They Do Not Know How Much Power They Have

A study of teachers’ understanding of immigrant parental involvement in their children’s learning

De vet inte hur mycket makt de har
En studie av lärarens förståelse av invandrarföräldrars engagemang i sina barns lärande

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Abstract

Parental involvement in children’s education has been a topic for discussion among educators and researchers for decades worldwide. Studies have shown the positive relationships between parental involvement and children’s education outcome. Yet, there is a gap between what is found in theory and what is practiced in schools. This project investigates the role that teachers can play in the integration and involvement of parents with culturally, linguistically and economically diverse families in the education of their children with a particular focus on immigrant parents. Furthermore, it highlights challenges faced by both teachers and parents regarding parents’ involvement in their children’s education. This research focuses upon a local school in Malmö. It is a qualitative study which explores parental involvement from the teachers’ perspective through semi-structured interviews with three teachers who work in an elementary school in Malmö city. The findings of this project highlighted the complexity within the relationships between parents and their children’s education, both at home, and as well as in connection with school. It has been found that the teachers understand the position of the parents through a deficit theory, which is to place the blame for children’s failure in school on their homes and families. Reasons for this includes parents’ attitudes and approaches to school, parents’ expectations that the school should deal with issues regarding students’ learning, differences in school systems between Sweden and the parents’ home country.

Keywords: Parental involvement, immigrant parents, partnership, responsibility.

1.0 Introduction

There is an extensive body of literature that documents the importance of the relationship between school and family, particularly parental involvement, for increasing student educational outcomes (Epstein and Dauber 1991, Nieto 2012, Hornby and Lafaele 2011, De Carvalho 2001, Wright and Stegelin 2003). While much research has focused on parent involvement in their children’s education, few studies have focused on parent education level/background and social class, and the way this influences their participation in the educational experiences of their children (Dauber and Epstein 1991). Hornby and Lafaele (2011) define parental involvement as including home-based parental involvement such as
listening to children read, and the supervision of homework as well as school-based parental involvement, such as attending parent education workshops and parent-teacher meetings. Scholars emphasize the potential of both home-based and school-based parental involvement in facilitating student education outcomes (ibid). In addition, it improves the connection between parents and teachers and arouses children’s interest in their own education. There are many partnership models, according to Hornby and Lafaele (2011), which are available to facilitate involvement and provide practical guide aimed at its development. However, it is not always easy for teachers to put the models into practice due to factors that act as barriers to the establishment of effective parental involvement. These include individual parent, parent-teacher, and family factors, such as level of parents’ education and employment status. There are also child factors, such as intelligence level, and social factors, such as cultural context (ibid). To achieve the goal of facilitating the involvement of parents in their children’s education, teachers are required to adapt scholars’ theoretical models and guiding framework to promote home-school partnerships.

In Sweden, like other European countries, parental involvement has become a subject of discussion within the field of education more broadly. According to the Swedish curriculum (Lgr 2011), both schools and parents have a common responsibility for pupils' schooling which is to create the best possible conditions for children's development and learning. In practice, the help that children receive from their parents varies greatly, due to parental cultural, ethnical, economical, educational differences. Subsequently, some parents require teachers’ guidance and encouragement to increase and enhance their involvement with their children’s education and school community. Teachers, therefore, have a significant role to provide a support network that they can offer to all parents. Regardless, parental involvement is as important to teachers as to children. Flising et al (1996) claim that parental involvement does not only lead the children to perform better at school, but that it may also be a condition for teachers to succeed in their work.

This project investigates the role that teachers can play in the integration and involvement of culturally, linguistically, and economically diverse families in the education of their children, with a particular focus on immigrant parents. This is important, because immigration has increased in Sweden, as in many other countries in the world. In Sweden, according to Lundahl (2009), over a million people were born in another country, and in a city like Malmö there are 170 nationalities represented. Throughout Sweden, there are 125
primary schools with a proportion of immigrant background student that exceeds 40 percent. Given the underpinning concepts of democracy and inclusivity within Sweden, it is important that those who may be marginalized are not overlooked. The way in which immigrant youth have been positioned as the “other” in the media raises important questions surrounding homogeneity. Lundhal (2009) claims that the media often describes immigrant youth as a “group”. Swedish youth are also described in uniform terms. Still both groups are far from homogenous with large variation evident within the two. Given the number of immigrants living in Sweden, and the tendency for this diverse group to be characterized as the same, it is important to consider how schools can provide support and facilitate parents’ involvement in their children’s education. This fits in with the Swedish school system’s call for an equivalent education. According to the Swedish curriculum (Lgr 2011), teaching must be adapted to each student’s abilities and needs. It shall also promote students’ continued learning and knowledge based on students’ background, previous experiences, language and knowledge. This leads to facilitate learning methods and to include all parents in the education of their children, regardless of their background.

