

INCREASING THE INVOLVEMENT OF PARENTS IN THE EDUCATION OF SPECIAL-NEEDS CHILDREN

H. Blok, T. T. D. Peetsma and E. Roede

Introduction

Many schools believe it is important for parents to feel that they are involved in the education of their child. They inform parents on a regular basis about teaching and special activities. They also approach parents to volunteer at school, for example on school excursions. Schools believe that, if parents participate in this way, they will gain a better understanding of the school's aims and methods, and will feel more closely involved. Some scholars claim that greater parental involvement could contribute to a higher academic achievement of the child (Eccles and Harold, 1993; Georgiou, 1999).

Yet parental involvement can also be a problematical issue. For example, teachers

can have mixed feelings about parental involvement, especially when this means that they are subject to critical scrutiny and pressures to produce good academic results. Parents, too, may be faced with a dilemma. Should they do everything they can to ensure their child receives a good education? Or should they, in the interest of their child, submit unconditionally to the wishes of the school (Nakagawa, 2000)? Such a dilemma can pose even greater problems for the parents of children with special educational needs. These parents are naturally more concerned about their child's development, and their concern results in closer involvement. On the other hand, educating children with special needs places extra demands on schools. A high level of expertise is required,

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as are often special resources such as individual supervision and modified learning materials. In such situations, misunderstandings can easily arise between school and parents. The school thinks that the parents are expecting too much, given their child's abilities, while the parents accuse the school of focusing on their child's limitations (Russell, 2003). Also, many parents feel that the school does not listen to them enough or does not keep them sufficiently informed about how their children's needs are being met (Lindsay and Dockrell, 2004).

In the Netherlands, important changes have recently been implemented with regard to the education of children with special needs. The changes are set out in the Pupil-Bound Funding (PBF) system (in Dutch: *Regeling Leerlinggebonden Financiering*). Parents now have the right to choose which type of school their child attends: inclusive education at a mainstream school or segregated education at a school for special education. One of the main aims of the new system is to increase parental involvement in education. This article describes the new system and assesses the extent to which it contributes to increased parental involvement.

Different ways to increase parental involvement

Parental involvement as a generic concept refers to quite diverse behaviours, depending on the motives of schools and parents, the chosen perspective (the parent or the school perspective) and the activities in which the involvement might become manifest. For example, Epstein (1992) defined six types of parental involvement in schools: (1) assisting parents in child-rearing skills, (2) school-

parent communication, (3) involving parents in school volunteer opportunities, (4) involving parents in home-based learning, (5) involving parents in school decision-making, and (6) involving parents in school-community collaborations. A common sense hypothesis might be that the way in which parents become involved moderates the strength of the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement. This hypothesis has been confirmed in a meta-analysis by Fan and Chen (2001). The overall correlation between parental involvement and academic achievement of students was estimated at .25 (the analysis included a total of 92 correlations from 25 different studies), but the type of involvement indeed appeared to be an effective moderator variable. Supervising parent activities (the second category) showed a relatively weak relationship, while aspirations, participation and volunteering showed an average correlation of .40 and .32, respectively. The causal nature and the direction of the relationship, however, remain unclear. It might be that favourable student outcomes stimulate parents to show greater involvement in school matters. However, the relationship might also work in reverse, if parental involvement improves the child's results.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) favour the latter direction, namely parental involvement as an antecedent of learning outcomes. They present a causal model that attempts to provide a theoretical explanation for the positive relationship between involvement and learning outcomes. Their model is based on the parents' positive decision to become involved. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) regard such a decision as a fundamental pre-condition for involvement. Without such a decision, involvement is not possible. After taking a

positive decision, parents might choose a specific form of involvement, depending on their skills, their availability and requests or invitations from the school. The model then hypothesizes that involvement affects the child's development through mechanisms such as modelling, instruction, and providing feedback. The authors clearly assume that the mechanisms through which the parents affect the child's growth operate in parallel to the mechanisms that are used at school.

