

Developing Collaborative Parent – Teacher Practises in Steiner Waldorf Schools

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**Is education a protagonist or antagonist in
the contemporary knowledge society?**

Jenni Steinnes, 2006
Den andre skoleporten

ABSTRACT

This study is an essayistic report with elements from single case study and critical theory approaches concerning the collaboration between class-teachers and parents in Steiner Waldorf schools. The purpose of the study is to present new insights and possibilities for further development of this element in the schools. The research methods have been interview conversations, a survey study, literature review and reflections on my own experiences as teacher and activist in non-governmental organisations. The political-emancipatory ideas of civil society and profound spiritual dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber are presented as a basis for competence in this field for both parents and teachers.

Rudolf Steiner strongly emphasised the importance of good communications between the teacher and the parents of the pupils already in the first Steiner Waldorf school. Today this idea of co-education is still practised in Steiner Waldorf schools worldwide, but systematic developmental work in this field has been scarce. As a contemporary effort to reform the collaboration of teachers and parents the Norwegian "Foreldreakademi" (Parents' academy) is introduced as an exemplary case having strategic importance in relation to the issue of this study.

The study concludes that serious reconsideration and empowerment of parent-teacher collaboration is very much needed today. The established ways are more or less outdated. The Steiner Waldorf School communities also need inner strength to be able to argue their right for independence, to defend their uniqueness and right to exist. The Foreldreakademi can be seen as a well-founded contemporary answer to these needs.

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FOREWORD

This research project is a master degree thesis for Rudolf Steinerhøyskole. The two-year master degree programme was a welcomed opportunity to resolve something that had become a burning question to me as a teacher: the relations between the teacher and parents.

I wish to especially acknowledge my supervisor professor Bo Dahlin. His nonconformist way of looking into the social phenomena was empowering to my work in a special way. I am also thankful to Aksel Hugo's thoughts and visions. He presented me to Godi Keller and the Foreldreakademi.

Meeting Godi Keller and his work, the concept of Foreldreakademi, was very inspiring and encouraging. His way of looking into the life situation of parents and the situation of education today was a turning point to me in this project. The element of change is essential in social inquiry, explaining and understanding are not enough. The researcher has to be ready to welcome change in him-/herself too.

Besides Godi Keller, also Hilde Lengali from Steinerskolenes foreldreforbundet (Norwegian parents' association of Steiner schools) and Markku Niinivirta from Snellman-College were important in sharing their insights.

I wish to thank my school, Steiner school of the Vantaa region, and the parents' association in Finland for their financial support.

The reader might find my work alien and overly political or academic compared to the life of a school: "Where are the children", they might ask. I have been lucky to experience how good connection between the parents and a teacher, and a healthy self-esteem in the school community can contribute to the well-being of the children. Common consciousness and understanding between the adults surrounding and supporting the child brings warmth, safety and certainty into the life of a developing child.

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SUMMARY

The purpose of this study

How should we arrange the collaboration between parents and teacher today?

I argue, that traditional, authoritarian models do not have justification any more. Their time is over, we as human beings are growing towards personal integrity and freedom in it's true sense. We have inevitably left behind the modern and are moving towards something else.

I see myself as reflective practitioner: teacher-researcher using self-reflective inquiry. The element of change is essential in social inquiry, explaining and understanding are not enough. The researcher has to be ready to welcome change in him-/herself too.

Today the social reality around the school is changing very fast. The education in its deeper meaning and other inner tasks of school are to be replaced with superficial, more or less practical, trendy demands of society or market economy unless the 'voice' of educators, both teachers and parents sound strongly, together.

The purpose of the study is to present new insights and possibilities for further development of this element in the schools.

Research procedures

Methodologically this study is a qualitative inquiry situated in the phenomenological-hermeneutical research tradition. As meanings and understanding in the parent-teacher -encounters are discursively produced together with language, my approach can be seen as social constructivist, too.

My emphasis is on *dialogue* as means to process experiences and define, develop and construct meanings, practises and principles together, in social situations. Any kind of discussion, speaking, argumentation or use of language as such is not necessarily dialogue. True dialogue has the element of encountering and meeting,

as Martin Buber has shown. The dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber is presented as meaningful contribution to the topic of this study.

Also issues about power and authority are crucial: who has or takes the right to define reality or dictate the agenda or direction to future? To go into that question I present the political idea of civil society and the late-/post-modern situation, seen as the fall of authorities and grand narratives.

Civil society and dialogue philosophy together form the "power-centre" for this study.

After studying civil society and dialogue philosophy the aim of this study was to find out Rudolf Steiner's original ideas about the collaboration between teacher and parents and study Foreldreakademi as an example to update the ways to meet with parents. A small survey about parents experiences in parent evenings was made too. A recent survey study about class teachers in municipal schools was closely studied and critically commented in the light of the experiences and insights gathered and literature used in this study.

These different components together form my address in this issue.

Conclusions

When literature based framework (civil society, Buber, Steiner) and empirical elements (interview, survey) are put together, the result is a critical overview that is pointing direction to reconsideration of practises in schools.

The principal ideas from Steiner should be taken seriously.

Foreldreakademi is well-founded concept and civic practises, Steiner's ideas and also elements of true dialogue are well represented in it. It could serve the whole school movement as adequate way to work with parents.

INTRODUCTION

A Prologue in Finland, 1861

A fierce academic battle raged. It was about which direction education should take. Famous and respected nationalist-romantic philosopher J.V. Snellman argued for the traditional ways of upbringing and the natural instincts and wisdom of the parents. Theologian and teacher Uno Cygnaeus promoted the pioneering, experimental, scientific, professional education that was to be led by academic research and executed by well-educated teachers. Mika Ojakangas (1997) has described this quarrel very precisely and in a vivid way.

All this was of course a relatively late, peripheral passage in the larger development, where the education in general was no longer seen as art of sculpting the child to some preconceived form; to become a decent member of some specific profession (officer, priest) or beholder of some status (worker, wife) in the society. Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote that the purpose of Nature was not to make Emile to officer or priest, but to a human being (Rousseau, 2004). Thus the preconceived, given life-form was replaced with continuous formation of life as the highest goal of the education, as Ojakangas writes (1997, p. 12).

Ojakangas (1997, pp. 17-20) shows us how the victory of Cygnaeus over Snellman was significant for the future of the Finnish school system. Snellman was very much for "the natural" segregation of the schools for upper and lower classes of the society. He thought that only some years of basic, mainly practical and especially religious-moral education should have been enough for the lower classes, whereas the further education should naturally be reserved only for the leading groups of the society. Cygnaeus was for a primary school that would guarantee the access to higher education to everyone as long as they had enough talents. He also understood the meaning of hand-working, art and gymnastics. He emphasised the meaning of the child's joyful play and well-being as source of successful learning. Both Snellman and Cygnaeus understood the great importance of education in the building of a nation. For Snellman it was merely

instrumental, but Cygnaeus saw the primary school more like the core, or as the "warm heart of the nation".

For the field of this study the victory of Cygnaeus meant also a lot. For Snellman the threshold of the home was very sacred, and the state should never rule over the family in questions of upbringing the children. Cygnaeus, in his urge to replace the conventions with expertise, very strongly emphasized the need to totally take over the whole field of education, the private sphere of the family life too. Since that time the Finnish families and homes have been under administrative, moral, medical and pedagogical control and regulation.

How about homes and schools today, in year 2008?

Home and School

When the academic teacher education gradually developed in the end of 19th century together with science of pedagogy the teachers gained more influence in defining the educational principles and practises. Until 1950s the teachers were respected and valuable resources in their communities. After that the autonomy of professional educators has gradually been taken away (Lapinoja, 2006, p. 67).

".... Today the social reality around the school is very different. Teaching is called mentoring, training or guiding and almost every modern problem in the society is thrown to the school, were it immigrants, drugs or free enterprise. The school is seen as hazardous waste disposal plant: 'Here, we hope you can process it somehow'..." (Lapinoja, 2006, p. 21)

Education in its deeper meaning and other inner tasks of the school (presenting cultural heritage, creating larger than self-experiences, developing senses and emotional capacities or the skills to self-governing and independent critical thinking and so on) have been replaced with superficial, more or less practical, trendy demands of society or market economy.

In her school-ethnographic study of parent-school-relations in grades 7-9 at Finnish secondary school Tuija Metso sums up her results:

"Education connects the home and the school, while there are also tensions and boundaries between them. ... the parents took the responsibility of raising their children upon themselves and felt that the teacher's most important duty was to teach. At school the responsibility of raising the children was transferred to parents. The parents were referred to as a background group and additional resource for the school." (Metso, 2004, p. 3)

According to this study the parents seemed to be quite comfortable with occasional parent evenings and informative letters from the school. Ideas like supporting the child together, discussing the meaning of education or constructing common educational consciousness were merely rhetorical, if at all mentioned. These 'deeper' viewpoints do not seem to bother very much parents and teachers at secondary school. Metso also says that she noted that in this context the word 'parent' equals mother. The importance of the role of the father was sustained only at rhetorical level at school (ibid. p. 38).

Is it the same at Waldorf school? Private¹ Waldorf schools are actively chosen by parents for their children. The deed of *not* choosing the closest municipal comprehensive school is always active and conscious. At least it is made active in the first parent's evenings at Waldorf school, when teachers are presenting the school and the pedagogy: what we are, how we work – and what we are not. The latter is important, illusionary or otherwise mislead precognition about the possibilities or nature of Waldorf school are usually behind any later crisis.

Parents are incorporated into the life of the school in various ways. Some of them are at first glance quite superficial, like baking buns and cakes for café at Christmas market, but children respect and feel confidence towards both school and parents when they can see their parents involved even in the simplest ways.

The legislation in Finland demands that the administration must be transparent and authorities must be in co-operation with the citizens. In addition, the EU-level principles of proximity and citizen's participation must be taken into account. As

¹ The word "private" is misleading, referring only to their non-governmental character. The Steiner Waldorf schools are more "community" schools.

schools are mostly run by municipals, they are responsible to be active in co-operation with custodians of pupils.

No such duty is put upon parents. Their responsibility (according to the compulsory education law) is to take care that their children go to school frequently.

The Waldorf schools are obliged by a decree to inform parents about the philosophical and pedagogical backgrounds of school. This sentence was originally "fed" to the decree by hostile critics of Waldorf education, their favourite slogan used to be that Steiner schools are keeping secret the real background of pedagogy from parents. According to these critics the real aim of the education in Steiner school is indoctrination in Anthroposophy. They had the idea that majority of parents would leave if they only knew more.

In my school we have turned this "ultimatum" upside down. For last five years we have told people about philosophy of Rudolf Steiner, origin of the school movement and handed out lists of recommended reading (presumably modern parents can use libraries and the internet, we do not have to simply hand out everything). This transparency campaign has brought to our school community more informed and involved parents. Moreover, the school is still growing every year.

Research Questions

How should we arrange the collaboration between parents and teacher today?

This is my primary research question, to which I try to find understanding in this study.

Before I can even think of approaching some understanding or insight about development, I have several secondary questions to go through:

- what are the collaborative practises today in schools?
- why is it organised in certain ways?
- what features are successful and working?
- are there some problematic practises or points where we tend to fail?
- what do parents think about collaboration?

