Parenthood in intensified documentation and assessment practice – with the focus on the home-school relation in Sweden

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The study seeks to describe and analyse parenthood in intensified documentation and assessment practice, with the focus on the home-school relation in Sweden. The research is based on fieldwork on the Internet. What currents of thought and dimensions of parenthood can be detected? What is considered in assessments and documentation of children? Who assesses whom? Whose interests can be interpreted as being involved in parenthood? The sample consists of material from two Internet sites, a total of about 120 pages. The unit of analysis in the study consists of online text-based communication initiated by parents in 2008–2009. Textual analysis was performed with an extended hermeneutic approach. The material from the Internet includes threads dealing with personal development interviews, individual development plans with written assessments, and standardized test and observation material. In the material there are examples of teachers assessing children, and examples of parents assessing teachers, other parents, and themselves. Four dimensions of parenthood emerge, which can be described as policy-related, evidence-related, market- and media-oriented, and experience-based. The dimensions that indicate which interests are involved can be interpreted as being either concordant and interwoven or contradictory. The study contributes to a greater understanding, qualifies the discourse, and offers alternative interpretations of what is at stake in an intensified documentation and assessment practice.

Keywords: Assessment, documentation, evidence, market, parenthood, policy, Sweden.

Introduction

The poorer school results in Sweden today compared with the early 1990s can partly be explained, according to the National Agency for Education, in terms of the students' social background (Skolverket, 25 September 2009). Support from the home has become increasingly significant since school has become worse at compensating for the students' differing circumstances and social background. "An increased focus on the individual student's own work and individual responsibility means, among other things, that school work is increasingly done in the home, in the student's spare time, and via the Internet. This in turn raises questions about parents' responsibility for their children's school work.

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There is a tendency here for parents to acquire greater responsibility for this" (Skolverket, 1 March 2010, p. 37).

During the period stated above, reforms have been implemented to improve school results in Sweden. One example is the introduction of individual development plans (Swedish *individuell utvecklingsplan*, IUP, see the description in the next section) and written assessments for all children from the first school year. In this connection it is interesting to look at parents and study parenthood. Children and parents are surrounded by new media (e.g. blogs, websites), self-assessments, portfolios, individual development plans with written assessments (IUP), observation and test material (e.g. LUS: *Läsutvecklings schema* [Reading Development Scheme] and TRAS: *Tidig Registrering Av Språk* [Early Registration of Language]), weekly letters,

logbooks, assessments, and so on – that is to say, a changed communicative practice. This field has seen relatively little research in Sweden, particularly from a parental perspective (Vallberg Roth, 2006, 2010).

Bibliometric studies otherwise show an increasing trend concerning research on school-parent relations over a forty-year period (1966–2005). The greatest increase in these studies has taken place in the psychological research field (Castelli & Pepe, 2008). A survey of psychosocial research (in the medical, educational, and sociological disciplines) on parenthood and the Internet reveals an increased interest and increased production since 1997 (Danebeck & Plantin, 2008). Four main themes are identified in 94 relevant articles. During the first years, research was concerned with listing and analysing useful sites for parents. There then emerged a theme that focused on parents' user patterns on the Internet, followed by a theme to do with activities in online support groups. In recent times there has been a theme concentrating on various interventions via the Internet. The studies have more often been geared to the parenthood-profession relation than the parent-parent relation (Danebeck & Plantin, 2008)

Aim

This study aims to describe and tentatively discuss parenthood in an intensified documentation and assessment practice, with the focus on the home-school relation in Sweden. The term *intensified* is used to capture the denser documentation and assessment in interactive forms of communication, both electronic (online) and non-electronic (offline). I intend to focus on parenthood in communicative practice based on empirical examples taken from the Internet. In these online communities, it has been possible for parents to discuss topics and write about how they view the intensified assessment and documentation. The aim of the study is to identify and describe currents of thought on the Internet, and to tentatively discuss dimensions of parenthood which can be interpreted as emerging from the intensified documentation and assessment practice. The study can help to increase understanding, to qualify the discourse, and to offer alternative interpretations of what is at stake, in the contemporary complexity of parenthood between offline and online.

Some introductory concepts

The concept of assessment is ambiguous. It can mean judging or examining something, appreciation, pronouncing a verdict, evaluating or grading someone or something. In Swedish research on the assessment of students' knowledge, the overall term *kunskapsbedömning* or "knowledge assessment" is used (see e.g. Lundahl, 2006, Pettersson, 2008). "[K]nowledge assessments can be understood as the production of information about children and their relation to their knowledge" (Lundahl, 2006, p. 407).

