Moving the Theory of Parental Cooperation and Innovation into Practice

Elsa Westergård
University of Stavanger
Stavanger, Norway

Although many schools and teachers are aware the important factors for effective parental cooperation, they seem to lack an understanding of how to transform this theoretical knowledge into practice. One reason for this difficulty appears to be that teachers have traditionally focused more on *what* is needed to practice good cooperation with parents and less on *how* they can implement this knowledge in practice. The aim of this paper is to reveal how research-based knowledge within parental cooperation (what) and implementation (how) can contribute to developing teachers' individual competence into schools' collective competence within "challenging conversations with parents". Taking a systems approach, we see that what is happening within the two separate systems—family and school—affects cooperation between the two parties. Thus, there is a need for a holistic view on cooperation. We draw upon recent research, qualitative and quantitative, on parent collaboration, revealing the important factors behind successful cooperation between parents and teachers. Our research suggests that teachers and schools need more individual and collective competence when working with parents. More specifically, teachers need additional competence and strategies when engaging in challenging conversations with parents. Transforming research-based knowledge about parental cooperation into practice is not a mechanical operation. We need different types of knowledge and approaches to implement strategies for teachers to handle challenging conversations with parents. This paper presents some strategies to help teachers accomplish this.

Keywords: parental disillusionment, challenging situations, strategies, implementation

Introduction

In Norway and internationally, there have been increasing efforts to use research evidence in education to better inform policy and to generate higher-quality decisions, more effective practices and, in turn, improved outcomes (Cooper, Lewin, & Cambell, 2009; Meld. St. No 11, 2009, 2011).

However, there appears to be a gap between research-based knowledge and the ongoing praxis in schools. According to Cooper, Levin and Campell (2009), one of the reasons for this gap is that teachers are busier revealing *what* is needed to exercise good praxis and less focused on *how* to implement this knowledge into praxis. They argue that these are two different types of knowledge, and that we need both to improve praxis.

They note that knowing *how* to implement research knowledge to improve praxis is different than knowledge about *what* is important to implement.

In this paper, we focus on both types of knowledge. First, we present relevant research evidence on effective collaboration between parents and teachers (*what),* and then, we present *how* this knowledge can be implemented into praxis. The focus will be on how teachers' individual competencies can develop into a school's collective competence in handling challenging conversations with parents.

Research-based evidence reveals a need for additional competence in communicating with parents. This paper primarily builds on interviews and a survey addressing parental disillusionment with schools (Westergård, 2010).

Drawing on research-based evidence addressing parental cooperation and innovation, we ask "Which factors in schools are conducive to

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

implementing effective communication with parents?" and "Which strategies can we use to develop teachers' individual competences into a school's collective competence?"

Theoretical Framework

Overlapping Spheres

Epstein's conceptual model of overlapping spheres (2001) was useful for illuminating our research questions (Westergård, 2010; 2013a). The model includes internal and external structures (figure 1). Factors such as families', schools' and communities' beliefs, experiences and practices can push together or pull apart the external structure. Thus, the quality and quantity of shared activities between schools, families and communities and the age, grade and level of students may change. When families and schools hold similar goals for the students and cooperate, the two spheres pull together. In contrast, when schools and families experience barriers in their cooperation, the two spheres are pushed apart.
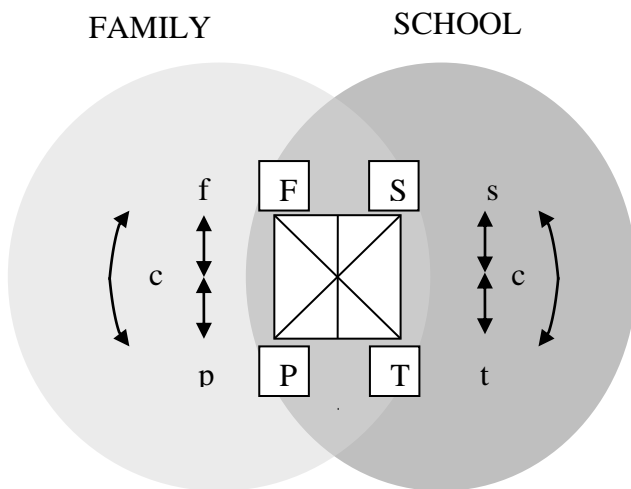

FAMILY   SCHOOL

Figure 1.
Overlapping Spheres of Influence for Family, School and Community in Children's Learning (Epstein, 2001: 28).