I do not go to my investigation without a certain bias that colours all my investigation: I argue, that traditional, authoritarian models do not have any justification any more. Their time is over, we as human beings are growing towards personal integrity and freedom in it's true sense. We have inevitably left behind us the modern and are moving towards something else, whatever name we choose to give to it.

One of the labels is 'the post-modern situation'. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1985) has characterised the post-modern situation as distrust to grand narratives. Grand narratives are stories or myths that have structured and motivated the mankind, such as religions. For Lyotard also belief systems that are behind science and rationality are narratives. One of the greatest narratives is the story of enlightenment as emancipation. It has had as basic assumption and belief that harnessing the nature, the economy and the technology will after all contribute to the benefit of the humanity in general.

Juha Suoranta (2004) has said that the post-modern situation in education means that education could be seen as process of transition(s). He refers to Thomas Ziehe, who has said that the modern school has inevitably lost its charm and aura. To enter this state of transition one has to stop, even collide. After that new possibilities can unfold. They are based on personal experience. Here the

education becomes self-education. There beside, together with the young person in transition is the place for contemporary education, a locus for the school and teacher.

Reconsidering the situation and meaning of education empowers the teacher. For Suoranta (ibid.) 'teacher' means intellectual and influential member of the reciprocal civic association of citizens. Teachers should be able to have resonating 'voice' – loud enough to reach the political discussion about education and school.

In everyday work as well as in research activity the most central principle in the use of this 'voice' is to question the established practises (own, in the school and in the educational system): are they based on consideration or tradition?

I see myself as reflective practitioner: teacher-researcher using self-reflective inquiry. The element of change is essential in social inquiry, explaining and understanding are not enough. The researcher has to be ready to welcome change in him-/herself too.

THEORETICAL BASIS

Methodology

This study is a qualitative inquiry "built on profound concern about understanding what other human beings are doing or saying," as Thomas Schwandt defines the 'movement' of qualitative research (2000, p. 200).

Broadly this study is situated in the phenomenological-hermeneutical research tradition. Georg Henrik von Wright (1971, p. 30) has shown that the important features of hermeneutics (the art of interpretation) are the language-oriented concepts such as meaning, intentionality, interpretation, and understanding.

As meanings and understanding in the parent-teacher -encounters are discursively produced together with language, my approach can be seen as social constructivist, too. 'Social constructivism' as label is like an umbrella, under it can be collected several theoretically differing views. My emphasis is on *dialogue* as means to process experiences and define, develop and construct meanings, practises and principles together, in social situations.

Social constructivism also tells us that interaction with other people with language is source of our understanding of reality. Our ways of understanding change or remain the same according to the validity of arguments produced in interaction (Alasuutari, 2004, p. 38).

The reality is constructed in the interaction. It is not necessarily consciously created, but gradually emerging like a texture. This process can be only partly controlled or intentional, inevitably all individual participants develop their own viewpoints. The entity of meanings is gradually constructing, not constructed (Schwandt, 2000, pp. 196-205).

Language is not merely reflecting or describing the world, it is also creating it as mental projection. It is not possible to say anything about the reality (it is not external object, but mentally reproduced in social context) with absolute

certainty, but there is always possibility to present well-founded insights and definitions of it. With language the meanings are produced and distributed.

In unavoidably heterogenic group of parents and teacher(s), this gradual self-constructing process can never directly be dependent on some singular subject, (like lead or dictated by teacher). It is decentralised and sometimes even peripheric. Therefore dignified honesty and openness towards each other and shared understanding; recognition of the value of pluralism and social diversity are a necessity.

Thus also issues about power and authority are crucial: who has or takes the right to define reality or dictate the agenda or direction to future? To go into that question I present the political idea of civil society and the late-/post-modern situation, seen as the fall of authorities and grand narratives.

Any kind of discussion, speaking, argumentation or use of language as such is not necessarily dialogue. True dialogue has the element of encountering and meeting, as Martin Buber has shown. The dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber is presented as meaningful contribution to the topic of this study. Civil society and dialogue philosophy together form the "power-centre" for this study.

Methods

Basic Orientation

In this study I have chosen not to observe the co-operation of teacher and parents from the outside. As my field of study is the meeting and collaboration of parents and teacher, it is obvious to start from the real-life situation: the meanings and common agreement and certain general consciousness are discursively produced and maintained. There would have been several ethnographic methods available, but because of my position as practising class-teacher I can put very strong emphasis on trying to learn and change myself.

Positivist approaches are not as themselves suitable, because of my own situation. I am not an outside observer. Being very deeply incorporated is demanding

situation: producing valid results can be difficult and I will have to be aware of my own biases and precognition to be able to present any conclusions honestly.

From the epistemological stance of social constructivism can be said that there are no simple truths or right answers to a social issue like this, once I have chosen to take seriously life-world experiences and arguments of both teachers and parents.

According to Schwandt the key ethical question in practical social inquiry is: How am I towards these people I intend to study? He also describes how many very different thinkers have come to the "ethic of closeness". Morality must be theorised from an experiential basis, specifically in the experience of I -You - relationship. (Schwandt, 2000, p. 203, 204).

As I began this study, I was in particular situation. I started to meet the pupils and the parents of the coming first class. There we were every month: a teacher and parents in our dialogue constructing with language something that did not yet exist, but was emerging, it was to be made together, with common consciousness, efforts, patience and mutual trust.

Merriam writes that getting started with research project begins with examining orientation to basic tenets like nature of reality, purpose of doing research and type of knowledge to be produced (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). My basic orientation is as follows:

- nature of reality: socially constructed
- purpose of doing research: emancipatory knowledge interest², development of school community, revealing out-of-date structures and sustainable practises
- type of knowledge produced: inspiring, challenging, solution oriented, practical

² Jürgen Habermas has defined three knowledge interests: technical, practical and emancipatory. Emancipatory knowledge interest is connected to the freeing of human capacities, gaining freedom from all kind of predetermined being, like conventional thinking.
Berndtson, E. (1993). *Politiikka tieteenä. Johdatus valtio-opilliseen ajatteluun*, pp.82-84. Helsinki: Painatuskeskus

Case-study

In case-study research some particular phenomenon is studied, usually in order to illuminate general problem. It is mainly descriptive by nature. It can have strong explanatory power. The knowledge produced can be more practical and more contextual than knowledge produced with other methods. (Merriam, 1998, pp. 30-32).

I approached the Foreldreakademi as a contemporary exemplar or prototype for parent-teacher collaboration.

Critical theory

Established practises, power and authority, emancipation and civic activity are important issues in this study. Thus it is logical to look at society and education in general and the collaboration between teacher and parents in particular with critical eyes. In critical research the knowledge produced is "... ideological critique of power, privilege and oppression ...", as Merriam (1998, p. 4-5) writes. Critical theory approach can have empowering effect for individual self-reflection and self-esteem of communities.

Interviews

To collect insights and experiences I interviewed two specialists in the field of this study. The interviews were mostly informal conversations.

Steinar Kvale (1996, pp. 5-6) writes about semi-structured life world interviews: "It is defined as an interview whose purpose is to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena. ... An interview is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose."

Literature review: Steiner's Ideas

I collected systematically essential writings about Rudolf Steiner's ideas about collaboration between teacher and parents. The findings are condensed to a list of "cornerstones".

Survey

I planned a survey to ask parents about parent evenings. It was sent to 141 homes of pupils in my school. The results give an overview to the experiences the parents have from parent evenings. The response rate was relatively low, so no exact statistical analysis was made.

CIVIL SOCIETY

In time of Athenian polis or Roman republic civil society referred to a social order of citizenship, where men regulated their relationships and settled their disputes. The modern civil society was conceptualised within Western political theory in the eighteenth century. For Adam Ferguson³ it meant manifesting moral and virtues: Citizens united in order to enact the ideal of civic virtues instead of falling into "warlike barbarians". A good citizen ought to avoid the temptation of a selfish private life and instead enter into search for common good, wrote Ferguson (Nilsson, 2006, p. 32-35).

Other 'classics' in this field are John Stuart Mill, John Locke, G.F. Hegel, Alexis de Tocqueville, Antonio Gramsci and Jürgen Habermas.

Gramsci separated the economy from civil society and he saw the emancipatory and revolutionary potential of civil society. It was for him like a wedge, a force to help overthrow the ruling bourgeois class (Harju, 2003, p. 82).

Most modern thinkers place the civil society between the state and the market. Family belongs either to civil society or is seen as fourth sector, the private – as the ancient Greeks and Romans already saw it (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. 85).

Jürgen Habermas divides the public sphere in two: life world and system world. In the life world people build communities and produce understanding with language and communication. In the life world consensus is reached with public dialogue. For Habermas politics is free speech, communication and activity of equal citizens. The concept "system world" means the economy and the state administration. The strategic, calculating logic is ruling there. The system world is constantly trying to colonise the life world (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. 471-474).

Harju (2006, p. 84) says, referring to Hannah Arendt and Ralf Dahrendorf that grass root activity and initiatives create the civil society. It is a network of several

³ Political theorist of Scottish enlightenment living in the emergence of the commercial and industrial society (1723-1816)

autonomous activity centres and as well a forum of experiencing and growing self-esteem and becoming a person. The impulses and activities come and go according to different trends and needs. In the voluntary organisations, free-form groups and campaigns the full, free citizenship can become real, blossom and be fruitful for the whole society. Activity in itself is important and it does not need any given meaning from outside or above.

The Scandinavian civil society is a well integrated and accepted element in the society, it is definitely not anti-political or powerless. It is based on voluntary organisations, which are taking care of numerous public tasks and offer services for all citizens. For example in the voluntary social work charity is not the central form of activity. Self-help and peer-group co-operation are more common. Many political parties have their historical roots in local or national civil society activities.

These civil, non-governmental organisations, all the way from small local clubs to national branches of respectful global actors like Amnesty or The Red Cross are seen as vital practitioners in the Nordic model of the welfare state. Therefore they receive also public funding. Their integrity, autonomy and own inner logic have been respected.

It can be argued that the state and the civil society are already too well integrated and they have over time developed in to a common hegemonic process. For example non-governmental organisations are seen as hatchery by ambitious young people in the beginning of their career. It looks nice in the CV, if you have grown your wings in some of the established civil organisations.

The state is no longer governing directly, but through several semi-private organisations and local authorities. Emergence of the liberal democracy (although in statist and bureaucratic form), which once was the distant goal of civic activism, means the decline of public sphere and civic activity. At the same time we have seen the rise of mass culture and manipulated leisure time, as Habermas and many others have stated (Cohen & Arato, 1992, p. 231-254).

There is – or was, see above – an unavoidable dualistic tension between the state and the civil society; many thinkers seem to agree on that. In modern Europe this dualism had its historical apex in the late 18th and early 19th century when the absolutist states were gradually developed into parliamentary democracies, as for example Carl Schmitt has described (Cohen & Arato, 1992, pp. 203-204). In South-East Asia new-born Eastern Europe and in Latin America the civil society is still striving for democratisation and basic rights against the idea – and violent reality – of absolutist state.

This state vs. civil society -dichotomy can also be seen as useful narrative. Inferior civil society wants to see the state as invader and identifies itself as defender of freedom and other virtues; like David vs. Goliath or Robin Hood and the sheriff of Nottingham.