The concept of documentation is not wholly unambiguous either. In a broad sense the word "document" can mean collecting and compiling information. Documentation can be both digital and analogue, including video film, photography, notes, observations, interviews, audio recordings, etc. This study concentrates on currents of thought expressed in digital documentation, online, which has a connection to non-electronic documentation and assessment offline, in individual development talks, in IUP and assessments, tests, and observation material.

The boundary between the steering and production of occasional claims to truth through documentation can be described with the term *documentality* (Steyerl, 2003). This term can be interpreted as concerning a kind of *politics of truth*. On the one hand, one can say that the documentation practice is embedded in power relations and social conventions; on the other hand it also makes it possible to reveal what is unforeseen in these power relations. It can become possible to express what is unthinkable, liberating, unspoken, unknown, or absurd. In other words, the documentation and assessment practice can empower and strengthen, but it can also weaken and constrict parents and children. The research questions, about currents of thoughts, interests and dimensions of parenthood, arise from a documentarily perspective. Based on a documentarily perspective, the *registration* comes into the foreground. Systematic recording and documentation is then the basis for the regulation of parents and children's lives.

Parents in relation to state, market, science and civil sphere

Earlier studies show traces of a multidimensional parenthood, and selected references concern parents and documentation in

relation to the state, market, science, and civil sphere. The majority of references consist of Swedish research, because the study involves a context of national character and a control system for the Swedish school and preschool. The phenomenon I consider specifically (IUP with written assessments, appraisals, and standardized observation materials) is state-regulated and/or appears in Swedish schools and preschools. In general, there will be similar documentation in other countries, and the dense documentation and assessment practice is understood as a global and transnational phenomenon.

State-regulated parenthood

State-regulated parenthood can be exemplified by IUP and systematic documentation on the individual level (Skolverket [National Agency for Education], 2010-03-01, 2008a; Utbildnings-departementet [Ministry of Education], 2010). The main motives for introducing individual development plans were that more students should reach the national targets in curricula and syllabuses and that students and their legal guardians should have increased influence on the students' school work. The responsibility in the documents is often placed with the students and their guardians (Vallberg Roth, 2009). "The students consistently state that the responsibility for their achievement of the goals chiefly lies with themselves" (Skolverket, [National Agency for Education] 1 March 2010, p. 116). A report from the National Agency for Education (1 March 2010) also states that parents and students are consistently positive about the idea of written assessments being given in all subjects in compulsory school. In the steering documents for different levels of school it is possible to detect a greater emphasis on the responsibility of parents and students (Vallberg Roth, 2009, 2010). The educational researcher Marianne Dovermark (2007) problematizes the concept of *responsibility* and describes how the decentralization of schools in Sweden has led to a shift of responsibility, under the assumption that students can and want to take responsibility. The same can be said to apply to parents.

The state-regulated parenthood is embedded in a noticeable tendency towards a reliance on *contracts* (Åkerstrøm Andersson, 2003). A study by the social anthropologist Åsa Bartholdsson (2007) describes examples of schools where *parental contracts* have been drawn up. These state that parents must show an interest in their children's education, be interested in the children's homework, ensure that the children are well rested and have had breakfast, know what the children do in their spare time, check that they do not watch certain television programmes and go to bed in time, by 11 p.m. at the latest. These are examples of how the public institution regulates desirable parenthood. Bartholdsson points out that professional actors intervene in family life and steer what is considered to be acceptable parenthood. Furthermore, the individual development plans can be regarded as contract-like documents since they regulate responsibility and virtually always include the signatures of teachers, parents, and students (Vallberg Roth, & Månsson, 2009). The child researcher Ann-Marie Markström (2008) describes how parents are encouraged to get involved in the pre-school's individual development talks. She points out that the forms that are distributed in advance encourage parents to talk in the home about the child's satisfaction, interests, favourite books, and so on. Markström argues that the distribution of the form can be interpreted as a means to help parents to suggest what the conferences should be about, and should be understood as a way to regulate the content of the conference. The educational researcher Ingegerd Tallberg Broman (2009) illuminates the relationship between pre-school/school and parent in the tension between policy and professional practice. She notes that there has been a shift from parental participation for increased democracy as a basic value, to parental participation as a strategy for school efficiency, improved learning, and increased goal fulfilment in pre-school and school.

While school has been given increased control *vis-à-vis* the family (assessments, tests, contracts, etc.), the family's influence *vis-à-vis* the school has increased, based on principles of equality and democratization (Persson & Tallberg Broman, 2002). Partnership has become particularly prominent in the educational sector, where the norms are determined by the state (Kristoffersson, 2008). The socio-culturally aware researcher Maria de Carvalho (2001) problematizes the home-school relation, describing it as power relations in which many families are powerless. She argues that parents' unequal potential to support their children's learning and school work lead to growing educational gaps and inequality. She declares that the home is not an educational institution, and she questions the educational policy and the school's

infringement and self-appointed right to claim time in the home and in family life.

