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Preface

Personal experience

What special motivation might one have for devoting one's doctoral dissertation to the topics taken up here? For me, it was a genuine interest in the role of parents in society generally, and in the school in particular, especially of those parents whom I consider to have difficulties in making their voices heard in school and in the society at large (the invisible parents). I also regarded the social network within the family, among one's relatives and in the neighbourhood to which one belongs as having a very important role in shaping the norms and values one acquires. I also felt driven by a desire to understand and know myself better, and where I myself stood, partly because I was in the impossible seeming position of being both an immigrant parent and a teacher who considered myself both as being perfectly integrated and often nevertheless as being completely unassimilable (cf. Sayed, 2004). As a teacher, I enjoy all the advantages that come from having two nationalities, speaking more than five languages and able to function in two or more cultures and feel adjusted to each. I can say that I have not only been driven by intellectual concerns but also by emotional ones in carrying out my research. In order to understand immigration adequately, one should best have knowledge of those who emigrated, since every immigrant is an emigrant in the first place (ibid). I feel that the reader, in order to be able to fully understand a topic of research and the research journey accompanying it, should often be given the opportunity of learning at least something about the researcher as well. Although one should not indulge too much in an autobiographical preamble to a doctoral thesis, a certain account of the researcher's background and experience may help the reader understand somewhat better how the topic in question emerged (cf. Campart, 2000).

I grew up in society in a part of North Africa where bilingualism and multiculturalism¹ were facts of life. That such is the case is due partly to the long history of colonisation and of people there interacting with a variety of peoples of varying nationality, and partly to the need of survival and self-fulfillment in this environment. There, many people could speak more than one language and could interact with many different ethnic groups daily without making a big fuss of it.

Starting school meant that I had to learn to speak the majority language of “Arabic”. I belonged to a Berber family and had not thought I would be obliged to learn a new language. I felt happy in speaking my mother tongue and could communicate with my brothers, my parents and my relatives outside the family so easily with use of it. There were also enough boys and girls who spoke Shawia² whom I could play with in my neighbourhood in the little village where I lived. Starting school was a new phase in my life and there were a number of different stages I had to go through there. First, I had to learn the Arabic language so as to be able both to understand the lessons and to communicate with the children who did not speak my language. I remember very well my father consulting my teacher, who could speak Shawia, and deciding that the best for me was to be placed in an Arabic speaking family where I would learn the language and the codes of the new society I had become part of. The school was rather far from the village where I lived and I had to stay with this new family there for three months without seeing my mother even once, and in thinking back on it I can recall being very disturbed about this. I was only seven years old at the time. I soon discovered that there were many other boys who were likewise unable to speak the Arabic language well. Soon we became

¹ As a descriptive term, multiculturalism refers to the coexistence of people with many cultural identities in a common state, society, or community. As a prescriptive term, it is associated with the belief that racial, ethnic, and other groups should maintain their distinctive cultures within society yet live together with mutual tolerance and respect. Advocates of multiculturalism often propose going beyond traditional liberal principles of tolerance for members of other groups toward acknowledgment of their positive value (Calhoun, 2002).

² Shawia also spelled Chaouiïa is one of the minority languages spoken by the Berbers living in the eastern part of Algeria. This Berber ethnic and linguistic group is largely found on the Aurès Plateau region of the Atlas Mountains of north-eastern Algeria. The Shawia people speak one of four major Algerian Berber dialects (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002).

friends through our sharing of the same difficulties. We could also communicate freely without feeling ashamed or being laughed at by other boys and girls. Those three months seemed like ages to me. The fact that both then and later my father failed to take me home to meet my mother and my brothers and sisters as often as he perhaps could have, made the whole experience a kind of a “language bath” for me. It was an integration project for me in itself when I think back on it and use the terms I employ today. The process in which I was involved empowered me both socially and linguistically and made it much easier for me to be integrated into the majority culture. The situation there reminds me of the situation with which children are faced who come to Sweden from other countries speaking others languages and having in many ways other norms and values than children of native origin or those born in Sweden do. I was lucky to have been living together with that other family until I had learned the new language so as to be able to interact easily with all of my schoolmates, which I could in a very short period of time, yet how is this with children who move to Sweden?

By the age of ten, I was able to communicate fairly well in three languages Arabic, Shawia, and French. My father was very much involved in my school education. Although I am sure he knew very little about parental involvement in school generally, he did all of this in his own way, since there were no parent-teacher associations or any representation of the parents on boards in any of those schools. The parents were expected to take care of their children once they were out of the school or were back home. The teacher and the parents knew their rights and duties, and each kept within the bounds that applied. My parents kept reminding me of how important school was and what would happen if I did not do well at school. My father often told me that if I did not do well in school I would end up working with him on the farm, which, as a child, I both hated and liked at the same time. I liked playing with animals and feeding them but I hated doing the hard work and waking up early to help the rest of family take care of the farm. The views toward my education that my father and my mother expressed represented one type of parental involvement, one that encouraged me to work hard at school so that I could go further in my studies. The language learning process then and the involvement of my parents in my

education helped me in becoming a language teacher later. I believe that without the support of my parents and my social network, which included my brothers, and sisters, my relatives and the people in my neighbourhood I might not have had the same chances to succeed in the way I did in school. This implies strongly to me that the support one gets from one's social network is as important for one's success in school as the parents' academic level, or at least so it was in my case.

Moving to Sweden made me feel like I had to start all over again, yet since I was accustomed to the integration process I found my way easily in working myself into the new society and culture. I already knew that in a new society one learns to be analytical and critical and that one has to accept the fact that the process of one's integration into it cannot occur without one's doing something about it oneself. I had to force myself into the system without waiting for any integration project or the like to help me become integrated.

As a teacher in Sweden I have been struggling as most of my colleagues do too, at finding ways and strategies of coping with the different situations with which one is faced day-by-day in school. Meetings with the parents have always been things in which I have been strongly involved, regardless of whether it is the parents of my own students or those of the students of my colleagues. I had often been asked to translate for my colleagues or to provide them direct or indirect support during their meetings with the parents they experience difficulties in communicating with. Since the children in the school where I worked were coming more and more to be of non-Swedish background, the burden on me, as well as that on other members of the school staff who spoke minority languages increased, It was not simply the problem of translating particular words but also of translating codes used by the majority of society. I sometimes felt that we as teachers at my school did not do sufficiently much to come closer to the parents and to get them more involved in the work of school. At the same time, there were three topics we were expected to discuss, representing goals we should strive for in our work:

1. The students' language development.
2. The students' influence and participation.

3. Parental involvement.

These three topics were discussed particularly often. We were able somehow to put the first two into practice, whereas we often avoided or skipped over a discussion of parental involvement, sometimes only writing more or less empty sentences in efforts to show the school head that we had discussed the matter of parental involvement and that we were aware of its importance. A major barrier here was that we felt we lacked both the time and the knowledge needed to get the parents interested in the work of the school and to get them to join us in our meetings.

I remember I often sat waiting with colleagues of mine for parents who had not shown up, and how, when it was getting later and later I phoned the parents whereupon they suddenly appeared at school. It sometimes took them no more than a few minutes to come. They often gave as excuses matters of language, of the information they had gotten from teachers being unclear, or of their having forgotten about it, partly because of their feeling that their presence at the school made no difference. The parents I met often expressed their limited knowledge of practices at the school and their limited social network. They were accustomed in their home countries from earlier of being surrounded by many cousins and by relatives of other sorts, their now suddenly finding themselves alone in a new country in which the school system, the culture, the codes, the styles, the language and the like were all different. These parents often felt unsure of themselves in making new contacts and in creating new social networks, due to their lacking the tools needed for making new contacts, even between people from the same country. One may ask what the situation of the child was in such families in which the social networks were very limited and in which the resources for creating new social networks or expanding those that already existed are very limited too. The basic answer to this is that the children could easily make friends in school and in leisure-time activities they joined in, whereas their parents often remained fixed to the very limited contacts they had, which reduced their opportunities for becoming integrated. They also expressed the idea that the problems of the school were nothing but a mirror of the problems in the community surrounding the school as a whole. This made me think of the school not as being isolated in its search for solutions but as having to work

for and accept the collaboration of other institutions, organisations and experts that were to be found in the surroundings. The community in which the parents live together with other agents there can be both a source of the problems and contain potential resources for solving them. I believe that if teachers and parents work together on problems and endeavour to gain acceptance for what they have to say, showing the courage of their convictions, problems can be solved. It was within this framework that the topic of my thesis emerged.

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1 Introduction

Throughout the history of Swedish school and in modern times as well the matter of parental involvement (or influence)³ has been discussed considerably in the schools, in the media and at a governmental level. In such discussions, conflicts often become evident. This can be considered natural since so many actors are involved: the students, their parents, and their teachers, along with politicians and many others. My task as a researcher is not to ignore the conflicts that exist but to endeavour to describe them adequately as they are in society today. Parental involvement is a combination of commitment to the students and active participation on the part of both the parents and the school staff (Johansson & Wahlberg, 1993).

Parents, regardless of their ethnic origin, social class and gender, want their children to succeed in school⁴ and to achieve good results (OECD 1997; Vincent, 1996, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Crozier, 2000; Crozier & Reay, 2005). At this fundamental level there are no major differences between the parents of the children in their expectations and wishes, even if there can be differences between parents in terms of social class and ethnic background. Lack of understanding of the school system can sometimes make it difficult for close working relationships between the

³ The Swedish terms “föräldrainflytande” and “föräldrasamverkan” are used frequently in addressing issues concerning parent involvement in school. The first terms can be translated as *parental influence*, as employed rather specifically in a school context; the second term can be translated as *parental cooperation* (see also Erikson, 2004).

⁴ The Swedish school system is divided up as follows: 1) *preschool* for children under 6 years of age, 2) *preschool classes* (from the fall term of the year in which the child turns 6 until he/she starts compulsory school, 3) *compulsory school* that all children between the ages of 7 and 16 must attend and 4) *upper secondary education*: a free and non-compulsory form of school offered for those who have completed their compulsory school education. The second and the third of these are often referred to as basic education, attended by students between 6 to 16 years of age. The word school in this study covers the secondary school phase for children between 12 and 16 years old.

parents and the teachers to be established, especially in schools with high rate of minority background children (Bastiani, 1997; Vincent, 1996, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Sjögren, 1996; Bunar, 2001; Crozier, 2000; Crozier & Reay, 2005). The need of strengthening the bond of cooperation between the parents and the school is being discussed today at a nationwide level in Sweden. Schools face the challenge of preparing an increasingly diverse generation of young people for a society in which literacy and basic knowledge in mathematics are compulsory and an understanding of technology and its many applications is becoming increasingly important. Moreover, the school is also an arena in which young people from different parts of the world meet and together enhance the democratic values of a multicultural society. The parents and the teachers together should have a clear communication channels. The children in urban schools travel daily between two different worlds, the world of the parents and that of the school and the teachers. The norms and values and the knowledge gained at home may not be of particular value to the child at school, at the same time as the child may face difficulties in making his parents understand the values and the knowledge he/she brings back from school. The child in this case may suffer from a type of “double loneliness”. When at school the child may feel lonely having the type of knowledge he/she has gained at home, and at home in the family environment those around may not understand what the school aims at providing here. The parents and the teacher together may be able to reduce this type of double loneliness of the child through creating two-way communication in which the child feels able to speak with both in the same voice.

The present study is about the involvement of minority parents⁵ in the work of the school and efforts to develop closer relations between the parents and the school their children attend. Although the lack of parent participation in the work of schools can be seen in part as the parents

⁵ This term has been used by Vincent (2000), Bastian (1997) and Crozier (2000) to describe the minority (immigrant) parents in to England. I intend to use the same term here to describe the groups of parents with which the present this study in Sweden is concerned. Although in Sweden the term “invandrarföräldrar” tends to be used which in direct translation is “immigrant parents”, I prefer not to use the term minority parents in this study. The parent group with which the study is concerned is the Arabic speaking one. A further discussion of this term is presented in a separate section.

neglecting their responsibilities, the parents may also feel unwelcome, believing that what they have to offer is unimportant and is unappreciated (Sjögren, 1996; Bunar, 2001). The parents may not consider themselves to possess any appreciable knowledge that the school is interested in partaking of (Sjögren, 1996). The parents can be said nevertheless to be those who have the ultimate responsibility for both the care and the education of a child. It is clearly stated in the curricula for school education Lpo-94 that the school and the home should collaborate in promoting a child's education. Yet how much collaboration actually takes place?

The section that follows is concerned with the importance of the study and of parental involvement in the school followed then by a section dealing with changes that have occurred in schools during the 1990s which have had an impact on parental involvement in the schools. All of this is meant to introduce the topic of my study. It is followed by the overall aims of the study.

Why is it important to involve parents in school?

Sweden today is one of the industrialised world's most ethnically diverse countries through the immigration that has taken place. Some 12 percent of the total population of just over nine million people was born in another country than Sweden (SCB, 2005). Sweden is becoming increasingly heterogeneous (Prop, 1997/98: 16). More than one in ten of the inhabitants were born abroad. A further 800 000 persons born in Sweden have one or both parents born abroad. More than two in ten of the inhabitants are people of foreign extraction. Sweden has inhabitants from 203 different countries (SCB, 2005).

During the 1990s, due to wars in various parts of the world, many people left their countries of origin to seek shelter and security for themselves and their children. The three wars that burst out in Iraq, the Balkan region, and Afghanistan resulted in many people moving elsewhere, Sweden being one country in which they located. Many families of this sort settled in large cities in Sweden, such as Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö. The census in the city of Malmö in 2005 (Malmö

stadskontoret, 2005), for example, shows there to have been a definite increase during the last ten years in the number of individuals with some other ethnic minority backgrounds than Swedish. The nature of the family constellations has also changed, more school children residing with extended-family members than ever before, as in the case of several districts in Malmoe in which many extended multiethnic families live.

The changes in cultural and linguistic heritage, family structure, and economic conditions evident on the local school level are also reflective of broader national trends. Such demographic changes and the increasing numbers of immigrant families in a city like Malmoe may well have profound implications for expectations of cooperation between the home and the school. The so-called *white flight*⁶ was found recently to be the highest since 1974, more than 14 000 families (Sydsvenskan, 2004a) having left the city to settle in places which had never have been popular before, their leaving in part because of the increasing street violence, gang building, and robberies, the increasing crime rate generally, and the school vandalism, all of which results in the city of Malmoe not being a secure environment for children to grow up in. The school standards are said to be falling and more children are failing in their studies than before, though strong efforts are made by policy makers and those in power to improve the situation in these schools. School violence and vandalism are becoming an unpleasant fact. The failure of integration and the increasing social exclusion of parents who

⁶ White flight is a colloquial term for the demographic trend of whites moving away from areas with large non-white populations in the USA. Due to the economic boom and growth of suburbia in the years after World War II, whites –many of them the children and grandchildren of immigrants–began to move away from inner core cities and to newer urban communities. They did so in some cases to escape the increasing crime and racial tension in inner cities throughout the country but, in other locations in the immediate postwar years, many whites left core cities because they believed that urban communities, with their new housing stock, roads and schools, were more desirable places to live in than the inner cities. As wealthier white residents abandoned the inner city neighborhoods, they ultimately left behind increasingly poor non-white populations, whose neighborhoods rapidly deteriorated, beginning in the 1950s and especially in the 1960s. Jobs and businesses disintegrated along with the neighborhoods and ultimately turned the increasingly poverty-stricken areas into crime-ridden slums with failing and dilapidated public school. (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/White_flight).

come from abroad and of their children are often considered as though they were the cause of a wide variety of serious problems in the city of Malmö. How can one best avoid its being felt that this multicultural society is the source of segregation, social exclusion, crimes, school failure, school violence and vandalism? What can the parents and the schools do together to demonstrate the positive sides of the new cosmopolitan population of Malmö?

The cost of dealing with school vandalism in the city of Malmö totaled 16 695 849 Swedish crowns during the 2003-2004 school year, these costs including the increase in preventive measures such as enhanced security patrols and physical protection measures such as the installation of school cameras (Malmö stadsfastigheter, 2005). In the summer of 2004 approximately 600 windows were smashed during a single night in one of the urban schools in Malmö (Sydsvenskan, 2004b).

The increasing rate of school violence resulted in a debate about the schools in the local newspaper during the spring term of 2005 (Sydsvenskan, 2005a). The parents of those young lawbreakers were described by many participants in the debate as being irresponsible and incompetent in the raising of their children. At the same time, the schools alone were said to be unable to reduce violence or to contain vandalism on their own, their relying heavily on the participation of parents, of public authorities other than the schools, and of school neighbours, to help them to hold vandalism and violence in the schools under control. A study conducted by Stigendal (2000) in the city of Malmö in which more than 1300 students, teachers and other members of the school personnel were involved showed that the blame was put on the parents and the children as being the source of the problems in school and of the children's failure.

The fact that parents who are considered to be of lower down on the social scale being blamed for such things is not a new phenomenon. It can be traced back to the late 1940s or perhaps even earlier than that. The following two quotations from an official report by Persson (1996) in which they are introduced can illustrate this:

Certain societal trends today have resulted in a reduction in parental authority and in a decline in the role of the home in the bringing up of children [...] Fear of not being able to take part in all that life has to offer or gives promise of has led to people neglecting basic values in life such as those connected with maintaining a good home and looking after their family (SOU 1946:31, pp. 23-24)⁷.

This quotation, taken from the report of a Swedish governmental investigation just after World War II in connection with an increase in the age for compulsory school attendance, illustrates how the role of parents, especially those belonging to the lower social strata, was viewed at the time. Their authority was seen as being weakened and they were considered less willing than earlier to assume parental responsibilities. There was a lack of confidence in their ability to bring up their children. The first parent magazine⁸ wrote:

Parents are often criticized for how they bring up their children. One speaks of lax and inadequate parents who devote too little time and interest to their children [...] Nevertheless, many parents have shown willing-

⁷ My own translation

⁸ In March 1941 an organisation termed the Målsmännens Förening (MF or Parent Association) was founded in Stockholm. It aimed at organizing public opinion regarding schools and participating in reform projects initiated by the school committee. The desire for a central organisation to unite and represent them led finally on June 16, 1945 to the creation of Målsmännens Riksförbund (MR or National Parent Association), a successor to the MF organisation, which had worked for the establishment of it ever since 1941. In 1946 MR decided to publish its own magazine, *Barn i hem, skola, samhälle*, which beginning in 1947 appeared six times a year, the number of issues being increased later to eight per year. The aim of the magazine was to provide "reliable but popularly written advice to parents and to those involved with questions of the bringing up of children generally". Emphasis was placed on *psychological* aspects of the bringing up of children (*Barn i hem skolan, samhälle*, no. 1, 1947, p. 1). It was felt that there was a need for a magazine of this sort in such a time of transition when "much of what was done earlier is being abandoned and we are engaged in the developing of new approaches". Professor Sten Wahlund, chairman of MR, wrote in the preface to the first number of the magazine, "the home and living at home no longer have the meaning for the generation now growing up that they had for the previous generation. The principles that our own parents - and their parents before them - followed in bringing up their children no longer have an effect adequate to what is needed in a modern society. Psychological science has broadened our horizons and given us new goals" (*ibid* p. 1).

ness, particularly in recent years, to learn more about child upbringing (Barn i hem, skola, samhälle, no. 1, 1948, p. 1)⁹.

Both quotations illustrate the conflicts between the conceptions public authorities and experts of various kinds had at the time regarding parents' exercise of their parental responsibilities and their views of themselves. Ever since a standard system of school education for the entire country was introduced (and probably earlier too), parents have had definite conceptions of how their children should be raised and taught in school. Politicians and school authorities have also realized that it is advantageous for the schools that the parents are genuinely involved in questions of their children's education (Erikson, 2004). The idea of parents influencing the schools and the education of their children, and of the schools and the parents cooperating with each other in furthering children's education, has gained increasing acceptance, at least on the documental level, as has been noted in Lpo-94. It is emphasized there that parents have the ultimate responsibility for caring for and bringing up their children and that part of the parental role is for parents to inform themselves about how their children are doing in school and to play an active role in furthering their children's education. Still, effecting changes within the system as a whole, such as those involved in anchoring the intentions of the school policy decided upon within in the thinking of both the schools and the parents, takes time. This is shown, for example, by the national investigation of Swedish elementary schools in 1992, which indicated the majority of the parents to experience their possibilities for influencing the schools their children attended as being virtually nonexistent (Prop, 1992/93:220).

Parental involvement and changes in the schools

The school as an institution has also undergone various changes during the 1990s. A new curriculum for the compulsory school was put into practice in 1994. Lpo-94 differs from the earlier curriculum, above all in being much briefer and more concise, despite its covering both the obligatory aspects of schools and the voluntary aspects. This is based on the idea that from 1994 on, the school curricula was to take up pri-

⁹ My own translation

marily the schools' more general goals, whereas each individual school was to work out its own local plan for how the work of the school was to be conducted, although this should be in a manner consistent with national goals and guidelines. Details of how contacts between teachers and parents were to be conducted and of the working methods to be employed are not described in Lpo-94 itself. Matters concerned primarily with the parents are also taken up more briefly than earlier. It is stated, for example, that it is the responsibility of both the parents and the school to create as positive conditions as possible for the child's learning and development. In addition, it is stated that the school and the parents should collaborate in developing the content of what is taught and the activities to be carried on in school.

A decentralized system of control in which a considerable amount of responsibility for a school's functioning is left to the local authorities of each municipality and to those who work in the school has been found to have clear advantages in facilitating a school's development. It is scarcely the case, of course, that in the systems found earlier, the teachers felt enslaved by governmentally prescribed rules regarding course content and teaching methods. In practice, teachers have held courses in the manner they considered best without feeling the weight of official responsibilities hanging from their shoulders every time they entered the classroom. The School Committee¹⁰ (SOU 1997:121) considers that in a decentralized system there are two basic strategies schools should follow: teachers' taking greater individual responsibility and schools' making themselves more open to influences from the society around. One might possibly consider these two strategies as being in direct conflict with each other, but this is not the view the School Committee takes, arguing that it is part of the professional task of the teacher to attend not only to the needs of the pupils but also to matters of concern both to the parents and to the society generally. The abolishment of the school inspectors during the 1990s is also linked to the decentralised system, its being argued that the money school inspectors

¹⁰ During the 1990s, the Department of Education had appointed a committee to discuss the development of school matters and provide proposals in this regard. The results were published in three reports (Föräldrar i självfövaltande skolor, SOU 1995: 103; Krock eller möte, om den mångkulturella skolan, SOU 1996: 143; Skolfrågor, om skola i en ny tid, SOU 1997:121). The three reports included discussions both of parental involvement and of multicultural schools.

cost should be used to support the schools themselves instead. The local authorities took over the responsibility of evaluating but to not of inspecting the work of the schools.

Unfortunately, all such school reforms were faced with the downsizing of school personnel as a result of the shrinking school budget during the 1990s. The latter affected in particular those schools that received many new students who were newcomers, had language deficiencies and needed help to catch up with their schoolmates. The parents were also given the role of being consumers on the educational market. They were given the opportunity of letting their children attend whatever public or private (independent) school they felt would meet the needs of their children best. In 1992 the state approved the right for the establishment of private (independent) schools.

There were also educational and political arguments for an increase in parental influence on the schools during the 1990s. In the SOU 1995:103 report of the School Committee, a concrete proposal was made for establishing, on an experimental basis, local school boards in which parents were in the majority. The starting date named was July 1, 1996. An initial period of five years was foreseen, this to be followed by an evaluation of the program, both by the local authorities that made use of it and on a national basis by the National Board of Education. The initiative to participate was intended to be taken by the individual school. A necessary condition for this can be seen as being that of a group of parents having a genuine interest in developing the school in this way, in addition to their initiative being supported by the parents generally and by the teachers and other members of the school staff.

The School Committee has also discussed the role of the school as an organisation open to the surrounding environment, arguing that taking a position of this sort should increase, and suggesting that a school should serve as a cultural center. Despite these changes, it is argued that innovations by educators will be needed to ensure that the rapidly changing school-age population receives an adequate education.

Although a decision was made by the government and by the National Agency for Education (SFS 1996:605, SFS 1997:643) giving schools the opportunity of creating their own school governing bodies and giving the parents a majority representation there, minority parents lacking proficiency in Swedish and knowledge of the Swedish school system might not be able to be part of such governing bodies. In a study conducted by Kristoffersson (2002) in nine compulsory schools which had local boards in which parents were in the majority, the overall conclusion drawn was that such school boards are weak agencies at the present time, their rights and responsibilities not being clear, and their being unable to represent all the parents and the stakeholders. When laws are passed and general policies are decided upon, considerable time can be required before their full effect is felt in the individual community, school, and classroom.

The importance of parental involvement has been an issue throughout modern school history in Sweden (Erikson, 2004). This issue is particularly complex for parents of other background than Swedish. The struggle between the parents and the schools existed long before minority parents arrived. In the present study, questions of parental involvement are seen as highly complex, concerning not only the parents of the child but also the importance of their being immigrant individuals who are struggling to become integrated. This is why involving minority parents in the work of the school concerns not only the relation between the home and the school, which has a long history in Sweden, but also the integration of the parents into the new society that they are becoming part of, its being important to bear in mind the migration process the parents are undergoing and have undergone. A multicultural society in which the schools are of intercultural character challenges culturally more established approaches and places particular demands on them. There is a need of both cross-disciplinary and multicultural studies that consider questions from a variety of different perspectives.

The aims of the study

The overall aim of the study is to gain knowledge of what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in an urban secondary school for

students between the age of about 12 and 16, and to achieve a better understanding of how parents of Arabic background and teachers view parental involvement in school. A further and related aim is to better understand how parents can be helped in a manner enabling them to increase their sense of involvement in the school their children attend. The study also considers how and to what extent the parents are involved in their children's education in these various ways.

The study takes a critical approach, in the sense of not simply providing the reader "a thick description" (Geertz, 1973, p.7) of what hinders and what promotes parental involvement in the work of the school. It also endeavours to determine what can best be done to reach out to the parents and how the parents can be enabled to better reach out to the school. A home-school mediation project was established to promote parental involvement, the knowledge attained by use of such an approach being examined. Efforts to establish a close working relationship between the school and parents in general, and minority parent in particular, are seen as being faced with a variety of complex issues, some of them of ethical character.

Clarification of concepts

In this section, dealing with certain of the concepts employed, it is not my intention to provide long definitions of terms or to compare the definitions different authors give to various terms. Rather, I aim to provide as clear definitions as possible of the notions I use without going into these in depth, since no discourse analysis on the different terms and notions I employ is aimed at in the study. The concepts defined in the following are used throughout the thesis.

Urban school

I refer to the school in which the study was carried out as being an urban school. The students were from more than 28 different countries. They spoke different languages and had different cultural and religious and socio-economic backgrounds. The term urban school is employed by many researchers, both in Sweden and elsewhere. In the US for example the term is used to describe schools attended by mostly low-

income black and Hispanic students. Urban schools often include a wide diversity of racial, ethnic and socio-economic classes that reflect the whole society (for further readings see e.g. *Journal for Urban education* and *The Journal of Negro Education*). A description of the school in this study will be presented in chapter 4. For the purpose of this study I will be using the term urban school in describing the school in this study.

Minority parents and families

The parents involved in the study, although they could be termed minority parents, were not a minority in the school in question. The term minority (minoritet in Swedish) has a somewhat different meaning in Sweden than when used in an international context. I tend not to use the Swedish term (invandrarföräldrar or immigrant parents) since it can readily be used to stigmatises parents of foreign background. The term ethnic minority parents or ethnic minority families are widely used in the international literature (see example Bastiani, 1997; Vincent, 2000). The term minority is defined according to the Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, as follows

A minority or subordinate group is a sociological group that does not constitute a politically dominant plurality of the total population of a given society. A sociological minority is not necessarily a numerical minority - it may include any group that is disadvantaged with respect to a dominant group in terms of social status, education, employment, wealth and political power. To avoid confusion, some writers prefer the terms “subordinate group” and “dominant group” rather than “minority” and “majority” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minority>).

In Sweden, the parliament decided in 1999 to recognise the Lapps, the Swedish Finnish, the Tornedals Finnish, Jewish groups and the gypsies as being national minorities in Sweden. Their languages also became official minority languages in Sweden. The Arabic speaking group which the thesis concerns has not been officially recognised as a minority group but belongs to the group of people described more informally as minority group. The term minority parents is employed here refer to this group of parents as a subordinate group.

Parental involvement

In addressing the question of parental involvement in schools in a Swedish context, the terms “samverkan”, “samarbeta”, “medverkan” and “inflytande” tend to be employed. The first two of these can be translated as cooperation and collaboration, and the last two as participation and influence, respectively. The term “influence” is rarely used in the international literature. In this respect and in other respects as well, the concept of “parental involvement” as used in the international literature differs somewhat from how the parents-school relations tend to be conceived of in Sweden.

How the involvement of parents in their children’s education is conceived depends upon what both the school and the parents want to achieve for the children through such cooperation with each other. There are two different places in particular, one should note in which the parents can become involved in their children, one being at home and the other at school. Parental involvement is a multi-dimensional construct, the participation of parents both in school- and in home-centered activities being ideally aimed of promoting the optimal development of children.

A review of the literature on parental involvement (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Berla 1994; Vincent, 1996, 2000; Crozier, 2000; Bastiani, 1997; Johansson & Orving, 1993; Erikson, 2004) shows there to be no complete agreement on what is meant by the term “parent involvement”. Several different terms such as “home-school relationships”, “home-school collaboration”, “family-school involvement”, and “home-school partnerships” are often used interchangeably to describe the relationship between the parents and the school. A review of the literature also indicates that parental involvement can be organized into two primary categories: a) school-centered parental involvement, and b) home-centered parent involvement. School-centered parental involvement is characterised by parental activities at a system level, its including activities such as participation in social and service events in the classroom (the classroom level), attending parent-teacher association meetings (the school level), and attending and participating in school board meetings (the district level) (Epstein, 2001). These are

activities which are often the first to come to mind when school personnel consider parent involvement. They typically take place in the school building. Home-centered parent involvement, in contrast is characterised by activities the parents carry on directly with their child, such as helping the child with its homework, providing a good breakfast in the morning, and attending one-on-one meetings with their child's teachers

Epstein (2001) refers to six different types of parental involvement.

1. *Parenting*: providing programs and services supporting the efforts of the family.
2. *Communicating*: establishing mechanisms that foster effective communication networks between the home and the school.
3. *Volunteering*: recruiting and organizing volunteer activities that support the learning of the children.
4. *Learning at home*: helping the parents support the child in its homework as well as support the parents from outside in their efforts to assist their child academically and socially at home.
5. *Decision-making*: endeavouring to increase the level of parent participation in school governance and in school advocacy.
6. *Collaborating with the community*: identification and integration of community-based resources that can strengthen school programs and support the parents in their efforts to help their children in their learning (Epstein, 2001).

According to Erikson (2004), the concept of parental influence equivalent to the Swedish term "föräldrinflytande" is rarely used in the literature. Instead, one finds such terms as "parental involvement" and "parent participation". These two terms can be translated as "inblandning" and "engagemang", as applied to what the parents do, terms which are rarely used in the Swedish school debate. "Parent empowerment" is a term used internationally, one which can be translated into Swedish as "bemyndigande; möjliggörande", although a correct and adequate translation of the term is not used in the Swedish school debate.

Erikson (2004) claims that the relations between the school and the parents are conceived somewhat differently in Sweden than internationally. New vocabulary in Sweden has gradually emerged as a result of changes made in educational policies over the years, such term as “empowerment” “devolution”, “choice”, “accountability”, “rights” and “participation” being the closest to their Swedish equivalents (Erikson, 2004, p. 363). For purposes of the present study, the term “parental involvement” will be used to describe parental engagement in the education of their children at home or in the neighbourhood, in class and at the school level generally.

Home-school mediator

The term “home-school mediator” is used here to refer to those teachers who took part in the home-school mediation project which is described. In England, such posts are often referred to as home-school liaison posts. The persons holding them are often bilingual teachers who work together with the parents and the school in order to build a close relationship between the two (Bastiani, 1997). There are also bilingual community liaisons in the American literature, see for example (Delgado-Gaitan, 1990). For purposes of the present study, I prefer using the term “home-school mediator”.

The Structure of the thesis

The thesis is divided into three main parts, the first consisting of three chapters, the second consisting of five chapters and the third of several chapters.

Part one

Chapter 2 deals with earlier research on parental involvement in Sweden and how involvement can be hindered or promoted by the power relationships involved. The chapter takes up the history of parental involvement in Sweden, together with the efforts of the schools today to involve parents. Issues of parental involvement in urban Swedish schools are also considered. The chapter also examines barriers that tend to hinder and strategies that serve to promote parental involvement

in the work of the schools both in a Swedish and in an international context.

Chapter 3 provides an account of the theoretical tools made use of in analyzing the empirical material. Bourdieu's major theories of capital, habitus, field, symbolic power and violence, agents and doxa are taken up. Bourdieu's concepts presented in this chapter are meant to clarify both empirically and theoretically what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in an urban school. The involvement in the work of the school of Arabic parents, who belong to an ethnic minority, dealt with very little thus far, is investigated critically in a broad context. Various concepts used throughout the thesis are defined here. In concluding the analysis I endeavour to provide a synthesis of what has been taken up, making use of the concepts that have been introduced. In employing social capital as a tool for analysis, Bourdieu's more critical approach is combined with Coleman's and Putnam's more functional ones. My own approach to a heterogeneous area of this sort is close to that of Bourdieu, but in my practical role as a mediator I was more concerned with solving problems than with criticizing the existing situation as such, my own approach thus being a more functional one.

Chapter 4 examines the methodological approaches taken. Two main approaches discussed are those of critical ethnography and participatory action research, an integrated form of the two is being considered. Critical ethnography based on the work of Thomas (1993) is seen as an approach for adopting a political goal aimed at effecting change. The present study endeavours both to provide thick descriptions of parental involvement in an urban school, and to find ways for the parents to get involved and structures enabling them to do so, in line with participatory action research. The chapter also takes up data collection methods employed, interpretation of the results and ethical issues.

Part two

Chapter 5 considers the teachers' views on what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in the work of the school generally and more specifically for Arabic-speaking Muslim parents. The teachers describe their understanding of parental involvement in the school and

their views of different obstacles encountered in working with the parents. The teachers also speak of barriers of various types connected with working with the parents, such as the parents' language deficiencies, and cultural and religious factors. They also suggest different strategies that could be employed in order to get the parents more involved in the work of the school. Home-school mediation was regarded by the teachers as a promising approach to helping overcome the obstacles they described and getting the parents to be more involved in the school's work.

Chapter 6 concerns the parents' understanding of parental involvement in the school that their children attend and their views regarding it. The parents also express their views regarding Swedish schools and compared them with the schools they had attended in their previous home countries. They describe the obstacles that hinder them from taking an active role in the education of their children and they make suggestion for strategies that could increase their involvement in the work of the school. The parents show a lack of knowledge of the school system in many respects and emphasise their need of obtaining more adequate knowledge of it as well as of educational practice in general. They considered a home-school mediation to be a useful approach to bringing the parents closer to the school.

Chapter 7 describes the home-school mediation project carried out in accordance with requests of both the teachers and the parents with the aim of getting the parents more closely involved in the work of the school and of developing a good working relationship between the parents and the teachers. How the parents could become more closely oriented to the school if the school took their needs into consideration to a greater extent and planned more carefully concerning involving them in its work is described. The outcome of the home-school mediation conducted is described in terms of the views of both the parents and the teachers.

Chapter 8 examines various ways of the parents of becoming involved in their children's education through activities they themselves arrange. A supplementary school, or school activities of an educational charac-

ter arranged by the parents-teacher association is described, including the logic of these activities and the means and methods involved. The major aims of the supplementary school activities were to support the children and help them in their schoolwork, to protect their cultural heritage, and to prevent the children from being influenced by “the culture of the street”, meaning preventing them from being drawn into drug abuse and criminality and ending up failing in school. The chapter describes the difficulties the parents faced at home in trying to help their children in this way. The supplementary school is seen as an opportunity for the children to obtain help from others who can provide them the help they need. The chapter considers how and to what extent the parents are involved in their children’s education in these various ways.

Chapter 9 describes various aspects of the parents’ struggles outside the school that I find very important to bring up in the thesis in order to provide a more complete picture of the parents’ difficulties and the strategies they develop to cope with the changes occurring in their lives in their efforts to establish themselves in a new country. They present their views on the migration process they have experienced, which for many of them has had a strong impact on their involvement in the school. Various questions with which they have been involved concern the following: how to encourage their children to continue their schooling when everything around them seems to show that success in school in no sense prevents unemployment, how to protect young people who are very much lacking in money from the temptations of making easy money, and how to accept and live with the major shift one is frequently forced to make from the high hopes connected with immigration to the reality of living in a country very different from the country one has left.

Part three

Chapter 10 considers challenges encountered and the difficulties faced in efforts to involve the parents in the school, making use of a critical ethnographic approach. It also takes up a number of methodological reflections and various dilemmas I encountered in my triple role as researcher, process leader and home-school mediator.

Chapter 11 is a summary and discussion of the outcomes that resulted, use being made of Bourdieu's theories of capital, habitus, field, symbolic power and doxa, and also of Coleman's ideas concerning social capital as well as Reay's notion of institutional habitus.

Part One

2 Research on parental involvement

This chapter deals with earlier research on relations between the parents and the school and how such relations can be hindered or promoted. The concept of parents used here includes parents in general, regardless of their social class, gender or country of origin. When the term “minority parents” is later introduced it refers to parents with other countries of origin whose children either were born here or were born outside of Sweden. The concept of school refers both to the primary and the secondary school levels i.e. the education of children between 6 and 16 years of age. The first parts of the chapter concern the history of school-parent relations in Sweden between about 1930 and the late 1990s various models that Erikson (2004) has presented being taken up, later parts of the chapter concerning research, both within a Swedish context and within a broader international context on how parents and teachers can work together more effectively. Research in Sweden has dealt mostly with the preschool and with the lower grades at the primary school level, whereas my research deals mostly with the secondary school, i.e. with the grades in which the children are between 12 and 16 years of age. I consider the relevance of this earlier research to my study. More specifically, I consider Swedish research on the involvement in the school of parents from minority groups, together with difficulties encountered by teachers in their work in such schools, and research concerning the community surrounding schools of this sort. Finally, I provide a summary of various issues that are relevant to my study.

A review of research on the history of relations between the parents and the school in a Swedish context

Very little research on parental involvement in the children’s school education has been conducted in Sweden (Erikson, 2004). Erikson (2004), after studying both the national and the international literature

carefully, created a typology containing four different models distinguishing competing conceptualisations of such central concepts as those of “parent” and “involvement”, relating each model to what he terms an overall system. Erikson considers his models as being partly comparable and partly non-comparable. They are comparable through their dealing with the same relationship, that between the school and the home, and non-comparable through their belonging to different overall systems. Erikson’s four models presented can be said to concern parental involvement in the child’s school in general terms, not involving a specific category of parents.

Persson (1996, 1998) discusses, in two research reports relations between the home and the school during the periods of 1930 to 1970 and of 1970 to 1990. Ribom (1993) also describes in his doctoral thesis how relations between the home and the school developed between 1930 and 1990. Erikson’s four models provide a structure to which a discussion of the relations between the parents and the school can be oriented. Although Erikson’s typologies emerged from his knowledge of both the international and the Swedish literature, I will consider here only their use within a Swedish context.

The separation model: Erikson traces this model to the work of the American sociologists Waller (1932) and Parsons (1959). The model, which questions the benefits of a close working relationship between the home and the school, concerns the same period of time in Sweden as in other countries. Erikson quotes Waller, who describes parents and teachers as being “natural enemies” in terms of the way in which the parents regard their relations with their own children and teachers regard their relations with their students, the teachers exercising their role as experts and setting boundaries vis-à-vis the parents. According to Erikson, this model still exists today and has existed, together with the partnership model that follows, since the 1940s.

The partnership model: This has its roots, according to Erikson, in the period after the Second World War from the late 1940s and through the 1960s and the building of the new welfare state during this period. He refers here to the School Commission report (SOU 1946: 31) and

the first Swedish school curriculum Lgr-62 and to the notion of reaching out that developed during the 1950s and 1960s. The dominant educational ideology was influenced by the political ideology of equal opportunities in education. He refers both to the report of Coleman (1966) in the US and to the study connected with the Plowden report (1967) in Britain. Both reports stress the need of providing equal opportunities in education everywhere, the social status of the family no longer being seen as decisive in this connection. Erikson states that from the 1970s the concept of “partnership” has been broadened to include a wide spectrum of ideas concerning parental involvement.

The user-participation model: This model emerged in the late 1960s due to parents becoming more empowered and more closely involved in the governing bodies of schools. This model was introduced in the mid 1970s and the 1980s, together with a proposal for establishing local governing bodies and revitalizing the community.

The choice model: According to Erikson, this model emerged in the 1980s in connection with a restructuring of the educational system was internationally first introduced in a Swedish school context in the 1990s. The accompanying shift in educational policy resulted in an emphasis on the rights of parents to choose whatever school they wanted to enroll their children in. According to Erikson, the four models are closely involved in how parental involvement in the school is conceived.

The models just described can be better understood if one looks closely at the development of the relation between the parents and schools in a Swedish context. Erikson (2004) makes no distinction between the parents' background, social class or gender. The section that follows considers how the relations between the parents and schools have been strongly influenced by the changes in society that occurred between the 1930s and the late 1990s.

Changes in society in Sweden during the 20th century

The basis for society as it exists today in Sweden, an industrialized and democratically governed country, was established in the 20th century, during which the country underwent marked changes, agriculture becoming mechanized, communications becoming greatly improved, the population increasing, and the class society that had existed being abandoned. Urbanization, the establishment of labour unions, changes in the status of women, changes in political parties, democratization and the building of the welfare state took place during the early parts of the 20th century¹¹. All of this placed new demands on the various societal institutions that existed and on the citizenry. Social relations of many kinds – such as the types of work available, the power relations found and ideological control – changed, just as did the distribution of work between the two sexes and the conditions under which children grew up (Sidebäck, 1992; Persson, 1998). Industrialization and development of the welfare system led to a wide variety of changes: economic, social and political. Changes in the social conditions affected the family and the views regarding it.

¹¹ How children and childhood were viewed by society underwent marked changes in the course of the 20th Century. Children, frequently exploited to perform work of various sorts, had long been viewed by large segments of society in economic terms. Beginning in about the year 1900, however, people became increasingly concerned about the feelings children had (Sandin, 1995). Directing attention at children in this way and regarding them primarily as individuals was the basis for the institutionalization of childhood that characterizes society today. Through children from so many different social groups and of so differing background meeting in school, childhood became more and more normalized and standardised. A new conception of the family developed that of a mother who was at home and could send clean and healthy children to school and of a father who alone was to support his family in financial terms. Children were no longer a part of the production process but rather became consumers who did nothing practically useful within the family and were dependent upon their parents longer than they had been earlier. Children were to be saved from being "useful" since a useful child was regarded as an exploited child (ibid).

The importance of the school in the children's upbringing

According to Myrdal (1935)¹², one of the causes of the population crisis of the 1930s was the society's shortcomings in the bringing up of children. She felt that a large proportion of the family's problems of this sort were based on insufficient competence and training in such matters (Persson, 1998). Myrdal considered the training of parents in the bringing up of their children to be the answer to this, and in 1931 she founded a set of system circles under the auspices of ABF. According to Halldén (1990) these circles can be seen as reflecting the public debate that began in the 1930s concerning the role of women in the home and on the job market, as well as the role of children as future citizens of the country. An announcement of the circles' activities that was designed to encourage people to attend took as a point of departure society's increasing interest in psychology: "There is interest as never before in how children should be brought up, particularly regarding the psychological side of it, lack of knowledge of which often leads to parents not knowing what they should do"¹³ (Halldén, 1990, p. 151).

During the first few decades of the 20th century, there was very little cooperation between the parents and the schools. Ribom (1993) and Johansson and Wahlberg (1993) note that according to SOU 1946:31 some 72 percent of the parents had never had any contact with the schools that their children attended. Investigations of the matter during the century as a whole emphasized the need of increased cooperation between the school and the home, although in recent years statements of this sort have become more emphatic (Tallberg-Broman, 1998). The role of the home in the bringing up of children was regarded as having gradually been weakened since the middle of the 1940s, parents being considered to be unaware of the duties they were to fulfill. It was regarded as important to make parents conscious of their duties:

¹² The new conception of the human being that evolved, one which Alva Myrdal described, gained a real breakthrough after 1945. Deviations from what was regarded as normal or desirable came to be seen through new spectacles.

¹³ My own translation

It is of obvious importance that parents, as representatives of the home, be clearly conscious of their job in the bringing up of children [...] Parents should know of and accept the responsibilities they have for the proper upbringing of their children (SOU 1946:31, pp. 23-24)¹⁴.

The home-school partnership was seen in terms of the parents' supporting the upbringing of their children in school. The schools took upon themselves the role of educating both the children and their parents in the proper way (Erikson, 2004; Härnsten, 1995). The cooperation between the home and the school that was aimed at was seen as being attainable through the school's providing parents' preparatory training in the role of being parents.

The parents were regarded as lacking knowledge of the schools, just as the schools can be said to have lacked knowledge of the home, which was considered by the schools to be instable and unreliable and to lack any adequate and objective view of the school's situation. Concepts such as that of irrational parental love were employed. SOU 1948:27 continued along this line in describing the relationship between the home and the school, stating that parents must accustom themselves to cooperating with the work of the schools. The schools took upon themselves the major responsibility for the bringing up of children and, according to Persson (1996), Erikson (2004), and Härnsten (1995), considered the parents to be in opposition to what the schools were doing. Nowhere in the document just cited was there any reference to the competence of the parents (Erikson, 2004). Both the state generally and many experts considered the task of bringing up of children to becoming good citizens with democratic attitudes to be highly important, at the same time as they were quite skeptical of the competence of parents in this respect, considering them to be in need of special training in being good parents (Tallberg-Broman, 1998).

The increasing professionalisation of child care that characterises the 20th Century led to a questioning of whether families are able to meet the higher standards for the bringing up of children that society had set (Tallberg-Broman, 1994). An inability of families to bring up children

¹⁴ My own translation

in a truly democratic spirit was regarded as a major reason for having the schools and the state take on a greater responsibility for the bringing up of children (Persson, 1996). Different professional groups concerned with such matters became established and battled with each other regarding which of them could best carry out the task (ibid). Sidebäck (1992) speaks of a *battle for children's souls*, a battle spurred on by increasing knowledge of the role that the manner in which children are brought up has for their view of the world, for their manner of thinking and for the norms they accept. It was seen as a battle to determine the content and direction of childcare.

In the battle between different groups regarding who should be regarded as able to bring children up best, attention became directed at children again as political objects¹⁵. A battle for the welfare of children began to be fought at about the beginning of the 20th Century, led by many persons of the middle-class and members of various groups involved in efforts to improve the living conditions of children in families that were poor. The effort was made to create a kind of idyllic situation for them, one in which insofar as possible there was a lack of class differences and of social problems. Different social measures with basic aims of this sort were taken over later by the community or by the state. Sandin (2000) speaks in this connection of a loosening of the borders between the private and the public spheres in the care and bringing up of children, children becoming increasingly a public responsibility, not simply a private matter for parents or guardians. The partial bringing up of children in school resulted in a public socialization process in which the state determined to a considerable extent what was right or wrong for children. No one could escape being exposed to this public socialization process in which all children were brought up within the same basic value framework (Richardson, 1983).

¹⁵ When attention became directed at children in their own right, this aroused the interest of the state in ensuring that they had a normal and happy childhood. The borders between what was public and what was private disappeared, the bringing up of children becoming a matter of concern for many different groups, not simply for the parents.

Children were seen as possessing particular rights that distinguished them from adults, the state taking upon itself the role of guaranteeing children an adequate childhood and of keeping watch over them in this respect. It was seen as being in the public interest that children of working-class parents grew up under satisfactory moral and material conditions. Work in ensuring that this was the case came gradually to be carried out by both community and national governmental authorities. In addition, each of a variety of different professional groups came to consider itself as the group best able to provide parents advice concerning how they should bring up their children. These included those in charge of kindergartens where children could work and play physicians, teachers, priests and psychologists. A battle between these various groups gradually ensued a battle partly concerning gender, a question asked being that of who could provide the best advice here, men or women (Persson, 1996; Sandin, 1995).

According to Persson (1996), the governmental investigation of the schools in the 1940s emphasized the role of the schools in the bringing up of children. The ultimate task of the schools was considered at the time not to be of disseminating knowledge but rather of bringing up children in the broadest and deepest sense. It was no longer regarded as reasonable to draw a strict line of demarcation between the school and the home. Although the bringing up of children was seen as being primarily the responsibility of the parents, the fact that children were in school a large part of the day was seen as implying that the school could in no way avoid its part of the responsibility for the bringing up of children (*ibid*). The school's task was seen as being primarily that of correcting what the home failed to do.

In this way the school advanced its position bit by bit to interfere in the task of the bringing up of children. Yet why was it so important for the school to emphasize a role of this sort rather than that of disseminating knowledge? From about 1900 on, instruction in school had come to be focused more and more on education enabling the person to later get a work, rather than on moral training and the teaching of religion. The society was rapidly changing and parents abilities to socialize children to the new society was seen difficult to achieve. Persson uses the term socialization vacuum to describe the new situation in which the school

and other institutions started to take new position in the battle for the child. This led to the school advancing its position so as to compensate for this, redefining what the bringing up of children involved and taking over a larger part of it (ibid.).

Both Erikson (2004) and Persson (1996) refer to the 1946 report of the Commission on Schools, in which it was asserted that the major task of the schools was to bring young people up so as to think in a democratic way. The schools took over generally the task of the mental care of children, the main classroom teacher being given the major responsibility for this and being made responsible as well for maintaining contact with the home and creating a sense of trust in relations with the parents. The State School Board also emphasized, in SOU 1949: 35, the importance of the classroom teacher's maintaining a close working relationship with the school physician and the school psychologist, despite the classroom teacher's continuing to be the person in the school with the major responsibility for the child generally (ibid.). The school was also given a corrective role in cases of children being faced with difficulties within the family.

The period between 1950s and 1960s

When in 1955 the National School Board advanced a proposal concerning the establishment of local school boards, the local communities were not particularly positive toward it since they considered the parent organisations that existed to suffice in meeting the needs involved (Lindbom, 1995). Accordingly, relatively little use was made of local school boards. When new school laws were passed in 1962, the possibility of establishing local school boards was abolished, the argument was that the parent organisations that already existed were sufficient to meet the needs at hand (Lindbom, 1995). In the governmental school investigation in 1957 it was argued that the norms employed by the schools for the bringing up of children and those employed by the parents should be the same and that the parents should follow the school's norms in this respect. In the governmental school investigation in 1961, in turn, it was argued that the information parents were provided con-

cerning the work of the schools should be improved so as to overcome the negative attitudes toward the school that some parents had (ibid).

The degree of influence parents had on the education that was provided varied. The general view of the schools was that their contacts with parents should primarily be those of informing parents of the results their children achieved. According to Persson (1998), both of the school curricula Lgr-62 and Lgr-69 showed a greater openness to the idea of there being a dialog between the parents and the school regarding the work the schools conducted. However, although it was seen as desirable that the parents as a group feel involved in what the school was doing, it was felt that no efforts were needed to inform them of this in precise terms and that their influence on the school should be limited.

The period between the 1960s and the 1980s

It can be seen that during the period of 1960-1980 particularly after about 1967, the influence of parents on the work of the schools began to be a matter of very active debate (Erikson, 2004). The schools were in a period of rapid development and the parents considered their own experience to be of considerable value in connection with this, a possibility that governmental documents had long ignored. Around 1970 there was a further change in the approach parents took, that of their demanding close insight into what the schools were doing in light of the fact that the work of the schools played such an important role both in their own lives and in the lives of their children (ibid). During 1975, when the governmental investigation termed the SIA-Study (Internal Work of the Schools) (SOU 1974: 53) had been carried out, the communities were given greater responsibility in educational matters. Those commissioned by the state to carry out the SIA-Study felt the possibilities for the local communities to adjust teaching to the needs of students should be increased (Lindbom, 1995). In the SIA investigation, cooperation between the school and the home was also examined and a number of concrete reforms were suggested, although the major idea was that decisions should be made by those most closely affected

by them. According to Persson (1998), seven different factors were said to lead to increasing parental involvement:

1. Meetings for intimate discussions at a local level.
2. Class meetings involving parents and teachers.
3. The efforts of schools to reach out to the parents.
4. Systematic coordination of informational efforts.
5. The function of there being a particular teacher responsible for contact with a given set of parents.
6. The idea that teacher education should prepare teachers for how to reach out to the parents.
7. The establishment and the activity of parent boards. (Person, 1998).