This tension can be seen also as a creative force, as Don Eberly writes (Harju, 2003, p. 87). There is dialectic tension between well organised civil society and the political society, he writes. The political power must have limits how far it can go into life of citizens. Eberly calls for good balance, interaction and creative tension between the state and civil society.

For Michel Foucault (Cohen & Arato, 1992, pp. 282-285) the main function of the state apparatus is discipline. The state wants to ensure that discipline reigns over society as a whole. The state can delegate its power to others, like to civil organisations or economy or to certain classes. Today the ruling market economy sees the voluntary work just as roadblock, hindering the march of free enterprise. Non-profit, communitarian work should be replaced with effective and exactly configured, service products. Especially the public subventions must be stopped – or at least shared equally to all players, were they voluntary civil organisations, small business or large corporations. Suddenly “the social capital”⁴ has only

⁴ Robert D. Putnam (1993, *Bowling Alone*) launched social capital as a popular focus for discussion. Social capital has also been picked up by the World Bank. http://www.infed.org/biblio/social_capital.htm

negative value. Citizens are seen as consumers and the state is quite willingly helping with this change of paradigm.

Jenni Steinnes (2006, p. 84) writes in her dissertation that "The most persistent voice in the multitude of ideologies, which make up 'contemporary knowledge society', might be the one which tells the state's citizens to be obedient under the law of the market. We are told constantly to remould ourselves into better and bigger consumers in order to secure these laws."

"Is education a protagonist or antagonist in the contemporary knowledge society?" she asks (ibid. p. 85-86). For Steinnes the critical, contradicting, troublesome and dissident antagonist element is essential for any human cultural expression.

School – System or Life?

Should we place the school and education in the life world or in the system world? Some thinkers inside modern civil society-activism can accept the small business (barbershop, café, bakery, local newspaper to mention few) and sometimes even closest authorities (like village police) as at least semi-integral part of civil society.⁵

Accordingly school could be part of civil society too. But if we look at it more strictly, then it is definitely an agent of the system world: The school is in the service of the state, which is trying to invade, control and patronise the social and private sphere. The school can be seen as the "normalising" weapon of the state. The unified right way of thinking of what is useful and good for citizens is brought to remotest villages and homes. Actually this was the modern project – no one asked the children or their parents what they thought about education, it was dictated and governed from above.

To go into that question I take a leap to the non-conformist and maybe even antagonist way of looking at the meaning of school and education.

⁵ The (narrative of) civil society, as our culture in general has a romantic element woven in: "Things were better in the old days".

Noam Chomsky states (Barsamian, 1995), that the origin of mass schooling was to control the people, the beast: "Mass education was designed to turn independent farmers into docile, passive tools of production. That was its primary purpose. And don't think people didn't know it. They knew it and they fought against it. There was a lot of resistance to mass education for exactly that reason. It was also understood by the elite. Emerson once said something about how we're educating them to keep them from our throats. If you don't educate them, with what we call 'education', they're going to take control ... 'they' being what Alexander Hamilton called the 'great beast', namely the people."

Today the modern comprehensive school certainly wants to see itself as subject in the life world rather than as an executor of the discipline in the service of state. The local or national authorities even have in the curricula programs to promote civil activity – among many other good and respectable elements. But this does not mean promoting civil disobedience or self-governing or joining activist campaigns. The pupils are more likely informed about something else than organising demonstrations, direct actions in old-growth forests and house-squatting.

Civil Society as Western Invention

Interesting complementary critique towards the concept of civil society has been presented by sociologists influenced by anthropology and/or having in-depth experience from non-European cultures. For example Hann (Hann & Dunn, 1996) points out that the civil society as a political idea was developed in the Western European cultural sphere. It is connected to liberal model of individualism and it is blind to the diversity how people experience and do politics in other surroundings than the birthplace of civil society. Also many feminist thinkers disregard civil society and say that it is very gender-specific and partly responsible for subordination of women.

The critics want to turn our attention to informal, everyday practises and inspect politics, economics and social and moral spheres from that point of view. A close

ethnographic look will reveal informal strategies and associations between people better than liberal-individualist concept of civil society. For example Jenny White (Nilsson, 2006, p. 36) has studied the networks of women in the slums of Istanbul. She calls the rich networks of these women "reciprocal associations", contrasting Western models that are based on organisation and educated debate. She argues that the conventional view of civil society privileges the groupings established by the articulate middle-classes.

For this study this critique is inspiring. It necessitates the need for 'expanded' or revised concept of civil society.

Gemeinschaft – Gesellschaft

Without social bonds we would soon end up in endless hostility against each other, said Ferdinand Tönnies, the founder of German sociology in late 19th century. The less we spend time in contact the more we are against each other. Tönnies presented two interesting concepts and described them with following terms (Ebeling, 1994, pp. 120-121):

Gemeinschaft (community) Family, friendship, home, neighbourhood, sustainability, natural or original will.

Gesellschaft: (society) Independent coexistence, impersonal, superficial, rivalry, unreliability, distrust, rational and instrumental will.

For his contemporary and later critics Tönnies was describing with his "Gemeinschaft of blood, place and soul" a form of togetherness that was already gone. The modern sociology and its positivist project of social engineering paid little or no respect to local, grass-root activities. Today thinking related to Tönnies' thinking can be found in the writings of civil society activists like Nicanor Perlas⁶ and many others. They see the future in local communities that are networking with each other on the global level.

⁶ Perlas was awarded the "alternative Nobel", The Right Livelihood Award in 2003 together with his colleague Walden Bello "for their outstanding efforts in educating civil society about the effects of corporate globalisation, and how alternatives to it can be implemented".

Rudolf Steiner and Civil Society

The Steiner Waldorf school movement is an offspring from a failed project in civic activity. Around the end of the First World War Rudolf Steiner and several others actively tried to promote the so called threefold social order as a solution for political, economical and social catastrophe that had struck Germany.

Rudolf Steiner's idea of threefold social order was an effort to organise the different players in the field of social life adequately. The economy is meant for providing wealth enough for everyone. Instead of open and free competition Steiner wants to raise brotherhood as a leading thought in the economical sphere. The cultural life (art, science, religion, ideologies) has to be free and it should be focused on providing freedom for everyone. The political life should be organised in such a manner that all citizens have equal rights and possibilities to participate (Leber, 2003, p. 23).

This was not only some abstract Platonic thought formation, but Steiner attempted to convince the public too. In 1919, explains Leber (*ibid.* p. 25), he presented and defended his ideas in Württemberg from April to June in many assemblies and public lectures, debates and in the press. Steiner's ideas appealed to the consciousness of the people, but soon he had to realise that he was on a collision course with the political parties. The bourgeois parties were very reluctant to accept Steiner's idea about the unused capacities of working-class people and the socialists did not bother about reformists like Steiner. They had different agenda, they were aiming for a revolutionary coup. Steiner and his adversaries were isolated, surrounded with hostility.

Near the end of this risky and exhausting attempt to step into the political life there was still one possibility left to promote the ideas of threefold social order: Make it reality in one organisation. So the first Waldorf school was founded in Stuttgart with hopes that it would induce trust and understanding to the ideas of threefolding (*ibid.* p. 26).

One of the leading principles of the new school was self-governance. It was incorporated in the educational aspirations too. The pupils can see for themselves that self governing is possible and fruitful. "This promotion of social skills will be as important as the teaching of the four basic arithmetical operations". (ibid. p. 26)

The collaboration between teachers and parents was also founded on the principles of threefold social order (see chapter "Rudolf Steiner's ideas about parent-teacher collaboration").

This short presentation of the social and political thinking of Rudolf Steiner can be ended with a quotation from Steiner's "Understanding the Human Being"⁷). This can be read with the co-educational relations between parents and teacher in mind too, although here Steiner speaks about salary. The underlying motive is universal: we work for each other, not in the service of others, as Dieter Brüll (2002, p. 136) has noted.

"There is a fundamental social law which spiritual science teaches, and which is as follows: The well-being of a community of people working together will be the greater, the less the individual claims for himself the proceeds of his work, i.e. the more of these proceeds he makes over to his fellow-workers, the more his own needs are satisfied, not out of his own work but out of the work done by others." (Steiner, 1993)

⁷ Online version available at http://wn.rsarchive.org/Articles/FuSoLa_index.html

DIALOGUE PHILOSOPHY OF MARTIN BUBER

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber presented his dialogue philosophy already in 1920's. He continued his active work with it – and it's practical applications until his death in 1965 (Smith 2000).

For Buber all real living is meeting (Buber, 1993, p. 34). He focuses strongly on relationship and the dialogical nature of existence. His main work in in this field was published in 1923 in Germany. This little book is called *Ich und Du* (1993, Finnish translation with title *Minä ja Sinä*). His texts are often highly poetical, layered and complex.⁸

According to Buber any meeting can take two forms: I-You⁹ or I-it. The I can meet any other person so that in this relation they both fully open themselves to each other. I-it meeting is for him more irrelation than relation. In this stance we hold ourselves apart, keep the distance and view the other as an object, an it (Buber, 1993 p. 25-31).

I-You relation amplifies both participants, whereas I-it can empower only the I. The it is denied it's right to show itself as You by seeing it as mere objective (Smith, 2000).

"I-it involves distancing. Differences are accentuated, the uniqueness of I emphasized" (Smith, 2000).

Buber had the idea that there had been a cultural development from relation to separation. For him this is the reason for the existential crisis of modern man and actually the very reason for any crisis of the modern society. He saw more and more I-it -relations (Smith, 2000). This same idea can be found in the ideas of

⁸ Trying to understand Buber will be almost an exhausting task unless the reader is familiar with the use of language in Jewish, and especially Hassidic philosophy and theology. Buber was influenced by Hasidism already in his youth. (Buber, 1993 p. 7-21)

⁹ Archaic form Thou has been used in older translations instead of *You*. I decided to use *You*, as most modern writers do in this context.

many culture historians. Also Steiner spoke about this development of human consciousness, see for example Lindenberg (1981, p. 38-58).

Buber connects the dialogical relation/reality to the soul-development of man in very clear way. For him, there is no self-development without relation to the others. If I observes everything and everyone constantly as it, then man will not be able to develop true I, but remains a singularity in irrelation:

"I needs You to become; in becoming I, I say You" (Buber, 1993, p.33).

The dialogue and the Community

Buber explains that there are tree kinds of dialogues. (Buber 1947, p. 19)

1. Genuine: having intention to establish living mutual relation, meeting of souls, the whole beings turning to each other. This dialogue is not found by seeking, but by grace, we are led to it by the dialogue itself, says Buber here. The genuine dialogue can involve both active speech and attentive silence, as equally important parts.
2. Technical: need of objective understanding, not engaging the souls.
3. Monologue disguised as dialogue: The distorted form of dialogue, little or no connection, the most common form.

" ... men, two or more, meeting in space, speak each with himself in strangely tortuous and circuitous ways and yet imagine they have escaped the torment of being thrown back on their own resources" (ibid.).

Here the focal point of Buber's thought is the space between souls. Releasing the I to unreserved, attentive silence, or stillness, is crucial part of the genuine dialogue. He also speaks about the heart as the point of unmediated impressions, opening the heart and special silent knowing the heart has for him (Smith, 2000).

