# Teacher Competencies and Parental Cooperation

**Elsa Westergård**

University of Stavanger
Stavanger, Norway

The aim of this paper is to begin to shed light on the competencies teachers need when cooperating with parents. Toward this end, we conducted a small-scale study, interviewing teachers and parents about their perceptions of teachers' competence regarding cooperation with parents. Sixteen pairs of cooperating parents and teachers at a primary school, agreed to participate in separate interviews. The interviews were based on semi-structured interview guides. The NVIVO program was used to assist data analyses. Building on research regarding parental disillusionment with school and the small-scale study, the paper reveals a need for competence-building activities at various levels in schools. First, the principal plays an important role in this process by building collective competence at the school level, such as routines and school standards for cooperation with parents. Second, colleagues' collective competence in cooperating with parents is important. Finally, each teacher's individual competence in cooperating with parents is an important factor regarding parental cooperation. We identify three separate individual competencies.

*Keywords:* Teacher competencies; parents' perceptions; collective-, relational-, communicative and context competence.

## Introduction

The potential benefits to students, parents and teachers of parental involvement in schools are well supported by documentary evidence (Desforges & Abouchar, 2003; Markow & Martin, 2005). It is therefore not surprising that the Norwegian curriculum envisions parents as partners and emphasizes the need to increase teachers' and parents' competence in cooperating with each other to achieve the aim of inclusive education for all students.

The curriculum emphasizes that it is the teacher's responsibility to promote cooperation and effective dialogue with parents. The dialogue must be based on the curriculum, and there must be a mutual commitment from both teachers and parents. Parents are seen as resources that the school can access by initiating effective cooperation.

Consequently, the parents must be taken seriously and be met as equal partners when cooperating with teachers.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elsa Westergård, e-mail: elsa.westergard@uis.no

However, both teachers and parents report that they struggle with cooperation (Fylling & Sandvin, 1998; Nordahl, 2007). Previous research in Norway reveals an apparent gap between the national

goals for teachers' competencies regarding cooperation with parents and the competencies that teachers actually display when cooperating with their students' parents (Nordahl, 2003).

From the literature we find that professional and personal competencies are both identified as important teacher competencies in order to develop effective parental cooperation (e.g. Deslandes, F.,Fournier, H., & Rousseau, N., 2005; Bergeron & Deslandes, 2011) The professional competencies refer to the capacity of a teacher to identify student's learning needs, arrange interventions based on didactic and pedagogic knowledge, to give parents adequate instructions etc. Personal competencies include a positive attitude towards students, a passion for teaching, the ability to establish positive relationships with parents etc.

The aim of the present paper is to begin to describe in more detail the competencies teachers need for effective cooperation with parents. It mainly builds on a survey regarding parental disillusionment with schools and teachers' perceptions of complaints from parents

(Westergård & Galloway, 2004; Westergård, 2007). The results from the survey and our small-scale study, which consists of separate interviews with parents and teachers, aim to broaden our understanding of the necessary teacher competencies.

### Theoretical framework

**Overlapping spheres***:* The theoretical framework for our studies, Epstein's conceptual model of "overlapping spheres" (1987), was useful when planning and analyzing our research (fig. 1). Both families and schools are seen as constantly changing in response to the interactions they are a part of. For example, interactions with one school affect the family's knowledge and attitudes in dealing with new schools that their children attend. Similarly, schools change as staff members, students and their families come and go.

Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres of influence emphasizes the importance of schools, families and communities working together to meet children's needs. The theory includes internal and external structures. The external structure can be pushed together or pulled apart by factors such as the beliefs, experiences and practices of families, schools and communities and by the students' ages and grade levels. These factors are thought to influence the quality and quantity of activities shared among schools, families and communities. For example, when families and the school have similar goals for the children for whom they share responsibility and conduct activities cooperatively, the two spheres are drawn together. In contrast, when schools and families avoid contact or experience barriers, the two spheres are pushed apart; however, they are pulled back together when the barriers are overcome. Finally, as the students' age, the spheres are more likely to bepushed apart as the parents feel less able to support their children.
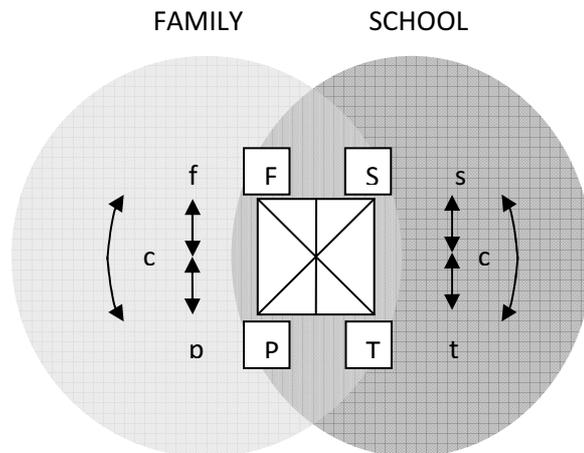