Similarly, Epstein (2001) has studied the effect of parental involvement in their children’s education. She reports that parent involvement has created more discussion than any other topic about school improvement. However, there is some confusion and disagreement about why involvement is important and how to obtain high participation from all families. In her work, Epstein also presents different opinions of both educators and parents on how to increase parental involvement within in their children’s education. Some teachers expect that parents should get involved spontaneously. If not, they are labeled as irresponsible, uninterested, or bad parents. However, some parents think that they should simply follow what schools tell them to do. It is suggested that neither of these approaches is effective for informing or involving all families (ibid). Furthermore, the author suggests a partnership approach that suits all needs. She describes partnerships as an approach that recognize the shared responsibilities of home, school, and community for children’s learning and development, and that students are central to successful partnerships.
1.1 Purpose and research questions

The purpose of the project is to investigate the role that teachers can play to help in the integration and involvement of parents, from culturally, linguistically and economically diverse families, in the education of their children, with a particular focus on immigrant parents. Furthermore, it highlights challenges faced by both teachers and parents regarding parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Importantly, this research focuses on the experiences of a local school in Malmö. This paper seeks to answer these specific research questions:

1. What methods do teachers use to involve parents in children’s education?

2. What is the perception of the immigrant parents’ level of involvement among teachers?

2.0 Parental involvement in the literature: an overview

Let us start with factors that influence parental involvement inside and outside the school community. Through exploring previous research about parents-school partnerships and how to outreach partnerships, we will consider different frameworks that facilitate parent-teacher relationships and parent involvement in children’s learning. Finally, gaps between theory and practice regarding parental involvement in schools are discussed.

2.1 Parental involvement inside and outside the school community

According to Bower and Griffin (2011), the traditional definition of parental involvement includes activities in the school and at home. Home activities (home-based parental involvement) are what parents do at home to affect their children’s education, including parent-children discussion about school, and, monitoring children’s educational progress and behavior. School activities include volunteering at school events, attending parents-teachers meetings, communicating with teachers, and other activities in relation to school (ibid). The integration between home and school requires parents to invest time and
money, but also facilitates the success of students and makes the necessary changes and adjustments (ibid). Parents are understood, according to Gonzalez et al (2013), here as role models, who can design effective learning characteristics, reinforce productive choices, and help set future goals. These characteristics can determine the level of parental involvement in school.

The emerging body of literature indicates positive associations between parental involvement and their children’s education (Dahlstedt 2009, Hornby and Lafaele 2011, Bower and Griffin 2011). Experience tells us that children need parents to teach and advocate for them in different areas of their lives. Wright and Stegelin (2003) argue that “nobody can deny the fact that parents are the first teachers of their children regardless of lifestyle and resources, both material and human” (p.62). This process is considered to be fundamental for further learning, and reflected in children’s later learning through guiding their own growth and development. To achieve this goal, there must be cooperation between school and home. Researchers acknowledge both the schools’ and parents’ responsibilities for promoting children’s learning. Thus, it is important to provide opportunities for parents to become involved and be part of their children’s education. It is therefore a priority to identify interventions that are effective in supporting parental involvement, especially those who are not significantly involved in their children’s education.

Moreover, scholars claim that increased parental involvement leads to early social competence, which is ultimately linked to academic success (Hornby and Lafael 2011, Gonzalez et al. 2013). In further support of this finding, Jeynse (2014) hypothesizes that parental involvement programs can be beneficial for some parents to get involved in their children’s education. Subsequently, Jeynse (2014) explains that parental involvement programs “are school-sponsored initiatives that are designed to require or encourage parental participation in their children’s education” (p.707). The ultimate goal for the parental involvement programs is to strengthen the relationships between parents and schools.

### 2.2 Partnerships between parents and teachers

Dahlstedt (2009), in his report on involving immigrant parents in Swedish schools, identifies numbers of arguments that encourage schools to build partnership between teachers and parents. The first of these is that parents have a self-evident right to participate
and take the responsibility of their children’s upbringing and educational activities, because they have a unique knowledge of their children. The second argument is the inclusion of parents as partners in the ongoing decision-making within schools. This second argument has gradually become educational policy. The third argument is that parents want to have more voices in their children’s education.