Why do parents become involved in their children's education? This question is crucial to the design of programmes for promoting parental involvement. Based on psychological theory and on research into involvement of parents, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) mention three major constructs they believe to be central to parents' basic involvement decisions. The first construct is the role and responsibilities that parents define for themselves in terms of their children's education. Only parents who believe their role to be active are inclined to become involved in education and school matters. The second construct is the parents' sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school. Self-efficacious parents regard education as a shared responsibility (Bandura, 1997). They tend to believe that personal actions related to the child's schooling will be effective in improving school outcomes. Without such belief few parents are willing to invest extra time and effort in school involvement. The third construct relates to the perception of parents of being encouraged to become involved in the child's school education. For many parents, invitations and opportunities to become involved are important considerations. Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997, pp. 32 - 34) regard the first two constructs (role construction and sense of efficacy) as more crucial than the third

construct (the perception of being invited to become involved). They therefore expect a high level of involvement if the first two conditions are fulfilled, even if the level of encouragement from the child and school is low. Conversely, if the child and school display a high invitational level, parents show at best a moderate level of involvement if the realization of one of the other conditions is low.

It must be noted that the reasons for such specific expectations are, to a large extent, of a hypothetical nature. There is still little empirical research that might be interpreted as supporting the model of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997). One exception is a study by Peña (2001), a yearlong case study of an elementary school in Texas, serving predominantly Mexican American children. Peña concludes that, in order to improve parent involvement, perhaps the simplest yet most powerful recommendation is 'make the parent feel more welcome' (p. 52). Her suggestions include changes in teachers' attitudes, planning parent activities, and adjusting communication with parents in order to meet their needs.

Teachers seem to play a key role in parental involvement. Bandura (1997) emphasizes the importance of the teachers' sense of efficacy. This sense supposedly influences the level of parental participation. Teachers who are secure in their self-perceived capabilities are most likely to invite and support parents' educational efforts. Teachers' beliefs with regard to parent involvement also seem important. For a number of reasons, teachers might display a rather reserved attitude towards parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 1992; Huss-Keeler, 1997). Cultural barriers, limited experience, negative encounters, mistrust or dissatisfaction on the part of the parents and other circumstances might make

teachers reluctant to engage with parents. A study by Hoover-Dempsey *et al.* (2002) evaluated an in-service teacher education programme specifically designed to improve teachers' beliefs and skills relating to parental involvement. The programme was implemented in two public schools with a high percentage of children who were at risk for socio-economic reasons. Although the programme proved effective in that the teachers' perception of their own efficacy – considered to be an important antecedent of beliefs about parents – displayed a small gain, the effects on scales representing beliefs about parents and parent involvement were negligible. It seems that teachers' attitudes might be more difficult to influence than is generally thought. This was one of the reasons that the Dutch government decided to invest in an appropriate legislative framework rather than in the alteration of teachers' beliefs.

The PBF system

The education system in the Netherlands is in a transitional phase in terms of the position of pupils with special educational needs. In the past, special schools were set up for pupils in this category, separate from mainstream schools for children without special needs. In the mid-1990s, the Dutch education system encompassed ten different types of school, each attuned to the specific needs of pupils (e.g. learning problems, language impairments, hearing problems, sight problems, behaviour problems). Parents had little say in the type of school their children attended. Obviously, this situation was not conducive to parental involvement. Moreover, many parents were becoming increasingly dissatisfied

with the segregated nature of their children's education, arguing that this type of education does little to propagate the principle that everyone, regardless of any disabilities they may have, is entitled to participate fully in society.

The PBF system came into force in 2003, after several years of preparation. The system provides for the allocation of extra educational resources for pupils with special needs. An important secondary aim of the PBF system is to increase the involvement of parents in the education of their child. These objectives are in line with more general social developments that are described as individualization or the increasing autonomy of citizens. Below we explain the principles underlying the system.

