



PARENT PARTICIPATION AT SCHOOL

A research study on the perspectives of children

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The present article discusses the attitude of children towards parent participation at school. To this end, a quantitative study was conducted among 250 10-year-old children in Flanders. The analysis shows that children tend to rather like parent participation, and that this attitude is related to the extent to which parents participate. Children from 'deprived' schools tend to like parent participation better. This article argues that children should be approached as fully-fledged, active participants in their parents' participation process and that it is necessary to take account of the specific perspectives of children on this topic.

Parent participation at school is a theme that is receiving increasing attention. In the literature, however, there is ambiguity about the concept of parent participation. In addition, the concept of parent involvement is sometimes used as well, referring to the same or to a different concept. This does not make for clarity: in some studies the concepts are not even defined (Verhoeven et al., 2003). Where parent participation or parent involvement is defined, there is a multitude of interpretations. Furthermore, the definitions given are generally very broad. In this study, we use the term 'parent participation' because this term has a high degree of recognizability. However, we have given the term a broad interpretation, covering besides formal participation also informal and non-organized participation. Under this broad definition, there is no difference from the term 'parent involvement'.

The growing attention to parent participation concerns both the scientific and the community level. The number of scientific studies on parent participation is on the rise. They investigate issues such as: what are the short-term and long-term advantages, how can parent participation be stimulated, which parents participate and which parents do not, etc. In daily (school) life as well, parent participation is given increasing attention: a growing number of schools undertake efforts to stimulate parent participation at school, whether or not as a result of the Act on Flemish Participation at School and the Flemish Education Council (2004),¹ or within the framework of the objectives of the

Flemish Equal Opportunities in Education-I Act (2002).² Parent participation offers various advantages: it is claimed to benefit children's learning process (Englund et al., 2004; Overmaat and Boogaard, 2004) and even to affect the children's academic results (Comer, 2005). Parent participation is also claimed to prevent behavioural problems (Kyriakides, 2005), truancy (Epstein and Sheldon, 2002) and drop-out (Barnard, 2004). There appears to be a consensus between the social-scientific world, the political world and practitioners about the proposition that poor contacts between the school and the home environment are prejudicial to children (Edwards and David, 1997).

There is some criticism of this trend as well: for instance, does parent participation have a positive effect on the school results of deprived children, do parents and teachers think that parent participation is meaningful? Even in these more critical studies, children are generally viewed as passive subjects existing outside the parent-school relationship and merely undergoing the consequences of parent participation. The suggestion that children and young people, individually or in group, can have their own opinions about how, when and which parent(s) should or should not be involved in the school has been given little attention in scientific research so far (Edwards and Allred, 1999; Edwards and David, 1997). There are a number of international studies on this issue (see later), but in Flanders this still is virgin territory.

The aforementioned assumption that children have their own opinions about parent participation at school clearly derives from a child-oriented approach that is typical of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The CRC shows a fundamental respect for and a recognition of the equivalence of children (Verhellen et al., 1999). However, equivalence does not imply that all children are equal, irrespective of their age, gender, cultural differences, etc., although much research approaches children as a discrete but homogeneous group (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006). The CRC recognizes children as children, and childhood prevails on the preparation for adulthood (Verhellen et al., 1999). Similarly, with regard to the school context of children and young people, the traditional approach that views children as 'not-yet' adults is often unconsciously the starting point. The purpose of education lies in the future of the child (Raes, 1994). Children are not 'refunded' for the efforts they produce at school until they are adults (Qvortrup, 1991). Within the frame of reference of the CRC, education should therefore be viewed as a major component of the current life of the child or the young person, involving both rights and duties for them, as active participants. The present study starts from the CRC frame of reference and deems it is evident that children's opinions on parent participation at school should be studied, since the school is a matter 'affecting' the child (Article 12 of the CRC). The present study uses the concept of 'attitude' instead of 'opinion'. Keers and Wilke (1991), for instance, view 'opinion as only one element of attitude. Conversely, the broad definition of the concept of attitude distinguishes an affective, cognitive and behavioural component (Billiet and Waage, 2001; Brehm et al., 2000; Keers

and Wilke, 1991). In the context of parent participation, the affective component comprises the feelings and preferences of children vis-à-vis parent participation. The cognitive component focuses on the views and the information children have about parent participation. Finally, the behavioural component concerns children's intentions to behave in a certain manner towards parent participation.