The idea that parents should play an active role in the work of the schools generally was also introduced in that investigation. It was argued that it was first when parents experienced their having something definite to say regarding their children's situation in the school that they became strongly involved in matters pertaining to their children's education (Ribom, 1993). It was suggested to be made obligatory that the class teacher meet at regular intervals with the parents of a given child and also meet from time to time with parents of all the children in the class. The parents were given direct though limited influence on the work of the school through the creation of parent school boards headed by the school head and containing representatives of the pupils, the parents and the school personnel. These parent school boards were to be given the right to decide on many questions with which the head was confronted, with the exception of those expressly reserved for some specific member of the school personnel or for one or more of the pupils, as well as to decide on various questions of the instructional material or teaching methods to be employed.

The question of whether the work of such boards was to be furthered was debated back and forth. What was finally decided upon in practical terms was that both the role of parents in working with teachers and the responsibility of the school head to inform the parents regularly of the school's work and to consult with the parents and with the pupils were

to increase. Consultations with the parents were to take place at school conferences. Although such conferences were given no decision-making rights, it was emphasized that cooperation with the parents was an asset to the school and that parental involvement could contribute to the children's education (Lindbom, 1995, Nyttell, 1996). That no decision-making body was created can be explained by the fact that such organisations as the Swedish Association of Local Authorities (Kommunförbundet) and the teachers' union were strongly against it and that the will and the energy of politicians who supported it were not strong enough to effectively oppose this. One of the arguments against the creation of a local school board with decision-making powers was that it was undemocratic, that schools should be steered, just as other public activities were, by politically selected representatives, whereas the parents and the pupils constituted special interest groups (Lindbom, 1995). The teachers' union also described the creation of a local school board with decision-making powers as being inconsistent with legislation on the rights of self-determination. Further arguments against the creation of such school boards were difficulties in deciding what questions the board should be given the right to decide on, unclear distribution of responsibilities and that such boards lack the competence to make adequate decisions (ibid.). The degree to which parents participated in the work of the school, however, was not affected simply by the position taken by the state, by various organisations or by the communities, but also by the parents themselves.

The period between the 1980s and the 1990s

Different investigations carried out during the 1980s¹⁶ showed parents to not take part to the extent the school desired in parent meetings that

¹⁶The POSLEF-project, conducted during 1979-81, which concerned the attitudes of parents toward contacts with the school and toward collaborating with it, found that, although parents tended to feel they could influence the work of the school, few took advantage of this. The SOL- and the SKARP-projects in 1984, in which the influence of different environmental factors - the activity of the parents being one of them - on the work of the school and of the teachers was investigated, found the parents to influence in particular what was designated as the school code, which was regarded as representing a major factor in steering the school's work. At the same time, parents were found to vary considerably in the influence they had in this respect, some of them having no influence on the school code whatever.

were organized. One reason for this, however, was that the parents had difficulties in getting away from their jobs or from caring for their small children at home, without this necessarily reflecting any disinterest in their children's schooling (Nihlén, 1976). During the 1980s the school received its third curriculum, Lgr-80, where one can read, "It is the home that has the primary and most basic responsibility for the care and upbringing of the schoolchild"¹⁷ (p. 24), a statement clearly similar to what had appeared in the previous school curriculum as well. The section dealing with contacts between the school and the home, one and a half pages in length is termed *Samverkan mellan hem och skola* "Collaboration between the home and the school". Contacts between the school and the home are described more briefly than in Lgr-69, though not as briefly as in Lpo-94. The school is seen as being obliged to take contact with the parents of all school children twice a year, and teachers are also to take advantage of the parents' knowledge of the child. Although personal contacts of this sort are considered highly valuable, meetings that parents of all the children in a class can attend are also seen as being very worthwhile (Persson, 1998).

It is recommended that different forms of contact be taken advantage of, its being felt that since the parents have knowledge and experience outside the school which is highly relevant, they can contribute in an active and worthwhile way to the education of the pupils (ibid). The school is also to support collaboration with a child's parents so that the parents and the teachers together can discuss such matters as the planning of the school day, department rules that are to apply and matters that can contribute to the children's free-time activities. Also, the broad experience many parents have with different occupations, hobbies and activities of other types are seen as enabling them to contribute in a useful way to their children's education in this connection. The school is also to actively seek contact with any parents who are otherwise difficult to come in contact with (ibid). An important point that Persson (1998) raises is that up to the 1980s the parents' role was limited to that of their responsibility regarding their own child's schooling. During the 1980s the parental involvement in the school took a broader turn, however, the schools endeavouring to involve the parents in taking a role in

¹⁷ My own translation

discussing other school issues than their child's schooling alone. According to Erikson (2004) most investigations regard the parents as a collective resource for the school in planning different activities for supporting the children's schooling (Erikson, 2004).

Parental involvement during the 1990s

Never before had the parents received as much attention at the political ideological, and the school document level as they had during the 1990s (Erikson, 2004). The user participation model had been weakened at the beginning of the 1990s, whereas the choice model mentioned above gave the parents the role of being consumers on the educational market. They were given the opportunity of letting their children attend whatever state or private school they felt would best meet their children's needs (ibid). The possibility of being able to make such a choice, of course provides one type of influence (an exit strategy). The partnership model was deepened and was referred to both in the new school curriculum and in other governmental documents. The four models were said to be concerned with what parental involvement consisted of. Erikson argues that both the choice model and the separation model are strong but that the revival of the local governing boards in the mid-1990s strengthened the collective involvement of parents. Erikson also notes that during the 1990s the teachers' professional role in the schools was a dominant theme in discussions. This is described in a research report by Persson and Tallberg-Broman (2002) in which teachers in the schools and students training to be teachers at the university of education in Malmoe expressed their views generally that the role of teachers in schools nowadays is not limited to the teaching of the children, but also involves their bringing up and that since the parents are not always able to give their children a proper upbringing, the teachers are often obliged to become involved in matters other than the teaching of school subjects. Findings of this type reflect the fact that historically the relations between the parents and school had been characterised in particular by the issue of the upbringing of the children, the battle between different expert groups that was described earlier having played a dominant role in discussions of the parents-school relationship from the early thirties up to the present day.

Parental involvement according to governmental documents in the 1990s

Persson (1998) points to the fact that the School Committee (SOU 1995:103) considered an important reason for giving parents greater influence in the schools than previously to be the desire of the parents to have such influence, yet he noted that parents were very much limited in what they could do here because of the dominant view that having a direct influence on the schools should be largely limited to professionals (ibid). The fact that there could be a developmental potential in discussions between teachers and parents was in effect largely ignored, despite the National School Committee (SOU 1995:103) having a view that the parents should have a more supportive role in the administration of schools.

The School Committee (SOU 1995:103) argued that the parents are an important resource for the schools, yet one which is insufficiently utilized. It was felt that the participation of parents in school matters can contribute strongly to the development of a good learning environment for the children. The parents were also described as representing a force that can influence a school directly and can further its development, this being not a primarily matter of the parents simply helping out in various activities, such as in the baking of biscuits for school excursions, going along on such excursions or discussing rules of deportment that should apply generally. To a much greater extent it was regarded as involving the parents' participating in certain everyday matters of much more central character pertaining to the schools and their having an influence on matters regarding their school experience that the children can take up at home – the lessons they have at school, their feeling of a sense of security in school, the friends they have contact with in school, whether they enjoy going to school and whether they feel they are learning something (SOU 1995:103).

Objections were also raised, however, to the parental involvement on the schools. One possible objection of this sort was that parents lack the competence for participating in decisions of central importance concerning the schools (Persson, 1998). Against this objection, one can argue that participating in such matters requires no further competence

of the parents than they already possess through being both parents and members of society. Knowledge of the rules that apply in school, of the school curriculum, and of specific courses is also readily available in the schools. One thing the parents can contribute with in a very unique way is their knowledge of their own child. The parents' possible lack of knowledge concerning the school can also be seen as a transitory phenomenon. Later, through participating in school committees and the like they can learn very much about the school and the principles that apply to it (SOU 1995:103).

In the 1995 report of the School Committee (*ibid*), a concrete proposal was made for establishing, on an experimental basis, local school boards in which parents were in the majority. The Committee recommended that municipalities be given the possibility of establishing, on a trial basis, separate school boards in which parents were in the majority and to which various decision making functions are assigned, functions which in terms of Lpo-94 and national regulations for the schools were currently assigned to either the local board of education or to school headmasters. One could assume that many questions currently being dealt with by local administrators could just as readily be handled instead by these separate school boards, including questions such as those of the use of monetary resources, the organisation of the school in question, its building facilities and its recruitment of personnel (SOU 1995:103).

The School Committee referred to, proposed that the program be described in a special document giving it legitimacy and removing any hindrances there might otherwise be to the parents having a genuine influence on the school. The background to this was the fact that parents, despite all that had been written over the years regarding the rights of parents to influence their children's education and the need of collaboration between the home and the school, had never been given any formal rights in terms of decision making or responsibilities they could take concerning what goes on in the school (SOU 1995:103).

Minority ethnic parents received little attention in the report (SOU 1996:143) of the School Committee (*Krock eller möte: om den mång-*

kulturella skolan). It was stated that for children of immigrant background, just as for other children, it was their family and their parents that assumed the most central role in their life. At the same time, parents who have emigrated to Sweden may have somewhat different conceptions of relationships between people, of societal norms and of education than is usual in Swedish schools. This can place them in an in-between position which is characterised by demands being placed on them that conflict with their earlier views and by their possible sense of confusion. This makes it particularly appropriate to draw in parents of immigrant background to take part in various activities at the school that their children attend. It was the hope of the School Committee that many such parents would become members of these new school boards. It was found, however, that it was not particularly easy to involve many parents of immigrant background, who might feel that they were not a part of the school, in such board work which involved assuming considerable responsibility for what the school did. The section that follows takes up research on minority ethnic parents in Sweden and the efforts of the schools to increase their involvement in the school's work.

Research on parental involvement in urban schools

Erikson's (2004) four models are applicable to parents of all sorts since policy makers do not make special laws for the involvement of parents belonging to ethnic minorities or urban school. When minority parents are discussed issues such as those of integration and segregation, discrimination and the migrations they may have taken part in are often brought up. The following section provides an account of the research concerning ethnic minority parents conducted in Sweden.

For many schools in Sweden, getting parents with a background other than Swedish involved is full of obstacles and is difficult to achieve. Many authors (Flising, Fredriksson & Lund 1996; Arneberg & Ravn, 1995; Sjögren, 1996; Bunar, 2001; Rodell Olgaç, 2000), have pointed to various factors that can prevent the schools and the parents from getting together to establish the close relationships that are needed. Limited language skills in Swedish on the part of the parents and their lack

of knowledge of the Swedish school system are two major obstacles encountered frequently. Lack of guidance and advice and of printed information in the parents' own language regarding the school system and how it functions, as well as teachers and school administrators not taking the time needed and their failing to discover appropriate strategies for involving the parents are two further barriers. A feeling many parents from foreign countries have experienced is that of not feeling welcome at the school their child attends, or having a certain fear of coming there. This has been described in a variety of sources, and similar accounts have been presented in other countries. Bunar (2001) speaks of a sense of mutual distrust and accusation on the part of teachers and parents alike.

The negative impressions regarding schools that foreign parents can obtain are often based on incorrect information, possibly heard in the neighbourhood or passed on to them by relatives or friends in telling them of dissatisfying experiences they have had in contacts with the schools. Their own children may also exploit the parents' lack of knowledge of educational practices in Sweden or their language deficiencies, the children presenting their parents an exaggerated and unjust picture of how they are treated by their teachers, perhaps to gain sympathy or to avoid responsibility. Cultural and social barriers can create many difficulties. Differences in values, norms, religion and traditions between the parents and the teachers can result in tensions that prevent both sides from taking the steps needed to establish a sound working relationship based on cooperation and mutual understanding. According to a report for the year 2000 on attitudes towards the school, one that the National Agency for Education in Sweden has published (Skolverket, 2001:197), four out of ten teachers expressed a need for further knowledge concerning how they could best satisfy the diversity of needs of multicultural children and their parents. One psychological barrier on the part of teachers to close contacts with the parents appeared to be the fear that some teachers had of their work being interfered with by the parents (Sjögren, 1996). They appeared to also lack knowledge of how they could best get parents involved.

Minority parents' distrust

Sjögren (1996) has studied parents and their contacts with the school in a number of suburban schools. In one school, where English was just as well accepted as Swedish as a language to be used in class and the parents were English-speaking, the parents were found to be highly active. There appeared to also be a high degree of equality in power between the school personnel, who were Swedish, and the parents, who achieved prestige through their knowledge of a high-status language. Even as immigrants, these parents could feel very secure in making their views known. The parents possessing cultural capital may have better chances to make their voice heard than those who lack it. The issue of class becomes evident in this respect. The involvement of the parents in the school may depend on the social class they belong to. The more west European a person is, the easier it is for the person to gain access to the school and to be listened to.

A number of the other schools Sjögren had contact with were located in areas that were stigmatized because of those living there being socially underprivileged. Parents belonging to various immigrant groups maintained an emotional distance toward Swedish, were often considered by the school personnel as being different and seldom came to meetings of parents who had children attending the school. The issue raised at this point was whether the failure to attend such meetings was related to the degree of emotional distance they felt toward the school system. Many of the parents had experienced the insecurity of being refugees and the unemployment that often followed this and they had lost the sense of self-confidence and trust they would have had in their own country. Their uncertainty regarding both Swedish and daily codes of conduct in Sweden tended to reinforce the subordinate position in which they found themselves. Strong efforts of the school that their children attended would have been needed to enable them to circumvent the invisible but real barriers with which they were faced. A major question is how to overcome not only the emotional distance found between the home and the school generally but also that between Swedish people and immigrants.

Sjögren (1996) describes how a teacher who for years had attempted to get as many parents as possible to come to informal meetings at the school had refused to give up, even when the emotional distance involved seemed immense. She sought out immigrant parents in organisations to which they belonged. She told of one visit she had made to an immigrant organisation located near a school together with one of the teachers and of the bitterness and the dread for the future the person in charge there expressed. The immigrant group there considered itself to not be recognized at all socially and to be at the bottom of the social scale. The distrust the members had of the school and of authorities generally was obvious. The members of the association referred to the school as a “police school”, suggesting that a teacher who was unable to teach the children effectively would simply call for the police to take over. They accused the teachers at the school of being closely allied against them both with the police and with social workers. Their whole view of the power relations involved was colored by patterns that characterised the various countries from which they came. If one grows up in a country in which it is the norm to not trust authorities generally, and still less to trust the police, it can be difficult to become accustomed to viewing the police as providing a helping hand.

The writings of Bunar (2001) provide considerable insight into problems of this type. He describes the difficulties which teachers have with parents who are living at the boundary of poverty in disadvantaged and distressed areas in which they remain in squalor, not because of moral liabilities but because of social inequalities and limited opportunities of improving their economic circumstances. Bunar’s work concerns such matters as segregation, stigmatisation, the social reproduction of negative circumstances, and a culture of ruthlessness. The situation of those living in such disadvantaged areas can be described as what the French refer to as “le provisoir qui dure” (the temporary but lasting situation). Bunar tells of the need of cooperation between the school and the home frequently being brought up in conversations he has had with school administrators, schoolteachers and parents. He finds that, although teachers often refer to obstacles to cooperation, they seem scarcely able to propose strategies for overcoming them, and that neither teachers nor school administrators are well prepared for communicating and interacting effectively with families caught up in such circumstances.

Bunar describes the relations in Sweden between parents and schools as traditionally being bilaterally passive, both parties acting as though they were satisfied with the degree and type of cooperation they have and scarcely making the attempt to explore ways of strengthening their relations with each other. In contrast, the type of relationship that tends to be found between the school and minority parents is more unilaterally active in character. It reflects the separate and differing discourses in the school, in the community, among politicians, between parents, in organisations to which minority groups belong and among enthusiasts for the system as it is. Blame for the relationship not being a closer one is often placed on an invisible other, so to speak. Parents belonging to minority groups tend to distrust the school and the educational system as a whole, due partly to difficulties in gaining access to knowledge concerning the system itself. The result can be one of mutual accusation, each party placing the blame for the lack of a close working relationship on the other. The parents often consider themselves rejected in the roles they endeavour to assume and feel there is a neglect of what they have to offer, as though this were in a different “currency” (cf. Vincent, 2000) than that of society at large. They may feel that their culture, norms and values are considered by the major part of society to be of little value. Parents experiencing matters in this way may be reluctant to cooperate with the school in a deeper sense, partly because of failing to adequately understand the norms and values of the schools.

Distrust of minority parents by teachers in urban schools

In analyzing the conceptions, assessments and intentions of the teachers regarding their pupils of immigrant background, Lahdenperä (1997) found that most of them regarded the parents as being the root of the difficulties teachers had with the children. Her findings agree with those of Stigendal’s (2000) study in Malmö. The teachers in his study claimed there was nothing wrong with the school and the teachers, the problems they faced being due to the children and their families. In Lahdenperä’s study the fathers were the group whose behaviour they considered to deviate most sharply from the norms accepted in the school and the group that most readily became the object of antipathy, discrimination and prejudice. The mothers were found to far more readily attract the sympathy of the teachers, although they were sometimes

described as being malicious and ignorant. Various of the teachers felt that the parents were in need of knowledge of what they as parents should provide their children with, their regarding the parents as either being too strict or as lacking in a mind of their own. The basic assumption common to all of these negative judgments appeared to be that the parents were not satisfactory as parents and that the children's problematical behaviour in school reflected the deficiencies of their parents.

Lahdenperä considers a complementary approach toward the parents here to mean one's regarding the education and bringing up of a child as involving a partnership in which parents from a different ethnic group are treated with equality in discussions concerning the child, its being important that one should not be fixated on a single model or strategy conceived as applying to all children, regardless of their situation, an openness for different types of bicultural educational strategies being important. It is argued that in efforts to improve the school performance of children, teachers should respect the parents, who are an important factor in motivating the child, and that communication and collaboration with the parents involve not simply questions of democratic influence, but the whole question of the child's success generally and the child's continued possibilities in society.

In reading all of the teachers' negative statements regarding the parents in the Lahdenperä's study, the attitudes toward the parents that the school personnel showed in this way should somehow be questioned, which are also reflective of the relationship between the parents and the school generally and the teachers' moral judgments concerning the parents. What relational patterns and what manner of thinking are reflected here? Is it primarily a matter of the school personnel's negative assessment of parents in general or of parents who are immigrants? One matter Lahdenperä discusses is the compensatory role the school can play, such that the school compensates for parental deficiencies and negative socioeconomic conditions with which the child may be surrounded. The idea is that children should be given basically equal opportunities in school, regardless of their family origin or other background factors.

What promotes and what hinders parental involvement in a Swedish context?

How the parents and the school should work together to achieve a mutual understanding and to build trust is a matter of setting up an action plan, since parental involvement is about getting both teachers and parents to work together and developing certain activities that benefit the child's school-work and social development as well. Various persons in Sweden who have worked closely with parents in the areas described are (Kärrby & Flising, 1983; Flising et al., 1996; Lund & Nilsson, 1995). The teachers they interviewed felt that how well cooperation could function is highly dependent upon the parents. The results obtained are examined in some details below.

Attempts to involve parents in the work of the school have not always led to close cooperation between the parents and the school personnel. This suggests that establishing close collaboration between the school and the parents can be a difficult task. The starting point for close cooperation of this sort can be said to be a strong interest on the part of the parents in their children's education and in their being happy and contented in school. If there is a lack of such interest on the part of parents, it is primarily this that one needs to concentrate upon, informing the parents of the work the school and of its importance for their children. Such information can increase the parents' interest and involvement in the work of the school, which in turn can help the children do better in school, and lead to the teachers receiving greater support from the parents, feeling more encouraged and developing new perspectives toward their work. It has been found that parents as a group can have a strong influence both high up in the school hierarchy and in relation to the work of the individual teacher. It has been shown, for example, that the closing of various schools threatened with being closed has been prevented by strong involvement the parents have shown (Flising, 1995).

Although it is expected that the parents will support the work of the school, it is regarded as the responsibility of the personnel to see to it that collaboration with the parents functions as well as possible. The parental involvement required needs to develop in a process involving

trust, the taking of responsibility and decision making. Trusting each other requires that one have knowledge of each other. It gradually develops on the basis of actions carried out by both. Knowing that the other will behave in the manner one expects creates a sense of security. In working together, it is important that one have goals, suggestions of how the goals can be achieved, an exchange of information and a follow-up of what has been accomplished. For this reason, discussions of what one feels the school should provide the pupils with and how this can be accomplished are important. Teachers and parents should discuss any differences there are between them in their norms and their views generally (Flising et al., 1996)

Failure in collaboration is often due to the respective parties differing in how they conceive the goals being aimed at, which in turn can reflect a failure to discuss such matters adequately. If the conveying of information between the school and the home is one-sided, proceeding only from the school to the home, there is the danger that the parents will become passive and get the impression of their being unable to influence the school in any way. How the parents are treated is decisive for how cooperation can develop. It is important that professional and parental roles be respected, that teachers be able to explain and motivate their manner of working, and that the parents feel they are needed. There are many activities that schools can provide which run the danger of creating difficulties for certain persons, such as for those afraid to express themselves in a large group or those with speech or other linguistic difficulties. Also, parents of children who have difficulties in school may avoid contact with other parents because of being afraid that they will be regarded by the others as being losers (Kärrby & Flising, 1983; Flising et al., 1996). One can say that the holding of successful meetings with parents is only possible if both those in charge and the personnel make a conscious attempt to make intelligent use of the resource which the parents represent.

The parents often interpret criticism of their children by the teachers as criticism of themselves, not only for what they have done or not done as parents but also criticism of themselves as persons (Flising et al. 1996). In connection with cooperation between teachers and parents, there is often a great deal of uncertainty present on both sides. The un-

certainty may be based in no small measure on the fact of having invested so much of oneself in the child in question. If a teacher employs vague terms, this can put a parent on the defensive, and a teacher may also attempt to make use of a position of power to hide his or her sense of uncertainty (ibid).

Parental involvement requires a sense of trust. If this trust is violated, it may be difficult to repair. Factors that can serve to make a teacher trustworthy for the parent are those of acting in a responsible way, of being concerned about and wishing well for the pupil, of dealing with problems directly and of doing a professional job generally (Nytell, 1996). It is important that roles be clarified. Teachers, for example, are teachers of the children, not buddies of the children's parents. The teachers often feel that the parents fail to take full advantage of their opportunities to influence the work of the school. They feel the parents place too much trust in the competence of the teachers and do not experience a sufficient need of trying to influence them in some way. The teachers' having a positive attitude toward collaboration with the parents and a genuine belief in the parents' knowledge and ability can be seen as extremely important (ibid). One can also note that teachers' views regarding contacts with the parents change with the age of the pupils. Up to the sixth grade, teachers generally tend to regard parents' support of them in very positive terms and to consider the parents' interest in their children's schoolwork to be strong, whereas teachers of grades seven to nine often complain of limited support from the parents (Kärrby & Flising, 1983).

Promoting parental involvement—an international review

Developing an effective program aimed at getting parents in general and minority parents in particular closely involved in the work of the school requires careful planning and is best done by a team of well-qualified persons with thorough knowledge of the school and of the parents' situation. Epstein (1995, 2001) suggests that a school should take the following steps to promote close working relationships between parents and educators:

1. *Create an action team*: consisting of parents, teachers, administrators, and students. “The action team takes responsibility for assessing present practices, organizing options for new partnerships, implementing selected activities, evaluating next steps, and continuing to improve and coordinate practices” (Epstein, 1995 p. 708). Creating an action team in an urban school means relying on the bi- or multilingual teachers in the school to act as home-school liaisons together with the rest of the schoolteachers for developing a programme that meets the needs of the minority parents (cf. Bastiani, 1997).
2. *Obtain funds or other forms of support*: “Funds may be available from state, and local programs that support parental involvement. “Support from the head is necessary to allow time for team members to meet, plan, and conduct the activities that are selected for each type of involvement” (Epstein, 1995, p. 708).
3. *Identify starting points*: “The action team needs to address the strengths of the current partnership, the changes needed, the expectations that exist, the sense of the community that is found, and the links to various goals” (ibid).
4. *Develop a three-year plan*: “The three-year outline shows how all school/family/community connections will be integrated into one coherent program of partnership that includes activities for the whole school community, activities to meet the special needs of children and families, activities to link to the district committees and councils, and activities conducted in each grade level” (ibid).
5. *Continue with planning and with the ongoing work*: “Each year, the action team updates the school’s three-year outline and develops a detailed one-year plan for the coming year’s work” (ibid).

Henderson and Berla (1994) note that effective efforts by the school to get parents involved should be comprehensive in nature, reaching out to all families, not only those most easily contacted, engaging the parents in all major roles, from tutoring to governance. Involvement of the parents should be well planned, with specific goals being set and there

being clear communication regarding what is expected of each of them, special training or courses for both educators and parents also being provided. Making long-term arrangements and achieving long-term commitment rather than simply having short-term projects is also important. Vincent (2000) describes four roles possible for the parents.

1. *Supporter/learner*: supporting the work of professionals and adopting their concerns and approaches.
2. *Consumer*: encouraging school accountability and high standards.
3. *Independent*: maintaining only minimal contact with the school.
4. *Participant*: getting involved both in the governance of the school and in the education of the child (Vincent, 2000, p. 2).

Knowing that parents differ from one another as persons in the roles they play as well as in their way of getting involved, it would be best to adjust the strategies and approaches taken up to get as many of the parents as possible actively involved in the work of the school.

Teachers training in parental involvement

Problems of parental involvement are serious ones for educators generally, especially for those who work in economically distressed or socially disadvantaged communities. Research by Tomlinson (1992) and Crozier (2000) concerning Bangladeshi parents showed these parents to not be well informed about educational practices there. Tomlinson felt that the education of teachers should include courses in which they learned how best to gain contact with ethnic minority parents and to help these parents, also those not easily contacted, to become more closely involved in the work of the school. The accounts Bunar (2001) collected of how teachers experienced minority parents bear witness to the teachers often lacking any in-depth knowledge of the cultural background involved, their being able to do little more than try out very general strategies for getting the parents more closely involved. This can readily lead to mutual misunderstandings and to a lack of trust for each other on the part of both the teachers and the parents. At the same time, the parents—despite their marginalization and possible stigmatization—are still those who can understand their children best (Epstein

1995, 2000; Ballen & Moles, 1994). Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) has also emphasised the importance of the training and professional development of teachers in ways of getting the parents more actively involved. Ballen and Moles (1994) describe certain basic elements that such training could include:

Schools and school systems seldom offer staff any formal training in collaborating with parents or in understanding the varieties of modern family life. There are myriad ways for families to become more involved in schools, and training can help teachers and other school staff change the traditional images of contacting parents only when a student is in trouble or when the school needs help with a bake sale. Teacher training programs can include general information on the benefits of and barriers to parental involvement, information on awareness of different family backgrounds and lifestyles, techniques for improving two-way communication between home and school, information on ways to involve parents in helping their children learn in school and outside, and ways that schools can help meet families' social, educational, and social service needs (*ibid*, p. 28).

A lack of training for teachers in how to develop a close working relationship with the parents is a clear hindrance to such a relationship developing. As a teacher myself, I could at least speak for a school in which I used to work, pointing out that no courses or conferences were held to provide knowledge or insight concerning how one could best reach out to the parents of the schoolchildren, despite there being considerable need for knowledge of this type.

Summary

Creating the Swedish welfare system involved considerable economic, political and social change. When compulsory education became fully established, children's lives were increasingly affected by different professional groups or experts. The line of demarcation between what was private and what was public was also displaced, a sense of public responsibility for children and their education increasing.

When school attendance became compulsory, children as a group became obvious in a new sense, at the same time as the basis was created for a longer period of childhood of a character that differed in many ways from what it had been earlier. This aroused the interest of many professional and expert groups, all of whom considered themselves called upon in some way to influence children or contribute to their upbringing in some way. New psychological findings and an increased interest in psychology generally also played a role here. Questions not only of who should best bring up children but also of how they should be brought up and the goals that upbringing was to achieve were discussed.

Concerning parental involvement in Sweden and the relationship there between the home and the school, Erikson states that during the period between the early 1940s and the late 1950s emphasis was placed on the partnership between the home and school and on the separation model. During the 1960s the idea of the school's reaching out was established and parents were said to be better informed than earlier about things that happened to their child in school. Erikson argues that this period was dominated by the school's creating boundaries and keeping the parents at a distance, the participation of parents being minimal. Tensions arose between the partnership and the separation model and the parents were to play a supportive role, but only at a distance. During the 1970s the user-participation model was introduced by SIA (SOU 1974: 53), which proposed that governing bodies should be established. During both the 1970s and 1980s, the separation model could exist side by side with the partnership model. During the 1990s, the parents were given the role of consumers and were provided the opportunity of sending their children to the school they found to best fulfill their expectations. According to Erikson, the four models existed side-by-side during this period and were actively involved in the relationship that was formed between the school and the parents. He argues that in the mid-1990s both the partnership and separation models were very much accepted. The introduction of governing bodies in 1996 tended to easily exclude many parents, especially in schools with a high proportion of minority ethnic parents. Persson and Tallberg-Broman (2002) found that the new professional role of teachers as being more involved in issues of a child's upbringing was important, especially for dealing

with parents who failed to become actively involved in their children's schooling. Relatively little has been done to gain a better understanding of the home-school relationship in Sweden generally and of the situation of ethnic minority parents in particular. The parents' lack of knowledge of the school system and of educational practices can prevent their approaching the school and getting involved in the schooling of their children. Much of the research presented earlier focuses on the hindrances involved and the strategies for overcoming them. Epstein (2001) suggests six ways in which teachers can structure their work in a manner promoting parental involvement in the school:

1. *Parenting*: providing programs and services supporting the efforts of the family.
2. *Communicating*: establishing mechanisms that foster effective communication networks between the home and the school.
3. *Volunteering*: recruiting and organizing volunteer activities that support the learning of the children.
4. *Learning at home*: helping the parents provide support for the children doing the homework they are given as well as supporting the parents from outside in their efforts to assist their children academically and socially at home.
5. *Decision-making*: endeavouring to increase the level of parental participation in school governance and school advocacy.
6. *Collaborating with the community*: identification and integration of community-based resources that can strengthen school programmes, and supporting parents in their efforts to help their children in learning effectively (Epstein, 2001).

According to Epstein, promoting close working relationships involves creating an action team consisting of parents, teachers and school administrators, obtaining funds or other forms of support, identifying the starting points and developing at least a three-year plan with clear goals for the work. This normative structure may thus not be easy to put into practice. Three main areas can be said to be of importance for gaining an understanding of parental involvement in an urban school:

1. Swedish school history, which has been dominated by a low degree of belief on the part of the school in the ability of parents to bring up their children in a proper and effective way so that they become democratically inclined and well-functioning citizens, as the very limited amount of research in this area suggest. It is often argued that parents need to be informed of their important role and to be educated in performing it, at the same time as there is often a lack of any genuine confidence in their ability to live up to this task.
2. The integration issues often raised when speaking of parental involvement in urban schools.
3. The parents' migration process, their dreams and their aspirations.

The present study focuses on minority parents, who are Arabic-speaking, a group which is not often discussed in details. A major aim of my study is to contribute to a better understanding of parent-school relations in an ethnic minority and urban context, especially in connection with Arabic speaking parents. Parents with a background other than Swedish may have a very limited network of persons with whom they have close contact in the new country and may possess cultural capital of a somewhat different currency than the Swedish one, which can be a hindrance to relations between them and school developing in a positive way. In the next section, Bourdieu's theories of capital, habitus, field, symbolic power and doxa, which constitute tools used in analyzing the data gathered, will be taken up.

3 Theoretical tools

Questions of minority parental involvement in the work of the school concerns issues that can be analyzed making use of Bourdieu's theories of capital, habitus, symbolic violence and power, the field, agents and the notion of doxa. In Bourdieu's work, classes—or socioeconomic groups, habitus, symbolic power and all forms of capital—play an important role in analyzing issues of parental involvement in urban schools. Bourdieu's theoretical perspective has also been applied to other forms of social groupings and classification, to inequalities and to conflicts in modern society, as well as to questions of sexual equality, ethnicity and international relations (Grenfell, 2004). In that which follows I take up first a summary of Bourdieu's most central concepts concerned with capital, and also endeavour to interpret some of his concepts that I use as theoretical tools in analysing the results of my empirical study. Secondly, I discuss the concepts of social capital in relation to his concept of field as well as other forms of capital. Various authors who have provided further ideas concerning the notion of social capital are also included here. The relation between ethnicity and social capital is of considerable importance in the present study, with respect to minority ethnic parents generally and Arabic-speaking parents in particular. Finally, a summary is provided of the use of these various theoretical tools in the study.

The overall aim of the study is to investigate what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in an urban school, using a critical approach. The sections that follow take up the theoretical tools used in the analysis of the empirical material. As was discussed in the previous chapter, getting parents involved in the work of the school has undergone a variety of changes in course of the Swedish school history. Different groups of experts that battle with each other here can be linked in Bourdieu's terms to agents. In the home-school mediation project to be introduced in chapter 7 in which the teachers and the parents participate, a form of social change takes place between the home and the

school, one that has the aim of enhancing parental involvement. A space is provided in which the parents, the home-school mediators and the teachers interact. They differ in the types of habitus they possess and in the forms of capital that are produced and reproduced. Some of these persons match and others do not, depending on the amount of cultural and social capital they possess and their habitus. The parents' degree of involvement and influence in school could depend in part on their interaction with the school and the amount of power each side possesses.

Bourdieu's conceptual system

According to Grenfell (2004), Bourdieu describes his theory as representing constructivist structuralism or structuralist constructivism, the two main concepts that characterises Bourdieu's theory thus being structure and constructivism. Of the more specific concepts Bourdieu employs the best known are those of habitus, field and social, economic, cultural and symbolic capital. If one adds to this the concepts of taste, life style, language, education, and agent, as well as the adjectives of accepted, rejected and unknown, the theory and the social spaces involved become more differentiated. Bourdieu has also written about the relations between structure and agency. The account of Bourdieu's idea in the sections that follow is based primarily on the following references. (Bourdieu, 1977, 1984, 1986, 1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1991, 1993, 1998, 1999, 2000; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). Various authors who have used Bourdieu's work or developed it further, such as Broady (1998) are also taken up.

Capital

In general terms, capital consists of symbolic and material assets. Bourdieu (1986) distinguishes between different forms of capital: economic capital, social capital, cultural capital, and symbolic capital.

Economic capital

Economic capital consists of material assets (Bourdieu, 1986). Income is seen as an expression of socioeconomic acceptance (class). A high income allows the individual to spend comparatively lower sums of money on such basic needs as those of food, clothing and living quarters. As income increases, so too does the quality of things one is able to pay for, as well as the possibilities for having things just as one wants in terms of free-time, vacation activities and travel.

Social capital¹⁸

Social capital consists of such matters as family ties, one's circle of friends and acquaintances, contacts with schoolmates from earlier, membership in organisations involving close contacts, and the like. Measuring social capital is more difficult than measuring economic capital. Having or not having a job affects one's social capital, just as one's engagement in social events does as well. Having a low level of social capital can be interpreted as a sign of isolation or of being an outsider, a situation which can be created too by having recently moved into a new living area (Bourdieu, 1986).

Cultural capital

Cultural capital consists of such matters as use of legitimate forms of language and being readily accepted in cultivated circles. It involves being engaged in such matters as attending exhibitions and concerts of classical music and being a connoisseur of good wines, as opposed to being a consumer of popular and mass culture. It can be exemplified by going to the theatre, visiting museums and by the fact of owning a sizeable library at home. The type of sections of a city one tends to visit and the types of places one tends to go to, can likewise be indicative of the social capital one possesses (Bourdieu, 1986).

¹⁸ A further discussion concerning the notion of social capital is found in a separate section in this chapter

Symbolic capital

Any type of asset serves as *symbolic capital* in those contexts in which value is assigned to it. At an individual level, an academic degree or title tends to be an asset, but there can be reservations regarding this (Bourdieu, 1991). For example, having an engineering degree can readily be seen as constituting symbolic capital within industry but would scarcely be seen as doing so within the literary field. Are there assets comparable to those within the parent-school partnership? A parent-teacher association can serve to indicate a form of partnership that can assign symbolic capital. The parent-school association can generate formal and informal contacts between the parents and the teachers. Symbolic capital can represent the accumulation of social capital and of various other types of capital, but they are not assigned symbolic value before their presence is made known (Bourdieu, 1984). The other forms of capital involved then become invisible (regardless of the extent to which they are present and the relationship they bear to one another) (ibid). Symbolic capital must thus be made public in some way and be assigned symbolic value by one or more observers (Broady, 1998).

Habitus

Habitus is described as the disposition to act which individuals acquire in the earliest stages of socialisation and which they consolidate by their subsequent choices in life (Bourdieu, 1993). Habitus refers to more than norms and values, because it is embedded within everyday actions, much of which are sub-conscious, hence the use of the term disposition (Bourdieu, 1990a). Habitus is also a set of capabilities (dispositions) one has for being able to act, think and orient oneself effectively within the social world. These capabilities are attained gradually through a learning process (experiences gained in childhood being of particular importance here). Habitus has the character of being durable and long-lasting because of its characteristics being integrated with one another. Since the behavioural patterns involved are tenacious, habitus can be regarded as a personified form of capital (ibid). It is a matter of both body and soul (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Habitus—or a system of dispositions providing one the possibility of acquiring characteristics that were not needed from the start—becomes an arrangement in terms of which certain positions in social space are associated with tastes of a

particular sort. The tastes characterizing the one category of individuals always involve the dislike of the tastes of some other category of persons (Bourdieu, 1984).

Habitus is also connected with the *lifestyle space*, its occupying a position somewhere between the social space and the lifestyle space, the latter having a greater degree of mobility (Bourdieu, 1984). A social position—or life style—achieves its meaning when seen in relation to other positions. The *social space* is thus a system of relations between the positions in society that different groups have assumed (classes, subclasses and occupational groups, for example) (ibid). Social space can be considered as a space consisting of possibilities that are not completely static in their nature (Bourdieu, 1993). Together, these two spaces constitute the core of the distinction involved in social and economic inequalities. Habitus can be said to be the capital provided by one's habits in the sense that such matters as a person's manner of speech and articulation, of standing and walking, and of thinking and feeling are incorporated into his or her body and soul. The human body thus serves to express a person's life history (Bourdieu, 1990a). Accordingly, one can ask whether the combined effect of school and home can produce a history which is structured, one which structures the person accordingly. Habitus refers to a set of dispositions created and shaped by the interaction between objective structures and personal histories, including one's experiences and understanding of reality, lifestyle, taste and the like (Bourdieu, 1984). The habitus of both teachers and parents may differ since parents of Arabic background have a personal and group history quite different from the majority of teachers in school. The history of a person forms its habitus. This can be matched or mismatched when two or more individuals with different histories endeavour to establish a relationship.

Institutional habitus

In order to understand the relation between home and school and in particular to answer the question of why the parental involvement in urban school districts encounters certain difficulties, I have found it useful to employ the concept of institutional habitus (Reay, 1998b, 2004a). The notion of institutional habitus draws strongly on Bourdieus

work and on the notion of habitus as mentioned in the previous section. Reay et al. (2001) note that habitus produces action, but because it confines possibilities to those feasible for the social groups the individual belongs to, much of the time those actions tend to be reproductive rather than transformative. What is central in Bourdieu's notion of habitus makes one think of two basic ideas. The one is that in every society there is a need of classes and groups of people to reproduce themselves, such as parents endeavouring to become closely involved in the work of the school. In order to become involved, the parents need to reproduce a habitus that is accepted by the majority of the teachers, if they are to be accepted as real partners. The other basic idea is that in every society there is a dominant class of people that control access to the educational institution of the school. Bourdieu attributes this to the dominance of cultural capital, which legitimizes the maintenance of the status and power of the controlling classes (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). The dominant classes have symbols such as language, culture and artifacts that enable them to subjugate other social classes (Bourdieu, 1991). The more symbolic capital there is that accumulates (as the sum of the social, economic and cultural capital that contributes to it), the more power symbolic capital has. This can be applied to the case of minority parents of Arabic background being faced with teachers in the school who possess a higher level of symbolic capital due to their possession of other forms of capital. Drawing on the work of Reay (1998b) and Reay et al. (2001), institutional habitus can be understood as the impact of a cultural group or social class on an individual's behaviour as it is mediated through an organisation (Reay et al., 2001).

The significance of organisations is apparent in Bourdieu's work. He viewed the education system as the primary institution through which class order is maintained (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), through educational institutions favouring the knowledge and experience of the dominant social groups (e.g. the teachers at a school in a disadvantaged district) to the detriment of other groups (e.g. parents of the children in those schools). Hence, the education system is socially and culturally biased, this being played out in the relations between the teachers and the parents (Lareau, 1987). Institutional habitus is a significant variable that can interact with class, gender and race to impact on the relation-

ship between the school and the parents in a disadvantaged district. According to Reay (1998b, 2004a) and Reay et al., (2001), institutional habitus should be understood as more than the culture of the educational institution; it refers to relational issues and priorities which are deeply embedded and sub-consciously in a form of practice. This is possible since educational institutions are able to determine what values, language and knowledge are to be regarded as legitimate, their ascribing success and awarding qualifications on this basis. This process ensures that the values of the dominant class are perpetuated and that individuals who are inculcated in the dominant culture are those most likely to be assigned importance and be taken for granted, the parents own values and norms being readily ignored. In the words of (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127), one “encounters a social world of which it is a product, it is like a ‘fish in water’: it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted” (ibid, p. 127). Conversely, parents from a non-traditional background may thus feel like ‘a fish out of water’, and thus return to their familiar habitus. I would argue that if an institutional habitus is inclusive and accepting of differences, it does not prioritize or place special value on one set of characteristics, but rather celebrates and prizes diversity and differences, parents from diverse backgrounds finding greater acceptance of their own practices and knowledge and respect for them, and this in turn promoting higher levels of parental involvement in the work of the school. In order to apply the concept of institutional habitus to issues relating to the home-school relationship, it is necessary to develop, explore and understand different institutional practices that can impact on the extent to which parents feel that they are accepted or rejected.

Field

A field is characterised by movement or in other words by battles being fought for positions in social space (Bourdieu, 1993). This space is differentiated and structured. It is in encountering this structured space that habitus is formed. The field includes professionals (e.g. teachers and school administrators), persons in close personal contact with each other (e.g. families, social networks, friends, relatives) and political organisation (administrative institutions, political agencies). According to Bourdieu these are all examples of fields: “fields are ‘networks’,

‘configurations’, ‘objectifiable structured spaces’, ‘have specific interest and stakes’, and include states of ‘power relations’, ‘share common interest’” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 87; Grenfell, 2004, p. 27). The battles in a field take place between different persons, groups or institutions that compete with one another. The battles have a tendency to become institutionalised through different individuals or groups having a common belief and in the possibilities a field possesses, which readily leads to the field being closed off and developing autonomy of its own (Bourdieu, 1993). It is within the field that various forms of capital can be transformed into other forms of capital and also into symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). For example, the education one has can be cashed in to obtain work or economic capital of some other form. A field is thus a structured time space in which various positions and their relation to one another are determined by the distribution of different forms of capital and of resources. Battles in the field can concern such issues as the right to adjudge quality, the making of conclusive statements regarding value and values, and performing classifications of various types (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Agent

Agents can be described in terms of the different types of people in the field (teachers, social workers at the school, and school administrators) whom the parents of the children come in contact with. They are involved in battles in which they endeavour to retain their position and the attention the field directs at them. According to Bourdieu (1993) agents do not act in a vacuum, but rather in concrete situations governed by a set of objective social relations. A change in the positions of the agent necessarily entails a change in the field’s structure. The greater the symbolic capital of an agent is – or the better his/her position is within social space – the greater the agent’s possibilities are of exploiting the differences and distinctions within the system to his/her own advantage and of retaining the gains achieved in terms of appearing important, successful, wise, powerful or whatever (Bourdieu, 1991). The agent—a politician or a governmental official, for example, or a person in any other appropriate position—serves as a medium between a group and its members. The agent has status and can declare or imply that the world, or the particular part of it involved, conforms with the conception he or she has. Possessing a certain status and power po-

sition contributes to the person's symbolic capital and protects the person from a loss in assigned value (Bourdieu, 1993).

Agents can occupy a variety of different positions or can create new positions, and can engage in competition for control of the interests or resources that are specific to the field of question. Parents, teachers, pupils, social workers and administrators of various sorts can compete in the field encompassed by using their different types of capital and power position. Since the interests of the parents and the teachers are not material or economic ones, their competition may not be directed at concrete and consciously calculated ends. Bourdieu developed the concept of symbolic power in which the authority in such a situation often involves prestige and is purely symbolic in character.

Symbolic power and authority

In Bourdieu's (1986) view, the greater the symbolic capital is (and the higher the position) that one has, the greater the symbolic power one possesses. How is symbolic power achieved then? The answer according to Bourdieu is that it is achieved through education and common sense. Bourdieu sees the educational system as producing a cultural monopoly that nurtures a *homo linguisticus*. The educational system is seen as unifies a field and creating consensus, common sense and normality with the help of science (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Symbolic power is found in everyday routines (Bourdieu, 1986, 1993). It becomes an invisible power through these routines coming to be regarded as legitimate and lawful. Their appearing both reasonable and normal is necessary for such power to be assigned to them. The legitimation of truth is connected with (institutionalized) controversies within an (autonomic) field. The controversies concern the creation of legitimate definitions of things. Establishing boundaries and lines of demarcation is to establish regions. Agents—serving as representatives of a group—can create the identity of different people by giving them names and creating classifications of them (Bourdieu, 1991). The assigning of names such as those of minority parents or immigrant residential areas and schools is also a form of classification.

Authority, according to Bourdieu, can come from outside by way of language and also in the form of appointments or of one's being honoured in some way (Bourdieu, 1991). The giving of names and designations can also be of very considerable importance as a rite of passage. The different phases of a ritual—or perhaps better yet of consecration, such as rites connected with legitimization and institutionalization—are aimed at providing the authority needed to give different things names and to create (dictatorial) boundaries with the help of techniques of rejection and disavowal.

Symbolic violence

The symbolic capital and power that an agent possesses—in the form of accumulated prestige or honour can be exploited (misused) by means of symbolic power (involving the giving of names to things or to people or the classifying of them, for example) by the agent so as to achieve either the acceptance or the rejection of other social phenomena possessed of either higher or lower symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1986, 1991). An example involves the case of referring to the area in which a group of parents live as being a disadvantaged area and using this as a basis for legitimizing various measures that are to be undertaken. This involves the risk of problems found in the area which has been referred to being associated with persons residing there through simply the fact of its being there that they live.

Those groups which Bourdieu consider to possess the highest level of symbolic power today, and with this the possibility of employing symbolic power, are politicians and journalists, who if they are in alliance with each other can have a still stronger influence, such as through stereotyping used as pedagogical instrument in the media (Bourdieu, 1993).

The notion of doxa

In considering the educational system's power of creating consensus, Bourdieu uses the concept of doxa (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). According to Bourdieu, the field is divided in terms of hierarchies en-

deavouring to establish and reproduce cultural consensus by means of education often aimed at the furtherance of certain norms and values (ibid). The portion of the public that contributes to the recognition of a field and of its norms tends to be critical to the continued existence of the cultural field in its current form (ibid). The degree to which knowledge is made public and is made accessible to people generally is thus relevant to the hierarchy involving the culture of minority groups versus the majority culture, as in the case in the present study.

According to Bourdieu, knowledge of the fact that groups opposed to each other battle here for something they have in common and which thus becomes doxa—or that which is usual being taken for granted—helps one understand how controversies develop and continue within a given field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). In Bourdieu's view, what is usual becomes dominant and nurtures the symbolic power which, by use of symbolic force establishes what is to be regarded as usual through training people to perceive that which is regarded to be illegitimate. Stated in brief, what is a normal profits from what is unnatural. Using the notion of doxa, Bourdieu develops other related terms, those of *orthodoxy* and the *heterodoxy* (p. 170). Doxa is an accepted subtext of how the world works in a given field, so natural and unspoken that its absence is “unthinkable” (p. 170) and is thus not available for discussion or for any opinion regarding it being expressed.

When the doxa becomes questioned through some crisis, the result is what Bourdieu calls *heterodoxy* (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Heterodoxy occurs when one raises issues and disagrees with the mainstream assumptions regarding the way things should be. The emergence of heterodoxy means that the doxa has been apprehended. Bourdieu writes, “the dominated classes have an interest in pushing back the limits of doxa and exposing the arbitrariness for the taken for granted; the dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of doxa or, short of this, of the establishing in its place the necessarily imperfect orthodoxy” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, pp. 168-169). The orthodoxy may be an imperfect substitute since it represents a sort of lifting of the societal curtain to reveal the hidden working order. The emergence of heterodoxy draws attention to the ways in which domination is structured through social institutions, cultural norms and values that are

taken for granted in daily life. Heterodoxy also emerges when a disadvantaged group notices the behind-scenes players whose interests dominate the show, such as parents getting involved in school and coming to have better insight concerning what is going on in the school their children attend. Heterodoxy, according to Bourdieu, is necessary for the awakening of political consciousness (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 170). The home-school mediation project, the outcomes of which are presented in chapter 7, is a sort of heterodoxy, a way of making certain inferences concerning the doxa, or what was taken for granted by the teachers and the parents, matters which are revealed so that they are no longer hidden from both parties. The home-school mediation project could thus awake the political consciousness of teachers and of those possessed of power. The project could also awake class-consciousness within the parent group which could also lead to dissatisfaction and call forth a transformation and possibly produce a vanguard position.

The notion of social capital in education

Social capital also concerns resources linked to membership in a particular social group. The social network that membership in the group involves, provides a person's access to the group's resources and to the social, cultural, human, symbolic and economic advantages that group membership generates. Each individual belongs to some group, and everyone belongs at least to an extent to a variety of different groups. Membership in one group may take precedence over membership in another.

Husén (1999) and Coleman (1988) emphasize the need of parental involvement, especially in schools located in disadvantaged areas. They note that children with what is regarded as good social capital tend to do better in school, and also that the less opportunity parents are given to become closely involved in the education of their children, the greater the difficulties in school their children are likely to have. They stress the importance of the school and the parents cooperating in efforts to provide children as high quality of education as possible. They also consider there to be no clear borders between the responsibilities

of the school and of the home in ensuring that a child receives a good education. The success of children in school depends not only on their motivation and ability to understand their lessons, but also on what Husén et al. (1992) call “F-connections” (Family, Friends, Firms) (p. 124), by the latter term he means networks outside the realm of family and of friends). These represent the networks and the psychological support that a child can be said to need in order to get ahead readily in school.

Hanifan (1916) is said to have coined the concept of social capital, her defining it as good will, fellowship, sympathy, and social intercourse between the individuals and families who make up a social unit. She also declares that there is a need to be an accumulation of social capital before any constructive work can be done, such as community building by which she means that cooperation of any type between the family and the schools should be preceded by social capital building. Hanifan did a great deal of communitarian work and had much to do with schools and the community as a whole. She asserts that the individual is helpless socially if left to himself/herself and that if a member of a community comes in contact with other members of it, there is an accumulation of social capital. She also describes the need for people building networks, declaring that the community as a whole benefits from the cooperation of all its parts. When the people in a community have become acquainted with one another and have made it a habit to come together occasionally for entertainment, social intercourse and personal enjoyment, the social capital thus created can easily be directed in constructive directions, particularly with the help of skillful leadership.

Bourdieu’s work on social capital (e.g. Bourdieu & Wacqaunt, 1992) focuses on family membership and the relationship between the family and the broader social group, social capital being conceived as the resources generated by membership of both types and the relationships between them. The family, according Bourdieu, is the means by which social capital is created and is transmitted to future generations. He also regards social capital as being produced and maintained through the interaction between the individual and society, the latter being stratified

by social and economic inequalities. Bourdieu considers all forms of capital to be convertible. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as

The aggregate of actual and potential resources which are linked to possession of durable networks of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintances and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of collectivity owned capital (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 248).

