

3rd Ensact Joint European Conference
Social Action in Europe: Towards Inclusive Policies and Practice
17-19 April 2013 in Istanbul www.ensactistanbul.org

Paper presentation at the ESEP Symposium with the common theme
"Ethics in progress. From teaching to practice"
The Symposium will take place on Thursday, April 18 from 9.30 to 12.30 o'clock

Drs. Kirsten Nørh, lecturer at the Amsterdam University for Applied Sciences
Dr. Ron Oostdam, professor at the University van Amsterdam and the Amsterdam University for Applied Sciences

Ethical challenges of 'active parenting' in an urban setting.

This presentation will discuss the collaboration between teachers and parents especially in areas where social, economical, cultural differences between the parties are likely to influence the communication and the moral judgement. How do schools create inclusive environments with room for differences? How does teacher training include ethical issues and help students become 'ethical practitioners'?

Let me start with a short case from a school:

A young female teacher finds that there is too much bullying and fights going on among her pupils of eight. She decides to address the theme of violence and conflict management with the class. 'Especially the boys use violence as a way of communicating. Many have a limited vocabulary and easily lose their temper', she says. The teacher asks the children to write a letter to her, using words or pictures, about what kind of conflicts they experienced and how they handled them at home. When the teacher sees the letters, she is shocked. A majority of the letters are about violence, about children being hit. Some of the children experience being hit with a hard hand; one child has drawn a picture of a coat hanger with which he was hit; and another one, a stick. Some children wrote that their mother was hit.

The teacher is painfully aware of her legal obligation as a teacher to report to the social authorities about child abuse, but she does not believe it to be the best way to reach the parents and to change the ways in the families. She discusses the problem with the principal of the school and it is decided to confront the parents of the children in the class as a group in order to establish a dialogue about conflict management in the families. No reports are written to the social authorities.

The parents are invited to a meeting about how to stop violent conflict in the class. Almost all parents show up. Through role plays and groups discussions the teachers want to establish a dialogue with the parents and to make the point that children learn from their parents how to handle conflict. If parents themselves use or allow violence, then they tell the children through their acts that violence is right. During the meeting the teachers also told the parents about the letters and about the law in the country. Furthermore they informed the parents about the teachers' duty to report about violence against children.

This case took place in Denmark where it by law is forbidden to hit your children. About 75% of the children in this particular class have an immigrant or refugee background, most of them coming from Turkey or from Arab countries in the Middle East. The teacher herself came from Palestine to Denmark about 20 years earlier.

From the dialogue with the parents the school learned that many immigrant and refugee families in that area live in a 'parallel society' and know very little about the Danish society and Danish norms about bringing up children. They have no idea that it is neither allowed nor regarded useful to hit one's children.

The meeting was a success according to the principal and the teacher. Some months later they experience less bullying and fighting among the children in the class, and the parents have become more trustful and open to the teachers about the problems they faced with their children at home.

However, the case provoked much public reaction in the media, and the school was heavily criticised for letting the children down and for not fulfilling their legal obligation to report about child abuse.¹

This case touches upon a number of issues that are often met in urban settings: differences in ethnical background, in socio-economical status, in family traditions and ideas about raising a child.

This case also raises the questions how professionals – in this case school teachers – anticipate and meet their 'clients' – in this case parents and children. What does it mean to be cultural sensitive – and how do teacher students develop cultural sensitivity – and an understanding of their ethical responsibility?

Active parenting

Active parenting is used as an umbrella term to describe various forms of parental involvement. It has the connotation of parents who consciously and proactively commit themselves to various activities in mutual consultation with the school.

A large research project in the Netherlands focussed on improving active parenting at schools and developed different practical applications for more powerful and effective partnership for parental involvement. In recent years there has been an increasing shift in the roles of parents and schools. Originally, the roles were clearly delineated: Parents are responsible for bringing up the children and the school is responsible for education. Gradually, this distinction has become blurred, and upbringing and education are seen more as a shared responsibility of parents and schools. In that context, the term 'partnership' is used to describe meaningful school-parent cooperation in which the two parties consult and support each other in furthering the learning, motivation and development of pupils.

Different types of partnerships were developed in the research project: between a *social partnership* describing a broader 'collaboration with the community' and

¹ Case study 5.4 *Bending the law? A case about reporting child abuse in Denmark*. In: Banks, S. & K. Nøhr, 2011, p. 179-187

a *formal partnership* referring to the involvement of parents in all manner of school activities. The researchers Oostdam and Hooze focus on an *educational partnership*, including a pedagogical and a didactical partnership.