Further, Epstein (2001) highlights the importance of building school-family partnerships. The author demonstrates that one main reason to establish school-family partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in their later life. Further, she explains that there are other reasons to create such partnerships which:

a) Can improve school programs and school climate  
b) Can provide family service and support  
c) Can increase parents’ skills and leadership  
d) Can connect families with others in the school  
e) Can help teachers with their works

In their report, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) discuss how scholars designed different frameworks in order to provide different models for involvement. Furthermore, and perhaps problematically, they assume that these models are suitable for teachers to facilitate and motivate parental involvement. For instance, Bower and Griffin (2011) review the Epstein model which outlines six concrete types of parental involvement. This framework assists the school in expanding school and parent relationships by explaining what schools are supposed to do, and challenges all parents to engage in their children’s education. The six points are: positive home conditions, communication, involvement at school, home learning activities, shared decision making within the school, and community partnerships. Similar to Epstein, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) designed a framework that creates hierarchies of parental contributions and parental needs to provide a model of involvement. It includes eight types of parental involvement: communication, liaison, education, support, information, collaboration, resource, and policy. Each model tends to emphasize several concepts which are associated with parents, schools, pupils, involvement etc. Thereby, these models place focus on children’s education and encourages cooperation between parents and schools. Teachers are expected to work in cooperation with parents to promote healthy partnerships.
2.3 Gap between theory and practice

Despite extensive confirmation of the parental involvement in their children’s education, scholars highlight that there is a gap between what is found in theory and what is practiced in schools (Kohl et al. 2000, Bower and Griffin 2011, Gonzalez et al. 2013). The gap between what is said and done can be considered a barrier to parental involvement. Thus, scholars have added clarification to these barriers. Scholars worldwide discusses that parental involvement is affected by different family factors such as ethnicity, family composition, income, education level, and work status (Kohl et al. 2000, Jeynes 2012, Bower and Griffin 2011). In further support of this finding, Bower and Griffin (2011) report that African American and Latino families show low rates of parental involvement. Scholars assume that involvement is influenced by material deprivation, which, according to OECD glossary of statistical terms, refers to the inability for individuals or households to afford those consumption goods and activities that are typical in a society at a given point in time, irrespective of people’s preferences with respect to these items, and parental aspiration. These in turn have negative impact on parents volunteering in school which is often considered a key measure of parental involvement (ibid). Volunteering in the school demands parents share the responsibilities of providing materials requested by schools. According to Bower and Griffin (2011), these are identified as the investment of time and money. Those who are unable to provide these resources are considered uninvolved (ibid). In contrast, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) found that deficit explanations are not compatible with parental involvement among families with different demographics, rather parental involvement relates to the parents’ beliefs and attitudes towards parental involvement. In addition, the researchers claim that parents with both immigrant background and low level of education avoid any contact with school because they believe their involvement will not bring about positive outcomes for their children (ibid).

In regards to immigrants, Malmö has a high rate of immigrant students, according to Bouakaz (2007), the number of individuals with some other ethnic minority background than Swedish have been a definite increase during the last ten years, which in turn leads to change of the nature of family constellations. Therefore, it is important to consider the extent of parental involvement among immigrant families in their children’s education.
Skolverket (2003) reports that there are large differences in performance between native students and immigrant students. Some of the differences, according to the Skolverket (2003), can be explained by the fact that there are some immigrant students come from homes with lower socioeconomic status to a greater extent than native students. Immigrant students also have a greater number of low-educated parents and a higher proportion of parents who do not work. Moreover, Flising et al (1996) reports that the majority of immigrant parents know relatively little about school and its goal. Therefore, lack of knowledge makes parents reluctant and as a result they distance themselves from schools. According to Dahlstedt (2009), this turns partnerships between school and immigrant parents into more of a one-way communication than a truly free and open dialog between equal partnerships. Even though the Swedish curriculum clarifies the roles of the teachers in school-family partnerships, their roles are described as (a) working together with and continuously informing parents about the pupil’s school situation, well-being and acquisition of knowledge, and (b) keeping themselves informed about the individual pupil’s personal situation and showing respect for the pupil’s integrity. There are still some teachers, according to Flising et al (2006), who feel further from the reality of immigrant children than that of Swedish children. She finds that some teachers experience that working with immigrant children is harder than working with Swedish children. Flising et al (2006) claims residential segregation may be an explanation. What Flising means is that teachers become “guests” in the reality of the immigrant children, the teacher commute “in” in the morning and go” back” in the evening. Moreover, they do not understand the children’s native language, which is problematic when they come into contact with both children and their parents (ibid).