The PBF system specifies that parents are responsible for requesting a special-needs budget for their child from a SNAC, or Special-Needs Assessment Committee (in Dutch: *Commissie voor Indicatiestelling*). The task of the SNAC is to make a decision with regard to the allocation of extra resources. The SNAC bases its decision on criteria set at a national level. When submitting an application, parents must include a file with up-to-date information on their child's disabilities. When compiling the file, parents can consult an REC (Regional Centre for Special-Needs Education). If the SNAC issues a negative decision with regard to the allocation of extra resources, parents have the right to appeal. The appeal procedure allows parents to consult an Appeals Advisory Committee (in Dutch: *Bezwaar Adviescommissie*), and even to take the matter to court if necessary. If the SNAC issues a positive decision, parents can choose between a school for special education or a mainstream school. In the latter case, the pupil is given a package of resources that will enable the chosen school to provide tailored education. The

package consists of funding for three purposes: additional resources, ambulant supervision and the adaptation of learning materials. The contents of the package are based on the nature of the child's handicap, and there are rules attached to how the budget is used. One of the responsibilities of RECs is to assist parents in choosing a school. Schools are not obliged to offer a place to a child with special needs, but a refusal must be accompanied by a written explanation. In case of a refusal, parents can contact a parent-school mediator (in Dutch: *Onderwijsconsulent*) or the ACTB, an advisory committee on admission to and supervision in special schools. These institutions support parents who are experiencing difficulties in finding a school for their child. Regardless of whether a special or mainstream school is chosen, the school must draw up an individual educational plan (IEP) in consultation with the parents every year. This is a condition for the school receiving the resources package.

The PBF system tries to increase parental involvement in a specific way. The system mainly touches on the communication between the school and the parents, the second type identified by Epstein (1992). The system enables parents to show their involvement at four stages. In the first place, the responsibility for requesting extra resources now rests with the parents rather than the school. The parents decide whether, and if so when, a request is necessary. Moreover, they are also responsible for compiling the file in support of the application. In the second place, the system has complaints procedures for two situations, namely if the special-needs budget is refused, or if a mainstream school will not offer a place to the child. These complaints procedures contribute to the empowerment of parents. In the third place, parents can choose between

inclusive education at a mainstream school or segregated education at a school for special education. In the fourth place, parents can make an active contribution to the IEP for their child. This allows them to exert influence on the learning goals and the way in which the school pursues these goals.

The PBF system encompasses each of the three constructs in the model of Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1997). The fact that it offers parents significant scope for participation in decision making is expected to have a positive effect on the third construct: 'the perception of being invited to become involved in the child's school education'. The system also influences the role that parents define for themselves: the first construct. The system requires parents to adopt an active approach and forces them, in effect, to make certain decisions themselves. Not all parents will feel able to do this. The system, therefore, provides for support in cases where parents lack a strong 'sense of efficacy' (the second construct in Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model). Parents who have difficulty compiling the file that is required in support of their application can consult the REC. If required, the REC can also provide advice on the choice of school and the IEP. By incorporating extensive support without obligations, the system gives all parents the opportunity to acquire a positive 'sense of efficacy'. Nevertheless, it is not certain that the system will lead to greater involvement of all parents. The system not only provides opportunities, but also responsibilities. Compiling a file, submitting a complaint, choosing between alternatives that have uncertain outcomes, and helping to draw up an IEP, all these responsibilities place considerable demands on parents' commitment and expertise, even if the RECs are able to offer effective support

to all parents. These responsibilities may mean that, in some cases, the desired level of parental involvement is not achieved in practice.

Research questions

The main question is whether the PBF system leads to a strong involvement of parents in the education of their child. In order to obtain a more detailed picture of that involvement, we have formulated a number of more specific research questions. The first three questions relate to the chronology of the procedures described. The fourth research question relates to the position of parents with regard to their commitment in a more general sense. The research questions were as follows:

- A. Are parents satisfied with the special-needs assessment procedure?
- B. Are parents sufficiently informed about the possibilities for their child in mainstream or special education?
- C. Are parents involved in drawing up the IEP?
- D. Are parents satisfied with the opportunities offered by the PBF system to become involved (do they define an active role for themselves, do they experience a positive sense of efficacy, are they encouraged to participate)?