The internal structure delineates where and how interactions occur within and across school, home and community contexts. Two levels of interaction are shown: communications between the family and the school and, more specifically, individual communications between parents and teachers. (Interactions between the family, the school and community members within the internal structure acquire and store social capital and thus strengthen social networks and social capital.)

The theoretical framework of overlapping spheres provides a model for understanding the relationship between the two collaborating systems, families and schools. Both the external and internal structures of Epstein's model help to elucidate our research questions (Westergård, 2010; 2013a).

We need to take into account many of the same influences when implementing new knowledge about factors conducive to implementing effective communication with parents (i.e., challenging conversations with parents) (Greenberg, Domitrovich, Graczyk, & Zins, 2005).

Fixen, Naom, Blasé, Friedman, & Wallace (2005:12) provide a conceptual framework for the implementation process for new knowledge (figure 2). The framework consists of five essential components—source, destination, communication link, feedback and influence - which are here related to challenging conversations with parents. These components are all commented upon in the text below.

The *source* refers to the described change being implemented, i.e., core components of challenging conversations with parents (see table 1: plan of implementation). The *destination* is the organisation carrying out the change, both individually (teachers) and collectively (school). To be able to carry out the change, it is critical to establish *a link of communication* to the destination. This destination may be an individual or a group of individuals, called "purveyors", who actively and with fidelity work to implement the defined change elements (core elements of challenging situations with parents). The core elements in this link of communication are training (how the core components are learned and implemented into praxis), supervision, coaching (input and suggestions when training) and administrative support (monitoring, motivating and providing resources). The link of communication must be active to implement the core components from the source to the destination. The purveyors must be familiar with what is being implemented, the methodology for implementation and implementation science (theory). *Feedback* includes how the flow of information works on the individual, team and
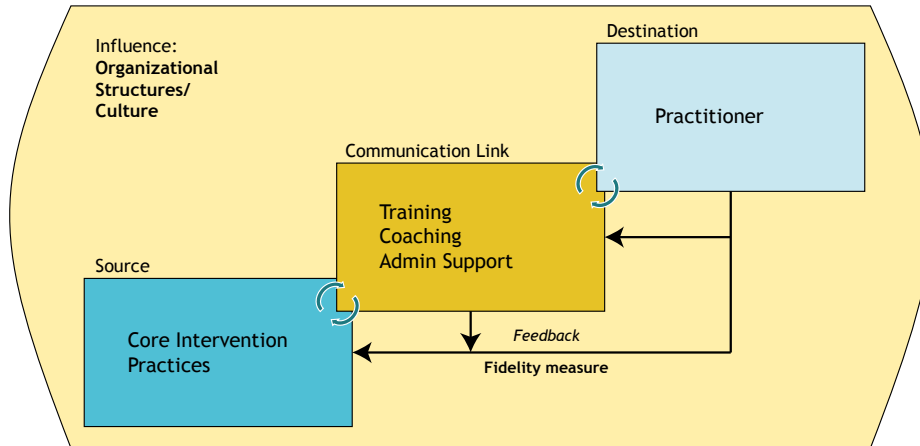
Figure 2.
Implementation Framework Applied to Developing Evidence-Based Intervention Practices within Organisations

organisational levels. This flow of information should be continuous throughout the entire process of implementation, from the source, to the communication link and, then, to the destination. Thus, the implementation will be successful. The last of the five essential components in Fixen, et al. (2005:12) conceptual framework is the sphere of influence, where "social, economic, political, historical, and psychosocial factors impinge directly or indirectly on people, organisations, or systems".

Why Parental Cooperation?

