

“I Buy Paraffin So He Can Read in the Evening” – A Study from Kenya about Parental Involvement in School

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The present paper investigates parental involvement in a rural primary school in Kenya. Qualitative interviews have been used to gather information from ten parents, a class teacher and a head teacher. The aim of the case study is to find out how – if at all – parents are involved in their children’s education, and how important parents’ background and involvement in school activities are for their children’s results. It is also interested in determining whether the school-home relationship in rural Kenya may provide new knowledge to the relationship between minority parents and schools in western countries. The findings of the study indicate no shared responsibility between parents and school; the school is solely responsible for students’ education. Normally, parents’ responsibility is limited to providing economic resources: buying school uniforms, books and other necessities. Where the mother tongue is not a school language, some parents also prepare their children for school by code-switching at home: using both the school language and the mother tongue. There is hardly any relationship to be found between parents’ involvement and students’ results. The findings from the study may provide new knowledge about minority parents’ involvement in school in western education.

Keywords: Minority student, Minority parents, Mother tongue, Parental involvement, School-home relationship, Traditional cultures.

Introduction.

Studies, mostly from Europe and USA, register the importance of parents’ background and parental involvement in students’ academic success (Epstein, 2001; Marks, Cresswell & Ainly, 2006). Studies from Norway also underline parents’ background and their involvement in school as being important for the students’ achievements and results (Bonesrønning, 2004; Bonesrønning & Vaag Iversen, 2008; Bæch, 2005; Huang, 2009; Nordahl & Skilbrei, 2002; OECD, 2004). In a study about the school-home relationship, Harris and Goodall (2008) found “a major difference between involving parents in schooling and engaging parents in learning” (p. 277). A study with data from 30 countries (Marks, Cresswell & Ainly, 2006) examines the relationship between socioeconomic status and student achievement. The research shows that, in most

countries, cultural factors play the most important role, and that social factors have little impact. However, in developing countries, material resources are the most important factor in educational outcomes because wealthy families send their children to expensive elite schools (Cleghorn, 2005).

In this qualitative study, I use data from a primary school in rural Kenya to develop knowledge about parental participation in a developing country. The aim of the case study is to find out how parents in rural Kenya are involved in their children’s education, and how important parents’ background and their involvement in school are for the students’ educational outcome. The theoretical framework is based on parental involvement in urban and rural areas in the world, school and the culture in Africa. After the theoretical framework, the fieldwork in Kenya and the method of the case study will be explained. In the discussion, the paper will, through the knowledge about parental

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involvement in rural Kenya, try to shed new light on the relationship between minority parents and school in western education.

Theoretical framework.

People all over the world tend to believe that schooling is important, and that education will make people "move up the social ladder" (Abdi & Cleghorn, 2005, p. 6), and parents everywhere want their children educated in order to give them a good life (*ibid*). Based on a study conducted in a rural Mexican community, Azaola (2007) found that although parents had limited economic and educational resources, they wanted their children to study. The parents believed that through education their children would have a better life than they did.

The notions of parental participation and parental involvement are, according to Smit, Driessen, Sluiter & Slegers (2007), not clearly operationalised. They understand, as I also do in this paper, that parental participation and involvement are relevant in both the school and home sphere. Epstein (2001) shows the benefit of parents' involvement and refers to the importance of agreement concerning parental participation; but she also refers to the disagreement about "which practices of involvement are important and how to obtain high participation from all families" (p. 3). She points to three perspectives on family and school relations. The first is separate responsibilities of family and school where teachers maintain their professional responsibility about students in the classroom, and parents are responsible for socialisation and learning at home. The second is shared responsibilities of family and school, where both families and school are responsible for the socialisation and education of the child. The third perspective is what Epstein calls sequential responsibilities of family and school: the parents prepare their children for school, but when the children start school, the teacher assumes the major responsibility for educating them.