For Buber the consequences of his existential thinking were obvious. He had no intention to remain as only academic utopian. He sought, also in many practical

ways to sustain cultural creativity in communities, to build living dialogical community as a third way between individualism and collectivism.

"On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge where I and You meet, there is the realm of 'between'. This reality, whose disclosure has begun in our time, shows the way, leading beyond individualism and collectivism, for the life of future generations. Here the genuine third alternative is indicated, the knowledge which will help to bring about the genuine person again and to establish genuine community" (Buber 1949, p. 67).

The community building needs personal opening, a relation to others, recognition of every I. The quality of the community will depend on the extent to which I-You relations, or the genuine dialogue exist.

Competence in Relations – not enough

Jonas Aspelin (2005) has written an interesting book about Martin Buber's educational thinking and writings. The book is concerning education of children and young people in the school. In the end of this book in an interesting chapter Aspelin criticises the idea of competence in relations ("relationskompetens" in Swedish) presented for example by Jensen and Juul (Aspelin, 2005. p.169-172).

This in many ways concluding chapter of this book can be read and interpreted with the relations between parents and the teacher in mind. Aspelin writes that the qualities that create and establish good relations and bonds between people are the same for both children and adults and the development of competence needs interplay.

Social competence is usually understood as having skills, mastery and argumentative or other kind of abilities and judgement about how to act in particular situations with other people. The call for wise use of social competence and self-reflection is almost integrated to the concept of true competence. It can be said that in classical terms social competence, or competence in relations

belongs to phronesis; it is ethical and practical intellectual virtue. Competence is not just *theoria* – activity that is observing from the outside¹⁰.

But the dialogue philosophy of Buber, according to Aspelin, is something else. He argues that this widely accepted virtue, 'competence in relation' is after all I-it relations. There is nothing wrong in this, of course we have to try to do well in these relations too. They are the majority of all relational encounters we have in our daily life. Aspelin points very clearly out that as long as the obvious limitations of this concept are understood, it can be useful as "toolbox". Longing for and chasing or hunting the true, spiritual I-You relations and ignoring our competence on I-it -level would certainly be absolutely impossible attitude.

Aspelin shows through his whole book that for education, as in any human encounters the dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber is the way out of subject-object -setting; out of I-it irrelation. This is not at all difficult to accept and understand if one has gained some experience in the class-room or as a parent: the personal growth of the pupil is connected to the personal growth of the teacher – and vice versa. For some strange reasons to notice this meaning of relations has taken very long time in the modern science of education. Or actually it was noticed, but rejected as subjectivity.

True I-You relations are not realised between subject and object, but between subjects, that is what we have learned from Buber. "All real living is meeting" (Buber, 1993, p. 34). To continue from the idea that if practical intelligence about I-it -relations is phronesis, then maybe in contemplative I-You relations we are dealing with *sophia*? *Sophia* is wisdom and ability to think well about the nature of the world. In his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle (1990) defines wisdom as knowledge of causes: why things exist in a particular fashion.

¹⁰ *Theoria* or *theorein* today certainly means observing from the outside, for Aristotle it was mental viewing; contemplation to approach *episteme*. See for example p. 8-12 in Ramírez, J. L. (1995). *Skapande mening: En begreppsgenealogisk undersökning om rationalitet, vetenskap och planering*. Nordiska institutet för samhällsplanering. Avhandling 13:2. Stockholm: Nordplan.

Buber himself clearly resigned from all sentimental interpretations of looking at I-You and I-it -relations. With help of Aspelin it is now possible to understand that dialogue philosophy is not merely consisted of skilful, civilised methods of interplay either.

COLLABORATIVE PRACTISES AND STEINER WALDORF SCHOOLS

Rudolf Steiner published his first texts about education in 1907 (Steiner, 2004). The original title of this booklet is "Die Erziehung des Kindes vom Gesichtspunkte der Geisteswissenschaft". In this booklet he mainly covers general educational issues like understanding the meanings of different developmental stages before adulthood.

Rudolf Steiner's ideas about parent-teacher collaboration

There are several passages about the collaboration between parents and teachers in the later lectures and writings of Rudolf Steiner. They appear mostly in the context of the founding and the first years of the Waldorf school in Stuttgart, from the year 1919 to 1925, when Rudolf Steiner died.

In the Waldorf School in Stuttgart Rudolf Steiner was present at some parent evenings giving speeches or answering questions. Some most central thoughts about the collaboration between parents and teachers can be found in a lecture given to the parents 22.6.1923 (Steiner, 1996, p. 190-202). "This address", he says, " is an answer to active wish" from the parents (ibid. p. 190).

He speaks to the parents about trust, understanding and the essentials of the Waldorf school. In this interesting chapter he talks about the meaning of understanding *from* parents to the teachers:

"Without this understanding, we cannot carry out our work at all. This understanding must be general in nature at first" (ibid. p. 192).

In the next sentence he describes how this still new and independent school is not under some established order or control by some "wisdom" of conventions or state, and still absolutely not at all alien to the everyday life and cultural situation:

"We cannot claim to be guided by a higher wisdom, derived from the acknowledged social order and hovering above our heads, and to need nothing more than awareness of this wisdom. We must gain leverage for the ideals of our school, and this happens when people see that what comes to light through the idea of the Waldorf School is very deeply rooted in the most important cultural demands of the present and the near future" (ibid. p. 192).

And then he continues about the special nature of understanding that comes from parents:

"Therefore, we must strive to present our intentions to our contemporaries in a clearly understandable form, in a form that can engender understanding. Above all, we count on the understanding of those who entrust their children to us, who therefore have a certain love for the Waldorf School. We count on them being able to grasp the thoughts, feelings, and will impulses that sustain us" (ibid p. 192).

The next important message he gives to the assembled parents is that the school does not want the parents and the school to have such a relation, that is based on "faith in authority" (ibid. p. 192).

Here Rudolf Steiner outlines three cornerstones of parent-teacher collaboration for the Waldorf school: understanding from parents to teacher, non-authoritarian relationships between them and communicating in clear and understandable way.

Later in the same year, in August 1923 Steiner gave a series of lectures at the little village of Ilkley, England (Steiner, 1983). In one of these lectures he suddenly, in the middle of completely other topics presents his principal ideas about the importance of the teacher-parent -collaboration. In this passage of less than twenty lines Steiner almost like accidentally says in two interesting ways what he thinks about the essence of home-school collaboration. Here he is specifically talking about the parent evenings and his audience here are educators themselves. For the Waldorf school the parent evenings are not merely for exchange of information. It is the support from the parents to the teacher that is the meaning of these evenings:

"Whereas the teacher conferences are essential as something in the centre, the parent evenings are extremely important as something in the peripheral" (Steiner, 1983, p. 32).

"The echo that comes from the parents during the parent evening, there flows life towards the teacher from another perspective, and this is something that the teacher needs to be able to remain lively in his/her inner being" (ibid. p. 33).

He also says that the teachers must learn to be able to recognise " ... what is real in the living communication with them who really have the responsibility of the upbringing of the children – the parents". (ibid. p. 33)

This shows us his original idea about the attitude towards the parents. In this sense he is more for the "home-respecting", traditionalist ideas of Snellman than the interventionist ideas of Cygnaeus.

In a lecture published with title "Collaboration Between the Teacher and Parents in the Spirit of Waldorf Education"¹¹ (Steiner, 1991, see also Steiner, 1996, p. 210-225) Rudolf Steiner concentrates, as he says it, to "the path between the teacher and the parent's house" (Steiner, 1991, p. 5). This lecture was given at the meeting of the Independent Waldorf School Association in 1.6.1924.

He shows openly his respect for the home. Thus he takes distance from such educational ideas that neglect the home and the parents, or even demand that the child has to be taken or lead away from the home – literally or symbolically. He has a rather pragmatic starting point: the family situation and the child's relation to the father and mother is to be taken as de facto. The family situations, were they positive or negative to our critical eye, should be taken as they are, as something very objective. The family relations should not at all be criticised. He emphasises strongly that every child has a very special connection to the parents, mostly because of imitation. They have grown together. (ibid. p. 9-11)

¹¹ Freely translated from the Swedish title "Samarbetet mellan lärararen och föräldrahemmet i waldorfpedagogikens anda" The same lecture can be found for example in Steiner, 1996 with title "How Teachers Interact with Home in the Spirit of Waldorf Pedagogy".

The key idea of Waldorf education – and thus central demand for the teacher – is that the teacher has to read the impulses for the right education from every child itself. This idea inevitably shows us the link to home and parents. He advises the teachers to notice that very often the parents can be seen behind the characteristic behaviour and the whole being of child as it expresses him-/herself to us. (ibid. p. 10)

"The only way to do anything in real life is to feel life itself pulsing within you and to create out of this pulsing life" (ibid. p. 15).

Later he says that bigger classes are no problem in education, on the contrary smaller classes bring about pedagogical weakness. He says that actually only good reason to limit the size of the class is that the teacher should be able to have good contact to the parents (ibid. p. 15).

The latter statement about the class size and the previously presented advice not to criticise the family situation or parent-child relations may sound very odd today for teachers. It is quite often one of favourite topics among teachers having their coffee in the staff room to complain how parents are this or that and how the classes should be smaller to be able to cope with children. Occasional visit to any staff room of any school could prove this.

Teachers are in a profession where a certain sensitivity is a crucial ability. We are working with our whole personality. Usually the price you pay for this is that in a way overgrown sensitivity "extrudes" to the areas where it does not belong, like to the collaboration with parents. Then every divergent idea or observation, statement can be in a hypersensitive way be interpreted and rejected as criticism, even attacks. There we are, in an encounter, but immediately lost in I-it relations, like Martin Buber has explained.

The right of a child to welfare and "the sacred threshold of the home", like Snellman said it, can sometimes contradict very strongly today. Extreme conditions, where the health and development, sometimes even survival of the child are at stake are part of the life of some families today. In these cases the threshold must be ignored, in order to simply save the children and help the

whole family. Avoiding criticism, like Rudolf Steiner meant, does not mean not to act when, for example, it's the duty of the teacher to alarm the social workers. In these extreme cases it can be possible and healthy practise to restrain from excessive criticism. These are unavoidably chaotic situations but at least the professional educators must be able to maintain their capability to work.

The common criticism towards these ideas of Steiner is that we live in other times now and these ideas are out of date. The children are not the same as they were in 1920's. They are less respectful, quite often even rude and bully in an excessive way to any adult.

This next as strongly put principle must sound even more strange to both teachers and parents of today:

"... we as Waldorf teachers must maintain our natural authority in all respects and in most subtle way. How can we do this? It is possible if our interaction with parents arouses the feeling in them that it is all right for them to influence their children to see the natural authority in the teacher" (ibid. p. 17).

We, the modern people have learned to keep as a virtue to jump into conclusions, form opinions, take stances or choose sides. Critical, almost sceptical stance is synonym of free and independent thinking. Assisting someone maintain 'natural authority' seems unbelievably subjugating attack against personal freedom and integrity.

But Steiner continues after that sentence in a way that underlines, how he does not at all speak for overly hegemonic, authoritarian attitude, but authoritativeness. That means like someone or something being highly reliable and likely to be respected by nature, not because of having power over others or some official status.