Method

The study consists of two parts: a telephone survey among parents (addressing questions A, B and C) and an in-depth survey for which parents were interviewed at their homes (specifically

addressing question D).

The population for the telephone survey comprised all parents who received a special-needs statement from a SNAC between 1st August and 1st November 2003 – the first months after the system came into force. The parents were recruited for the survey through the RECs in order to protect their privacy. The RECs were asked to send our recruitment letter to a random sample of parents. A total of 360 recruitment letters were sent. 185 (51 percent) letters were returned, 140 (39 percent) stating a willingness to take part. Eventually we were able to contact 116 (32 percent) couples for a telephone interview. There are various reasons for the loss of respondents: some RECs did not honour the recruitment request, not all parents returned the recruitment letter, and some parents could still not be contacted after five attempts. The response group of 116 couples reflect the national situation in terms of the nature of the children's impairment (hearing- or language-disabled 21 percent, mentally retarded 46 percent, psycho-emotionally disturbed 33 percent). It is not known whether the parents are representative of the national population in other respects. There are indications that, on average, the response group were better educated and live more often in a rural environment.

A total of 21 couples took part in the in-depth survey. They were selected from the respondents of the telephone survey. All seven couples that received a negative decision took part in the in-depth survey, so that information could be gathered on the reasons for these assessments. Fourteen couples whose request was granted the first time they applied were selected in such a way as to reflect as wide a diversity as possible in terms of the children's impairments. Five students were hearing- or language-disabled,

nine were mentally retarded, and seven were psycho-emotionally disturbed. Ten couples in the in-depth study were educated to university or college level, and eleven couples to vocational/technical level. Fourteen couples lived in a rural area or village, five in a small or medium-sized town, and two in a large town/city.

For the telephone survey, a structured questionnaire was compiled with mostly closed answer alternatives. The questions for the in-depth study were more open, and gave parents the opportunity to respond in more detail. The telephone interviews took approximately half an hour on average. The in-home interviews took between 1.5 and 2 hours. In one case, an in-depth interview was conducted by telephone. During the in-home interviews, the parents' responses were noted down in detail. Two independent raters then carried out a content analysis on the responses. Scores were derived for four different variables:

Satisfaction (Are parents satisfied with the opportunities for becoming involved in the education of their child?)

Active role definition (Do parents define an active role for themselves with regard to the education of their child?)

Positive sense of efficacy (Do parents have a positive sense of efficacy with regard to helping their child succeed at school?)

Feeling of being invited (Do parents feel that the school and other officials actively invite them to become involved?)

All the variables were measured on a three-point scale (1 = yes, 2 = partly yes, partly no, 3 = no). The level of agreement between the two raters was acceptable (88 percent of the scores were in agreement; correlation coefficients were .96, .88, 1.00 and .89 for the four variables, respectively).

In none of the disagreeing cases did the difference exceed one scale point.

Results

In presenting the results, we will integrate the findings from the telephone survey and the in-home interviews.

Re: Research question A. Are parents satisfied with the needs-assessment procedure?

In almost 50 percent of cases, parents took the initiative to request a special-needs budget. However, schools and care institutions also do so on a regular basis. Parents find themselves in a difficult situation if there is a lack of agreement concerning the needs of their child. Either they are 'forced' to request an assessment when they do not wish to do so, or there is a lack of co-operation when they compile the file in support of their application. We found examples of both problems in the in-home interviews. Parents were dissatisfied with various elements of the assessment process (TABLE I). Approximately half the parents interviewed were dissatisfied with the amount of time involved – often several months. One in four parents were dissatisfied with the support received from the RECs. Parents found the application form complicated, but they also found it difficult to compile a full and up-to-date file. One of the problems is that assessment reports must not be more than two years old. There was less criticism with regard to the information supply concerning the appeal procedures. Only 10 percent of parents expressed dissatisfaction with this. By and large, parents were also satisfied with the way in which the SNAC dealt with applications. The legislation states that, once the file has been submitted, a

decision must follow within eight weeks. This was the case for most applications.