3. Method

This chapter provides an outline of the qualitative approach chosen for this project. Additionally, the specific methods used for data collection are discussed. Following this, the method for data analysis is explored. It also outlines a short description of the school. Further, it covers the respondents’ background. Following this, the method of data collection is presented and discussed. Moreover, the ways in which the data have been analyzed are also introduced.
3.1 Qualitative research

A qualitative approach was chosen for this project because of the way it aligns with the research questions, which is to answer the research questions in more depth through interviews and avoid statistical techniques of the quantitative approach. Silverman (2013) notes that the choice of method by researchers cannot be right or wrong rather more or less appropriate. The project focuses on the authenticity of teachers’ experiences, which is considered to be a strong feature of qualitative research because it allows the participants, on the one hand to reflect on their own experiences, and on the other hand to explore people’s life histories or everyday behavior (Silverman, 2011). The aim of a qualitative interview, according to Silverman (2011), is to get inside the heads of interviewees and to tell things from their point of view. In order to solve the problem of low parent involvement among minority families, it is imperative to listen to and analyze the experiences of teachers working in the education system. Their perspectives will provide a better understanding of the problem and how to address it. In this project, three language teachers with different ethnical background were interviewed in order to explore the role teachers can play in involving immigrant parents in their children’s education. Another significant advantage of conducting interviews is that researchers can collect data through an interview faster than data from documents or the internet (Silverman, 2011)

3.2 The School Location

The project draws upon experiences of teachers within a multicultural school located in Malmö. For the purpose of this project, the school has been allocated the pseudonym Green Hill. The school is divided into two main buildings with more than 500 students (aged 6-16) attending. Students from age 6-11 attend in one building and the rest attend in the other building. It also has a preparatory class for grade 4-6. More than 95 per cent of the students have an immigrant background and speak more than one language. The staff in the school works with the development of language pedagogy in all school subjects and activities with a focus on genre pedagogy in all grades.
3.3 Respondents’ Background

This section provides the educational and personal experiences of the respondents. As mentioned in the previous section, three language teachers with different ethnical background were interviewed. The respondents for this study are three female teachers. The first respondent teaches only English and the other two teach Swedish. They are between the ages of 35-48 years old. There will be no mention of their names to keep the respondents anonymous. The difference between these three respondents is that the first and the third respondent have had experience in schools with similar ethnic diversity background while the second respondent has had experience in a typical Swedish school. In addition, the first one has a different ethnic background and the second and the third respondent are native Swedish.

The first respondent has worked at the school for 16 years and as a teacher for 32 years. She is a qualified teacher in English and French, although she teaches only English. She has taught English fulltime during the time. She teaches English to 7th, 8th and 9th graders.

The second respondent has worked at the school for 12 years and as a teacher for 13 years. She is also a qualified teacher in Swedish and Swedish as a second language and German. She has taught Swedish fulltime and German occasionally. She teaches also Swedish to 7th, 8th and 9th graders.

The third respondent has worked at the school for three years and as a teacher for four years. She is also a qualified teacher in Swedish and Swedish as a second language and civics. She teaches also Swedish to 7th, 8th and 9th graders.

3.4 Data collection

As I mentioned earlier, three teachers from Green Hill School participated in this project. I chose these teachers because I knew them in advance and I consider all of them to be experienced, and they would provide me with useful information. Further, there was no need to build a new relation because I already knew my informants. The participants were each interviewed for approximately 30-40 minutes due to the limited time of my informants. The interview questions were semi-structured and categorized into three sections. In order to get comprehensive responses, the primary questions formulated had follow-up questions. Each interview question was followed by several prompts which the interviewees could draw upon to facilitate further discussion surrounding the interview (see the appendix). The informal patterns of
questioning allowed the interviewees to set the pace (Silverman, 2011) and, as a result, a relaxed atmosphere was created. Consequently, semi-structured interview encourages the interviewee to speak personally and at length about their experiences with both immigrant parents and their children inside and outside the school community. The interviews were conducted in Swedish as two of the teachers only teach Swedish. The time and place of each of the interviews were negotiated between the interviewees and the researcher to make sure nothing would disturb us. The interviews were digitally recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees.

The interview questions began with a question about teacher’s background as a starting point to allow interviewees to feel comfortable. From here, the researcher was able to narrow the discussion to lead in to the interview schedule. The second category was to investigate how teachers describe their students’ populations and their parents in relation to ethnicity and socio-economic status. The third category was dedicated to teachers’ views on parental involvement among parents for the students in the current school and how parents perceive the approach of parental involvement. Additionally, what actions can teachers carry out that support and inspire the development of both the everyday and formalized influence of parents.

3.5 Data analysis

As Silverman (2011) highlights, there are numerous ways in which qualitative data can be analyzed. For the purposes of this project, a thematic analysis was chosen to make sense of the content within the interviews that were conducted. Braun and Clarke (2006) discuss that the purpose of thematic analysis is to identify patterns of meaning across the collected data to provide an answer of the research questions being addressed. The process followed and adapted from Braun and Clarke (2006) has outlined below:

Step 1) Data familiarization: I firstly transcribed the interviews verbatim, read and re-read them. Then, I noted down the initial broad ideas such as parents involvement, cooperation, cultural clash and many more.