According to Epstein (2001), it is important for home and school to share responsibility. This means interaction between parents and teachers, and interaction requires knowledge about each other. Many teachers have an inadequate understanding of the students' background, it is not possible for them to develop practices that inform and involve all parents in their children's development (p. 5). When teachers do not understand the children's background, they may

form stereotypes of the families; "pushy upper-middle-class parents, helpful middle-class parents and incapable lower-class parents" (p. 115). In a school in which students have different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, many teachers will be able to reach some of the parents; the parents with the same social and cultural capital as the school.

Lareau (2000) investigated the parents' ideas about school and school-home relations. Working class families trusted teachers as being responsible for education and, for this reason, they did not seek information that they needed to help their children. On the other hand, upper-middle-class parents assumed that they had to share responsibility for the children's education and took an active part in their schooling. The study also indicated that mothers were more involved in children's school achievements than fathers. Upper-middle-class mothers were most involved in children's learning, while working class fathers were least involved. Azaola's (2007, p.5) study from Mexico also shows that parental involvement in their children's formal education is "basically a duty of mothers". The main reason for the mothers' responsibility was the expectations of the gender roles in the community. Harris and Goodall (2008) conclude that parents are the most important influence on students' learning, and the greatest impact on students' achievement was parents' involvement in homework. Deslandes and Rousseau (2008) also found that students benefit from parents being involved with their homework, and they refer to numerous studies with the same result. According to Epstein (2001), teachers report the futility of involving less educated parents. Teachers believe that these "parents would not be able to or willing to help their children with homework if the teachers involved them in strategies and techniques" (p. 116).

There is a great difference between life in western countries and life in Africa ('western countries' is a term that deals with more than geography, and it is a problem "to divide the word in west and not west" (SSB 2010); in this paper, the term 'western countries' reflects modern communities and Africa reflects traditional communities).

Also, in rural and urban areas in most parts of Africa, there is great variation in economy and lifestyle (Cleghorn, 2005). According to Abi and Cleghorn (2005), the equality of educational opportunity found in western countries does not exist in Africa. There are also considerable differences in educational opportunity within rural

areas, and between rural and urban areas in Africa. In urban areas, people have high socioeconomic status in one part of town, and live in slums in other areas. Rich parents may choose private schools, while people in slums do not send their children to school at all because they lack the money to buy school uniforms or books. In rural areas, most of the people have a simple lifestyle with a non-monetary economy, but most of them can afford to send (some or all of) their children to government schools. This means that students in the same school have almost similar socioeconomic backgrounds, because rich parents send their children to private schools, whereas poor parents send their children to public schools (Cleghorn, 2005).

Shizha (2005) compares studies about the connectedness of Aboriginal languages and culture with the situation in Africa. He concludes that African languages and African culture "have a dialectical relationship that gives meanings to the lives of Africans" (p. 80), and claims that it is impossible to disconnect culture from language or language from culture. When children use one language in school and another at home, much more than languages will change. Students transfer norms, values and beliefs through languages. When curricula are presented in a language other than the mother tongue¹, cultures in school differ from cultures at home, and the curricula may support assimilation. If there is a distinction between the culture in school and cultures at home, the school will not play a socialisation role from one generation to the next, but will promote a process that makes the new generation lose its genuineness, in many cases the Aboriginal culture (Cleghorn, 2005). Hoëm's (1978) research into the Sami people in the north of Norway found what he called *skjærmet sosialisering* ('isolated socialisation', my translation); conflicts between values and interests in school and in homes. He concluded that this socialisation was detrimental for the students, and may generate conflicts between school and students/parents, and also between parents and their children.

Hughes (1989) points to different studies in Kenya and claims that indirect influence and high expectations from the student's family result in success at school, but he also claims that "the family has been so ignored as a parameter in the understanding of educational outcomes" (p. 53).

¹ Mother tongue in this paper is defined as the language that children use at home with their parents.

He refers to a study of students at the University of Nairobi, where about half of the sample indicated that their parents had been influential in their educational success, and the critical element that the parents provided was encouragement and economic assistance in paying school fees and buying books. Hughes (1989) claims that parents' level of education and occupation have great consequences for the children's educational outcomes, because educated parents speak English, the school language, at home. He also contends that parents in rural areas with a low educational level keep the daughters especially, and the first-born son at home to help with the household and to work in the garden.