Bourdieu views a social network as the product of investment strategies of individual or collective character, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that can be useful in the short or the long term (Bourdieu, 1986). Such relationships can be within a given neighbourhood, at the workplace, or between the parents and the school that their children attend, for example.

Coleman (1988), in contrast, defines social capital in terms of its function and what it does, rather than what it is, as in the case of Bourdieu. He states, “The function identified by the concept of social capital is the value of these aspects of the social structure to actors as resources that they can use to achieve their interests” (p. 101). Coleman is concerned with such questions as how social capital as a resource produced in people’s family relationships enables them to increase their human capital, this in turn enabling them to obtain economic rewards. His research on social capital also deals with how children’s educational achievement is driven by parental investment, which is then passed on to the community in the form of the generational transfer, which includes not only knowledge but also moral principles and norms. Coleman has a normative view concerning the notion of social capital. He sees it as public good, and hardly speaks of its having bad sides. He describes the public-good paradox as follows:

Public goods quality of most social capital means that it is in a fundamentally different position with respect to purposive action than are most of form of capital [...] Yet, because the benefits of actions that brings social capital into being are largely experienced by persons other than the actor, it is often not in his interest to bring it into being. The result is that most forms of social capital are created or destroyed as by-products of other activities. This social capital arises or disappears without anyone’s willing it into or out of being and is thus even less recognized and taken ac-

count of in social action than its already intangible character would warrant (Coleman, 1988, p. 118).

Coleman (1988) argues for the public good of social capital. He argues that social capital in religious catholic schools is greater than in either nonreligious private or public schools, this being due to the parents of the children in religious schools being more involved with the teachers than parents in other types of schools and to the parents knowing one another through church participation. The parents often have a thorough knowledge of their children's friends and of the other parents, through networks of this type they provide their children psychological and social support. Information is often easily spread between the parents during their church meetings, the school being kept closely informed.

Both Hanifan and Coleman are broadly functionalist in that they assume that interests can only be harmonized, supporting both the general theory of equilibrium and rational choice theory. Bourdieu in contrast, takes a conflict perspective and sees the accumulation of social capital as being related to other forms of capital, and the differential access to them as depending on the field and on the agents' own actions being invested in the producing of social capital, where power and history are highly relevant to the accumulation of social capital.

Putnam (1993), who has also been strongly involved with questions of social capital, conceives it partly in terms of "trust, norms and networks" (p. 137) which he regards as facilitating cooperation aimed at mutual benefit. He also takes a functionalist view and considers norms of trust and reciprocity as being resources that constitute a form of social capital. Putnam focuses on behaviours at the system level and is concerned with economic and political developments at a regional and a national level, a perspective which distinguishes his approach from that of Bourdieu and Coleman, even if the definition of social capital employed is basically the same for all three of them. Putnam simply formulates the concept of social capital on a broader scale.

Since Coleman and Putnam define social capital at the most general level, their definitions raise questions of how social capital produced in a particular social space can be aggregated to build social capital in a larger, more encompassing social space. In addition, such concepts as those of norms and trust, which are the heart of social capital and are considered as its main component, cannot be easily created and manipulated for collective benefit. Both of them place strong emphasis upon the positive consequences of social capital which makes them easily biased toward seeing good things as emerging from sociability, whereas indeed bad things are often associated with the behaviour of homo economicus (Portes, 2000). Portes identifies four negative consequences of social capital.

1. The social exclusion of outsiders, the same ties that bring together a group commonly enabling it as well to bar others, who do not belong to the network, from access to it.
2. Excess claims on group members, such that under some circumstances group or community closure prevents of a group from achieving its goals.
3. Restrictions on individual freedom can develop, such as the dilemma of community solidarity versus individual freedom.
4. Downward leveling norms: this is the situation in which people invest in bad networks, such as youth gangs, gambling rings. Such networks often have a solidarity which is not to the public good (Portes, 2000).

According to the authors, social capital can be to the public good, but this entails enormous efforts to keep networks that have been established functioning for long period of time for reasons which have been discussed above.

Ethnicity and social capital

Ethnicity is not a central concept in my thesis. The word ethnicity has long been discussed in the literature and has been given a variety of definitions (Rex & Guibernau, 1997), but certain characteristics these definitions involve, often tend, in my view to strengthen a severe otherness. I will not dwell on questions of whether ethnicity has reduced or

increased challenges and opportunities regarding the involvement of those who arrive in other countries that differ from the host country in terms of world views, history, culture, language, religion, cuisine, taste, appearances of the people, views on many questions and ways of doing things, all of which contribute to constructing the habitus of the individual. I will examine the relation between ethnicity and social capital as defined by the network of people basically sharing common norms and values, feeling obligated in many ways towards one another and having many expectations in common, this network serving as an information channel which those belonging to the network can communicate through (Coleman, 1988).

Ethnicity is often defined in terms of the belonging of people to a particular ethnic group which maintains certain characteristics on the part of its members. Weber (1997) defines an ethnic group as follows:

'Ethnic group' those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration [...] it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists [...] common language and the ritual regulation of life, as determined by shared religious beliefs, everywhere are conducive to feeling of ethnic affinity (Weber, 1997, pp. 20-21).

Ethnic groups often invest in protecting their own culture; religion and language through their membership in the different ethnic groupings or associations (cf. Giorgas, 2000). Social capital often exists in the relations between the parents, their children, and relatives, and in their relationship with different organisations in the community in a broader sense and within the ethnic group. Giorgas (2000) refers to a study in Australia concerning social capital within ethnic communities containing six different nationalities; Germans, Dutch, Hungarians, Poles, Italians and Greeks. She found that cultures that place greater emphasis on the family and are collectivist in nature, such as Greeks and Italians, are more likely to utilize social capital. In contrast, cultures that have an individualistic focus, such as the Germans and Hungarians, are more likely to under-invest in social capital.

Reay and Mirza (1997; 2005), in a study of supplementary schools¹⁹ organised by black women in London found, there to be enormous investment in social capital within this ethnic group. They investigated the establishment of the supplementary schools of this sort, in which most of those involved worked voluntarily, to be an important factor in improving the chances of upward mobility for black children. They regarded networks of this type based on ethnicity as providing a moral support with this group and as being a way of preserving the black cultural heritage. They described such supplementary schools as representing a school form in which parents belonging to ethnic minorities invested not only social capital but basically all the forms of capital. They also referred to activities run by voluntary religious ethnic minorities, such as Jewish and Muslim communities and churches. These were types of schools based on a particular ethnic background in which the culture, religion and language of the children were maintained to a very large degree and were made highly visible.

Reay introduces also the notion of emotional capital. She sees the mothers' involvement in their children's schooling as an emotional one as well. She defines emotional capital as: "Emotional capital is generally confined within the bounds of affective relationships of family and friends and encompasses the emotional resources you hand on to those you care about" (Reay, 2004b, p. 61). She asserts that the mothers experienced an extensive range of emotions in relation to their children's schooling. Guilt, anxiety and frustration, as well as empathy and encouragement were the primary motives of mothers' involvement. She claims that the mothers used up a lot of time and emotional energy to support their children.

Black Americans, for whom no appreciable State assistance was available, sometimes developed institutions of their own to pursue their collective interests (Caldas & Bankston, 2005). Black church congregations emerged, functioning as centers for black families. These congregations become important centers of social and political mobilisation, sharing information and providing help for those in need. Not only did the churches give birth to many institutions having an important role in

¹⁹Supplementary schools are after-school activities often arranged by parents in which children get remedial help and learn to preserve the language, culture, and religion of their parents.

the black community, such as schools, banks, and the like, but they also provided an academic arena for different activities, and encouraged young person with talent to embark upon musical, dramatic, and artistic careers. Black churches in the US became important sources of black social capital (ibid). The supplementary schools that Reay and Mirza (1997, 2005) referred to emerged in much the same way.

Summary

Bourdieu's concepts presented above are used to clarify both empirically and theoretically what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in an urban school. The relationship between Arabic parents and the school their children attend is investigated critically in a broad context. This area tends to be neglected in research. Whereas particular emphasis was often directed earlier at problems of working-class parents, the problems of ethnic minority parents are increasingly coming to the fore. In the present study, considerable use is made of Bourdieu's theory of capital, habitus, field, symbolic power and doxa, particularly in connection with barriers to parental involvement and approaches taken in efforts to enhance it. Various analytical tools are employed to help clarify what aspects of the data on parental involvement should be emphasised and to analyse the data with the aim of examining barriers to the involvement of parents in the work of the school, as well as a means of promoting the parents' involvement here. Use is made of earlier research on parental involvement in Sweden, the historical background and the nature of the relations between the parents and the school particularly in the case of ethnic minority parents. Use is also made of governmental school documents concerned with the school and with parental involvement specifically in the context of Malmoe's present-day situation involving problems encountered in an urban schools. My own background as a minority parent, a teacher and a researcher has contributed here to my understanding of such matters.

Various concepts that have already been defined are used throughout the thesis. In the concluding analysis I endeavour to provide a synthesis of what has been taken up, making use of these concepts. In making use of social capital as a tool for analysis, Bourdieu's more critical ap-

proach is combined with Coleman's and Putnam's more functional one. My approach to a heterogeneous area of this sort is close to that of Bourdieu, but in my role as a mediator I have been more concerned with the solution to problems rather than with criticism of the existing situation as such, my approach thus being a more functional one.

4 Methodologies

The construction of the research journey

Here I endeavour to provide the reader insight into the story of my research journey as it has changed over the different periods of time, depending upon the type of questions I have asked. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first draws mainly on the work of Thomas (1993) within the area of critical ethnography. The second section is devoted to a discussion of action research. The third section deals with an integrated model combining critical ethnography and participatory action research. Finally an account of the project concerned with school mediation and ethical issues connected with it are taken up.

The process of my research has consisted of two continuums. In part, it was of ethnographic character in which I attempted to gain a deeper understanding of what promotes and what hinders parents getting involved in the school their children attend. In part, it was of more critical character, my being involved in action concerned with efforts to get the parents understand the work of the school that their children attended and to become involved in its work. Parental involvement meant interaction between the different agents concerned (teachers, parents, children, school administrators and still others, such as researchers) differing in their habitus, capital and the power they possessed. As discussed in the previous chapter institutions of power lie behind the behaviour and the cultural meanings that are central to the construction and limitation of parental involvement, the conferring of legitimacy, and the steering of its routines. This power is symbolic and potentially violent in a way that relies on shared beliefs and ways of expressing them (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Symbolic violence can be resisted, according to critical ethnographers, “by displaying how it restricts alter-

native meanings that conceal the deeper levels of social life, create misunderstandings and thwarts action” (Thomas, 1993, p. 50).

I believe that a researcher who primarily aims at serving a dominant class has no real need of a dialogue with people generally, being primarily interested not in the reality with which they are faced but rather imposing some type of reality upon them, whereas the researcher who is devoted to serving people generally aims at engaging them in genuine dialogue (Reason & Bradbury, 2001). In line with this, I have tried to integrate participatory action research with a critical ethnographic approach. These approaches, which will be taken up in the sections that follow, have been used interchangeably. Attempting to integrate them provided an understanding of how ideology and epistemology, as well as knowledge and power, are bound together in close way (cf. *ibid*).

“We don’t want to be researched to death”

During the year 2002 and the stage in my research journey I had come to by that time, I met various parents to discuss with them what hindered and what promoted their involvement in the school their children attended. The parents had many ideas and suggestions. At the same time when I discussed with them my being a researcher and my wanting to understand parental involvement in the school, one of them interjected the remark “We don’t want to be researched to death”. The following field note illustrates the choice of the approaches I used. Both action and deep understanding of the issues were needed.

During the autumn term of 2002, parents were invited to school to discuss the relations generally between the parents and the school and how these could be improved. After I had introduced the aim of the meeting and of my study, one of the parents almost immediately objected when another parent said “there is a risk of being researched to death as an immigrant”. The objected parent had been interviewed more than six times by different researchers and community workers without any changes in his situation. Soon most of the other parents agreed with this first parent’s objections. They expressed a need to learn more about the school, the teachers and the educational practices and to come into closer contact with the school environment. A desire for action on the parents’ part be-

came obvious. They sought an opportunity to overcome their isolation from the school (my field note, 14 October, 2002).

If research is really to gain access to the reality of practical events and to base its theories upon that, it must respect and be attentive to participants and their needs. In my very early meetings with parents I realized that action is needed to obtain a deeper understanding of the opportunities of parental involvement in the school and of how to overcome factors working against it.

What is critical ethnographic?

Early in my research project I found myself nearly overwhelmed at times by large amounts of new information regarding different cultures that I tried to understand better. Simply staying within the confines of the school was not sufficient for gaining an adequate understanding of the world in which the parents lived. Being a teacher, I already knew basically how teachers in the school I was working in think and had certain knowledge of the assumptions already existing in the school and things taken for granted concerning parental involvement and parents who belong to ethnic minorities. It was the world of the parents that interested me primarily. To enter that world, something had to happen. I knew already that a conventional approach could fail to provide me a deeper understanding of what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in the school their children attended. The fact that the parents did not want to be researched to death expressed a critical perspective some of them had. Willis and Trondman (2000) argue that ethnography should be critical and that researchers have a variety of positions to choose between.

Considering the school in the current study as a social site would be to take a perspective often adopted by conventional ethnographers. Using such an approach regards parents as sense markers whose culture is captured and displayed in consensual view in the way it actually exists. The expressed goal of such studies is “to show how particular realities are socially produced and maintained through norms, rites, rituals and daily activities” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000, p. 34). What distinguishes

critical ethnography from conventional ethnography is not so much an act of criticism, but an act of critique in the sense that Thomas (1993) describes. Criticism is a form of complaint and is often associated with dissatisfaction with a given state of affairs, yet this does not necessarily mean that the person in question is interested in seriously challenging the situation he/she is currently living in. Whereas critique often tells us about how things are (Thomas, 1993) and that if one get a deeper understanding of the underlying sources of conditions, these could become better (ibid). Thomas also states that critique is iterative, moving back and forth between examining the assumptions and foundations of how things are, how they got that way, how things might be changed, and why we should care in the first place (Thomas, 1993).

Regarding the field notes cited earlier, I assume that the parents not wanting to be researched to death is not expressing a criticism in itself, it is more a call for action and some form of change in the conditions as they currently are. The parents also feel that little is happening with their lives. They express the need for some action to change their situation and to become more involved in the education of their children. Thomas notes that critical ethnography “begins from the premise that the structure and content of culture makes life unnecessarily nasty, brutish, and short for some people” (Thomas, 1993, p. 4). The parents met at the early stage of this study were open for change to happen in their lived situation rather than being researched in a conventional way.

If conventional ethnography often attempts to provide one with a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p. 7) of culture, the critical ethnographer is adopting a political goal of effecting change. Critical ethnography attempts to further such goals and find answers to how things should be developed and changed. The present study, though attempting to provide thick descriptions of what is going on, also seeks ways for parents to get involved and structures for this.

Critical ethnography

According to Thomas (1993) critical ethnography is conventional ethnography with a political purpose. It is not a theory, but is rather a perspective that provides fundamental images and metaphors and an understanding of the social world. Conventional ethnography assumes the status quo, it affirms the meanings that are assumed, even if alternatives may exist, and it seldom reveals the dominant assumptions of the research subjects or of the researcher (Thomas, 1993). Critical ethnography, in contrast, strives to unmask hegemony and to address oppressive forces (Thomas, 2001). “To understand any culture, we may have to begin by unchaining ourselves from our own assumptions and create new ones that correspond to the meanings of our subjects” (Thomas, 1993, p.12). According to Thomas unchaining ourselves from the assumptions we have taken for granted require an intellectual rebellion, as described in the quotation below:

Intellectual wilding is resisting domestication by identifying these illusions and questioning their necessity [...] Domestication leads not only to a form of benign ignorance, but also absolves us from certain kinds of social responsibility: Racism and sexism are things other people engage in, crime is a problem for police rather than partly a structural problem, and solutions to problems are the domain of experts and government, not individuals. We have no sense of the big picture that we feel is painted by somebody else’s cultural brush because we are not taught a critical consciousness [...] We are continually reminded of crime, poverty, war, homelessness, unemployment, and other social problems and, if we are lucky, they belong to somebody else [...] Researchers study things in isolation from their processes (Thomas, 1993, pp. 9-10).

As a critical ethnographer, one should “resist domestication” (Madison, 2005, p. 5) and take a walk on the wild side, as Thomas (1993, p. 9) describes it, which means that the researcher should use the skills, resources and privileges available to her/him to make things accessible to go deeper and to give voice to those subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach, moving from “what is” to “what could be” (Thomas, 1993, p. 20). The teachers might simply assume that working to involve parents in the school is the job of community workers and others involved in measures of this sort.

Critical approaches also involve the explicit recognition of the bias and subjectivity of the researcher, recognizing that those who are researched have the right to refer to reality as it is, to articulate how social reality functions, and to decide how issues are to be organized and defined (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). This essentially amounts to a de-privileging of the voice of the researcher, countering one of the major criticisms of traditional ethnographic work, that of researcher bias. Doing so can lead to a greater engagement of participants. The ontological and epistemological foundations of critical research also have specific implications for research methodology.

Empowerment

Forsberg, Hagquist and Starrin (1997) discuss empowerment as a model that mobilizes people through enabling them to help themselves and to play an active role in dealing with the tasks at hand. The solutions found to problems are often informal ones and can sometimes involve civil disobedience. The persons involved work together within the framework of a model of learning by doing. The relations between separate actors can be anywhere from emotional to emotionally neutral, but all of them work together, becoming strong as a group. In such a group it is the citizens of the local community who define the problems with which they are faced and discuss what needs to be done. Empowerment has the future as its goal and aims at giving those who take part the strength needed to succeed through active participation and democratic dialog (cf. Starrin, 1993). Critical ethnography studies the social situation of a marginal group and endeavour to find alternative ways of creating opportunities for participation within their communities (Thomas, 1993).

Critical ethnography is more than just the study of obviously oppressed or socially marginal groups, because researchers judge that all cultural members experience unnecessary repression to some extent. Critical ethnographers use their work to aid emancipatory goals or to negate the repressive influences that lead to unnecessary social domination of all groups. Emancipation refers to the process of separation from constraining modes of thinking or acting that limit perception of and action toward realizing alternative possibilities. Repression is the condition in which thought and action are constrained in ways that banish recognition of

these alternatives. Critical ethnography is simultaneously hermeneutic and emancipatory (Thomas, 1993, pp. 5-6).

According to Thomas (1993) and to Carspecken (1996) critical ethnography has a fundamental interest in emancipation and empowerment to engage the participant in autonomous action arising out of authentic, critical insights that are also facilitated by the researcher, in the social construction of human society. Although those who use critical ethnographic approaches speak of emancipation, empowerment, social change and a need for action, they rarely speak of how this social change is to be carried out in the field. They prefer to leave discussion of this to those engaged in social change, mainly action researchers. Action researches tend to take greater responsibility for social change. In the next section I will discuss the notion of action research and how it is used in this study.

An overview on action research

Although critical thinkers share a set of basic tenets and goals, their individual intellectual and ideological preferences branch out in varying directions. This may seem confusing at first, but the confusion dissolves if one realizes that the critical label actually refers to a broad range of approaches, not all of which are compatible. One can utilize the perspective of political action, of participatory research, of applied policy research, or of community organising or one can observe from the sidelines by critiquing and challenging culture and its symbols (Thomas, 1993).

Most accounts of the roots and history of action research begin with the work of the German social psychologist Lewin (1952) who is said to be the person who coined the term “action research” and who declared that to understand a social system one must engage in attempts to exercise change in it and that there is no action without research, and no research without action. Wahlberg (1998), in contrast, who conducts action research concerned with community work, has emphasized Lewin’s studies of ethnic minority groups in the U.S. that are subjected to discrimination. According to Wahlberg (1998), Lewin felt that re-

searchers should show their solidarity with the underprivileged and endeavour to achieve an improvement in their living conditions. According to Starrin's (1993) categorization, that tradition belongs to what he terms the pragmatic, newly oriented branch of participant-based research. Brown and Tandon (1983) call it the "northern" tradition within action research (Hansson, 2003).

An ideologically and politically oriented research tradition was developed in the 1960s and 1970s based on experience gained from developmental and change-directed work conducted in the Third-World aimed at helping underprivileged groups gain control over their situation. This tradition of "participatory research" or PR, is partly inspired by Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals-Borda, although Fals-Borda himself refers to such research as participatory action research, or PAR (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991). Starrin (1993) calls it "the ideologically and politically oriented branch of participatory oriented research", whereas Brown & Tandon (1983) call it the "southern" tradition within action research (in contrast to the "northern", see above). According to Brown & Tandon (1983), the northern tradition works *within* the existing societal system, whereas the southern tradition works against the existing societal system.

This southern tradition is primarily inspired by Paulo Freire and his book "Pedagogia do Oprimido"²⁰. A central idea in Freire's writing is that of conscientisation. Starrin translates this Portuguese word as "creating a sense of consciousness", which he interprets as meaning that those who are suppressed should be made conscious of belonging to a group that is subjected to a collective abasement as a class, despite their not lacking in ability or being inferior in any way. The idea is that making those who are suppressed conscious of this creates the conditions necessary for them to gain control over their situation (Forsberg et al.,

²⁰ The book appeared in 1968, the Swedish translation of it being given the title "Pedagogik för förtryckta" ("Pedagogy for the oppressed") (Hansson, 2003). Wahlberg (1998) argues that the correct translation of "Pedagogia do Oprimido" would have been "Education of the Suppressed" ("De förtrycktas pedagogik") rather than "Pedagogy for the Oppressed" ("Pedagogik för förtryckta").

1997). Wahlberg (1998) conceives of conscientisation instead as a mutual process in which both the teacher and the pupil can expand or transform their conception of the world or their understanding of reality.

Participatory action research

Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) introduce seven other key features of participatory action research

1. Participatory action research can be considered to be a social process in which the researcher explores the relationship between the realm of the individual and of society.
2. It is participatory, engaging people in examining their knowledge (understanding, skills and values). It is a process in which the individuals in a group endeavor to grasp the way in which their knowledge shapes their sense of identity.
3. It is practical and collaborative, engaging people in examining the social practices that link them to other forms of social interaction.
4. It is emancipatory, aiming at helping people to recover and to release themselves from the social structures that limit their self-development and self-determination,
5. It is critical, aiming not simply at producing knowledge but also at changing the structures that limit individual self determination.
6. It is reflexive, aimed at helping one reflect upon one's own practice.
7. It aims at developing and transforming both theory and practice (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

During the research process, the researcher is well advised to ignore any conventional set of rules and rather become a part of what is a kind of a research spiral (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). It is very much a matter of a democratic dialogue between the researcher and participants, involving the participants' having the possibility of presenting their ideas and suggestions without the researcher's having a foregone

conclusion regarding how the investigation is to be conducted. The researcher's language and ability to communicate are tools that can facilitate contact with participants through simplifying and clarifying questions that are posed. The language employed enables various actions to be better interpreted and facilitates an understanding of the matters to be conveyed, the research questions developing successively from the research process itself. In that process, the researcher endeavours to establish a continuous and mutual relationship with the participant (ibid.).

Most authors seem to agree that action research takes as its point of departure in the problems faced in practice by those whose problems the research concerns and that there is a close interaction between behaviour and research and between theory and practice in a process aimed at effecting change. What I find to distinguish the different forms of action research is the approach one takes to participation and to ideology, and partly to the methods one employs. These factors clearly distinguish the different forms of action research, but can also vary between different action research traditions. Participatory action research, PAR, is the approach I will be using in addressing issues of action research in the present study, drawing on the above typology developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005).

Integrating PAR and critical ethnography

According to Starrin in (Holmer & Starrin, 1993), Whyte (1991)²¹ is presently the best known representative of the direction the latter refers to as the pragmatic, new-oriented form of participant-based research (which he also considers Lewin to belong to). Here the active participation of the members of an organisation or of members of society in general is fundamental for efforts to change the social system to succeed (Holmer & Starrin, 1993). According to Hansson (2003), who calls this direction "participatory action research", the ideological per-

²¹ Foote Whytes most famous work is 'Street corner society'. It is a fairly conventional work of ethnography of the Chicago School. It is Interpretative sociology using a symbolic interactionist framework.

spective is ignored by Whyte, who emphasizes behaviour instead. PAR²² is also the designation that Whyte uses for his own research. He considers PAR to be a methodology in which a professional researcher invites one or more members of the organisation being studied to play a more active role than that of simply being passive informant. In terms of Whyte's terminology, there is also a behavioural element involved in PAR. I understand this behavioural element as being the researcher's participation in the practical work to be done.

Many traditional scientific methods are too reductionist when applied to community work. Participatory action research (PAR) can represent a better methodological approach to studying practical measures directed at change. In contrast to more conventional research methods, PAR, when integrated with critical ethnography accepts a relationship being found between facts and evaluations, feeling and reason, and science and non-science. PAR stimulates the researcher being strongly involved in the research he or she conducts and to feel a clear sense of responsibility for its consequences. The basic point in conducting such research is that on the basis of praxis. Both the researcher and the actors involved can obtain experience and knowledge regarding social processes and such relations as those involving power or tyrannization, and concerning such matters as the hidden resources a person, a com-

²² During the 1940s, the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations, concerned primarily with action research at the place of work, was established. Various Tavistock researchers went to Norway, contributing to the spread of Tavistock ideas to other countries, in particular Sweden, from which they spread back to the US, developing further there within various traditions (Hansson, 2003). The action research that came to Sweden by way of the Tavistock Institute assumed a central role in Swedish action research and can be equated with what Whyte designates as PAR. Wahlberg, in contrast, who is engaged in community work, emphasises the critical emancipatory aspects of action research. According to him, the action research carried on in Sweden from the end of the 1960s to the beginning of the 1970s challenged the positivistic paradigm, questioning the idea that research can be neutral and unpolitical (ibid). Radical social scientific researchers such as Vilhelm Aubert, Yngvar Lochen and Thomas Mathiesen began to make themselves known in Norway at the end of the 1960s. Mathiesen's action research aimed at humanizing the Norwegian penal system (ibid). It gradually assumed relevance for community work in Sweden within the framework of social work. Community work and action research became linked in a number of different projects in Sweden, such as the Östergård project and the Kroksbäck project in Malmö and the Aspudden project in Stockholm (Wahlberg, 1998).

munity or an organisation can possess. A further advantage of this approach is that the knowledge obtained can be applied rather quickly through its being made available successively to the parties involved. An advantage of PAR, as compared with more conventional methodologies, is that it protects the researcher against such mistakes as those of jumping to conclusions, interpreting things in an oversimplified way, and making naïve recommendations, since those who serve as research objects can comment on the tentative conclusions arrived at, as well as on the supposed facts and how these can be interpreted. Through enabling ordinary persons, such as those employed in an organisation, to take part in various phases of a research project, it becomes possible for them to assess the veracity of findings, how these should be interpreted, and how various constructive changes that can be suggested (Holmer & Starrin, 1993).

The area of research, and collection and interpretation of data

The section that follows takes up the description of the school, the district the different measures that were taken during the time the research was in progress. Measures were aimed at improving the standard of the people living there and enabling the school to find new ways of helping the children and of involving the parents. The efforts made by the city of Malmoe and the School of Education in Malmoe to increase research in urban schools are also described. The section thereafter describes the time schedule of the study and the different data gathering methods employed, as well as the overall story of the research journey undertaken, starting with questions of how access to the field of the research project was gained, how the parent education course that was provided was designed and how data was gathered and selected, these including cross-cultural interviews, observations, field notes and questionnaires. Ethical issues and the dilemma of the double role of the researcher are discussed and issues of confidentiality and anonymity are raised.

The school and the area where it is located

The research was carried out in a comprehensive school, i.e. one that offers a variety of different curricula (up through the junior high school level) and also includes a preschool. It currently has some seven hundred pupils up to 16 years of age, nearly 90 percent of non-Swedish background. The research concerns parents who have children in upper secondary school, i.e. children between 12 and 16 years of age. Both the number of pupils and the variety and complexity of their needs, especially linguistic ones, are increasing. Getting the parents more closely involved in the education of their children has long been pursued as a goal, efforts in this direction having been directed at parents both of Swedish and of immigrant background. The school is located in an urban area of Malmö belonging to a district having about 39,000 inhabitants, 14 932 of them being of foreign background. The area had undergone considerable changes during the last six years, many minority families having moved in and many Swedish families having moved out.

The Iraqi group is one of the dominant Arabic speaking groups in the district, about 1 598 persons living in its different part. Arabic speaking children represent the largest group in the school. The school is the only general meeting place for the children, since the area lacks shops, cafés and other such places where people in the neighbourhood can meet. The school and the area in general are presented in the media as an area dominated by crime, drug abuse, school vandalism and students who are low in achievement. During the school year 2005 more than 57 percent of the students did not achieve sufficiently good results to allow them to join the upper secondary school programmes (Sydsvenskan, 2005b). The area has thus been linked with failure in school and with crime, and is one of Malmö's most discussed districts. The government has raised money to improve the living standard of those living in the district and money has also been raised for the schools to help them better meet the requirement of the children there. The section that follows takes up some of the plans the government has for such districts and the schools located there.

Background and measures to improve the living standards in such areas²³

The district of Malmö where the research took place is one of the urban areas in Sweden that the Swedish Parliament decided in 1998 to support the development of in various ways. During the period of 1999-2003 two billion Swedish crowns that were made available were divided up between the municipalities in question, which included Botkyrka, Gothenburg, Haninge, Huddinge, Malmö, Stockholm, and Södertälje (Prop, 1997/98:165). In Malmö, the sections of the city that were provided help were Rosengård, Fosie, Hyllie and the southern part of the innermost section of the city. Two major goals aimed at were:

- To improve, for each of the urban areas included in the program, the chances for stable and long-range expansion being achieved, enabling new job opportunities to be created, both there and in other parts of the country.
- To put an end to social and ethnic discrimination and segregation in large cities and to help create basically equal job opportunities and living conditions for those living within a large city.

Through providing the sections of cities taking part in such programs, funds were earmarked for such purposes, the government aims at steering developments there in the right direction. The central government aims through establishing agreement with certain disadvantaged sections of large cities at improving conditions there. Such agreements are revised each year. They are concerned with goals of strong local relevance. The central government steers local governmental policies through agreements of this sort that are reached. In so doing, it places emphasis upon a bottom-up perspective for achieving the long-range goals aimed at. It is considered important that both residents generally and parents in the urban areas involved become actively engaged in formulating goals and in development of the concrete plans to be decided upon.

²³ The material described in this section was obtained through the reading of document concerned with measures directed at improving the lives of people (the parents) living in such a district as published on the website of Malmö city, www.malmo.se/storstads

The goal which this section of Malmö has of being the section of the city that develops on the basis of people's own power is quite in line with the bottom-up perspective which the state wishes to further. It was decided that the overall measures aimed at improvement which the city took during the years 2003-2004 would be concentrated upon this area. The goals were those in particular of putting an end to the social, ethnic and discriminatory segregation found in the area and to work for a sense of equality and for equality of living conditions for residents there. (This agrees well with the second of the two basic aims just referred to.) More specifically, the basic goals of measures on behalf of the school in this area were as follows:

- To provide a more adequate picture of the situation in the area so that the local governmental authorities could adopt the supportive measures to be taken in the way best suited to the area's needs.
- To develop procedures for facilitating dialog and cooperation between the school and the parents. In order for the parents to play a more active part in developmental work there, improved collaboration with them was planned so as to take stock of the problems existing, assign them priority and carry out measures to alleviate them.
- Improve ways of reaching out to the parents and creating a multicultural centre in the school, providing a pleasant atmosphere for the parents and for other residents to be able to use the school for their own activities (The district of Fosie policy 2002, see also www.malmo.se/storstads).²⁴

One thing I find particularly interesting here is the emphasis placed on adopting a bottom-up perspective. Although no exact definition of what is meant by this is provided, it is clearly stated that considerable weight is to be placed on participation on the part of those living in the sections of the city and to get them involved in the formulation of goals and in the development of plans for the local measures to be taken. *How* this is to take place is not stated in explicit terms. The efforts that have been made to involve parents in the study have partly been financed by a programme fund this section of the city was provided with.

²⁴ My own translation

The idea in the present study of the need of taking action in connection with matters of parent involvement can be said to be an attempt to put into practice the government's goals referred to here.

Center for diversity in education²⁵

In light of the changes occurring at all levels in this section of the city, the School of Education of Malmö University has applied, together with the city of Malmö, for a state grant for establishing a Center for Diversity in Education. This came as a response to the school committee (SOU 1997:121) proposition presented to the government. The Center is conceived of as a meeting place for school administrators, teachers, politicians and local governmental employees for discussions concerning with cultural heterogeneity. It is to serve as an arena for lectures, workshops, conferences, planning sessions and the like, as well as making available books, periodicals, research reports and other literature. The city of Malmö itself has already donated a million crowns to enable the Resource Center to become established.

In the spring of 2002 the School of Education received money, primarily from the Swedish Department of Education, for creating a research environment for studying multicultural schools and preschools. The situation in schools in Malmö served as a point of departure. In Malmö there are some 60,000 persons of non-Swedish origin who represent 165 different national backgrounds. This has led to what was originally the largely unified culture found in the schools being broken up into a mosaic of cultural heterogeneity. There two questions that can be asked are whether there is a sense of insecurity that this creates and what aspects of the schools are basically as they were before and what aspects have changed. Multicultural schools are often regarded as failing to succeed in meeting the needs of many of the students.

²⁵ Information obtained from Malmö municipality and Malmö School of Education website. www.malmo.se and www.mah.se

In the joint application for a research grant that was submitted, the Malmoe School of Education and the city of Malmoe went one step further than simply cooperating with each other, maintaining that research collaboration alone does not suffice if the perspectives of the schools that are studied are ignored. The Malmoe School of Education and the city of Malmoe wanted extend the circle of those directly involved in the research project, and want thoroughgoing discussions of many basic matters to be conducted out between school representatives, political leaders and persons representing various city-governmental organisations. It is stated in the application that teachers, school heads and political leaders are in need both of relevant research being conducted and of working together in a concrete way toward improving the schools. They are in need of learning from each other and from other sources to provide insight into various approaches to teaching. They should argue for each approach, question it, suggest how it might be changed for the better, and allow political leaders and representatives of the organisations involved to discuss matters thoroughly before decisions are made. The city of Malmoe also partially finances doctoral positions in education and was one of the parties originally applying for research funds in the areas just referred to. It was within this framework that my doctoral position came about. This research endeavours to live up to the ideals taken up here. It addresses issues of urban schools, taking critical ethnography and participatory action research as a basic approach (see methodology chapter 4).

Data collection

According to Coghlan and Brannick (2004), action research can include all forms of data gathering methods. They argue that action research does not preclude use of methods from traditional research as well as the important thing being the planning and the use of the data gathering tools selected. As a means of data collection I used formal and informal interviews, observations and a journal in which my notes and reflections were recorded. I recorded points that I had observed in the form of field notes. The interviews were recorded and photographs were taken to assist my memory of various things. I had to seek out people outside the school in order to adequately understand certain things I had

observed and also got to know many things from the parents. In addition I observed the work of parents who provided supplementary schools in the neighbourhood for their own or other children who were in need of special help with their homework, aiming to provide them cultural and religious studies and lessons in their mother tongue. Interviews were conducted in both a formal and an informal manner. I concentrated on conversations carried out with parents and with the teachers. The interviews were conducted as a help in being able to explain the nature of various events I had observed. Thus, I was able to collect reflections by the parents on activities they had undertaken or had planned and background information concerning this. In my analysis of the material, I was able to compare the data being of this sort obtained at different times, from different sources and in different settings and locations, data analysed both directly in the field and afterwards.

The participants and their degree of participation

Whom one refers to in speaking of “practitioners”, “those involved” and “participants” appears to me to be a central question in the study. These might either be teachers who at their place of work are sometimes involved with the parents, together with school administrators and the researcher himself. When different authors speak of the degree of participation, they appear to primarily refer to the extent to which persons doing practical work participate in the research process, although it could also refer to the extent to which one or more researchers take part in the practical actions being studied. This section begins with a general overview of how PAR participants have been discussed in the literature, and with the type of participants taking part in the present study, the role and degree of participation of those involved, the process of knowledge production and the action for social change.

Reason and Bradbury (2001) suggests that agents of change who initiate the PAR process must embrace a genuine commitment to work with these democratic values and honour the wisdom of people. That which distinguishes PAR from other forms of research is that instead of trying to avoid influencing what one conceives of as a static type of situation that is being investigated, one engages in a process aimed at constructive change in the situation at hand. According to Kemmis and

McTaggart (2005), instead of being separate from the persons being studied, the PAR researcher needs to study not only these persons but also what one is doing oneself, since one takes part in the situation being investigated. They regard both the creation and collection of data and the analysis of it as involving collaboration and they appear to argue for a high degree of participation of all those involved. What they mean by collaboration, however, is not that all those participating need to collaborate in doing everything. Rather, they consider it to suffice that the results of an analysis carried out by one or more persons be made available to the others for their own contributions or whatever changes they may feel should be made. What I see as a difficulty here is that too much involvement might be a problem itself in getting all those involved satisfied with the results. By this I mean that the parents and the teachers can differ in their expectations regarding the project, which may not be carried out in the way they expected it to be.

The study is concerned above all with what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in school on the part in particular of parents of Arab background. Research of this type means meeting very many parents and becoming involved in actions of many different types. There were not only the parents I interviewed when the project first got underway, but also other parents with whom I conducted informal interviews of a general discussion type, jotting down some notes and possibly deciding to meet them later for more thorough interviews. The teachers were easier to manage since largely the same ones were involved during the period of the research as a whole. The parents who kept dropping in often unexpectedly were more difficult to deal with in practical terms. I was struggling from the very start with the question of how many interviews I would need to measure up to my research aims and how many parents I should include in my presentation. The views presented in the later chapters show the variation of the parents' understanding of what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in the school that their children attend. For reasons of confidentiality, I will not describe the background of either the parents or the teachers involved. In Box 1 I present the basic time schedule of the study, the types of activities conducted with the parents and with the teachers and the different methods of data gathering employed.

Box 1. An overview of the time schedule, the activities conducted and the data collection.

| Autumn term 2002 | Spring term 2003 | Autumn term 2003 |
|--|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establishment of the team of home-school mediators. • Meeting with the parents • Questionnaire during the in-service course day. • Interviews with teachers and with parents. • Meetings with the home-school mediators and with other teachers at the school. • Analysing the data. • Preparing the general map ping. • Material needed for setting up the parent education prog-ramme | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launching the parent education course (study circles). • Preparing the parents for cooperation with the teachers. • Building the parent-teacher association. • Informal and formal inter-views, field notes, observations and photographs. • Interviews with teachers and with other member of school staff. • Questionnaire to the teachers (open questions). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The parent-school association is established and work with the home-school mediators is conducted. • The teachers and parents cooperate (are involved in arranging different activities). • The home-school mediators serve as a sounding board. • Study circles involving the parents are established. • Interviews with teachers, parents and other school staff members. • Observations and photos |
| The number of interviews | The number of interviews | The number of interviews |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seven teachers and school administrators three male and four female. • Six fathers and four mothers were interviewed. • Most interviews lasted about 55- 60 minutes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Four of the teachers- two male and two female were interviewed • Six of the parents were re-interviewed at the end of the parent education course. • The interviews lasted about 55- 60 minutes. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews with new parents in the supplementary school six mothers and two fathers. • Six interviews with other conducted with the parents in their homes to get to know more about the problems in the neighbourhood. • The interviews lasted about 55- 60 minutes each. |

Sampling

The group studied consisted of teachers, school administrators and parents of different ethnic background. The sample size was not decided

on in advance and my knowledge of the larger population from which the sample was taken was limited. The aim of the sampling was less to be able to generalize the results to a larger population than to gain as deep an understanding as possible of the groups that were studied (cf. Nueman, 2000).

The sampling was done at two levels:

1. At the first level I focused on two main groups a) teachers and school administrators who represented the school, and b) the Arabic speaking parents, involving parents who came from different Arabic countries, regardless of whether they were Muslims, Christians or had some other religion.
2. At the second level I collected variety of views and observed a variety of actions that could serve to clarify what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in an urban school as such.

In the sections that follow I describe the Arabic speaking parents, the teachers, school administrators and how the samples were selected.

The teachers and the school administrators

Those selected to be interviewed were meant to insofar as possible be representative of the views of those working at school. The variable selected also depended upon the type of data collection method employed. For example, in interviews I selected teachers and school administrators according to their gender, age, and the length of the time they had worked at the school. I interviewed four female and three male teachers since the women were overrepresented in the school. Using a questionnaire during the in-service course was primarily to obtain a certain overview of the views the teachers expressed while in the group. The questionnaire, to which each individual teacher responded, concerned their views on what promotes and what hinders parental involvement. The questionnaire was given to all the teachers regardless of their gender and age or to how long they had worked at school. I had no intention of obtaining life histories of those who were interviewed or of conducting quantitative analyses of the questionnaires. I was more interested in the variety of views the teacher displayed, hoping to ob-

tain as thorough understanding as possible of how teachers reasoned concerning such matters. In presenting the views of the teachers and of the school administrators I used what Neuman (2000) has called purposeful or judgmental sampling. I made my own assessment of how well various views could provide a thorough understanding of what works for and against parental involvement. I did not exclude any of the answers the teachers gave but some of the teachers wrote more than others and their views often appeared to better represent the views of the other teachers in the school.

The parents

Selecting the parents was not an easy job. I had no knowledge of them and they had no knowledge of me or of the research I was conducting. During October 2002 I sent a letter in four languages (see appendix A) to the parents inviting them to the school to discuss matters concerning the school and how they could become more involved in its work. The first interviews, with ten of them, were done in the autumn of 2002. Some twenty-five parents came. Fifteen were of Arabic background. I asked whether I could interview them so I could learn more about their views regarding their involvement in their children's education. Six men and four women agreed to be interviewed. I did not know any of them and had no idea whether they had something definite to tell. The parents who agreed came from different Arab countries. They differed too in their level of education. Three of them—two men and one woman—had jobs and the rest were still learning Swedish. They were between 35 and 55 years of age. Two of them were not Muslims. Six of these parents were re-interviewed during the summer of 2003 shortly after the end of the parent education course and the establishment of the parent-teacher association.

The second type of parents I interviewed were those connected with certain activities or for particular purposes, such as to learn about the supplementary school activities, as when I interviewed the four mothers who had worked there and the two fathers responsible for its establishment. The parents talked a lot about life outside the school, their difficulties in becoming integrated into the society, in finding jobs, and in learning Swedish, and their struggling either with their younger chil-

dren, who were still attending school, or with their older ones, who had left school but were jobless and still lived at home. I found these parents to be of considerable interest. Since I wanted to better understand them, I decided to interview some of them in their homes to understand better their daily life struggle and what problems they were faced with day by day. Six interviews were then held with these parents, some of whom I had also interviewed earlier.

In presenting the views of the parents on what promoted and what hindered their involvement, I had to use my judgment in deciding what views the parents expressed promoted and what hindered their involvement in the work of school (cf. Neuman, 2000). I did not exclude any of the parents' views. This is why the presentation of their views also includes those concerning their struggling with their older children, issues related to the migration process and dilemmas this could create for certain of the families, matters which I found to increase my understanding of the parents' life situation. The parents differed in their degree of understanding of their situation and in how much they said during the interviews. This is why certain of the parents are quoted more than others.

Gaining access to the field and establishing my ethnographic tent²⁶

According to Burgess (1991) access to the field should not be negotiated just once but should be renegotiated several times during the research process, this in the present case meaning negotiations with different persons at the school on how to gain access to the school facilities. Despite the present research study being carried out in a school in which I had worked, I needed permission to gain full access to the site as a whole. Through meetings with the school head and with some of his assistants, I was able to gain such access and the permission to carry

²⁶ How access to the field after the parents had been given access to the school to arrange different activities for both grownups and the children affected the research process as a whole is discussed further in chapter 10. Parental involvement as a whole became a question of access, one which affected my own access to the school facilities as a researcher.

out the research. The first meeting concerned with this was with the head of the school and some of his assistants. We discussed the aim of the project, its vision, estimated costs, obstacles to carrying it out as planned and the opportunities it provided. Although the school administrators were positive to such a project, they expressed concern that most of the teachers might be reluctant to cooperate since they already had such heavy workloads and the project would require them to take on extra responsibilities, which would mean their staying at the school after classes finished for the day and taking part in activities planned for involving the parents in the school work. We discussed possibilities of recruiting teachers who were strongly interested in developing a programme for meeting parents. It was within this framework that the idea of *the home-school mediators* was conceived.

I was also given access to one of the schoolrooms outside the main school building, one often used for teaching small groups of students who had special needs. The room served as a kind of ethnographic tent during my research journey, where most of my interviews and much of my writing down of field notes was done. The room's location made the parents feel at ease in discussing with me what they wanted to discuss or just dropping in without feeling that they were disturbing me or anyone else being in the room. It was situated in the middle of the neighbourhood in the most defective and crowded building in the area. It was in the bottom floor of the building where I spent most of my time reading, planning, holding meetings, watching, observing and talking to parents, children and other people who just passed by and were curious about what was going on there. Some of the teachers were also interviewed there.

The room became very much known as the place where most of the parent-teacher meetings were held. Situated on the ground floor, it had a door opening to the children's play yard, which made it easy for me to sit outside frequently and watch the neighbourhood in action. I could hear mothers shout from their balconies, asking their children to come up. I could hear people playing loud music, children playing and young people just hanging around for many hours talking.

The room was a place that had become known to all of the parents and the place where I chose to conduct most of my ethnographic work outside the school. I spent one and a half years there in my ethnographic tent. In the course of this, the parents were given access to another place, in the middle of the square just some hundred meters or so from the room, a place also used for young people's activities. This place was also one where I conducted some of the fieldwork. I often sat and discussed things with parents and young people in the neighbourhood both there and in the school. There were many issues they were concerned with and there is considerable data of interest regarding these young people that is not reported in the thesis, due to the vastness of the task this would have involved. I also had night-watch walks with parents, which provided access to yet another type of data, which included things that happened in the neighbourhood at night and during the weekends and how the parents expressed their views and understanding of their children's social reality in this regard.

General mapping and description

Description and mapping work entailed using different types of techniques to gather data about the school, the teachers. I also noted possibilities for taking action and how much support in the form of action I could get to carry out my research. I collected information about the school and the district in which it was located through reading different policy documents, using questionnaires for teachers to assess their views on what promotes and what hinders parental involvement, and through interviews with both the teachers and the parents. This was at an early stage when I wanted to obtain a general idea of the situation with which the teachers and the parents were faced. My carrying out a research of this type in my own school required an understanding of the difficulties there were in getting the parents involved in the school's work and the opportunities there were for this.

Such a mapping inside the school was undertaken through use of a questionnaire (see appendix F) directed at the teachers, mainly at the secondary school level, and by discussions with them, as well as with the parents, through a group interview. Such interviews were followed

by individual interviews with some of the teachers and parents. My efforts here, beginning in the autumn term of 2002, were aimed at improving relationships between the school and the parents. These were some of the first steps I took in examining the potential usefulness of action research in this context.

There are variety of reasons for my emphasizing the importance of mapping in the way that was described here. The collaboration with the parents and the teachers, as well as their involvement in this early stage of planning was essential for interventions to succeed, a matter I placed strong emphasis upon. I felt that collaboration with the parents had to be started early if close involvement on their part was to be achieved. It is easier to have a sense of involvement in something one has been with from the start, has planned, and has created the possibilities for. Another reason for emphasizing the importance of the mapping of problems is that there may be a tendency for intervention to be based on a rather dismal view of the area in question, a view that may differ markedly from that of the parents themselves. This made it particularly important for the parents to take part in discussions of the problems that existed. A third reason for regarding this initial mapping as being so important concerns the distinction between “involvement” and “influence”. These two concepts are linked in such a way that collaboration facilitates achieving influence and that having influence encourages collaboration (Epstein, 2001). Yet it is possible to collaborate in some endeavour without having appreciable influence on it and also to have influence without collaborating.

The parent education course as a form of group discussions

Data gathering within the framework of the parent education course was discussed with the school Head and with three of the teachers involved in both the planning and the carrying out of this course. The aim of the parent education program was to provide parents with more thorough information than they had had previously concerning the school system in Sweden, the local school as an organisation, and Swedish society generally. The course was aimed at empowering the parents to

become closely and effectively involved in the education of their children and to work with the teachers and the school as a whole to this end.

Box 2. The time schedule and themes taken up with the parents during the spring of term 2003.

| Dates of the parent education course | Themes discussed with the parents |
|---|--|
| 21 st of January 2003 | The Swedish school system. |
| 6 th of February | Discussions about the school the children attend. |
| 28 th of February | Language teaching (second language teaching and mother tongue teaching). |
| 14 th of March | Whose responsibility it is to bring up the children properly (the school or the home). |
| 6 th of April | The children's rights in school and in society. |
| 21 st of April | The children's leisure activities and health issues. |

In this ethnographic research project a course of this type was meant to be in the form of a discussion group in which participants listened, talked with each other and discussed many different issues, joining in conversation during coffee breaks and both asking and answering questions. The emphasis in the course was particularly on getting the parents involved in dialogue about the school, getting answers and exchanging ideas, and discussing what they could do in school if they got together there. A forum of this sort gave me the opportunity to better plan and carry out my research. The participant observations made and the results of the informal interviews there were recorded as field notes and were kept in different categories and in different folders.

Observation and Field notes

Work in the field resulted in a very large amount of notes on things I observed or thought might be interesting to follow up on and endeavour to explain. This reflects a kind of notes and a memory approach to field note writing described both by Hammersley and Atkinson (1996) and by Burgess (1991). I observed what was going on both within the school and outside of it in the neighbourhood. The parents I had interviewed could come the next day and tell me: “You see, this is what I told you yesterday in our interview” speaking of some action or phenomenon they had observed and wanted to consolidate in their minds. The notes I took down in such cases served as a kind of data validation. In most cases, I did not have to go back to the parents to check on the accuracy of what I had transcribed. What they had said was discussed in the meetings we had during the parent education course and at other meetings that were held.

The field notes I took helped in obtaining an understanding of what promotes and what hinders parental involvement. The observations I made during the parent evening course frequently contributed to the field notes. The parents’ accounts of their struggles outside the school were often presented during these evenings and were discussed throughout the sessions.

The notes I took down were often rewritten and transcribed once I got back home or already at the school. The parents activities in and outside the school were often observed and notes made. My notes were divided up into two columns, in the one column my noting what I had observed and making my recordings, in the other column my reflecting on what I had observed, my often going back and adding new reflections. Since the study dealt with what promotes and what hinders parental involvement I often marked my comments with a Pro for what promotes or and Pre for what hinders it to keep reminding myself of the aim of the study. This could be regarded as field data interpretation and of a way keeping matters of observation and of interpretation clearly separated. I also made note of the names of different parents and recorded from time to time what they told. Since some of them were ac-

tive virtually all the time, I was able to record very many data that they provided me, including quotation I could later present.

Cross-cultural interviews

How should I handle different languages used in the research: Swedish and Arabic for interviewing and English for writing things up? Should translation occur while I was transcribing? In what language should I record my field notes? Did I need to translate all the data I gathered into English? What might be lost in using one language for interviewing and another for reporting? Who makes the language choices, me or the parents or the teachers (cf. Pant, 2005)? These are some of the questions I was struggling with during my research journey. Every time I entered a new phase in my research, it meant making justifiable decision regarding my choice of language.

Bourdieu (1999) states that the interviewer with different types of cultural capital and linguistic capital may nevertheless have difficulty in finding his/her way through to the heart of respondent and in getting the respondent to answer in an adequate way the questions he or she was given. Conducting the interviews in Arabic made it easier for the parents to express themselves freely. When I asked one of the parents whether he wanted to be interviewed in Swedish he said “I have to keep to Arabic. At least I know then what I’m saying”.

