the powerlessness of professionals and organisations to bridge the gap. Therefore, the Parents and Diversity project not only put the social function of childcare on many agendas, but has also shown how it could be implemented, on the one hand at the level of the professionals and on the other at the level of the childcare organisations. Change is also obviously needed amongst the parents although the project did not deal with this aspect.

Critical reflection by educators and other childcare staff either on the job or in training courses, as described by MacNaughton, can break through professionals' sense of powerlessness by giving them insights into the competences and qualities both they and parents need. Combining innovation with implementation, as in the Parents and Diversity project, helps break the impasse at the organisational level. Managers no longer have to wait for initiatives from professionals or parents as they all set out together on the same 'road'.

It is also important to mention how research appears to have played a supporting role in this process, not so much because it brings together and records information, but because it asks questions of all those involved, which gives rise to a process where people ask one another questions, communicating in a way that brings them together.

We end with a poem written at a project symposium which nicely captures one of the project's key goals of developing greater understanding and empathy between educators and parents so that they can work together 'as one' for the benefit of their children.

Binding

Do you bind yourself and the other fast in a role?
As an educator, parent, each to his own.
Or do you face the same challenges as one?
Do you form an unbroken line, a nurturing band
And both take your children by the hand?

Karin Boone at the symposium 'Open doors for parents', April 2006

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About the Bernard van Leer Foundation
The Bernard van Leer Foundation funds and shares knowledge about work in early childhood development. The foundation was established in 1949 and is based in the Netherlands. Our income is derived from the bequest of Bernard van Leer, a Dutch industrialist and philanthropist, who lived from 1883 to 1958.

Our mission is to improve opportunities for children up to age 8 who are growing up in socially and economically difficult circumstances. We see this both as a valuable end in itself and as a long-term means to promoting more cohesive, considerate and creative societies with equality of opportunity and rights for all.

We work primarily by supporting programmes implemented by partners in the field. These include public, private and community-based organisations. Our strategy of working through partnerships is intended to build local capacity, promote innovation and flexibility, and help to ensure that the work we fund is culturally and contextually appropriate.

We currently support about 140 major projects. We focus our grantmaking on 21 countries in which we have built up experience over the years. These include both developing and industrialised countries and represent a geographical range that encompasses Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas.

Also central to our work is the ongoing effort to document and analyse the programmes we support, with the twin aims of learning lessons for our future grantmaking activities and generating knowledge we can share. Through our publications, we aim to inform and influence policy and practice both in the countries where we operate and beyond.

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