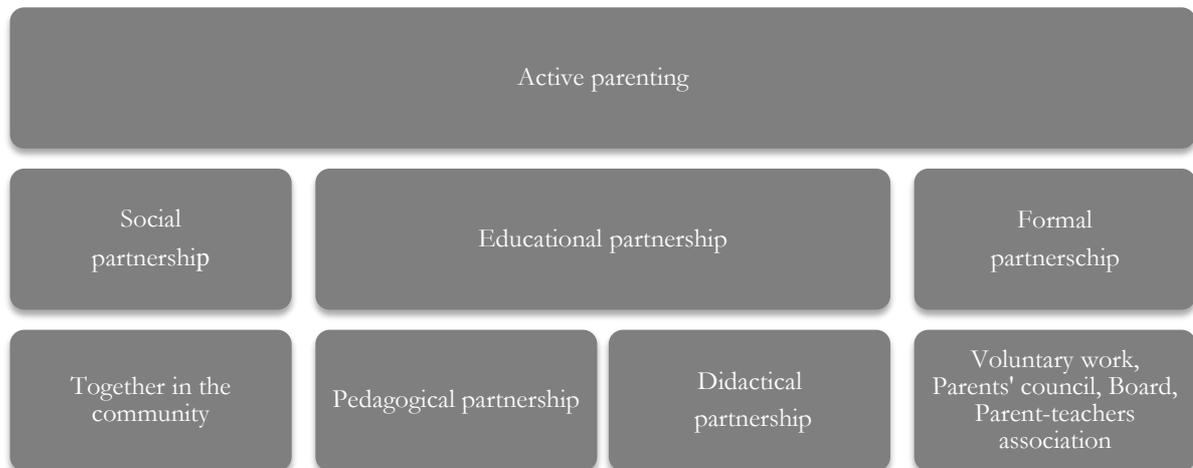


Figure 1 Dimensions of active parenting

A partnership implies an idea about equality and mutual trust. Or rather: it implies that the two parties have an equal status in the partnership, it does not mean that they are equal to each other. Parents and school have different intentions, interests, stakes and responsibilities. Parents are evidently more emotionally involved with their children and do not like to hear anything bad said about their children. Also, children mostly do not want to talk about their parents or their home situation. The school is more focussed on creating the 'optimum' conditions for children's development and learning.

In the case above it looks as if the parents have not been actively involved in the school activities. Or maybe rather that the relation between teachers and parents has been based on little knowledge about the reality that each of the parties lived in. Not until faced with the dilemma of violence did it become clear what the family lives of some of these children was and the parallel lives that some of these families were living. At that moment it also became possible to put the real problems on the agenda and to talk about them.

Mutual trust is essential in building and maintaining a parent-school partnership. It does not mean that school and parents are in an equal relationship. There is always an issue of power; as in this casestory where the school has the power to report child abuse to the authorities. They could have made a different choice and sent reports to the social security. But as the principal of the school stated this could have led to mistrust from the parents and had probably not resulted in the open dialogue which was now made possible. Furthermore she doubted if the children would in fact have been helped by the action.

When parents and the school succeed in combining information about the child's strengths and weaknesses, about their vision and expectations regarding the child's capacity for growth and the steps to be taken in its development possibilities, this benefits mutual trust as well as the child's development.

Parallel to this, Sarah Banks refers to 'democratic professionalism' in social work with an increasing focus on partnership with service users and with viewing service users as experts on their own lives and issues (Banks, 2012, p. 106) The professionalism of teachers and the openness and flexibility of the school are key factors to this.

These key factors leave us with questions how professionals are being trained in dealing with ethical challenges and how organisations can create environments open to differences?

Professional training as teachers, social educators and social workers is often attractive to young females from (white) middleclass families, naturally influenced by the norms and values they were brought up with. Through internships the students are often confronted with social realities of which they have no or very little experience or knowledge. An essential task for professional education is to stimulate – or should I say provoke – students' reflection about differences and ethical dilemmas and help them to a non-judgemental professionalism.

Not only in the training program at the university but even more so in their internships do students meet social realities that can challenge their personal values and their well-known communication patterns. Schools and institutions that are receiving students for internships bear great responsibility for ensuring these differences are open for discussion and that students are not met with standard answers or solutions.

The researchers Oostdam and Hooze state that 'apart from pupils, parents are the most important target group for schools to communicate with. However, in general, teachers and schools appear not very well prepared for this. In the initial and post-initial teacher training programmes, teachers are not made enough aware of the many aspects of parent-school relationships besides informing parents about children's learning and progress. They could be taught knowledge and skills in order to make parents feel that they are welcome in the school and that they are respected by the school staff as partners in education.'

A case-based method can be very useful to bring discussions about ethical dilemmas close to real life experiences. For instance, students can be asked to bring in their own cases about dilemmas they have met in their internships and work with these cases according to one of the methods elaborated in the book of Banks & Nøhr. In our work it has proven succesful to have students – often with different cultural backgrounds – discuss ethical cases with each other, analysing, researching issues raised by the case or using role play or drama to reach a dieper level of understanding.

The challenge for us as trainers or educators of the coming professionals is to bring ethical discussions into the classroom *and* into the internships, not as a separate subject to be 'ticked off' with a test but as an ongoing reflection that will stay and contribute to 'lifelong learning'.

Possible questions for discussion about the case:

1. Do you think the school was right to take the approach it did to tackling the issue of parents physically punishing their children?
2. The approach taken by the school could be regarded as 'cultural sensitive' practice, taking into account the fact that many of the families concerned were immigrants and refugees from Middle Eastern countries. What do you think is meant by 'cultural sensitive' practice, and how do you think it can be achieved, whilst also taking into account children's rights to non-violence, as recognised in Western countries?
3. Do you believe the Danish law forbidding physical punishment of children is a good law? What are the laws and regulations about physical punishment of children in your own country?
4. Do you agree that forming an educational partnership between school and parents is an effective way of discussing and solving ethical issues?

References:

Banks, S. (2012 (1995)) *Ethics and Values in Social Work*. London: Palgrave Macmillan/BASW, 4th edition.

Banks, S. & K. Nøhr (ed) (2011) *Practising social work ethics around the world. Cases and commentaries*. London and New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis group.

Oostdam, R. & E. Hooge (2012) *Making the difference with active parenting; forming educational partnerships between parents and schools*. European Journal of Psychological Education. Published with open access at Springerlink.com