The present study researches the attitude of 10-year-olds, unlike most other studies, which measure the attitude of adolescents. Following De Wit et al. (2005), adolescence is described here as the period from about 12–22 years of age. The frequent use of the term 'young people' refers to this age group. Where the term 'children' is used, reference is made to children below the age of 12. Insights into adolescence suggest that the attitude on parent participation may change during adolescence. For instance, De Wit et al. (2005) and Roediger et al. (2001) argue that the quest for autonomy, during which young people gradually distance themselves from the members of their family, is typical of adolescence. This often implicitly presupposes that children will like parent participation until adolescence. This assumption that children will like parent participation is questioned in the present article. This study assumes that 10-year-olds also have an attitude, and that their attitude matters. For instance, children appear to exert a significant influence on their parents' participation (Crozier, 1999; Edwards and Allred, 2000). Independently of the motivation offered by the CRC for taking children's attitudes into account, their attitude also appears to be important for the success or failure of parent participation.

The first part of the study assesses the attitude in which parent participation is viewed through the eyes of children. Besides this descriptive part, the study also contains an explanatory part. It examines whether children's attitude towards parent participation is influenced by the children's gender and/or the extent to which a school population is from a deprived background. This social dimension of the study is highly topical in the context of Flanders, since parent participation is being stimulated at schools that have a population that is to a greater or lesser extent deprived. In the framework of the policy for equal opportunities in education, these schools are given extra resources for taking initiatives in the domain of, for example, parent participation. It is indeed assumed that low-income parents face more obstacles to participation (Hill et al., 2004) and that parents having a lower educational level provide less support to their children in problem situations (Englund et al., 2004). To prevent such children from facing the negative consequences of their parents' more limited participation, these schools are given extra support.

Finally, this study also raises a more theoretical question: namely, whether children and parents have a different perception of parent participation. This theoretical research question derives from the finding that the measurement of children's attitudes towards parent participation is virtually uncharted territory in Flanders. When children effectively are questioned about their

attitude towards parent participation, this is generally done from the adult perspective. In the framework of the CRC, we should be able to offer a theoretical framework for reflecting on the way children perceive parent participation. Policy-makers, schools and parents can draw inspiration from this reflection to organize parent participation activities that take the attitude of children into account.

Theoretical framework

As stated already, little research has so far been conducted into the attitude of children towards parent participation. Several researchers do cursorily mention – alongside their studies highlighting the opinions of the parents and the teachers – that the views of children and young people should be studied as well (see for example, Bloomstran, 2002; Verhoeven et al., 2003). Some international studies explicitly discuss children's and young people's views of parent participation. The study by David et al. (2001), for instance, urges children and young people to reflect on parent participation, assuming that children and young people are active participants who have the right to be heard. Edwards and David (1997) make a case for research involving a child-focused approach in which children and young people are treated as competent information sources and actors in relation to their parents' participation.

With regard to the attitude of children towards parent participation, a number of international studies draw a distinction between the affective, cognitive and behavioural components of this attitude. When it comes to liking parent participation (i.e. affective component of the attitude), it appears that 10-year-olds generally appreciate their parents' assistance in school matters. Boys and girls have different motivations in this regard. Girls feel that this demonstrates that their parents are interested in what they are doing, while boys view their parents' assistance as useful because it helps them to obtain better marks (Crozier, 1999). The preference of children also depends on the frequency and the nature of the interaction between the parents and the teachers. Indeed, where there are frequent negative parent-teacher interactions, children view parent participation as an indicator of negative pupil behaviour (Lawson, 2003), which naturally makes them like parent participation less. Next to this very limited body of research involving children, there is, on the other hand, more research on the attitude of young people towards parent participation. Crozier (1999) came to the conclusion that of the 12-year-olds whose parents do not participate, 43 percent are disappointed. However, according to Pryor (1995), research with 15-year-olds shows that young people are generally wary of their parents' participation, although they expect their parents to be available to them when they need it. Young people appreciate their parents' help in their school work but do not want parents to interfere in their social life. Deslandes and Cloutier (2002) conclude that

young people view parent participation mainly as a private matter dissociated from their peers or teachers. Edwards et al. (2002) confirm in their research that young people draw a clear distinction between the home environment and the school environment. The same study shows that girls are more inclined to link the school and the home environment.