"The parents must have the possibility to get to know the teacher; the whole being of the teacher well. Everything they discuss and what the teacher says about the school and education must show them the truthful character of the school,

embodied in the teacher, who is the self-evident authority in the school" (ibid., p. 17).

So finally the list of cornerstones looks like this:

1. Understanding and empowering support from parents to teacher.
2. Non-authoritarian relationships between parents and teacher.
3. Communicate in clear and understandable way.
4. Respect – not criticism – towards parents, home and family situation
5. Take care of the authoritativeness of the teacher in the eyes of the children.
6. Mutual heart-to-heart relationships

To sum up this overview to the thinking of Rudolf Steiner in the field of home-school collaboration, I want to present one more statement from the previously presented lecture to the parents of the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart. The last idea on the previous list of cornerstones is presented here:

"We are not dependent on details, but rather on a heart-to-heart relationship between school and home. We are confident that if this heart-to-heart relationships is present, the right thing will come of it. We want to see this attitude awakened not merely with regard to details, but in full force ..." (Steiner, 1996. p. 200).

The Modern Steiner Waldorf Curriculum

Rawson and Swann (Rawson. 2000) say about the collaboration of parents and teachers, that "the school needs the support and interest of the parents and the children always benefit when this collaboration is mutually supportive."

They also refer to the practise of having systematical policy to give and get feedback, consultation and answers to questions. Formal grievance procedures and mediation policies are also important element, in case the communication breaks down.

Written, clearly detailed and transparent policies are important, not only for the conflict management, but also for everyday social life of the school. " ... in the UK, Steiner Waldorf Schools follow a detailed Code of Practice which outlines basic procedures and describes best practice in a whole range of areas within the life of a school community (Rawson, 28)."

Parent Evenings

The regular meetings of the class-teacher and the parents are the heart of the home-school collaboration in Steiner schools. During the eight first school years the class teacher may have up to 70-90 evenings with parents.

The other forms of encounters with parents are consultative meetings with parents of one child at a time and visits to homes. And one should not forget the countless telephone conversations, letters and e-mails. Parents, pupils and teachers can naturally also meet in many informal occasions inside and outside the school.

A typical parent evening consists of exchange of information about practical things, discussion about how the children are doing at home and school, presentation of workbooks, handicraft, paintings, drawings or modelling done since last meeting and some 'pedagogical part'. That means usually small lecture by the teacher. After that there is possibility to questions and discussion.

Sometimes there is some difficult situation to solve and the evening is dedicated for that. Occasionally the classroom can need some helping hands for decorations, cleaning or re-organising. Teacher can also present things like knitting, painting, playing flutes or form-drawing in practise and let the parents experience themselves what their children do.

In the pre-study phase I recorded three parent evenings. Two were my own evenings from a colleague in another school. They were not analysed for this study, but in brief some observations can be reported: The teacher speaks 70-95% of the time, so only 5-30% is left to the parents. Is this dialogue? The parents tend to speak from personal level ("my child", "when I was at school") and the teacher comments 'from above', he remains on general educational level. The teachers also explain a lot as they present the work or the situation of the children for parents. The parents do not have time to observe or wonder, the meaning is given instantly.

Survey Study– What Do Parents Think?

To get to know what parents think about the parent evenings I designed a questionnaire consisting of a set of 16 statements and questions about some personal background information. The parents were encouraged to give free comments too. They were also told about the possibility to volunteer for a personal interview. The questionnaire was designed to be filled in anonymously. (See Appendix 2)

The teacher conference gave me permission to send this poll to parents. The questionnaire was sent to all parents who have children in grades 1-8 in Vantaan seudun steinerkoulu, where I work as class teacher. The questionnaire was sent mostly via e-mail, those who did not have e-mail address received it as a letter. Two class-teachers copied it and delivered it in their parent evenings too.

This questionnaire was planned to give up-to-date background information about the experiences and opinions of parents in our school, with the simple idea to anchor my study about parent-teacher collaboration in the life-world situation. There were no plans to design the questionnaire or analyse the responses with elaborate statistical methods.

In grades 1-8 we have 194 pupils. Naturally many families have more than one child in our school. After leaving these doubled or tripled out there was left a sample of 141 families. I received first 55 answers. For the last two weeks I arranged a possibility to participate in this survey on-line. I used service from Amundis Communication GmbH, <http://www.2ask.net>. The school sent a reminder message with the weekly newsletter. This brought in 22 answers more. In total I received 75 answers. The response rate is 53%. The reliability of this questionnaire is not very good, because of the relatively low response rate.

Of all 75 responses 58 came from mothers, 15 from fathers and two from some other carer. These parents and caretakers who returned the questionnaire have 101 children in our school, 52% of 194 pupils in grades 1-8. Other background information can be seen in Table 1 on the next page.

Table 1. Background Information of the Answerers

A1 Age

26-30	31-35	36-40	41-45	46-50	51-55	56-60	N.A.
4	5	19	19	11	11	3	3

(N.A.: no answer)

A2 Role

FATHER	MOTHER	OTHER	N.A.
15	58	2	0

A3 I have child/children in class

1 - 3	4 - 6	7 - 9	10 - 13	N.A.	TOTAL
40	16	35	10	0	101

A4 How many years have you been involved in Waldorf education?

1 - 3	4 - 6	7 - 9	10 -12	13 -15	16 -18	19 -21	22+	N.A.
12	13	12	6	9	4	10	7	2

A5 Who from your family usually attends the parent evenings

FATHER	MOTHER	BOTH	NONE	N.A.
4	45	25	1	0

A6 Do You have any other occupations in the School Besides Being a Parent?

BOARD MEMBER	IN WORK GROUP	OTHER VOL.	EMPLOYED	N.A.
9	9	43	4	11

Table 2. Answers to the Statements

	1	2	3	4	N.A.	m
B1	0	3	37	35	0	3,4
B2	1	4	33	37	0	3,4
B8	2	10	29	34	0	3,3
B11	0	8	37	30	0	3,3
B12	4	13	32	26	0	3,1
B4	3	15	40	17	0	3
B9	2	16	41	15	1	2,9
B10	3	19	32	19	2	2,9
B15	5	26	27	14	3	2,7
B3	4	28	35	7	1	2,6
B6	16	22	21	15	1	2,5
B7	8	29	31	8	0	2,5
B13	32	31	8	2	2	1,7
B16	31	33	8	0	3	1,7
B5	43	29	1	1	1	1,5
B14	36	25	10	4	0	1,5

(N.A. : no answer)

B1 I like parent evenings

B2 I get good information about what is going on in the classroom

B8 Everyone is welcome to speak up

B11 The evenings are well prepared

B12 The atmosphere is encouraging

B4 We have good discussions

B9 We can talk freely about difficult things too

B10 The questions are answered and problems solved

B15 I would like to go deeper in the Waldorf education

B3 I get good advice to my parenting or teaching

B6 Some parents talk too much

B7 I usually sit quiet and listen

B13 Some parents 'test' or question the competence of the teacher

B16 The overall perspective is 'problem-centred'

B5 Teacher talks too much

B14 We have conflicts and serious disagreements

Results

Table 1 shows that the answerers are mostly mothers. Nine out of 14 members of the board have given their answer. The four who state that they are employed in the school are teachers who have children in grades 1-8.

From Table 2 it can be seen that on the top of the list and at the end of the list there is quite consistent agreement and the mean values are well over 3, or clearly below 2 in statements concerning problems in the parent evenings.

The four statements that got highest arithmetic mean were:

B1 I like parent evenings

B2 I get good information about what is going on in the classroom

B11 The evenings are well prepared

B8 Everyone is welcome to speak up

There is general agreement in the end of the table too, where the negative conditions or practises are listed. These parents seem to agree that there is no unnecessary testing or distrust to the competence of the teachers and the tone of the discussions is not too problem-centred and they are not disturbed, if the teacher is the one who speaks more than other participants.

	1	2	3	4	N.A.	m
B13	32	31	8	2	2	1,7
B16	31	33	8	0	3	1,7
B5	43	29	1	1	1	1,5
B14	36	25	10	4	0	1,5

B13 Some parents 'test' or question the competence of the teacher

B16 The overall perspective is 'problem-centred'

B5 Teacher talks too much

B14 We have conflicts and serious disagreements

With 14 votes for 3 and 4 the statement about conflicts and serious disagreements almost ended in the critical category. Also in statement B8 Everyone is welcome to speak up with 12 votes in 1 and 2 agreement is not so unified.

In some cases 20% or more of the answerers had marked 1 or 2 but the mean value is over 2. I would like to name the issues of these statements critical points; areas that seem to need improvement - or at least further study.

	1	2	3	4	m
B12	4	13	32	26	3,1
B4	3	15	40	17	3
B9	2	16	41	15	2,9
B10	3	19	32	19	2,9
B15	5	26	27	14	2,7
B3	4	28	35	7	2,6

B12 The atmosphere is encouraging

B4 We have good discussions

B9 We can talk freely about difficult things too

B10 The questions are answered and problems solved

B15 I would like to go deeper in the Waldorf education

B3 I get good advice to my parenting or teaching

Why put the limit of 'critical opposition' around 20%? For pragmatic reasons: 20% of parents means that in a parent evening half a dozen of thirty participants are more or less discontent with the state of many central affairs like atmosphere, quality of discussions, possibility to speak freely or getting good answers to questions. Could any teacher call the evening good and successful if there were discontent parents sitting on every fifth seat? It can of course be asked what about on every sixth seat, or seventh...

Two statements ended up exactly in the middle of the scale, 2,5:

	1	2	3	4	N.A.	m
B6	16	22	21	15	1	2,5
B7	8	29	31	8	0	2,5

B6 Some parents talk too much; B7 I usually sit quiet and listen

There will certainly always be situations where some people feel that some others talk too much or some who prefer just to sit and listen. There is not much to do about it. Quick cross-tabling revealed that those who agreed that parents talk too much (B6) or that they themselves are usually quiet (B7) also clearly disagreed that 'Teacher talks too much' (B5).

The Critical Points

From the answers of parents I could find seven critical points following roughly my 20% rule. These issues should be taken seriously. The dialogue is not working or maybe these people expect something else than the others.

- B8 Everyone is welcome to speak up
- B14 We have conflicts and serious disagreements
- B12 The atmosphere is encouraging
- B4 We have good discussions
- B9 We can talk freely about difficult things too
- B10 The questions are answered and problems solved

So, this means – to exaggerate a little – that 20% or more of parents might think or feel that at least sometimes in parent evenings everyone is not welcome to speak freely up, especially not about difficult things, there are conflicts and disagreements, the atmosphere is not encouraging, there is something wrong with discussions, questions are not answered and problems are not solved. These statements turned upside down sound very alarming. They are showing us where to aim with quality improvement of parent evenings: to the dialogue, not only speaking, but also to listening and understanding.

- B15 I would like to go deeper in the Waldorf education
- B3 I get good advice to my parenting or teaching

These two last statements are not so critical and alarming. It is not possible to interpret these as ignorance towards Waldorf education or that the advice is not welcomed, or that it is somehow foolish, not suitable or something like that. It is possible that statement B15, about studying Waldorf education, can be understood in many ways. Most likely everyone likes to know more, but to study something is a different thing. Also the results from B3, I get good advice to my parenting or teaching, can mean that the parents agree very much with what they hear from the educational principles at parent evenings – so there is nothing new for them.