Parenthood, market and consumption

The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2008) describes the post-war rapid transition from a production society to a consumer society, where people are first and foremost defined as consumers. This may be exemplified by the intensification of documents and surveys on customer satisfaction. Parents and students can experience a sense of power by assuming the role as consumers of educational services, but the freedom of choice is not synonymous with democracy (Biesta, 2011). "Consumers can choose from a set menu. But democracy only exists when people from the beginning are involved in the decisions about what is on the menu" (Biesta, 2011, p. 106).

To understand the forces behind family consumption, the sociologist Allison Pugh (2009) spent a few years observing and interviewing children and parents in the United States. Pugh noted that children's desires derived less from striving for status or falling victim to advertising than from their longing to join the conversation at school or in the neighbourhood. Most parents react to children's needs for belonging by buying certain products and experiences that serve as passports into the children's social worlds, because they sympathize with the children's fear of being left outside or regarded as different from their peers. The family gives priority to children's wishes even during financial constraints. Pugh illustrates the surprising similarity of the fears and hopes held by parents and children from very different social contexts. So while corporate marketing comes into play in the commercialization of childhood, what really matters is a desire to belong.

Professionalized parents on scientific basis

In 2008 a national strategy was published concerning public support for all parents with children up to age 18 in Sweden (SOU, 2008:131). Measures were suggested for the local, regional, and national levels. The report gives examples showing that nurses from child health centres, or staff from pre-school or school, can act as leaders of parental education and parental support. The content of the parental support can concern how parents can contribute to success in school work and counteract truancy,

and how measures can be offered to make it easier to build relationships and set limits.

Parent training will be based on scientific evidence and on standardized assessments and documentation. The report entitled *Parental support – a win for everyone* is a study that emphasizes evidence-based parenting interventions. "The commission has chosen to use the term 'evidence-based programmes' but with a slightly broader meaning in which the evidence is based on the overall profession's best practices, a user perspective and the best available science" (SOU, 2008:131, p. 99).

Through the national *parental support* it is possible to detect an extension of existing professions, or an incipient design of a new profession, that of *parental educators*. To emphasize science-based parenting enhances the professionalism and *pedagogicalization of parents* that occurred in public childhood (e.g. Gars, 2002: Popkewitz, 2003). Professionalized parenthood on a scientific basis can be interpreted to be compatible with the knowledge-intensive society, where the production of knowledge is the most important factor for growth and competitiveness (Globaliserings rådet [Globalisation Council], 2009).

Parents and a civil sphere

Parenthood linked to a civil sphere is implied but is not conspicuous in earlier research focused on the home-school relation in Sweden. The civil sphere tends to develop resistance against other spheres of government and market (Daun, 1997). "Among the teachers, it can be manifested as resistance to the central directives and among parents and students it can be manifested as resistance to the culture that is produced and reproduced in schools" (p. 177). The cultural sociologist Jeffery Alexander (2006) describes how the community is bound together by a civil sphere. The feeling of being "connected to others" (p. 13), civil repair and solidarity, which is ignored or toned down in the theories of power and self-interest, is central to his work. For Alexander, the point is not to "highlight differences between the civil society on the one hand and the state, market and family intimacy, on the other" (Trondman, Lund & Mast, 2011, p. 16).

> *We need a new concept of civil society as a civil "sphere", a world of values and institutions, which at the same time generates capacity for*

social criticism and democratic integration. Such a sphere is based on solidarity, on the feelings of others that we do not know but that we respect... (Trondman, Lund & Mast, 2011, p. 16)

Currents of thought expressed online

This study discusses material from the Internet concerning parents' formulated experiences and views of documentation and assessment. The term *currents of thought online* is used to mean the experiences and outlooks expressed in electronic, computer-mediated communication. Currents of thought online are quite simply thoughts expressed and flowing between actors in electronic networks. The research questions that I treat in the study can be structured as one overall question and some subordinate questions.

Overall question

What currents of thought and dimensions of parenthood can be detected in an intensified documentation and assessment practice with the focus on the home-school relation in Sweden?

Subsidiary questions

a) What is considered in assessment and documentation concerning children? What views are seen online concerning individual development plans, written assessments, and tests?

b) Who assesses whom? Do parents assess their children? Do parents assess teachers' assessments? Do parents assess other parents?

c) Whose interests and what interests can be interpreted as being involved in parenthood?