*Figure 1* - The overlapping spheres of influence of family, school and community and their impact on children's learning (External structure of theoretical model) (Epstein, 2001: 28).

When, for example, parents and teachers are true "partners" with a frequent and ongoing relationship and positive communication, the two forces, family and school (see fig. 1), are pulled together to a "maximum" overlap. When parents and the school experience problems or the parents experience disillusionment, the same two forces are pulled apart, and there is less overlap. For example, if only a few teachers acknowledge parents' complaints, there will be very limited overlap (Westergård, 2007). When the opposite occurs, there will be a larger overlap. The reasons for these overlaps are to be understood within the model "system" that are interacting (e.g., within the families and within the schools). The overlapping spheres model (Epstein, 1987), using a systems approach, suggested the use of a correlation design. By adopting this model, we

were able to determine how the investigated variables in our research related to each other. In the following section, we will first review the research on parental disillusionment and teachers' perceptions of parental complaints. We will then follow up these research findings by using another methodology that aims to further illuminate the competencies that teachers need when cooperating with parents.

### Parental disillusionment and teachers' perceptions of complaints from parents.

Several influences at the school and family levels can be related to parental cooperation. Previous research reveals that factors on the parent, teacher, school and community levels have an impact on school- and home-based parental involvement (Smith, Connel, Wright, Sizer, & Norman, 1997; Adams & Christenson, 2001; Westergård, 2010). These factors may act as either facilitators of or barriers to parental cooperation. Parental disillusionment is one of the barriers that teachers encounter when cooperating with parents.

In the following section, we will draw on previous research on parental disillusionment and teachers' reactions to it.

Parental disillusionment "…implies that parents have made some attempts to involve themselves in their children's education at school and to establish a relationship with teachers, either at a formal or an informal level" (Westergård & Galloway, 2004: 189).

An instrument containing 10 items was constructed to measure parents' disillusionment with their children's school (Westergård & Galloway, 2004). Each item assessed parents' experiences with their children's teachers in situations that were seen as essential to the relationship between parents and teachers. All 10 items started with "*I have experienced that teachers…*" An example item is "*…do not take action when I lodge a complaint about my child being bullied.*" The sample was of 1569 parents of pupils aged 9 to 16 years in 20 schools in 9 municipalities in Norway. The study revealed that at least 10 percent of parents report disillusionment with their children's school.

Based on this research (Westergård & Galloway, 2004), Westergård investigated whether teachers acknowledged complaints from parents. A parallel scale to the parental disillusionment scale was constructed. All of the items on this parallel scale

start with "*I have received complaints from parents that…*" An example item is "*…I do not deal with the bullies in class.*" The sample in this research involved the teachers and their students' parents (Westergård, 2007). The main teachers for each class were selected, along with the parents of the students in each participating class. The results revealed that teachers recognized fewer parent complaints than the parents actually reported. There was no meaningful relationship between the teachers' and parents' responses to the same scale. Consequently, when investigating teachers' perceptions of their relationships with parents, we should assume that teachers' and parents' perceptions may often differ.

Previous research identified variables related to teachers' performance in class, pressure on the teacher and school climate to be important to understanding teachers' professional work and pupils' behaviour and progress (Bergeron & Deslandes, 2011; Hornby, 2000; Miller, 2003; Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll, Lewis & Ecob, 1988; Roland & Galloway, 2002). However, little evidence was found regarding how these variables related to teachers' perceptions of complaints from parents. Thus, we investigated the relationship between the teachers' perceptions of complaints from parents and aspects of the classroom (e.g., the teachers' sense of self-efficacy, classroom management, how the teachers deal with difficult pupils' behaviour), teachers' general feelings of job satisfaction (e.g., work pressure, emotional exhaustion) and aspects of the schools' professional climate (principals' position, colleagues' attitudes) (Westergård, 2007).