When conducting the interviews, I endeavoured to make sure that the power relationship between the parents, the teachers and me was as horizontal as possible. One needs to avoid placing informants in a disadvantaged position, such as getting them to reveal more than they intended or their feeling they have to answer certain questions they do not really want to (Burgess, 1991). Bourdieu (1999) states that the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee often involves the relationship between the different types of capital, together with the linguistic capital which is a form of cultural capital that both the interviewer and the interviewee possess. Bourdieu states in addition that the researcher should do his/her best to control or “*reduce as much as possible the symbolic violence exerted often in that relationship*”

(Bourdieu, 1999, p. 609 in italics in the original text). Bourdieu sees there being as perfect a match as possible between the interviewer and the interviewee as being crucial here. Sharing the respondents' history, social class, and background may allow the interviewer to get deeper into the subject he/she is studying.

Bourdieu states that “every investigator is situated between two extremes doubtless never completely attained: total overlap between investigator and respondent, where nothing can be said because, since nothing can be questioned, everything goes without saying; and total divergence, where understating and trust become impossible” (ibid p. 612). In Bourdieu's terms, I had to work my way through grasping the social mechanisms that affected the category of parents I interviewed through understanding as adequately as possible the social and psychological conditions of their social position and endeavouring to present the interview in a way that made sense to them, so that they felt comfortable in telling me their stories and making them feel confident enough to tell them in a way that made sense to us both. Some of the parents considered this type of interview to be a sort of therapy through my being there listening to them and answering some of their questions, from time to time making the interview a form of friendly conversation. Expressions like “we need someone who likes to listen to us and can tell those in power about our problems” and “at least someone we can talk to about our troubles.” Such expressions were used by some of the parents to show that the interview was a sort of relief or something they express “to empty themselves”.

By offering the respondent an absolutely exceptional situation for communication, freed for the usual constraints (particularly time) that weigh on most everyday interchanges, and opening up alternatives which promote or authorize the articulation of worries, needs or wishes discovered through this very articulation, the researcher helps create conditions for an extra ordinary discourse, which might never have been spoken, but which was already there merely awaiting the conditions for its actualization[...]certain respondents, especially the most disadvantaged, seem to grasp this situation as an exceptional opportunity offered to them testify, to make themselves heard, to carry their experience over from the private to the public sphere; an opportunity also to explain themselves in the fullest sense of the term, that is, to construct their own point of view both

about themselves and about the world and to bring into the open point within this world from which they see themselves and the world become, comprehensible, and justified, not least for themselves (Bourdieu, 1999, pp. 614-615).

The parents had a strong appetite for speaking and some of them took the lead in the interview, finding a sort of relief in the opportunity to speak about their own troubles and their social suffering. The interviews were held so that the parents could talk as much as they wanted or they could about some given thing, without my interrupting them. Expression such as “let me empty myself” which in Arabic means to let them speak until they had nothing more left to themselves, were used. They did this to help me as a researcher and also because they believed that what they told me would make the situation better for them and for their children. My acting more as an insider or as a native researcher provided me greater insight than if I had conducted the interviews in Swedish, or in English. The trust that had been built up during the parent education course helped considerably in making the parents feel at ease when talking with me and revealing their stories.

Interviews with both the teachers and the parents were carried out in two different languages, the parents who come from different countries in the Middle East having different dialects but all seeming to have learned to speak in a way that was understood by everyone. The Arabic dialects differ slightly from each other, except for the people who came from North African countries such as Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia whose dialect is often a mixture of French and Arabic. The interviews were held in Arabic and were then transcribed.

A matter which is worthy to note in carrying out interviews with these parents is the fact they sometimes used quite different words for one and the same thing, sometimes using very well known metaphors expressed in the Arabic language and at other times preferring to use local metaphors that were historically linked to the place they were born and grew up in.

Some of the parents were very well educated and had analysed their situation very well, whereas others had difficulties in finding words to describe or explain their situation and what was happening with them. They might lack the vocabulary of the new society and still use the vocabulary of the societies from which they stemmed, which might fail to adequately convey what they really wanted to say. Thus, conducting my interviews became strongly concerned with matters of language and of the interviewer's language capacities in helping interviewees to say what they really wanted to say. I found myself often obliged to guess and to fill in a word so that the interviewee could continue to express what he/she wanted to say. The parents who were interviewed appeared to feel quite comfortable at this. Some of the women I interviewed hesitated a bit in meeting me alone and talking to me but I told them in such cases that if they wished they could come together with a friend or someone else they knew. This approach worked very well so that I was able to meet all of these women.

Data interpretation

How much interpretation there should be of the data is a major controversy in qualitative research (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Some researchers claim that the data should not be analysed and should simply be presented as it has been gathered leaving it to the informants to speak for themselves (*ibid*). The aim involved is to give as true and honest account as possible of what respondents have said, with little or no interpretation or interference with the informants' spoken words. This form of presentation of the results of interviews aims at avoiding bias, and preventing the researcher's own views from disturbing reality as the informants experience it. Another approach is to present the results in terms of as accurate a description of them as one can provide. If it is impossible to present the entire data one has gathered, it is necessary then to reduce, categorise and structure the data before presenting it to the reader. This reducing and ordering amounts to analysis and interpretation (*ibid.*).

The decision of whether analysis of the data should be in English, Swedish or Arabic is strongly influenced by how much translation

needs to take place. Since I had two languages of direct relevance to work with, I tried to restrict the analysis to those two languages (Arabic and Swedish). I avoided translating all of the transcripts since I found it time consuming to first translate all of my interviews into English. I decided to make the analysis of the Arabic data in Arabic and of the Swedish data Swedish. I tried to first find issues and categories in those languages and then translate them into English. This was because of the risk of losing important information otherwise. Already in translating the first interview, I noticed that I began to neglect the original version of the interview, which contained all the metaphors and the language of the parents. I could still hear their voices while I was reading the interviews in Arabic. This is why I decided to make the analysis in Arabic and translate everything then into English. Making the analysis in Arabic and in Swedish ensured continuity in constructing the presentation of the results and also the validity and the reliability of the research.

I used language as an important tool for conveying the ideas and the feelings of the parents and the teachers in as precise a manner as possible. As for the style, I realized at the beginning of my research journey that in particular some styles of Arabic writing tend to be redundant and general. Some words and expressions, when translated word for word into English meant absolutely nothing. There are many expressions and statements in Arabic that mean positive things and are very frequently used there which can sound questionable when translated into English. There are also statements that could describe changes in society such as the following: “as an immigrant one should not forget the humiliation one can be subjected to” a direct translation of “يا غريب لا تنسى نصيبك من الذل” that would be very problematic to present in a directly translated version. This involves the fact that some parents need to accept certain humiliations when they arrive in a new country. Words and phrases used by the school teachers such as *utvecklingssamtal*, are used here since it has been found difficult to find truly appropriate equivalent statement in English. The parents may never have heard such words or have used them at all in their home countries, so that they may prefer using the original statement, partly because of not finding an appropriate translation for it and partly because of their failing otherwise to understand very readily well what is meant by such meetings with the teachers.

I make no attempt to conduct a discourse analysis of the different phrases and words used by parents, but I do want to point to certain issues I encountered during my research journey and while working with the interpretation of my data. Parents using the Arabic language often use different metaphors than those used in Swedish or in English such as “people are like mines “الناس معادن” meaning that people differ from each other and should not all be treated in the same way. Some of the parents were annoyed at the generalisations made in society, speaking of “the society putting all Arabs in the same bag”, feeling that people should not be given the blame for others misbehaving either in the neighbourhood or in the city, their feeling that some people are mines of gold and others are mines of coal, both being important but their differing in their value on the market. Dahman, an engineer, described the process of integration in terms of different mines becoming assimilated and melting into each other, something which cannot be done unless conditions are ready for them to melt, and how integration should normally be that one can continue to say that people are different, just as mines are different and the condition for copper melting are different from those for the melting of iron, (*a tabaâ yaghlob a tataboâ*), “الطبع يغلب التطبع” being a statement used to express this. Using Bourdieu’s notion of habitus, what the parents mean by this is that whenever one wants to learn or acquire some new form of habitus the person’s primary habitus, acquired in his/her childhood, belongs to the person’s previous life, the second word التطبع “a tataboâ” meaning the person’s secondary habitus or what he/she tries to acquire being in a new society. The meaning of the statement in its entirety is that the primary habitus is stronger than the secondary one and that one will never convert one’s primary habitus into a secondary one. This notion can make the discussion of this more a struggle between the old and the new forms of habitus, the word “*Yaghlob*” meaning in Arabic to win or to defeat. It is as if a parent wants to express here an internal psychological struggle between the old norms and values and the new ones. Al-Baldawi (1998) speaks of people immigrating to Sweden suffering from different types of traumas and in being in a state of a psychological imbalance in the new society. The data interpretation meant being aware all the time of ethical issues and that the parents and the teachers who both gave so much of their time and understanding should not be subject to harm. The next section takes up ethical issues.

Ethical issues²⁷

This section provides a discussion of some of the ethical issues related to my research journey and how I tried to protect and avoid harm to the people who opened their hearts and spoke to me about their own lives, including their inner experiences. In this section I endeavour to describe the researcher's role in the actions carried out. In analyzing eight doctoral studies involving action research, Hansson (2003) found the authors of several of them to experience the action researcher's role as unclear and to have difficulties in identifying the role which the action researcher should take. She describes the authors of these studies as emphasizing the intervening-process role the action researcher plays in supporting the developmental efforts of local actors. These authors considered the action researcher to be in a conflict between the task of stimulating and motivating a process steered by participants, on the one hand, and, developing theory and putting it into practice, on the other. They found that the direction and contents of a project are defined by practitioners who are "experts" on their realities involved, whereas the researcher contributes to a dialogue concerned with this reality on the basis of his/her knowledge of developmental work in the area (ibid.). In contrast to the role of the traditional researcher, in terms of which it is the researcher who determines the questions to be examined, some action research involves the researcher and the practitioner being engaged in collaborative efforts to develop knowledge through dialogue within the framework of a subject-subject relationship (ibid.). There is also a dilemma which the researcher involved in action can experience of having a supportive role in a developmental process without being cast in the dominant role of being an expert. The action researcher needs to clarify his/her role at every new phase of a project. This role is complex, since the development of knowledge can occur at several different levels simultaneously. It is not simply a matter of the dualistic or complementary roles of theory and practice, but also of action research contrasting in many ways with more conventional research (ibid).

The dilemmas I felt faced with in writing the thesis in English and conducting interviews in Arabic and Swedish can involve ethical issues

²⁷ Ethical dilemmas and issues concerned with the use of the critical approach are discussed in chapter 10.

rarely discussed in a Swedish research context. The ethical dilemmas are not related simply to the question of the validity of the data but also to the fact that the parents who collaborated with me might not be able to read the final text. This led to my checking the transcripts again and again and having a translator friend check them to determine whether I could have misinterpreted something, or misunderstood some word or phrase, I have also had the help of other friends in interpreting certain words or statement used in different regions of the Arab world. In fact it has been a language journey for me as much as a research journey that I have pursued here. I learned many new words and phrases that I did not know prior to entering this field.

Each step in my study involved the need of being ethical (cf. Burgess, 1991). O'Reilly (2005) discusses covert and overt research, the former being carried without the full knowledge of the informants. By gaining full consent she means the researcher explaining to the participants what such researcher represents, why it is being conducted such research and what is to happen with the material that has been collected. In more overt type of research, often conducted openly by the researcher, exactly what is to be done is known to all the participants. O'Reilly refers to different issues that are ones which I faced and. All of these are discussed in the Swedish ethical guidelines:

1. Responsibilities toward the participants i.e. parents, teachers, home-school mediators, and all those involved in my study.
2. Responsibility to conceal the identity of participants in all situations in which revealing it could cause harm to them of any sort.
3. Responsibilities toward assistants and key informants, in the present study toward home-school mediators and other teachers who contributed to the study.
4. Responsibilities toward funders, sponsors, and gatekeepers who have provided access to data, in my case the municipality of Malmoe, the gatekeepers at the school where the research was conducted, and the Malmoe school of Education.
5. Responsibilities toward colleagues and toward future researchers, in the sense of not abusing or causing any harm of any sort to anyone in the field, or doing anything that could lead to peo-

ple mistrusting research carried out of those who come after me (O'Reilly, 2005).

In conducting the study as I did in an overt way and dealing in it with parents and with teachers I had to explain and re-explain every action I took and had to conduct everything openly, at the same time realizing that what some parents might regard as prohibited could be something regarded as perfectly normal by the teachers, and vice versa. My role meant my carefully watching and taking note of any cultural codes that might harm the processes involved or destroying the trust that was being built up, not simply trust of the parents in the school and in the teachers but the also trust of the parents and of the teachers in me. Meeting with parents who dropped in often involved discussing ethical issues with them, issues which came up much more frequently than I had expected, and my having to explain for them my role and why I was engaged in what I was doing. My concern with how I should be dressed and how I should address and talk with the parents and how I would keep them interested in the research project and motivated to take part in it, can be compared with a person's receiving certain guests for the first time and doing everything possible to please them and make them feel at home.

Research of the type I carried out involves ethical responsibilities that are strictly prescribed (cf. Burgess, 1991). This is partly because parents and teachers alike are subject to power hierarchies within the school, the home, the family and the community. I was aware of my role as a researcher needing to be appropriate to the existence of these hierarchies, which also increased the possibility of respondents having a feeling of being exploited and of my having to work at regulating the power relations between me and both the parents and the teachers.

I introduced the aims of the project to the teachers and the school personnel both to familiarise them with the project and to make their participation in it seen as natural as possible. I also delivered information to the teachers weekly about what I planned to do and to discuss with them any issues they wanted to discuss. Issues of anonymity and confi-

dentiality²⁸ were discussed with all of the teachers who were directly involved in the project, including the home-school mediators and those who showed up repeatedly in our evening courses or in the work of the parent school association. I had discussions with some of them so as to check on their thoughts and ideas about the project. In the initial phase, I emphasised the idea of involving the parents as such, rather than the research itself, since I was not sure myself at the time just what the research in its entirety was to deal with and since I was aware of the majority of my former colleagues not being familiar with the concept of action research. One of them, when he asked what type of research I was doing, considered action research to be a form of academic research that is difficult to grasp. After that, I decided not to mention either “action research” or the “critical ethnographic approach” as such. Instead, I explained the basic strategy of the project, which involved learning from working with planning from involving parents, and from acting in a constructive way, observing and reflecting. I made it clear for the teachers that the project was to involve the parents getting together and discussing with each other what I was writing about. My being freed of teaching duties raised certain suspicions on their part. Some of the teachers wondered why the school paid me for doing such work and why they should work together with me on this. I had to explain to them that I was doing research relating to the school.

Summary

The aim of gaining knowledge in the present study was not simply to explore the areas concerned but also which effects social change - a call to action designed to go beyond what already is, and discussing together with the parents and the teachers what one could do instead. Thomas identifies a central weakness in conventional ethnography, pointing out that “the ontology of critical thought includes a conception, albeit vague, that there is something better, and that the goal of knowledge should include working towards it” (Thomas, 1993, p. 70).

²⁸ The actual names of teachers, parents and other school personnel are not used. I endeavour to not reveal much of their identity. The parents’ identity is also not revealed. Gender age, country of origin or any other things that can be traced are not indicated either. This is partly because the project has been followed very closely by the media and in other sources.

This ontological position takes an explicit position from the outset, that of ethical issues being addressed in particular as they relate to action oriented results of the research conducted and the acceptance of participants in conducting research having this in mind. Critical ethnography claims to meet the demands of practitioners for research that is more demonstrably useful. Various parts of the present thesis may possibly not be properly understood as being critical unless one reads the thesis in its entirety.

Doing research in my previous school allowed me somehow to be accepted as an insider and positioned to collect better data for social change and acculturation than would have been the case for a detached ethnographer. One proposition is that ethnographic methods provide a valuable toolkit for action taken in developing a thorough understanding of a complex educational intervention such as parental involvement in an urban school is. A second proposition is that participatory action research can serve as a useful methodology in extending the work presented here to some future context.

The parents and the teachers in the study were not responsible for the research process; their only participating in the different courses and other activities held at the school. The team of home-school mediators consisted of three teachers including me. We were mainly involved in planning and launching the home-school mediation project. The other members were not involved in gathering or analyzing any of the data

Several materials were used to support the approach taken. Results reported are based in large part on interviews, observations, questionnaires findings, field notes, and individual and collective talks with the parents and the teachers, the home-school mediators, and persons within the school administration. Several of these actors were interviewed twice and worked closely together in planning the actions to be taken, as well as reflecting on and evaluating the actions carried out.

Language played an important role in collecting the data. I used Arabic with the parents and Swedish with the teachers and the school administrators. Speaking the language of both the parents and the teachers

helped a great deal in revealing many things that would not have been possible to investigate adequately without being able to speak those languages. These data obtained provided me an understanding of three main areas. First, it enabled me to better understand what promotes and what hinders parental involvement within the school context and outside the school. Secondly, it provided a means for those of us at the school to plan and carry out the home-school mediation project. Lastly, it gave me the possibility of following how parental involvement and the development of the approach they took progressed both within the school and outside the school.

I describe my role as a researcher in the study as shifting back and forth in efforts to find a balance between the role of being a researcher in action and of being simply an academic, a shift both in terms of theory and of practice. My role has been partly that of a facilitator, organizing meetings and convening them, and partly that of an adviser while carrying out investigations to obtain results driving the process forward. Yet, in deciding to participate in the project, I also took on the role both of determining the general content of interest and of it, i.e. the matters of supporting the processes involved.

There is a clear distinction that should be made between efforts to involve the parents in the work of the school and the home-school mediation project, which involved four main ethnic groups; those of the Arabic speaking, the Bosnian speaking, the Pashto speaking and the Swedish speaking parents. The research is concentrated on the following topics and areas:

1. The Arabic speaking parents, particularly the variety of views and actions regarding what promotes and what hinders their involvement in the school their children attend.
2. The views of the teachers regarding what promotes and what tends to hinder parental involvement in the school generally and on the part of the Arabic speaking parents in particular.
3. Much emphasis in presenting the empirical materials is placed on the parents' and the teachers' views of the obstacles to parental involvement and how to overcome them rather than on the process of home-school mediation itself.

4. The results are presented making use of Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, symbolic power and violence, field, and the notion of doxa. Coleman's contribution to the notion of capital and Reay's contribution to institutional habitus are also made use of.

Part two

5 What the teachers say about parental involvement

This part of the study concerns in part the results of a written questionnaire with open questions (see appendix F) given to the teachers at the secondary school level, analyzed qualitatively. The teachers received information about it orally during a meeting, but an explanatory letter was also included together with the questions asked. The questionnaire was filled out by 25 teachers during the spring term of 2003.

The questions were clear and simple ones. Although the teachers were allowed to fill in the questionnaire anonymously if they wanted to, all of them wrote their names on it. Another data source was created by making use of a one-day in-service conference in which the teachers discussed parental involvement in three small groups. The questions discussed were what the teachers felt kept them from establishing a good working relationship with the parents and what it was that the parents should know about the school and its work in order to be able to contribute more effectively to their children's education. The teachers were also asked during this conference to answer the question of what can be done to involve the parents to a greater extent.

In depth interviews with five of the teachers and two of the school leaders were also conducted at the beginning of autumn term of 2002 and a second time in the autumn term of 2003. The material taken up in the chapter is selected to represent and illustrate the diversity of the teachers' views. When quotations from interviews are presented, the period of time involved is included to indicate to the reader of the source of the data. The teachers were not asked at this level to specify particular parent groups when they answered the questions.

How the teachers viewed and conceived of parental involvement varied. Some of the teachers considered parental involvement in terms of basically school-centered activities such as meetings held at the school, whereas others considered parental involvement in more home-centered terms. The teachers regarded willingness and give-and-take attitudes on both sides were regarded by the teachers as being important. The chapter includes the following four sections:

- Home-centered parental involvement
- School-centered involvement
- Hindrances to parental involvement
- Teachers suggested strategies to overcome those hindrances

Home-centered parental involvement versus the good parenting model provided by the teachers

The role of the parents was seen by the teachers who were interviewed and those who answered the questionnaire as being essential to the child's education and upbringing. Home centered involvement included both parents helping the children with their homework and their bringing their children up in a proper way. The answers the teachers gave emphasised the parents' role at home more than the parents taking an active role within the school. None of the teachers or school administrators referred to the parents being involved in any decision taking in school. The following quotations indicate the views various of the teachers expressed. Kent, one the teachers, wrote in answering a question about what parental involvement meant for him as follows:

That the parents take an active part in their children's education and do their best to help, providing their children support and stimulating them. That the parents help their children with their homework and what they're to learn, and that they maintain discipline and bring their children up properly (Kent, questionnaire, 2003).

Kent considered parental involvement not to be limited to the parents taking contact with the school and consulting the teachers, but as also being something practiced at home, such as through the parents helping their children with their homework, maintaining good discipline and bringing up their children properly.

Another teacher wrote, in answering the same question:

The parents being closely involved in their children's education – checking that their homework is done, reading information the school has sent them, coming to parent meetings and to consultations, asking that things be explained better if they fail to understand them properly and make their children behave as good family spokesmen (Maria, questionnaire, 2003).

The teachers' call for parental involvement in the work of the school meant a call for the parents to provide their children a better education and making them good family ambassadors or spokesman.

The parents should make their children understand that it's their children who are their family's representatives at school. There is an old saying in Sweden to the effect that children behave outside the home in the same way as they are accustomed to behaving at home. Despite the teachers having decided upon having teaching as their profession and being paid for it, it's not acceptable for pupils to behave badly in school. Also, it's unpleasant for a teacher as an adult individual, possibly having both children and grandchildren, to be considered by pupils (either boys or girls) as a sexual object (Camilla, interview, 2002).

I consider Camilla's statement that the parents should give their children a better education and that if the child misbehaves at school the parents are those who should take the blame for not raising their children properly. Camilla blames the parents of the children who misbehave at school, implying that if the parents give their children a good upbringing they do not misbehave at school. The parents are thus being judged by the behaviour of their children in school. This type of judgment may create more tensions and the assumptions taken for granted can be an obstacle to close cooperation with the parents. Moreover the old saying mentioned by Camilla is not always true. Children's behaviour is a result of different complex factors in which the parents may be helpless and have little say to the children because of their uncertainty of how to deal with the new system in a new country.

Anna feels that the home life of many of the children should be reorganized, the parents taking care of their children in a manner the teach-

ers consider correct. She also feels that the parents themselves should adjust as well as possible to the new society. She states,

The parents' should help the children with their lessons, taking note of the days on which a child has math or English, for example, and urging the child to complete the homework connected with it is important. The teachers' informing the parents of the value to their children that watching Swedish television programs can have, including those that are particularly instructive, such as certain sports programs, programs concerned with the human brain, news programs, and educational programme is likewise important (Anna, interview, 2002).

Maria provides some examples of mistakes parents make when sending their children to school.

It is important also that the parents provide the child with a pencil holder containing pencils and an eraser and that they avoid using offensive language the parents should know how important it is that the child eats a proper breakfast rather than simply drinking coca cola then. Too many of our pupils go to school on an empty stomach and buy candy, which puts an excess of sugar in their blood, so that one can even think that the children are hyperactive. These are just my spontaneous thoughts on how to get this sinking ship afloat (Maria, questionnaire, 2002).

This last account is a desperate call on Maria's part to save herself, the other teachers, and the children they teach. The picture drawn conceives of the school as a ship in a storm with calls for help to parents who become life savers at least in the case of this school.

The teachers seem to focus on the role of the parents at home and argue strongly for a better family structure in which the parents provide their children better education and better upbringing. According to the parent model suggested by the teachers, there is distrust in the ability of the parents in taking their responsibility. Home-centered parental involvement takes the form of the good-parenting model the teachers designed for the parents. The section that follows takes up different checklists the teachers designed for the parents for raising their children in a better way. There is clear line of demarcation between parental duties and teachers' duties.

Checklist on being a good parent

Mikael states that the Swedish school system and the courses given differ from those of many countries, that the children themselves are given a high degree of responsibility for behaving properly and that the schools are more lax in dealing with unruly pupils than is the case in many countries, as well as that Swedish laws forbid corporal punishment. He made a checklist for parents to follow when their children fail to follow the rules:

The following suggestions can be given to parents whose children misbehave (measures other than corporal punishment being involved):

Being forbidden to go out.

Not being provided any monetary allowance.

Not being allowed to watch television.

Not being allowed to use the Internet.

Not being allowed to use a play station.

The parents should be conscious of the responsibility they have toward their children, not only in terms of food and clothing, but also in terms of sending them to school (school attendance is obligatory).

The parents should see to it that their children go to bed early enough to be sufficiently well rested when attending school.

They should also see to it that their children receive an adequate breakfast before going to school (Mikael, questionnaire, 2003).

Regarding her views on a good working relationship, Annette said that the parents should understand and respect the following:

Their coming to school at the times scheduled for consultations concerning their child's progress in school.

The fact that the bringing up of children is seen as the responsibility not only of the school but also of the home.

Children showing respect for the teachers as adult individuals, a matter which also requires that at home it is the parents who steer their children and not the other way around. The children are expected to spend about an hour a day on their homework (Annette, questionnaire, 2003).

A group of teachers which consisted of about fifteen teachers during the in-service course day stated the following when asked what the par-

ents should know in order to become more clearly involved in the work of the school. The following quotations illustrate how the teachers individually or collectively spoke of such things:

- Boys and girls are considered equal and are taught in one and the same group, they sit next to each other in class and have to be allowed to talk with each other and to work together without being chaperoned.
- Memorizing things without understanding them is considered in Swedish schools to be pointless; its being regarded as better to adequately understand just a few things than to be able to recite many things by heart without understanding them.
- It is considered the job of the school and the school's personnel to provide children leadership, and of the parents to bring children up.
- Everyone, regardless of age, sex, religion or language is to be shown respect.
- Graffiti and the like, littering or spitting indoors and similar acts are forbidden, as are smoking, as well as destructive acts in addition to those just referred to.
- Pupils are to be able to get 7-10 hours of sleep a night, and they should also have regular sleeping hours.
- The eating habits of a child should include having breakfast and supper at home.
- The child's clothing should be appropriate to the activity involved and to the weather (indoors as well, outdoor jackets and coats not being appropriate in a lunchroom, for example).
- The same basic rules apply to all pupils in a school, rules such as those of being on time, of coming to meetings with a teacher that one has been called to, taking along to class whatever materials are needed, doing one's lessons, and doing what's needed to master the material (A group of teachers during an in service course day, 2002).

The teachers suggest a range of different things the parents should be learning to do so as to ensure home-centered parental involvement. The teachers emphasise that the parents' involvement means fulfilling their roles as *good parents* and adjusting to the norms and the values of the

school and the new society they have become part of. The teachers and the parents should be working together with clear goals in mind and with clear tasks for everyone, deciding what's to be done, leading and planning the work, the parents on their part should be providing support and motivating their children.

School-centered parental involvement

Johan remarks in the following way about the importance of the parents playing an active role in the work of the school and in the education of their children:

That the parents feel actively involved in their child's education and communicate actively with me as one of the teachers their child has. That the parents show a readiness to express their views on the education of their child. That the parents take an active part in preparations for parent meetings and for their children's class parties. That the parents feel free to visit the school, that there is a give-and-take perspective and that there be a willingness on both sides to work with each other (Johan, questionnaire, 2003).

For Johan and the other teachers, the parents being welcome at the school and spontaneously visiting their children is a way for parents to show their interest in the education of their children and to take a collaborative role.

For Anders parent involvement can be shown by the parents in taking contact with the teachers when there is something they want to discuss and not simply waiting until they get a letter from the school.

That the parents are actively involved in their children's education, that they come to parent meetings and to consultations about their child's progress in school and that they stick to what has been agreed upon. If there's something the parents wonder about or want to discuss about how their child is doing, that they take contact with the school, with a teacher or with some other members of the school personnel and do so on their own initiative, not simply passively sitting at home and waiting for the school to take contact with them. That the parents help their children with

their homework and what they're to learn, and that they maintain discipline and bring their children up properly (Anders, questionnaire, 2003).

For Martina, parental involvement should not be limited to schoolwork and need not always to take place in the school. She feels that parents and teachers should meet in other forms and should together show the children that the most important grownups for the child can always meet and have a walk or an excursion together. She also enjoys most taking part in activities in which the teacher takes a passive part.

Parental involvement for me is when the parents take an active part in the work of the school, such as to come to tell the class about the work they do, to hold a lesson on how to bake pastry, to demonstrate a dance of some kind, or to sew curtains for windows in the school. It's particularly enjoyable when parents take the initiative so that you feel you're simply a participant, such as when parents arrange for walks to interesting spots or for evening cookouts, things I enjoy taking part in but where I don't have to take charge (Martina, questionnaire, 2003).

Annette has a view similar to Martina's but she is more interested in having meetings in which the parents and the teachers can learn about each other.

That the parents are really involved and show a strong interest in their children and their children's education. That you can have a relaxed dialog with them, such as about how different problems might be solved, and discuss with them how schools are today and how the school system in Sweden works (Annette, questionnaire, 2003).

Home and school-centered parental involvement is important. Parents should to be actively involved in the schooling of their children at home as well as at school. Home-centered involvement is considered by the teachers as being more important for the teachers than school centered involvement. This can make me think of the teachers being interested in the parents helping them performing their work well at school. If only the parents took their responsibilities by sending the children to school clean, neat, tidy and well-behaved, this would make the teaching of the children easier. The teachers also spoke of different types of hindrances that made the relationship between them and the parents difficult to establish.

Hindrances to parental involvement in school

Cultural and language differences

The teachers made a variety of suggestions regarding how to bridge cultural and language differences. The Arabic speaking parent group and the Muslims groups in general were the parents groups that showed the greatest difficulties in adjusting to the school regulations. The teachers were at least indirectly referring to the Arabic-speaking Muslim parents when they spoke of difficulties in connection with the children taking showers and the girls not being able to take swimming lessons.

Some Arabic speaking families often use their religion as an excuse for not letting their children participate in swimming classes or attending Christmas ceremonies. They often refer to their religion to get their children excused from certain school activities that we consider compulsory (Maria, interview, 2002).

The Arabic speaking families are often described by the teachers in Crozier and Davies (2006) study of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani Muslim parents in England as being impenetrable and problematic. The parenting skills they preserved were called into question at times. The quotation above can be explained in terms of cultural differences that may create difficulties for the both parties in collaborating. Differences between the parents and the teachers, that can be in terms of values, norms, religion and tradition result in tensions that prevent both sides from taking the steps needed to establish a sound working relationship based on cooperation and mutual understanding.

Barriers that have to do with the parents and their children

According to the teachers, the parents as a group did not know Swedish sufficiently well, did not know enough about how children are brought up in Sweden, and did not know enough about their rights and obligations in Swedish society. Their having negative attitudes toward Sweden and toward Swedish can be obstacles to close cooperation between the home and the school. In the following section some of obstacles referred by the teachers are taken up.

Cultural differences

The multicultural school in itself is a problem. Having cultures of many of different kinds interacting at school every day can create tensions between the teachers and both the children and their parents. Paul states that: "In a school such as ours that has so many immigrant children, differences in cultural traditions can create problems in day-to-day matters." For Paul, who has been working at the school for more than five years, the difference in viewing how the children should be brought up can create tensions between the school and the teachers resulting in the teachers and the parents not being willing to take the steps needed to develop a closer working relationship. Tania agrees in stating that:

Limited understanding of the language and differing views concerning cultural and religious matters (e.g. the idea that girls should be alone when taking a shower) and some parents declaring that for religious reasons their children should not take part in certain activities. Attitudes towards matters of democracy are particularly a problem among boys of Arabian background (Tania, questionnaire, 2003).

Tania states specifically that the boys of Arab origins often misbehave and show a misunderstanding of the use of democracy. Religious matters are also referred to as being an obstacle. According to her, differences in the understanding of religion and ways of viewing democracy lead to a separation between the school and the home.

Mikael, another teacher who belongs to the younger generation states that the parents should not take leave of their children during the different religious festivities and considers that the parents should adjust better to the new society.

Although this is a sensitive area to discuss, Sweden has not adjusted its holidays to take account of those found in all the cultures represented within the country. Yet if one ignores that and simply considers the situation of a child of foreign extraction in Sweden, one can say that foreign-born parents should see to it that their children not miss attending school more than necessary because of the holidays in their own culture, and also possibly that they should consult the child's teachers who may on the one hand feel that a particular child could perfectly well miss being at school for three days in a row say because of a holiday, when considering how well the child is doing in school or may on the hand, consider it to

not be sensible that the child miss more than a single day of school in this connection because of the child's needing considerable help in school. One should thus think of the child's better interests. It has happened that a child has watched Eurosport in television or has been on the playground instead of in school without the child's chances of getting by in school being spoiled in this way. Also, one should think of the child without meaning by this that traditions should be completely ignored. Obviously, certain traditions should be adequately maintained (Mikael, interview, 2002).

Although for Mikael religious festivities can be an obstacle for him in performing his teaching as planned, he does not call for any absolute banning of holiday leaves for children on religious grounds. Religious and cultural differences have already been pointed out as being problematical issues in some respects, however, especially regarding girls' dress and their participation in different activities held at school. Tina, belonging to the younger teacher generation, sounded very confused and did not seem to know much about how to deal with these issues. She stated the following:

Sport and showers: Many of the girls are prohibited for religious reasons from revealing themselves naked for other girls, even in first grade. This raises the question of what should be done. Many native Swedish girls would also rather not reveal themselves naked for other girls but must nevertheless. Swimming instruction is obligatory in Swedish schools. It is given already in third grade. Some of the children, girls in particular, are prohibited by their parents from taking part in it, at the same time as some of the same girls may go around in very tight or skimpy clothing. What principles should apply? (Tina, interview, 2002).

The parents' cultural and religious background might be said to dominate the discussion. The views of some the teachers I had discussions with were more negative of the parents of these children. Things like sports and showers are often discussed even by teachers who are not teaching these subjects and have only a minimum knowledge of the behaviour of the children during these lessons and the attitudes of the parents concerning these matters. The teachers sometimes express a great deal of aggressiveness and intolerance, feeling that these old-fashioned traditions do not belong in the school.

Language barriers

Language was viewed as a crucial obstacle by most of the teachers.

It's always been my view that language is the big barrier. For many years, I've recommended our holding meetings in the respective language but no one has listened or shown an interest. Now I've given up! (Greta, questionnaire, 2003).

In my daily conversation with teachers at school, I noted that language was regarded as one of the major obstacles and the key to successful parental involvement in school. It was also considered often to be the key to mutual understanding between the parents and the school. For many of the teachers, language and cultural differences are related. Kent feels that lack of minority parental involvement cannot be blamed on the foreign background of the parents.

As I see it, there is nothing but linguistic and possibly cultural hindrances on both sides! If the parents lack involvement and interest, one can't blame this on their foreign background. There are many Swedish parents who are also not easy to reach. My experience is that most parents of foreign background are very interested in how their children do in school (Kent, interview, 2002).

Kent maintains that the lack of involvement in the school their children attend on the part of foreign-born parents can never be blamed on their being of immigrant background. He also declares that there are parents of Swedish background who likewise are not interested in getting involved or are not easy to reach. He considers language to be the crucial obstacle to overcome.

Parents own school experience as a barrier

Parents coming from countries with authoritarian school systems often have definite assumptions about how schools should be run and how teaching should be conducted. This can cause difficulties for the parents in adjusting to a school system that has its own school history. Camilla is aware of certain obstacles that may stand in the parents' way of getting closer to the school, she states that:

Many of the parents come from countries with an authoritarian style in which pupils are expected to show strong respect for their teachers and

possibly feel considerable fear of them. This is perhaps one reason for their not visiting the school to the extent we would like. Some of them are illiterate and have no possibilities of helping and supporting their children in their schoolwork. In addition, some parents are afraid of contacts with the school, since in dictatorships schools are part of the state and are thus something one avoids becoming involved in (Camilla, interview, 2002).

In my view teachers like Camilla is expressing an assumption which is generally taken for granted when she declares that the parents of the children are used to an authoritarian style of teaching. The low level of cultural capital of some of the parents i.e. their not having gone to school themselves or their being illiterate, is also an obstacle to their coming a step closer to the school and getting involved with the teachers in a meaningful way. Camilla speaks of the struggle between the old and the new and between the current school culture and the parent's previous school culture. She declares that parents holding to the old traditions, those of parents viewing the school as the business of the teacher and believing that the teacher should have the authority to teach the child in the manner that he/she considers most suitable and parents' viewing the school as an authority that belongs to the state, can also be a barrier to close cooperation. This has been described by other researchers as well (Sjögren, 1996).

Anna had worked at the school for a very long time and experienced many generations of pupils.

Differences in what one experienced while growing up and thus differences in one's conception of how teachers and schools should be and what should be taught there, are considerable. In Swedish schools one tries to get pupils to think for themselves, whereas in various other countries more emphasis is placed on rote learning. This can lead to misunderstandings and to the idea that Swedish schools are wishy-washy in what's being taught (Anna, interview 2002).

Anna believes that both the parents' previous school experiences and their views on how children learn best can lead to misunderstanding. The parents and the teachers can differ in their views of what good teaching is. Swedish schools, which emphasise democratic values and

want children learn to think for themselves and have the opportunity to question their teachers and also become involved in the planning of courses might be viewed by outsiders as not being serious.

Hindrances related to school

Time and resources

Language differences can of course be a hindrance, but they don't have to be. I'm afraid many of the older teachers are not as flexible and tolerant as those of us who have only worked here a much shorter period of time. It's important that the time and resources needed are made available for letting the school personnel attend conferences that the parents can also attend that aim at improving things. This also makes it easier to become acquainted with the parents and with their culture (Annette, interview, 2002).

What Annette states here emphasises the conflicts going in the school between members of the older generation, who feel secure in the earlier approach, and those belonging to the younger generation, who can be more innovative and more willing to try out new approaches. In my view, the matter can also be quite the opposite, however; the younger generation of teachers, through lacking experience, may also have difficulties in approaching the parents. The school may have weak educational networks, which can have a negative impact on efforts made to involve the parents in the work of the school.

Lack of time has also been considered to be one of the obstacles to a meaningful working relationship. Teachers whose schedules are filled up speaks of their hardly having time for inviting the parents to extra meetings. For Anders, the parents are welcome at school anytime, but he realizes that time to be devoted to such efforts can be a problem for many of the teachers.

The parents should feel free to visit the school. There should be a give-and-take perspective and willingness on both sides to work together, but I think that time is the big problem. We teachers receive new tasks continually and society is changing very rapidly. We hardly have time today to cope with what's going on in the school (Anders, questionnaire, 2003).

The teachers describe the obstacles to establishing a good working climate with the parents, both school-based obstacles and home-based obstacles. Misunderstandings based on language are seen as a dominant aspect of the relationship between the parent and the school. The differences for parents from other countries between the school system and educational practices one knew in one's native country and those in Sweden may be considerable. Lack of time, along with differences in culture and in views regarding many things, sports (showering, swimming), excursions, religious training, food, health and hygiene, and legal matters, as well as a lack of any common vision regarding the school, conflicts between the old and the new, the younger and the older teacher generation, all these can be obstacles to a close working relationship between the parents and the school.

Teachers' strategies for overcoming hindrances to parental involvement

The teachers suggested a variety of strategies for overcoming the obstacles mentioned in the previous section. Four main categories of these could be distinguished:

- managing the language barrier
- raising multicultural awareness in school
- the open school being a meeting place for both parents and teachers
- enhancing two-way communication

Managing the language barrier

Matters of language create difficulties, of course, but most of these difficulties can be overcome. Where there's a will there's a way. One can make drawings. One can have an interpreter. Some of the parents I meet speak good English as well. I feel there is always a way to communicate with anyone (Tina, questionnaire, 2003).

Tina apparently feels that parents' cultural capital and linguistic capacity can easily be underestimated and that language misunderstanding

can be overcome. Knowing that most of the parents in the study come from countries in which English is a second language, she states that it can be a good thing to have the help of those relatives of a child who are particularly good in English or those who speak good Swedish.

For some of the teachers, language difficulties seemed to not be a major problem. They emphasised the ease which one can use interpreters. "The only solutions I think of at the moment are the use of interpreters and getting to know more about each other." (Tina). What Tina states here is backed up by others like Johan, who states that

Language can never be a problem if one is seriously interested in getting more knowledge of one another, there always being ways to reach out to the parents through colleagues or other persons in the family network, such as older brothers or sisters who have learned to speak the language and can help their parents understand the school system (Johan, questionnaire, 2003).

Kent also speaks of the same strategy

Utilizing the help of a teacher or a colleague thoroughly familiar with the language spoken in the pupil's home. Close contact with a family can sometimes best be achieved by establishing contact with older brothers or sisters who have reached the age of being independent and who know Swedish, rather than attempting to establish contact directly with the parents. One can also invite the parents to come to the school together with their child several days in a row (Kent, interview 2002).

Most teachers described language as being one of the main obstacles for the parents to getting close to the school and for the teachers to establishing a good working relationship with the parents. The teachers suggest different strategies to overcome this barrier, such as through the mother tongue on the part of teachers, or of colleagues in the school, who speak the language of the parents, or hiring a professional interpreter.

Home-school mediators as language and cultural mediators

Interpreters are often used as a sort of *home-school mediator*. For some of the teachers, however, using interpreters can sometimes lead more to misunderstandings than to mutual understanding. Camilla sees this as possibly being the case when an interpreter is a close relative or someone who knows the family well and may be allied with the one party rather than taking a neutral position.

Linguistic problems of the translator sometimes being a friend or a relative of the family so that supposedly spontaneous translations are not spontaneous at all. Also, various matters that the parents should be told about may not be told to them at all due to the linguistic problems involved (Camilla, interview, 2002).

Another strategy that Kent and Camilla suggest is that the parents accompany their child and learn about the daily situation with which the child is faced by attending lessons and spending several days at the school. They indicate the need of *home-school mediation* through the help of mother tongue teachers and colleagues who have a better knowledge of the parents' culture and language who can help to get the parents more closely involved in the work of the school. He considers it important that the whole school becomes involved in the process of engaging the parents.

The whole school, the administration included needs to discover some forum or manner of dialog that seems natural and enables those involved to come in close contact with each other and discuss things, such as inviting the parents by use of the teachers of mother tongue or other teachers who speak the language of the parents as interpreters and cultural mediators (Kent, interview, 2002).

Sending continuous and regular school information to the parents of a child is a good way of building a two-way communication channel between the school and the home. Maria in speaking of *home-school mediation*, states the following:

With the help of interpreters, teachers of mother tongue and printed and oral information both for individuals and for groups, and being as clear and explicit as possible in communicating with the parents is a way of helping them to better understand the school as well as what and how we

teach the children, respecting the parents and explaining why one does things as one does, letting the parents present their views (Maria, questionnaire, 2003).

The teacher describes a range of strategies as providing information and having meetings aimed at increasing the insight the teachers have into other cultures and religions is a very constructive approach. Courses in Swedish for the newly arrived should also be provided, together with engaging persons able to serve as interpreters.

Raising multicultural awareness in school

Anna one of the teachers with long experience, had also developed a sort of multicultural awareness of the daily situations she is faced with. She maintains that teachers should be patient and not give up easily. She suggests a range of strategies that in her view can help teachers succeed in involving the parents.

As a teacher one must have patience. The parents are often more strongly affected by their cultural background than their children are. The most important thing for me as a teacher is to be well informed about the parents' views of what is being done in school, matters that for Swedish parents are self-obvious. An example is that of its being necessary for girls to shower after physical education classes. If the parents are not accustomed to this in their own country, it can take some time for them (and their daughter) to fully understand that this is not as dangerous as they had imagined. As a teacher one needs to have an understanding of this. By providing the parents, already at the start, with adequate information about how Swedish schools and our school in particular function, one can help considerably in dispersing any misgivings the parents may have about how their child will be taken care of. This is an excellent basis for continued collaboration with the parents (Anna, interview, 2002).

Camilla, another teacher belonging to the younger generation of school teachers, claims that having an interpreter available when they meet with parents and providing special courses for parents about the Swedish school system and the way children are brought up in Sweden need to be given high priority if a fruitful involvement is to take place. She also notes the importance of special training for the teachers in matters of the culture and the customs of the countries which the parents came

from. Camilla states that the teacher and the parents getting together and both learning about the other, is the only solution to the problems of increasing parental involvement in the school, she writes:

There's a simple approach I believe in. This is for teachers and other members of the school personnel to feel open to the idea of cultural differences and feel free to ask the parents if there's anything they fail to understand about Swedish culture. Taking a benevolent attitude and showing an interest in other cultures is essential here (Camilla, questionnaire 2003).

Kent states that continual meetings with the parents, special get-acquainted meetings and working actively to get over being afraid of cultures that differ from one's own is essential if any sort of mutual understanding between the teachers and the parents is to be achieved. He notes that "One can meet and discuss things with each other with the aim of discovering ways of looking at things that both have in common".

The teachers also maintain that the school and the parents should have the same goals, that they both have what's best for the children in mind and that they show respect for each other.

Having good contacts with the parents, meeting them in groups and letting them come to visit the class. This either being planned in advance or their simply turning up, making use of their competence. They can tell the class about such things as their traditions, their native country or their religion and letting them present their views on different things, go along on excursions, etc (Kent, interview, 2002).

Greta had a similar view. She said:

Reducing and bridging over any feelings of we and them (*the teacher and the school vs. the parents; my own addition*). Getting the parents to understand that we want to work together with them and that we have their child's best interests in mind. It is important that the parents come to meetings and to consultations about their child's progress that have been planned. Getting certain parents to come to the school several days in a row to see how we work and how their child is doing (Greta, questionnaire, 2003).

Kent and Greta both speak of basically the same thing. It is important that the school and the parents work closely with one another and that the parents show an interest in their child's education and how the child is doing in school, as well as holding forums or meetings of other sorts allowing teachers and the parents to develop a *We feeling*. Knowledge of the parents' views regarding the school and the teachers' respect for other cultures and for ways of thinking that differ from their own, are the basis for the teachers and the parents to take part in becoming closely involved in the children's education, its being important that the parents come to consultations that are scheduled.

Religious tolerance

Kent sees the opposite to what Mikael (see pages, 142–143) was quoted as saying about religious festivities, his emphasising the importance of the parents' adjusting to Swedish culture. Kent is more for scheduling these religious holidays in the school's yearly calendar to make the teachers' in-service courses days planned for these days, when teaching is not held anyway, than for making exceptions for children of foreign background.

Religious holidays: a summary of which holidays belonging to various religions take place during the school year should be prepared and be taken account of (some of them involving only a single day and others involving more). The schools could endeavour to schedule certain teachers' conferences on days when Muslim religious festivals take place (Kent, interview, 2002).

The parents' cultural and religious background could be said to dominate the discussion. The views of some of the teachers I had discussions with were more negative toward the parents than toward the children. It was considered to be highly sensitive to discuss with the parents religious matters due to the teachers expressing a lack of the knowledge about the parents' religious background. The teachers may take a step backwards once faced with parents with strong religious beliefs.

Two-way communication

The teachers made a number of recommendations regarding the participation of parents in providing support for the children such as in regard to their linguistic development. It was also felt that in order to involve the parents in the work of the school a clear and continuous form of communication should be established. Increasing two-way communication and informing the parents of things that happen at school and how the teachers teach was also seen important. The teachers made different suggestions of how this work could be done. Still, their implementation remained more an ideal. Teachers appeared to discuss simply the content of the activities to be planned with the parents, but not questions regarding who was to do the work and how it was to be carried out.

The school invites the parents to an “open house” many times during the school year in accordance with a carefully prepared scheme such that it takes place on a different day of the week each time so as to provide as many of the parents as possible the chance to attend.

Giving the children continued assignments involving their watching a particular television program together with their parents.

Giving the children many home assignments that involve the parents in one way or another.

Giving the children better opportunities than there are at present of loaning out books from the library that are translated into the language the children speak at home, books that they and their parents can both read.

Sending the parents information regarding equality of the sexes, including reference to UN regulations concerning human rights.

Sending information home to the parents regarding the importance of movement and physical activity and of how it improves the child's ability to learn (insofar as possibly tying this in with the current school curriculum).

Making the parents conscious in various ways of the fact that they are one of the three separate parties that have a responsibility for their child's education (these being the school, the parents and the children themselves).

Indicating to the parents that the school provides sexual education and explaining why (referring also to the school curriculum).

Informing the parents that the school teaches the children matters of religion and clarifying for them that this is an integral part of the instruction school pupils are provided with in Sweden.

Calling to the parents' attention the fact that the child's receiving instruction in the language spoken at home is regarded as important for learning Swedish properly (A group of teachers, on the 2002 in-service day, all of them secondary school teachers)²⁹.

Recommendations of this type by the teachers provide an indication of how the teachers struggle with certain difficulties in their teaching and how they need considerable help and support from the children's parents. The teachers appear to make it clear that the children's possible failure in school is what worries them most. These recommendations are all information centered and are directed at changing parental knowledge and commitment. It is very much part of a strategy vector of change that meant that the parents should change, the school being basically okay.

The open school strategy

By an open school, the teachers meant that a school should welcome the parents to make spontaneous visits to it. Greta had a list of strategies that she said would be appropriate for involving the parents in the school. She said that the parents should do voluntary work at the school their children attended and that the teacher and the school administrators should work together to organise the voluntary work of the parents a variety activities being involved.

- Viewing the parents not as a hindrance but as an asset.
- Education of the parents.
- Finding appropriate tasks in the schools for parents who are out of work (but not at the same school that their children attend, since otherwise they might tend to exert undue control over their children there, particularly over their daughters).
- Inviting them to attend lectures.
- Offering training in Swedish for parents who are in particular need of it.
- Having parties that the parents can arrange together with the teachers (Tina, questionnaire, 2003).

²⁹ My own translation

Tina thought of many things the parents and the teachers could do together, but regarding matters of the time she wondered whether a time could readily be found that would suit both. Although her suggestions regarding these activities seemed well-intentional they seemed to me to be also a matter of educating and correcting the parents in the first place.

Clarify what the current problems at the school are, have open houses at the school more frequently, invite parents who aren't at work to come and visit the school more frequently while classes are in session and to come for visits spontaneously, clarify for the parents what the damages to school property that the children are responsible for cost, and provide more courses for the parents (Anders, questionnaire, 2002).

Anders felt not only that there should be courses for the parents but also that they should be aware of the damages their children cause to school property, and that the parents should be given access to the school and be welcome to visit the school spontaneously.

Perhaps through letting the parents visit classes, more or less as we had it several years ago. One lets the parents come to the class for half a day once a year or once each term, such a visit being rounded off by a visit to the lunchroom for having lunch (Camilla, interview, 2002.).

Camilla told of a strategy used at the school some years ago that worked very well, that of letting parents drop in at the school being made part of the school for half a day and having lunch with the children so as to become more accustomed to making spontaneous visits at the school. Mikael thinks of meetings between teachers and parents involving activities that both can take part in, meetings that should come about in a very natural way.

Both we as teachers and they as parents need to take the responsibility for making the meetings both interesting and worthwhile so that both sides will continue to attend. I think more parents should be encouraged to come and visit the school spontaneously which I do with the parents of the children in my class, the parents coming and visiting the school several days in a row. While they're here they can possibly report for the class on how life is in the countries they come from including the music and the culture there generally, as well as how people dress (Mikael, interview, 2002).

The school often arranged different open house activities for both the teachers and the parents. Mikael noted that open house activities had also been attended by children without their parents. The children knew that their friends at school would perform music and that there would be some refreshments. The parents did not come, however, the fact which made Mikael and the other teachers became confused about what strategies and activities were best for encouraging parents to get more involved in the work of the school.

Summary and conclusions

Ever since the appearance of folk schools in Sweden 1842, parental involvement has been a matter of informing the parents how best to bring up their children. Teachers and school administrators have always believed that they argue for the best way of bringing up children. In most cases, the school teachers still believe that they can be effective educators for both children and their parents (cf. Erikson, 2004). The parents' habitus versus the teachers' habitus have a strong impact on the construction of the relationship (Reay, 1998b; Ribom, 1993). Major factors here are the teachers' assumptions that are taken for granted and are fed by the media and the public debate concerning the growing number of people with a different background than Swedish, their difficulties in adjusting to the system, and what ways are best for helping them get more involved in the work of the school. The teachers at the school develop a sort of institutional habitus (Reay, 1998b; Reay et al., 2001), one that may hinder the parents to become more closely involved in the work of the school. This can lead to minority parents being thought to have little interest in the schooling of their children and can be a barrier to their getting involved.