Method, selection, ethical considerations, and analysis

In connection with the study's aim and research questions I choose a netnographic approach. Netnography is research based on fieldwork online. It uses computer-mediated communication as a data source for the understanding and representation of cultural or shared phenomena (Berg, 2011; Kozinets, 2010). Studies that analyse qualitative data from the Internet can provide valuable knowledge in themselves, and they can contribute knowledge that can elaborate on earlier studies. The material can show various currents of thought that have been formulated online, which can raise new questions or expand on older ones.

Selection

The selection of sites was obtained through a Google search using the Swedish terms for: parents, family, meeting place. I then looked at each site and searched its forum for threads concerning individual development plans, written assessments, individual development talks, and tests. In this study an online community can be defined as a social environment that arises through computer-mediated communication, interaction, and meaning creation between people on the Internet.

I have studied material from two communities: "Allt för föräldrar – Din familj på nätet" ("Everything for parents – Your family on the net" (approx. 25 threads in 90 pages) and "Familjeliv" ("Family life", approx. 10 threads in 30 pages). The two communities began in 2003 and are privately owned. The online communities are said to have many members, and the website of *Family life* states that the environment is the largest family site and was ranked by the Internet World Top 100 as Sweden's best community in 2010. It is uncertain which parents participate, but some posts indicate that there are more women than men (see results). It is important to remember that on the Internet anyone can pretend to be, for example, a parent – mother or father. The threads from the online communities are initiated by the participants and often involve communication between two or three, and sometimes up to five or six people. These people can be in and out of communication for periods of varying length, from one to several days. People and posts are difficult to comment on accurately, especially since the participants can change their username. The selection of quotations is based on the principle of using characteristic and varied statements which do not take up too much place. In this study, with the aim of tentatively discussing parenthood, the purpose of quotations is mainly to open up and provide a basis for possible interpretations.

In studies in the social sciences it is common for researchers to work on macro or micro level (Sveningsson, Lövheim & Bergquist, 2003). The orientation of the study and the size of the sample, with selected threads in two forums, might place the study on the micro level. At the same time, the interpretation of possible dimensions of parenthood tends to bring the study to a macro level.

Ethical considerations

In the following I discuss four main requirements as regards Internet research: information, consent, confidentiality, and use.

On the one hand we have a responsibility to do research of high quality that can be of benefit to society and that increases our understanding of how people interact and create meaning in a new social environment. On the other hand we have a responsibility to protect individuals' integrity and privacy. (Sveningsson, Lövheim & Bergquist, 2003, p. 189)

When it comes to the information requirement, it can be difficult to inform everyone on the net, since the users use non-identifiable names (Sveningsson, Lövheim & Bergquist, 2003). There may be notices informing people who log in that research may be performed, which I take to be the case in one of the meeting places I studied. I have written to the contact persons on the sites to ask for permission to analyse material from the period 2008–2009, but I received no answer. We ought to inform the individuals we do research on and ask for their consent. Obtaining consent, like the requirement to inform, can be problematic, since it can be difficult to trace the users afterwards. In Sweden it is in principle permissible to register, analyse, and report what happens in public environments on condition that no individual is identifiable. To make it more difficult to identify anyone in this study, I state only the name of the Internet site and the date of the quoted extract. Quotations used in the results are translated from Swedish into English and are therefore not easy to find through search engines. This brings us to the requirement of confidentiality. Although the practice on the Internet is not to state one's real name but instead a username (also called a nickname, nym, or alias), I have chosen not to state the usernames, which have no specific value in this study; by omitting to state the usernames it is possible to reduce the risk that someone in the user group or their family members could be identified. In cases where names occur in the quotations, for example, names of children, these have been removed and replaced by "NAME". Of the main ethical requirements it is only that concerning the use of data that can be satisfied without problem. The data collected will be used only for research purposes.

Description of the analysis of currents of thought expressed on the Internet

The object of study and unit of discussion consists of online communication initiated by parents in two Internet environments in 2008–2009. Communication here is text-based and concerns individual development talks, individual development plans with written assessments, and standardized tests. The analytical approach can be described in terms of textual analysis with an extended hermeneutic approach (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2008; Silverman, 2011). This method emphasizes interpretation and reflection through a dialogue between what can be described as different voices: that of the empirical material, that of hermeneutics, and that of critique and ambiguity. The analysis and interpretation are performed abductively, alternating between the theoretical (empirically loaded) and the empirical (theoretically loaded). *The voice of the empirical material* refers to an interpretation and description of the text that is close to the material. The data consist of text in documents which can be designated as *non-reactive*, that is, data not affected by the presence of the researcher (Merriam, 1994). The *voice of hermeneutics* denotes an interpretation that alternates between the whole and the parts, with a search for underlying meanings. Through *the voice of critique and ambiguity* I approach the object of study by problematizing – asking questions and shedding light on formulations, tensions, and traces. Both what is expressed explicitly and what can be read between the lines is interesting. The interpretation allows an understanding of the study object situated in a reality that is textual (linguistic), material, and related to the body.