The potential benefits of parental involvement for students, parents and teachers are well documented (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein, 2001; Markow & Martin, 2005; MER, 2006). Students' learning outcomes, well-being, social relations with peers and teachers, attitudes toward school and work performance appear to increase when parents become involved in their children's schools. Parents can also take advantage of involvement in their children's school activities by learning more about the curriculum content, getting to know the teachers better, and getting to know other parents. All of these together may result in increasing parents' positive attitudes towards their children's school (Eldridge, 2001; Rosenholtz, 1991). Teachers also appear to benefit from greater parental involvement, developing a better understanding of their students' and their families' cultures and thus being able to support their students more appropriately (Eldridge, 2001; Rosenholz, 1991).

Finally, teachers' motivation and self-esteem improve when working with parents, which also increases their job satisfaction (Eldridge, 2001).

We can thus conclude that when parents and teachers are involved and support each other, it influences not only the climate and relationships between parents and teachers but also the students' learning environment—individual and collective—in class.

When parents involve themselves in their child's school, the literature and government documents commonly characterize parents and teachers as partners (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Epstein, 2001; MER, 2006; Rosenholtz, 1991).

In this paper, we build on Cuttance and Stokes' (2000) definition of the parent-school partnership:

- "A sharing of power, responsibility and ownership with each party having different roles;
- A degree of mutuality, that begins with the process of listening to each other and which incorporates responsive dialogue and "give and take" on both sides;
- Shared aims and goals based on a common understanding of the educational needs of children and;
- A commitment to joint action in which parents, students and teachers work together" (p.5).

From research, we learn that although most teachers see parents as partners and most parents experience a good relationship with their children's teachers, some parents and teachers

struggle to effectively cooperate (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001; Epstein, 2001; Westergård & Galloway, 2004). In the following text, we will comment on the factors that promote an effective partnership between parents and teachers in schools.

Factors Conducive to Implementing Effective Communication with Parents

Implementing better strategies for communicating with parents as partners (i.e., Cuttance & Stokes, 2000) requires research-based knowledge about the factors within schools that contribute to improved communication. The following text will address this topic, focusing on the research of Westergård (2007, 2010, 2013a) and Westergård & Galloway (2004; 2010).

There are myriad factors at play when teachers and parents interact and communicate (Smith et al., 1997). How the relationship between schools, teachers and parents takes shape depends primarily on how institutions and their professionals carry out their roles (Dusi, 2012).

In the following text, we present findings from Westergård's research (Westergård, 2010), focusing on the factors in school that contribute to effective communication with parents.

Parents with children aged 9 to 16 years in 20 schools in 9 municipalities in Norway participated in a representative survey that aimed to reveal the factors conducive to effective parental cooperation (Westergård & Galloway, 2004). The research revealed that 90 per cent of informants reported that they were heard/supported when approaching their child's school regarding matters they needed to discuss with teachers (e.g., bullying, criticism). Consequently, 10 per cent of the parents did not feel their complaints or demands were met when approaching the school. We defined these parents as disillusioned:

> *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. It arises when parents feel that a cooperative partnership cannot be established or has broken down" (Westergård & Galloway, 2004:189).*

Most of the relationships between parents and teachers appear to be positive. This relationship is particularly important for children who experience problems in school. However, some parents of pupils struggling in school, in one way or another, report having problems communicating with teachers (Andersson, 2003; Drugli, 2008; Nordahl, 2004). These parents might experience disillusionment and struggle to establish an effective partnership with teachers. Parents who feel disillusioned with their child's school (e.g., make complaints about specific situations, such as bullying, without being heard) are likely to be less persistent in involving themselves in positive ways, and thus, their important *potential* contribution to their children's education at school is lost. Thus, recognising these parents as disillusioned is of considerable importance for them and their children. We therefore conducted research aiming to identify factors that contribute to identifying parental disillusionment (Westergård, 2007).