Another significant finding by Deslandes and Cloutier (2002) is that the preferences of young people with regard to parent participation do not correlate with the family structure or with their parents' educational level. The researchers relate this finding to the fact that young people's backgrounds affect their school results and conclude that there is a discrepancy between young people's receptiveness to parent participation and the low degree of participation by parents having a lower educational level. Other research confirms that parents having a lower educational level participate less. Beemer (2002), for instance, concludes that the parents' educational level, rather than their ethnic background, determines the nature and the scope of parent participation. Englund et al. (2004) argue that mothers having a higher educational level give more support to their children in problem situations. Moreover, they cherish higher expectations of their children's school results and are more committed to their children's school during the first school years. Hill et al. (2004) add that parents with a low income face more frequent and more numerous obstacles when trying to participate in their children's school life. Hill and Taylor (2004) link to this the fact that the children who stand to benefit most from participation are often those who are given least support by their parents.

As for the cognitive component of the attitude, several studies show that children and young people are aware of parent participation but do not always perceive it in the same way as their parents. Paulson and Sputa (1996) found a difference between young people and parents in their perception of the extent to which the parents participate. The parents rate themselves higher on the different dimensions of parent participation.

As far as the behaviour of children and young people towards parent participation is concerned (i.e. behavioural component of the attitude), several studies have been conducted already. For instance, research by Edwards and Allred (2000) shows that children and young people can be both active and passive in stimulating as well as curbing parent participation. The impact differs according to the socioeconomic environment: children and young people from 'lower' socioeconomic environments are alleged to be more active, both in stimulating and in avoiding. The impact of young people in any case appears to be substantial (Crozier, 1999; Edwards and Allred, 2000). For instance, some young people hamper communication between school and home that takes place via letters (Pelco and Ries, 1999). Crozier (1999) says that parents often report that their children's urge for independence and autonomy forms a major obstacle to their engaging in parent participation. Parent participation is therefore something that in many cases is engaged in at the request of the

young people, rather than as a consequence of school results, gender, etc. However, a positive relationship between parents and their children might incite even adolescents to 'invite' their parents to participate (Deslandes and Bertrand, 2005; Edwards et al., 2002). The studies cited above thus clearly confirm the major influence of young people on their parents' participation. It is therefore important to be well aware of the expectations and attitudes of children and young people towards parent participation (Deslandes and Cloutier, 2002).

Research

Research set-up

To survey the attitude of children towards parent participation, we used written questionnaires. The following research questions were addressed:

1. What is the attitude of young people towards parent participation? We assessed (1) the preferences of children towards parent participation, i.e. their feelings towards parent participation – the affective component of the attitude; (2) their conceptions of and information about parent participation – the cognitive component; and (3) their intention to behave towards parent participation in a certain way – the behavioural component. The questionnaires for assessing the affective and the cognitive components of the attitude were drawn up on the basis of Epstein's parent participation typology. Since Epstein's typology is broad, it is frequently used in scientific research. The first type in Epstein's typology is 'parenting', in which families create home environments that devote much attention to the child's life at school, ensure good health and safety, a positive learning environment, good support, etc. The second type is 'communicating': it implies mutual communication between parents and school on the curriculum and the child's progress. The third type is 'volunteering', in which parents help out at school for (non-)educational activities. 'Learning at home' implies that parents support their child at home for school-related tasks such as homework or planning. The fifth type of parent participation is 'decision-making', where parents are involved in school decisions. The final type is 'collaborating with community'. This implies that the facilities and services of the community are used to improve the school, the families and the learning process of individual pupils (Epstein, 1995; Epstein and Dauber, 1991). On the basis of previously published operationalizations of Epstein's typology, various items were linked to each type of parent participation. The children were asked to rate these items on a five-point scale, from less to more (1 = less, 5 = more). A different approach was taken for measuring

the behavioural component. Indeed, it would be impossible to cast every possible behavioural response to every type of parent participation into a scale or a multiple-choice answer. We therefore opted to address two common types of parent participation: parents helping with homework and parents helping at school. For each of these types of parent participation, an item with different possible answers was presented, pointing to motivations for behaving in a given way. Children were allowed to tick more than one answer for these items.