In 90 percent of cases, a special-needs statement was issued on the first application (TABLE II). In 50 percent of cases where the application was rejected, parents lodged an appeal. The majority of appeals resulted in a statement. This indicates that the appeal procedure meets an actual need, and gives parents the opportunity to defend the interests of their child.

Re: Research question B: Are parents sufficiently informed about the possibilities for their child in mainstream or special education?

Parents receive information about the types of school mainly from schools and

external experts. Less important sources of information are the RECs, parent organizations, and other parents. Personal discussions are much more valuable to parents than printed information, which is often unclear, even for well-educated parents. Approximately 60 percent of the parents interviewed claimed that they were well informed about the options open to them in mainstream education (TABLE III). The same is true for the level of awareness about special-needs education. Parents find it difficult to form an impression of the school's approach. This was also commented upon in the in-home interviews, for example: 'It isn't clear to me what methods are used in special schools', or 'It wasn't clearly explained to

TABLE I
How satisfied are parents with the various elements of the needs-assessment process (percentages)?

Elements of the process (number of respondents)	Judgement		
	Satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Dissatisfied
Support from the REC while preparing the application (n = 87)	43	30	27
Handling of the application by the SNAC (n = 102)	67	14	19
Information about appeal procedures (n = 99)	71	18	11
Total time taken (n = 113)	47	6	47

Note: Due to the fact that not every question applies to every respondent, the number of respondents varies between 87 and 113

TABLE II
Decision regarding the application for a needs assessment (percentages)

Outcome	%
Request for a special-needs budget is granted on the first application	90
Request for assessment is granted following an appeal	4
Request for assessment is refused following an appeal	1
Request is rejected, parents did not appeal	5

Note: The number of respondents is 115.

me what the school can offer in terms of my child’s learning difficulties’.

Parents’ views on social participation and inclusion play an important role in the decisions they make. In many cases, however, they have fewer choices than it would at first appear. Sometimes the child’s limitations are such that the parents consider a mainstream school unrealistic. In other cases, the child is already attending a school and there is no reason to look for another school. Only 10 percent of parents visit a special school as well as a mainstream school. Approximately 50 percent of parents opt for a special school, and the remainder for mainstream education. This result reflects the fact that a growing number of parents are choosing inclusive education in a mainstream setting. Before the PBF system came into effect, only one in five pupils from the target group attended a mainstream school.

Re: Research question C: Are parents involved in drawing up the IEP?

Although an IEP is compulsory, 25 percent of the parents interviewed claimed

that this had not (yet) been drawn up. Where an IEP had been drawn up, most parents felt that it provided sufficient certainty. Approximately half the parents felt closely involved in drawing up the IEP (TABLE IV). Many schools do not have a clear procedure in place for compiling an IEP. Although the law requires that parents approve the IEP, they were consulted on this in only half the cases. Despite these shortcomings, 85 percent of the parents were satisfied with the IEP and the IEP procedure (TABLE IV).

Re: Research question D: Are parents satisfied with the opportunities offered by the PBF system to become involved (do they define an active role for themselves, do they experience a positive sense of efficacy, are they encouraged to participate?)

The final question relates only to the subgroup of parents who were selected for in-home interviews (see the method section). TABLE V shows that approximately one in four parents were dissatisfied with the opportunities offered by the PBF

TABLE III
Do parents feel that they are well-informed about prospects in mainstream or special education? (percentages)

Type of school (number of respondents)	Yes	Partly yes and no	No
Mainstream education (n = 106)	63	19	18
Special education (n = 108)	66	23	11

Note: Due to the fact that not every question applies to every respondent, the number of respondents varies between 106 and 108

TABLE IV
Level of involvement and satisfaction with regard to the IEP (percentages)

