Parents’ satisfaction with their child’s first year of school

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Abstract. A group of university and vocationally educated parents (n = 486) were requested to evaluate their satisfaction with their child’s first school year, and they were also asked to recall the positive and negative events from their child’s academic year. Both structured and open-ended measures consistently revealed that parents were quite satisfied with the functioning of their child’s school. Parents’ social–psychological distance from the school, as measured by their social positions in the education hierarchy, tended to structure parental satisfaction: the mothers, and especially the university-educated parents, indicated the highest level of satisfaction, and these groups emphasized both positive and negative recollections; the group farthest from the school turned out be the vocationally educated fathers. Our results highlighted the teacher: the recollections concerning the teachers were evenly distributed into positive and negative accounts, and negative recollections regarding teachers and home-school cooperation in particular affected parents’ overall satisfaction. The findings were discussed in terms of their implications for educational policy.

1. Introduction

Along with recent changes in educational policy, which prefer to regard parents as consumers of, rather than participants in, education, there has been a growing interest in surveying parents’ satisfaction with their children’s schools. In Finland, too, the role played by parents and the choices they make have been emphasized as part of the changing educational policies of the 1990s, and local surveys on parental satisfaction have been conducted by municipal educational authorities. Based on a nation-wide sample of parents, the present study set out to examine parents’ evaluations of their child’s first school year and related recollections from a social–psychological perspective.

Educational barometers have already been employed in the Nordic countries. According to a recent survey, participants representing Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Finland generally hold quite positive views about the educational system, and Finns’ confidence in their educational system has turned out

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be stronger than in any of the other Nordic countries (Nordisk Skolbarometer, 2001). The survey also revealed that parents’ evaluations of the schools were more favourable than those made by the general public – a difference that has frequently been observed in other countries as well (e.g., Boschee, 1987; Elam & Gallup, 1989).

Surveys have actually found little evidence to support the assumption of the current educational reformers that there is widespread dissatisfaction amongst parents regarding their children’s schools, at least in countries where the public school sector is strongly supported by the state, as is the case in the Nordic countries. Likewise, in the UK, a study conducted by Hughes, Wikeley and Nash (1994) showed that at least 80% of parents were happy with their child’s school, thought that their child’s progress in the ‘three Rs’ was satisfactory, and they had not considered moving their child to another school. Similarly, in Finland, at least two-thirds of parents of third and fourth grade students demonstrated either total or fair satisfaction with the teaching, assessment, the level of home–school cooperation and fairness of the treatment of their children (Räty, Snellman, Mäntysaari-Hetekorpi & Vornanen, 1996).

Theoretically, these findings suggest that parenthood is a social position which tends to organize individuals’ appraisals of school. As Doise (1986) argues, the variation in attitudes corresponding to social positions provides us with information about the ‘pre-existing social dynamics’ pertaining to these positions. For example, the parenthood of a school-aged child includes more or less shared experiences and perceptions concerning the functioning of the child’s school, the relationship with teachers and other parents, interrelations amongst the pupils, and such factors as the ethos and atmosphere, resources, facilities, and academic results of the school.

In assessing the within-group differences amongst parents, their education and school experiences are obviously important sources of their own attitudes and appraisals. Just as parents’ education and related experiences vary in quality and length, so, too, will their attitudes to education and the evaluations which they make of the school concerning their children’s education vary in such ways. From a theoretical point of view, our investigation was conducted within a positional context: how does the educational position of the parents, in particular, organize their evaluations and recollections.

Educational position locates parents in the hierarchy of education and thus it ‘measures’ parents’ social–psychological distance from the school. The higher the parent is in the educational hierarchy, the closer s/he is in relation to the notions and valuations of the school. As Bourdieu argues, the standards of any school are not neutral; their requests for parental involvement may be laden with the social and cultural experiences of intellectual and economic upper classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). For example, there is research evidence to show that in comparison with vocationally educated parents, university-educated