Classroom, teacher pressure and school climate variables related to recognising disillusioned parents. Our first research question was: *"Do teachers recognise complaints from parents"?* The results revealed that teachers thought that fewer parents were disillusioned than was actually the case. As revealed in the literature, several factors appear to influence teachers' perspectives on ongoing cooperation. Thus, we aimed to identify possible factors that contribute to recognising parental disillusionment/complaints from parents (Westergård, 2007). We started by looking for possible relationships within schools (Westergård, 2007). One research question relevant here was as follows:

> *"Is there a relationship between teacher's perceptions of disillusioned parents and the following work context variables: classroom context (teachers' sense of self efficacy, classroom management, how teachers deal with difficult pupils' behavior), teacher pressure (work pressure, emotional exhaustion) and schools' professional climate variables (principals position, colleagues attitudes to parents)?" (Westergård, 2007:160)*

Classroom context variables. When teachers report having a strong competence in classroom management and being capable of managing difficult pupils' behaviour, it is reasonable to believe that they will then communicate well and act more positively, proactively and professionally with parents (particularly disillusioned parents). This is consistent with research that reveals that secure and confident teachers are more flexible in their approaches when managing unpredictable situations (Lortie, 1975; Rosenholtz, 1991). Consequently, these teachers will have a positive starting point when communicating with parents. On the contrary, insecure teachers may be reluctant to involve parents because they feel insecure about how to involve them (Eldridge, 2001), and this was the case regarding newly qualified teachers (Bayer & Brinkjær, 2003), possibly due to a lack of competence in cooperating with parents.

Teacher pressure variables. It seems clear from the literature that when teachers experience stress and pressure, it affects the quality of parental cooperation. This is further likely to affect teachers' perception of their working situation in general and their emotional well being in particular. Moreover, exhausted teachers are likely to have reduced job satisfaction (Hornby, 2000; Starnaman & Miller, 1992). Our research supports these findings (Westergård, 2007), and it is likely that insecure and exhausted teachers might want to hold parents at a distance to avoid conflicts and to avoid becoming involved in time-consuming cooperation with parents. Consequently, these teachers will not recognise disillusioned parents/complaints from parents.

Professional school climate variables. Westergård's research reveals that the school's professional climate (leaders' positions, teachers' attitudes) also relates to teachers' recognition of parental disillusionment/complaints from parents. Teachers with school leaders who experience strong support from parents, teachers and pupils are more likely to recognise parental disillusionment. These findings are in line with other studies regarding the relationship between school leaders and the quality of parental cooperation (Imsen, 2003; Nordahl, 2005). Nordahl (2005) found that teachers increased their competence in parental cooperation when school leaders emphasised its importance.

The findings from Westergård's study revealed that the variables had a mediating effect on teachers' recognition of complaints from parents/the quality of parental cooperation. All variables together accounted for 42% of the variance in the multiple regression equation; classroom context variables accounted for the most (23%), whereas teacher pressure variables and professional climate variables accounted for the least (9% and 10%, respectively).

These results indicate that when parents and teachers discuss children's challenges in school, not only the child's challenges but also factors within the school are of importance for the quality of the relationship. The classroom context variables appear to be the most important school variables when recognising parental disillusionment and establishing effective parental cooperation/communication.

Other Factors of Importance

To obtain more in-depth data on the possible factors that contribute to the quality of parental cooperation, we conducted a small-scale study consisting of 16 interviews of parents and teachers (Westergård, 2010, 2013a). We aimed to elucidate other factors that contribute to effective partnerships/cooperation between parents and teachers. We found that 10 of the 16 pairs of parents and teachers had managed to establish effective cooperation. The outset of the cooperation appeared to be important. When teachers initiated the first contact with parents, the cooperation appeared to be more effective than when the parents initiated the contact (Westergård & Galloway, 2010). Other conditions conducive to effective partnerships were when the two parties experienced two-way communication, mutual expectations towards each other and "give and take" actions and attitudes on both sides. The six remaining pairs of parents and teachers experienced some barriers to communication at the beginning, which included parents' expectations that the teachers could not meet, the teachers' stress and heavy workload and the inability of the parties to see each other's point of view.

In the same study, parents and teachers identified 3 individual competencies that were relevant to the quality of the cooperation: relational competence (teachers were forthcoming and welcoming), communicative competence (mutual and respectful communication) and context competence (e.g., teachers' competence in identifying pupils being bullied (Westergård, 2013).