In concrete terms I first read through the material, processing and coding it. In this phase I search for salient words, phrases, and content. I categorize the content of the currents of thought according to research questions and themes. The empirical material is tested in relation to theoretical premises. This generates developed concepts and empirical descriptions, synthesized in prominent dimensions of parenthood. The empirical material is seen as a source of well-informed conceptual development. The quotations from the Internet material, reported in the results, function more as a springboard for discussion than as exaggerated evidence and objective data (Alvesson, 2011). The interpretations open up into tentative concepts. Concepts represent an

interface between the patterns in empirical data and theoretical considerations (Berg, 2011).

The term dimension is used to mean authoritative currents of thought that can be detected in the material. This study explores dimensions of parenthood that are related to state, market, science, and experience. The dimensions can be interpreted as having a centre, with side currents that flow into other dimensions. Four dimensions are visible in the material; they can be designated as i) *policy-related*, ii) *evidence-related*, iii) *market-oriented*, and iv) *civil-experience-based* dimensions of parenthood. The dimensions can be interpreted as either concordant and interwoven or contradictory. Although the empirical material is national in character, coming as it does from Sweden, the elaborated dimensions can have a transnational bearing.

Results

In the results section I present first the questions that concern *what is discussed*, *who assesses whom*, and *what views emerge* concerning the assessment and documentation of children through individual development plans with written assessments. This leads to a discussion section which explores in a general manner how currents of thought and empirical examples can be related to salient dimensions of parenthood.

What is discussed?

In the material from the Internet, the threads discuss individual development talks, individual development plans with written assessments, and tests. Examples of tests and standardized observation material which are claimed to have a scientific foundation and can occur in pre-school and school are: Early Registration of Language (TRAS) and the Reading Development Scheme (LUS). There are also comments on topics such as mathematics, sport, and social interaction.

Another theme in the material concerns responsibility and information. Here we find, on the one hand, examples of views advocating that parents rather than the school should have the primary responsibility for ensuring that the child succeeds in school. On the other hand there are example of tendencies to advocate the principle of separation (cf. Eriksson, 2004), as parents believe that schooling is not the parents' primary responsibility, as in these quotations:

How sad that your daughter is having a bad time in school.… my point is that it is primarily we parents who should ensure that the child copes in school, not the school. (Allt för föräldrar, 9 September 2008)

…But no, I don't think that it is my primary responsibility to interfere in my child's schooling. I turn to either a municipal school or to a free school so that they will do everything they are supposed to do, namely, to guide my child in the work that he/she has to do. (Allt för föräldrar, 9 September 2008)

Earlier studies show that the responsibility for school work is often assigned to students and guardians through individual development plans, that there is a lack of descriptions of actions and obligations concerning the teacher and the school (Skolverket, 1 March 2010; Vallberg Roth, 2009, 2010).

Who assesses whom?

In the material from the two Internet environments there are examples of teachers assessing children and examples of parents assessing teachers, other parents, and themselves (see also the examples in the section on dimensions):

What effect does a written assessment from the first grade have on the child's future? At the bottom of the page there is a column entitled "interaction". My child got: "Finds it hard to interact in a group. Moody." That doesn't feel very nice. I think they could have written something positive too. (Allt för föräldrar, 5 June 2009)

A clear example where a parent assesses the teacher and the teacher's assessment is the following:

You don't have to have met that teacher to write back with a written assessment: Unpedagogical and tactless. Lack of empathy and difficulty in putting across criticism in a constructive way (Allt för föräldrar, 5 June 2009).

What views emerge?

Views concerning assessment and documentation that emerged can be interpreted as both positive and negative:

> *Sure, it's nice that children learn letters and numbers, but you shouldn't make great demands of small children. And IUP is a real FLOP. (Familjeliv, 13 October 2009)*

> *A good thing about grade-like written assessments from the very first year is that both teachers and parents see how the child's work and development are progressing. (Allt för föräldrar, 3 October 2009)*

> *A teacher must be able to see what a student needs support in anyway … This decision about assessments will increase children's mental ill health, I'm sure of that. (Allt för föräldrar, 10 June 2008)*

> *Tragic, I think – the stress and frenzy are spreading more and more…it's lucky my children aren't small any more. (Allt för föräldrar, 10 June 2008)*