2. What effect do 'gender' and 'degree of deprivation' have on attitude? The degree of deprivation of a school population was measured on the basis of the number of hours of support that a school is granted in view of achieving equal opportunities for all children (so-called 'GOK hours' or 'Equal Opportunities in Education hours') under the Flemish Equal Opportunities in Education Act.
3. How do children perceive parent participation? The aim was to chart children's perceptions of parent participation from the point of view of the children and not from the traditional 'adult' views and typologies of parent participation (see earlier). To answer this research question, a factor analysis was applied.

The questionnaires were processed by means of the SPSS statistical processing software.

Research group

Respondents in this survey are 10-year-old children. The aim was to work with a group that is younger than the research population in most other international studies on parent participation. The percentage of extra hours granted to a school to guarantee equal opportunities for all children ('GOK hours') was another criterion for selecting the schools. We opted for a diversity of percentages of 'GOK hours' (the number of GOK hours that a school receives corrected by the number of pupils in the school), so as to include schools ranging from more deprived to more privileged. Additionally, a subdivision was made into rural vs urban schools. The questionnaires in the classes of the nine schools yielded 250 respondents: 130 boys and 120 girls. In the schools that cooperated, there was a very low non-response: only six children were not allowed to take part in the survey by their parents. This sample is not necessarily representative, but conversely there is no reason to assume that it is not representative.³

During the questioning, special attention was paid to respecting the child as a respondent. Research with children requires a different approach from research with adults, although it is of course not opposed to it (Punch, 2002). Dealing with children and adults as distinct groups is useful for obtaining a

better understanding of children, but it can also mask certain correspondences (Vandenbroeck and Bouverne-De Bie, 2006).

For this study, the explicit cooperation of the children was requested. In the framework of the CRC, it is evident that the permission of the children should be sought first. This was also done in order to ensure that the children would not perceive the research as an obligation. Indeed, Lewis and Lindsay (2000) point out that children sometimes feel obliged to participate. Research into children's attitudes towards parent participation may therefore be considered as an invasion of private life, especially when it deals with individual experiences in the home environment (Edwards and Allred, 1999; Hill, 2006).

The literature shows that it takes time and effort to make children realize that only their attitude will be assessed and that their answers will be valued irrespective of what their attitude turns out to be (David et al., 2001). Since the survey took place at the children's school, extra attention was paid to their perception of correct or incorrect answers. Indeed, children at school are used to their answers being considered as correct or incorrect (De Winter and Kromeman, 2003; Hill, 2006). However, the literature shows that children think that school is a good setting for a survey, although it is important that the questionnaires should be presented and organized by outsiders and definitely not by teachers (Hill, 2006). We took account of this condition by ensuring that the researcher was in no way related to the schools and was personally in charge of organizing and administering the questionnaires in the classes. The teachers present were asked to keep a low profile and not to interfere in the survey.

Results

Measurement of general attitude

Figure 1 shows the means on the affective, cognitive and behavioural components of the attitude. As far as the affective component is concerned, children on average 'rather like' parent participation (categories 3 and 4 on a five-point scale). Furthermore, children think that their parents participate 'sometimes' in school activities (categories 2 and 3 on a five-point scale relating to the cognitive component). For the behavioural component, behaviour tends slightly towards the negative response (categories 2 and 3 on a five-point scale).

Table 1 shows the average scores of the children on the affective and the cognitive components. For these and other results, it was explicitly opted to process the parent participation items separately and not per type of parent participation (according to Epstein's typology). This made it possible to start optimally from the children's perspective without constantly referring to an adult perspective. It is noteworthy that according to the children the preferred types of parent participation are those that take place at home (for instance, joining in play, helping with homework). Another notable finding is that the