The findings revealed that teachers' sense of self-efficacy, classroom management and job satisfaction was related to their perceptions of complaints from parents. It is reasonable to believe that when teachers feel competent and successful in their work in class, they will communicate well with parents and act more positive, proactive and secure toward parents. This suggestion is consistent with Eldridge's (2001) findings that insecure teachers may be reluctant to involve parents if they feel insecure about how to involve them effectively. Although we did not make any distinctions between experienced teachers and newly qualified teachers in our research, Bayer & Brinkjær (2003) found that newly qualified teachers felt less secure when dealing with parents, possibly

because of a lack of competence in cooperating with parents. This finding is in line with Denessen, Kloppenburg, Bakker & Kerkhof (2009), who reported that students in teacher training programs have low levels of competence and consequently do not feel adequately prepared to communicate with parents when they begin their teaching career. Smit, Sluiter, Driessen & Sleegers (2007) reported that teachers require new knowledge related to communication and cooperation, such as new techniques, methods and skills related to communication and cooperation with parents.

Our school climate variables (comprising the school leaders' positions with parents, teachers and students) were also related to the teachers' perceptions of complaints from parents. When school leaders experienced strong support from parents, teachers and students, teachers were more likely to recognize complaints from parents. We find support for these findings in the research of Imsen (2003) and Nordahl (2005). Both studies emphasized the relationship between a school's leadership and the quality of parental cooperation. Nordahl (2005) emphasized that teachers increase their competence and thus improve their self-efficacy in cooperating with parents when school leaders emphasize the importance of parental cooperation.

The abovementioned results suggest that the studied variables had a mediating effect on teachers recognizing complaints from parents (Westergård, 2007). Nevertheless, because the survey used correlation data, it could not tell us anything about cause and effect or about the nature or quality of the cooperation between parents and teachers.

However, to obtain more in-depth data, we drew on the results from a small-scale study consisting of interviews between parents and teachers.

The main aim of this paper is to develop a better understanding of the competencies teachers need when cooperating with parents. The interview data from a sample of parents and teachers are viewed as a contribution to this process.

## Methodology.

**Sample.** The sample consisted of 16 pairs of parents and teachers in two primary schools for children aged 6 to 12 years. Because there is evidence that issues in home-school cooperation in secondary schools may differ from those in primary schools (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Bæck, 2007), we chose to focus on the latter.

The participating schools had 450 to 500 students and were part of a wider research and school improvement program (Westergård, 2010).

**Interviews.** The interviews were based on semi-structured interview guidelines and aimed to illuminate the processes involved in parent-teacher cooperation.

The teachers' interviews were audio-recorded using a digital Pocket Memo. The NVIVO program was used to assist with the data analysis (Bazely & Richards, 2000). This qualitative computer software program enables the researcher to access and analyze the data without losing its richness. The software also allows the researcher to identify categories of responses and subgroups within each category.

Epstein's conceptual model of overlapping spheres is as relevant for the interview data as it was for the large-scale survey data presented earlier in this paper. However, we required another perspective that could help us understand the communication and relationships between parents and teachers. Symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969) is one of the most useful perspectives for understanding individual interactions between parents and teachers (Epstein, 2001). According to symbolic interactionism, the individual's self-concept, personality, values and beliefs are all products of two-way communication and the interactions he or she has with others. Thus, this perspective, in addition to Epstein's conceptual model, is used to elucidate these individual interactions between parents and teachers. Through these interactions, we learn how others perceive and anticipate our goals and behaviour to better fulfill the expectations of others and to receive their recognition.

## Results

The results revealed that 10 of the 16 pairs of parents and teachers managed to establish effective cooperation from the outset. The remaining six pairs, parents and teachers failed to establish effective cooperation, at least at the outset.

All of the interview data for the 16 parent-teacher pairs, regardless of whether they were effective, suggest a need for several competencies. Although there is some overlap between relational and communication

competence, we have separated them below. These competencies are as follows:

- Relational competence: The teacher's ability to connect with parents, be kind and welcoming and build good relationships.
- Communication competence: The teacher's ability to communicate respectfully, openly, positively and reciprocally with parents.
- Context competence: For example, the teacher's competence with regard to bullying and how to observe children when they interact with each other.