Several teachers in our interview data claimed to have low levels of competence in cooperating with parents due to a lack of training in teacher training programs. However, many teachers reported having good cooperation with parents despite this lack of training due to good support from colleagues and the school leader.

Teachers seem to require new knowledge on how to communicate and relate effectively with parents, for example, through new techniques and strategies related to challenging communications with parents (Smit, Driessen, Sluiter, & Sleegers, 2007; Westergård, 2010, 2013a).

To improve the teachers' and the school organisation's competency in parental cooperation/handling challenging situations, one must develop teachers' competence individually, inter-personally and collectively within the entire school organisation (Flaspohler, Duffy, Wandersman, Stillman, & Maras, 2008; Westergård, 2013a).

The following text aims to identify ways to develop this competence. The first focus will be on what theoretical knowledge teachers need to successfully implement "challenging conversations with parents". Afterwards, we aim to illustrate some strategies for developing teachers' individual and schools' collective competence.

Theory of Implementation

From the research above, it appears obvious that there is a need to reduce the gap between research-based evidence about factors that contribute to improving the communication between parents and teachers in school and the ongoing praxis in schools.

Thus, we need another type of knowledge about how to implement this research-based evidence. More precisely, we need research-based evidence on the factors that are conducive to implementing knowledge in general and, more specifically, on how to communicate effectively with parents. In other words, we must hold two thoughts in our head at once.

Although research has revealed a general need for more competence when communicating with parents (Smit et al., 2007; Westergård, 2010, 2013a), there are likely differences between schools and within schools. Thus, one must perform an analysis within each school to clarify what the actual need for change is (Fullan, 2007).

School-based change requires a decision-making process among all teachers in a school to anchor decisions and obtain mutual understanding (Ertesvåg, 2012). Consequently, teachers will have ownership in and show loyalty to the change process for parental cooperation. In this initialisation phase, one should answer the question: What collective competence does our school need when communicating with parents? To build new competence within a school, it is important to integrate new knowledge with existing knowledge and praxis (Fullan, 2007; Hargreaves & Fink, 2006).

The school leader has an important and central position in the change process and must prioritise the use of resources, internal organisation, planning and support for the teachers (practically and technically) from the very beginning (starting in the initialisation phase). Furthermore, the school leader must continuously support teachers in the implementation phase.

Taking a systems perspective on parental cooperation in school, we have learned that improving the quality of parental cooperation touches (is in contact with) several levels in the school (teachers as a group on the school level/the individual teacher on the team level) and the parents (cf. Westergård, 2010). Thus, several factors on each of these levels contribute to whether the implementation process is successful (Fixsen, et al., 2005). As the change becomes more complex, the clarity needs to be greater to handle the processes of change (Blase, Van Dyke, Fixsen, & Baily, 2012; Fullan, 2007). To reduce the complexity, one must identify the core elements of the change content (a checklist of "challenging situations with parents") and make an implementation plan (Domitrovich, et al., 2008). The core elements can be principles, theories or actions for a change. More concretely, the core elements in "challenging conversations with parents" can be the three competences that teachers need when cooperating with parents (relational, communication, and context competence) and competence in the three phases of the conversation as illustrated in table 1, *An implementation plan.*

The success of the implementation process for new competence in handling challenging situations is related to the school's *general capacity for change* (Flaspohler et al., 2008). Schools that have repeated success with innovations will most likely build collective self-efficacy, a common belief among the teachers in the school that they will succeed (initiating and implementing) in future innovation processes. These schools have a

sufficient general capacity for change, according to Flaspohler et al. (2008). However, one must also consider whether the school has sufficient *innovation-specific capacity* to change (Flaspohler et al., 2008), i.e., whether the school has the necessary skills to implement the tools provided by research-based evidence in "challenging conversations with parents" (e.g., relational, communicative and context competence). These conditions must be clarified in the early phase of innovation (initiation) to make a plan for further work (implementation). According to Flaspohler et al., (2008), both these types of capacity are necessary when implementing new knowledge. However, these authors also divide capacity into different levels: *individual capacity, interpersonal capacity and organisational capacity*. In terms of parental cooperation (or competence in handling challenging conversations with parents), individual capacity is related to individual teachers' knowledge, skills and motivation within parental cooperation, whereas interpersonal capacity is when a team develops (improves) its capacity in parental cooperation together. An organisation's collective capacity is the school's capacity to develop a general standard within parental cooperation. It is emphasised that school leaders have an important role in organising collective competence-building activities (Fullan, 2007; Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006)