> *I find it very hard to understand how things are supposed to be clearer with these so-called written assessments (which can be like grades). I often think that you hear the minister [of education] Björklund and others use this as an argument for the introduction of assessments. How can a few lines on a sheet of paper be clearer than a conversation between children, parents and the teacher, where you have an opportunity to ask questions, discuss and together arrive at any problems that exist, strategies and targets? I think it's too early to introduce this in first year. The children are small and still in a new and unaccustomed school environment ….(Allt för föräldrar, 25 March 2008)*

The findings of this study show a variety of views. Critical arguments that are put forward concern the risk of stress through early categorizing of children, and the risk of increased mental ill health. There are also arguments that question how the written word could be clearer than the spoken word. This can be related to the trend towards contracts. In this context I can detect traces of counter-power and critique of "contractualization" (cf. Åkerstrøm Andersson, 2003). Parents also question negative personal assessments and can react with both pride and a critical attitude to positive personal assessments:

> Anyway, I look forward to clear goals and clear statements as to how far my child has come in relation to the targets. No more woolly "she's so good". (Allt för föräldrar, 27 March 2008).

This can be related to earlier studies (Skolverket, 1 March 2010; Vallberg Roth, 2009, 2010) which show that personal assessments frequently occur. These are mostly positive, but they can also be worded in a way that violates integrity. The instructions of the National Agency for Education (Skolverket, 2008b) stipulate that the individual development plan should not include evaluations, whether positive or negative, of the student's personal characteristics. The National Agency for Education (1 March 2010) states that there is currently greater awareness of formulations that cause offence and that these are not present in their collected material.

In the Internet material collected here there are examples where parents refer to wording that can be interpreted as causing offence (see the quotation above). I can also partly detect a tendency for parents who can be interpreted as having children in need of support to question the assessments and documentation (individual development plans and written assessments):

> *I left my son off this morning and the teacher came to "take up" a matter with me. …My son doesn't like gymnastics and sometimes doesn't want to take part. He can't cope with losing, so it doesn't work at all well in ball sports for it makes him sad and disappointed in himself because he thinks he's bad. Sometimes he gets sent out of the class. The teacher said that if he doesn't change he will get a FAIL in gymnastics. They are going to give grades in the first year! What kind*

of signals does that send? You are NO GOOD!! If that isn't a way to bury kids at the age of seven I don't know what is. Am I the only one who thinks it's wrong to label children so early, or am I just an upset mother who loves her wonderful but not faultless child? Are there any children who are perfect? (Familjeliv, 9 November 2009)

In the material there are parents who question the publicly determined and coercive documentation and assessment, the "labelling". In contrast, parents of children who get good assessments seem to think that individual development plans are good, saying that these instruments mostly exist in order to register any need for support at an early stage.

The aim is not to point out those who are best but to catch the problems in time. (Allt för föräldrar, 10 June 2008)

At the same time, parents proudly display their children's good results (see the quotations in the section on dimensions). On the other hand, criticism is expressed about categorizing and judging children at an early age. The latter is partly in agreement with the outcome of an evaluation by the National Agency for Education (1 March 2010) which puts forward some criticism of assessments of children in the autumn of the first school year.

One conclusion that emerges is that parents who can be interpreted as having children in need of support – the children that the increased documentation and assessment are chiefly supposed to benefit, according to the arguments – are the ones who point out deficiencies and express discontent based on their familiarity with their own children. This indicates a need for further research. Why have these parents' voices not been heard?

Dimensions of parenthood: Whose interests can be interpreted as being involved? – An exploratory discussion

This study sheds light on tendencies and examines whether parenthood in our time can be viewed as being complex and even composed of contradictory aspects. Parenthood, in other words, can be embedded in a multitude of dimensions which involve interests related to the state, market, evidence (scientific or pseudo-scientific), and experience. Each dimension can be interpreted as having a centre with bearing in empirical examples, and threads that hook into and are interwoven into other dimensions.