Step 2) Coding- interesting features: when I have read and familiarized myself with the data and have listed ideas about what is in the data and what is interesting about them. I started to code information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon in question. Afterward I have highlighted interesting features based on the discovered themes and concepts that embedded throughout the interviews, and then developed them into the broad themes by sorting the different codes into potential themes, and collating
all the relevant coded data extracts within the identified themes, for example, poor interaction with parents, lack of responsibility, enthusiasm for learning, parents connection to their children, and parents concern for their children’s learning.

Step 3) Supporting the data- I read the collected themes whether to know if they appear to form coherent patterns. Furthermore, I considered the validity of the individual themes in relation to the entire data.

Step 4) Thematic map of analysis - Finally, I reviewed the broad themes and refined them into specific categories which acted as a map of sorts (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The final themes within the thematic map include family context, responsibility and relationship. These themes are discussed in detail in the following section

4.0 Results and analysis

When analyzing my data, three major themes emerged from the project that highlights teachers’ perception about what hinders or strengthens parental involvement in their children’s education, namely family context, responsibilities they have to their children and their relationships to the teachers. In addition, the project focuses on the challenges teachers face in regards to facilitating parental involvement. Each theme can be linked together since they influence each other. The themes are also constructed in order to give the best possible answer to the research question.

4.1 Family context

During the interview process, the respondents were asked about the students’ population at Green Hill School. The first respondent answered that more than 95 per cent have an immigrant background. Then she also added that the largest group is of Arab origin. Later, they were asked about the socio-economic status make up of the students’ parents. The first respondent said that “we have many students; their parents are not highly educated, many who are not employed or have a temporary job, it is visible if a student has not come from a study environment” (Respondent 1, 2015). Furthermore, all of the respondents highlighted how they perceived the parents’ lack of knowledge as having a negative impact on their involvement in their children’s education. The second respondent also explained that “the high expectation parents have of teachers to keep the class under control, to provide discipline and to enhance technological and academic development might be based on the parents’ limited knowledge of how the Swedish
education system functions” (Respondent 2, 2015). Moreover, the third respondent explained that “every parent can't fully support their children because of their poor Swedish language skills. This creates a communication problem”. The first respondent also agreed with this assertion.

Perhaps or really they don’t know what to expect here, unless they haven’t gone to the Swedish school themselves (respondent 1, 2015).

In many cultures worldwide, the school has traditionally held more power than the home. This tradition has been reflected among the parents of the students in Green Hill School. Parents at Green Hill School have a limited knowledge about how much power they have in the school. This knowledge limitation, as discussed by the first respondent, can make it difficult for them to perform some of their parental roles:

Other parents have the power and they have influence in other schools. They are in constant communication with the teachers, and they are part of the decision making process in the schools. This is not the case in our school. For example, we have some students who don’t reach the required goals but I haven’t seen any parents come and demand any help and explanations (Respondent 1, 2015)

When asked about the value of the cultural norm of the school, the second respondent acknowledged students’ cultural values and viewed them as strengths, which in turn helped her to better integrate them in her lesson plans (Respondent 2, 2015). The third respondent, however, disagreed and found the cultural diversities of the school problematic in terms of knowledge. She addressed divergent cultural norms in this way:

There is also a certain cultural clash within certain groups where parents and children don’t always argue much. Perhaps, many children get help but they might get it more as direct words instead of analyzing and discussing. It makes you sometimes think that the students are not always able to analyze and discuss texts, television programs and other school materials used in the classroom. It doesn’t work, I’m generalizing now, but it shows that the children live in an inadequate text environment (Respondent 3, 2015)

There are other factors that may affect some parents’ low level of involvement. For instance, the difficulties some parents have experienced in their previous countries. One of the
respondents explained the extent to which parents understood the importance of their involvement in their children’s education in this way:

I don’t think that everyone understands that (it is important). I think every parent can’t keep up or can’t manage involvement in their children’s education. I think there are a lot of families from this area who have some problems in their baggage which have impacted their involvement and their strength as a whole. (Respondent 3, 2015)

The above quotes show that all three respondents spoke of this in similar terms. Parents’ embarrassment in speaking the Swedish language, lack of the familiarity with the Swedish educational system and cultural conceptions of the role of the teachers and parents are barriers to their involvement. This is in line with Gonzalez et al (2013) study that “families with limited personal experience in formal educational settings have not had the opportunity to construct the role of parents as educational advocate”. Generally, the respondents emphasized that the school should be responsible for providing and establishing a clear and commonly understood framework to facilitate parental involvement, to assimilate knowledge and make parents enthusiastic about their children’s learning. This can be achieved, according to the first respondent, through “using school resources effectively to support parental involvement, as well, leveraging additional recourses outside the school” (Respondent 1, 2015). To support this, Epstein and Dauber (1991) highlight also the schools’ role to assist the families to develop required knowledge and skills to understand their children through different informational workshops, support programs or other forms of education training.