The review of the literature and research reveals that systematic cooperation among colleagues in school is favourable for developing a common standard and culture for parental cooperation. This cooperation can contribute to individual and collective learning in school and can contribute to a shared vision (understanding) and an increased capacity for change regarding parental cooperation throughout the entire organisation. Colleagues' attitudes towards parental cooperation and how they support and supervise each other will also contribute to teachers' collective competence. We will see some examples of this in the coming text.

Implementation Strategies for Capacity-Building – "The Challenging Conversation"

When aiming to build a new capacity, the starting point must be the teachers' own practical experience (Skogen, 2004), i.e., their previous experience with parental cooperation and whether they experience a need for improvement (Fullan,

2007). Schon (1991) emphasises that successful professionals have the ability to reflect on their own praxis and thereby increase their competence. Teachers who reflect on their own praxis have a unique ability to meet parents in open and two-way communication, showing mutual respect and enabling mutual decisions. This success will also then affect teachers' beliefs about cooperating with parents.

Successful schools employ, to a greater degree, teachers who cooperate and learn from each other (Rosenholtz, 1991). Rosenholtz discovered that this tendency could increase teachers' level of professionalism or sense of security in their work. Cederstrøm (1995) comments on the effect a school's collaborative standard has on the quality of cooperation with parents. Teachers who are used to cooperating with and receiving critiques from colleagues are more likely to be open to cooperation and critique from parents.

Based on teachers' individual competence and need for improvement, the goal is to develop a collective competence in holding "challenging conversations" with parents. Thus, parents will experience the same basic attitude and professional competence from all teachers when approaching the school. To develop a collective competence, school leaders must develop an implementation plan (see table 1). Such a plan can contribute to a high quality implementation, i.e., ensure that what we plan to change or develop is in accordance with what actually is changed or developed (Greenberg et al., 2005). The intention is for the implementation plan to make visible both what we intend to implement (core elements in challenging conversations) and the support system we intend to use (support from the project group, parental team, internal resources, external agents, routines for supervision, time, resources) during the development of competence (change process). The plan should be a visible and dynamic tool in the change process. It should also be clear what tasks and roles the actors hold along with time limits and milestones.

There should also be a plan for the school leaders and project groups to follow up on this work in school, and the school leader should have the responsibility to drive capacity building activities (Ertesvåg, 2012; Fullan, 2007).

Table 1.
An implementation plan – an example.

Activities	Methodology/ material	Module 1	Module 2	Module 3	Module 4	Time	Responsibility
Need	Survey, I-T-P workshop	x					Leader, teachers
Anchoring	I-T-P, workshop,	x					Leader, teachers
Core components competencies: Relational Communication Context	Case, read articles, film, seminars, workshops		x	x			Leader, action team, external agents.
Core components structure: 1. Beginning 2. Working phase 3. Closure	I-T-P, reflections, training, role play, film, supervision, observation, coaching, workshop			x	x		Leader, action team, external agents.
Strategies	Training, individually, in pairs,			x	x		Action team

When building capacity in parental cooperation, one must consider the existing structures for cooperation. Through structure and real tasks in which teachers can cooperate and reflect together, capacity can be developed (Hopkins, Ainscow, & West, 1994). It is preferable for team meetings and plenary meetings to follow each other within the same day when following the I-T-P method, as we suggest below.

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1) Think about both good and challenging conversations you have had with parents (I). Write them down on a piece of paper. 5-10 minutes.