Parental involvement for the teachers had a home-centered character which meant efforts being made by the parents at home to help their children understand how important their school education is for their future. The teachers' engaging in a dialogue with the parents on how Swedish society and the Swedish school system function. The parents and the teachers each endeavouring to learn more about the other's culture. The important thing was felt to be that of showing the children

and the parents how things done in school and things done at home correspond with and influence each other, emphasizing the fact that the school and the home should not be regarded as two separate worlds.

The second thing felt to be important was that change be expected of the parents in particular. For the school to function properly it was seen as necessary for the parents to have a deep and genuine interest in how their children were doing and their providing them support. Such goals, to be sure, are not easy to be put into practice. The teachers appeared to regard the parents as a source of backup of what the teachers were doing rather than expecting the parents to actively initiate things themselves (cf. Crozier, 2000). The teachers described a wide range of obstacles that could prevent the building up of a good relationship with the parents and a wide range of opportunities for an open and mutual dialogue between them and the parents. Although the teachers were asked in the questionnaire to describe what they found to be lacking in terms of parental involvement, their answers seem to reflect in part problems they had themselves in understanding the Muslim Arabic group and the Muslim groups from other countries, in terms of the religious background, traditions and culture of these group. Results of this sort suggested the teachers to be taking a step backwards rather than approaching the parents and helping to get them become more closely involved in the work of the school. Drawing on the research of Lareau (1989), who found that teachers did not want to be placed on the same level as the parents, Lareau described the differences between the teachers and the parents and this creating an alibi for the teachers' difficulties in approaching the parents. Crozier (2000) found that the teachers expressed a unified view regarding a norm in the sense of what they considered to be a normal way for parents to behave. What Bourdieu calls *doxa* becomes obvious in the assumptions the teachers take for granted regarding parents of Muslim or more specifically Arabic background, since their culture and ways of doing things remained strange, and not fitting within the ways followed by the school.

The teachers in the study developed a sort of institutional habitus (Reay, et al., 2001) which led to their perceiving difficulties in approaching the parents, especially those of Muslim and Arabic background, who had a different world view than they themselves had. The

teachers suggested a wide range of activities for the parents to employ in supporting their children at home and also suggested and wrote down checklists for the parents to follow. The partnership model suggested for the parents is built on a model concerning good parenting. According to Vincent (1996, 2000) a good parent is one who is obedient and who behaves in a particular way in the school, in line with the expectations of the teachers. A good parent is also regarded as one who fulfils the proper role of a parent at home. The teachers' positive intentions in efforts to develop a good working relationship with the parents are embedded in a call for educating the parents to adjust to the norms and values of the school.

Language was an obstacle mentioned by some of the teachers but questioned by others in terms of its being particularly important. The lack of a common vision and the feeling of lack of collegiality between the new generation and the old appear to be a clear hindrance for a positive development in the school in general and for parental involvement specifically. Some of the teachers seemed definitely aware of the difficulties the parents of foreign backgrounds had and expressed considerable understanding for their situation and called for action plans to help the parents get closer to the school and learn about the school and its educational practices. The call for home-school mediation was described as a way of reaching out to the parents, its form and functions not being fully clarified by the teachers. In the section that follows I describe the parents' views regarding the teachers and the school their children attend.

6 How parents view the school and their involvement

ل: إذن كيف تحلل مشكلة دمج اولياء الامور وزيادة نفوذهم في المدرسة؟
ض: فالمشكلة هي الحقيقة مشكلة أعمق من حي منطقة مشكلة الكرة الأرضية شمال وجنوب
ل: نعم
ض: يعني شعوب الشمال تنظر بدونية إلى شعوب الجنوب وهذا موجود يعني سواء رضينا أم لم نرضى
أحنا دنحسه موجود
ل: أي
ض: على أساس هي الحقيقة لها علاقة بمسألة عصر التنمية الأوروبي يعني مسألة الثقافة الأوروبية
هي الثقافة السائدة في العالم (Dahman, interview, 2003).

This translates from Arabic to English as:

Laid: How do you explain parental involvement in school?

Dahman: The truth is that the problem of parental involvement is not related to this district or this town; but is deeper than that; it is about how people of the north view people of the south. It has always been that the people of the north view people of the south as people of lower status, and this exists regardless of whether one accepts it or not, and that truth is related to the European Age of Enlightenment regarding the European culture as the dominant one in the world.

Dahman is a type of parent who may have a low assessment of himself concerning his ability to be usefully involved in his children's schooling. For him, adjusting to the idea of close cooperation with the school and active involvement in its work can be difficult. Such problems can be compounded by matters of power and identity, gender and social position (Bastiani, 1997).

During the early stages of my field work, in October 2002, I met with a group of approximately fifteen Arabic speaking parents to discuss their views on their children's school and their own involvement in the schooling of their children. The meeting was held in the school. It was sort of an introduction to my project and my first data-gathering step. The meeting was recorded on tape and was later transcribed. The parents who came to meet me then expressed their views about the school and the teachers and also other issues related to the children's failure and success in school. A summary of the meeting was then translated into English and part of it is presented below.

Though the Arabic speaking parents expressed a strong gratitude to the Swedish schools and its teachers, they also expressed a lack of knowledge of Swedish schools and educational practices. They stated that they often agreed with what the teachers said at meetings that were held in the school, but that elsewhere they expressed a need for more information about the school system and the way their children were being taught. They expressed a deep concern regarding the influence of a highly permissive society and the effects that institutional and cultural racism could have on their children.

Lack of information and lack of knowledge of the system disables and weakens the role of the parents at home and in the society as whole. They are also disturbed about the effects of conflicts between the values and norms in the school and those adhered to in the home. For many of them and for their broader family circle, the problem is both that of the children losing their parents' culture and of the parents not knowing how to adjust to the society around them without assimilating its culture, which they are hesitant of doing. The parents also express their failing to transmit their own norms and values to their children adequately, unable as they are to integrate their own values with those that predominate in this new context, and separated as they are from the social customs of the countries from which they came. One problem is that their understanding of the concept of integration is vague, their tending to criticize the system for its claiming to believe in multiculturalism and democracy but its assuming that every new member of the society should shed his or her culture and cultural roots and replace them by new ones. These parents tend to blame many problems they experience with their children at home and problems their children have at school on differences in language, culture, traditions, religion, values and norms. Thus, conflicts and tensions

are created for the children both at home and at school. Often, the parents have the feeling of not being able to discuss with their children openly the issues connected with their living in a multicultural society, and feel at the same time that they are losing their children (My own notes after the first meeting with parents 2002).

The issues taken up by the parents that are mentioned in the above quotation need to be studied closely in efforts to obtain a thorough understanding of what hinders the parents from getting involved in the school and what tools could promote greater parent involvement in the school. The following sections concerns both the parents' views of what prevent them from taking a more active role in their children's school education and how the parents describe their manner of involvement in the work of the school.

Although the parents who took part in the study were of Arabic speaking background they belonged to a wide range of different social, cultural and ethnic categories, their also representing such countries as Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Syria. Parents from Iraq come from different regions and represented varying ethnic groups such as Kurds from the North, Shiâa Muslims from the south and the Sunni from the middle of the country and a few Christian parents.

The importance of the parents' previous school experience

Although the parents had different countries of origin, their description of their own earlier school experience seemed to show certain similarities. Their own school experience was important for them to understand the school their children attend today. In talking to me, they focused largely on material things such as books, pens and meals and also described the school curriculum and the way the teachers there have to adhere to it.

The schools in the home countries of the parents are seen as being an authority representing the state, the teaching being done according to decisions at the top, the parents' influence and role seeming nonexistent. The curriculum, the text books, and parents' involvement and stu-

dents' influence and special needs are things that the parents highlighted and the parents all seemed to have a similar view, despite their differing countries of origin. Bahia said the following:

The curriculum is not something to be discussed with the teacher. Everything is planned, and the teachers have to follow the state guidelines without trying to change anything. The students have no participation at all. They are to learn everything by heart and are not to discuss things very much. Everything is controlled in a very hard-handed way (Bahia, interview, 2002).

Although Bahia and Aziz belong to two different countries, they still express their views in basically the same way.

The school system in my country reflects the will of those sitting in power. The state in Iraq owned everything. The power of the state could be seen in every inch of the school system. Starting with the head of the school, regarded as the president of the school, who had total power, being able to dismiss teachers and have the freedom in his school to treat everyone as he and those in power want to (Aziz, interview, 2002).

The school systems there seem to not change very much. The parents can still see what they have learned themselves during their time in school as being what their children learn too.

We are used to a system in which the books have not changed for more than 40 years. The same books are still taught. The subjects are the same; the syllabuses are still the same. If your child is in grade four or five you know what they are studying. You can still remember what you studied and you can ask your child about whether they studied this or that subject. But things are different here (Bahia, interview, 2002).

Dahman who belongs to the same country of origin as Aziz, also described nearly the same problem. For Dahman who is a former teacher himself, teachers' providing of knowledge is a top-down process, neither the child, the parents nor even the teachers themselves having much to say about the type of books and study materials to be used in teaching.

The texts in the textbooks should be taught from just as they are printed. You cannot write freely and express yourself as you want, and the sub-

jects of the essays are also planned. There is a yearly plan which the teacher should follow and finish by the end of the year. It is very important and is compulsory for the teachers to finish the book of that level at the end of the year. They are responsible for this. If they did otherwise they would be punished. It is a kind of a mass production (Dahman, interview, 2002).

Bahia also speaks of a lack of provision for special needs. By this he means that children who have certain disabilities in learning are not put in special study groups.

There are no special needs at all. The teacher cannot choose books. He has only one book to teach from for all the students, both the weak ones, and the smart (Bahia, interview, 2002).

Aziz speaks of the costs of school materials, saying:

When I was in my home country I used to pay for everything. The books, the pens, and the school bag and even the meals we had to pay for and most schools were not equipped with a dining hall. Here in Sweden the children get everything (Aziz, interview, 2002).

According to Aziz, the system here frees the parents from their material responsibilities, which he believes can burden the parents very much and make them feel insufficient. Aziz says that buying books and pens in their home country was a huge problem for those families who could not readily afford it.

Nader speaks of children inheriting their parents' books.

In my country we used to have one book for the whole country. For example if you had a book in math it was one taught from to all the students in the country. The books don't change that often and the production of books is limited. Teachers are not allowed to teach using any other material. That meant that my son could inherit my books and use them (Nader, interview, 2002).

The parents in speaking about their previous school experience made me think of the parents having at least realized what differences there are between the two systems, their bringing up certain important issues

they had noticed themselves in contacts with their children's school. In the next section, parents' views of Swedish schools are taken up.

Swedish schools seen through the eyes of the parents

The parents in the study had made it clear that the teachers had always met them with a welcoming attitude once they were at school and did not show any signs of not wanting them to be there.

I have to say that the teachers are very good at this school and that I have not problems with them. I think the teachers are parents like us and want the children to succeed as much as we parents want our children to. They often talk nicely to us and welcome us when we are at school (Bahia, interview, 2002).

Bahia has a positive attitude and feels welcome to come to the school often.

When I first came to Sweden I was both surprised and worried each time I left my children at a school without a *fence*. We were very worried about how our children would be protected and thought the school could not be trusted, since someone could come and harm our children or our children could go away from the school without anyone noticing them. I often sat with my children and taught them not to leave the school area for fear of their getting lost (Aziz, interview, 2002).

For Aziz, the sense of trust he had from his own country disappeared in the very beginning when he had to leave his son in an open school without a fence. The school seemed to him to not be protected, so that someone could get in there and harm his children.

There is no lack of material needs in Swedish school

The parents praised the Swedish school system for its providing everyone the chance to be educated. At the same time, it can be said that the parents not being involved in the type of books the children study from limits their engagement in their children's education as Nader has indicated.

The schools here in Sweden have much more materials available and the children can normally get what they want too, although this is not always good. They learn to be lazy if they don't know the value of the things they get. As a parent I feel that I cannot say anything to my children because I don't know what type of books they get at school and how many books or pens they are allowed to get (Nader, interview, 2002).

Bahia was trying to guess how the teaching in his child's school was organised through information he got in the school he goes to himself as an adult. She said:

What I noticed here when I started going to school myself was that the teacher has the chance to choose a textbook that he feels would suit the level of his students. I also noticed that a teacher shouldn't stick to one book so much but that we had copies of many articles and section from other books and that we had newspapers to read as well and discussed things. This made me understand that how you teach is more important than what you teach, which is the opposite from my country, where what you teach is important but whom you teach is worth nothing at all (Bahia, interview, 2002).

Bahia's understanding of the school system came after several years of living in Sweden. It was something he did not know until he had started going to school himself and noticed the amount of freedom the teachers in Swedish schools have in choosing the teaching materials.

Lack of discipline in the children's school

The parents who had been in contact with the school did not approve of the fact that the school teachers gave the children the opportunity to do almost anything.

After having had our first meeting to enroll our children, we saw how the students ran upstairs and down screaming, without anyone controlling them or even telling them to be quiet. We didn't know who was in charge in school, the students or the teachers and the school staff. Time passed and we understood that this was a part of the process of democracy and the right of individual children to express themselves and take responsibilities on their own. We felt as if the children do as they want and no one controlled them. This system is very much different from ours. Children here learn to be free at school, whereas we teach them to be calm and

quite at home. I don't know. Maybe because we parents are hard on them at home, so that they just do as they want once they are not under our control (Abdou, interview, 2002).

Abdou expresses negative views about how the school lets the children do anything whereas at home the parents try to practice hard discipline. She also understands that behaving in that way at school is a part of the democratic values in this country. That would appear to be a misunderstanding which in my view many of the parents have.

I see that the teachers are not controlling the children and have no real punishment for them. The teachers should understand that our children are not Swedish and that the way they treat them is only appropriate for children of Swedish background. The children need more control and more discipline (Nader, interview, 2002).

Nader states that he cannot help his children at home by being hard on them when at school they're allowed to do anything they want. He feels there should be an agreement between the school and the parents on where the limits should be set.

The school is more than a playground. I don't think teachers have authority toward children at all anymore. By letting the children do as they want, they make us lose our authority as parents as well. Our children learn not to respect older persons in society (Abdou, interview, 2002).

Abdou considers there to be bad relations between the teachers and the pupils, through the absence of the authority of the teacher and the teacher's laxity or, more generally, the faulty functioning of the school. This is one reason for parents' considering the direct and immediate investment of their efforts on behalf of the school to not be something really called for. The next section takes up what the parents find to be barriers to their involvement in the work of the school.

The parents views on their involvement

The parents had different views about their ways of getting involved in the education of their children. Aziz felt that his involvement meant getting to know everything about his child's school.

My involvement means that I have to know everything about my children and what is going on in their school. I don't really know what's going on if I don't receive information from the school. I can't play my part if I don't know what it is. I have to know in this way what I can do unless my children can help me with this (Aziz, interview, 2002).

For Aziz, confidence in the school system means distributing of responsibilities. He expects of the school that it assures the success of his child. Children's failure, like the success, is the matter for both the school and the parents, as he sees it. Zahia agrees with Aziz and she believes that her involvement is not something she is proud of, so to speak.

My involvement has always been minimal and that made me feel guilty about it all the time. I don't know anything about how to get involved or whether I'm allowed to get involved. I haven't had so much contact with the school except for the progress discussion meetings, where we sit and listen to what the teacher tell us about our children. I often hear the same things again and again. I know what I'm going to hear. I'll go and hear. He's wonderful, he does this and he's good at that. He's sometimes talkative. Well I knew all of that. I sometimes feel it's a waste of time to listen to the same thing repeatedly, but I go there for the sake of my children. I want to make my children feel I'm involved (Zahia, interview, 2002).

Zahia's involvement in the events of the school was very much limited to the meetings held there once a term, which often seemed to her to involve mostly one-way communication where she sat and listened to the teacher without having much to say herself.

Nader looked at his involvement in a similar way, he said:

The only meetings I go to are those about my children, at which I often get information about my children's school situation. I have to say that about all they do is to inform us. They don't give us much time for deeper discussions of this sort. I had hoped the teachers would tell us more about what's going on in the school and would do this frequently (Nader, interview, 2002).

Bahia describes her meetings with the school teachers and her participation there in positive terms.

Of course I've always been in school meetings and not only that, but I've often participated in the different school events, such as Christmas, and in events at the end of each term and before the summer holidays (Bahia, interview, 2002).

When Bahia and the other parents speak about involvement in school they mean participation in the different meetings and the events held at school. The parents make a distinction between the lower grades and higher ones claiming that their participation decreased when the children moved on to the higher grades.

When my children were in the lower grades, we were like a family in our contacts with the teachers. We knew what the children did and had much greater insight into their schooling. We were often invited by the teachers and we had very nice times together, but now we're only invited to certain parent meetings and to the individual child meetings "utvecklings-samtal" (Zahra, interview, 2002).

The parents make it clear how easy it is to obtain good insight into a child's schooling when the child has only one or two teachers to deal with. Once the child moves to secondary school the parents tend to get confused regarding who they should build a close relationship with. Since the teachers have many students and the students have many teachers, it becomes difficult to keep control of things as a whole. The parents' lack of involvement in the work of the school has its reasons; these are described in the next section.

Barriers to parental involvement in the school

Language barriers

The parents in the study found language to be as an obstacle to parental involvement. Zahra had found it difficult to express certain things in Swedish, though she feels her command of the language is quite good.

One can't explain what one really wants to say in ways that the teachers can readily understand. You may say one word and then need ten others to complete the meanings of what you want to say. Then you may remain

silent, even though you may have much that you want to say or you ask your children to explain to you what the teacher means. When I get written information I often try to read it, but I'm not sure I understand all the words. My daughter helps me a lot but my son often refuses and gets angry when I ask him about what some words mean, I think because he doesn't understand himself what they stand for (Zahra, interview, 2002).

Zahra prefers to keep silent and remains a passive parent, although she has many questions to ask and issues to raise, since she feels this might weaken her position in front of her children, who might misuse opposition of this sort to their own advantage at home. Rahban has difficulties in asking question, even if important matters are involved. He said

I often prefer to not ask questions because of my bad Swedish. I'm also afraid of not understanding the answers. Although there is always an interpreter who can explain things for us; it's difficult to understand how the interpreter explains what I feel myself. I think the language holds us back a lot from taking contact with the school (Rahban, interview, 2002).

Rahban's fear of not understanding the answers often hinders him from asking questions. Even though Rahban may have some good suggestions for the teachers concerning his child, he prefers not to speak for fear of not being understood. Rahban's lack of language skills continues to limit his contacts with the school, his participation in the work of the school and his spontaneous visits there. Dahman explains this as a handicap.

I have often felt it to be a handicap to not have enough knowledge of the school and how things are run. My children serve as *my message carriers*. I rely on them to give me the information I need. I believe the teachers think I understood what they were saying, but in fact I didn't (Dahman, interview, 2002).

The language used by the teachers can be difficult for some of the parents to understand, which leads to parents like Dahman not placing much importance on information of this type. He sees the key to good home-school communication to lie in a clear and readily understood language that the parents can manage by themselves without asking for help. He says again and again; "If the language used is weak the rela-

tionship will also be weak”. The child often becomes “the go between, serving as a home-school mediator” (Dahman, interview, 2002).

Some parents referred to having received letters from the school that in most cases they were unable to read. The school sent out information to the homes via the children, who filtered it then in accordance with how much information they wanted to relay. Since the children were aware of their parents not being familiar with the educational procedures at school, they could easily take advantage of their parents’ linguistic weaknesses.

Difficulties in understanding the information sent out by the school

Language was one of the main barriers to building a solid link between the home and the school.

At the beginning of the school year, we often receive information. This, of course is often in Swedish. I remember the first letter I got, which I didn’t understand. I got a friend to help me with it. It was about the type of food my children were to eat at school. We sometimes receive information about vaccinations and things like that, but knew very little about how the school was organised (Rahban, interview, 2002).

Rahban says that the written information the school sent out was often not about the school system as such. It was about such things as the permission the school nurse needed to examine the children’s hearing or getting the parents’ permission for the children to go on an excursion. Zahia had received information about the school through friends.

When I first arrived here we got information from friends or from other parents who had been in the country for awhile. That was our source of information. I don’t remember any information about the school itself or about the teachers. When we were invited to the school, we only received information about our own child and only very little information about that (Zahia, interview, 2003).

According to Zahia, relatives and friends who had been living here for a longer period of time were a source of information, but they could

provide wrong information. Even friends who had been here for a longer period of time might be asked to answer questions that they didn't normally know the answer to. This can create confusion and misunderstanding. Nader, who often got help from an interpreter, describes his experience as follows:

It was difficult to understand what he was saying. I understood that he was speaking to me in Arabic but believe me I didn't understand very much. I started to speak for myself. Of course my Swedish is not that brilliant, but I at least could say what I wanted to, then I started to speak English and that was even better because I know more English than Swedish (Nader, interview, 2002).

For Nader it appeared worthless to receive information by way of a translator who in his view had done poor translations at a meeting that concerned his son having been involved in certain trouble, where difficult decisions had to be taken. The information provided by the school through translators is not easy to understand properly and can create more tensions than mutual understanding. What Nader takes up here might be also explained by the different dialects spoken in the Arab world. This language problem could lead to the parents leaving the meetings with more questions than answers.

The school as an unknown universe for the parents

The parents' limited access to knowledge of the school system is an obstacle to their involvement in the school. For them, the school is a different universe, one they lack knowledge about, which leads to parents like Dahman expressing his relations to the school as follows:

The relation between the school and the home can be compared to the distance between our home countries and Sweden; we are cut off and can participate neither here nor there (Dahman, interview, 2002).

This is what Sayed (2004) defines as *the double absence* of the migrant. Parents in Dahman's situation do not see themselves as part of either the current society and its institutions or of the previous one, which they no longer belong to physically. This makes their absence obvious, even if the matters involved concern the education of their children.

The social suffering and the parents' feeling of not being able to act as full parents is frustrating and can make the relation between the parents and their children at home difficult, as Aziz describes:

L: Have you ever felt that your child knows more about school than you do?

Aziz: Yes, yes, you put your hand on a very deep wound, which hurts every time I think of it. The truth is that when the children have more knowledge than their father and mother this creates big problems at home. I often ask my son why don't you do your homework? He often answers that he has already done it at school. I also ask him about his books, why he doesn't bring them home with him. He says that he left them at school in his locker. I often feel as if I'm not part of the education of my child and feel like an outsider who doesn't know anything about what's happening in school. This creates frustration and makes me feel like I'm nothing. Our children's information is always better than ours. This creates problems of low self-esteem among the parents and destroys the sense of confidence between the parents and their children. It isn't easy when you can't follow the development of your own child (Aziz, interview, 2002).

According to Aziz, the lack of knowledge of what one's children are studying causes considerable frustration and is a source of misunderstanding between the school and the parents. Since Aziz wants to share knowledge with his children and help them with their schoolwork but is unable to do that he cannot make them feel that school is important in the same way. The degradation of the status of the parents' role has become a fact and Aziz states that his children are running away from him and that his involvement in the school can be worthless if he is unable to acquire the necessary information.

Last time I was here I asked my child's teacher why they let her pass to a higher class when she can't read or write correctly, and the teacher said it is the school regulations. I asked, if there was a regulation to let children pass without being able to read and write, asking whether they don't have an assessment system. I think the school focuses on things like democracy, children's rights and gender equality rather than on teaching them to read, write and count. How can a child learn about democracy when he can't even read a short text? I don't want to distrust the school system

and the teacher, but I do wonder. How come Sweden is such a well-organized and well-developed country? They must have a good education system, but I must say I don't know anything about it. I'm confused (Abdou, interview, 2002).

Abdou states that the school cannot teach children about other values before they can read write and count. For him school is a place where children get access to knowledge through these three processes; reading, writing and counting. He sees a contradiction between what his children learn at school and the fact that Sweden is a well developed country.

Limited access to the knowledge of the school

The limited access to the knowledge of the school and its practices that the parents often experienced is illustrated by Zahra's case, in which the school did not inform her of her child's results in school until her son was in 8th grade, her discovering then that he was below average in several subjects which she had thought he had done well in. She claimed then that the school was deceiving both the children and the parents by not having revealed to the parents earlier their children's actual results. She was one of the parents who were not aware of the assessment system used in the school. She declared just as various of the other parents did, that if they knew anything about their children's examination results at all they got it from the children themselves.

Although I was in continuous contact with the school, I was surprised when I was told by two of his teachers that my son was not doing well. I discovered then that he was not doing well in any of his school subjects. A miracle would be needed for him to achieve as good results as most of his schoolmates. The information about the school doesn't seem for me to be enough. I feel the teachers should take their part of the responsibility for this, since I am not the one who evaluates whether or not my son has achieved good results. I must say that it was my trust in the school that led me to not interfere, but my son is paying the price for this now (Zahra, interview, 2003).

Zahra states that her trust in the school and in the teachers did not permit her to interfere with their work, even though she felt many times

that she should ask for more information, but her confidence in the schoolteacher prevented her from doing so. Zahra is one of the mothers who actively seeks the help and advice of the teachers. She feels that the school functions better at the lower school levels and becomes fuzzier in the upper grades.

The school is the business of the teachers

According to the parents, a lack of school-centered involvement is due both to the parents themselves viewing the school as being simply the business of the teachers and to the school itself failing to inform the parents adequately regarding its organisation and educational practices.

The parents believed in placing the entire responsibility of teaching on the school when leaving their children there, reasoning that: “once we leave our children at school, it is the responsibility of the teachers to carry on from there” (Aziz). He had like many other parents learned in the country of his origin to not interfere with the work of school.

In my country, once I leave my children in the hands of the school the teacher is responsible for them. I cannot go and tell the teacher what to do and how to teach my son. I realize that in a well-developed country like Sweden in particular, that there is no point to my accusing the teachers of not doing their jobs. Yet I feel a need of knowing what my children basically do at school and how I can help them (Aziz, interview, 2002).

Nader felt that the school and the home are two separate worlds. He said:

To me, teachers, have their job to do and no one needs to intervene. It's not for me to tell the teachers to do their work, just as they should not try to teach me how to do mine (Nader, interview, 2002).

For Nader, the school makes the distinction between the personal responsibility of the parents and the responsibilities of the school and the teachers. He makes it clear that there should be a mutual respect for the line drawn between what the parents' and the teachers' areas of responsibilities are. He does not want to interfere in the work of the school.

The teachers have the responsibility for our children and we trust them very much and should not interfere in their work. It is their world and we have our own at home. I think everyone of us is an expert in his area of competence and that there is no need to interfere in each other's work (Zahra, interview, 2003).

Zahra has a view similar to that of Bahia and does not want to interfere in the work of the teachers. In referring to her previous school experience, she said:

At home it's the parents who decide. In the school, the head of the school and the teachers are those who decide. Everything is decided on there and there's no space for participation or influence (Bahia, interview, 2002).

Bahia's previous school experiences still dominate much of her attitudes towards the school particularly when she asserts that the school is the house of the teachers and that they have the right to decide how things should be done there. Abdou's earlier experience with the school remains an obstacle to his spontaneously coming into contact with the school, doing so having been considered in her home country there as an act that brings "shame" upon the family.

We're raised in a system in which schools are nothing one can criticise, or if we do criticise them, we do that between ourselves. It is considered shameful "a'ib عيب" to interfere in the work of the school and of the teachers (Abdou, interview, 2002).

Abdou was brought up to not criticise the school or express his views about such things, which it was argued he might fail to understand properly. Schoolwork, according to him, should be left to the experts.

The ambiguity of the school system

The parents' participation in the schoolwork of their children remains limited to activities arranged by the schoolteachers and the meetings held at the school, which are usually arranged by the teachers or the school administrators.

The school takes care of everything, whether we participate or not the children will pass on to the higher grades. I mean, why bother, since the children have everything in school. They pass anyway, regardless of

whether they succeed or not. All pass on to the higher grades (Dahman, interview, 2002).

For Dahman the system itself makes it difficult for the parents to evaluate their children's school situation or to involve themselves in the education of their children. The fact of children not receiving marks in the lower grades makes it difficult for him to see whether his own involvement is worth anything. The children pass anyway, as he emphasises. For him, the system makes the parents lazy about getting involved in the school. He would rather see a school in which children take part in learning competitions.

The parents' absence from school. Resignation or strategy?

The parents declaring that the school is the business of the teachers can be interpreted as a form of unburdening of the task of being involved in the education of their children, a position that could be understood as a form of resignation on their part. There was a desire of the parents to avoid being criticised by the school for their lack of involvement, their sometimes perceiving such a negative judgment of their passivity as a threat. The avoidance in which these parents were engaged too is a form of defensive strategy aimed at keeping themselves away from the school world and protecting their identity. The mirror of the school condenses and focuses all the rays of stigmatising social perception that emanates from the residential space in which the parents live. In line with this, the question can be raised as to whether the parents' keeping the school separate from themselves, sometimes escaping or avoiding it, is due to resignation or to a conscious strategy perhaps.

For Abdou, it appears to be a strategy other than that of simply resignation.

We escape because of our suffering and our impotence as parents, not because of resignation. I prefer to not go to school because of my wanting to avoid being contaminated by the type of democracy in which children do whatever they want. I'd rather stay at home (Abdou, interview, 2002).

Abdou was avoiding contact with the school because of what he perceived to be his low status as a parent, and his limited knowledge of the school regulations and the educational practices followed. He also had only a vague understanding of the democracy that was being practiced at the school, where according to him children were allowed to do anything, his feeling that he does not want to be contaminated by a democracy of that sort in his own home through letting his children do whatever they want.

Zahra had a similar view. She blamed things on a lack of knowledge on her part. "I sometimes wonder whether going to school and attending the different meetings is worthwhile since we lack so much knowledge and don't manage without it". For Dahman the matter was even more difficult when critical decisions were to be made concerning his child's future. He says:

The teacher was talking to me about my child's moving to another class and she was explaining to me its benefits and so on. My son did not want to move to a different class. This put me in an impossible position, being expected to agree to something my son did not agree to. I told the teacher I could not discuss this with her since I had no knowledge concerning it. You know what's best for him, I said. Then I went, but deep within me I knew it was wrong to do as I had done, but I preferred to not discuss things more. I don't know. My son blames me for agreeing on it because he says he learns nothing there and they did this just to get him pulled out of his class. I don't know. I prefer to stay away from the school (Dahman, interview, 2002).

Dahman's sense that he lacked knowledge made him lose the power of making certain decisions regarding his child's future. He would rather stay at home than go to the school feeling unable to understand the different practices and regulations involved and what decisions to make. For Abdou the matter was different. He saw his going to school on his son's behalf as being worthless. He said:

Every time I go to the school, it's because of a problem with my son. I asked them to help me to help him. We sat and talked. They said that would happen, but in the long run nothing happened. Time simply goes by. There's meeting after meeting but nothing decisive happens. My son is weak. I know he needs help. It was not that he has it in his blood to be

a troublemaker. It becomes useless my going to the school when nothing really happen. I sometimes doubt whether they are competent in doing the job they have. They deal with my child as if he had some social troubles and as if we are not good enough to him as parents. It's not about that. My son is weak and he has learning problems. When other children work in class, he makes a lot of noise because he doesn't understand what to do. They put him in a class for children with special needs, but he doesn't belong there because he's a normal child and has no mental handicap. I don't know what to do, I just want the time to pass by to when he grows up and might possibly be good at something other than what he has at school (Abdou, interview, 2002).

For Abdou, receiving a letter from the school means just trouble and nothing else. The school doesn't have the tools for helping his child, and he has doesn't have these tools either. The school means trouble for him and the incompetent teachers don't know how to handle a young child. This has led to resignation on his part and he's become passive leaving everything in the hands of "destiny", as he says.

Bahia, who seems to be speaking not only for herself but for also the rest of the parents as well, says:

I think that what is problematical is that we parents are afraid if we criticize the teachers this will make our children suffer in school. It's better to not say anything and to keep away from school. We don't want our children to be blamed for our own involvement (Bahia, interview, 2003).

In my view, the problem is that such parents as Abdou and Bahia hardly attend the school meetings; they make no attempt to meet the teachers either spontaneously or systematically. They only go there when a message to come is sent to them. There are several factors that can help one to understand the type of involvement these parents show. The first factor concerns to the school as an institution. The parents of the pupils believe that their involvement would not be worth investing in. The school wants the parents to hear its recommendations, but it proves to be very difficult to get the parents to listen to the school's requests. The parents often have the feeling of running up against such a dense and resistant wall that the teachers feel questioned in their legitimacy and potentially blamed. The second is due to the nature of the

meetings. They are held by the parents being called to them, and they represent intrinsically a criticism of the family itself. The parents feel that the teachers speak more readily about the child's problems than about the child's success. This makes the parents feel accused. The meeting takes almost the form of lawsuit, especially if it is a question of the child's behaviour and of disciplinary problems, as in the case of Abdou. Finally, the meetings put the parents poorly at ease, partly because they remind them of their own failure in school, possibly because there is a strong ceremonial element about the whole thing. The teachers remain characters in the eyes of the parents, even if they themselves have lost much of their aura and also have become people just like any others.

Parents' views of what promotes their involvement in school

A need for knowledge of the school system

The parents ask for more knowledge of educational practice since the relation between the school and the parents is problematical if the school system appears opaque and complex. Things such as the teachers' lack of authority and other things that seem ambiguous to the parents can only be made plausible through greater knowledge of the school.

We should normally be familiar with the school laws and the different education practices, our duties and details concerning the children's learning and what kind of measures are taken if a child fails. The school administrators and the teachers should inform us better and more frequently on how children come into upper secondary school and how we as parents can help our children choose the right programme. We cannot wait to the 9th grade to get such information. I think it should be given to us from the first day we enroll our children in school so that we know what conditions need to be met by the child in order to enter good upper secondary school programmes (Dahman, interview, 2002).

Dahman has an awareness of his role in the education of his children, but still he needs guidance and greater knowledge of how the school educates the children and how parents can help their children choose the right programme for upper secondary school. Dahman doesn't believe in waiting for 9 years before knowing what factors contribute to determining his child's future.

Multicultural awareness

Multicultural awareness in school for the parents includes not only being aware of cultural differences but also aware of the parents' social situation, not only as parents of minority backgrounds but also as new citizens who have rights and duties in the society they have become a part of.

As a minority parent I am in a weak position and lack knowledge, and the school should realise that we are not here as tourists. We came here under difficult conditions and most of us still suffer from psychological depression and have lost everything we had. The school should be the leader in such action and it is the school that can pull the parents ahead and help them understand things better. As a parent who lacks the language and the codes of the society I don't dare to go to the school myself and ask. I see myself not only as an immigrant but also as a citizen and I want to know my rights and duties towards my children and how I can be a part of this society without feeling that I am of lesser value than anyone else. I feel the school should take the initiative to inform us parents about its work and about our rights and duties as citizens and not as immigrants. We believe that the teachers and the school administrators do their job very well and we expect to be informed so that we know what we can and should do (Rahban, interview, 2002).

Rahban does not see himself as tourist anymore and he believes in getting to know his rights and doing his duties as any other citizen does in this country. He feels he should receive information just as any other citizen does. He is eager to participate and cooperate with the school and feels the need of knowing the way and means for this and what cooperation should concern. Rahban would like to pursue his concern in particular regarding the issue of citizenship more than the right of being involved in the school. By this I mean that the rights and the du-

ties of the individual parent should be given priority rather than speaking simply of one's involvement in the school.

Protecting the culture of the children

For the families participating in the study, enhancing multicultural awareness in connection with the school meant protection of the child's culture and tradition. Discussion of the norms and the values of the family being protected or being transmitted to future generations leads the parents to worry that their children will be losing the parents' traditions and culture. The parents' satisfaction with the school does not mean that they dare not critically express themselves regarding it. For Zahia, the school has the mission of making the children lose their culture and tradition rather than protecting their identity, which in her view helps them become better Swedish citizens.

I see the school as making learning pleasant for the children but not teaching them about their roots and their culture. How come my children know more through the school about Halloween and Lucia than about Ramadan. I think the teachers are doing everything to mislead our children. They are wrong to think that by doing this they can make them be more Swedish (Zahia, interview, 2003).

Zahia expresses her confidence in the school yet she doubts that the school would recognise her culture and traditions and attribute any particular value to these. According to her, her children could feel lost if they were running back and forth between different cultures, which could make them feel they did not belong to any of them. Nader stated that his bringing up of his children reflects how he had been raised himself. He believes that it is difficult to adopt new methods especially when assistance is not provided for parents like him. He says:

We cannot raise our children in any other way than the way that we ourselves were brought up. The children go to school every day and learn things that we parents never learned before ourselves. My 12-year old son came home one day and told us, "I know all about sex now, father." I laughed and did not understand what he meant. I talked with him and discovered in our discussion that they had had a lesson in sex education in biology. The school should make us parents aware of such things and not simply deal with our children without telling us. We as parents should be

informed so that we can help the school in explaining things. This is a very sensitive subject for us and we are afraid our children will get the wrong information or misunderstand things (Nader, interview, 2002).

For Nader the teachers should be better at informing him about how teaching is conducted, especially regarding sensitive matters such as sex education. Children, according to him, might either get wrong information or misunderstand the whole thing. Rahban, in discussing the matter of democracy in school versus compulsory school subjects, said:

Why should my daughter take a shower with the other girls and boys? Their teacher went with them to the swimming pool and took her clothes off and showered with them. It isn't normal, it's not human. This is not the way we have been raised. There should be respects for other people's privacy. Although they talk about democracy, they require children to do things they don't like to do. I'm sure that there are also Swedish girls who don't like to shower with other girls (Rahban, interview, 2002).

Rahban does not think that because the school is called a compulsory school certain things like "swimming lessons" should be obligatory. He raises the question of democracy in school versus freedom of choice. According to him, there is a contradiction between democracy and the notion of compulsory education.

Common vision

The parents talk about speaking with the same voice, a metaphor often used to express the fact that the parents of the children and those who work in school should have a common basis for things such that children learn that the home and the school both support their success in school and their life in general.

Neither the school nor the parents can do the job alone. Children need their parents and their teacher. If we don't get together and speak with the same voice the children will do as they want with us. We as parents need to take clear command of the children, but the school should not weaken our position by telling our children that this is a "free country" and that children here can do whatever they want. We need help to get our children on the safe side in their lives (Zahra, interview, 2002).

Aziz tells of the parents and children having a common vision and a common voice. By this he means that the parents and the school should have a common platform for children, so that the rules become clear for them.

We are not interested in changing the school but we love our children and we want them to be better off than we are. We have not had the same chances as they have had to make our lives better. Through having moved to this country, we want to be able to give our children a better life. We're completely at a loss regarding school policies and what's going on in the school. We're interested in our children's succeeding in school and getting along well in this multicultural society. Since the children learn to live in a society with people from different nations they also learn to be tolerant and less racist (Aziz, interview, 2002).

For Aziz, the most important interest on the parents' part is to get the school close to the parents and enable their children to succeed and become integrated into their new society. Similar views are expressed by the other parents as well.

Volunteering

The parents wanted very much to help but did not know how. They were ready to invest their time in helping their children to succeed in school and in life generally, but felt that engagement on the part of the school was also required.

There are many parents including me who have very much to offer the school. We could easily start up different activities in school for both the children and the grownups. This would give the parents, the children and the teacher the opportunity to all be together. Most of us are jobless and I wish I could do something for the children and the community (Dahman, interview, 2002).

Dahman believes in common activities for the parents, the children and the teachers. He is ready to be a volunteer and to arrange some activities for the children and for other parents and teachers in the school. Bahia tells of her child's previous school, she said:

In the previous school when I was living in the northern part of Sweden, I conducted different activities for the children together with some of the

other parents. We helped them with their homework and had other activities for the mothers. I think the school here should ask the parents what they can do to help and give them the chance to help our children have a better life, both in school and outside of it (Bahia, interview, 2002).

Bahia is a mother who believes in the need of using the parents' resources and getting every grownup to help young people to have a better life. She said: "I need to do what I can for the behaviour of my neighbours' child, just as much as for my own child, because if the neighbour's child is doing something bad my son may sooner or later be influenced in this direction". Bahia tells of a social solidarity and the need of parents and the school getting together to give their children a good education.

Summary and conclusions

How the parents view their role and involvement in the education of their children depends very much on the amount of the school capital they have. By this I mean the amount of educational knowledge including knowledge of the school system and its practices, matters which help decide the degree of the parents' involvement (cf. Crozier, 2000). Parents with limited social capital and lack of cultural and economic capital often display a sort of resignation, not because they have stopped loving their children or stopped caring for them, but because they are afraid of getting involved in the wrong way, such that it could cause more harm than good for the child. The parents' views concerning the school system and their trust in it can become an obstacle in itself, as expressed by one of the parents, who said, "My trust in the school did not allow me to interfere". Thus, trust in the school need not mean trust in the content of the subject the children are studying. It is more a material trust in which parents who themselves did not get so much material help during their schooling value the material things their children get in school today. They tend to delegate everything that concerns their children's school to the teachers declaring "The school is the business of the teacher". This is also expressed by Crozier (2000) in a study of working class parents in England, with the statement that "Teacher knows best" (p. 61). The parents in her study regarded the teachers as experts who knew more about their child and their educa-

tion than they themselves did, which led to their delegating the responsibility for their children's schooling to the teachers. She found that middle class parents seemed to be more anxious to gain access to information than working class parents did, who seemed to have a resigning attitude (ibid).

The parents who showed a sense of resignation in this study can be compared in their thinking to what Bourdieu (1994) designates as "the resigned submission to being excluded" (p. 9) in describing the distance and the misunderstanding between teachers and working class students in higher education. Lack of knowledge, as the parents here stated minimized their participation in the school and made them less curious and involved. Knowledge is an important key to gaining access to the school world (cf. Crozier, 2000). The school has been described as a different universe for parents who do not dare to interfere for fear of making mistakes that could cause more harm than good for their children.

Vincent (2000) in discussing active citizenship and governing of the school, points to knowledge as a key component in citizens' participation. The knowledge parents gain regarding the organisation of a school increases their self-confidence, which in turn leads to their becoming more closely involved. According to Lareau (1989), however, parents' lack of knowledge of the school their child attends can be due to the absence of a social network and social capital that can provide the parents with correct information about the school.

The parents in the present study, in contrast to the study by Crozier (2000), did not go to school to get information but instead waited for the teachers to contact them and to the extent they received information it was often their children who transmitted it to them. For many of the parents of Arabic background in this study it is regarded as very "shameful" to interfere in the work of the teachers. Also, their own habitus does not allow them to interfere since they possess cultural capital of a different currency (cf. Vincent, 1996).

The children's parents remain excluded from the work of the school without a network of relationships that introduce the school to them. The parents call for a common vision and a platform to stand on that involves the children being spoken to in the same voice at home as at school. The parents' willingness to help develop a good working relationship with the teachers has its roots in these parents caring about their children, just as any other parents in the country do. They simply lack the tools to develop such a relationship easily. Lacking knowledge of the school and its educational practices, the parents try to protect their children against the school, especially regarding moral values and religious beliefs, which they often feel that the school does not assign sufficient importance to.

Teachers' and parents' views on what hinders and promotes parental involvement

The teachers gave various reasons for the parents not taking an active role in their children's education. They referred to such obstacles as those of language, cultural differences, and differences in religious beliefs, lack of time, and lack of a common conception on the part of the school regarding how it could get the parents more strongly involved in the work of the school. The teachers mentioned two main levels in which they felt the parents could become more closely involved: school-centered parental involvement and home-centered parental involvement. The teachers also suggested different strategies to overcome the obstacles referred to here. Parental involvement is first of all posed as a problem because it reveals the lack of resources of the parents, their lack of knowledge of the school system and the absence of an effective strategy, due generally to the non-schooling on their part. The parents often lack the knowledge needed to become really closely involved, their maintaining that the school is the business of the teachers, declaring by this a sort of resignation due to their knowledge not being sufficient for them to be able to discuss with the school and the teachers what is best for their child. The multicultural awareness mentioned by the parents meant in other words protecting the child from the school. The teachers on the other hand, call for an increased multicultural awareness but they also express considerable concern regarding the children being strongly influenced by their parents' traditions, and their

wanting in connection with this to protect them from their own parents. The teachers and the parents both discovered the limits of their actions. Certain parents missed taking advantage of the invitations sent by the teachers, failed to respond or did so with delay. It has been suggested by both teachers and parents that some sort of mediation could take place in order to overcome some of the obstacles mentioned earlier and get the parents and the teachers closer to each other. This is why, the project of home-school mediation presented in the next chapter was regarded as assistance to the parents to get better knowledge about the school their children attended with aim of increasing their involvement in it. The project of home-school mediation cannot be understood in any way as a means of solving the problems that have been posed.

7 The home-school mediation project

Introduction to the home-school mediation project

The chapter is organised as follows: First there is an introduction which includes various methodological reflections. This is followed by a presentation of the project, its aims and the strategies employed. Third I present the outcomes of the project, including the parents' way of getting involved, the activities they arranged and the difficulties they confronted. Fourth, the teachers' views of the parental involvement found during the project and the opportunities and the challenges encountered during this period are presented. Finally a summary of the outcomes and conclusions concerning them are presented, both Coleman's functional approach and Bourdieu's more conflict-oriented approach being illustrated here.

The home-school mediation project reflects the challenges and opportunities encountered in a research process in which participatory action research and critical ethnography are used interchangeably. The question of how best to engage the parents in the school itself and the work done to achieve this, are central to my research, in which an empowerment agenda is included and efforts are made to understand what promotes and what hinders building relationships within the community between the parents and the schoolteachers. My role as a critical ethnographer was to empower the parents, facilitating their involvement in the school their children attended. In contrast to conventional ethnographic research, in which the aim is primarily to understand and describe (not to change) the conditions within the community in which the study takes place, my role as a researcher takes a critical stance in which I become an agent of change. I was a sort of mediator who collaboratively developed structures intended to critique the situation with

which both the parents and the teachers are faced and support the positive transformation of it.

The school mediation carried out within this study is not based on any tradition present in Sweden, but rather emerged as a result of the parents' and the teachers' wishes. A call for home-school mediation was indicated as being a means of getting the parents and the teachers to establish a closer working relationship so as to overcome the hindrances already referred to. As described (in chapters 4 and 5), there were a variety of difficulties the teachers faced in involving the parents in the work of the school. Different strategies for overcoming these obstacles were suggested. The parents reported a need for emancipation and liberation from the situation they described. The need of a mediation project was suggested by both the teachers and the parents as a means of building a bridge for each of the two parties reaching out to the other.

Much of the work done by the home-school mediators was performed by bilingual school teachers or other bilingual personal (see Bastiani 1997, for example). Within the framework of the study, I will designate those involved in the project as home-school mediators, since the word mediation has more the meaning of negotiation than the French word "liaison" used more often in the English literature, which means "linking". Bastiani (1997) notes that home-school mediation risks falling between two worlds. The balance can be lost and those working in home-school liaison risk losing the trust of their colleagues and can be seen as too much in alliance with the families and the community and be viewed by the parents as too narrowly representing the issues and agenda of the school. Such ethical dilemmas are discussed in a separate chapter (chapter 10).

The present chapter deals with the home-school mediation project in the present study, what characterised its sphere of activity, the procedures it involved and its objectives. The data presented were gathered through field notes, photographs, interviews with both parents and teachers, and a questionnaire (see appendix F) the teachers filled out at the end of a parent education course. The data collection took place

largely during the autumn term of 2002 and of 2003 by means of interviews with the parents and interviews of two school administrators and five teachers, and a written questionnaire answered by 25 secondary school teachers.

The home-school mediation project—its actors and its aims

For reducing the obstacles in question and increasing the opportunities for both the parents and for the teachers in the sense referred to, there was a need of developing an effective program aimed at getting the parents more closely involved in the work of the school, a programme that required careful planning and was best done by a team of well-qualified persons with thorough knowledge of the school and of the parents' situation (Epstein, 2001). The project described and analyzed here was carried out between September 2002 and December 2003. The home-school mediators commissioned to carry out the task consisted of four qualified teachers who spoke Bosnian, Pashto, Swedish and Arabic. The basic function the mediators were to fulfill was to establish closer bonds between the schools and a particular group of parents in a suburb district. Being able to speak the parents' language and having knowledge of the country from which the parents came and of the type of school system they themselves had attended earlier was highly important here.

Our main role was to support and advise the parents on issues concerning the education of their children and to encourage teachers at the school and the parents to initiate a close working relationship at a secondary school level for children between the ages of 12 and 16. We also worked at raising the awareness of cultural, linguistic and religious differences. This multidirectional project proposed bringing together the teachers and the parents of the pupils through strengthening the ties and improving the communication between the school and the parents so as to benefit the learning and the school success of the children generally. The mediation seeks to mobilize the teachers and parents in order to better combat school failure, school violence and vandalism. The project was ambitious in its objectives, the means selected and the field

of intervention selected. As mediators, we were not expected to solve problems directly but to try to mobilize the families so that they become partners and actors able to support appropriate actions by the teacher.

The plan of the project

In planning the project, a bottom-up approach was thought to be appropriate, letting both the parents and the teachers know that their help was needed. This was a type of involvement in itself. A letter in four languages was sent to the parents in October 2002 inviting them to come to the school to discuss what they felt they needed to know in order to become more actively involved in the education of their children. Some 25 parents appeared. Together, we discussed the obstacles to such a partnership between the home and the school. We also discussed the needs of theirs, indicating that an evening course of this sort could be of help to them in becoming more closely involved in their children's education. An allied aim was to inform the parents about the school and its policies which could also contribute to parental involvement. A similar approach was used to get the teachers' views regarding what they felt was the source of the parents' lack of involvement in school.

After identifying what appeared to be the most common barriers to a fruitful working relationship between the parents and the school, we decided to try first to overcome the barriers that appeared most crucial. This was the parents' lack of knowledge of the school system and of educational practices in Sweden. Lack of such knowledge resulted in the parents having fears and uncertainties in approaching the school. The home-school mediators held various meetings on how such a project should be planned and carried out and how to meet the wishes of the parents. This also including the translation of different leaflets and producing a leaflet itself on the school system in Sweden and how the school their children attend is organized, a leaflet which was also translated into four different languages. We spent one term in planning it all and launched the parent education course during the second term, giving the remainder of the teachers the opportunity to become involved

with the parents during the third term, during which the home-school mediators were to act as a sounding board.

The work with the parents aimed initially at providing them with an introduction to the school system, making them more familiar with it, more accustomed to being at the school and helping them overcome any psychological obstacles to being there. The danger otherwise was that the parents could regard the school as a public institution of the same basic category as the police or the social welfare authorities, which they were often afraid to approach. The mediators were regarded as the school's and the parents' symbolic capital, due to the central role they played in implementing the process that was underway and the programme in its entirety.

The strategy employed³⁰

The team of mediators was made aware of the six types of parental involvement that Epstein (2001) has described, those of

1. Parenting,
2. Communicating
3. Volunteering
4. Learning at home
5. Making decision
6. Collaborating with the community

These six forms of involvement were seen as providing as a form of structure for the project. The parents needed appropriate information to become actively involved and for two-way communication to be established. The team also planned together with the parents in creating a parent-teachers association in which both the parents and the teachers took part on a voluntary basis.

³⁰ See Box 3.

Creating a process³¹ in which the parents took part was seen as one way of reaching out to them. The process included the different strategies shown in Box 3 and a variety of other elements. One element of this process was to make the entire school aware of what was being done to further parent involvement and giving the parents general access to the school. The school staff as a whole was informed of this and was alerted to the need of making the parents feel welcome and letting them understand that the entire school needed and wanted their active involvement. The school's head emphasised during several meetings with the teachers the importance of respecting the process and of everyone's working together to reach out to the parents. Even the janitor, who was seldom included in such matters otherwise, was informed. No one was to be left out. The overall structure of the project including the home-school mediators, the goals, the plan, the strategy, the follow-up, evaluation of the results and the economic resources available are shown in Box 3.

³¹ I define the word process as the different activities done during this journey to reach out to the parents; this included my role as a researcher and as project leader. The process included meeting with the teachers, the head of the school and the home-school mediators, collection and analysis of the data, defining the needs at hand and establishing the parent education programme and all actions taken inside or outside the school aimed at reaching out to the parents.