In light of these theories about parental involvement in urban and rural areas in the world, and about lifestyle and education in Africa, this paper will try to answer the following research questions:

- How do parents in rural Kenya involve themselves in their children's schoolwork?
- What is the relationship between parents' background and involvement and their child's results?

After answering these questions, the paper will discuss if the knowledge about parental involvement in rural Kenya may provide new knowledge about the school-home relationship between minority parents and school in western countries.

Method.

This case study is based on data from Kenya collected in March and April of 2009. The fieldwork was done at a government school in a small village 30 kilometres from the nearest town. In this village, all the students live in simple farms with traditional houses, most of them without electricity and water. Very few parents have jobs that provide an income, and most of the families exist within a non-monetary economy. The school has about 350 pupils and 14 teachers. The number of students in each class varies from 19 to 35. The material was collected in standard eight, and this class had 21 students. The students' mother tongue is Nandi, but the languages in school are Kiswahili and English. It is forbidden to speak Nandi in school, even in the schoolyard. The village and the school can be seen as

representative of life and school in rural Kenya (Hughes, 1989; Yin, 2003).

The material was collected by observing a school meeting for all parents, and interviewing the parents, head teacher and class teacher. Sources triangulation provides different points of view and makes the findings more valid (Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995). In analysing the material, I miss the voice of the students. If the students had been interviewed, the data could have provided more reliable results. All the interviews were done in school, and each took about one hour. The term 'informant' in the article points to the interviewed head teacher, class teacher and parents and the term 'parents' means both the informant and his/her spouse. The school year has three terms, and the list of marks (see footnote of Table 1) at the end of the first period is used in this article. The students are listed after results, and the list was published some days after the interviews were conducted.

The study had a tight design which provided focus on the research question (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Interview guides were used as a frame for the interview; one for the teachers and one for the parents. To make it possible to compare parents' involvement and students' performance, student's ranking in class was the criterion for selecting the parents. The class teacher selected parents; five of the informants were parents of the students whom he believed would be at the top of the term list, and the other five were parents of the students whom he believed would be at the bottom of the list. The head teacher contacted the parents and all whom he contacted came; three men and seven women. The head teacher and the class teacher spoke English during the interviews; five parents spoke English and the other five code-switched between Kiswahili and the local language, Nandi. I do not differentiate between the English- and the Nandi-speaking parents in the paper, because I found no systematised differences between them with regard to their answers. An assistant, who spoke Nandi, Kiswahili and English, was engaged in the parental interviews. The interviews were planned as a guided conversation (Yin, 2003), but it was difficult to make the parents speak out; these interviews, therefore, mainly took the form of questions and answers.

The main topic of the school meeting was the official opening of a new administration block at the school. This meeting, like other school meetings, was announced by the head teacher at an assembly, and the students delivered the

message to their parents. Only 30 parents out of about 100 attended, but this is unlikely to influence the findings.

As with all research, this case study depends on interpretation (Stake, 1995), and the researcher comes to the fieldwork with "some orienting ideas" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 17). My own knowledge about parental involvement was acquired through a Norwegian project with focus on the relationship between ethnic minority² parents and school³. My experience from Africa is through periods as an auditor in primary schools in Congo, Zimbabwe, Malawi and Kenya. The knowledge that I have acquired about parental involvement and how to understand the Kenyan culture, has been valuable at all stages of the project; preparation (both theoretical and practical), field work and analysis. I also believe that this pre-knowledge gives the findings greater validity and reliability (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Yin, 2003).

The data were organised into categories according to the research questions. To validate the data, the head teacher was consulted by telephone during the analysing and writing process. Qualitative studies generalise from one case to another "on the basis of a match to the underlying theory" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 29), and through this case, new knowledge is constructed (Stake, 1995). The new knowledge in this article is primarily about parental involvement in rural Kenya, but it may also give teachers in western countries important knowledge regarding their cooperation with minority parents. In western countries, some of the minority parents in school acquire their experiences from rural areas in the world. It is not possible to draw general conclusions between parents in this study and western minority parents. Additionally, some minority parents with rural backgrounds may have the same opinion about parental participation as the parents in the study (Hughes, 1989). Based on this understanding, the findings in the study may be transferable to relationships between school and minority parents in western countries.