4.2 Responsibility

Schools and parents have common responsibility for pupils’ schooling and they should create the best possible conditions for children’s development and learning (Lgr, 2011). In reality, however, most of the parents in Green Hill School hand over the responsibility to the school and the teachers in many areas regarding their children’s learning. Bouakaz’s (2007) study documents a similar phenomenon and explains that the “handing over” is not due to the disinterest but, as it is mentioned in the previous paragraph, because of the sense of lacking the ability to support their children in terms of language. The second respondent explained the reason of parents’ responsibility delegation as following:
I think that many parents hand over the responsibility in the school and the teachers. They rely very much on my words if I say something has happened here, they trust me. We can have conversations and so it goes well (Respondent 2, 2015).

When asked about parents’ involvement in their children’s education, the first and second respondents answered “it is not as much as they wish” (Respondent 2, 2015). Furthermore, the first respondent added that some parents seemed to have diverging viewpoints about how that involvement should be manifested (Respondent 1, 2015). I interpret that the teachers have an ideal image of how parents should be involved in their children’s education, and what are the parents’ responsibilities and how parents are expected to interact with the teachers. In this case, some of the parents in Green Hill School do not understand what their responsibilities are in regards to school work and how they can manage it to help their children in the best possible way.

In regards to parents’ responsibilities, the third respondent assumed that how to take responsibility seemed to be understood differently among some parents in Green Hill School. She explained that there are some parents who focus on academic achievement and others who focus only on behavioral improvement at the school, and some parents who have failed to have a clear parental boundary. She discussed how parents take responsibility in the following way:

We have a group of parents who have problems with setting boundaries and they can’t manage it. Then there are those who have no linguistic knowledge and perhaps their levels of education aren’t as high as their children, but they have managed to control their children’s behavior. Then there are those who ask about the curriculum and they wanted to attend in all teacher-parents conferences in order to follow their children’s educational and social development (Respondent 3, 2015)

The respondents stressed repeatedly one main point, which was to reach an ideal balance of responsibilities between school and home as a key to help the students to achieve academic outcomes. The first respondent discussed that “parents can play as great role as school. I can say that school and home complete each other. We as the school cannot help the students 100% if homes don’t support us, and they can’t do anything without us. There must be cooperation between the school and home” (Respondent 1, 2015). In addition, The Swedish curriculum (Lgr 2011) states that the two parts, the parents and the school, are responsible for providing a
productive learning environment and promoting continuity in the learning process. As the second respondent mentioned the teachers can encourage the parents and their children to talk regularly about school work, sharing ideas and encouraging interaction between parents and their children (Respondent 3, 2015).

4.3 Relationships

All respondents emphasized the importance of an active collaboration with the parents, but they experienced difficulties, which according to them could possibly be due to parental background, economical or linguistic issues. According to the Swedish curriculum (Lgr 2011), everyone who works in a school should cooperate with students’ parents so that they work together to develop the school content and activities. A strong relationship and good communication between parents, teachers and students offers students confidence, drives them to learn, and contributes to a successful learning experience. Similarly, Gonzalez et al. (2013) explains that communication between parents and school may promote social adjustment in addition to academic achievement. In contrast, Hornby and Lafaele (2011) argue that lack of communication causes existence and absence of trust between the home and the school, which impacts the improvement and sustenance of meaningful parental involvement. The first respondent discussed how children’s attitudes are affected toward school achievement through cooperation between school and home in the following way:

When the children see cooperation between school and home, for example when we talk to each other, they can’t deceive us or their parents. It affects them very positively. I think parents have pretty much influence on their children. Moreover, the signal that parents give their children about the school and about us teachers is also very important. If a mother criticizes the school all the time in front of her child and then send his/her to the same school. This in turn leads to the child does not care about the school and perceive the school as meaningless (Respondent 1, 2015).

When asked about how they describe their relationship with the parents of the children they teach, one of the respondents stated that they are required to build a strong relationship with parents by exchanging information the children’s learning process, sharing respect and trusting each other. In reality, however, some parents at Green Hill School avoid any contact with the teachers because they view the school as authority figure (Respondent 3, 2015). She then conveyed that they opened the door to all parents and were willing to communicate with them (Respondent 3, 2015).
What is positive is that we have phone number for our working place. We have a cell phone which belongs to the school. It is easy to catch us. We also give our private cell phone to all students; texting is also as good as calling and sending an email. We also have other teachers who speak a language other than Swedish. This is considered as additional resources that help us to reach home. Additionally, parents are always welcome to visit the school, and they are free to participate in teaching, which I think they don’t do, and feel open and come in and ask for help for their children (ibid, 2015).