Reaction	High	Moderate	Low
Involvement	53	25	22
Satisfaction	85	7	8

Note: The number of respondents is 72, involving only cases with an existing IEP

system, and two out of four were only partly satisfied. Therefore, in the view of many of the parents interviewed, the system's aim – to increase the involvement of parents in the education of their child – has not been achieved. The table shows three aspects that can contribute to the parents' level of satisfaction with the legislation. The most striking result is the low score for 'Feeling of being encouraged to participate': the majority of the respondents do not feel that experts and schools welcome the idea of parental involvement. A regression analysis (TABLE VI) shows that this condition is closely related to parents' satisfaction with the system, as are the other two conditions ('active role definition' and 'sense of efficacy'). The negative regression coefficient means that parents who define an active role

for themselves are less satisfied with the system than those who do not. In the latter two cases, the regression coefficient reaches only a marginal statistical significance, which could be due to the small number of subjects. Together, the three conditions account for 54 percent of the variance.

Conclusions and discussion

The PBF system attempts to enhance the involvement of parents in the education of their special-needs child. The evaluation was carried out immediately after the system came into effect, in order to identify any 'teething troubles'. The nature of the evaluation is therefore formative rather than summative. Furthermore, the study

TABLE V
Parents evaluation of their own position (percentages)*

	Yes	Partly yes and no	No
Are you satisfied with your level of involvement?	28	48	24
Active role definition	52	24	24
Positive sense of efficacy	71	19	10
Feeling of being encouraged to participate	29	9	62

* These variables were measured only during in-home interviews (n = 21)

TABLE VI
Regression analysis of 'Satisfaction with involvement' on preconditions*

	Unstand. B (stand. error)	Stand. Beta	Stat. Sign.
Intercept	1.76 (0.93)	-	.08
Active role definition by parents	-0.33 (0.16)	-.36	.06
Positive sense of efficacy	0.36 (0.20)	.32	.08
Parents feel they are encouraged to participate	0.51 (0.14)	.62	<.01

* N = 21; R² = .54 (stat. sign. <.01)

was conducted on a relatively small scale: 116 couples were interviewed by telephone and 21 couples took part in an in-home interview. Therefore we can draw only tentative conclusions from the results. The initial findings indicate that parents are indeed involved in important decisions. They play an active role in the needs-assessment procedure, they make use of the appeal procedure when necessary, and they base their choice of school partly on their views regarding social integration and participation. In addition, they decide more often in favour of inclusive education at a mainstream school, and they feel that they are involved in drawing up the IEP. The majority of respondents were satisfied with the main elements of the procedure. However, many still find that the system offers less scope for involvement than was intended. The main problem appears to be that experts and schools are not yet sufficiently open to the idea of parental involvement. The majority of parents felt that their input was not particularly welcomed. We have three suggestions for improving this situation.

The first suggestion relates to the functioning of the RECs. At the moment, these institutions do not always perform well when it comes to providing support for parents. Our research showed that many parents feel that they did not receive adequate support. Importantly, parents do not have clear information about the process, the assessment criteria, and the statutory responsibilities of the RECs. Problems arise when parents and schools disagree about the need for an assessment. In our view, therefore, it is important that the RECs communicate their tasks and services more clearly to parents. The role of parent-school mediators should be developed further, so that they can be a valuable source of information and support for parents. It is important that

the mediators provide support that meets a variety of needs, since some parents will need more support than others.

The second suggestion relates to the role of parents in the IEP procedure. By far the majority of parents are satisfied with their level of involvement in the IEP, but the research showed that many of the parents have only a passive role, and schools have no procedure for obtaining their approval. We wish to point out that there are significant differences between parents and schools in terms of expertise. This can lead to a situation in which parents adopt a passive role, but are still satisfied. Obviously, this is not what the legislator intended. The PBF system encourages an active approach from parents, also with respect to the drawing up of the IEP. Schools should therefore realize not only that the levels of competence differ, but also that they need to make efforts to bridge this gap. One possible way of doing this is to offer options, and discuss these with parents before drawing up the definitive IEP.