² In this paper, the term 'minority students' refers to students with both parents born in a country other than the country in which they live, and 'minority parents' means parents born abroad (SSB 2010).

³ The project was named: *Minoritetsspråklige foreldre – en ressurs for elevenes opplæring i skolen* [Minority-speaking parents - a resource for students' education] (UD/FUG 2007).

Parental background and the parents' involvement in school.

Epstein (2001) claims that it is important for schools and parents to share the responsibility for education. In my data, I do not find this form of cooperation. The school had the main responsibility for the students' education, and parents were hardly involved in their children's school work. This does not mean that the parents considered school to be unimportant. All the parents said that it was important, and they all had ambitions for further education and professions for their children (Abdi & Cleghorn, 2005; Azaola, 2007). I also find sequential responsibilities of family and school (Epstein, 2001); some of the parents prepared their children for school by using Kiswahili and some English in addition to Nandi at home. When children start school, the teachers assume the major responsibility for teaching them the national and official languages.

Home background: Educational level, language and culture.

Most of the parents⁴ were farmers or housekeepers. Only two of the parents had a job outside of the home. Both were men. One had finished secondary school and was a clerk at the university; the other was a pastor in the local church. The pastor was the only one with a college education, and his wife had a few years of primary education. In three families, both father and mother had a secondary education. In two families, the man had a secondary education and their spouses had completed primary school. In three families, both the man and the woman had finished primary school. In one family, the woman had completed some years of primary school, and the man had no schooling. In couples with different educational levels, mothers had higher education in three cases and lower in four cases. All parents who used English during the interview had finished secondary school.

Njoki Wane (2005) emphasises the importance of indigenous knowledge as a valuable teacher resource. All informants made a distinction between home language and school language. They also agreed that school was not, or should not be, responsible for teaching the mother tongue. Nandi in school was, as I understood,

unthinkable for all the parents. All of the informants said very clearly that the mother tongue should not be used in school. It is uncertain whether this idea is based on postcolonial matters of elitism (Cleghorn, 2005; Wane, 2005), or just the parents' wishes for their children's future. As they said, Kiswahili and English provide their children the possibility to study, and also to meet people outside of their own tribe. Half of the parents said that it was important to speak Nandi at home. The reason that they gave for the importance of knowing the mother tongue was to maintain the culture. As one of the fathers said: "It's the parents' responsibility to give the children the mother tongue and the culture". One of the mothers said that they spoke only English at home. This is hard to believe because the mother spoke Nandi throughout the interview, and she did not understand much English herself. A father said that they spoke three languages at home; Nandi, Kiswahili and English, but that Kiswahili and English were only spoken when they did school work. All the informants emphasised the school's responsibility for teaching the students Kiswahili and English. All parents also said that it was important for the parents to speak some Kiswahili at home:

Parents have to speak Kiswahili home to prepare the children for school (Mother).

When children learn Kiswahili at home they will do better at school (Father).

Only one of the informants said that he had no books at home; the others had a few books. Three informants said that they had some story books — all written in English. Four parents said that they had some books in both English and Kiswahili; story books, school books, religious (Christian) books and atlases. One informant said that he had a Kiswahili grammar book. Only one of the parents said that she had a book in Nandi at home, and this was the Bible. None of the parents knew any books in Nandi other than the Bible or books about Christianity.

Parents' knowledge about school.

My main impression is that the parents had little knowledge of their children's school situation. Most of the parents knew the names of subjects and how many students there were in class; but only half of the parents knew the name of the class teacher, and only one parent could mention

⁴ There were ten informants, but the informants also gave information about their spouses' background.

a topic taught during the past two weeks. Even if parents did not know much about their child's school situation, they all had ideas about school. The informants said that both parents and teachers had to check the children's work. They were all concerned about the importance of control. One of the fathers, who did not know much about the class or the school, said:

It's good for the parents to follow their children's work because children can cheat parents.