What kind of conclusions can be made from these results? At least further study is needed to find out what discontents parents have. Do they want more effective and shorter or more formal meetings? Or maybe they are discontent in a large crowd of almost unknown people? Perhaps they just have basically shy, critical or reserved personality? Are the evenings boring or hypocritical, uninspiring? Has the teacher really met them, or are there some tensions between them?

One has to be realistic with criticism and see the reasonable limits of quality work in after all quite heterogenic communities, like in a group of parents in one class. After all the rather low response rate means that my results are not more than approximations or speculations. Although the explanatory power is not very strong, this survey might be useful for fuelling self-reflection and help to make more precise the insights of teachers and parents in my school community.

INTERVIEWS

Foreldreakademi

To learn from Norwegian Foreldreakademi, "Parents' academy" I conducted three interviews, read the book "Med hjertet is skolen" by Godi Keller and studied the concept paper, a document presenting the program and overall organisation and principles of workshops. Unfortunately it was not possible to join some of the weekend courses to observe more closely.

Parents' academy is a co-operation between Rudolf Steinerhøyskolen and the Steinerskolenes foreldreforbundet, Association of Waldorf Parents in Norway. One course lasts four meetings, with one or two weeks long break between the meetings. In between the meetings participants practise child-observations as home work. Each meeting has artistic program, lectures, discussions and presentations of child-observations. The course focuses very much to the nature of child and it's development. Also conversations about the influences from outside, such as the media are important elements.

Here are some examples of the principal ideas:

- it will be forbidden to use words like 'right' or 'wrong' in discussions. No one should get the feeling that they are incompetent as educators. The culture of mutual respect among the participants and the leaders must be nourished.
- all activity aims to create own development and understanding by doing observations and getting experiences.
- The course will be useless, if it does not have a warm, healthy atmosphere with also humour.
- one should as much as possible start from plain, simple observations and avoid preconception and bias. Prejudices should be under control in order to be able to open up to new understanding.

This idea of Foreldreakademi is something totally different than the idea that the school has to sell or market its 'brand' in efficient way and all problems of interaction between parents and the school can be solved with better pr-work or with streamlined information policy.

Design of the interviews

I interviewed two persons: Godi Keller and Hilde Lengali.

Godi Keller, a Swiss-born Norwegian teacher and teacher-educator, has become a popular lecturer among parents of many Norwegian Steiner schools. He has written a book "Med hjertet i skolen" with subheadings "Lesebok I pedagogikk for foreldre, skrevet av en Steinerskolemann" (With heart at school. A reader for parents about pedagogy, written by a Steiner school man). We met twice, first very briefly in May 2007 and continued that interview via e-mail. In February 2008 I travelled to Oslo and made a two hour interview with him. (That conversation is added as a supplement to this study, see Appendix 1.)

Hilde Lengali is the secretary of Steinerskolenes foreldreforbundet, Association of Waldorf Parents. She has been involved in the parents' development work to find new ways to activate school communities, manage conflicts and support schools, among others. I interviewed her in Helsinki, when she visited a Nordic meeting of parents of Waldorf Steiner schools.

I decided to study Foreldreakademi in the light of four previously presented elements: The post-modern situation, civil society, dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber and Rudolf Steiner's ideas about parent-teacher collaboration. I formulated the four elements into questions: How do they see the cultural situation we live in? Can the collaboration empower the social well-being in the school community? How to meet the parents? How about the traditions of the Steiner Waldorf school movement? The case, Foreldreakademi is put in the middle and these four questions are around it.

I have worked as journalist and thus I have experience in making acceptable and readable, perhaps also interesting interviews. These interview situations were easy,

relaxed and rather equal: both participants knowing about the subject, having personal experience and sharing the same emancipatory knowledge interest. This is not always the case in the everyday work of journalists.

I prepared a thematically arranged interview guide with some key questions around the four topics. The interview guide is not just a note, it has to be internalised, the paper might disturb the discussion. The interviews were intuitive, free-form conversations.

This whole study is an essayistic report, so I decided not to use strictly some standard method of analysing the interview data. Steinar Kvale presents in his book *Inter Views* (1996, pp. 187-209) several methods of analysis to use with interview texts. These two interview texts from two persons are partly categorised as I present related answers together. Meaning condensation and interpretation is only mildly done, I found it best to allow their voices to sound.

The Fall of the Authority and Consensus

Godi Keller describes his attitude towards the present cultural situation referring to his book. "The reality of modern western parents is fundamentally different than in any other historical period and culture. The conventions built on religious norms or on other unwritten social contracts have disappeared during the development towards individual freedom ..."

Hilde Lengali looks at this situation from the reality of of homes:

"We are the first generation without mothers – we do not have our own mothers right beside us giving advice about right and wrong in rearing our children. Today we have the grandmother saying one thing, the weekly magazines present some other thoughts and from the school or health-station we hear maybe a third advice... It is difficult to know which advise to take seriously. The parents do not easily trust themselves. From very early stage they might begin to think about all the wrong choices and mistakes they can do with their child. Here freedom really means insecurity."

Godi Keller continues about the school and the situation of modern parenthood: "[It]... makes the parents suspicious. That is a logical consequence of the lack of conventions. Parents do not necessarily trust a pedagogy just because it has the label Waldorf. They want to know how and why, and they have the right to know that. ..."

Sometimes this causes problems in the school, says Godi. Here we can notice the inertia the school has as basic attitude towards changes.

"Waldorf teachers are often insecure about the fundamentals of their pedagogy. And if they are not so sure in what they are doing and why they are doing it, then they often take a defending position instead of opening up to listen to the concerns of the parents."

It is striking how consciously both interviewed persons look at the times we live in. Without using any special philosophical, sociological or trendy terminology they describe in lively manner the post-modern situation and they do it without complaints or nostalgic sentiments towards the old times when everything was better.

The strong emphasis on trying to really listen and understand each other is leading the way to next questions about civic practises and dialogue.

Godi Keller: "Know each other, then you can feel respect. It is common to say that the teachers have lost their respected status. You can try to gain respect by inflating ego with this "I know and you shut up" -gesture. But the better way is to grow interest to people, to be interested of each other."

The School Community

According to Hilde Lengali, the Foreldreforbundet tries to present and emphasise ideas like better self-esteem of parents, involving each other, recognising each other and remind that everyone can be activea resource for school. They are also offering special conflict management, consultation or advices of lawyer:

"... if there is some special case then the parents invite Foreldreforbundet, quite often also both teachers and parents in agreement invite us to work with them. For conflicts we can offer a team of lawyer, parent and teacher, Steinerskolenes Ombudsordning."

Transparent, explicit civic practises, like written, clearly detailed and transparent policies are important for schools. They are not useful only in conflicts, but in everyday life too.

Hilde Lengali: "It is important to ask and talk straight at early stage and to take care that questions of parents get answers. They have to get answers in good time and it has to be easy to find right 'address' for the questions. There must be a system for all this at school. Usually big conflicts start with an unanswered question."

There is certainly a possibility to have also the element of change and improvement in the whole body of the school organism:

Godi Keller: "... sometimes teachers and parents have told me about improvement in atmosphere and that it has even gone through to the pupils. This sense of life, that there is something living in the community, is very interesting."

Previously, in the chapter about civil society, I presented the idea that both Ralf Dahrendorf and Hannah Arendt share: civic activity is in relation to experiencing meaning in life and growing self-esteem, not only as citizen, but also as subject of own life. This is also central prerequisite to the idea of community according to Martin Buber: The community building needs personal opening, and that can begin in healthy, encouraging environment.

The Dialogue

In these short quotations Godi Keller reveals the general idea of Foreldreakademi about how to be towards parents:

"... dialogue, dialogue, dialogue with a warm heart and a genuine will to understand the other side and to look forward, not back."

"... the worst possible position is to be arrogant and tell them [insecure parents] 'You know, we are professionals, and you are not'. The division between them and us is not true and it is not useful."

"It has to be dialogue between co-educators, not dialogue between some specialists and customers, who are buying some educational product."

About coming to these principles he says: "... I was looking for something else than the normal one-way communication from me to the audience. The first step was to find out more about the situation of the parents."

It is notable how well this is in accordance with the dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber, as presented in previous chapter. According to Smith (2000) Martin Buber means with 'heart' a form of understanding or appreciation that comes before mental operation of interpretation. This 'form of understanding' is not an emotion, like sympathy or empathy. 'Appreciation' can also be seen more as a deed rather than emotion: recognising the other as person, as You. Buber himself clearly resigned from all sentimental interpretations of looking at I-You and I-it - relations.

Usually schools do mostly informative parent work, where can not be seen very much 'heart', or true dialogue; the understanding and meeting. That kind of work has a hegemonic 'from above' -attitude.

The element of healthy dialogue without authoritarianism is what makes Foreldreakademi very much different than older ideas about 'school for parents'. It is interesting to note that behind this way to approach collaboration with parents are three things: in the first place there was the need to renew the traditional way of presentation, the lecturing style and this lead to observing and understanding the situation of parents. Third important basis is critical and realistic analysis of the cultural situation we live in today.

The core process of school is the relation of the teacher with pupil: one teacher face to face with one pupil. This is the essence of the school. The class teacher has a multitude of these processes, with all of his/her pupils. Other processes have

supporting roles around this essence or nucleus: parents, college of teachers, kitchen, school buildings, environment, classroom decorations etc.

Foreldreakademi, according to its concept paper (Keller, 2006) has as starting point to give insights to the development of child as basis for preferences in the education. The program of the weekend courses is designed around this centre: child observations are starting point when looking at what is done at school and why, in discussions about media and so on.

The Traditions

The school is basically slow, suspicious and somewhat reluctant to adopt new ideas or apply major changes. Especially alternative pedagogics are constantly in opposition to momentary impulses of the contemporary society. It in a way belongs to their grand narrative that they possess something perennial wisdom about the child and the essence of education. Strong, both explicit and implicit traditions are like a huge archive, resource to the teacher, but on the other hand the weight of the correct, tried and true can be an obstacle and blind-folding to the teacher.

Tradition is by nature contextual. We have some reasons to consider some practises or phenomena traditional in comparison with new, modern, innovative or up-to-date and contemporary. Thus it is not possible to approach tradition or understand it without having some interpretation connected to own standpoints. The contextual element should not be neglected, neither when studying some tradition in connection to its own time and place, nor in regard to formation of our own activity, motivation and knowledge interest. The simple questions who, what, when, where and why are useful.

When presenting the idea of social constructivism, Thomas Schwandt (2000, p. 200) says that standards for rational evaluation are completely dependent on the forms of life in which the phenomena arise.

For investigation of practises and ideas constituted by Rudolf Steiner in Stuttgart some ninety years ago, this means that one has to be conscious of the contextuality of the source in first place, for example Steiner visiting parent evenings in 1923. One has to profess own bias too, own contextual positioning. For example I am critical non-conformist and anti-authoritarian by nature and that has a certain effect, it affects my reading and understanding.