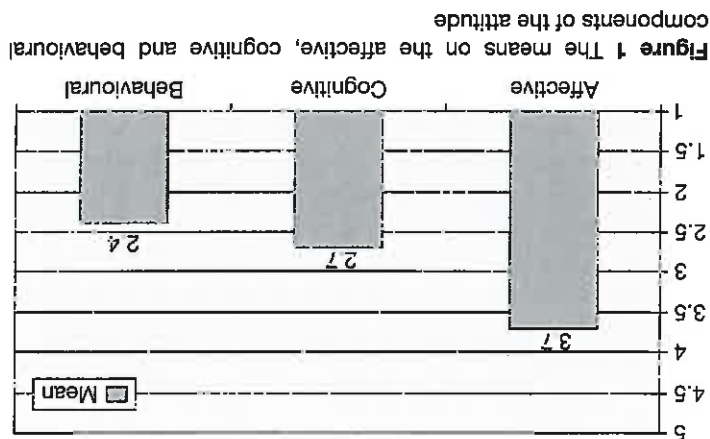


Table 1 Averages for the answers relating the affective and cognitive components of the attitude (on a five-point scale, range 1-5)

Affective			Cognitive		
Parents playing together with their child (parenting)	4.52	2.96	Parents teaching their child new things at home which they do not learn at school (parenting)	3.92	2.95
Parents saying what is and what is not allowed (parenting)	2.81	3.84	Parents talking with their child about what is going on at school (parenting)	3.59	3.35
Parents attending parents' evenings (communicating)	3.65	3.96	Parents receiving letters from school (communicating)	3.09	3.12
Parents talking with the teacher (communicating)	3.24	2.90	Parents assisting the teacher in class (volunteering)	3.70	1.38
Parents accompanying the class trip (volunteering)	4.05	1.42	Parents helping at school (meals, cleaning, childcare, school events, etc.) (volunteering)	3.58	1.66
Parents observing their child in class (volunteering)	3.13	1.57	Parents helping their child with homework (learning at home)	4.20	3.51
Parents who are satisfied when their child is working hard for school (learning at home)	4.46	4.34	Parents attending meetings at school (decision-making)	3.00	2.39
Parents co-deciding on important school matters (decision-making)	3.34	2.27	Parents and school working together with the community around the school to make the school better (collaborating with community)	4.13	1.65

traditional types of parent participation are still most often engaged in by the parents (according to the children). Examples are: being satisfied when the child is working hard for school, attending parents' evenings, saying what children are and are not allowed to do, helping with homework.

As for the behavioural component, it appears that children tend to behave in a fairly positive way towards their parents' proposals to help them with their homework. When children allow their parents to help them, the reason they most frequently state is that they want their parents to know what they are learning at school (54.8 percent of the children chose this as one of the motivations), and also that it enables them to obtain better marks (48.8 percent). Only a few children do not want their parents to help them. Children also tend to react favourably when parents propose helping at school. The reason that is stated most frequently is once again that this will enable parents to know what is going on at school (48 percent). In addition, children also react positively if they like their parents (43.6 percent). Yet, there are quite a few children who want their parents to talk this over with them first (29.2 percent). Some children prefer their parents not to come and help at school; 28 percent of the children do not want that their parents come and help at school or observe them, while 10.4 percent of these children think that their parents will come and help anyway, whether they like it or not.

Correlations between the preferences of children, the frequency of parent participation and behaviour towards parent participation

There appears to be a positive correlation ($F(1, 247) = 46.63, p < .001, r = .40$) between the frequency with which parents participate, according to the children (cognitive component), and children's preferences for parent participation (affective component). In other words, it is possible that the more parents participate, the more children will respond positively to parent participation. However, it is also possible that the more positive children are about parent participation, the more the parents will participate. Further analyses show a remarkable fact: the preference for a specific type of parent participation is not correlated to the frequency in which parents are occupied with this specific type of parent participation. This means that preferences and subjective occurrence only correlate on the general level of parent participation across all types and not on the specific level of the different types.

There also appears to be a positive correlation ($F(1, 247) = 22.90, p < .001, r = .29$) between the preference of children (affective component) and children's behaviour towards parent participation (behavioural component). Children behaving more positively towards parent participation will also like parent participation better and vice versa. For specific types of parent participation, further analyses show that it is important to take the motivation of the children into account. Children who let their parents help them so that they could get better grades, for example, have no greater preference towards parent participation. They do behave positively towards parent participation, but they only show an instrumental motivation. This kind of motivation does not lead to a more positive preference towards parent participation.