Three of the parents emphasised the importance of good discipline, and stated that good discipline meant being quiet and doing what the teacher told you to do. Nobody could give information about the discipline in standard eight, but they said that the teachers had to punish the students if discipline was not good. All the parents agreed that physical punishment was sometimes necessary:

All students must have good discipline. You discipline students by beating, or you discipline by talking with him or her (Father)

Even if parents did not know much about what went on at school, all the parents had an idea of the child's school results. They told me confidently whether the child was average, below average or at the top, and all, except one, also said what they believed were the total points for next term's results. The result was compared with the parents' assumptions, and all except one believed that the result was better than it actually was.

Parental involvement in school activities.

My findings show that there is little cooperation between parents and school, and parents are hardly involved in their children's schoolwork. The school has a parents' school committee for practical work with two parents from each class. Two of the informants were in the school committee, and three of the informants had been in the committee earlier. Two of the parents said that they had not been, and would not like to be, committee members. They argued that it involved too much work.

The school meeting, which I attended some days before the interviews, was not an ordinary meeting, but a celebration of a new administration block at the school. The meeting was poorly attended, and only two of the interviewed parents

attended the meeting. The head teacher could not give a reason for the poor attendance. He said that the students had been given the message to deliver to their parents. Additionally, the informants could not give a reason for their absence. Even if the school had given insufficient information, the parents should have known if they talked about school at home, because the students had prepared for the entertainment. My impression is that what happens in school is not a subject that is discussed at home. The class teacher said that 75 per cent of the parents used to come to the school meetings that they had once a term. These meetings were usually about the classes and the students, and addressed practical problems such as lack of uniforms and books, and also information about the community. Nine of the informants went to the last ordinary meeting, and regarding the topics discussed at that meeting they said: "The meeting was about the class and students ... how to make the students pass and how many students to repeat ... about preps and registration". The informants said that they had the opportunity to ask the teachers questions during the meeting, but that they seldom did so. In the meeting, the head teacher, the teachers or the chairman of the committee used to give information about the students, school or community.

The head teacher could, as he said, contact the parents and ask for a meeting if there were problems — usually having to do with discipline — but he rarely did so. Sometimes, the parents contacted him. These were often the mothers, especially if they had economic problems which could have implications for school attendance. The class teacher said that parents rarely contacted him. He sometimes contacted the parents himself if he had to tell them about problems that the student had. If he contacted the parents, they often did not come. One of the mothers from a family in which both parents had completed secondary school, said:

The class teacher sometimes asks me to come, but I don't - I have too much to do at home.

Half of the informants said that they had never contacted the class teacher, nor had they been contacted by him. All of them had a primary education. Four of the parents said that they sometimes had a meeting with the class teacher. These meetings were about the students' development in different subjects. They said that

a meeting could be requested by both class teacher and parents.

All of the informants said that their children did homework for two or three hours every evening, and some also did so at weekends. One student had a study, whereas the others did their homework in the sitting room. Just one of the parents said that he sometimes helped his daughter with homework. He had secondary school education himself. Some mentioned older brothers or sisters who helped. All of the parents perceived homework as being important:

I buy paraffin so he can read in the evening. If we don't have we borrow from the neighbour or he sits in the neighbour's house (Father).

Sometimes she takes her "preps" (homework) to school and sits there till 9 pm - there is electricity at school (Mother).

Only three informants knew the title of one of the school books, even if all the informants said that they usually looked at their child's school work. In response to my questions, all informants, except one, said that their child told them about their school work at home, and that they also asked their child questions about school. Compared with their lack of knowledge about school matters during the past two weeks, this is difficult to believe. One mother said that her son never informed her about school and that she never asked.

According to the head teacher, the parents do not participate fully in their children's education. He said that the parents make the children do domestic work instead of sending them to school. He also said that the students' results would improve if the parents helped with school work, bought the necessary books and met with the teacher as required. To make it easier for parents who spoke only Nandi to come to school, the head teacher said that parents were allowed to use Nandi, and that teachers could code-switch between English, Kiswahili and Nandi.