In case of the Foreldreakademi it can be noted that the relation to Steiner Waldorf tradition and/or the ideas of Rudolf Steiner is based on two important factors:

1. Concise, realistic analysis of the contemporary life – without judgement or longing for something that is gone or not yet realised
2. Studious observation as basic approach in *all* encounters were they children, parents, the modern life or writings of Steiner or conflict situations.

It can be said that the basic standpoint of Foreldreakademi is *pragmatic*, it is dealing with things sensibly and realistically in a way that is based on practical rather than theoretical consideration.¹²

¹² the definition of *pragmatic* from Oxford English Dictionary, 2005

TEACHERS AND PARENTS – IN NARRATED (IR)RELATIONS?

During the finishing phase of this study the traditional, bi-monthly household magazine *Kotiliesi and OAJ*, Trade Union of Education in Finland, published in 8.4.2008 the results from survey study about the attitudes and experiences of class-teachers. Newspapers, radio and television news reported about the results. PR-work of OAJ is often very efficient and *Kotiliesi* ("Fireside", since 1922) is traditional and respected "serious" household magazine with more family-centred orientation. So, for one day we could hear something else reported from the school-world than the official, "grand narrative" of PISA-success.

The overall message is alarming: teachers tell that the amount of extra work has risen to vast dimensions, in the full-packed classrooms very demanding pupils consume all the time and attention of the teacher and the parents are disturbing and tormenting the teachers more and more.

Sadly to say this situation is nothing new. All teachers know it, the parents know it, the pupils live it. In Europe the profession of teacher has lost its public respect years ago. So now this effect has reached remote Finland, the PISA-winner, too.

The reportage presenting this survey, with the headline "Restless children, threatening parents" is written by Essi Salonen. The reportage is spread to 9 pages and it is the main article and cover story ("Teachers are in the brink of exhaustion"). The editorial by the chief editor Leeni Peltonen is also concerned about the situation in the schools.

To be able to present the overall tone and message of the article, I have below translated the sections where the relations between parents and teachers are presented. After that I present the thoughts I had after reading this reportage, in connection to this study.

"The trouble-making and threatening parents bring about a sense of stress and pressure to the work of teachers."

"The teachers were asked what do they think is the origin of problems in schools. The many problems in 'the need for adult contact' and too large classes were main reasons found from their answers."

"Parents suing the schools [sub-heading]. It was startling result to notice that class-teachers confront a lot of disturbing behaviour from the parents. Over 60% of class-teachers had experienced taunting, defaming or scolding from parents during this year ..."

"Physical violence at school is more often directed towards female than to male teachers. Usually the harassment from parents was also directed to female teachers."

"Erkki Kangasniemi [the president of OAJ] thinks, that when there are problems at home, the parents can project their emotional confusion to the teacher, and they can sometimes quite blindly defend their children."

"For Sari Sarkomaa [minister of education] intimidation of teachers by parents is a serious phenomenon. She proposes that schools and homes should collaborate more closely."

— In the beginning of the school-year it would be good to go through the rules and practises of the school, for example inform them how to contact the teachers. ... In the most extreme cases, for example if parents have serious mental problems and when the problems at home are flooding into the school through doors and windows, we must take care that the teachers are not left alone. The specialists from social and health sectors should join in, that would be important."

"The minister of education emphasises that schools should practise zero tolerance to all kind of mobbing and harassment."

The main article is accompanied by several inserts. They are interviews with experienced teachers. In one of them special needs teacher Ulla Saarinen speaks

about the home-school situation. She does not agree with the idea that the causes of the disturbing behaviour of pupils are to be found primarily in their homes.

"She sees that the cause is our more and more challenging and demanding society.

— More and more effectiveness is demanded from everyone, in work, in hobbies and even in consuming. Because of all this the parents have less time for their children.

— Dialogue between home and school makes things better, it is even prescribed in law. Sometimes parents try to interfere with the work in school, usually based on the comments of their children. The pupils of today have strong opinions, but after all their point of view is one of a child. For constructive dialogue we need openness, adults and professionals. Direct attacks will not help."

To comment this article, one must start from the most notable feature. It is the projection as general reactions to everything teachers find problematic: inadequate funding of the schools, too much work, no respect, troublesome and restless pupils saturated with entertainment, TV and computer games, too large classes with special needs pupils consuming all time, interfering and harassing parents, the busy modern life... This was also noticed immediately in the response from the readers. Maybe this waked up personal school-time memories from those good old times when the teacher was always right, no matter what the situation really was? Would it be too much to ask for teachers to look in the mirror too, why are they accusing everyone and everything else, the readers asked in many ways.

Previously in this study I have presented the dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber. For him being is always being in relations. They are either true, connecting I-You or distance-keeping I-it relations. The comments of exhausted teachers reveal very strong an I-it relation to the people and the cultural situation around them. They are not ready to look in an understanding way at the situation of parents or pupils. The interviewed special needs teacher is the only exception, she does not blame the parents, but refers to the overly challenging busy life *they* are living. Does not the life around the school surround the teachers as well?

The results of this survey are alarming as presented, but also in another way: what really, after all, is the concept and idea of school and the territory of education held by teachers?

It is striking how alienated and "reality-repellent" the teachers seem to be try to find illustrations of this from the quotes.... Maybe I would say obviously it is the exhaustion and feeling of being under pressure from every direction? Teachers are in a profession where a certain sensitivity is a crucial ability. Here I repeat what I said before: Teachers are working with their whole personality. Very often the price they pay for this is that in a way the overgrown sensitivity "intrudes" into areas where it does not belong, for instance into the collaboration with parents. Then every divergent idea or observation, any statement can in a hypersensitive manner be interpreted and rejected as criticism, even as an attack. There they are then at the treshold, in front of the possibility of true encounter, but immediately get lost in I-it relations, like Martin Buber has explained.

Sociologist Thomas Ziehe has said, that school is inevitably alien and strange to the social environment in which it is located (Suoranta, 1994). There is special built-in stiffness, or friction in the changing of school compared to flexibility of the surrounding society. This idea of strangeness can be connected to the three models of school Sakari Saukkonen presented in his dissertation about reviving the autonomy of the teacher (2003, 108).

The first school-gestalt is the "unquestionable school" with strong hidden agenda behind the explicit curriculum. Frontal ex cathedra-style teaching is practised and pupils are sitting in rows. Rules, timetables, order, discipline, tradition of the school and rituals can be even more important than the substances taught in lessons. The school as a system knows everything, or it *is* in itself the answer to everything. The illusionary Education with big capital E is practised, this school believes that it is well above – or beyond – all earthly worries and superficialities. School is seen as transferring conventions ad traditions (mostly defined by the school itself).

The second model is "the imitating school". It wants to connect to the surrounding society, but ends up taking in popular cultural horizons: momentary trends and tendencies are guiding this weathervane-school. Trendy projects follow one another. Pupils (and their parents) are seen as consumers, end-users of different services the school provides. The actual client is the "law" of market economy. This school does not question or challenge, it obeys before even told to.

Saukkonen's third model is not a caricature unless idealism itself is considered to be a caricature. It is the "school of inspiration". There teachers and pupils devote their time (plenty of it) to the study of humanity, to contemplation and to work and efforts. It is situated in the middle of the life-world and the high ideals of humanity are not merely mirrors or filters, but practised everyday in encounters with different aspects of life. The focus of this school is on the emancipation of human capacities.

Saukkonen wants to overcome the atomistic late-modern situation with the combination of autonomous, alert teachers; true contemporaries and at the same time carriers of the most sustainable traditions of education:

"... This means that school should not be based on a fundamental orientation to popular cultural horizons. There is and should be a structural distance between school and culture. The distance between school and culture is not to be considered a disadvantage. Instead we should recognise it and emphasise it. ... new sound pedagogical perspectives may open up through combining a contemporary sociological analysis of late modern society, pupils' views and pedagogically healthy aspects of the more rigid school of the past. Educators should not forget the importance of continuity in educational practices, but at the same time they should be open to contemporary analyses of present-day culture." (Saukkonen, 2003, p. 113)

CONCLUSIONS

Numerous concluding thoughts have already been presented in the chapters. Here I list only some central issues.

Parent-teacher collaboration

In this study I have scanned the critical points and presented some useful new ways to re-think and rearrange this issue in schools. Schools should observe more closely and seriously the contemporary life-world situation of children, families and the education in general.

The dialogical and civic competence of teachers seems to be one key question, according to the experiences of interviewees. The cornerstones from Rudolf Steiner's ideas about parent-teacher collaboration could form together with the political-emancipatory ideas of civil society and dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber a new theoretical ground for gaining competence in relations for both parents and teachers. The quality of dialogue is the quality of the community, as Buber reminds.

The dialogue philosophy of Martin Buber has almost same essential qualities as Rudolf Steiner's social ideas. For example the reformist ideas Steiner presented for parent-school collaboration and his social law are very much related to the thinking of Buber.

Foreldreakademi

The concept of Foreldreakademi is "ready to ship", it could serve the whole Steiner Waldorf school movement. The strengths of Foreldreakademi are in the awareness of cultural situation, in understanding the situation of families and in atmospheric "heart" qualities, i.e. respectful, honest and anti-authoritarian practises. Cleverly the child-observation is chosen to fundament of weekend courses, exercises and discussions as a connecting element between teachers and parents.

Cornerstones

The established practises of Steiner Waldorf schools need serious re-evaluation. This list, with ideas from Rudolf Steiner can serve as check-list. I argue that it contains the fundamental values of parent-teacher collaboration for this alternative pedagogical movement. We can easily let time wear out many of our so-called traditions, but these have outstanding perennial quality. And it is astonishing that they were presented already for the first Waldorf school.

1. Understanding and empowering support from parents to teacher.
2. Non-authoritarian relationships between parents and teacher.
3. Communicate in clear and understandable way.
4. Respect – not criticism – towards parents, home and family situation
5. Take care of the authoritativeness of the teacher in the eyes of the children.
6. Mutual heart-to-heart relationships.

Open questions and ideas for further research

- Teacher education and competence for collaboration with parents
- New insights for conflict management
- Passive and withdrawing parents

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1 Interview with Godi Keller

This discussion is included here in its full length, because it has relevance to the whole study. On one Saturday afternoon in Oslo we had a thorough conversation about Foreldreakademi. We sat in Godi Keller's office at Rudolf Steinerhøyskole. The discussion was recorded and this is the transcription of it.

(Both participants are discussing with to them foreign language, English. The free flow of speech and thoughts is saved, no detailed language correction was made.)

Esa Mäkinen (EM): In your book the fall of the authority is very central idea, a starting point and you describe the situation of educators- both teaches and parents -very clearly starting from this point. What to say about those who very eagerly blame the parents, have they misunderstood this cultural situation, or what is it about?

Godi Keller (GK): Maybe they have just misinterpreted the situation, or are giving an answer that is not at all fruitful. Because of course you can say like that if someone is insecure, not sure about what they should do. But then after all we have to find a way to come through that to help each other. And the worst possible position is to be arrogant and tell them "You know, we are professionals, and you are not". The division between them and us is not true and it is not useful.

EM: People are seeking for the authority, although it's time is over... Longing for good old times.