There is also a positive correlation ($F = (1, 248) = 39.76, p < .001, r = .37$) between the frequency of parent participation according to the

children (cognitive component) and the behaviour of children (behavioural component). It is possible that parents engage more in participation when their child behaves more positively towards parent participation. A clear example can be found in the correlation between the frequency of parent participation and the rejection of help from the parents. Parents show less support on homework if children say that parents don't have to help because they are able to do it by themselves. Conversely, it is also possible that children behave more positively towards parent participation for the very reason that their parents participate more.

Differences between boys and girls

Overall, boys and girls like parent participation equally, their parents participate to an equal extent and boys and girls behave in the same way towards parent participation. When all types of parent participation are examined separately, however, some differences between boys and girls emerge. For instance, boys have a more negative attitude towards their parents telling them what they are allowed to do and what they are not. Girls have a more positive attitude towards their parents discussing with them what is happening at school, attending parent evenings and meeting the teacher. The only type of parent participation that boys like more than girls is parents accompanying the field trip. As for the frequency of parent participation, it appears that more girls say their parents are satisfied when they work hard for school. In contrast, more boys say that their school and their parents work together to make the school better. More girls than boys allow their parents to help them with their homework because this will enable them to find out what they learn at school. In contrast, boys allow their parents to help them with their homework because they prefer this to their parents coming to school. There are more boys who want only their father to help out at school than there are more boys who want only their mother to help out at school than there are children who want only their father to do this.

Differences according to the degree of deprivation in the schools
Children from so-called deprived schools like parent participation better, they say that their parents participate more and they have a more positive behaviour towards (proposals of) parent participation. When all types of parent participation are examined individually, however, some differences with regard to the degree of deprivation emerge. The extent to which parents come to class and the preference for parents who come to class appear to correlate best with the degree of deprivation: children from deprived schools report that they like this type of parent participation considerably more and that this type of parent participation occurs more frequently as well.

How do children perceive the different types of parent participation? Parents can participate in many different ways: they can teach their children things they do not learn at school, they can help in class, they can co-decide at school, they can talk to the teacher, etc. There are several typologies for parent participation, for example the Epstein one used in this study. The present study examined whether children also apply this 'adult' parent participation typology.

The study shows that in their preference for certain types of parent participation, children will generally base themselves on the effect a type of parent participation has on them. The degree to which parent participation is perceived as 'supervisory' will, for instance, be more important in determining the preference of children than the type of activity conducted by the parents. The factor analysis shows that children base their preference on the following clustering:

1. Supervisory types of parent participation (e.g. parents saying what is and what is not allowed, parents' evenings);
2. Parent participation not directed at the child as an individual, general logistical support (parents helping at school, parents accompanying a class trip, etc.);
3. Parent participation in class (e.g. parents helping in the classroom, parents observing activities in the classroom);
4. Parent participation not directed at the child as an individual but reflecting a general interest in the school (e.g. co-deciding about important school matters, discussing what is happening at school);
5. Performance-oriented parent participation at home (e.g. being satisfied when the child is working hard for school, support for homework, learning new things at home).

It is clear that the classification above is different from the common 'adult' typologies used in this context. The supervisory types of parent participation, for instance, can be found in several types of parent participation according to the typology of Epstein. Children base the frequency of their parents' participation on the following clustering of parent participation activities:

1. Logistical parent participation at school (e.g. parents helping at school, parents accompanying a class trip);
2. Parent participation at home that is not learning-oriented (e.g. playing together with the child);
3. Performance-focused parent participation at home (e.g. helping with homework, being satisfied when the child is working hard for school);

4. Communication with the school (e.g. attending parents' evenings, talking with teachers, receiving letters from the school);
5. Parent participation where the parents exercise a strong influence (e.g. co-deciding about school matters, parents saying what is and what is not allowed, parents attending meetings at school).

Once again, it is clear that children use a different method/classification to cluster actions of parent participation than adult classifications. However, the children's classification on the frequency of parent participation differs less from the adult classification than the children's classification on the preferences of parent participation.