Box 3. The strategy employed by the home-school mediation project

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Home-school mediators and resources | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Four teachers including me as a researcher functioning as home-school mediators. - Languages resources: Arabic, Bosnian, Pashto, and Swedish. |
| Goal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The parents were to be encouraged to become more actively involved in their children's education and were to be provided educational opportunities furthering this, as well as guidance in doing so. - Reaching out to all the parents, especially those who were difficult to reach (reaching the "unreachable" parents). - A goal was that the parents should obtain more thorough knowledge of the school through the home-school mediators during the first term of the project. - An approach focusing not on who is to blame but on what can be done. - Emphasis on knowledge that increased trust and mutual understanding. - Helping those involved to understand cultural and religious differences. |
| Plan/strategy | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Establishing a parent-teacher association, one able to function as a new team to carry on the work in the future done here by the home-school mediators. - A parent-education course in four languages (Arabic, Bosnian, Pashto and Swedish) was planned. - Providing the parents multilingual materials (produced by the team). - Workshops. - The parents and the teachers should be introduced to each other during the second term. - Regular meetings with the parents (two hours every fortnight), six sessions during the spring term of 2003. - Inviting external role model persons and persons from various foreign countries who had been in Sweden for an extended period of time. |
| Follow-up | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Field notes, interviews, observations, photos and questionnaires. |
| Economic support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Partly funded by governmental support to schools in disadvantaged areas, particularly of large cities. |

Promoting parental involvement through the parent education course³²

In this section, I will present some of the outcomes of the project, concerning first the parents' and then the teachers' views on the project. The analysis is based on use of the concept of social capital and other forms of capital. I identify three important steps to promoting involvement between the parents and the school by use of social capital as a tool of analysis. The first step is to build formal and informal networks between the parents. The second is to use these networks and resources to increase parental involvement. The third practical step is the establishment of a parent-teacher association.

Parental participation in the project

During the first five-month period of the parent-education program, from January to May of 2003, the number of parents participating gradually increased. The overall group was divided up into four smaller groups each speaking the same language. At the beginning of each meeting of the class, the group as a whole usually met first for half an hour or longer to listen to a lecture, often presented by a guest lecturer, before splitting up into the four separate groups, in which a variety of topics were discussed. The number of parents participating in the parent education course increased gradually from 20 parents in January to 150 at the end of the course (see table 1). We believed in a slow type of process for involving the parents and kept talking to the parents who participated concerning how important it was for them to get involved in the education of their children. Despite the course taking place evenings, many parents came and were able to participate.

³² The content of the parent education course, including the dates, were already presented in a previous chapter (see methodology chapter 4)

Table 1 The growing numbers of parents participating in the parent education programme.

| | January | February | March | April | May |
|-------|---------|----------|-------|-------|-----|
| Men | 8 | 15 | 21 | 27 | 47 |
| Women | 12 | 19 | 28 | 35 | 103 |

Since the more long-range program, of which the parent-education program was a part, aimed at achieving a close working relationship between the parents and the teachers in efforts to provide the children as good an education as possible, it was very important that close personal bonds, which (cf. Putnam, 1993) serve as a kind of glue that holds together efforts of this sort be formed. Initially, such bonds could most readily be created within the four separate groups, each united in terms of language, yet it was important that close bonds likewise be formed within the parent group as a whole and between the parents and the teachers generally.

When you see that your neighbour who you seldom speak with is also sitting there in the same classroom and getting the same information, this makes you feel that both of you have the same type of problems, anxieties, etc. You feel that the whole neighbourhood has the same sort of difficulties and that they all seek guidance. This helps give the group a common goal and increases the sense of community solidarity (Aziz, interview, 2002).

Many of the parents we met during the project had often had the feeling that they were quite alone with their problems. Yet they soon discovered that they were not at all alone with their lack of knowledge, and they shared many of the questions with which they were faced with other parents in their neighbourhood. The parents in the study demonstrated a sense of community action, the whole neighbourhood sharing basically the same type of problems and being very similar in the same type of guidance they needed.

Formal and informal networks

To get the parents interested in the work of the school meant in part getting them accustomed to the school building and its walls in order to break the psychological barrier that existed. The group of home-school mediators worked together in helping the parents feel that they were welcome and were needed. Enhancing parental involvement has been associated with information and communication, access to it being influenced by conditions known as social closure (cf. Coleman, 1988). It is assumed that communication takes time, but occurs more quickly through already established relationships, and that information circulates within a network before it moves from one network to another (cf. Burt, 2000). The role of the home-school mediators was to bring the four parent groups together into a single network.

I often called my friends so that we could get together. It was a bit difficult in the beginning to get used to coming, but after the third session we started getting used to it. We often called each other and agreed to meet in the school. It became a meeting point for us since we lacked somewhere else to go to (Dahman, interview, 2003).

The quotation above shows how the parents worked indirectly in developing internal and external networks together with other parents and with the team of home-school mediators. It also shows the lack of investment in local, social-cultural meeting places. The parents were requested to spread the information in their neighbourhood and between friends of theirs. We assumed that the parents had their own networks outside the school and we emphasised the need of their spreading the information to all the parents they knew. At the very beginning, the parents who had agreed to come were called before each session to be reminded of this. They were also reminded to bring other friends and relatives along as well. This method worked very well and led to a gradual growth of trust between the mediators and the parents. We made the parents feel that they were important and that their participation and engagement could mean very much for themselves and for the education and well-being of the children. Coleman (1988) has shown how parents of children in a Catholic school who have networks outside the school can invest in these within the school for the benefit of the children and how the parents can easily come in contact with one another through network that are already established. The parent-

education course had become a source of the parents' knowledge of the school and of those who worked there.

Communicating information

The parents who received information from the school did not understand much of it. The home-school mediators focused on communicating the information the parents received. This new link between the parents and the school made it easier for the parents to both get information needed about the school as well as understand its content. Zahra describes the parent education course as follows:

Before we received information through our children, but today we can get it ourselves. This makes a real difference. The parent education course created a kind of bridge between the home and the school and gave us the opportunity to get the information we needed. Our children feel that we can also go to the school and get the information they once provided us with. We also know that there are professionals at the school who can give us the information we need in our own language. We feel more safe and secure about information of this sort we get from the school now. This is a very good opening and we as parents should not be frightened approaching the school and asking for the information we need (Zahra, interview, 2003).

Most of the parents came to our sessions after having received information about them from other parents. We did not keep sending new messages to the parents. It was through the first parents who came that the network gradually expanded. Their own networks outside the school were brought into the school. A group of Arabic speaking parents who had sent their children to another district to get help with their homework and lessons in their mother tongue decided to start their own activity at the school.

The Arabic speaking parents were engaged together with other members of the community through a variety of associations that together formed networks of many sorts. The team of the home-school mediators had known that the developing of networks would take place at a variety of different levels, between mediators and between these and parents, between parents and other parents, between parents and teach-

ers and also by guiding and linking parents with other activities within the school and the community.

Reaching out to the parents

Parental involvement in the study did not imply an immediate and formal exchange of a legal contact, but rather a combination of short-term altruism and long-term interests. The parents were told to act for the benefit of their children and of other children. The team of mediators who formed the main network did not serve as a kind of inspector and act on behalf of the parents. Although the head of the school did not understand much of what we said to the parents in their language, trust and reciprocity were often emphasised during the meetings we had. Without mutual trust between the mediators, the head of the school and other teachers, the project would never have been able to take place. The head of the school was a major source of influence on school improvement, on planning generally, and on the structure of activities as well as being a link between the school and community. His role was to serve as the link between the outside world (the community and other agents) and the school.

Establishing the parent-teacher association

A major step toward achieving parental involvement was taken at the beginning of May 2003, when 150 parents came to the school. These were largely parents of minority background, but also of Swedish background. Some of the parents who attended could neither read nor write Swedish. At the other extreme, there were parents who were teachers, engineers, nurses or physical education teachers, for example. This gathering resulted in the establishment of a parent-teacher association that welcomed the schoolteachers, the school head and all the parents as members. The parents, to show their gratitude to the school and the teachers, came with refreshments. A celebration was held in which all took part. Several days later, the parents and some of the teachers took a trip together to get to know each other better and celebrate the success. The sense of trust between the school and the parents had grown enormously, as exemplified by the parents being able to be in the school and have keys to it as well, without feeling they could be

suspected or blamed for this. There were also 18 of the parents who on a voluntary basis, along with several of the teachers and the Head, took part in leading the work of the parent-teacher association.

The parent-teacher association in which I am involved is currently arranging many activities we are in need of, both the grownups and the children. One hears of other associations that raise money but in which those responsible don't really know how to organize good activities, but I've really learned a lot about the work of the school and have met many of the other parents. We often heard bad things about the school earlier and had much prejudice (Dahman, interview, 2003).

The parents used to often rely on the information they got from their children, which was not always correct. Now we have the opportunity to get information in our own language, which is very helpful in our being able to understand the school and what the school regulations are. What to do, whom to contact and how to ask for information (Bahia, interview, 2003).

The ability of the parents to acquire social capital through a parent-teacher association was also demonstrated in a study by Crozier (2000). Social capital was acquired in relation to the school through the parents' networks, contacts and activities.

The community school

During the autumn term of the year 2003, when all of the teachers became directly involved in the program the school opened its doors to the neighbouring community and functioned as a community school in which activities were arranged for both parents and their children. The parents arranged a party for the teachers in the beginning of the term. Food and music were provided, and to make the teachers feel themselves as guests, despite their being at the school where they were employed, they were asked to enter by way of the front door of the dining hall.

The parent-teacher association also developed a new parent education course together with the teachers in the school that was given to the parents during the fall term of autumn of 2003, a program adapted to

their current needs. The parents and the teachers were able by then to readily discuss such emotionally laden themes as sex education, often considered taboo in such a context. The parents were now used to coming and using the school and being in the same building as the teachers did. This created a sense of responsibility and made them feel that the school was not simply for the teachers but belonged to the whole community.

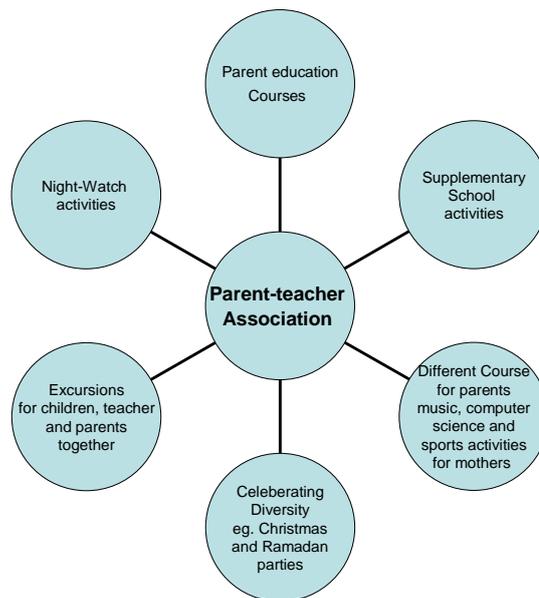


Figure 1. The parent-teacher association's activities

The parent-teacher association began immediately arranging activities at the school (see Figure 1), both for the children and for the adults. It also took charge of having the school open for various events after the end of the regular school day and on weekends, whereas previously it had been closed at such times. The activities arranged have led to the parents creating different networks associated with the parent-teacher association. Each activity of those mentioned in Figure 1 is a way of fostering the relationship between the school and the parents. The school became the place where the different types of networks created

outside the school met and were organised by the committee of the parents-teacher association. In Denmark, for example a similar developmental programme that was established earlier was based on the idea of the schools getting the opportunity to function as local cultural centers and to do so across boundaries. The experiences from this developmental programme led to the new Basic School Act in Denmark of 1993, which emphasizes the educational link with the local community (Høgsbro, Jochumsen & Ravn, 1991). Similar efforts to open the school for the surrounding community were also made in some school in Sweden such as Rinkeby school in Stockholm and Krocksbäck school in Malmoe.

Parents views about the home-school mediation project

Parents felt that the home-school mediation project was not only a project connected with their involvement in the education of their children, but one also that gave them the opportunity to meet other parents and to enable them to enter the universe of their children.

What you did is that you brought the parents to the child's universe, at once getting to know where your child spends his day, where the library and the dining hall are and where the children spend their break. Once I get inside my child's world while speaking with others about the school, I know what my children are talking about and the places they have been to. I'm familiar now with the whole inside of the school. My son often talks about spending so much time in the library and the computer room and now I know how they look (Bahia, interview, 2003).

The parents explained how their participation in the parent education course and their involvement in the parent-teacher association and other activities increased their understanding of the way the school works, and how their contact with other parents could lead to broader and stronger network. The parent-teacher association became the parents' source of information. Many parents got information about the school through the committee members, who spoke more than six different languages.

Zahia was able to get the phone number of the teacher of her child so that she could get more information. She was able to do this after having discussed with others the possibility of also contacting the teachers outside the school itself.

After the two first sessions I was able to ask my son's teacher if I could call her if I needed to know some more about my son. Yes, I did and she gave me her phone number. I had never thought it would be permitted to call the teachers of your children to ask them. Now I did and it works fine (Zahia, interview, 2002).

Zahra explained that there were more positive discussions at home about school than before. She said

We speak a lot more about school now, thanks to the activities arranged by the school and by the parent-teacher association. It's becoming a social project for the families to meet or to have a trip together. We surely need this since we live isolated from the rest of the world in this town (Zahra, interview, 2003).

The home-school mediation only meant not only getting the parents close to school, but it also became a social project in which the parents felt that they could meet and discuss other issues or run other activities. Bahia said:

This project is the best thing that has happened in this area. It's becoming alive now. We women often wonder where to go and spend sometime. One needs to meet other people and talk about other things. We can do here it now (Bahia, interview, 2003).

Parental involvement is first of all posed as a problem because it reveals the lack of resources of the families, their ignorance of the school system and their absence of a strategy, due generally to the parents' lack of schooling. This is why the home-school mediation project as presented is regarded as assisting to the parents, its being aimed at providing them better knowledge of the school their children attend and getting them more closely involved in its work. For many of the parents the home-school mediation project seemed to be a solution to the problem of their isolation and their depressed situation, even if the home-

school mediation cannot be regarded as solving all of the problems posed.

Parents from guests to colleagues

Some of the parents got jobs through the school receiving extra funds that could provide some of the parents, who had previous teaching experience and could speak Swedish fairly well, with job opportunities, all of which changed their views and their lives as a whole.

I had never expected to get a job either here in the school or anywhere else. I had never thought that there would be work opportunities for me. I came here as a guest to learn about the school and how to help my children with their homework and now I'm a colleague. Six months ago I was completely unfamiliar with the work of the school. Today I'm someone who has a key to the school. My children are more proud now than ever before. This project changed my view of the whole system and gave us parents a job opportunity and we hope through the parent school association to get more parents involved in the school's work (Aziz, interview, 2003).

Parental involvement entailed willingness to take risks. A major step towards a trustworthy relationship was taken in the beginning of the autumn term. Five of the parents who had participated in the parent education programme voluntarily during the term before were given jobs of various types at the school, including those of librarian and of being an assistant-teacher. This was a far cry from the fear of approaching the school many of the parents had felt earlier. This step meant a lot for those parents and their families. Some of them even celebrated this event by inviting all of their relatives and friends for a big family party.

Difficulties in getting the parents organised

The establishment of the parent-teacher association led to many parents getting involved in the work of the school. The association consisted finally of more than 380 members after a period of two to three months of work in the field. Although these efforts were interesting and the

number is quite surprising, this entailed long days for me in the field. Trying to follow my studies, collect data, write a thesis, and at the same time function as a home-school mediator, since the other three school mediators were no longer engaged because of shrinkage in the school budget. I was the only mediator for all of the parent groups, although two of the groups were more strongly represented than any of the others and dominated the parent school association: those of the Arabic speaking group and of the Pashto speaking group. These two groups had strong religious ties, though some of the Pashto parents spoke Arabic fluently. The work with the parents after the establishments of the association entailed extra paper work for me since I had to function as a mediator between them and the school and other authorities outside the school. This was time-consuming, but I had to do it since I had become engaged in the whole undertaking. Some of the parents had definitive views on how the work should be carried out and others did not. Some regarded the work of the association as their main job and might call me ten to twenty times asking about how to do certain things and who to contact in the school or elsewhere. Most of the parents thought that I was paid to do this work and they sometimes become angry if I could not live up to their expectation.

Parents keeping to their own ethnic background

The parents seemed to keep to their own ethnic groups during the meetings we had at the school. We could sit in the big dining room and there you could see parents sitting in different corners with their ethnic groups. This happened several times on trips we made together. The parents could sit at differing locations so that they had little contact with one another. Language might have been barrier for many of them in their efforts to communicate freely. How strange it was that the Arabic speaking group had difficulties in getting together as a whole. I could see small group of Iraqis, Palestinians and other small groups sit for themselves, whereas the children did not have the same problem but could play and get together without any difficulties, since they had the Swedish language in common and all went to the same school.

A sense of community awareness is needed to build up a solid network allowing parents to easily communicate and learn to live together. The

parents' lack of interest in knowing much of each other and taking everything for granted made many of those who were not particularly strong to feel excluded.

The work of the parents can be positive in many ways, however, the association arranging many activities for the children and grownups, but the parents as a group did not have the knowledge needed to integrate the tools for getting acquainted with each other. Some of the parents had spoken of a lack of fairness and justice in the sharing of the economic resources that the association got from the local authorities. This provided strong evidence that even though the parents together built the association and worked together to improve and develop its work for the benefit of the children, they still had views from outside and the bad reputation an "association" can have. The parents who were members of other associations knew that associations that have many members must receive considerable funds. Abdou said that:

It is because the associations out there have the tendency to raise funds and collect names to make the list of the members as large as possible in order to apply for considerable funds. The members often don't get anything back. It's those who sit in the committee that handles the money. There's a lot of fakery going on there. People are allergic, you know, to the word association (Abdou, interview, 2003).

The parents' previous experience had a strong impact on their involvement in the school. Each group wanted to use the school to their own benefit, ignoring all the others. Their thinking was often limited to their own ethnic group, their not caring whether the other groups got access to resources to the same degree. The fact is that even the Arabic group showed tendencies to differentiate between the different countries that the children came from. Parents who arrive in Sweden have often left their countries because of conflicts, wars and the like. According to them these conflicts often dominate their thinking although they are often silent about this and one can hardly hear them talk about it in public.

The conflicts can be religious ones, as for the "Sunni" and "Shia" Muslims or for other Muslim groups. But there can be political differences too, since there are people of differing political ideologies in their

home country and there can be ethnic differences, as in the case of the Arabs and the Kurds. This project took place in the middle of the US invasion of Iraq during the spring term of 2003, a fact which led to many discussions and issues and also activated old conflicts. There was a sort of ethnic hatred among these groups which appeared each time they started discussing religion or politics. As a rule, the parent-teacher association members did not bring up these things in the discussion held, instead focusing there on helping the children and spending time resolving ethnic or religious conflicts within in the school. The parents who were of Arabic background had a different view of the language used to help their children with. The language they used by certain Iraqi parents who assisted the students was not understood by the pupils whose parents were of Palestinian origin.

Gender differences

Some of the parents who voluntarily arranged activities for the children did not listen to the voices of individuals who wanted to destroy rather than to build. The mothers who engaged in the work of the association were more interested in getting involved in arranging activities than in holding positions of power. They felt more comfortable in that role and in their interest and engagement had showed a will to work towards developing a close relationship with the school. Some of the fathers had been more interested instead in taking positions of power and were more interested in taking decisions than in arranging activities. What I noticed is that fathers with strong views and who spoke better Swedish than other parents readily became an obstacle to other parents becoming involved in the work of the school, since they were the ones who were listened to most and wanted to get as much space as possible. The strong parents who were very active had at first not been very much interested in showing that they pursued a definite aim through their engagement. Some of them wanted to get jobs and others wanted to help with activities and get paid for this too, or to gain power on behalf of other parents. Some of them had learned that there was no work for free.

The teachers' views of the parent education course and its outcomes

Meeting children in the hall, I found their greeting me nicely and saying: "Hi! My mother was here yesterday! And she met you! You remember her, she told me that!". Some children are just happy with the fact that their parents are familiar with me and the teachers and that the parents can use the names of the teachers they met when they're at home discussing matters of the school with their children. This gives stronger motivation for the parents to come (Mikael, interview, 2003).

The teachers at the school were not involved very much in the planning and conducting of the home-school mediation project but they were kept informed during the entire period of the project. Some of the teachers thought that the strategy used to involve the parents had come a considerable distance, was interesting and functioned well, but that for the teachers further training in such matters was needed, so that they would see the point of the metaphor "bridge needed to be built from both sides".

It would really have been good if all the teachers had been actively involved. They emphasised the role of the school administration and those sitting in power, who they felt should devote more time and resources to such efforts.

The strategy functioned well

Creating a meeting place for both the parents and the teachers had been very important in getting both parties discussions of issues they did not have the opportunity to discuss before. This is illustrated in the quotations of teachers presented below. It is highly important to take an initiative in getting the parents to understand the need of a dialog being maintained between the school and the home.

Yes, there are certain positive tendencies. It's important to always support the parents and to speak of how important they are in connection with the school, especially those parents with small children. You meet some of the parents more often than others and those who participate seem to have learned something (Camilla, interview, 2003).

The teachers agreed that the strategy of involving the parents functioned well and that it made it possible to meet with them under relaxed conditions. It was also noted that it gave the parents the possibility of getting to know what they thought about other parents, as well as about the school administration and how teaching is conducted. This stimulated the desire on both sides to discuss and reflect on things.

It's a good approach. Meeting with each other under pleasant conditions makes it easier to take up sensitive issues. Knowing what the other party wants helps establish a sense of trust and makes one feel secure (Mikael, questionnaire, 2003).

Yet Johan felt that more emphasis on minority parents meeting with Swedish-born parents was needed.

Fine, but if anyone can think of any other methods that are good, these should be made use of too, since the immigrants wish there would be more Swedish parents there, for example. Also, more emphasis should be placed on the fact that it's within the framework of Swedish society that the children are going to school. This should be considered as the starting point here (Anders, questionnaire, 2003).

The need for cooperation with the local community was mentioned, and the need of helping the parents see the school as an institution integrated with the rest of the community.

It's fine with parent meetings, although in order to achieve maximum concentration it's best that children not be brought along. The themes taken up in the evening meetings have been worthwhile, although it would be nice to have more speakers from outside (such as police, social workers and physicians) (Tina, questionnaire, 2003).

Tina's view was shared by Camilla

It's all right, but I think that the contacts and the collaboration should be increased somewhat, for example by open houses being more frequent, say three of them per term, and by providing the possibility of the parents coming and listening to what the different teachers say about how and what they teach and as many parents as possible attending (Camilla, interview, 2003).

New strategies were suggested, in addition to that of involving the local community in the school such as arranging open houses so as to get close to the parents, and increasing the parents' knowledge of how the teaching is done. This could in my view be a step toward a stronger parental involvement in the education of their children, since the parents stated that their knowledge of how the teaching was done was at a minimum.

A closer engagement of the school administration

The teachers stated that the school head and his assistants should be engaged to a greater extent in involving the parents in the school and that a plan should be set up to gain better insight into the home-school mediators' project.

I think it's really a brilliant idea, but the school administration hasn't taken full advantage of it. I wish a whole day for a completely open discussion of it all could have been planned. I think that the teachers need to learn more about the parents, now that the parents are here (Anna, interview, 2003).

Kent agrees fully with Anna and added that the project had not gotten the attention it should have. He expressed a need for showing the mediators involved more respect for their efforts so as to help the parents become better acquainted with the school and receiving information they might have missed earlier.

Yes, but the changes would have been much greater if the administration had utilized more effectively the resource that the course represents and had shown those who were giving the course more respect (Kent, questionnaire, 2003).

When the teachers' emphasized the role of the school administrators in connection with the issue of parental involvement this raised the issue of "back passing". No one in the school appeared to want to keep this issue in his/her hands, as though it was always someone else who was not doing his/her job. In this sense the teachers could be seen to free themselves from any responsibility for parental involvement, consider-

ing the failure to get the parents involved in the work of the school as not being their fault. Similar observations have been made by Bunar (2001) for example.

The parents' involvement as seen by the teachers after the establishment of parent-teacher association

Views on parental involvement differed. The teachers did not notice as much change as the parents did and felt unable to evaluate the results for them at an early stage, but they were very positive to actions of this type being taken to establish a good working relationship between the parents and the school. Some of the teachers stated that the parents of the children they had in their in classes were not more strongly involved than earlier, simply because of their having taken part in the home-school mediation project.

The eight single parents I have contact with (in six cases immigrants and in two cases native Swedes) who represent the group I advise have not become more engaged in things than they were earlier, but I don't think either that they've attended any of the meetings of the parents-teacher association (Maria, questionnaire, 2003).

The involvement of the parents in the school during the course of the project was facilitated very much by their participation in the parent education course. Those parents who did not take part in it had far less knowledge of what was going on in the school. Some of the teachers felt as though they were in a strange and different world while being with the parents and that they needed more knowledge than they had in order to become integrated with the parent group.

It's good that certain parents come to the school who might otherwise not have dared to come, and yet I don't feel completely at home in the large group meetings. There I feel as though I needed to be integrated somehow (Annette, questionnaire, 2003).

Some of parents the teachers met were ones who normally stayed at home and did not dare to come to the school. When teachers met parents of the children whom they normally don't teach, this served to strengthen the social bonds between the parents and the teachers and to

provide opportunities for further meetings that both parties experienced as positive.

This view was shared by several of the teachers, one of whom said,

Yes I have noticed it. The climate of the contacts between the teachers and the parents of the children has improved. There are more of the parents now who show an attitude of openness and display a stronger interest in their children's schoolwork than they did just a few years ago (Martina, questionnaire, 2003).

Rome was not built in a day

Kent thought that there were a few of the parents who had become considerably more involved than the others. He said: "Unfortunately not as much difference as one could hope for. There are a few of the parents who've become strongly involved and can be seen here all the time". A change had somehow occurred and could be seen to some extent. Annette felt it was too early to see changes or to clearly detect progress in parental involvement. "Unfortunately, it's often those parents who are most in need of coming to the school who stay at home, regardless of whether it's a meeting or a party that has been announced". This view was shared by other teachers, such as Camilla:

I think the slight progress I can note can very well be due to the fact that the parents know me better now than they did at the start. I think it's too early to be able to identify changes that the parent training program has clearly brought about (Camilla, interview, 2003).

Rome was not built in a day. It takes time to get the parents involved and to get them to know their rights and duties, what to do, who to contact and how contact between the home and the school functions in a country like Sweden, Kent declared:

As I said earlier, it's mostly the parents of children for whom things function as they should who attend the meetings that are held, whereas parents with children who are troublemakers generally don't come. I haven't heard anything negative about the parents' association and have heard that many parents take part, which is a good sign in itself (Kent, interview, 2003).

The teachers appeared to believe that the parents needed first to have acclimatised themselves to life in Sweden in order to be able to profit adequately from information about the school and the Swedish system generally and to get involved. They were positive toward learning about Swedish schools but were too much taken up with their efforts to manage all right when confronted with a new country, a new language, culturally-oriented childcare and a new school system to be able to take advantage of such information adequately. Information alone is not enough. The parents need to get a genuine opportunity to become involved in the work of the school.

The teacher's views of the parents' access to the school

After all of the parents felt safe in coming to the school and a sort of trust had grown up through their contacts with us, I think that we at the school became aware of the similarities we have, because I think we have the same values and norms, even though we may belong to different worlds. We all want these young people to succeed in school and in their lives afterwards. When we show respect for one another and treat each other as grownups, we achieve better results. I think it's a matter of how we view one another. It doesn't matter which religion or culture one has. I think it's not simply the teachers who became aware of this, I think the parents too have realized that there's no difference really between us (Tina, questionnaire, 2003).

As this quotation and others illustrate, the school is a place where the shaping of attitudes and the communication of knowledge are pursued in an explicit way over an extended period of time, and it is also a place where the most important grownups in the children's lives can meet and discuss common problems.

It's a great thing that's happened in our school, our getting to meet more and more of the parent. The school is alive after three o'clock in the afternoon and during the weekends, which is just how the school should be used. The trust that the school has shown toward these parents by giving them the keys to the school is an enormous step towards achieving, "an open school" (Anna, interview, 2003).

Certain teachers felt that the idea of a community school was somehow being lived. The school having opened its doors to the parents made the school function as a social-cultural meeting place for the parents in the district. Teachers, who were used to seeing the lights of the school switched off after leaving at the end of the day started to see the school being used by the parents and the children for different events. The parents getting access to the school and getting jobs there was not a dance on roses, however. Many questions needed to be asked for an adequate answer to be obtained.

The teachers were no longer free to talk about the pupils

The teachers had mixed views. They felt that having the parents there was a positive step towards democracy, at the same time as they also felt that they to a certain extent were losing ground. The parents being at school required that they needed to be more careful in talking about the children, through fear of their being blamed for spreading information about the children that should not be spread.

The quotations that follow are from interviews with various teachers after the establishment of the parent school association and parental access to the school. I let these teachers express their views about what they thought were the problems in having the parents there at the school.

It's good having the parents present at school, but it's sometimes a bit difficult to talk about the children that they know, in view of work policies and matters of confidentiality. We're not sure that the parents can keep what we talk about at school within the school walls. It's difficult to judge (Camilla, interview, 2003).

The problem is that we can no longer talk freely about the pupils at school. We don't know whether the parents keep what we say within the school walls or tell it to the parents of the other children. Many of the girls are complaining about the presence of their parents during the school day. They see this as limiting their freedom of dressing and acting like other girls (Annette, interview, 2003).

I don't think it's a good idea to let the parents use the school. Look we have to clean up their mess every Monday after they've been here on Sundays. Things are disappearing and we can no longer afford to get new pens and pencils. There should be limits set to the parents' involvement in the school (Maria, interview, 2003).

Parents should be kept out of the school

The parents who had direct access to the school during daytime were those in particular who were offered jobs there. These parents created problems for the rest of the school staff through their being both parents and colleagues, at the same time as they were colleagues who some months before had been unknown to them, being only part of the neighbourhood. These parents had direct access to the school where the children spent their school hours during the day. Complaints of the sort just referred to led to some of the teachers and other school staffs members being critical toward the idea of letting the parents work at the school and use the school facilities.

There are so many people here, it's difficult to know who's a parent and who isn't. It's also difficult to know the role of the new parent association in our school. Those parents who get jobs here are very helpful, but we need to teach them the policies that apply in our school. Some pupils complain of their parents being informed about things through those parents who are working at the school. This causes problems for them at home especially for the girls (Mikeal, Interview, 2003).

Parents being present at the school become defined by the teachers as a problem for their children. Anders heard daily of the damage the parents had caused since they had become involved and he tried to see the benefits of the parents being present at the school.

One hears complaints every day about the parents misusing the school facilities, but one should look at the other side of the coin too. The coin has two sides, of course, but people often tend to see only side of it. I suppose you could say that this process is more about opening people's minds than about opening doors (Anders, interview, 2003).

The parents becoming much more active and engaged in the work of the school was described as representing too much involvement. It was

said that parental involvement should support the work of the school not disturb it. The teachers did not wait long before starting to discuss the negative influence of parental involvement on the school and how the parents could be kept away, their expressing a desire to protect the students, especially the girls.

Exiting the field

Once the time had come to leave the field I started to feel myself a stranger in my own school and I felt that the teachers had begun to see me as someone who was more allied with the parents. The whole process turned out to be very complicated. I felt it was time to leave the field since things began to go the wrong way and I was afraid of bringing harm to those who were participating. I decided then to break off what was being done. I have to accept the fact of disturbing the peace of the school. As a teacher put it, "You've been disturbing the peace of the school by getting the parents involved". Some of the teachers who complained never attended any of the evening courses or any of the activities the parents arranged. They had also been complaining of the majority of the parents involved being of Arabic background rather than other nationalities being involved. I had to define my research questions for them several times.

The key to school power

During the autumn term of 2004, all of the parental activities that had been arranged at the school were banned, which meant that the parents had to find some other place in the neighbourhood or some other district to send their children to if they were to be able to give them the help they wanted to give them.

We are positive to the school being used for after-school activities by the parent-teacher association, for example. But this must be arranged under accepted forms and at times that have been decided on. Rules concerning how classrooms and other materials should be used are very important, as well as principles for cleaning up and putting back the materials that have been used where they belong. We request that Mr. X and Mr. Y collect all the alarm keys and main keys that are circulating (Meeting of the school leaders Aug. 1, 2004).

During the autumn term of 2004 the school head left his job. Three of his previous assistants took over the tasks he had had. Without their having even discussed the matter with the committee of the parent-teacher association, they made the decision to close down the school for all the activities that had been taking place there. The parents could not continue to use the school as they had been doing and the trust that had been built up during the previous year and a half was destroyed.

The earlier image of a school that was characterised by openness, trust and mutual respect was replaced by a new image characterised by a one way exercise of power in which the new school leaders decided that the school keys would only be available to the school porter. The parent education courses and the other activities that had been the basis for the parents' involvement in the school were frozen down. This illustrates how easy it is both to build trust and get the parents to the school and how difficult it is to keep such efforts going, especially in the present case after the disappearance of the home-school mediators. The positive social cohesion that had marked the district in the form of social capital, where the parents could together arrange for "night watching activities" and other activities for young people in and outside the school turned to distrust against the school and toward the system. The parents, except for only one of those who had been offered jobs earlier had to leave these jobs because of shrinkage of the school budget. The whole process started to be similar in appearance to the end of a "forced" or "arranged" marriage, in which one partner or both were not satisfied with the other but were forced to marry, all of this ending up finally in divorce.

Summary and conclusion

Various factors can interact to make it easier for parents to approach the school and to facilitate establishment of an active parent-teacher association, or a network of this sort, involving mutual trust and reciprocity. The basis for the parents' involvement in the education of their children can be created and strengthened in this way. The present study illustrates how home-school mediators with a carefully planned multi-

professional approach of this sort can reach out to parents yet how difficult it is to keep such projects going when home-school mediators disappear. The study also illustrates the need of action in which the entire school is involved and a close working relationship with the parents is established. The parents came to the school feeling that the school needed them and that the school appreciated the contribution they could make. This project demonstrates how school involvement created parental involvement and that when the school got the parents involved this did not mean that the children alone would benefit.

The parents had a strong inner motivation to learn about the organization and the different educational practices of the school. This is partly for their own benefit through their learning things useful to them generally which helped them become integrated into society, and partly for the benefit of their children through enabling them to be of greater help in their children's education, and partly through its enabling them to come closer to their children.

The teachers who functioned as home-school mediators had a high level of competence and a thorough knowledge of the school and were also patient and understanding in providing answers to the questions the parents asked, helping the parents understand that they were fully needed and accepted at the school. Crozier (2000) found that many parents, irrespective of their social class, reported that they found parents' evenings at school daunting, time confusing and partly chaotic. In one of the schools she examined in her study, the teachers attended development sessions on managing the parents' evenings and were given a list of "do's and don'ts" (Crozier, 2000 p. 64). The parents who received information about parents' evening often went there because they wanted to show the teacher that they were doing the right thing and to show their children that they are interested in their schooling.

Vincent (2000), in analyzing the outcomes of some parent education courses devoted to women, found that the mothers wanted to do more than simply taking part in a parenting course (cf. Reay, 1998a). The parent education course in the present project has as its objectives both empowering of the parents and getting them together through their par-

ticipation in the project to construct their own habitus as mothers and fathers who genuinely cared for the children. Through their gaining knowledge of the school and access to it, they could better contribute to their children's well being and success at school. Their actions in this respect are not ethnically based, their participation instead being recognition of what they felt themselves to lack in terms of school capital and of networks that could provide them with the type of information that could help them follow their children's schooling more adequately.

Reay (1998a) declares that the cultural capital parents possess gives them confidence in approaching the school. The mothers in her study appeared to be more involved in the education of their children than the fathers were. This can be due to the fathers preferring to take a role not involving direct contacts with the school (cf. Reay, 1998a; Reay 2004a). It can also be due to the mothers being more receptive to advice than fathers were. The mothers' emotional habitus (ibid) can be another reason for the mothers being in the majority in the parent education course. The mothers and the fathers invested in their social capital through their own network outside the school and through the time they took in participating in the course and investing their time in the arranging of many activities for both children and grownups. Much of the information the parents were given was not readily available elsewhere. When they came to the school the parents were also provided information about other public organisations that could be of relevance to them. A school can serve as a place of learning not only for the children but also for their parents, and can also open its doors for closer contact of the parents with the community at large.

The present study demonstrates both the complexity of the parental involvement issue and how the obstacles to it mentioned by both the teachers and the parents can be overcome. However, it also shows how new obstacles within the school as an organisation appear to be more difficult to overcome, since they are related both to the school as an institution and to the teachers being members of the major part of society, the culture of which dominates. There are other obstacles related to the parents being involved in ethnic conflicts within their broader ethnic group, something which can create obstacles to the parents becoming a unified group working closely with the school.

The importance of the continuity of home-school mediators and of a carefully planned programme of establishing a parent-teacher association or network of this basic type is evident. Work of this sort is never finished, but if the program involved is well conceived and is given the continued support it needs, it can contribute to a very large degree to the children's education and to the integration of the parents into the work of the school and into the community. The home-school mediation did not receive enough support from those sitting in power to be continued. Working with parents of this sort can be a time-consuming process and much of the work involved is unpaid. The parents are often very much in need of information about the school and about the society as a whole the matter which the teachers often avoid getting involved in.

The home-school project could unveil the parents' way of getting involved in their children's education and how through arranging activities for the children the parents could prove their engagement for their children. Some of the activities had educational character and were child-centered while other activities were meant for the children's general wellbeing. The next chapter takes up one activity which had an educational character, namely that of mothers and fathers investing their social, cultural, and economic capital in supplementary after-school activities for the children to help them do their homework, preserve their cultural heritage and to keep them protected from what they describe as the culture of the street.

8 Parental involvement—activating social capital

This chapter presents an account of the supplementary school that children attended alongside their regular school education. The accounts here are drawn from interviews observations and field notes made during the period of time between the beginning of autumn term of 2003 and some time in the spring term of 2004. The activities the parents arranged were conceived as being of common interest and were aimed at the well-being of the children generally. For the parents involved in it, the supplementary school activities represented a sort of symbolic capital in which various other forms of capital were invested, especially social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988), many of the children receiving education in their own mother tongue and getting extra help in different school subjects. After the parent association had been established, the parents started to arrange activities of such type alongside other activities. Although there is a dearth of literature on supplementary schools both in Sweden and abroad, several aspects of schools of this sort have been noted in the literature. Most of the studies conducted this far have dealt with the students and with those who manage and guide such activities. I will be concerned, not with assessing the effects of the supplementary school activities as a whole, but with examining this activity that appeared to be of particular importance educationally and getting deeper knowledge on the difficulties that parents face in trying to get involved in the education of their children at home.

What is a supplementary school?

Mirza and Reay (1997, 2005) have examined how supplementary schools can provide safe spaces for alternative discourses concerning positions that differ from the dominant mainstream ones. Hall et al. (2002) compared the supplementary schools in two cities, Oslo and

Leeds. They have highlighted the role of supplementary schools in raising educational achievement. Greese et al. (2004) have studied the role of supplementary schools in enhancing the sense of identity of learners, and explored how such supplementary schools provide support and encouragement of the learners' identities and promote flexible bilingualism.

Reay and Mirza (1997, 2005), referring to activities of this type as representing supplementary school, described the involvement of black women in arranging extra curricular activities for children in a black neighbourhood in London, largely hidden from public gaze. Networks of this sort are often established through the different ethnic associations in which parents are represented. According to Reay and Mirza the parents wish to give their children what the school fails to provide, in particular the parents' culture, which includes their language and their religion, arranging extracurricular activities after school and on the weekends for children between about 5 and 16 years of age. These authors found there to be more than 60 black supplementary schools in the inner section of Greater London, an area in which approximately 300.000 black Caribbeans live. Reay and Mirza's studies (1997, 2005) illustrate how the investment of black women in their social capital and their use of networks within the black community is able to establish and to maintain the activity of supplementary schools there.

The background and the organisation of the supplementary school in this study

How involvement of the parents in their children's education manifests itself can differ from the expectations that the teachers have. The teachers often expect the parents to visit the school spontaneously and to show up at meetings the school arranges. Many of the parents in this study is concerned with have quite different views of how their involvement in their children's education should be expressed. Those parents who often fail to attend meetings and do not visit the school very often tend to not see themselves as being less involved in their children's education. Rather, they consider the roles they play to be outside the school itself and to be within the networks they already be-

long to. The parents who took part in the study spoke of supplementary school arrangements made available to children in the neighbourhood and in other parts of the city, which they generally considered to be a safe environment for their children and to be a form of parental involvement in the education of their children.

The supplementary school activity conducted was basically led by both mothers and fathers. I had a double role in this activity. As a researcher I conducted observation and interviewed some of the parents involved, at the same time as I, in the role of a home-school mediator, functioned as a facilitator and an advisor in arranging various educational activities in such a way that they fitted within the walls of the school. I had meetings with parents who wanted to get involved in such activities who had already established contact with other parents who were involved in activities of this sort earlier or in other parts of town. They also suggested getting in contact with a mother responsible for a supplementary school arrangement in the Rosengård district to obtain more thorough knowledge and to better plan the activities they were engaged in at school.

The group of parents who were involved in these activities consisted of four mothers and two fathers. The fathers of the children took the responsibility for the activities as a whole and for supplying the materials needed. The mothers had responsibility for the educational part since all of them were previous teachers in their home countries. They contacted other parents who registered their children, everything went faster than I could have thought. They had about 50 pupils between the age of 6 and 15.

The parent group having Pashto as its native language started to arrange parallel supplementary school activities some time before the Arabic speaking group did. Their activities and views are not taken up here. Some of the mothers in the parent-teacher association as a whole stayed in the staff room frequently discussing things with each other while their children were taking their lessons. A few of the fathers also dropped in from time to time with their children.

The aim and the content of the supplementary school activities

Arabic speaking parents in the present study arranged for different activities for both the children and their parents after the parent-teacher association had been established. In the present chapter I will consider both the supplementary school arrangements that were set up and the “invisible” role the parents can be said to have played to help their children in school and to prevent them from succumbing to the “culture of street”.

It isn't that we're not involved in our children's education. The teachers sometimes might want to show us a lot more about what they think we should do with our children at home. We of course do take care of our children, it's not that, but it's that the teachers don't know what we do with our children outside of school. We have many worthwhile activities for our children and we belong to associations that often arrange many different activities for our children. But the school and most Swedes don't realize this and that we want the very best for our children, like any other parents. We do our best to give our children a good education, and even send them to Saturday school in Rosengård School. I think the problem is that we do it in our way (Bahia, a mother, interview, 2003).

Teaching activities of this sort were conducted in the children's mother tongue, the children receiving help with various of their school subjects, such as math and English. Efforts at cultural empowerment and identity building were also made. Some of parents expressed an increasing distrust of the formal school regarding certain of the subjects in the curriculum, such as the teaching of the mother tongue, of cultural studies, and of the history and geography of the parents' countries of origin. They gave their warm support to the supplementary school arrangements, which they conceived of primarily as providing help with their children's homework and a way of protecting their own language and of furthering their children's cultural socialisation. As one of the parents said, “What shall we call the Arabs if they lose their culture, religion and language? We would still call them Arabs, but we have to do the best we can, nevertheless, to protect our culture and our language.” According to the parents who were responsible for the extra-curricular teaching their aim was to fill a gap that the school failed to fill. It also represented the parents' way of involving themselves in the

school. According to them, their chances of becoming involved in the education of their children were limited, for this reason their preferring to do it differently. One of the fathers responsible for the extra teaching arrangements expressed his views of this activity as follows:

We arrange many different activities for the children. These activities are often carried on by us parents so as to give our children what the school fails to teach them. The lessons in their mother tongue that the children receive at school are not enough and the teachers there are often not qualified enough, or they speak dialects that our children have difficulties in understanding. We do this teaching because we feel our children need to learn two sides of things, the Swedish side and their parents' side. We often have difficulties in getting large enough rooms for holding the lessons for all the children we receive. The parents come with their children even from other parts of the city. The children often have difficulties with their homework and want also to learn better Arabic. We do our best to arrange either with some student or with persons who are good in Swedish to help the children with their homework (Aziz, interview, 2003).

The parents involved in the supplementary school wanted their children not only to achieve educationally but also to be proud of their Arabic culture, language and origin. They were willing to invest economically to provide their children a better education. For many of them, the fact of their children being Arabs and Muslims was a problem for their getting ahead in school and in life in general. Through the supplementary school, the parents wanted to give their children an identity. They would otherwise risk its losing due to stigmatising discourses and because of the parents' culture not being highly valued by the school. The parents wanted the supplementary school arrangements to make their children aware of who they were and of their parents' culture, in addition to providing them help with their homework. According to the parents the school did not place any emphasis on the gap there could be between what the child was learning at home and in school.

The help the children were being given in the supplementary school with the homework provides clear justification of the efforts made by the members of the parent-teacher association on the children's behalf. Activities of this sort were given high priority by the parents. They can be said both to contribute to the legitimacy of the parent-teacher asso-

ciation and at the same time to also partly delegitimize the association through the activity being separate from the school.

Although the parents had strong expectations with regard to the schoolwork their children were to do during the time they spent at the supplementary school, they accepted other approaches as well such as play and leisure-time activities, and the serving of refreshments and fruits, partly as a means of attracting recalcitrant children. The majority of the parents appeared to be open to the idea of methods involving games being able to help their children to learn. This attests to the spreading among them of principles generally less widely shared in urban school districts.

The importance of the supplementary school

During my talking with the parents and my observations on the field, they gave answers to questions such as: How do the parents view the extracurricular schooling for their children in terms of its furthering their children's success? What social requests do they direct at the actors in these arrangements? What functions do they assign to them and what utility do they see in what these actors are doing?

The term "outgoing parents" is repeatedly expressed by the teachers at the supplementary school. These parents described the importance of such arrangements being located in an environment in which their children could both study and be protected from being out in the street.

There are some parents who feel there are so many problems they need to help their children with, that they give up. They simply don't know what to do. That's why, thanks to this parent-teacher association, the mothers have the opportunity to just sit and talk about their problems with their children. They need very much help. The school should understand that the parents sometimes cannot help their children, even if they want to, especially the boys. Often, the mothers already have so many problems. It's difficult for them (Samia, a mother and teacher at supplementary school, interview, 2003).

Amina agrees with Samia saying:

You see! It's as I told you. One needs assistance, one needs a helping hand. My older boy, I tried and did not give up; each time I met the teachers I asked what I should do. They explained to me what I should do, and I've tried, I can't say I don't care. Now I ask the teachers and other parents here in the supplementary school what I should do and I often get help from them in dealing with the problems (Amina, a mother and teacher at the supplementary school, interview, 2003).

The parents explain how their efforts to help their children with their schoolwork, with all the difficulties they had, began long before the establishment of the supplementary school arrangements, and would not have stopped even if the arrangements had been closed down. Their search for such school arrangements can be presented as clear proof of their interest in the schooling of their children.

This is the problem: the parents don't abandon their children. They despair, they don't know what to do. This is why I sought assistance. If we didn't seek assistance, one could say that we simply gave up that we don't care. But we seek assistance and find it. No one can't say we don't care (Hamida, a teacher in the supplementary school arrangements, interview, 2003).

They understand very well that the school cannot provide their children adequate help, and at the same time they are conscious of their own educational limits in helping their children; thus, they welcome being released from this heavy concern by others who may be better qualified or are simply interested in their children's education. Zahra describes this arrangement as a release. She uses the metaphor of "removed a thorn from my foot".

Zahia: That helped me very much; it removed a thorn from my foot, since even if I attended sessions with him at school I was unable to help him. Neither his attention nor his concentration was there; I couldn't give my children all the attention they asked me to with their schoolwork. Each day is completely filled up. One has to be here, there and everywhere.

L: Did you feel that you needed some sort of help?

Zahra: Yes, I needed help at this. I didn't know how I would manage (Zahra, interview, 2003).

I had the opportunity to observe a meeting of the parents in which there was a mother whose son was told that he would be excluded from the arrangement. I found myself first talking with the only mother who had dared to oppose this at the meeting, and then tried to convince those responsible for the activities to not exclude the mother's son. I was astonished then to see the mother praising the benefits of these activities. This is an extreme situation, but it reveals the following: that for the parents the supplementary school activities are not conceived (as yet) as being a right, despite their being conducted within the school walls. The parents feel that the arrangements, whatever the methods and their implementation are, meet their aspirations and fills the gaps that the school failed to fill.

Difficulties the parents faced in efforts to help their children

The parents described two major sets of reasons for explaining their difficulties and their vexation, in trying to help their children do their schoolwork: difficulties of a relational nature and difficulties of an educational nature. These often exist in parallel.

Difficulties of relational nature

The parents often tend to speak of their relational difficulties in putting the child to work. Nader said:

I tried to help them many times but it was difficult. They don't listen to me and the relations became bad. They seemed to not grasp what I said to them. Their mother was better than I was. She is more patient than I am. Anyhow, I think it's better that someone else helps them and does this in a place where they can be together with their friends (Nader, interview, 2003).

The position the parents take and their status make it, according to them, not particularly easy to establish educational relationships with their children. Difficulties in controlling the child and the intense conflicts in connection with carrying out of homework show how much aroused emotions invade a relationship of attempting to assist in

schooling. Some parents thus feel unable to control their feelings, or to achieve the sense of distance needed to free the relationship of such passions.

Children have so many leisure-time activities today that they are often busy playing computer games or watching TV rather than working with their homework. They often try to escape and make me forget about their homework. You see! We mothers have a lot to do, cooking food, cleaning, shopping and doing our own homework. They often throw their bags as soon as they come home and say, "Mother, we are going to our friends at our neighbour's house". They sit and play games as they decided to do after school. They often forget about their homework (Zahia, interview, 2003).

The expression "throwing their bag down" is one used by some of parents in speaking about a situation in which the children get rid of everything having to do with the school when they arrive home and of their refusing to submit to the parents' orders or advice when they encourage them to do their homework. This difficulty in controlling their children concerns both the girls and boys, but according to the parents it is even more the case with boys, largely because of the attraction exerted by the street or by computer games. Those working in supplementary school also endeavour to stabilise the children's behaviour in a place where they accept a certain degree of social control.

Before, I sent the children to a school located in another district, only two days a week. Now, it's near here and the children find it to be an opportunity to meet their schoolmates. My 10 years old son, is being protected. It's better that he learns some Arabic or does his homework instead of hanging around in the playground or in the street. I was always pushing him trying to get him to do his lessons. But he'd said, "I'm going to go and play a little bit, I'm coming!" And he didn't come. At the supplementary school, he knows that the hour is the hour, that he cannot come later. He goes there by himself now and he feels encouraged to do things since he can meet his friends there. He can't simply be alone in the play yard or in the street. He joins his friends. Nobody is annoyed, nobody is irritated (Hania, interview, 2003).

For certain of the parents, the difficulties boil down to the simple question of how they can succeed in putting children to work who often

rebel against doing their schoolwork, whether by open revolt or by means of tricks. The children slow down and develop strategies of avoidance, of diverting their parents' attention so as to flee from their homework. Yet things are different with the teachers in the supplementary the school.

Difficulties of educational nature

In discussions with the parents about how to make assisting their children in their schoolwork effective, the parents often tend to speak about their lack of knowledge of the subject matter or the language. Parents who mention language emphasise the impossibility of their helping their children. This does not necessarily mean their withdrawing at all from efforts to help, yet they feel unable to provide the concrete help their children are in need of when they ask for it. Some of the parents, of course, are well educated (often at a level higher than the Swedish parents are). But others emphasise fear of being inefficient and ineffective.

I arrived in Sweden in 97. My children were 6 and 8 years old at that time. Since I didn't speak Swedish very well, I didn't want to try to explain things to them in a way that would be difficult for them to grasp. My children often told me, Mom you explain things one way, but the teacher explains them in another way. It's often very problematic when the children get older and the lessons get to be more difficult. I used to ask my neighbour who has lived here for a long time, to help them with their homework (Zahra, interview, 2003).

For parents who attended school themselves, the difficulties increase as their children get further along in school. They succeed in looking after their children's schoolwork to some extent at least during the whole of primary school, but when their children enter secondary school the majority seemed to give up attempting to provide assistance they feel unable to give. The parents stress in particular the changes that have occurred in the methods of teaching, especially of reading and mathematics as compared with their home countries. They see this as complicating the task for them in helping their children. Thus, even if the parents do not challenge the "educational approach" of the teachers when they express their points of view regarding changes in the methods, they

note in their child's homework the new manner of making divisions and the innovations in the training of reading skills as a source of insecurity for them. These innovations fuel controversy and the parents' doubts regarding the effectiveness of the current teaching methods. Actually, the parents feel they are deprived of their knowledge and are prevented from providing their children support. Ashamed of their incapacity of following what their children do, some of the parents, instead of acknowledging their own inability, choose instead to defend their own methods. Of course, this trial of the old against the new is hardly productive. Bahia describes a conversation she had with her son while trying to help him.