The class teacher said that half of the parents were not concerned about the schoolwork of their children and that they *needed to be sensitised*. He said that school results would improve if parents provided the basic needs, such as food, clothing and shelter, the equipment needed for school work, a good learning environment at home and in school, and if they became involved in solving problems concerning their children.

Even if the parents did not take part in school activities, they had expectations for further education and professions for their children, and they all said that school was important for a better life and to enhance one's ability to help others. They also had dreams for their children's future. The mothers wanted the daughters to become nurses (2), policewomen or pastors, and the sons to become doctors (2), teachers, lawyers or policemen. The fathers wanted their daughters to become pilots and secondary school teachers, and the sons to become engineers. The father who wanted his son to become an engineer was the only one who could give a reason; he said that his son was interested in fixing many things, such as radios. Some informants said that it could be a problem to achieve the goal because they lacked money. None said that lack of ability was a potential problem. This confirms Abdi and Cleghorn's (2005) claim that all people want their children to be educated in order to give them a good life.

To use Epstein's (2001) term, I found *separated responsibility of family and school* in this study. All the informants made the school responsible for their children's education, and they also said that the school was responsible for teaching the children the national and official languages. The parents said that the home was responsible for socialisation and for teaching the children the mother tongue and the local culture. The head teacher, the class teacher and the parents pointed out parents' responsibility for material resources. These were food and clothes, but also school books and light for studying in the evening (Marks, Cresswell & Ainly, 2006). The head teacher also emphasised the parents' responsibility for sending the children to school instead of giving them domestic work.

The students' results.

There are nine subjects in standard eight. Three are non-examinable subjects: creative arts, physical education and life skills education.

The examinable subjects are: English, Kiswahili, mathematics, science, social studies (SSR) and Christian religious education (CRE)⁵. In each subject, it is possible to achieve 100 points, but SSR and CRE together represent 100 points.

⁵ In other areas, the school may choose Hindu religious education or Islamic religious education instead of Christian religious education.

The total score is 500⁶. The points are based on tests in the middle and at the end of term. Some of the tests are common to all schools in the district, and some are set by the teachers in school. The final test in standard eight is a national test. All the test results in standard eight are posted outside the head teacher's office⁷. The class list with names, results and ranking is available for those who are interested in seeing it. At the end of a term, the students receive a report card with marks in every subject, as well as total marks. This must be signed by the parents and returned.

The class teacher expected the informants' children to be the five at the top and the five at the bottom of the class list. On the class list (see Table 1, Appendix) , the informants' children are numbers 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17 and 19 (numbers 10 and number 15 are brothers). One student is average, four are better than average and six are below average.

Parental background and students' results.

Various studies prove the relationship between parents' educational level and students' educational outcomes (Epstein, 2001; Marks, Cresswell & Ainly, 2006; OECD, 2004). In the present study, I find such a connection in only one case; but, like Hughes (1989), I find a possible relationship between language spoken at home and students' school results.

In the present study, one of the parents has no education at all, and one has a college education. The rest have completed either primary or secondary school. In only one case do I find a possible relationship between parents' education and their child's results. The student was the one with the lowest marks (number 18 in class). She was the daughter of the only parent with no schooling. The mother completed six years of primary school, and was one of two informants who looked really uncomfortable during the interview. I assume that she felt uncomfortable because of her lack of knowledge about the

school, and that she was afraid that she would not 'give the answers' that she thought I expected. The only parent with a college education had a daughter who appeared almost at the bottom of the results list, at number 17. Children of two parents with secondary education were numbers 11, 12 and 13 in the class. The two girls on top had just one parent with a secondary school background. Children of two parents with a primary education were numbers 5, 6, 10 and 15. The difference between primary and secondary school background results in a great difference in the use and understanding of English, which is the educational language in school (Hughes, 1989). Informants with a secondary education were able to use English during the interview, whereas the informants with a primary education only used Nandi as the main language, and some Kiswahili. Even if I hardly found any connection between parents' school background and their child's result, there may be some connection between languages spoken at home and school results. "Families who actively nurture language development will best prepare their sons and daughters for academic success" (Hughes, 1989). Two of the informants said that they spoke some English at home; their children had the best results on the list (numbers 2 and 3 in class). Two of the informants said that they spoke only Nandi at home; their children were numbers 12 and 18 in class. The rest of the families spoke both Nandi and Kiswahili at home.