The *policy-related* dimension of parenthood has prominent claims to democracy (see e.g. SOU 2008:131 and steering documents for school). The dimension can include increased user influence and responsibility, increased communication and transparency, and the exposure of power relations. The policy-related dimension is driven by state interests, and in this study, which focuses on the home-school relationship, it is chiefly regulated by educational policy. The formal influence of parents is strengthened, for example, through proposals for a new School Act in Sweden. *Policy-related parenthood* is exemplified below through threads which concern, on the one hand, increased information and transparency in school and on the other hand the exposure of power relations and inequality in practice. Here are some examples:

I think it's good. It gives both us parents and the child a possibility to know from the beginning what the child is good at and what we need to work a bit extra with. (Allt för föräldrar, 25 March 2008)

A good thing about grade-like written assessments from the very first year is that both teachers and parents see how the child's work and development are progressing. (Allt för föräldrar, 3 October 2009)

As it is today it's uneven in Sweden's schools how feedback to the home and students works about how things are actually going in school. (Allt för föräldrar, 25 March 2008)

In some sense, democratized parenthood can be interpreted as permeating the entire material, in that it is possible to make one's voice heard, to obtain information, and to expose power relations through Internet environments. The question of increased *information*, however, can be problematized in relation to reciprocal *communication*. The concept of information and arguments concerning the duty of schools and

teachers to inform seem to have increased, thus benefiting the reciprocal dialogue and democratic communication (cf. Tveit, 2007). There are also allusions to problems concerning the uniformity of Swedish schools as regards the feedback they provide to home and students.

Something of an *evidence-related parenthood* which seeks and bases parenthood on tests, parental education, standardized assessment and documentation can also be explored in this study (cf. Grimen, 2009; SOU 2008: 131; Thomas & Pring, 2004). The evidence-related dimension is a dimension with an interest in and a claim to knowledge. Evidence-based practice can mean a careful and openly presented integration of what is currently the best scientific evidence, the user's experience and wishes, and professional expertise. In scientific studies, parents in Sweden can be described as being highly involved and simultaneously self-critical (cf. Forsberg, 2009). Uncertainty, confusion, and the ambition to be perfect and to get evidence that one is doing right and being successful can be a motive for parents in relation to this dimension. Documentation in this context can be viewed as *evidence*, that is, as systematically documented data with a scientific connection. In school there are stricter demands for evidence-based knowledge and measurable results. Evidence-related parenthood can be exemplified in this study through the following communication about standardized assessment instruments:

> Hi, Our daughter is in pre-school class and has been able to read for a year or so.… They assess the children's reading ability in pre-school but nothing that is documented as when they start school. Do you other parents who have children in pre-school know about your children's learning in school and are you also curious? (Familjeliv, 27 December 2009)

> Borrow the book about the Reading Development Scheme from the library. It's easy to check for yourself. (Familjeliv, 27 December 2009)

> …I have heard that there is some type of colour circle (TRAS) where you colour different segments and as the child develops there is more colour in the segments. I have only just heard

> tell of this circle and I think it sounds good. Anyone who knows? (Familjeliv, 22 September)

Questions can be raised about whether evidence-based practice helps to empower and increase confidence or to disempower and weaken confidence in parenthood. Lars H. Gustafsson (30 March 2010), researcher in social medicine, says that he has noticed a tendency for uncertainty among parents to increase in pace with the growth of expert advice. He says that he himself as an expert has probably also contributed to this. The sociologist Harald Grimen (2009) examines evidence-based professional practice and problematizes the relationship between expert rule and democracy. He is sceptical about the democratization argument, which he thinks is based on premises that are not especially plausible. For example, members of the public can click their way into databases to read surveys of knowledge, but they find it difficult to evaluate the quality of these summaries. The evidence-related parenthood that can lead to the embedding of the parent-child relationship in tests and standards suggests an instrumental and manual-based parenthood that needs further research. What does it mean for children, for example, if they are also tested and diagnosed by the parents in the home?

Furthermore, a *market-oriented parenthood* can be detected. Documentation and assessment can be viewed as the driving force and product on a media and education market. Market-oriented parenthood is about being seen, noticed, talked about, and desirable. Here the quest to be seen and chosen is the distinctive feature, for example, through exposure on commercial sites. Babies become web-babies (in Swedish *bebisar* become *webbisar*) and parents plan, discuss, expose, and can be said to *market* parenthood via the Internet. Parents and children can be regarded as consumers in an overall knowledge economy; parenthood simply follows the commandments to buy-sell-choose. Profiling oneself is a distinct trend arising under the influence of a worldwide, market-oriented ideology. It becomes crucial to be seen and profile oneself in the race to be chosen. Attracting attention, being spoken about, being desirable – these make up the foundation of the consumer society (Bauman, 2008). A quest for assessment through documentation can be interpreted as compatible with today's life of

consumption. Market- oriented parenthood can be illustrated with the following extracts:

Today NAME's [the child's] assessment arrived by post, I eagerly tore open the envelope and saw that she had met the goals in all the subjects. Of course I was pleased, but when I read on I became even more pleased. NAME is an orderly, good, and nice girl and she helps her classmates. Wonderful! (Allt för föräldrar, 4 June 2009)

How marvellous! But with a mother like that she could hardly be anything else. (Allt för föräldrar, 4 June 2009)