Supporting this, Epstein and Dauber (1991) suggest a framework for parental involvement; it explains “Basic obligations of schools include communications with families about school programs and children's progress. This includes the memos, notices, phone calls, re-port cards, and conferences that most schools conduct and other innovative communications with parents that some schools create. Schools vary the forms and frequency of communications and greatly affect whether the information sent home can be understood by all families” (p. 290). The result shows that to maintain a successful relationship between the school and home parents need knowledge about the school’s approach and what the school expects of them. To achieve this goal, the school administration is required to explain to the parents how the cooperation between them and parents in general is expected to work, and this cooperation should be approved by the teachers. In another words the teachers are aware that they hold formal power, which leads them to set rules and procedures of the school to facilitate relationships. Finally, parents’ lack of structure and resources means that they are perceived as incompetent actors who need to achieve a certain level of knowledge and have access to resources to be considered ordinary actors and influence their children’s learning.

Despite all barriers, the finding of the study highlighted that clear and effective channels of communication with all parents helps to build strong relationships between parents and teachers and encourages involvement in the children’s learning and progress. Whalley (2001) demonstrated that method of engagement is considered to be effective in engaging as many families as possible because parents are not homogeneous groups. It is reported that what worked for one family was not necessarily what works for another (Whalley 2001). According to Whalley (2001), teachers are required to adapt the way they work to accommodate different families’ needs. The findings of this project also highlighted the ways the interactions between parents and teachers were facilitated at Green Hill School. The teachers used some basic ways to facilitate parental involvement at Green Hill schools. The first interaction identified by the teachers was phone conversation: The teachers in the Green Hill School would call home if there was bad news as well as good news. The second interaction identified was parents-teachers conferences: These
conferences were carried out by the teachers at Green Hill School to inform the parents about school-wide events and individual student progress. In this way they aimed to increase parental involvement in their children’s education. Parents-teachers conference consisted of the teacher telling the parents how the child is doing in school. According to Wright & Stegelin (2003) parents-teachers conference is a traditional method for parental involvement that occurs through scheduling sets of parents-teachers conferences at least twice during the school year. Wright & Stegelin (2003) reported that teachers are required to follow three steps to prepare for parents-teachers conference as a) collecting documentation of the child’s progress, b) setting the environment for the conference in a way to facilitate physical comfort and two-way communication, and c) following up on parents’ requests. Indeed, it should be noted that the interviews revealed that emailing and written notes were also available for parental involvement; however, the parents did not take up the last two methods due to language barriers.

5. Discussion

This project sought to investigate two specific questions regarding parental involvement in their children’s education. I wanted to find out how teachers view culture, linguistic and economic diversities among parents as factors affecting children’s academic outcomes. The reason behind this matter is due to the increasing number of individuals with some other ethnic background than Swedish, in Sweden generally and Malmö particularly. The research questions formulated for this purpose were: What methods do teachers use to involve parents in their children’s education? What is the teachers’ perception of minority parents’ level of involvement in their children’s education? The results from the interviews with the three teachers pointed to three common themes: family context, responsibility and relationship. Understanding these themes and the relationships between them can contribute to our overall understanding of parental involvement in their children’s education among culturally, linguistically and economically diverse families.

Teachers might often ask themselves how they can increase parental involvement, particularly among culturally, linguistically and economically diverse families. As mentioned in the previous sections, scholars worldwide agree that children’s education is significantly enhanced when the cooperation between parents and the school is facilitated. Therefore, it is important for both teachers and parents to overlap their roles and responsibilities. This means teachers assist parents with parenting skills and adjusting home conditions to support children. In
addition, parents in their role help teachers in understanding family contexts and make recommendations for how best to work with their children.

All of the teachers in this degree project revealed their ideas and thoughts about what hinders them in strengthening parental involvement. The teachers interviewed expressed a clear connection to what has emerged from some previous studies about parental involvement, namely cultural, linguistic and economic diversities of the families. Similar to the research conducted for this paper, Gonzalez et al (2013) illustrates the distinct role of schools and families in their article about Latino families who immigrate to the United State. It is reported that Latino families are not able to participate in the traditional parental involvement opportunities due to economic, linguistic, cultural or life circumstances (ibid). Furthermore, the teachers discussed how the relationship between parents and teachers is one-way communication, and parents rarely initiate contact with the school due to the distinct role of schools and parents in many cultural, linguistic and economic diverse societies. This is in line with Bouakaz’s (2007) study that there is a danger the parents may become passive and feel they are unable to influence the school if the meditation of information between the school and the home is one-sided. The results of this project could suggest that the teachers do not always manage to facilitate parental involvement. One reason for this could be related to the lack of teachers’ time. Every year the amount of responsibilities placed on teachers continue to increase for instance; teachers face with the additional workload produced from testing, monitoring assessments, documenting student’s behavior, grade level meeting with administration and many more. In addition, the teachers thought that working on parental involvement without a guaranteed cooperation with parents seemed to be a risky attempt since the parents avoid contact with the teachers. All the teachers believed that establishing closer relationships with parents do not come easily and need more effective working strategies. This is similar to Bouakaz’s (2007) study that in working together with parents, it is important that parents and teachers have goals, suggestions for how the goals can be achieved, an exchange of information and a follow up of what has been accomplished. Furthermore, there is not a special model for the teachers to follow in order to facilitate parental involvement.