Parental involvement and students' results.

Epstein (2001) found a clear connection between parents' involvement in school and students' results. In the present study, it is difficult to see any connection between parents' involvement in school activity and children's educational outcomes. The children of the informants who were on the school committee, were numbers 2 and 13 on the results list. The informant, who contacted the teacher once a month, said that he wanted his son to be one of the top five. He believed that his son was number nine, but he was actually number 11. The informant who said that they were contacted and met with the class teacher once a month had two sons in class. She believed that one was top of the class and that the other was average. The two sons were numbers 10 and 15. Five of the informants never met the class teacher to talk about the child's school situation. Their children were numbers 3, 5, 6, 17 and 18. One of the

⁶ To continue to the next class, a student needs to have at least 250 points; if not, he/she has to repeat. After standard eight, the students may go on to secondary school, and the total marks decide which school. A student with 250 marks may start at a district school; with 300 marks at a provincial school; and with 380 marks at a national school.

⁷ The results of the final national test in standard eight are also published in the national newspaper. Districts, schools and students are compared.

informants never met the teacher even though he asked her to come in. Her son was number 12 in class.

Research shows that parents have great influence on students' learning, especially regarding involvement in homework (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Deslandes & Rousseau, 2008). All of the parents in the study perceived homework as being important; but only one of the informants said that he helped his daughter with her homework. This informant also knew something, although not much, about one of the topics of the past two weeks. In this case, I find a relation between involvement and the child's result: his daughter was number 2 in class. The head teacher and class teacher indicated almost the same as Hughes (1989); that parents' expectations influence success in school. The head teacher said that the results would improve if the parents sent their children to school instead of making them do domestic work. The class teacher said that the results would improve if the parents were sensitised and provided the basic needs and the materials needed for school. As Lareau (2000) and Azaola (2007) also found, all the informants — head teacher, class teacher, mothers and fathers — said that the mothers were responsible for the children and their schoolwork. However, the only informant who gave assistance with homework was a father.

Discussion.

The aim of this case study was to find out how and to what extent parents in rural Kenya are involved in their children's schoolwork, and how significant parents' background and their involvement in school are for the students' results. I found that the parents were involved in school through school meetings, and they prepared their children for school by sometimes using school languages at home (Hughes, 1989). More indirectly, they were involved through providing the basic needs and material resources for their children and sending them to school instead of making them do domestic work (Hughes, 1989). I hardly found any relationship between parents' background and students' results, apart from the value of speaking Kiswahili and English; nor did I find any relationship between parental involvement and students' results. These findings will now be used as the basis for a discussion of the relationship between school and minority parents in western countries.

The difference in the grades achieved by minority students and those achieved by majority students is well proved (Bakken, 2009; KD, 2007; OECD, 2009; Taguma, Shewbridge, Huttova & Hoffman, 2009). One of the explanations is that minority students have parents with a lower socioeconomic status than majority students. In light of this case study from Kenya, it is reasonable to believe that minority students with parents from traditional communities may also be at a disadvantage because parents and schools have different ideas about responsibility. The Norwegian curriculum directs the school to share responsibility with the parents, and, according to Epstein (2001), this is the prevailing view in western countries. Parents from traditional communities may trust, as working class families, teachers only as responsible for education (Lareau, 2000).