Oh, how nice (smiley). It makes you happy as Larry to hear that other people also understand how wonderful your children are! But listen, – I checked your blog and liked your necklace! (smiley) Do you make them and sell them?… (Allt för föräldrar, 4 June 2009)

There are different sides of the drive to be seen and chosen. Certain intentions and phenomena that are emphasized in policy and steering documents on different levels, such as the importance of children's right to be seen, heard, and met, come together and seem to strengthen the market and media forces. In this way one could say that some of the democratic and market-oriented dimensions merge and can be difficult to identify and trace. Perhaps the extracts can also be interpreted as an outcome of a desire for belonging (cf. Pugh, 2009), through an interplay between paying attention to successful parenthood and the interest in buying a necklace. Parents can be interpreted as floating between being supporting fellows and consumers. More research is needed here.

Finally, we have *civil-experience-based parenthood*, which expresses doubt about experts and teachers as professionals, and parents seek support via the Internet and exchange experiences with each other (cf. Plantin & Danebeck, 2009). This can be exemplified with the following statements:

Not needing to be totally dependent on someone else's guidance is always good, surely. Today the information is more accessible than in the past, when there was mostly someone who "guarded" the information and brought it out for anyone who asked to share it. Today you can find an incredible amount on the Internet if you just know how to search. (Allt för föräldrar, 13 September 2008)

Now I'm sitting here with a questionnaire, an IUP [individual development plan], but my head's stopped working. I can't think of a good answer to the questions in the form. Can I have some help?… I'm really bad at this kind of thing and feel so STUPID about not being able to answer … (Allt för föräldrar, 1 February 2009)

I wonder what and how you get informed about your children at individual development talks? … (Familjeliv, 22 September 2009)

My daughter is dyslexic, as we suspected right from the first year, but the school and the teacher including the special teacher said that she's just a late developer and immature. Read aloud to her and it will work out. We were silly enough to content ourselves with that. We have read aloud to our children every day since they were one year old and could understand the books about Max's ball etc. By good luck there came a new teacher in the fourth year, and we had realized that we had to fight by ourselves to have her examined. Now that's been done and she has had her diagnosis for a year, and now we have to struggle to get adapted homework that works together with the reading aids. She's a smart girl and luckily finds it easy to learn if the facts are read to her. See to it that the child is examined, phone the school nurse!! That's my best advice. Check all the talk about dyslexia and dyscalculia. (Allt för föräldrar, 3 November 2009)

My son got a fail in one subject because he was cheeky to the teacher, but he had the necessary knowledge, how fair is that? I threatened to sue the school, and said that I was proud of my son! Grades in school are not always fair because it's the personal chemistry that rules! (Allt för föräldrar, 10 June 2008)

On the one hand, this dimension perhaps reflects a liberating and supportive potential between parents. On the other hand, it also illustrates something of a *confessional* and (self-)assessing function. The involved and (self-)critical parent stands out. This dimension displays features of a *show-and-tell culture*, or in other words public confessions, which the sociologist Bauman (2008) claims is a characteristic of a fluid modern world. Transparency (cf. Brin, 2006), both social and mental nakedness, is what counts. The experience-based dimension seems to merge with the market- and media-oriented dimension, while simultaneously being connected to the policy- and evidence-related dimension.

Concluding comments

Today's parenthood in intensified documentation and assessment practice has been exemplified in this study. We see clear examples of added assessment in interactive forms of communication through boundary-crossing flows. We have, for example, the Reading Development Scheme (Läsutvecklingsschema, LUS) which is introduced in the school institution (offline) and is then communicated in electronic form and flows in the home as parents encourage each other to test and document their children for themselves. Another example shows that assessment of children leads to assessment of parenthood. The example is based on the non-electronic individual development talk in school. The positive assessment of the child from the individual development talk is then communicated electronically by the parent, and added and transformed assessment is illustrated in the way that other parents assess and praise another person's parenthood. This ends with the positively assessed and praised parent receiving a query about the sale of necklaces. These examples can be interpreted as shedding light on dimensions of parenthood which perhaps are primarily connected to evidence and market.

The study shows that parents create meaning by using a multitude of different interactive forms of communication (Kress, 2003). In our time it can be interpreted as concerning a challenging parenthood in a communication- and knowledge-intensive consumer society. Currents of thought and dimensions of parenthood expose power relations and show, on the one hand, how the documentation and assessment practice can strengthen and empower, and on the other hand how it can weaken and restrict parenthood (cf. Steyerl, 2003). Furthermore, the currents of thought reveal how parents develop strategies, adapt to, and/or express appreciation for or opposition to the documentation and assessment practice.

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