In order for the PBF system to be successful, it is important that parents actually make use of the opportunities it provides for greater involvement. The in-home interviews revealed significant differences in this respect. Not all parents want to take on an active role, and some have serious doubts about taking on extra responsibilities. Some parents feel that the PBF system places an unwelcome additional burden upon them. They are already in a difficult situation because they have a child with an impairment, who requires extra care and attention. We would therefore argue – in our third suggestion – that all the institutions recognize the fact that each family has different needs. This means that RECs and schools must be responsive to parents' wishes and tailor the education they provide as closely as

possible to those wishes. It is not enough for these institutions simply to adopt a passive stance and wait until parents approach them with their questions and wishes. A pro-active approach towards parents is essential to their increased involvement. This study has shown that this approach is still lacking in many cases.

The Dutch example shows that legislation can be an effective – albeit in itself insufficient – means to enhance parental involvement. The Dutch approach can be compared with the Parent Partnership Services (PPSs) introduced in England and Wales (Wolfendale, 2002). Interestingly, the PPSs – which did not become firmly embedded in the legislative framework for several years – have more or less the same goals as the PBF system. The goals of the PPSs include the reduction of disputes between parents and local education authorities, the provision of information to parents about special educational needs and the various aspects of assessment, and the inclusion of specific measures to increase parental participation (Todd, 2003). The PPSs essentially empower the parents of handicapped children to work with the schools and local authorities to ensure that their child's needs are properly met. The services of an independent advisor (Independent Parental Supporter, IPS) are made available to all parents whose needs are being formally assessed. Todd (2003) studied the operation of one particular PPS scheme, provided through a local education authority in the North of England. Data were collected through interviews with parents and IPSs, and through an analysis of project documents. The study concludes that PPSs are potentially an effective instrument for improving parent-teacher relations. In practice, however, IPSs constitute an extra tier of professionals, increasing the distance between parents and the decision-making

party, and removing from schools the responsibility to engage with parents as partners. Therefore, instead of reinforcing a sense of efficacy in parents, IPSs might foster just the opposite, i.e. a sense in parents that they are unable to handle situations autonomously. Of course, one should be careful in generalizing Todd's conclusions while the PPS system is still evolving and while the schemes are operating at a local level (Wolfendale, 2002).

Both the Dutch and English examples, however, seem to show that legislation in itself is not enough to change long-established educational practices. Legislation does not have a direct effect on teachers' beliefs. Teachers' beliefs have a considerable influence on the extent to which parents feel they are invited to participate. Parental involvement will not increase much unless teachers and other experts welcome their input. Experience has shown that it is difficult to influence teacher beliefs relating to parental involvement (Hoover-Dempsey *et al.*, 2002). We would therefore like to emphasize the need for greater knowledge in this area.

Neither does legislation have a direct effect on parental beliefs. We must recognize that some parents are reluctant to play an active role. The results of the in-home interviews show that Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's model (1997) is a good starting point for describing differences in the level of parental involvement. A notable result is the negative contribution of the 'active role definition' variable. This means that parents who prefer an active role are dissatisfied with the provisions of the PBF system. Active parents believe that the system still does not provide sufficient opportunities for involvement. An effective system should therefore provide for parents who wish to be actively involved,

as well as parents who wish to maintain a more distant relationship with the school. An interesting finding is that the 'feeling of being encouraged to participate' variable showed the strongest relationship with the involvement level, while Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) speculated that the two other variables would carry greater weight. Further research is required in this area.

Summary

The system for admission to special education in the Netherlands was recently amended. The new system aims, among other things, to increase the involvement of parents. The new regulations enable the parents of children with special needs to choose how they wish their children to be educated, i.e. inclusive education at a mainstream school or segregated education at a school for special education. This article describes the first experiences of parents with the system, based on interviews conducted with more than 100 couples. The findings show that the new system has been partially successful. Approximately half the couples interviewed believe that the system provides insufficient scope for involvement. Some parents also have a need for greater support, particularly during the assessment process. The findings of the study are important in the context of the discussion on the desirability of, and possibilities for increasing parental involvement.

Authors' notes

This research was funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), contract no. 412-03-

010). We are grateful to our colleagues Margaretha Vergeer and Charles Felix for their help in conducting the project.

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