## Conditions conducive to effective cooperation:

Relational competence: A general point of view was that teachers were *forthcoming, caring and understanding*. The parents reported that these teachers were easy to relate to.

Paul's mother: "There is something special about Paul's teacher: the way she approaches me, the way she talks to me. She is more friendly and relaxed than the other teacher."

May's mother: "The teacher seems enthusiastic. She is really engaged and interested in May and the other students in class."

May's teacher: "All teachers know it's important to have a good relationship with parents, but I think it all depends on how much you care about the students…. It has to do with what role models you have. My mother was a good role model for me…. You can't learn this kind of engagement at teachers' college."

Communication competence: Parents and teachers reported having a *good and trusting dialogue* together based on *constructive, mutual, positive and two-way communication*.

Paul's teacher: "We discuss things together, having open, direct, positive and frequent communication. Mother gives the impression of relying on me."

Jane's teacher: "We have an open and two-way dialogue when communicating with the parents."

Context competence: The teachers reported having good self-efficacy regarding their work.

Jane's teacher seemed confident: "I would like parents to involve themselves more, so I invite parents to visit us in class. They can even visit the class without informing me in advance…. I feel competent as a teacher. I know how to deal

with difficult situations in class and how to deal with difficult parental conversations."

The parents reported having confidence in the teachers' competence regarding curriculum matters, dealing with behavioural problems and developing pupil's social skills. For example, Paul's mother said, "I can't praise this teacher enough. She seems to know how to deal with students with behavioural problems…. She has high competence with ADHD."

Although the cooperation was effective, some teachers reported a general lack of competence regarding parental cooperation. However, the teachers emphasized the importance of support from their colleagues and school leaders when they experienced difficulties with parental cooperation:

Jack's teacher: "I didn't learn about parental cooperation in teacher's college, but I have learned a lot during many years of teaching, discussing difficult situations with colleagues. I have received great support from colleagues. The school leader has been a great support."

**Ineffective cooperation:**
Unsurprisingly, many of the parents and teachers who did not experience successful cooperation reported different perspectives from those who were experiencing good relationships:

Lack of relational competence: The teachers were perceived as less forthcoming and not having a welcoming attitude.

Sara's father: "One of the things I would put my finger on is the teacher's personality, which we cannot do anything about. Sara's teacher is not forthcoming at all, but I believe she is doing her very best."

Paul's mother thought the teacher was not interested in what they were saying: "She seems completely lost. I don't think she knows what it's all about. She doesn't seem to listen to us."

Anne's mother did not feel that the teachers acknowledged the parents' points of view: "I don't feel they are taking my points of view seriously. They think I am making a fuss out of nothing."

Lack of communication skills: Some teachers were sensitive to criticism and responded defensively to the parents' point of view. This behaviour was observed at the outset of the parent-teacher relationship. Tom's teacher: "The parents seem to think Tom's behaviour was better before I came into the class, but I'm not

the one having the problem. Tom has problems accepting my rules in class."

Tom's mother saw this rather differently: "I felt the new teacher became defensive. Perhaps she interpreted us as having sympathy with the previous teacher… The teacher just cut me off and denied that she was the reason for Tom's change of behaviour."

Lack of competence in dealing with problems related to students' behaviour: Sara's father expected teachers to act more systematically when trying to help students who have special educational needs: "Things seem to happen by a chance. There are too many contingencies that may influence teachers' work with these students… which they [the teachers] are not taking into account."

We also found that the teachers lacked sufficient competence regarding classroom management, how to deal with bullying, how to develop good social relationships among children and how to make effective observations of children. Some examples follow:

> Sara's father: "…Teachers (also) seem to lack competence dealing with behavioural problems among students…. Teachers don't have the capacity to systematically observe pupils' behaviour to take actions to improve the girls' social competence."
>
> Anne's mother: "The teachers lack competence in teaching the girls in class how to make friends."

These findings, along with the findings from the survey data, are discussed below, as is the study's goal of establishing the total set of competencies that teachers need when cooperating with parents.