The aforementioned classification on parent participation from the view of children also gives a better explanation of the differences between girls and boys and the differences according to the degree of deprivation of the school than the traditional adult classification. A further analysis shows that girls are more positive about types of parent participation that occur at home and which are performance-focused. Furthermore, their parents engage in these types of participation more frequently. The 'supervisory' types of parent participation appear to have an important impact as well: boys like these types of parent participation less, and so do children from 'more privileged' schools. Parent participation in the classroom appears to be variable too: boys like this type of participation better, and so do children from more deprived schools. With regard to the frequency of parent participation, there appears to be a difference as well: children attending more deprived schools say that their parents engage in more non-performance-focused parent participation at home, and that their parents communicate less with school.

Discussion

The present study extends and enriches existing research. It assumes that not only adolescents but also 10-year-olds have an attitude towards parent participation. They are no passive recipients of care and support from the school and their parents. Children generally like parent participation but they don't like all types of parent participation equally. They also have several motivations to behave in a certain way towards parent participation. It is important to be aware of the attitude of children on parent participation, since they can actively stimulate or curb parent participation.

This study yields significant findings, especially with regard to pupils from schools with a higher percentage of 'GOK hours'. Indeed, it appears that children from schools with a higher percentage of 'GOK hours' say their parents participate more. A higher percentage of 'GOK hours' at school implies a higher number of parents from deprived and/or foreign backgrounds (see earlier). The findings by Beemer (2002), Englund et al. (2004), Hill and Taylor (2004), Hill et al. (2004) and Verhoeven et al. (2003) that parents

from deprived backgrounds participate less cannot be confirmed on the basis of the present study. In contrast to what Paulson and Spota (1996) claim, in the present study it is the children who give higher scores to the degree of participation than the adults.

This remarkable finding can have different explanations. First of all, the first effects of the equal opportunities in education policy may be emerging. It might, for instance, very well be that extra efforts undertaken by schools with regard to parent participation are changing the way children perceive this participation. Second, it is possible that the perception of children does not correspond to the common perception that parents from deprived backgrounds participate less. However, in the framework of this study, this explanation is relevant since – following Anderson et al. (2003) – it is the very perception of children that is of crucial importance for the effects of parent participation on children. A third possible explanation is that other studies view parent participation restrictively as 'presence at school'. The present study shows that children from more deprived schools do say that their parents communicate somewhat less with school but engage in more parent participation at home which is not performance-focused. The above findings lead us to conclude that parents from deprived schools are less engaged in traditional types of parent participation but do not in general participate less. Following Beemer (2002), there is a differentiation in the type of participation rather than in the frequency. It is, for instance, very possible that parents in deprived schools participate less in the school itself because they have negative experiences with education (Verhoeven et al., 2003). The present research suggests that according to the children this should in no way be generalized into a statement such as 'parents from deprived backgrounds engage less in parent participation'.

Following Astar (2002) and Ferrara and Ferrara (2005), this may face schools with the challenge to examine how parents *do* participate, looking beyond the traditional and familiar types of parent participation. According to the CRC, children are to be involved in this as active actors. Indeed, childhood – of which school time constitutes an inherent part – is important as such (Verhelien et al., 1999). Hence, we should not just question children about what type of participation their parents engage in, but we should also find out what the children prefer and how they wish to be involved. Furthermore, the present study suggests that children from deprived schools like parent participation better. Because of that, it is very possible that schools will find an important partner in children when working on parent participation. As Crozier (1999), Pelco and Ries (1999) and Deslandes and Bertrand (2005) found in earlier research, the present study suggests a strong influence of children on parent participation. Independently of the motivation offered by the CRC for taking children's attitudes into account, their attitude also appears to be important for the success or failure of parent participation. Indeed, the frequency with which parents engage in parent participation correlates