Shared responsibility means interaction between parents and teachers (Epstein, 2001), and interaction requires knowledge about the other party. Many teachers have an inadequate understanding of the students' background, and they have no possibility to develop practices that inform and involve all parents in their children's development (*ibid.* p.5). In light of the present study, we may also assume that minority parents from traditional communities have an inadequate understanding of how to engage in their children's learning (Harris & Goodall, 2008). The greatest difference to students' achievement is, according to Harris and Goodall (2008), parents' involvement in homework. The Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows that about 20 per cent of Norwegian teachers monitor homework, while the international average is 80 per cent (KD, 2007, p. 8). This means that Norwegian students need more help from parents to do their homework, and it seems obvious that minority parents from traditional countries will not be equal to this task. Families from traditional cultures like rural Kenya think that teachers are responsible for education and, for this reason, they do not seek the information that they need to help their children with their homework. Also, in western countries, tests and exams are influenced by the involvement of the parents. In lower secondary school in Norway, students get marks in each subject, and teachers' marking is mostly based on tests during the term. The students are expected to prepare for the tests, and even have to plan the final examination at home. I find it likely that with help from parents, students will achieve better marks than

those who do not get such help. With the knowledge from Kenya as a backdrop, I assume that minority parents hardly believe that it is possible to prepare the tests at home, and will most likely not give their children the necessary help, even if they are able to.

Minority students receive their curricula and teaching in a language other than the mother tongue. The Norwegian Education Act (KD 2010) gives students with limited knowledge of the Norwegian language the right to receive lessons in their mother tongue. My own experience of education in Norway is that some parents from traditional communities do not want their children to have this kind of lesson, and they do not want their children to use their mother tongue in school. In light of the present study, we may understand why: parents from traditional cultures are used to curricula and teaching presented in a language other than the mother tongue, and they separate the responsibility for teaching languages. School is responsible for the school language, and the parents are responsible for the mother tongue and the culture.

When the school demands that parents contribute to their children's school work, the school has to educate the parents; but many teachers do not have the necessary knowledge to guide the parents (Epstein, 2001). According to Epstein, teachers also report that it would not be

useful to involve less educated parents. Teachers believe that these "parents would not be able to or willing to help their children if the teachers involve them in strategies and techniques" (*ibid.* p. 116). I believe that this may also apply to the way in which teachers think about minority parents.

This paper has discussed whether or not knowledge about parental involvement in rural Kenya may provide new knowledge about the school-home relationship between minority parents and school in western countries. Summing up, this knowledge may be that: a) schools in western countries and minority parents may have different understandings concerning parental involvement; cooperation means shared responsibility for the school and separated responsibility for the minority parents; b) It may be difficult for the minority parents to understand their responsibility for following up their children's schoolwork, especially the homework and the tests/exams, because of the different expectations about involvement from school and parents; c) The reason why some minority parents do not want their children to get instruction in their mother tongue may be their experience from their home country; and finally, d) The school-home relationship is different in traditional and modern cultures, and schools in western countries have limited knowledge about these differences.

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Appendix 1

Table1 Students' results

ID	Name	English	Kiswahili	Mathematics	Science	SSR + CRE	Total
1	Kip	58	63	78	70	65	334
2	Jepchirchir	68	75	70	58	56	327
3	Jepkorir	60	54	62	52	47	275
4	Kip	44	61	58	60	52	275
5	Jepkemei	53	63	60	50	46	272
6	Jepkemboi	51	53	52	56	51	263
7	Jep	62	66	24	52	54	258
8	Kip	44	53	52	58	47	254
9	Kip	46	50	46	42	42	249
10	Kiprotich	40	54	44	56	53	247
11	Kipchumba	48	67	44	36	46	241
12	Kiptoo	41	52	56	46	44	239
13	Kiplagat	41	49	58	42	46	236
14	Jep	38	49	54	52	40	233
15	Jep	48	65	34	48	35	230
16	Kiprotich	48	49	40	54	39	230
17	Jepechi	44	49	54	52	40	224
18	Kipkogei	40	46	46	36	56	222
19	Jep	45	53	40	42	42	222
20	Jep	58	54	26	28	39	205
21	Jep	35	38	30	18	25	146
	Total marks	1010	1268	1006	1004	971	5182
	Mean scores	48	55.5	48	48	46	247

Note: The class result is presented to show the marks of the informants' children compared with the rest of the class. The informants' children are written in bold letters and are given fictive Nandi names (Jep means girl and Kip means boy in Nandi).