Regarding the teachers’ perception of immigrant parents’ level of involvement in their children’s education, the teacher’s perception is largely understood, or developed through a deficit theory. According to Nieto (2012), a deficit theory places the blame for children’s failure in school on their homes and families. In other words, the teachers at Green Hill School believe that the problems are located within children themselves or their families.
It is reported that the deficit theory assumes that some children, because of genetic, cultural or experiential differences, are inferior to other children that is they have a deficit (Nieto 2012). This was demonstrated throughout the interviews when teachers spoke of, for example, a group of parents who have problems with setting boundaries. There are parents who do not have linguistic knowledge, and perhaps their levels of education are not as high as their children. There are also parents who do not prioritize school, and these parents often do not provide books to read at home. Furthermore, there are parents who only give negative signals about the school without seeking any solution. In addition, the teachers believe that the parents have limited knowledge about the Swedish school system and there is a popular assumption among some teachers, at Green Hill School, that some minority parents do not value the education in the same way that their Swedish parents do, which leads in turn to these parents handing over their responsibilities to the teachers.

Lastly, the teachers suggested that the limitation of the parents could be addressed with training/education such as, parent information meeting, holding seminars and work towards raising parental involvement awareness among parents at Green Hill School or hire a professional employee who can take responsibility to accomplish this task. This result shows the similarity to Gonzalez et al (2013) study who suggests that immigrant Latino families are demanded much requirements as they adjust to a new culture, new types of work and school and perhaps a new language.

5.1 Conclusion

In conclusion, it was found that the teachers understood the position of the parents through a deficit theory that is teachers locate the problem for students’ lack of educational success within the students or their parents. Furthermore, when considering the methods that teachers use to involve parents, in Green Hill at least, the teachers tend to shift their focus towards “interventions” with the students, rather than the parents. The teachers’ shifting focus is due to teachers knowing more about the children’s experiences at home, which makes them provide better classroom instruction suited to the children’s needs. Reasons for this include parents’ attitudes and approaches to school, parents’ expectations that the school should deal with issues regarding students’ learning, differences in school systems between Sweden and the parents homeland.
Finally, it is important to emphasize that the results of this project provide a small, yet an important starting point for understanding the low level of involvement in children’s learning among some immigrant parents in Malmö. Strong relationships between parents and schools, and parents with their children’s education align the education system in Sweden, which is established upon a democratic foundation. In other words, a democratic society requires democratic schools which are based on diversity and respect that there are differences. One way of respecting differences is by adapting different teaching styles and environments based on each pupil’s needs, including those pupils from immigrant background.

6. Recommendation for future research

In order to gain a complete understanding of how to facilitate parental involvement and its effect on children’s learning, it is necessary to conduct a study that examines parental involvement from the parents’ perspective to make their voices heard. Additional research is needed to explore school parental involvement policy for example, to investigate the formalizing parental involvement through policy.
Bibliography


**Appendix: The interview schedule**

1. Can you tell me about yourself as a teacher? How many years have you been teaching? What schools have been worked at?

2. How would you describe the students’ population at your current school, is this typical of a "Swedish school"? Why? Why not? Is this different to the other schools you have taught at? Why? Why not? How do you describe the socio-economic status make up of the students’ population? Ethnicity? Religion?

3. What strategies have you found to work well with the students you currently teach?

(Why do these work well? What things haven’t/don’t work well, are there any specific considerations that need to be made? Generally speaking, how is your relationship with the students? Is this the same, different to at previous schools?).

4. How would you describe your relationship with the parents of the children you teach?
(Prompts: do the parents feel comfortable with the school? With the teachers at the school in general, being engaged in their child’s learning? Why, why not? What things do you do to develop this relationship?)

5. What role can parents (all parents generally speaking) play in their child’s education?
   (Prompts: Within each subject area, within the school more broadly, extra-curricular ways, non-academic ways).

6. To what extent do the parents at your school understand the importance of involvement in their children’s learning?

7. How do parents at your school support their child’s learning and education.

8. How easy is it for the parents to contact the teachers at the school and also to develop a relationship with the school?
   (Is there anything the school does, or could do to facilitate this? how do parents contact you)

9. In what ways do you facilitate parents engagement in their child’s learning?
   (Prompts: What has worked well? Is there anything that makes this difficult?)