well with the preferences of children and the behaviour of children towards parent participation. It is possible that children like parent participation more and have a more positive response because their parents participate more. However, it is also plausible that parents engage more in participation when seeing that their child likes parent participation and has a positive reaction to parent participation. It should be noted that the research population of the present study is substantially younger than that of the studies cited. An innovative aspect of this study is the recommendation to not only take the adolescents' perceptions into consideration. Schools should take into account that even children in primary education have a huge impact on the participation of their parents. In other words, it appears that even at an early age children determine the participation of their parents. In addition, not only the strong influence of children but also the personal relationship between parents and children appears to be important for parent participation (Deslandes and Bertrand, 2005; Edwards et al., 2002). The present study confirms that having 'nice' parents correlates strongly with a preference for parent participation. As a consequence, a school can't organize or stimulate parent participation out of thin air, parent participation can't be approached without considering the home situation or the relations between parents and children. Moreover, policy-makers can't simply promote parent participation as a goal that a school can easily reach by inviting parents more often. Working on parent participation is also about developing a certain attitude comprising respect for and interest in the parents and the children. This may ask for an individual approach dependent on the parents and their background, the children and their age, preferences, the relationship between parents and children, the school, and so forth.

Starting from the CRC and the fact that children have a significant impact on their parents' participation, and following Deslandes and Cloutier (2002), who focus on the growing autonomy of children, we make a case for organizing parent participation in consultation with the children. This study points out that children's preferences on parent participation cannot be classified by the traditional categories. So the way in which children evaluate the different types of parent participation should definitely be taken into account. The extent to which activities are perceived as 'supervisory', 'performance-focused', 'logistically supporting', etc. is decisive for the preferences of children. Parents, schools and policy-makers should be aware of this and take this into consideration. Schools and policy-makers should not start from a given type of parent participation and link it with attempts at making both parents and children enthusiastic about this type of participation. Instead of applying this supply-side approach, it should first be assessed what effects certain types of parent participation have on children. On this basis, it can be decided to develop certain types of parent participation and if necessary adapt them to the wishes, needs and perceptions of the children. If parent participation is to have a future, we should therefore abandon the traditional 'adult' conceptions of parent participation as the only point of view.

As a limitation of the present study, it can be said that it offers few motivations or indications of the importance children themselves attach to their input into parent participation. Additional research should consequently further investigate the views of parent participation qualitatively. Qualitative research could, for instance, raise the question as to how the concept of participation is defined or perceived by children. It would be interesting to compare these views with the views of the other parties concerned. A second recommendation for further research concerns the use of age as a variable. So far, only a very rudimentary distinction can be drawn between adolescents (by means of the international research reviewed earlier) and 10-year-olds (by means of the present study).

Further analysis of the different age groups may reveal an evolution in attitude according to the age of children and young people. This will make it possible to give an appropriate response to the attitude of children and young people towards parent participation per age category. This will also pave the way for an approach to parent participation that no longer ignores the children.

Notes

1. Legal initiatives have been taken both at the central and at the local level to stimulate participation in the field of education. . . . Since the Act on participation at school and the Flemish Education Council of 2 April 2004, one set of rules is applicable to all primary and secondary schools as regards educational councils, parent councils and pupil councils, pupils in primary schools or parents of children in primary and secondary schools can respectively ask for an educational council, a pupil council and a parent council in the school. . . . The different parties involved in the school also often organise separate informal committees. (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2005: 43)
2. In the nineties of the past century, the Flemish government already encouraged primary and secondary schools to have an eye for equal opportunities in education for all children. . . . Since 1 September 2002, all these temporary projects have been replaced by an integrated support provision, paying special attention to children from deprived backgrounds. This new provision provides full opportunities to all children to learn and develop themselves and counter exclusion, social separation and discrimination. The Act on equal opportunities in education sets out three major lines of action:
 - each pupil has in principle the right to enrol in the school of his/her (parents') choice. . . .
 - the establishment of local consultation platforms with a threefold task: the local consultation platforms ensure the right of enrolment, act as an intermediary in case of conflicts and cooperate in implementing a local policy on equal opportunities in education.
 - an additional support that must enable schools to develop an extended needs provision geared towards deprived children. The support is aimed at schools that have a rather large number of pupils who meet certain indicators. These indicators are mostly socioeconomic in nature. This additional support consists of additional teaching periods or additional teaching hours per teacher. (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 2005: 41)

3. Some comparisons of ratios: ratio boys/girls in the fourth year (this study: 130/120; in Flanders: 32,474/32,280), average number of pupils per school (in this study: 220, in Flanders 181), average percentage of 'GOK hours' of a school (in this study: 20 percent, in Flanders 10 percent).

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