2) Present your experiences and reflections in the team (T). You can use a case if you have one. Can you find common grounds in the team? 20-30 minutes.

3) Communicate the teams' reflections in plenary. The school leader is responsible for the further process. 20-60 minutes.

Box 1.
An example of the I-T-P method

The I (individual) – T (team) – P (plenary) method addresses reflections on three levels in schools (Ertesvåg, 2012). In Norway, most schools are organised into teams or levels; thus, they already have a structure in place. The method seeks to engage all teachers, including those who do not normally engage easily, to reflect upon a theme or a current problem. Each teacher starts reflecting on both good and challenging situations they have experienced in communicating with parents. These reflections provide a good start for further reflections in the team (T). It is useful to illustrate the challenges through real stories (cases) from praxis. The team

leader is responsible for engaging all teachers and leading the discussions; he/she is the team secretary. The outcome could be to identify common issues that the team wants to highlight. Do these issues indicate a need for a special type of competence when communicating with parents? Do they need any professional contributions from external agents, lecturers, supervisors, or coaches? When the team leader communicates the core elements from the team in the plenary section, these thoughts and reflections may form new knowledge among teachers in the school. Thus, this process may initiate the development of a collective competence that is further developed when teachers share their experience and knowledge with the rest of their colleagues in the plenary.

The school leader is responsible for further process in the plenary. Each team leader presents his/her teams' reflections and puts the core elements in a Power Point presentation. New core elements from other teams are written in Power Point and form a basis for collective and binding decisions made in the plenary. Questions in plenary could be as follows: On the basis of what the teams have presented, do we (teachers in school) need more competence in handling challenging conversations with parents? Which competences or skills need to be further developed? How should we go about developing these?

To fulfil the school's vision of "a school for all" (e.g. Blossing, Imsen, & Moos, 2014), where disillusioned parents are included and taken seriously, an overarching goal and outcome of the plenary reflections could be to develop a common standard of how to communicate with parents as partners (i.e., Cuttance & Stokes, 2000). Then, the standard should be written down and read to the teachers in the plenary, who approve the decision.

The I-T-P method is flexible and ensures both individual and collective levels of improvement. Teachers can use one to three hours, one day or several days; it all depends on how comprehensive the subject of change is. It also depends on whether the school would like to use this method in the initiation phase to anchor the decision to improve communication with parents. This process can also be used in the implementation phase when working with the core components in the challenging conversations. To develop capacity-building individually, interpersonally (team) and collectively (plenary),

one must use some time to reflect and make the core components concrete. Thus, collective competence can be developed.

Previous research identified a need to develop strategies to handle challenging conversations with disillusioned parents (Westergård, 2010) and a need to develop teachers' relational, communication and context competence (Westergård, 2013a).

Thus, Westergård (2012) developed a checklist (structure) for the initial planning of challenging conversations with parents (see box below). Making use of a checklist like this could be a good starting point, particularly for novice teachers (Bayer & Brinkjær, 2003; Denessen, Bakker, Kloppenburg, & Kerhof, 2009) when using the I-T-P method and identifying core elements in which teachers need to improve their competence. The following checklist contains three core components: the beginning, the working phase and closure (the end of the conversation). Each core component contains several partial components upon which teachers who are systematically using the I-T-P method can reflect.

To collectively build competence within challenging conversations with parents, reflections alone are not sufficient. Teachers must also focus on training in the core components. Combining training, observation, and supervision or coaching has been shown to be effective (Blase et al., 2012; Fixsen, et al., 2005; Joyce & Showers, 2002), i.e., training on how to plan for a challenging conversation with parents or how to initiate communication with parents. It is recommended to use a case combined with a supervision model (Westergård, 2013b) or to role play a conversation with parents to illustrate how teachers can work to see others' perspective to obtain a common understanding of certain issues or challenging situations.

Joyce Epstein (2001) recommends that schools establish action teams that consist of teachers, parents, a school leader and a social worker, nurse, special education leader or others. These team members can contribute many points of view related to plans (i.e., how to improve the quality of parental cooperation) and to activities that enhance parental involvement in schools. They could serve as an expert group when teachers and parents experience challenging situations when cooperating, and they could also be seen as important resources in building collective competence in parental cooperation, along with the other school members.