Subtractions, he's unable to grasp them, me either, it's odd. I say to him. It's the same as an addition, but in reverse. This is the way one teaches him, I think that the trick of a child is that, it's subtraction but that he performs addition. Maybe it's here the problem lies. It's like division. A division for us was this and not something else. Now, their division operation is a whole page, it's not logical. There's the multiplication, addition and multiplication that's all contained in division. It's pell-mell. They learn in a very different way. It's difficult to teach him to do the homework like the teacher wants them to be done. Then sometimes I say to him come, I'll show you a trick, it's easier to do it like this. For me yes, but for him it was not easier. Then I said: But I understand nothing about this trick. Then he said to me: "You didn't go to this school. You don't know anything". "Yes, but it wasn't like that when I went to school", I said (Bahia, interview, 2003).

This can be said to be an experiment in humiliation corresponding to the painful astonishment of children in acknowledging of their parents' inability to explain the things in the same way as the teachers do at school.

Limited help at the supplementary school

The parents at the supplementary school recognise their educational limits. They feel that being there for the children and making them feel that the grownups are caring and are there for them is very important. These parents keep hope alive even though their methods and resources may not be sufficient. Hamida said:

We often manage to put them to work, They know why they are here and their parents often send them here on purpose to study Arabic or to get help with math or other school subjects that we can help them with. We approach the children and make them see the benefits of their succeeding in school. We keep motivating them and talk about how important school is. The older boys and girls often do homework by themselves here. They sit and work for an hour or two (Hamida, a teacher at the supplementary school arrangement, 2003).

Samia explained how she helps the children with math in Arabic, which she feels is very important for the children to learn. She said:

We teach the younger children math in Arabic. They learn how to count and take part in many games through which they learn multiplication, addition, division and subtraction. I think it is important for them to learn to count in their mother tongue. Many of the children do not know how to count in Arabic (Samia, interview, 2003).

The teachers at the supplementary school speak of their lacking knowledge of many things but their trying to help up to the limits of their own knowledge. They often concentrate particularly on teaching Arabic, as well as cultural and religious studies. Recruiting older brothers and sisters to help the younger children with their homework is also a strategy that was often found to succeed.

Summary and Conclusion

Crozier (2000) and Reay (1998a) argue that parental involvement is often primarily matter of the involvement of mothers. Reay declares that the involvement of fathers is often at more of a distance. In Reay and Mirza's (1997, 2005) study of supplementary schools the mothers involved were found rather generally to express a sense of belonging, collectivity and solidarity. Just as in Reay' and Mirza's study the mothers in the present study considered the supplementary school to be a kind of second home for the child, and also to provide clear educational gains. The mothers often brought their tea cans and sat in the staff room waiting for their children to finish school, having the opportunity there to speak of other things than simply the school and their children. There is this desire for sticking together, which mobilizes the mothers, despite

the difficulties they face, its being a matter of setting up activities that compete with the normal school form. They emphasise in such activities the culture to which the parents belong, the cultural needs to be met and their respect for wishes and expectations of the parents.

The parents, in investing their social and cultural capital helped establish and run such activities. Reay and Mirza (2005) argue for social capital being gendered and feel that Bourdieu's conception of social capital ignores gender, calling attention to the notion of emotional capital, considering the mothers' investment of emotional capital in their children to be a source of their social capital. By the emotional capital is meant here the amount of emotion mothers have for their children which is a motor for their investment in social relation for the benefit and the wellbeing of their children (Reay, 2004b). The parents believe it to be important to invest in social capital through emotionally engagement and helping the children with their homework, using the legitimacy this help results in carrying on other useful work as well. Supplementary schools not only provide educational help, but are also considered to be a safe environment for the children, keeping them away from the culture of the street. The regularity of the contacts involved and their legitimacy facilitates closeness of the children to their parents. The supplementary school arrangements are considered to be a major activity for the parent-teacher association and a way of helping children to succeed both at present and in a long-term perspective, helping the school in its mission and also helping to develop leisure-time activities with the same aim of protecting the children from what they refer to as the culture of the street, i.e. drug abuse, theft, robbery and various criminal acts. There were cases, on the other hand, in which mothers denounced this kind of schooling as schooling for leisure.

Participation in such arrangements was seen legitimate for parents to direct children towards a set of objectives children were to aim at, or the setting of rules, something the school often fails to do. Yet one can reasonably expect a supplementary school to fulfill a variety of worthwhile missions, while the public schools, remaining the major institution created for educating children. It is completely comprehensible that the parents endeavour, at the same time, to keep their children in the race, that they seek allies to help them, and that the arrangements

involved build up an identity of their own through following the wishes of the parents involved. The establishment of such arrangements can be seen as reflecting the difficulties of both educational and relational character, the parents face at home in trying to help their children. I would also point out that the Arabic speaking parents appear to place a great confidence in the supplementary schools. They appear also to accept the political and educational choices suggested by those responsible for the parent-teacher association, and they value the action of those parents who have taken the initiatives required. They have the conviction that even though it may seem naïve to think that the assistance they give the children can help them significantly in overcoming the barriers to success that the school alone cannot overcome, there is a genuine need of efforts of this sort and doubts as to the ability of the school to accomplish all that is needed. The supplementary schools are being given an important task here.

In view of the ambitiously conceived missions of the supplementary school and the tasks it has, one should not risk discrediting it in the eyes of the parents for the fact of its not always succeeding. The parents felt here that the daily struggle to help their children was enormous. They expressed their big concerns about their children being exposed to different attraction outside the school and the home which worried them considerable. The next chapter takes up the parents' struggle within their homes and in the neighbourhood.

9 Parents' struggle and involvement outside the school

“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe” (Muir, 1911, p. 110).

Seeking to understand what promotes and what hinders parental involvement should not be limited simply to the school and to contacts in the school between teachers, students and their parents; a broader perspective is needed, one that goes beyond the school itself. As a critical ethnographer, I had to follow the spiral of my research in efforts to better understand the complexity of the matter of parental involvement. Lifting the veil on the parents' struggle outside the school and the difficulties they faced is what this chapter is about. As Blumer suggests:

The empirical social world consists of ongoing group life and one has to get close to this life to know what is going on in it. The metaphor that I like is that of lifting the veils that obscure or hide what is going on. The task of scientific study is to lift the veils that cover the area of group life that one proposes to study. The veils are lifted by substituting, in whatever degree, performed images for first-hand knowledge. The veils are lifted by getting close to the area and by digging deep into it through careful study. Schemes of methodology that do not encourage or allow this betray the cardinal principle of respecting the nature of one's empirical world (Blumer, 1978, p. 38).

The section that follows concerns the views of the parents and the struggle outside the school which can directly or indirectly be the reason for a lack of school involvement, knowledge of which can provide a better understanding of the parents' survival struggle outside the school. There is a combination of different factors that interfere, such as parental occupation, material circumstances and cultural capital, the parents' familiarity with the educational system, and the integration and migration processes the parents are undergoing. These are more impor-

tant and reliable indicators of problems than ethnicity alone (cf. Vincent, 2000). The results presented in this chapter suggest perhaps the struggles I had with data of this type. These included my field notes and reflections, interviews conducted in the neighbourhood with Arabic speaking parents and their families, who came or were descendent normally from the Middle Eastern Arabic speaking countries, particularly Iraq (Arabs and Kurds), Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria. I present the results here and in so doing provide examples of the parents' struggle and their strategies of coping with their lives.

Multi-parental involvement

Parental involvement can mean different things: a home-centered involvement or a school-centered involvement (cf. Epstein, 2001). The parents being involved with their children outside the school means not only helping them with their schoolwork but also protecting them from drug abuse, from criminal acts of all sorts and from being negatively influenced by other children's behaviour that could result in their failure in school. The parents often maintain that their struggle with different life tasks apart from the school their child attends, such as the socioeconomic conditions with which they are faced, takes a very large space in their daily lives.

Some of the questions their struggle concerns are the following; how to encourage their children to continue their studies when everything around them shows that success in school obviously does not prevent unemployment; how to protect young people who are lacking in money from the temptations of making easy money; how to accept somehow the frequently major shift one is forced to make from the high hopes connected with immigration and the reality of living in a country very different from the country they left. These are painful questions the parents struggle with. The answers they arrive at often depending upon the means they have at their disposal and the situation in which their sons and daughters find themselves, as well as their status as father or mother. It appeared as though the school was usually quite a different world for the parents than it had been for the children. According to some of the parents, boys with other background than Swedish who do

not complete their studies are “young people without a future” who have no place to go except to stay at home or to go to the street and the culture of the latter. Abdou declared “My own future is behind me and I’m really worried about that of my children.” One can well understand the anguish of these parents, obliged as they are to protect themselves against the school, the neighbourhood where they live and the city.

Parents faced with family disorder

The parents of Arabic origin who participated in the research here expressed a loss of solidarity and a lack of an adequate family network to function as a psychological support for the children. There had been a transition from being surrounded by a large social network to being isolated and even excluded from the rest of the family under the present circumstances. According to the parents, this fragmentation of Arabic speaking family networks of Middle Eastern origin that was evident was due to many factors. The value placed on family relations, on networks of relatives and on the traditional family was in the process of being lost. The family as a strong network, often represented in the country of origin by the father, had become very fragile and was easily broken down. According to Ibrahim, what hinders parents from taking an active role in the work of the school their children attend is above all the loss of solidarity within the family and the ambiguity of roles: “the family has lost its values here and our traditions are difficult to transmit to our children.”

The crisis of the family and its primary worries

The crisis of parental involvement here is found both within the school and outside the confines of the school. The problems of young children failing in school and of those involved in criminal acts are major points of discussion in the media and in public debate and are what worries the parents most. Immigration transforms in-depth the parents’ habitus (cf. Sayed, 2004), which includes the standards, values and practices of the Arabic speaking families. The parents’ imported their own models of education and upbringing, models they found themselves unable to use to the same degree as earlier. After they had come to Sweden the models become less and less applicable. Problems of delinquency drug

trafficking, and the like that appeared surely had their origin in a variety of factors, both within the school and outside the school. Dahman speaks of the “crisis of the parental model” or “the bankruptcy of the family, especially the fathers’ declaring their sense of resignation.” There was a shift from the model of traditional family authority to which the parents were accustomed to matters being regarded by the Swedish law. This could help explain the “crisis of authority” of some of the Arabic speaking families in the study and illustrates very well the notion of “doxa” used by Bourdieu. It concerns here what is taken for granted by the parents as being a good parenting model and yet is questioned and even rejected by the school and the other institutions, with the result that the parents—the fathers in particular—tend to resign from their traditional role in order to protect themselves. Dahman compares his situation before and now:

Everybody knew who was teaching in our school in our home country. The school and the home were not working together closely there, but there was a sort of social control in society. You could even meet the teachers in the local market and ask them how it was going for your child. There were barriers between the school and the home but there was a dialogue, even if it was a kind of invisible one. The children knew that their parents and the school held together so they were obliged to do their homework and follow the directions their teachers and parents gave them. Once you had gotten to this country (Sweden) things became very ambiguous and it was difficult to understand the system. The family here is in the hands of the children, who learn Swedish and get to know their rights before we get to know them (Dahman, interview, 2003).

According to Nader, fathers are deprived of their “very traditional power and their status as fathers”, occupying a devalued position, taking refuge in silence, and conceding their former position of power to their wives and children. Also, the older sons owe their prerogatives to the symbolic negation of their fathers, who are deprived of their status, have been humiliated and have lost their roles, being socially disqualified and being deprived of their former right to be listened to when they express themselves. Nader attributes delinquency to “the crisis of authority of the Arabic speaking families”, in making the shift from the standards of the society of origin to those of Swedish society. He speaks of himself and his family being “the eternal foreign” in Sweden.

He concludes by saying that fathers of his type are miserable and humiliated. According to him, his emigration stemmed from a hope of survival—leaving the country to escape threats, to find work and to found a family—and his conceiving it as a means of improving his condition. The family project of social mobility as he originally conceived was one in which he compelled respect for him by his children. He said that whereas the fathers here lose their aura of respect, the mothers stand at the junction between the world outside and the private world of their family (cf. Vincent, 2000). The mothers become mediators who try to hold the different parts of the family together to prevent their falling apart.

Parents face with unknown authorities

Abdou states that the school is not to be trusted and that no meaningful collaboration with it can be established. Although he still has children going to school, he believes that their future will not be better than that of their older brothers since in his view the school suspects the parents and doesn't have trust in their methods of upbringing and their capacity to take care of their loved ones.

How can I trust the school and the social authorities when it is they who took away the power I had earlier? I don't have command over things anymore. My home is like a ship without a captain. It is sailing all by itself. When I told my son not to come home late at night and ordered him to stay out of the house when he returned late one night, he did not return home the next day. He went to school and told his teachers that I was hitting him and not giving him the opportunity to have any leisure-time activities and that I throw him of the house. We tried to talk and the persons responsible at school did not believe me but instead believed my son. After a few weeks he was put in a home for young people in Lund. The strange thing was that I received a call from them telling me that my son didn't respect the times he was supposed to and often came home late at night. I told them that that had been my problem with him too but no one listened to me. I feel like my son is not mine anymore and I can't protect him any longer. I am nothing more than his biological father. I have to protect myself from being put in jail for no reason at all (Abdou, interview, 2003).

Some of the parents felt the school was not alone in tending to make children disrespect and disobey their parents. Several other agencies were also involved in making the children lose respect for their families. Nader describes how information about how the school and other authorities treat the parents is spread among the families.

One hears about the school, social welfare and the police taking away the parents' role of raising the children by disqualifying and excluding the parents. They criticize our way of raising our children, saying one should not punish children and not even shout at them. We can't raise our children if we don't use our own methods. The girls are being encouraged to be put in other homes than those of their parents if they feel that their parents limit their freedom (Nader, interview, 2003).

In describing the situation in some of the Arabic speaking families; Nader said that in a sense the parents no longer had children of their own, their children being dealt with by school authorities and others as basically being children of the State. This can create strong obstacles to close involvement of the parents in their children's education. He saw the crisis of the family as being due to there being obstacles to parents' involvement in the school. He believes that parental involvement should lead to the parents' establishing contact with all authorities, who then work together with the parents and not against them or work with the children so as to save them from *the street culture*, where it otherwise could be too late to prevent delinquency. He says: "The day will surely come when no one can stop these young lawbreakers, who will be stronger than us (the parents), the school and the police".

To break with this form of social etiology, one attributes the lack of parental involvement and the delinquency of the young people involved to the cultural features of these families or to the decline in status of the parents, of the fathers in particular. It is not enough to compare those families that are in the most difficult of situations with those whose situation is less problematic. On the one hand, the genuine difficulties that many families living in segregated districts are confronted with should not be ignored. On the other hand, there is also a collective demoralization of many parents whose children become delinquent or do not do well in school, the latter perhaps in part because of the family's

having settled in “miljonprogram” area³³. It would appear that the lack of parents’ involvement in their children’s education, as well as the social problems referred to have primarily social and economic rather than simply ethnic causes. What had previously been primarily a problem for the working class had now become a problem for “immigrant” groups. They were given housing for people at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder in the interest of people above them in this hierarchy. That which had been expressions of class contempt had now become expressions of class and race contempt.

Social and moral effects of family disorder

A feeling of dishonor

Parents whose children were labeled as troublemakers often kept silent or more or less avoided contact with the school, since that would be likely to reactivate the sense of *shame* which they feel at having a delinquent son or a child who doesn’t do well. In view of the stigmatization they are subjected to in ways like this, the parents sometimes declare very simply that they are not responsible for what is happening to their children.

They perceive of the degradation to which they are exposed in the district in which they live as a backwardness of the area they are living in and endeavour to flee from it. There is a strong concentration of minority families in many of the buildings, the increasingly accelerated exodus of Swedish families from the area canceling to a considerable extent the symbolic benefits associated with the presence of native Swedish families within the vicinity. The gathering of minority families in a given sector of the city deprives the Arab families who arrived there first of their capital of seniority: “Formerly, we were the only Arabs in

³³ The parents in the study live in an area of so-called Miljonprogram houses, built in the 1960s and 70s in various large Swedish cities in response to acceleration of the mass exodus of people from the country to the city, as well as to the post-war population explosion.

our building”. They say to point out they were among the first to arrive and that they thus did not choose to live in a “minority district”. Abdou states that even “the snow is not as white as it used to be. It’s becoming grayish in the neighbourhood now”. It was not what he wanted when he saw the other families that settled there too with whom he said he had little contact. This gathering of minority families did not contribute to a family solidarity or local solidarity that serves to unify families from the same home country. In fact, living in district in question was for those there somewhat sort of like being put in house arrest so as to have “to remain between Arabs” and other minorities, with little chance of living together being with the local population. Bahia said:

We’re put in house arrest. Why should they let all the Arabs and minorities be gathered together in one single place. This is wrong. Even if we want to move, that’s not easy. It’s difficult to find a flat for a big family. Also, once they hear that you’re living in that district no company rents you a flat. We’re blocked here and our children aren’t learning anything here either. There is no way we can lock them in at home; they go out and play with other children and they may learn of any number of bad things (Bahia, interview, 2003).

When they sought to move, their requests remained unanswered. They knew more or less consciously that their chances of achieving better acceptance, of living in a quieter district and of having a better school for their children were actually very slight. Belonging to the most devalued districts, some of them expressed nostalgia with regard to the transit houses (refugee camps) where they had been living when they first arrived to Sweden—their living now in another ghetto, from which they had wanted to flee. Certain mothers do not want to leave the district for another part of the city, since for them to move would mean being uprooting again. This is against their husbands who wanted them to move to another district or even to leave the country, more or less definitively. The mothers refused to accept the negative image spread about them as Muslims of Arabic background

The fathers and mothers faced with poor living conditions

In view of the situation of their living so close to other minority families, the mothers were generally less inclined than the fathers to pub-

licly condemn the young people who failed in school or the “parents who let them do everything”. They showed a greater tolerance, partly because the young people who are charged against of breaking the law could be their own sons, although the mechanisms leading to the delinquency or drug-addiction of some of the children were often obscure. The mothers tended to feel threatened by the society in which they live, regarding it as making it very difficult to bring up their children. It was largely the mothers who maintained relations with the families affected by the delinquency of their sons, providing solidarity to help shield the families afflicted with the shame associated with this.

Bahia expressed a dislike for young lawbreakers and did not hesitate to accuse parents of not maintaining control over their children. She was one of the rare Arabic speaking mothers who participated in the entire home-school mediation project. She said that: “The weight of shame generally prohibits the Arabs from appearing and expressing themselves”. She accepted almost without reflection meeting me to continue discussing the school and the district. She emphasized the distance separating her from these young people, and also her rejection of the gap which developed between the Swedish teachers in the school who complained and the parents (Arabs) who were driven to silence, and were made to feel guilt and shame.

Ibrahim declared that he did not understand parents who “don’t take care of their children”. “It can never be justified to not take care of the children one gives birth to”, he asserted. His words echoed the indignation of the teachers at the school. As he spoke, it was as if it were necessary for him to give me an example to show that one cannot put “all the Arabs in the same bag”. Ibrahim in contrast to his wife felt no solidarity with those parents who let their children do whatever they wanted. Between him and those he spoke of, there seemed to be the whole distance that separates the stable Arab working man from the underprivileged non-employed one, “respectable working men” from “young people without a future”, and those Arabs who cared for their children and did their best to give them a good education and those who placed the responsibility for educating their children on the school or organisation of other sorts.

Mrs. Ibrahim, like her husband has no understanding for young people receiving so little attention and support. According to her, they are not “hooligans” but “young people deprived of everything”. If they do not work, it is not because they refuse to do so, but because there is lack of work and for leisure time activity centers, nothing in the way of work being offered them, not even simple menial work such as cleaning, sweeping and the like. She is bothered by the noise in the hallway near her apartment, but she points out that they have nowhere else to go except out on the street or to buildings, which that they occupy from time to time. She feels that to keep them away from apartment houses and the like is to exclude them from the only territory they have. “If they break things, it’s to avenge themselves for what they’re faced with”, she says, expressing a sense of solidarity with these young people without resources who are excluded from a normal life.

When I was discussing things with a group of mothers who were sitting and waiting for their children to finish their lessons at the supplementary school in the autumn term of 2003, the idea expressed there of young people trying to avenge themselves on society for the hopelessness of their situation was one that seemed to be shared by most of them. They noted that their own children and others children, even those with a better education, remained unemployed. “One should understand them”, one of the mothers said, who told of “sacrificing everything” so that her children could carry on with their studies (her husband was jobless) but was afraid of their becoming discouraged later because of unemployment and racism in connection with recruitment to jobs. The mothers heard from their own children and from friends of theirs of young people not being hired because of their Arabic background, and of even graduates with good education not finding work, declaring that living in this district is an indelible mark that excludes them in advance from getting jobs. The young lawbreakers that were found were seen as being spokesman for the protest young people in general were making, their lacking hope and being deprived of any prospects of getting anywhere professionally.

The mothers of the boys in this situation whose fathers are ashamed of them tend to support their sons and their offspring generally, maintaining ties with their imprisoned sons, opening the door to let their sons in even at very late hours, protecting their sons from their fathers hostility, and even sleeping in the doorways to prevent them from not going out late at night for fear they will commit crimes or use drugs. The mothers' engagement under such conditions illustrates the mother habitus and what Reay (1998a) refers to as emotional capital. The mothers in the study tended to invest all of their emotional strength in trying to make life better for their children.

Fear of the negative influence of other children

For Hania, letting her children play with other children and hang out in the neighbourhood seemed out of the question.

I'm not sure anymore whether I can afford to let my children play outside alone. I'm very careful about letting them be by themselves on the playground. I don't want them to be in contact with children who commit crimes, steal or use drugs. You can't trust anyone here. Even our closest relatives have had school failure and drug abuse in their families (Hania, interview, 2003).

The parents feared that their children would invest their social capital badly (cf. Portes, 2000), where living in the neighbourhood could involve the children being confronted with drug trafficking, for example, and seeing children of relatives of theirs fail at school or become delinquent. According to some of the parents, the disorganized family situation and loss of close family ties served as a negative educational model or a bad model for living generally in a great many of the families. It appeared that the long duration of unemployment of the fathers, mothers and the young people had mixed the cards profoundly, threatening those families in which there were teenagers at home without work.

Strategies of the parents to protect their children from becoming involved in criminality.

Fear of their children becoming involved in criminal acts was very strong on the part of the parents.

I used to stay and watch my children at a distance each time I left them at school. I wasn't able to go in the schoolyard. I didn't know for sure whether I'd be allowed in the schoolyard. I wanted to be there to check on my children, who they were playing with who they were speaking with at school, to make sure that they weren't getting bad company (Hamed, interview, 2003).

Hamed, had developed his own strategies for looking after his children, he developed strategies of this sort use in the home. He dreamed of getting a job and leaving the area, which he described as a ticking bomb and a place it was not good for children to grow up in. He worked very hard to give his children a good education and believed there to be a strong risk of the children going astray since the area was not very closely controlled by the police or by the parents themselves and since the parents were not very well informed about the different risks in the area or about what was happening in the school or in the local community. "We often guess what's happening in the area and at the school or we hear about it from different friends," he said.

Hania, who settled in the city in 1990, belonged to those Arab families in which no child had gone astray. Yet she did not feel that her children were completely protected against the risks inherent in the current situation. She noted the dangers of young people not succeeding in the labor market and felt that the young sons of Arabic background, particularly those who have not completed their education, easily became victims of discrimination according to their looks or because of their names. She told of being in touch every day with the mothers who did not have her good fortune and whose children were drug addicts or were delinquent.

This mother had done everything possible to protect her children against what could happen to them. She told of having forbidden her

children from staying in the street after school, having enrolled them in sport training (judo), and of putting them in pyjamas when they came home from school, devoting as much time to them as possible. She wanted them to succeed. She followed their homework very closely and was one of those mothers who attended all the meetings, not hesitating to make extra appointments as well. Hania explained that she never said to the teachers that they were wrong in what they did or that they imposed on her children in any way, telling her children that they should be well-behaved and respect their teachers.

This family which was so closely oriented to their children's succeeding in school did not aim at building a house in their native country. The family budget was devoted primarily to ensuring the future of the children in Sweden. Thus, she also gave up their taking annual trips to their home country. Her five children live with her. Three of them continued with higher studies in accordance with the expectation of their parents.

The district where they lived was a distressing symbol to the parents. Even Hania felt she was no longer able to protect her children there. The older ones had succeeded better at school than it appeared that the younger one would. It looked as though the quality of the schooling available was affected more and more in negative terms by the changes in the district that had occurred.

Mrs. Hania and her husband undoubtedly made much greater efforts to further the schooling of their children than was expected of them generally. They hoped their children would conform to the expectations they had regarding them. The younger ones were compared with the older ones who had followed the path the parents had wanted. Every family is a field of relationships. Younger ones, if considered to be less good than the older ones, may decide to direct their efforts in other directions. According to Hania, the younger child wanted to embark on a career in the area of fashion, a professional universe in which he felt that having a school diploma or a higher academic degree was less important.

How to deal with jobless sons?

The older jobless sons represent a greater problem for the parents in question, who lack the means of dealing with them as they really see fit. How can these parents reproach their sons for being jobless? How can they encourage any younger children who still attend school to study and to behave well at school when the older ones have failed in making their way through life thus far? Amin had great difficulties in making a decision of this sort regarding his sons, feeling it would be to definitively condemn them to the street.

In dealing with their sons old enough to seek employment, the only solution available to the fathers could well appear to be to try to force them to work and to manage their own affairs. Mass unemployment makes employment possibilities for the sons very rare, however, and if such possibilities exist they are usually ones of low status and often do not leading to permanent jobs. Parents in this situation may feel constrained to keep their sons at home to provide for their needs, continuing to do so with no end in sight. They try to protect their sons as much as they can, partly because they do not consider them completely at fault for not having found a job or even looking for one.

They complain bitterly about the limitation of their social networks, which might otherwise be able to help their children get jobs. If their children do have some job contacts, they are often only those in “falafel” and “kebab” shops and the like in which they would be obliged to work long hours for little pay. Their children also see that even those who graduated may fail to find jobs. If the parents express publicly the fact that they support their sons, it is perhaps because they endeavour to be convinced that they really have no other choice than to keep them at home. The assistance that the fathers give their sons in this way may not be provided in an obvious way. At the same time, a father may lack the tools needed in the new society to enable a son to become established properly. Fearing that their sons may leave the family completely, the parents can do little else than try to reduce the tensions that develop and accept a degraded family life.

To keep at home young people 20-years old or older who are without a completed school education and are unemployed is initially to simply

accept their largely phantom presence. Even if in Amina's case they return at the hours imposed, during the time they are absent they are strangers to the life of family. Deprived of a regular timetable, they often wake up late and take only few meals with their parents, tending to isolate themselves, ignore their parents, and be busy with the only occupations they pursue at home: listening to music, watching TV, using the flat but often seeming to not actually live in it, avoiding crossing glances with their parents.

Such coldness of family relations results from the multiple avoidances which are the price paid for maintaining a relationship of pacified character between the parents and their sons who have scarcely advanced in their development since reaching adolescence. Amin, the father in this case, says that to raise his tone would result in a hardening of the relations. He thus avoids showing much distress or anger in seeing his sons loafing all day. He observes their difficulties without being able to mobilize them. Any intervention on his part would be likely to be received by his sons as though he were giving them a moral lecture. It could thus contribute to their moving inwardly even a little further from home, which is the last shelter before living in the street.

Deprived of financial autonomy, Amina's jobless sons depend on family support. Amin and his wife can afford to dress and nourish their sons, he says, declaring that he strains his ingenuity to find the means necessary to protect them from temptations of easy money. It appears that Amina tries to protect them from their father or, more precisely, to prevent conflicts from developing between them. Saying to her husband that his sons respect him and aren't abusing him, she tries to preserve his sense of being the father, and the head of the family, despite his no longer having control over the family. Such parents who want to save their sons from the culture of the street seem to prepare for the worst case, especially that the street offers clandestine sources of income though drug trafficking, robbery or other criminal acts to which youngsters can easily succumb, particularly with the lack of employment which is frequent. The parents may gradually adopt a sense of resignation and a fatalistic attitude toward this situation. These are matters which seem to worry such parents most, their feeling that even

their involvement in their children education does not help much, since the whole system is against them and their efforts to save their children appear to have little chance of succeeding.

Withdrawal of the father

Their sons being arrested to possibly be found guilty of drug trafficking, vandalism, theft, use of narcotics, or whatever plunges the parents into a sense of shame and can precipitate the parents' withdrawal, perhaps especially that of the fathers. A symbolic or physical withdrawal of fathers may occur. Yet the arrest of an unworthy appearing son born and socialized in Sweden is never the decisive event that separates the parents from him, rather, for the parents such occurrence can be an unbearable sign of the gap between them. The delinquent son is like an illegitimate son who intensifies the contradictory feelings the father maintains regarding himself (his emigration) and his children, whom, as Sayad (2004) has written, he longer fully identifies with or recognises.

On the occasion of his last trip from Sweden, the father in the Tarek family said to his wife that he did not plan to return, that he would be staying in his origin country for a while. He did not like seeing his son escorted away by police officers accused of theft and drug trafficking. He felt ashamed and would have killed him, his wife says, if she did not protect him. As a father he "was fed up" with his son and it was because of that he left, she explained. Yet this bad blow came after a long series of disappointed dreams, dreams of promotions that did not come about, and an intense desire to avenge the failure that made him suffer and that plunged his children into disaster. As his wife said:

My husband abandoned us; when he decided finally to stay longer in our home country. It's already been six months that he's been there. When we call him he says he has it better there. In August, when my daughter came back, she told me that he was staying there for work that he'd found. I believed her at the time. Then, a month later, he was still gone and didn't show up. I thought he was going to return. On the birthday of our daughter, he wished her Happy Birthday by phone. She asked him, "aren't you going to come?" He said, no, I'm well off here I'm staying

here for the moment”. She asked him “For the moment, what do you mean?, Oh I don’t know, and when I want to return I will return”. That doesn’t mean anything. After that we called him again and asked him. Are you coming back? and he said, No, I don’t want to come, you’re old enough to manage.

And you see! I don’t really care! I’ve always lived in misery, I try to work, or go to the school when I return home. I try to forget. I’ve always taken care of my children on my own. I’ve managed to learn Swedish. Since I arrived here, I’ve worked; I passed my driver’s license and got it. My son had problems at school. He was given special education in a school for young people at risk. Then my husband didn’t have any particularly large projects for him. But still, he said that mechanics were always useful, that a good mechanic earns a good living. Before summer had come, the police came to the house because he was accused of setting fire to things and smashing windows at the school. This chocked my husband. He was ashamed of his son. He didn’t beat him because I protected him, but I think he would have killed him otherwise. He couldn’t bear the idea of his son being picked up by the police, like a gangster. My husband has always wanted his son to be a good man that he can rely on to take over responsibility at home. He’s fed up and disappointed and that’s why he gave up. I try to help our son on my own but the boys need their father. I can’t run out in the street at nights and pick him up, though I did many times when he stayed out late in the neighbourhood (Mrs. Tarek, interview, 2003).

The father in the Tarek family is similar to the type of fathers that Sayad (2004) has described as someone who for a time nourishes dreams of an improbable promotion rather than feeling a sense of resignation about his emigration from his native land. He hopes that his children will succeed, justifying in this way their having emigrated. He is disturbed then about their children not being the persons today they could have been if the family had remained in their home country. There are perhaps illusions of grandeur of a sort on the father’s part as a kind of unconscious preparation for the disappointment that his two sons and his two daughters, born and socialized in Sweden, could turn out to be in the parents eyes. Father Tarek saw three of his children succeed in getting jobs but the fourth one becoming a delinquent. Although he tried to influence his children in the direction of their living

up to his expectations, he seemed at the same time to want to keep them at a distance. His wife told of his saying to them that they were not really Swedish, that they were deluded in believing it, that they were of the same background as their parents. Thus he expressed the ambivalence characteristic of fathers who belong to a supposedly scorned minority group of parents who on the one hand want their children to not be like them, although they on the other hand want them to remain close to them, in line with their position and their habitus. He dreamed and thus undoubtedly did not actually believe completely that things would in reality occur as he imagined they would, that his children would return with him to his home country someday, to a large house he would have built there. He could not bear the idea of their refusing to follow him. These not having internalised the standards of the country where they were born, that their father himself valued highly, the children were unable to identify with their parents' native land.

These contradictory expectations can generate a very sad relationship with the children, regardless of what they do, despite the fact that the mother's seeming to be saying to her husband in the interview that their children were not as unworthy as he seemed to believe. However, the father appeared to place no value on this, perhaps because of the modesty of the trajectories of his children testifying in his mind to their being like the other young people in the neighbourhood.

The mother highlights to a considerable extent in her account the expectations of immigrant fathers generally, whose search for recognition is perhaps the driving engine in any very definite success of their children, but whose frequently intolerant character is also the origin of the narcissistic wounds connected with any of the children being negatively assessed at school or elsewhere.

Summary and conclusions

The study suggests that there has been a decline in social capital (cf. Putnam, 2000) consisting here of trust, values and norms that are shared with the family as a network. This decline has led to many par-

ents, especially fathers, feeling a sense of resignation and abandoning the role toward their children that they had earlier. The parents are busy struggling to find their way in new networks at the same time as the children adopt norms and values that differ from those of their parents.

In a study that Vincent (2000) conducted, in which seventeen families were interviewed (seven white and ten Bangladeshi families), the central research question concerned how well advice centers functioned that provide guidance and help for the parents in education matters and in housing. The Bangladeshi families expressed unfamiliarity with the education system and appeared to be more anxious to discuss survival issues as matters that dominated their life discourses. Vincent described the difficulty that white professional researchers could face in accessing the thoughts and feelings of respondents of differing ethnic, cultural and in many cases class background, even if accompanied by an interpreter. Vincent declares it to be highly problematical to categorize parents' responses on the basis of ethnicity alone.

On the basis of discussions with the Arabic speaking parents in the present study, it appeared that there are a variety of processes that can lead to unity within an immigrant family such as those investigated here, being easily broken. The degradation of the conditions of existence that the disqualification on the labor market of young people who have not successfully finished their studies, serves in part to explain the distress these parents can feel in relation to this and the distrust they can experience of the principle that good schooling can protect their children adequately from being without jobs. For them, their involvement can be experienced as being without meaning if it fails to give results in the long term for their children. Their sons are among the first affected by mass unemployment and by strong barriers to entry into the labor market. It appears that under these circumstances, sons and daughters of Arabic background who fail to complete their education can readily be inclined to become delinquent. It intruded on them as though it were a compensatory resource through "the easy money" and the immediate symbolic benefits that it can provide even if only in terms of design label clothes.

For the families in question, the district in which they live constitutes a kind of trap. Due to devaluation of their social habitat and discrimination logic that tends to relegate Arabic families in particular and other families of minority background as well to degraded sections of “millionprogram” districts, the area where they live appears to be an additional factor tending to create a fragile structure in their families, that lack of cultural and economic resources necessary to keep their children from the enticements of living the life of the street. Also these parents are unable to readily escape individually from the kind of collective sense of disgrace that surrounds them in the district where they live. Delinquency threatens not only families there that are lacking in resources or whose sons are penniless and out in the street, but also families living in these areas generally.

The stigmatization of Arabic speaking parents, often perceived as persons whose children readily succumb to criminality is a powerful factor in creating the divisions between them that serve to prevent their becoming organized collectively against the social causes of the difficulties with which they are faced. The present study highlights the Arabic speaking fathers', reacting in a sometimes brutal way to feelings of dishonor and the risk of failure that perceive. Far more than the mothers, they are led to condemn their young delinquents son whose criminal fate incarnate to an extent the breakdown of the hopes they had had of their emigration leading to their getting ahead. By moving, or by distancing themselves from their children physically or symbolically when their either children become delinquent, some of them express with force the collective desolation of the fathers generally.

The possibilities of their children getting jobs being threatened if they quit school can also increase the distance between the Arabic speaking fathers and their children. The fathers separated as they are from their countries or origins, both physically and in terms of the socialization they are exposed to feel their sense of security and of worthiness threatened (cf. Sayed, 2004). The mothers try to preserve the family bonds. They oppose the negation by the father that the de-affiliation of the sons who have committed criminal acts results in, refusing to exclude them from the family home and not “dropping” those who fail at

school or commit crimes. Demonstrating their habitus of mother and their emotional capital (Reay, 1998a, 2004b), this solidarity also testifies to their hope of finding new standards of adjustment enabling the family to assist their children for a more extended period of time in their schooling while they seek or await employment. Divided in many cases in their efforts devoted in their children between the negative moral judgments of society regarding their children having committed a crime and the threats to their future that failure to complete their education or factors connected with their immigrant background can create. The mothers thus perform invisible work of great importance without which solidarity between the generations could not be maintained.

Part three

10 Methodological reflections—access, process and ethics

My research journey has been an interesting one, filled with reflections, planning for action and taking it, evaluating what has been done, and repeating various cycles repeatedly. My field notes, documents, journal entries and reviews of relevant literature fill several filing cabinets. I kept a journal regularly of what I was doing, examining and re-examining my own thoughts, feelings, behaviour and approach. The project had a dual purpose: changing practices in the school and understanding the processes taking place, the latter in part through observation, participation, reflection and feedback. My primary focus was on my research, trying to find answers to my question by working with the parents and the home-school mediators in endeavouring to identify ways in which the school and the practices we were following could be improved so as to facilitate contacts with the parents. I sought to describe and understand the opportunities and challenges encountered and how to improve communication and working relationships.

The part of the journey I describe here has to do with ethical issues and things that I faced and did which, though fully intentional, might better have been avoided, and could have been avoided with better and more careful planning. My double role became a multi-one, with each role having many dimensions within it, as a project leader, a researcher and home-school mediator. This was sometimes confusing to everyone involved in the project. I worked closely with hundreds of parents of differing backgrounds, with different ethnic groups and with teachers who had previously been my teacher-colleagues, my coming to know many of them much better in the process. During the project, my social network also grew enormously. My own social capital too has developed through my becoming acquainted with so many parents, teachers and people in a wide variety of organisations. Here I will discuss some of the difficulties and ethical dilemmas I have encountered. My discussing

these matters is based on the belief that it could be of some use to those engaged in social change or in projects of this type in their own schools or organisation.

Being critical

It has been argued that action research, as a form of ethical enquiry, should address professional dilemmas that practitioners who seek to improve their work are faced with (Kemmis, 1988). It has also been claimed that educational researchers deal far too little with many of the ethical questions connected with their research, ignoring various professional dilemmas with which persons in the area may be faced (Burgess, 1991). Issues of objectivity, loyalty towards research participants, and confidentiality are highly important and can be very challenging for the researcher. Our background, the environment in which we live, and the culture, or cultures, that shape our sense of meaning and our experience can make it difficult to be objective about many things. Objectivity is regarded by Bell (1993) as an impossible goal in any absolute sense, but as one worth striving for in the more realistic sense of doing the best one can to achieve it.

Being careful in presenting the truth as one sees it and in efforts to enlist the loyalty of others can be a wise approach and yet it can also create problems. This dilemma became evident for me in many situations involving my contacts with the parents of children and at various levels within the school system. What I was told by the parents with a sense of trust often involved highly sensitive matters that I needed to deal with very cautiously. The same was true of questions teachers brought up with me regarding a particular child or its parents.

Similarly, what the school did, even if I was sometimes highly critical of it, was not something I could feel responsible for telling the parents to take action against the school. As a researcher and a home-school mediator striving to establish a close relationship with minority parents and with the school, working closely with people also created problems and sometimes resulted in a loss of objectivity and perspective and pos-

sibly to my identifying with the parents under study, with the risk of forgetting my academic role.

Having an immigrant background has been both an advantage and a disadvantage. Some parents, to show their gratitude, invited me, either alone or together with my family, to visit their homes and tried in connection with this to build up a personal relationship with me outside my research project. This was problematic in the sense that I was never sure if the parents might fail to understand my role and thought that they could win my favour at cost of the other parents if I accepted the invitation to come. I was often worried that parents would take it for granted and that I would help them in some specific way since I was easily identified as “one of them”, my speaking their language and sharing with them the same religion and history. Speaking with the parents in their language could be effective in making them believe what I said, yet it could also lead to their taking certain things for granted or also to my doing so, and to either my pre-understanding and assumptions or theirs affecting my understanding of things, destroying the objectivity of the situation. It could also lead, as Schutz (1976) has indicated, to our sticking to what is easiest and not trying to go deeper. Somewhat, Schutz has told of the fact of his being a researcher constraining him to be rational and objective and to leave out his emotions. Yet emotional involvement can also be a constructive force. The matter is not simple.

From being native to going strange

My tasks included those of providing external support to the site where the research project took place and coaching the teachers and school administrators in implementing the organisational program and the changes that were aimed at. My secondary focus was on the research as such, i.e. writing my PhD thesis.

The role of the researcher as an outsider versus an insider can vary with the research methods involved, ranging from that of being an impartial objective observer, to observing while participating, to being a fully participating observer (cf. Agar, 1996). My roles in the research project

varied across the dimensions referred to. My participation in the project was overt (O'Reilly, 2005), characterised in part by my organisational role for the team and the parents. Various ethical issues arose as a result of conflicts between my role as a researcher and my previous role as a teacher at the school. I still tended to be treated as a colleague rather than as a researcher. There were teachers who simply "shrugged their shoulders" when they heard me talking about research and being a researcher at the school, which suggested that they felt that research was not made for people like me. Conducting research in the school where one teaches or has taught can be a challenge in many ways. Being freed of teaching duties, appearing at school only part of the time, and performing tasks quite different than what I had before, was sometimes interpreted as a failure on my part to perform the job and of being like all other immigrants supposedly are who receive social welfare without doing anything. It was not easy for my former colleagues to switch to accepting me in my new role. I was well known to the staff, some of whom had certain difficulties in distinguishing between a research project and a school development project. I found myself in a process of shifting roles.

As a researcher and a project leader, a home-school mediator, also a former teacher in the school, I experienced the process both of *strange going native* and of *native going strange* (Hockey, 1993). I went from *strange to native* in the process of getting to know the parents and becoming acquainted with their situation. This made me somewhat of a stranger in the school where I had been employed. My former colleagues began to consider me as someone who was closely allied with the parents and no longer as a colleague.

Bastiani (1997) describes the role of the home-school liaison as challenging and notes that liaison work runs the very considerable risk of falling between two worlds. The teachers in the staff room often stopped talking when I came in, which had not been the case before, their viewing me as being one of the others and no longer as being one of the teachers. I have also been seen as someone closely allied with the school head, a fact, as I experienced it, that made the teachers more and more regard me as someone who dealt with the people in power. Some of them became afraid to talk openly with me. At the same time, par-

ents who could get jobs at the school were more and more becoming allied with the teachers but not with the other parents. Their double role was to be a parent representing other parents in the school and their having colleagues in the school whom they should be loyal towards to. This made my role even more difficult, since I was the one who was easily blamed for everything that happened in the school, my being the one who had started everything and had become a symbol for it. I sought help from those sitting in power to take over this process but no one seemed to be interested or showed much respect for the very large efforts of mine and of all the others who had been involved in the project.

Being loyal or betraying trust

I often felt the desire to tell certain parents what I considered to be wrong with the school, but I realized that my role was not to be a kind of inspector of the school. I realized that taking such an approach would be unethical. Instead, I let this be a task for the parents to engage in and to take any actions themselves they considered appropriate for dealing with problems they perceived without any help or suggestions on my part. At the same time, I was given personal information regarding various students and their parents by some of my colleagues, but was told to not inform the parents about any of this. In such cases, I had no predetermined strategy as to what to do in response to the dilemma this might create. Instead, I reflected carefully upon any actions I might consider carrying out, analyzing the consequences of what I might conceivably do as adequately as possible. Another question, partly ethical and partly practical, concerned the amount of time I spent on the research project and on matters connected with it. The parents often had extra needs and wishes, leading to the question of how much time I should and could devote to these matters. I was often sought out at the school during the day by parents who had problems with their children that they needed help with. I sometimes acted as therapist, school adviser, lawyer, teacher even older brother, giving advice. At other times I had to hide in the school or make myself scarce in some way because I did not have time to meet the parents. Although the parents knew of others at the school whom they could talk with about their problems,

they seemed to often feel particularly comfortable in talking about them with me. I realized that it is important to know that research of this type can be very time-consuming.

Confidentiality and anonymity

I had not realized initially the risks associated with investigating ethical issues in an overt way while having responsibilities as a researcher and as project leader. In the course of the project, members of the team discussed with me in considerable depth their perceptions of events and behaviours and their emotional reactions to them. An initial plan was to examine ethical decision-making in the school with the hope of finding ways to improve it. I was not certain whether the final outcome of what we were undertaking would facilitate cooperation between the school and the parents or would lead to difficulties. I felt it could be difficult to get the parents, who came from different parts of the world and differed somewhat in their conceptions of ethical behaviour, to agree on these matters.

An area that gave me some difficulties as a researcher within the school where I had taught, and where there were both scientific and practical goals involved in the project, was that of its obviously being so important to ensure insofar as possible the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants. Yet I saw, for example, that most if not all of the staff members could be identified by the parents on the basis of the material obtained, in virtually whatever way it might be presented. Protecting confidentiality in this respect did not seem possible.

Dealing effectively with parents of highly differing background – some of them of high educational level and others even illiterate, not having attended school in their home countries at all – was not an easy task. It was one that required certain skills in leadership and respect for individual capabilities, such as to not ask the parents to write down their names on a list or to answer any written questions during our meetings since any of them might not be able to read and write. The parents who participated in the project had in common their belonging to an excluded minority group who shared many of the same difficulties and

life struggles. At the start, one task was to decide how to introduce my research project to both the parents and the teachers. I also had to explain certain ethical issues that were involved. My presentation of these matters had to be repeated again and again as more and more of the parents considered taking part and as new parents appeared on the scene (cf. Burgess, 1991). I needed to explain to them that data would be gathered, analysed and reported.

Assuring anonymity is at risk the very moment the researcher is told something or is allowed to see something that normally would be hidden from others (Burgess, 1991). The teachers realized that matters regarding them would be easily identifiable, since the project was known in the entire city and was taken up in the local newspaper as a positive approach on the part of the school. This made my position particularly complex. It was important to assure everyone that the information would only be used for purposes of the study and would not simply be reported to the school Head. The parents were worried that the information they provided would affect their children at school. They were afraid that if the teachers and the school administration knew about their views this might harm their children. Here I had to assure the parents that no names or anything of what they said would be readily identifiable, that the research results would take some time to be published and that by then the schoolteachers would have forgotten which parents had taken part in the investigation. I decided the purposes of the study to not identify the parents in terms of their age, the country they came from and the number of the children they had.

One thing my commitment to confidentiality as a researcher involved was the need to conceal such negative issues as those of racism, the abuse of power and attitudes that were against parental involvement in the work of the school or were directed against teachers in an accusatory way, as illustrated by such remarks as “Why should we bother to integrate them (the parents) in the work of the school? We already have enough trouble with their children.” or “The teachers are racist. They don’t like the idea of immigrant children learning and then going on to get better jobs”. Spreading such statements would destroy the process of building trust between the school and the families of the children. I did not want individual voices of this sort to have a negative affect on

the parents' becoming closely involved in the work of the school. I also felt the need of withholding certain negative information from the project for scientific purposes on the basis of loyalty towards my former colleagues, questions of individual vulnerabilities and even the safety of the people involved. When the parents provided me information explicitly in confidence, I could sometimes not be sure whether it was communicated to me as a researcher or as a project leader. Merely asking my informants which role of mine was intended provided no complete answer. After all, I am the same person in either case and they know what they have told me and that I cannot forget it. However, if they had given me information as a project leader I could have been authorised, or even obliged, to act on it to prevent harm to others. If there was any risk of this if the information was provided to me as a researcher, on the other hand, I might not have the right to do so. Determining and maintaining the boundaries between these roles required constant vigilance and despite this there was some spillover from the one role to the other. These differing roles presented me with a constant dilemma.

Conducting research at my former workplace

As a project leader I thought very much about the emotional side of being a researcher. We are all human and in the end can become a bundle of nerves. By this I mean that as a researcher one cannot cut off his or her feelings and be only a researcher. I pondered on the "I" and the "me" both of being a researcher and of being a project leader in an action sense. It was difficult to switch roles, and sometimes it was difficult to know when it was time to step aside and observe and when it was time to be actively engaged with a group of parents. I was bothered again and again by the question of whether I was doing the right thing, and would stop and ask myself this. I decided finally to basically follow the stream of my action research spiral and let things happen without trying as much to steer the process. One thing that made the project particularly complicated was the fact that neither I nor the team had ever before been involved in such a project and that we also lacked the routine to follow and record everything that happened in the group, which might have made things easier.

One critical reflection, it seemed to me, was that I had been too idealistic about the expected benefits of parent involvement and of the parent education course and somewhat unrealistic about our chances of promoting better standards of how to treat the parents. As a consequence, I attempted to examine my own thinking in order to bring certain critical issues to the surface and to challenge and address the “undiscussables” about how we should best have gone ahead. At the same time, I felt constrained in clearly stating my views as to how one should determine what is best in making decisions about various matters pertaining to the school since this could be construed as a criticism of the teachers and the school administration. It also seemed as though the school showed less interest than it might in the project. It had been hard work trying to clarify for each and every one of my former colleagues that what I was doing had to do with a research project and with a school development project at the same time. There seemed to be a certain confusion between what a research project versus what a school development project is. Most of my former teacher colleagues seemed to be familiar only with the known way of carrying out research of a conventional sort – through interviews, questionnaires, surveys, and observations, and not attempting at the same time to achieve institutional changes.

Although doing research in my own school had disadvantages it also had advantages. Having easy access to the school and being familiar with each and every one my colleagues saved me a great deal of time, just as avoiding having to be introduced again and again did too. Having ready access to the different parts of the school building and a thorough knowledge of the school and its history enabled me to move smoothly and confidently throughout the building without being viewed suspiciously or being asked why I was using some particular facilities or opening a door. All of this was very helpful in planning the space to use, knowing where to go, what to use and not to use, and where to get various things. Knowing my former colleagues as I did made it much easier as well to ask those I wanted to be with in forming a project team whether they were willing to participate. Burgess (1991) states that access has to be negotiated and renegotiated at every stage of research. Having access to the school does not mean that one has access to the different classrooms where the teachers have their own teaching. Since I did not negotiate with all the teachers, the problem of access

appeared strongly when the parent school association started to use a different part of the school. The teachers showed considerable reluctance to let the parents use their own classrooms, referring to things disappearing and to things being left in a dirty state whenever the parents had been there.

Although I had various discussions with these teachers, matters were not easy. What Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) refers to as *doxa* became very evident in this case, where the teachers took for granted traditions of the classrooms being theirs and the idea that no one except them should be there being invaded by certain parents who lacked the language skills to readily discuss this with the teachers. Letting the parents use the classroom seemed somehow to disturb the peace of some of the teachers and led to their presenting different arguments against letting the parents use those spaces. I did not think of myself as being involved in informing those in power in the school district about the project since I relied very much on the school administrators passing on information about it to their superiors. I realized later that access to the site of research of this type should have been negotiated with those higher up in the power hierarchy in order to obtain full support and for having access to the school generally. As it was, I had to accept the possibility of no longer being supported by those in power. I was given some words of consolation by one of those in power, who asked, "Can one be a prophet in one's own town?" and "Who are you to do this?" (cf. Agar, 1996). Understanding how the system functioned, my solution was to keep within the bounds of my research, being careful not to play the part of an expert who claimed to know everything.

11 Summary and discussion

The overall aim of the study is to provide a broader understanding of what promotes and what hinders parental involvement in an urban school. What can be seen as promoting parental involvement for one of the partners can be seen as preventing it for the other and vice versa. The teachers were supposed to give their views on parent group as a whole in the school that was studied. As it turned out, however, the parental involvement issue was limited to the Muslim group of parents, or more specifically those who were Arab speaking, these being those who hold strongly to their Islamic traditions and try as much as possible to transmit them to their children.