## Discussion

This study aimed to elucidate the competencies that teachers need when cooperating with parents. The survey data and the findings from the interviews reveal the need for several competencies on different levels in school. These competencies can be categorized as *collective* and *individual competencies.*

We argue that the identified relationships between teachers' perceptions of complaints from parents and classroom aspects, teachers' general feelings of job satisfaction and aspects of the school's professional climate (Westergård, 2007) can also identify some of the competencies that schools and teachers need to ensure a high quality of parental cooperation. These competencies can be described as the school's *collective competencies* or the school's standards for parental cooperation.

First, the school leader plays an important role in developing the school's standards and competencies for cooperation with parents by emphasizing the importance of parental cooperation within the school and among parents. Such an emphasis could improve teachers' self-efficacy in cooperating with parents (Nordahl, 2005). This approach might be what Jack's teacher had in mind when she reported the benefits of receiving support from the school leader.

Second, we found colleagues' collective attitudes toward parental cooperation, their support of each other and their discussions regarding ongoing parental cooperation were relevant to teachers' competencies. Both the above-mentioned survey data and the interviews with teachers support this point of view; in fact, Jack's teacher reported that support from colleagues and leaders were important when establishing effective relationships.

Finally, the interviews identified *three individual competencies* that were relevant to the quality of the cooperation between teachers and parents: *relational competence, communicative competence* and *context competence*.

When teachers are forthcoming and have a welcoming attitude toward parents, the quality of the cooperation seems to be high. These teachers seem to have a good *relational competence.* In contrast, we found that a lack of these competencies resulted in poor cooperation.

Competence in establishing good relationships with parents and *communicative competence* are closely linked. Sara's father noted the fact that teachers do not always have sufficient competencies when cooperating with parents and that the quality of the cooperation often depends on the teachers' personalities and competencies. This observation is also supported in the literature (Denessen, Kloppenburg, Bakker, & Kerkhof, 2009). Consequently, teachers should aim to develop necessary strategies and competencies to meet parents' individual needs. This finding is in line with previous research, e.g.,

that of Bergren & Deslandes (2011) and Deslandes et al. (2005)

Findings from the survey data (Westergård, 2007) reveal that teachers' competence with classroom management and their skills in handling difficult situations in class were related to acknowledging complaints from parents and to the quality of their cooperation. The parent and teacher interviews support this finding (e.g., the comments of Anne's mother and Sara's father). We call this competence *context competence* because it relates to the context (the content) of what the parties are cooperating about. For example, parents appreciate teachers who have competence related to bullying when their child is being bullied; thus, it is reasonable that this competence would affect the quality of the cooperation with these parents.

Teachers with good context competence would most likely feel more confident and competent in class and when cooperating with parents than would teachers without context competence. Consequently, it is likely that confident and competent teachers will be able to establish a good relationship with parents, enabling them to communicate well with each other. The teacher's context competence is seen as part of a teacher's professional competencies as described by Deslandes et al. (2005).

## Concluding comments

The research presented in this paper indicates that there still might be a gap between the national goals for teachers' competencies regarding parental cooperation in school and the present level of competencies that teacher's

exhibit. Our findings support previous research saying that teacher's professional and personal competencies (e.g. Deslandes et al., 2005) are necessary when establishing effective parental cooperation. However, we go further identifying competencies on several levels (collective and individual) in schools.

The survey data (Westergård, 2007) suggests that school leaders must appreciate parental cooperation and recognize their responsibility to build the necessary competence in the school system by creating the school's standards for parental cooperation (routines, regular meetings, competence-building activities). Furthermore, teachers must be given the necessary space to cooperate with each other. Both flexible and more systematic competence-building activities among colleagues as a group (e.g., supportive counseling groups, discussions with colleagues, role playing) are recommended. Efforts should also focus on enhancing teachers' individual competence and sense of self-efficacy when cooperating with parents. Strategies for handling criticism, dealing with conflict and building cooperative partnerships should also be developed to enhance teachers' individual competencies, as revealed in the interviews.

Firm conclusions cannot be drawn from these interviews because of the small sample size. Nonetheless, the present study contributes by focusing on the competencies needed to prevent disillusionment and to enhance the quality of parental cooperation. Further work is needed to extend the knowledge and understanding of the necessary competences.

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