1) The beginning is the most important part of the conversation.
   a. Planning: What are the challenges? What do I know about the parents that could help me to plan and start up this conversation? How do I plan to contact the parents?
   b. The startup of the conversation: building a good relationship, establishing a confident and respectful communication are core components.
2) Working phase.
   a. Taking each other's perspectives.
   b. Common understanding.
   c. Continue building a confident and respectful relationship.
   d. Set specific goals to achieve.
   e. Work towards a common solution.
3) Closure.
   a. Summary.
   b. Set further goals to continue working on until the next meeting.
   c. Evaluate the conversation.

Box 2.
An adapted version of a checklist for challenging conversations
(Westergård, 2012)

Summary and Concluding Comments

The present paper highlights how research-based evidence addressing parental cooperation and implementation theory can help develop schools' collective competence in handling challenging conversations with parents. Several factors within schools affect the quality of parental cooperation and the implementation of effective communications with parents. Teachers report that the school culture, their perceived workload and their self-efficacy regarding classroom management indirectly relates to the quality of cooperation with parents (Westergård, 2010). When teachers report that they lack the necessary competence and strategies to cooperate with parents, this may lead to a lack of professional security in meetings with parents (Westergård, 2013a). Professionally secure teachers with a reflective and open attitude will be more likely able to handle unpredictable and challenging situations with parents appropriately (Munthe, 2001), thus securing the quality of the cooperation.

Taking a systemic perspective, we see that the change process involves several levels and many actors in schools. To succeed in building new capacities in schools, we must have competence in parental cooperation and research-based knowledge about how to implement this knowledge into praxis.

Several factors are conducive to implementing new knowledge for handling challenging situations in schools. School-based change requires a process of decision-making among teachers (Ertesvåg, 2012) to establish clarity about the core components and a common understanding of the planned change. The leader and the project group are central actors in leading the change process, making an implementation plan and supporting teachers in their work. Success in building new capacity among teachers in schools depends on the schools' capacity for change. Schools that have succeeded with change processes previously will most likely have developed a collective sense of self-efficacy, i.e., colleagues' belief that they will succeed in future change processes due to earlier experiences. However, they must also have professional competence in parental cooperation and in handling challenging conversations with parents.

Flaspohler, et al., (2008) claim that both these competencies, general and innovation-specific capacity, must be present to achieve a successful change process. Capacity is also divided into 3

levels in schools: individual, inter-personal and organisational capacity. By emphasising all of the capacities, the school will be able to build a collective capacity to handle challenging conversations with parents.

In this paper, we have emphasised the I-T-P method as an effective methodology in the anchoring process and in the process of implementation. This method's goal is to enhance teachers' individual competence and, through reflection and cooperation in teams and in plenary sessions, to develop a collective competence. However, reflection is not enough. Schools must also complement the I-T-P method with, e.g., training, supervision, observation and coaching to develop collective competence in handling challenging conversations with parents (Fixsen et al., 2005). To obtain good implementation quality, systematic work throughout the entire school organisation, led by the school leader, is necessary.

Implications for Praxis

This paper indicates that there is a need for more focus on implementing our knowledge about successful relationships between parents and teachers. Further focus should be devoted to developing effective strategies for reducing teachers' stress and for enhancing teachers' competence and sense of self-efficacy when collaborating with parents. The present paper suggests strategies for handling criticism, handling conflicts and building collaborative partnerships that will hopefully be useful for teachers' praxis in schools. Further work on developing strategies is needed.

Further Research

Thus, there is need for (more) intervention studies on "what works" for parental cooperation in general and, more specifically, when parents experience disillusionment in their contact with the school. Future research could focus on intervention programs to help novice teaches feel more secure when working with parents. Interventions could also focus on whether collaborative learning, role playing and support among teachers in school can enhance the quality of the relationship between teachers and parents. Finally, we suggest an intervention to develop strategies for school leaders and project groups to support change processes in schools.

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