The complexity of parental involvement

Parental involvement—its definition

In this study parental involvement was defined to be both home-centered and school-centered forms of involvement, in which the parents were supposed to invest their resources to help their children at home and at school (cf. Epstein, 2001). The school-centered form of involvement meant parents being able to visit school spontaneously and make themselves more visible in the meetings and the different activities arranged by the school.

The teachers claim that parental involvement should be characterised by the parents' establishing an active relationship with the school and that the parents should generally attend meetings or regularly establish contacts with the teachers, make sure that the child follows the work to be done satisfactorily, discuss their possible concerns with the teachers and ask the teachers advice when the need for this is felt.

School-centered involvement for the parents meant not only attending the meetings held at school but also arranging different activities to help their children within the school building. The parents' involvement is concerned with the well being of the children, protecting their own cultural heritage and helping them to succeed in school and being proud of their Arabic and Muslim identity, which for many of the parents seemed to be threatened and possibly disappear by the longer period of time they stay in Sweden.

The home-centered parental involvement included teachers' views about parents involving themselves as much as they can in the child's schooling, stimulating and encouraging the child as much as possible in his/her studies and learning. The teachers also claimed that the parents should take an active role in bringing up their children properly, look after their needs, help them with their homework and send them tidy, clean and neat to school. Parents on the other hand described their home-centered involvement to be going hand in hand with the school-centered parental involvement. The supplementary school arrangement for example was regarded as a home-centered form of parental involvement though it was arranged between the walls of the school. They expressed problems of both relational and educational character while trying to put their children at work or help them with their homework.

While teachers regarded parental involvement to be concerned with each individual family or parent to be more involved in his or her child schooling, parents were more interested in a collective form of involvement through establishing a parent-teacher association or getting together arranging different activities for their children. The home-centered parental involvement can be said to take the form of a battle between the teachers and the parents, a symbolic battle of protecting the child. The teachers viewed the parents as individuals in need of guidance and help deciding what was best for them and what could best be done to help their children to succeed in school and further their integration in society, adopting in this way a form of a symbolic violence. The parents on the other hand did not seem to be interested interfering in the work of the teachers but showed a great will of protecting

their children from the influence of the school and the teachers on their children.

Parental involvement– its obstacles

Although both the teachers and the parents appeared willing to develop a closer working relationship, their ambitions and good intentions were faced with a wide range of obstacles, both within the school itself and outside the school, within the family or in the parents' daily struggles within the neighbourhood. There were thus obstacles related in part to the school and the teachers and in part related to the parents and the neighbourhood where the parents lived.

The teachers in this study experienced difficulties in dealing with parent in general and parents of Arabic Muslim background in particular. The parents' religious beliefs, language and cultural background present difficulties for the teachers to establish good working relationship with these parents.

While religious differences were not mentioned by the parents, language was considered as one of the main obstacles of not getting close to the school. A basic consensus is expressed by the teachers that these matters can create barriers to the establishment of a close working relationship with these parents. Another matter which clearly affects these parents but was generally not emphasised by the teachers is the parents' socio-economic situation. The parents on the other hand express a strong need of better knowledge of the educational system and of acquiring the school capital connected with it. They often lack the knowledge needed, however, to get really closely in the work of the school their children attend. Maintaining that the school is the business of the teachers, and that school is designed for teachers, the parents having for the most part nothing to do there. Developing a sort of resignation attitude which doesn't mean a disinterest in getting involved in the education of their children, but a sort of strategy to avoid feeling of humiliation once meeting the teachers at school and not knowing much of its educational practices.

The parents' complex world

The study also exemplifies the complexity of the world outside the school of parents who are faced with survival issues. It could be shown that the effort to involve the parents in what the school is doing is confronted by partly competing efforts of the parents to improve the situation in the residential area and integrate them in the new society. Such problems as those of lack of adequate living space, unemployment, problems of the changing makeup of young people in the neighbourhood and the ambiguity of roles in the changed family structure confronted the parents, problems that can lead to parents living in such districts lacking the energy to participate actively in the measures the school or the local authorities plan. These parents are often in a situation of exclusion regarding the school and its work and from the social activities in the neighbourhood.

In general, these parents do not seem to be belonging to social networks in which the school is discussed and in which they are ready to invest time. They tended to develop activities besides the school in which they invested their own cultural, social and economic capital. These activities were often hidden from the school and the public gaze and to some extent excluded from the field of the school. The challenging circumstances that surround the families and the young people made the parents' role even more complicated and their relation to school and the different authorities becomes vague and lacks consistency. The struggle takes on the form of a battlefield between different agents—the parents, the school and the teachers, the neighbourhood and the city itself—the parents developing strategies to protect their children from being drawn astray by those who fail in school, and drugs using. The study shows that matters of class and habitus are unavoidable in clarifying and better understanding parental involvement in urban school. The socio-economic situation of the parents make them constitute a class of themselves since the discussion tend to be around immigrant in the district forming a new category of class. Much of the emphasis in this thesis was placed on the parents' active participation than on their influence since neither the teacher nor the parents brought up issues of parents being involved in decision making at the school.

The home-school mediators

The need and the importance of home-school mediators to bring both parts together were felt crucial. Obstacles such as language barriers and cultural differences can be managed better by use of home-school mediators who are well-qualified teachers who speak the language of the parents and function as cultural mediators as well, however, overcoming certain of the obstacles involved may lead to new obstacles coming up, such as the teachers not wanting the parents to use the school. The parents may manifest their involvement in the problem at hand then through their establishing of supplementary school arrangements as well as other activities. The teachers refusing the idea of the parents using the school facilities. Different conflicts within the group of the parents may hinder the parents from functioning as a united group. It was felt that the home-school mediators should best be teachers or trained professionals so as to be able to adequately meet the needs of the parents and the teachers.

Efforts made by the home-school mediators in this study to obtain the involvement of the Arabic parents in the work of the school showed that changes can occur at many different levels, such as in educational practices, so as to better take account of the needs of minority parents, and in attitudes and perceptions on the part of both the school personnel and the parents. The study shows that efforts to establish a close working relationship between the school and parents belonging to an Arabic minority can encounter complex issues of many types, such as those of cultural, social values and norms, institutional aims, the types of knowledge and skills that should be provided, and how best to reach out. The study also shows the complexity of the roles that both the teachers and the parents should fulfill, the changing family structure, differences in life experiences, in practices of bringing up children, and in views concerning democracy. I chose three main areas through which the complexity of parental involvement in such urban school could be clarified and better understood. These are:

1. The impact of Swedish school history and the different governmental document on the relations between parents and school in general and minority ethnic parents in particular

2. Parental involvement in an urban school as composition of efforts to get the parents involved in the work of the school and getting them integrated in the society.
3. The impact of the parents' migration process and their living situation in such disadvantaged areas on their involvement in the education of their children.

I will in the next section try to discuss the most important results of the study in relation to the theoretical concepts defined earlier.

The relation between the parents and the teachers

The analysis that follows is based on use of Bourdieu's notion of capital, habitus and symbolic violence. Bourdieu's notion of *doxa* also plays a central role in the area of cooperation between the home and the school, as well as the notion of institutional habitus coined by (Reay 1998a).

To synthesize the results obtained, I propose a typology concerned with the relation between the Arabic speaking parents and the school, obtained by combining both the teachers' and the parents' views.

The parents' involvement strategies

In a study which Vincent (2000) interviewed seventeen families—seven white families and eleven Bangladeshi families—and developed a typology of parental strategies involving strategies of three basic types; the detached approach, the band-aid approach, and the toolbox approach. The detached approach is characterised by a passive relation between the parents and the teachers; this type of approach often originates from the parents' feeling their resources are not sufficient to enable changes in their situation. They despair and give up. The band-aid approach represents the parents' contacting teachers once a problem has arisen and then disappearing and coming back when a new problem arose, but otherwise doing little to nurture or develop the relationship. The toolbox approach involves the parents' tending to choose from a wide

range of options open to them. These parents, in contrast to those using the detached approach, often have resources - such as social capital through personal contacts, or cultural capital through confidence and knowledge- available to them. These forms of capital are often in the same currency which facilitates contacts and makes partnership possible. Vincent concludes presentation of this type of typology by indicating that the strategies in question are influenced by social class, ethnicity and factors such as familiarity with the school system and language fluency, the parents' occupation and their economic situation.

Parents delegating responsibility to their school

The detached approach presented by Vincent (2000) can be exemplified in the relation between the Arabic speaking parents and the school. The parents appeared to delegate responsibility for many things regarding their children to the school and the teachers. This is not due to disinterest but because of a sense of their lacking the ability or opportunity to give their children many of the things that they would like to. The parents relied almost entirely and exclusively on the school to ensure the learning and the motivation of their child, in a word to guarantee his/her success. They often had an extremely positive conception of Swedish schools as compared with the schools they were familiar to in their home countries and felt they do not have to intervene, the school having at its disposal all the means needed to enable the pupils succeed. Moreover, problems of language made it almost impossible for many of them to provide what they considered would be any appreciable help for their children in their schoolwork, just as it was difficult for many of them to understand what went on in the meetings which they, because of this, often did not attend any more. Lack of knowledge of the school system and its educational practices was a real hindrance to their feeling they could become useful partners in discussions. The high level of trust in the teachers and in the school that many parents had became a hindrance for some of them to playing an active role in the work of the school.

Often too, the parents who delegated virtually all responsibility for things to the schools had the idea that the teachers preferred that they did not interfere in school matters. Certain parents thus tended in a

sense to make the school something sacred in which they placed all their hopes of social success for their children. They regarded it as inappropriate that they meddle with or interfere in the work of the teachers. Accordingly, some of the parents were astonished when the teachers told them that they expected more involvement on their part. In contrast, when I met them for the first time, at the early stages of the project, most of them expressed a sort of skepticism towards the teachers. Often, the parents, even if their child was having difficulties, did not take part in what was going on in the school adhering to the following simple rule: "The home is the home; the school is the school, the parents must rely on the teachers and not interfere with their work." This cultural model of school/family relations was found in this study to be rather widespread, particularly among the Arabic speaking parents which contrasted with what the teachers in effect were saying. The good parents of pupils are those who provide school help to their child and who dialogue with the teachers.

The teachers delegating the whole idea of parental involvement to the invisible other

The teachers at the school expressed considerable worry about those parents with whom they were unable to reach. They put certain hindrance in the way, obstacles that prevented the necessary parental involvement from developing. The parents' cultural and religious beliefs as well as their being unable to speak the Swedish language well, all these served as hindrances here.

Some of the teachers appeared to delegate the whole project of achieving parental involvement to others, whether by accusing the school administrators of not doing enough to get the parents involved or by delegating the responsibility for this to persons like myself and the team of home-school mediators. This was shown by many of the teachers repeatedly stating this during my daily talk with them, but it also came up in interviews I held with them or indicating their answers to the questionnaire. Views such as "Tell the parents...inform them...make sure that they understand that...tell them that in Swedish school matters are different...explain to them..." all illustrate the teachers regarding the job of getting parents involved as being one to be done by someone

other than themselves. This can be considered as a form of institutional habitus (Reay, 1998a; Reay et al., 2001) developed by the teachers. Things having always been such that the teachers were not to be involved in efforts to involve the parents in the work of the school, and the idea that the teachers' role is to teach the children not to have additional meetings with the parents at inconvenient times, aimed at informing the parents of the children about their school and about the school system.

The teachers' delegation of such tasks to others can be understood in terms of the teachers' defending their profession of being teachers and not wanting to be given additional task that could burden them in their professional role, as other studies have shown (e.g. Persson & Tallberg-Broman, 2002). The teachers delegations is also due to the complexity of the issue of parental involvement and of teachers not having themselves a clear definition to what it means and what strategies that can be used to get the parents actively involved in the work of the school.

The parents' sense of resignation

The constructed habitus of the fathers' tends to become one simply of resignation, the mothers in contrast making use of their emotional capital (Reay, 1998b, 2004b) to develop a more caring role and try to protect the family unit and the children. The sense of resignation they also feel being moderated by their role and status as mothers.

My own experience in the school in meetings I had with the parents was that considerably more mothers than fathers attended the different meetings held in the school for consultations. The fathers were involved at a distance, as observed by Reay (1998a). The sense of resignation can be understood through what Bourdieu (2000) describes the fit between field and habitus. The closer the fit between field and habitus, the more likely it is that the parents feel like "fish in water". The parents in this study felt more like "fish out of water" since their habitus didn't fit in the field and are thus being rejected or rejected themselves.

Crozier (2000) studied relationship with parents in two schools in England. One of the schools had predominantly a middle-class intake and the second predominantly an intake of children of working-class parents. She found that the working-class parents more often showed an attitude of resignation towards their role in school and considered the work of school to be the job of the teachers. Reay (1998a) found working class mothers to not want “to fuss” or to be seen as being pushy parents.

Examining the answers of the Arabic speaking parents in my own study, the resignation of the parents showed, appears to be a genuine strategy and not simply an attempt to escape from their responsibilities as parents. Their resignation appears to reflect the fact of the parents encountering difficulties in helping their children with their homework or a sense of failure in this regard or feeling a certain sense of humiliation when facing the school teachers, lacking adequate knowledge of the school and possibly possessing less economic and cultural capital than they would like to be able to satisfy the demands of both of their children and the school. The authority of the fathers can be seen in the amount of economic, social and cultural capital they possess. It appeared that the more the parents gained control over their situation the more ready they were to take initiative contacting the school. They could become discouraged in particular when feeling unable to help their children, and when having the impression of the school and its educational practices being too difficult and their children not finding their way, and those of their lacking the cultural capital (confidence and knowledge) (cf. Vincent, 2000). They seemed to sometimes feel as though the school was not made for people like them and that their children’s failure in school was sometimes inevitable. Accordingly, they failed to invest in closer relations with the school, partly because of a feeling of incompetence and partly because they considered it to be useless.

The contact with the various parents of my study confirmed my intuition that none of them ignored the schooling of the child. They were not indifferent to what occurred at the school, even if they sometimes had a negative image of it and avoided contacts with the school staff. One can thus not really speak of the resignation of these parents, it ap-

pears instead to be a feeling of impotence and suffering on their part that could lead to a form of withdrawal. Material and social difficulties, as well as life risks in general meant that some of them could not become as involved as they would like to be or as the teachers desired. They felt drawn between the desire to see their child successful and to receive their help with this end and the difficulties they experienced in knowing how to do this or their fear of doing a poor job of this.

Teachers and parents are ambivalent on parental involvement

Ambivalence on the parents' part is defined here as the attitudes of the parents toward the school being partly self-contradictory. On the one hand, the parents consider the work of the school important and their involvement in the child's schoolwork, but at the same time openly criticize the school for expecting too much of them and for the teachers being too indulgent or unjust or the teaching methods being inadequate. This can place the child in conflict, the child's seeing the school as being both important and bad which is a contradiction, that can disturb the child and may prevent him/her from doing her/his schoolwork in the best possible way.

Ambivalence on the part of teachers can be illustrated by their calling for a close working partnership with the parents and the parents' taking a more active role but at the same time expressing a deep sense of worry regarding the effects of the religious and cultural differences between them and the parents. Their call for parents getting closely involved in the school can at the same time be a call for the parents becoming *good parents*. In the sense conceived by the teachers who have their own views on how a good parent should be and in considering the relationship between the school and the parents, Reay (1998b), notes that what the parents think have always felt is the right thing for their children may not coincide with the teachers' views of this. That which is to be considered as proper may be negotiated between the two parties with the genuine risk of their values of the parents being lost as far as their children are concerned. The teachers both trying to get closer to the parents and trying as much as possible to change the parents' ways of doing things can lead to the parents' saying "we can only bring up our children in the way we have been brought up ourselves".

This can also be explained by the separation model presented earlier by (Erikson, 2004). The study also shows that the teachers depended so much on the parents help for change and at the same time wanted to change the parents' ways and upbringing methods.

Parental involvement, what it means?

The idea of parental involvement has been described in terms of partnership between a school and the parents. It is not a new conception (Erikson, 2004), and the history of the schools in Sweden indicates there to have long been a strong mistrust of the schools on the part of the parents being able to bring up their children properly. This can be understood in terms of the place and particular role the schools have had in the construction of modern society. The school has long been and remains an institution that serves to in considerable degree transform the not yet integrated individual into a full-fledged citizen. To carry out its task the school creates a certain separation between the universe of the school and that of the parents (cf. Erikson, 2004). In the development of the Swedish schools, the schools appear to have both partly dissociated themselves from society and protected themselves from it in order to extract the child from more fully original milieu (cf. Sandin, 1995). The battle for children's souls, a battle spurred on by increasing knowledge of the role parents and the manner in which children are brought up (cf. Sidebäck, 1992). This battle in this study between teachers and the parents of the children is a symbolic battle to determine the content and direction of the children's schooling and education. Each tries to protect the child. The parents feel that their cultural heritage is being lost and tries to pertain it and the teachers try to free the children from the parents' old tradition and make of them members in a modern society defined by the norms of the school and the teachers. According to Bourdieu (1991) competition can occur on the field and between different agents, where there is a struggle to assert particular capital, new capital definitions and devalue others. There can also be symbolic violence, where the struggle between the dominant forms and the less dominant forms of capital is a struggle over power to impose.

The teachers in this study could be characterised as employing symbolic violence through their use of symbolic power in their belonging to the majority culture, the children serving to guide their parents on their way towards integration into society in which school is one of its institutions. The teachers hoped through schooling the children, to educate and perhaps change the parents. This has been demonstrated by other researchers (e.g. Persson, 1998; Erikson, 2004). The children thus became the teachers of their parents. This mission of the school supposes the school to have a particular relationship with the parents. It must mark its distancing itself from the social background of the child's parents without establishing too distinct a cut, which could risk reducing the effectiveness of the measures it undertook and the failure to obtain positive echoes in the parents. The school is thus charged with a difficult mission, that of transforming the children and their parents into modernity. Even if this double function of educating both the children and their parents is not carried explicitly, it nevertheless exists, at least in a subjacent way.

The influence the school has on the families is not limited to a political project or to the state providing the guarantee of all children being educated and receiving a thoroughgoing framework of values and norms (cf. Erikson, 2004; Richardson, 1983). The teachers in school also carry out a form of symbolic violence since they shape, or endeavour to shape the parents of the children, to the school's and the teachers' image and for their needs. They try to disorganize and reorganize the life of the family unit, by the rhythms they impose, the codes and rules they provide, and the normative control they induce. This can also be explained in the teachers' common sense in asserting the self-evident value of doxa (Bourdieu, 2000).

It appears here that for the large majority of the parents the school provides new rhythms to their life, calling for both hopes and anguishes. The bond between the school and the parents is ambiguous since the family, for the success of its children, needs to agree to be dispossessed of what has been its most expensive and valuable asset: its own cultural background, including the traditions and the religion belonging to it. In addition, the parents must accept an important transformation of their habitus in comparison to that of its children and the school, changing its

status and adjusting to the school norms and values and its institutional habitus.

Between partnership and educating parents

The parents, on the other hand express a need for partnership but not control. The parents' manner of seeking partnership goes beyond the teachers' and the school's way of seeking it. Their involvement is aimed at their receiving support for the child in the school but not at creating means for the school to gain control over them. They feel that the school takes advantage of their lack of knowledge and that it tries to transform the families into the parents being simply the parents of pupils, giving the parents a status which obliges the family to adopt the general interests of society and of the school at the expense of its more particular interests. The parents, through their becoming the servants of the child, lose their absolute power over their children and are drawn into a definite framework that delimits their rights and duties. To be the child's servant, is above all to do one's duty, to satisfy the expectations of the school, one could say. The education of the families becomes a must, less because the school carrying out a political project than its closely allying mobilization of the parents with success of the children at school. In this sense, the project of home-school mediation represents in an intrinsic way the will to transform the parents, since it is not possible to bring the school closer to the parents without modifying the balance of the latter and remolding them to become parents of pupils. What at the end of the 70s was denounced as being the social control of the families or the policing of them (Donzelot, 1979) is accepted today as the key to success. The school as a political project hides an ideology of turning the children against their parents.

The parents between getting involved and not being controlled

The teachers and the Arabic speaking parents who took part in the study both expressed a desire for a partnership but seemed to not like being subjected to control. The criticisms directed at the parents concerned primarily to their failure to convey the work of the school to the children effectively. The teachers felt that the "parents should do better in playing their role as parents", one of them said. By this was meant

that the parents should better supervise the children in their doing their homework, provide them whatever help they needed, check their written work, sign the note books of correspondences and see if generally that they did their school work in a satisfactory way.

The dominating area of criticism directed against the parents, however was that they contradicted the wishes of the school. This done intentionally either erecting barriers or, believing to do well, they oppose the school in such way as creating prejudices by not letting their daughters participate in the swimming lessons or taking showers at school or their questioning the school's methods of teaching "sex education". Most of the parents maintained that there needed to be continuity and a symbiosis between the family and the school, so that the children would feel that both their parents and teachers spoke with one voice, yet a common voice seemed to be lacking. Partnership, though aimed at both sides, thus appeared to be strongly limited. The teachers did not expect the parents to participate directly in the work of the school but wanted the parents to deal with matters concerned with the school's work that the teachers themselves could not deal with effectively.

By rapprochement or social closure in such contest, Coleman (1988) means the parents of the children largely keeping away from school and being constrained to framework, one the school itself defines (cf. Erikson, 2004). The traditional aim of the school in Sweden has been to modify, rectify the behaviour of the parents, a matter anchored in the history of the Swedish school system and its particular place in Swedish society (Erikson, 2004; Sandin, 1995). This position is maintained today as well, viewed in this typical urban school district as being needed in order to adequately confront the rising level of delinquent acts, violence and increasing number of children failing at school. The teachers seek to exert control over those parents in efforts to control disorderliness in the school. Yet this approach poses problems for the teachers, who oscillate between accusation and compassion. Some of the teachers, when faced with difficulties on the part of the children and the apparent incapacity of the parents, perceive the pupil as being a victim and seek to protect him/her from his or her family, parents being seen as an obstacle. Others, in contrast, think that if the child simply remains within the family; the family becomes the victim of its own

children. Some of the parents on the other hand seek to protect their children from the school and the teachers and the influence of western norms and values. The parental involvement according to the parents is not limited to the school they express a deep worry for the problems they confront outside which the school and the teachers may have less knowledge of.

The chaotic situation with which the mothers and fathers are faced

According to Bourdieu (2000) fields evolve configuration of capital and construction of habitus. However, their effects for the individual or a group are not always, necessarily, positive. Some are caught in - double binds—not knowing what to do, creating internal division and suffering (ibid. p. 160). Mixed messages between field and habitus can result in conflicting action—a kind of social schizophrenia (Grenfell, 2004, p. 29). In other cases, when the field moves beyond habitus, whose structural dispositional possibilities can no longer respond to the actuality of the field (ibid). The parents in this study describe their undergoing of major changes in their lives in which their habitus may misfit the field (the school) and thus not being fully recognized. The discussion below exemplifies what is taken up here.

The parents' assessment of their relations with the children was somehow negative. It was also they who to a large extent were blamed for the failure of close ties to become established between them and the school. For these Arabic parents, the generic term of family has to come to consist of a disparate unit of individuals held together in a network of relationships into which the school and the teachers has limited insight. The term "family" has become a word in itself here in which mode of its operation, self-regulation and functioning has lost its traditional meaning. In the home countries of the parents, the notion of the family involved a network based on a strong belief in nuclear family, whereas today, in these uprooted families the ties involved have partly been weakened and the traditional family aura has been lost. This fragmentation of the family reflected by the social distance to that ex-

ists between the world of teachers and of the parents in such a disadvantaged district.

The daily struggle in the neighbourhood, which represents the field in which the parents act, accompanied by unemployment and segregation has mixed up the order of things profoundly. The antagonism that is found best understood in terms of social relations or classes rather ethnicity, as long as these concepts having much of their explanatory power here, it is also being understood in terms of deficits in capital (cultural, social and economic), a lack of economic resources generally and markedly differing habitus (Bourdieu, 1993) both at the individual and the institutional level (Reay, 1998a; Reay, et al., 2001). The traditional social categories have been sometimes by cultural categories such as those of minority Arabic speaking parents often identified by their strange culture and ways of doing things. The reference to working-class families has disappeared in this district and been replaced by reference to minority parents in which there are many lawbreakers who invade the city. The degradation of the parents, especially the father, have changed everything so that one can speak not of families but of parents and their children. The fathers have lost their status as the heads of families, their role having become highly ambiguous and led to new family structures to appear in which the mothers take on an enormous responsibility.

In the context of an endemic unemployment of the fathers as well as of the mothers, the parents feel that their children when leaving school are nothing but the sons and daughters of Arab and of Muslim parents who feel threatened in their own national identity, as groups of people who are stigmatised by the media, in the school and various other institutions. The parents and their children are defined above all by their exclusion and as being Arabic speaking families of Muslim background. They are also defined by their failure to give up their own traditions and religion and to adjust to the traditions and the culture of the new society, which would mean the transformation of their own habitus through their accepting a new set of norms and values and getting rid of their original ones. The views towards them of school teachers are focused on cultural, linguistic and religious differences as compared with traditional members of society. Everything in the attitudes, behaviours

or modes of consumption of the parents' tends to be interpreted in pathological terms and viewed as strange because of their habitus and cultural capital being, of a different currency (cf. Vincent, 2000). Between including parents in the work of the school and excluding them, the ambiguity wins. It is not a matter of exclusion of the individual as such in the sense of discrimination, but rather of the habitus of these people – their manners of acting and the like – being questioned, of its seeming impossible to think of the differences in a positive way.

Bourdieu (1993) speaks of the misfit type of habitus, and mentions the form of habitus that becomes ignored and excluded since it does not fit within the majority culture. These families are doubly victims of exclusion and stigmatization, on the one hand being culturally different and on the other hand being part of urban milieus that are separated from the society. The teachers, like various other societal institutions, are locked in negative views of the parents, stigmatizing and excluding them in many ways on the basis of their differing type of habitus.

The parents' difficulties in helping their children

In any events, the involvement of parents in the work of the school generally remains little more than a wish. The parents express difficulties of a relational nature and of educational one. The children in question were described as getting rid of everything having to do with the school as soon as they get home, these parents speaking of the children "throwing down their schoolbags as soon as they get home from school", disobeying their parents and leaving them to go out to the street. Even if, as in some cases, the parents possessed a high degree of cultural capital in terms of their being highly educated, there could be difficulties for them in helping their children with their homework, since what the parents had studied in their home countries often did not help them much in understanding what their children were learning at school. The parents became relegated to an often almost helpless position that could create misunderstandings and could result in the parents not being able to approach the school or to talk about the school with their children. To what extent then could the parents be involved in the schooling of their children? It would seem that the teachers, unless they had a deep understanding of the knowledge the parents possessed in any case were

unable to comprehend the fact that even illiterate parents are not devoid of competences in being able to follow the schooling of their children in a regular way and to supervise their work.

Arabic parents in this study are like all parents. They by no means ignore the schooling of their children. On the contrary, they hope and expect them to do well and to go on higher studies as well. Today as much as ever these parents possess high hopes of their children's schooling being successful. They follow the global trend in society for parents wanting their children's schooling to be a success. At the same time, the Arabic parents fear their children's school failure. This appears to be directly connected with their desire for their children's success and their endeavour to socially rise.

Parents who possess large cultural capital consider that the schooling of the children is far from being limited simply to the school. The teachers expect, more or less explicitly, the parents to assist and support their children in learning. Parents often feel, however, that the field in which this can take place involves many different places and agents (the home, the neighbourhood, the school and other place where the child may spend very much of its time), a field that is filled with obstacles. The child may also be described as a warlike child difficult to raise. The heavy burden this places on the parents' shoulders makes it difficult for the mother and the father to manage this properly without possibly being suspected of not being a good parent. The parents can feel that they are far from corresponding to the model of a good parent in the eyes of the school, due to what they fear that they lack. A supplementary school arrangement is conceived by the parents as filling the gaps in what they themselves can do for the children's education.

The role of social capital and parental involvement

The present study suggests that the capacity of the school to carry out its various tasks is partly a function of how it invests in different forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986). The home-school mediation project meant enhancing social capital of the school which includes the network of connections to various sources of useful knowledge, norms of collegial-

ity and trust, and functioning networks both within the school and extending to the community outside. Coleman (1988) defines a network as a social structure of individuals who share norms and values. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defined symbolic capital as the representations and expectations of social values. The symbolic capital of the study carried out includes the representations of the aims and goals of the home-school mediators' project. Each form of capital has the potential to structure the other forms and to be structured by them. Bourdieu (1986) and Coleman (1988) have discussed how the different forms of capital relate to each other and reproduce themselves and how the one form of capital can help to increase another form.

Parental involvement in the study led to structural changes within the school, which meant in part developing internal social capital (Coleman 1988). The internal capital had been produced through increasing the sense of collegiality between the teachers and the home-school mediators, to supporting the goals and plans for action that had been developed. The four mediators involved invested their own cultural capital and social capital in reaching out to the parents. The mediators' cultural capital, had the potential of increasing school capacity because it has a direct influence in building social capital, through creating a parent-teacher association and through parents investing their own social capital when arranging for different activities, such as those of the supplementary school and other activities. The home-school mediators were a major source of influence on school improvement planning, bringing the teachers and the parents together and structuring possibilities for this. The school head, together with the mediators both inside and outside the school, responded to the parents' wishes and government demands, but most importantly by working inside the school, maintaining contact with parents and responding to their problems they were faced with.

Communication and creating social ties

The home-school mediators as an internal network represented a form of social capital and helped to build more social capital through getting the parents together and reaching out to those that were difficult to reach. Involving the parents in the school was helped by the commit-

ment of the home-school mediators and their belief in successfully reaching out to the parents to build and maintain parent-school network. This is exemplified by establishing the parent-teacher association. These characteristics consistent with the literature that emphasizes the need of the school's to facilitate social, human, and structural resources to develop such a sense of community and positive attitude towards the school (SOU 1997: 121).

Lack of parental involvement in this study calls upon efforts in order to get the parents involved in a network of relations through which they could get advice and guidance on the school, its system and organisation. In other words, it meant creating situations in which the parents created social ties with the school and with other families in the district. An aspect of social capital of importance in the study was the capacity of the parents, home-school mediators and teachers' to negotiate where social borders and the institutional barriers should lie. This capacity had been developed over time through interaction and through network building. It is social to the extent that accumulation of it can only take place and have a currency value, so to speak within the context of social networks.

Lin (2001) defines strong ties as those which bind people with others similar to themselves; weak ties bring people from different social and cultural background together. While strong ties bring together individuals and groups with rather similar resources and purposes in order to pursue normative and identity based goals, weak ties may be better serving instrumental goals as they can provide access to new types of resources but rely less strongly on values (*ibid*). The home-school mediator project in which the parents participated could develop mutual knowledge and create such social ties between parents who lacked the knowledge of the school and often had less spontaneous contact with other parents in the neighbourhood. The home-school mediators worked for strengthening the weak ties through improving communication between the parents and the school.

Coleman (1988) asserts that an important form of social capital is the potential for information that inheres in social relations. He maintains

that information is important in providing a basis for action. We also developed a strategy of communicating with the parents instead of informing them, since confusion can easily be made between the action to inform and that to communicate. Sending information to the parents doesn't often mean that they understand it. Information is not enough; it is a question of communicating it in an adequate way so that it is understood and used by the parents.

Printing leaflets in different language is not enough to get the parents involved in the work of the school; it's a question of discussing the content of these leaflets together with the parents (cf. Bastiani, 1997). It was important for the home-school mediators to make the schoolwork understood by the parents who often have difficulty grasping its objectives and teaching methods. Holding meetings with parents are necessary but not sufficient. The organisation of the meeting, the nature and the methods of communication creating the conditions of a true dialogue between parents and teachers is of more importance.

Social capital and integration

Coleman (1988) defines social capital as a useful resource available to an actor through his or her social relationships. The social capital available to the parents results from investing their own capital, meeting their expectations, their degree of familiarity with the Swedish school system and the resources that the community, the school, social services and the like that are put at their disposal. The parents who expressed isolation are those who lack social capital. They share neither the values nor the norms or cultural resources of the host society. They often don't belong to associative networks of cultural or political sorts that increase their knowledge of the school and other authorities.

It also seemed that these parents do not have access to the collective social capital, i.e. to collective resources which constitute the neighbourhood, the district and the city. They don't have access to use these resources effectively or even knowledge about their being available to them. They do not enter the networks which could increase their knowledge about the schooling of their children and would help them to understand the norms and the values underlying an effective in-

volvement in their children's schooling. The teachers inform and support the parents during the meetings and children's progress discussion but the parents in question often fail to attend these meetings. The question is whether the resources made available by the school for these parents are adequate and meet their needs. The knowledge useful for them is not often accessible and those resources do not constitute a true social capital as the values, norms and rules set up for the children which create relations of confidence are not often shared between the parents and the school.

The parents being in need of knowledge and social contacts to get ahead in the new society may place a heavy burden on the school. Involving the parents in the work of the school also includes investment in the professional networks formed internally through use of the competence available within the school as well as available externally, through use of the school's network to invite external individuals to participate and to establish contacts with different organisations that facilitate the access of the home-school mediators, the teachers and the parents to various resources and services available within the network structure (Portes, 2000; Coleman, 1988; Bourdieu, 1986). The resources made available for the parents outside the school for their integration were not accessible and the parents lacked knowledge of their being available for them. That's why efforts made to get the parents involved in the school were soon overwhelmed by the parents daily survival needs.

The study shows that it is not only the school which is to be concerned with parental involvement, but also the whole community surrounding the school. Without a strong involvement in the resolution of the problems of lack of parental involvement, there is very little chance to break the correlation between exclusion in urban districts as such and inclusion of those living there in the work of the school. Parents participating in the home-school mediation project were not only interested in getting knowledge about the school, but also about other authorities. They sought guidance from the mediators and other teachers for possible help of getting larger flats or filling in diverse applications. That's why efforts to get the parents involved in the work of the school is of-

ten confused with efforts to integrate them in the new society, a matter which most teachers often avoid to deal with.

The teachers tend, to insist on it being the obligation of the parents to become integrated, and at the same time to consider it to be the responsibility of the host society to provide them with all the means and resources possible of coming to know and of coming to understand how the school functions and how the education of their children takes place. According to the teacher there is a tendency to place all the weight of integration, including that of the parents, on the school. Instead, the reception of these parents by the whole community as a whole should go hand in hand with the reception of their children by the school. The school cannot bear the entire burden of the integration of both the parents and their children, for this reason the whole community should be involved in the effort to integrate the parents in the host society where the school becomes a central meeting place for the arranged activities.

The parent-teacher association as a form of social capital

The parents invested their resources in creating a network within the school. This network functioned as a link between the school and the outside world. The parents together with the home-school mediators reached a sort of commitment on the form of organisation in which they were ready to invest. Though the parents school association functioned as form of symbolic capital to which the parents often referred when speaking about the amount of benefit this brings to them and their children, it also created conflicts and had a negative function in involving all the parents who wanted to get involved. The parent-teacher association was in this study an organisation for a public good (Coleman, 1988) since it demonstrated the will of the parents to get involved in activities arranged by the school. It also demonstrated that the parents became aware about their differences when they faced the school and wanted to arrange activities together.

The parents can readily feel that the entire burden of responsibility for the problems of their children rest on them, thus they may feel obliged

to prove somehow genuine involvement in their children. Establishing the parent-teacher association in a sense provides such proof, its existence becoming a sort of symbolic capital. In addition to the objective difficulties, which they are faced, they feel doubt regarding their abilities to educate their children. Although the parents are sometimes called upon to intervene in school matter, the teachers seem to stigmatize them for various limits to what they feel able to do or can accomplish, limits to their readiness to become involved positively, but also limits to their capacities for socializing their children, to make them integrate a minimum of rules and standards which allow the teachers to do their work. This posture is ambiguous and contradictory.

Supplementary school arrangements

The parents in this study arranged different activities (see chapter 7) both for children and for grownups after the establishment of the parent-teacher association. They worked to empower their children culturally and against what they called the culture of the street. They utilised their social capital through networking and through structured networks to help their children succeed in school (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988). Studies by Reay and Mirza (1997, 2005) illustrate the investment of black women in their social capital and how using their network within the black community led to the establishment of a supplementary school activity. As in Reay and Mirza's study, women in my study had a major role in putting the activity into practice. Both Bourdieu and Coleman were criticised for "gender-blindness" (Field, 2003, p. 41).

The supplementary school seems to have found acceptance by the parents as being truly legitimate. Even if these arrangements seem that the actors in it insist on dissociating themselves from the methods of the school. The parents tend to develop their own methods and field of involvement, they consider the supplementary school arrangements to be effective in terms of contributing to the success of their children, even though no assessment has never been made to determine the effectiveness of those activities. The supplementary school arrangements have become the parents' field of involvement, in which they have invested in the various forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1986) in efforts to give their

children what they feel the school has failed to give them (cf. Reay & Mirza, 2005).

The mothers who helped children living in their district through conducting teaching at the supplementary school did so within the framework and the aims that guided the project. In a pragmatic way, these mothers helped both complete the homework they were given in school and preserve their culture. In conducting the lessons, the mothers in question acted in accordance with their convictions and know-how. They aimed at designing the objectives that guided their teaching and to develop the educational approaches they used in accordance what had characterised their own school system while they were growing up. The supplementary school was ruled, organised and managed according to habitus of those who ran it and in line with their own resources - social, cultural and even economic. It also meant these mothers investing in their emotional capital, (Reay, 1998a; Reay, 2004b) and demonstrating their mother habitus, which involved their wanting to care for and be there for their children and for other children as well.

The parents responded positively to the offer of letting their children attend the supplementary school, far beyond original expectations, when the parent-teacher association had implemented it. There thus appeared to be a strong need for such a school felt by the parents, revealed latent needs of this sort and reflecting strong aspirations in this direction by the parents of letting their children profit from educational help, and of preserving, furthering and in particular protecting their cultural heritage. Speaking of the Arabic language being in danger of vanishing among persons of Arab descent is very widespread among the parents, who believe that otherwise their sons and daughters will never gain the ability to read or to write in Arabic as they do themselves. Thus, the supplementary schooling a means of providing the children help with their school work, protecting their cultural capital and the heritage of it for their children. It is also a means of enhancing social capital by creating social networks between parents and their children.

The methods and arrangements of the supplementary school appear somewhat fuzzy, and its methods are often established in a unilateral way by those responsible. It can be important for the parents who serve as teachers there beginning their work with what Freire (1972) has termed “conscientization”. It is through this activity that the parents can show what competence, knowledge and know-how they are able to mobilize. It would appear more productive on the part of the parents involved in the work of the parent-teacher association to think of the know-how of the supplementary school teachers and how this or other factors may contribute to their being able to mobilise other parents.

An important function of the supplementary school, in addition to those already mentioned, is that it made it readily possible to devote special attention to the needs of those children who are not doing particularly well in class, possibly much more attention than the regular school devotes to them. One can ask whether the relation of the greater proximity of the mothers and fathers to their child which can readily be achieved in the supplementary school, though its flexible framework of instruction enables those parents who function as educators to keep hope of improvement alive in parents of the children, a hope that the teachers at school may provide little support to keep it alive. However, it seemed that the parents did not perceive these arrangements as being a right, but rather as their being an additional help which was granted to them, and they were indebted to the parent-teacher association for this, since it takes into account the particular difficulties of these children.

The dark side of social capital

Coleman claims that social capital is social good since it may not just benefit those whose efforts are required to realise it but all who are part of the structure (Coleman, 1988). Neither Coleman nor Bourdieu mentions the emotion capital involved when investing in social capital and that people might love or hate each other and therefore associate together or avoid each other.

The parents’ different position outside the school and inside of it had a remarkable impact in their will of getting power position within the

parent-teacher association. Parents who got jobs felt more privileged in the sense that they had gained access to the school and become colleagues with teachers of their children. They developed methods and attitudes which made other parents feel envy and started to think of competing to get jobs more than getting involved in the work of the school. Parents who got jobs felt they were on the safe side of the society and were more or less accepted by it. They felt in this sense like real citizens not immigrants as they describe their process of change. This goes together with Bourdieu's (1986) treatment of social capital. Privileged individuals maintain their position by using their connection with other privileged people. This stands in contrast to Coleman's naïve and optimistic view of social capital as a public good with little or no dark side (cf. Field, 2003).

The parents getting involved in the school and arranging many activities within the school obtained too much of social capital. Parental involvement became too much for the teacher who used to be for their own receiving the parents at scheduled times and in places and rooms decided by them. The parents being at school had decreased the freedom of the teachers to be together with their own colleagues who often share the same sort of expectations and obligations. Social capital is also about knowing the rules of the game. The parent-teacher association access to the school using the same facilities as the school teachers had raised many protests within the school building. I could hear statements like: "the school is the school and the home is the home, parents should not interfere in the work of the school".

This reminds me of what the parents told me about drawing the line between the work of the school and the responsibility of the parents and can be exemplified in the parents starting to seek alliance within the group of the teachers and the teachers seeking alliance in the group of parents. Some of the parents who got jobs started repeating the teachers' words. They became more accepted and felt "like fish in water", whereas others, who lacked the language and did not have access to the school in the same way, could more or less feel like "fish out of water" or in other word, "fish that can't swim". Social capital goes beyond ethnicity. The teachers knew that that they had to have some parents by their side building a network of view defending their reluctance for the

parents using the school facilities. They could get allied with anyone of the parents who supported their views to keep out the others who wanted to arrange activities in the school.

Bourdieu (1986) states that capital building is about history and power. The latter is a way of drawing boundaries around and between people, and through social cohesion reconstructing the same power differentials between those who belong and those who do not. Thus, he concludes that social capitalism as much as economic capitalism is an ideology of inclusion and exclusion, a means by which the powerful may protect and further their interests against the less powerful. Moreover, the relationship between the parents and the school can be explained by the relationship between the parents' habitus and the field and its agents (the school, the teachers and other school personal). The relations are such that nothing can be said in the field context without a process of sanction and censure going on in terms of what is acceptable (orthodox) (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) and unacceptable, and recognized and unrecognized for those teachers who occupy different positions within the school. The study shows that social capital cannot stand alone as a form of capital through which knowledge could be gained on how parental involvement could be increased in school. It depends on the other forms of capital, the field and habitus, both individual and institutional.

The parents constructing habitus of involvement in the school which is dominated by western norms and values involves the capability of obtaining from a particular field a set of characteristics that they did not originally possess, characteristics providing the basis for new forms of action. This takes place in a field (the school) in which different forms of capital can be transformed. A set of boundaries are created by the teachers as a sort of institutional habitus. Such boundaries—which support that seen as legitimate for teachers—represent both social and mental boundaries. Rites of passage are thus more than simply the establishing of boundaries. They are the boundaries or the lines, if demarcation in themselves. A boundary is of interest in itself through the boundary between the centre (the school) and the periphery (the parents and the neighbourhood), for example, using the school by the parents and moving their position towards the center (the school). This allows disagreements between the centre and the periphery to be institutional-

ized and takes the form of institutional habitus. One can also speak of the dominance of the centre over the periphery in terms of symbolic power. Thus, physical barriers can contribute to the legitimatising of differences as based on the conception of the centre being the norm and representing what is regarded as normal. The institutional habitus is thus not always seen in the teacher's words once you speak to them but more in the action they take once the parents are present at school using the school facilities.

Parental involvement as a forced marriage or as a long term process

Maintaining a system of home-school mediation involved use of social conditioning that emphasised the teachers' and the parents' capacities, where the abilities they acquired in the past were made use of at present as well. The interaction here between the teachers and the parents can be understood in terms of Bourdieu's notion of habitus, meaning that their interaction would not be simply a meeting between two individual histories but also an interaction of two habituses, involving four histories, altogether, two of them individual and two of them collective (cf. Scahill, 1993). Getting the Arabic parents involved required getting people of differing habitus having different positions in a field and two embodied histories to meet in a particular environment. The one hand of the school, with an institutional habitus meaning (the school curriculum, the school law, the school history, local school policies) and different types of documents that governs the school in which teachers may or may not have some goal of relevance and support it in this type of relationship. The school as an institution has a national goal that shapes the values and the norms which either transforms or reproduces a person's habitus. On the other hand the parents' and the teachers' habitus may either be matched or mismatched. Thus the accounts of this interaction may make more sense, not only by discussing these issues in terms of ethnicity, race, class, or even gender, but in terms of habitus as well. It seems worthwhile and sensible to speak of the will to power and of interactions of habitus in the same way as interactions of middle class teachers and parents of minority group, where ethnicity is often claimed as an important variable. A mismatch of teachers' and

parents' habitus is a prevalent and sometimes unavoidable feature involved. The study shows that the matter of parental involvement is a matter of class less concerned with ethnicity. The difficulties faced by the parents and the teachers in keeping the work of the parent-teacher association have made the whole issue of parental involvement to be a matter of a long process of contradictions, agreements and disagreement on what is best for developing a close working relationship between the parents and the teachers. In very simple words, the home-school mediation project in this study ended in a similar way as a forced marriage often ends in a sad separation.

Suggestions for future research

The child's double loneliness

According to the parents, what their children learn at home is given little value once the children are at school. What the child is being taught at school does not seem to make sense to him/her, a fact that in this case negatively influences the child's success at school, and if in addition what is being taught at school doesn't make sense to the child's family. The latter may be isolated in relations to its environment, its having few close relations with the school, other families in the neighbourhood, on the network of relationships and not managing to establish them.

An assumption is that the child can thus experience double loneliness in relations to his learning, at school as well in his or her family. Moreover, in reality, however, it is often the child's family itself which is isolated or badly integrated, which leads to a situation of exclusion. Very little of what the children have internalized through the structure of the family and coexistence with it, enables them to deal with the principles that apply to the type of knowledge that is specific to the school and the forms of social relations common in the school. The children do not really have at their command the tools enabling them to live up adequately to the demands placed on them by the school and are thus alone like foreigners when faced with what the school expects of

them. When back home again the constellation of persons around them cannot help. The children thus being forced to carry on alone with problems they have difficulty in resolving. In different parts of my thesis I have avoided speaking of the double loneliness of the children, despite my sensing this to be the case, since I did not have sufficient materials to demonstrate this to be the case and since I was not focused on this. I hope to be able to take up in a future study the child's double loneliness and its impact on the children's school failure and success taking into consideration the efforts made by parents at the supplementary school to reduce the harm of such a double loneliness.

Students achievement and supplementary school activities

Although this study is not concerned with the pupils' views as such, I find it worthwhile to mention some of the views of a few of the children I have talked with during my field work. They speak of the difficulties they experience in working at home. The supplementary school arrangement is a constraint on their behaviour which they accept and even praise. It is a place where they come to work at their lesson and to learn during a period of few hours; they feel being in an environment that encourages them to do their homework. The majority of them do not feel they can find the same things at home, in views of all the pleasurable things they can do there that divert them from their schoolwork. Television, play-station games and the Internet seem to be in the centre of their interest during their leisure-time. For some of them the lack of space at home, where many of them live in extended families, is also a reason for their deciding to go to the supplementary school, even if they don't receive help there in all the school subjects because of the lack of professionals who can help them with subjects such as Swedish and social sciences. A further study should be focusing on the views of the children and the impact of supplementary school activities on the children's well being and success in school.

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Appendices

Appendix A: A letter to the parents October 2002.

Appendix B: Semi-structured thematic interview guide for the teachers and the school leaders, autumn term of 2002.

Appendix C: Semi-structured thematic interview guide for the parents, autumn term of 2002.

Appendix D: Semi-structured thematic interview guide for the parents, spring term of 2003 after launching the home-school mediation project.

Appendix E: Semi-structured thematic interview guide for the parents, spring term of 2003 after launching the home-school mediation project.

Appendix F: Questionnaire for the teachers, spring term of 2003.

Appendix G: Semi-structured thematic interviews with parents in the supplementary school activities, autumn term of 2003.

Appendix H: Semi-structured thematic interviews with parents in the supplementary school activities, autumn term of 2003.

Appendix A

A Letter to the parents October 2002

Dear Parents;

My name is Laid Bouakaz and have been working in the X school for more than five years as a modern languages teacher. I am now working at Malmoe School of Education where I will be carrying my PhD studies during the four coming years. I will be both working at the school and carrying research at the same time.

We are pleased to inform you that you are welcome to the X school on the 14th October 2002 at 18.00 in order to discuss issues concerned with the school and the education of the children. The issue of parental involvement will be the main topic of our meeting. We will be discussing issues related to the school and the parents in order to find ways to increase your involvement in the school of your children. The meeting will be held in the school and will not exceed two hours time. The meeting is held in four languages, Arabic, Bosnian, Pashtou and Swedish and will be led by teachers who work at the school and speak the languages mentioned above.

We are looking forward to meeting you

X school October the 2nd, 2002

Appendix B

Semi-structured thematic interview guide for the teachers and the school leaders, autumn term of 2002

- Name, age, subject and length of time working in school
- Talking about their own school years
- Being a teacher in such school
- Challenges and opportunities working in such school
- Parental involvement what it meant for them
- What promotes and hinders parental involvement
- Strategies to involve the parents in the work of the school
- How the school regard the issue of parental involvement

Appendix C

Semi-structured thematic interview guide for the parents, autumn term of 2002

- Name, age, country of origin and length of time living in Sweden
- Their previous school experience
- Their school experience compared to the school in Sweden
- Their views on school in Sweden
- Challenges and opportunities for them and their children in school
- Their involvement in school their children attend
- What hinders and what promotes their involvement in the school their children attend
- Strategies used to cope with their new situation
- What can be done to increase their involvement in school

Appendix D

Semi-structured thematic interview guide for the parents, spring term of 2003 after launching the home-school mediation project

- Name , age and if they attended the project
- Reflection on the home-school mediation project
- Knowledge gained, difficulties faced
- Their views on the Swedish school after the project
- Their relation with the school and their children
- Their involvement and participation in the different activities arranged by the parent-teacher association
- Their views on how things should be done otherwise
- What had been hindering and what had been promoting their involvement

Appendix E

Semi-structured thematic interview guide for the teachers and the school leaders, spring term of 2003 after launching the project

- Name, age and the subject they teach in
- Their participation the home-school mediation project
- Their views on the strategy employed to involve the parents
- What changes that can occur in the school when employing such a strategy
- What can be problematic using such approach
- Reflections on the knowledge gained and how it can be used in the school
- Future plans, what more can be done to involve the parents in the work of the school
- Views on the parents using the school facilities (problems faced and how they can be solved)
- Views on the parents getting jobs in the school
- Difficulties faced when parents being present in school most period of the school day

Appendix F

Questionnaire for the teachers, spring term of 2003

Dear Colleagues,

A number of course for the parents were given with the aim of increasing their knowledge of matters concerned with the school and of creating communicative channels between the parents and the school. This resulted in establishing a parent-teacher association that endeavours to support the school in the task it performs and, in collaboration with the school, to engage other parents in this work as well. These various activities represent a research project I am in charge of. With this letter I am asking you for your views, *thoughts* and possible suggestions concerning the work that has been done here and which is still in progress. Your statements and answers to questions will be treated completely confidentially and with full respect for each respondent's personal integrity.

1. What does parental involvement mean to you?
2. What hindrances can be there for a close working relationship to be established between the teacher and the parents of minority background?
3. How can we overcome these hindrances?
4. What do you think of the methods the school makes use of for getting the parents more involved?
5. Since the parent evening courses began, have you as a teacher noticed any differences in the contacts parents have with the school or in their involvement in the work of the school?
6. What strategies you suggest to get the parents more involved?

Appendix G

Semi-structured thematic interviews with parents in the supplementary school activities, autumn term of 2003

- Name, age, country of origin
- Their views on involvement in school
- Supplementary school and what it meant for them
- Difficulties faced in arranging such activity within the school and outside the school
- Difficulties faced by the parents in trying to help their children at home
- The organisation, the methods and the material used in the supplementary school arrangement

Appendix H

Semi-structured thematic interviews with the parents on their involvement in their children outside the school, autumn term of 2003

- Name, age, country of origin and when they arrived first in Sweden
- Their migration story (the reasons of leaving their country of origin and how they got to Sweden)
- Their views on the school and their involvement in the education of their children
- What keeps hinders their involvement
- Their relation with the children
- Their integration in the new society
- Specific matters they wanted to talk about concerned with their children, the school, the neighbourhood or society in general