GK: This is interesting but a little dangerous state. Pedagogy is a living matter, children are changing every time, circumstances are changing. We do not need some gurus to tell what is good or bad, is it acceptable to have television in the toilet, or television as toilet and so on. This I not at all in accordance with Waldorf pedagogy. We just should take together steps towards understanding the children. To go in solidarity together towards it.

So my question [after describing the situation/ EM] was what is the motive of the parents and then I thought that their motive is the motive of the heart, they love their children, all normal parents do. They want the best for them. And this is astonishing for the Waldorf point of view, because this pedagogy works through the heart. This is central motive that we through these heart forces connect to will and the thinking. And it has to come to harmonise (the child) through this.

This is the real meeting point of loving, caring parents and us as professional pedagogues. This is where I always start my courses: by emphasising this common point. I'm not just explaining it in intellectual way. I will also have in the room the feeling that we are here in respect and for the love to the child – this is to warm up the situation in a way. Because, you know, the conflicts are always so cold. The dialogue is in stagnation, there is no dialogue at all or the situation is not equal – like when parents meet someone who is patronising them.

When the warmth of the heart takes over, when it begins to live in the room it just starts to happen something in the room and people really want to go on and on. It is not me or my "wisdom".

GK: In parent evenings you can always see that there are some people who are very intellectual – teachers or parents, they criticise usually something and then there are parents who invent something that has the element of heart, or warmth involved. This is where the title for my book came, it is very serious, not just some sentimental title.

EM: Usually schools do mostly informative parent work, where we can not see "heart", or true dialogue; not having this understanding and meeting idea. That kind of work has a hegemonic "from above" -attitude.

GK: This was possible in times of our parents for example, when there was big consensus about pedagogical questions. But how could you trust now if you can not feel trust to yourself! We have this tendency of being suspicious. If the teachers are hiding their motives and just ask for blind trust, it is not working anymore. You really have to be communicative what you are doing and why you are doing like you do

For example in eurhythmy this is interesting. Very often the eurhythmists say something like "Oh we can not talk about this, it is not possible, you just have to feel it" and so on. But the reality is that you have to communicate in some way or another, that is the task.

EM: Can Foredreakademi reach those who are not true believers, can it help with passivity and withdrawal that is so common among parents?

GK: No, I can not say that it reaches.

There are several groups, not just active and passive ones. There are for instance conscious, supportive people, they are maybe anthroposophists themselves, they are usually very few. Then there are as conscious, as supportive, but not anthroposophist parents. To begin to spend your evenings studying and discussing is already a threshold, they are willing and that is something to respect. I really can not say that I speak to my "community" only.

But still you are right, we can not reach that way those who maybe would come to listen, who are interested in an another way, but are not ready to join the process. There is an individual step to take: to join or not. You have to choose it. No forcing, it is not possible.

But often the participants are spreading the word and new people come to listen, it has to be possible. Then they come and maybe they are touched by the atmosphere and stay or not. We simply have to work with those who want to work this way.

EM: Often we can see that there is too much trust for organisation, the three-folding is mentioned as the ideal model so easily. This is not the level of real meeting.

GK: This old way is also built upon the old consensus idea, that does not exist anymore. The education has to be co-operation. There are so many elements in the life of pupils and he families that we have to be aware of and the only way to do this is to be in active co-operation with he parents. We have very many almost perfect teachers who meditate in the morning, dress properly, freshly go to the

classroom with a fairy tale prepared and so on. They tell their story in a fully artistic way, but they do not know that maybe half of the pupils in front of them have already been watching for example violent Japanese animation in the morning before coming to the school. This is where we need co-educators to show us the everyday reality.

It has to be dialogue between co-educators, not dialogue between some specialists and customers, who are buying some education product from these specialists.

And mostly the teachers have no reason to be arrogant, because there is always something to learn, the world changes around them and it is also their world that changes. The parents have desperate need to know how is life now for their children at school. We as teachers should have that too, "Tell me something, how are you?"

EM: Teachers love the authority principle in their way, they can have a lot of nostalgic longing back to the good old times. The life and the world "out there" can be seen as problems...

GK: ... and for example escaping into the subject is one way too. I once was involved in a situation in grade 8 where the teacher had totally lost control. She escaped to the subject. I advised her to forget the subject for next five weeks or so and concentrate to find out who are these people. And also in everyday work you should be able to spend about twenty minutes or half an hour to discuss with them, make a bridge -it will make different atmosphere in the room, they know that you are interested in their life.

Know each other, then you can feel respect. It is the same with the parents. It is common to say that the teachers have lost their respected status. You can try to gain respect by inflating ego with this "I know and you shut up" -gesture. But the better way is to grow interest to people, to be interested of each other.

After puberty, in Waldorf schools, we deal with the truth, it is not just some element that has to be present, but it really is the whole picture.

EM: But do students get any competence about how to deal with the parents?

GK: No, I don't think they get. This is a big problem. Here in Rudolf Steinerhøyskolen we have only few elements in the curriculum. But what kind of competence would that have to be? Competence in dialogue? Of course, the art of listening, yes. But understanding of the modern culture serves that purpose too. What is going on in the world – that is teacher competence too.

EM: The home and the school are in a way quite marginal players in the life of the child or the teenager -friends and commercial youth culture play a bigger role than we are ready to admit. Isn't this co-operation of parent-teacher silly, like San Marino and Liechtenstein joining their forces to change the direction of the Europe...

GK: Yes, it is – and it is not, because we are role models, and they look up to us. They turn away if there is nothing to respect, admire or stay with us if we really are worth of it.

The way the adults are looking to the world is important model to give. They are looking at us, we can not directly teach this, it is mostly indirect influence.

The forces of market grow stronger, when parents are withdrawing

EM: Parents should be encouraged to take over, take the position that belongs to them beside their children.

GK: Meet the child with interest, then you are interesting to them. Meet the child with ignorance and you get ignored. Here it starts.

[--pause in the recording--]

GK: Parents should be confident that they can speak freely.

It is sometimes difficult...

... It is not always what is said, what I say, it is the atmosphere in the room.

The parents are confident that they can tell others about their life, they can listen to others. They should never be blamed for anything. This really is the atmospheric quality we need.

I say for schools that it is important to find those who can make and maintain that atmosphere, warmth should never be abused in the situation or afterwards.

Parents should be able to activate other parts of themselves than only brain, this requires a special preparation.

EM: But you also have to be careful not to hit with this "love and warmth"? I mean that you really should be able to tell them – perhaps also in conceptual way – that this is the basic approach and reasonable element here. Like you said about your starting point, how parents love their children.

GK: Yes, this is nothing overly sentimental, this must be underlined. Blah, it really is just sickening to drown in "here we are together in this love and so on" -thing.

Rudolf Steiner has in many of his advices and remarks same idea: you could try this and this, he says and explains why and in the end he says something like "but never without a loving eye" or "never without warmth in your heart."

My way to have this loving eye is storytelling, I tell little stories about my experiences as a teacher. Also humour, with the glimpse in the eye is good. Humour with its paradoxes is a good element too. If it is not irony or sarcasm you can have this warmth together, when you laugh. This is totally something opposite to the sentimental, overloaded way.

EM: Sometimes too personal aspects, like an intimate story from the life of some family or child, can prevent discussion too. If the emotional-sentimental, heavily laden element is too much emphasised, then the story is very unquestionable. If you present a question after that, or say something that has another perspective, still far from being really critical, it is so easily taken as something cold or insulting, hurting. The use of very deeply personal aspects can be seen as manipulation too.

GK: Yes, but pure observation is not questioning. That should be noticed. Here we really come to the central element of the courses, which is observing. Observing the child in a proper way, describing the child with respect and warmth. Not blindfolded by sentiments or criticism.

Just describe and let it stay for a while, you can look at it. Then do interpretations. After that it is often useful to take a step back and try to look if it is also possible to see it on the opposite way.

I take an example: In one conflict where I was involved, there was a child, who had problems and his parents had totally lost their confidence with one teacher.

"He only has problems in her lessons", they said. I asked what does this tell for them. "Yes, this teacher is a bad teacher", they immediately stated. I asked them, could it be on the opposite way, that the boy is just more relaxed and open in especially her lessons. This opposite statement made them think it again; "Oh, maybe it is so!" After that it was much easier to go on with the discussion.

To go back one step and re-look at the situation, it is often opening up locked states.

EM: But this "lets go back, wait, look again" is very strange for people nowadays... We are not observers. Sometimes we start formulating an opinion before we have even read or heard the end of a sentence. And being ready to check one's opinions or interpretations, it is considered weakness or like being a weathervane.

GK: This possibility to reconsideration is in fact the characteristic feature of being an adult, compared to a child. You have lived some years, you can have an overview.

Being adult is that you do not loose yourself in every situation, you can wait and see. This calmness must radiate to the children too in crisis.

To be adult is not primarily the ability of being responsible of yourself, but of the others. That means that you have some kind of fundament within yourself, that fundament we can call the emancipated I. With that fundament you can try to

keep every crisis a little bit outside, so that they are not suffocating you. That should be able to be managed with crisis of one's own children too.

We can also look at a child in the age of 2-3 years: always or very easily screaming "No, no, no..."

We need good way and examples to demonstrate this ability; the grown-up (fullvuxen) quality of not jumping into judgements so easily and fast, but to step back and look at the situation again; maybe something went unnoticed first and so on.

EM: What does it serve to be so much involved with parents work? This is the question I've been asked many times in several occasions -mostly by colleagues, and last but not not least by myself. I usually answer that just being together in many simple ways is like saving money in the bank. It is for the bad times. When the crisis comes – yes, in real life of a teacher today it is when, not if – it is easier to grasp the essential early enough and manage to go through the crisis in some constructive way rather than distracting everything.

GK: I understand. The difference of my position is that I'm not involved like the teachers are, I'm an outsider, a lecturer talking more in general terms. This is sometimes good, sometimes not so good.

I avoid such positions, where I feel that I have to defend something that I think is not right or that I can not speak for. When the discussion turns into actual cases and I hear someone criticising a certain teacher or something like that, I withdraw a little and say something general about the need to solve this kind of situations.

EM: Do you make it clear, that you are not a hired consultant by the teachers and you are not there to defend the teachers?

GK: Yes, very clear. I do not even defend Waldorf pedagogy in the first place, although it is always present in the situation: we are at Waldorf school and the method we are using is Waldorf pedagogical. I'm for the understanding of the children in our time.

EM: Is it the board of the school association or the teachers who invites you?

GK: Normally it is the board, the elected democratic leadership of the parents in the school. But there is always someone or some people who are active and you need that kind of contact, fathers or mothers of the idea to have this kind of activity in the school community.

From this start can later spring sustainable independent work, an established element to the community. In Ås where we have worked very long, they have been having this dialogue between parents independently for very long time, and they want to go on and on by themselves. This is really very good for the school.

It is very interesting that this group is very mixed. There are some very experienced parents with five children in the school and then there are new parents, newcomers

EM: Could this process in a way radiate something to the whole school too? On the personal level this gained understanding is obvious: now I understand and know more about this school of my children, I can see the meaning of this and that practise, trust the teachers and so on. This is what individual parents can have to say to themselves and the others. Also the teacher who have been involved can have something similar to say on their behalf. But I think there is certainly a possibility to have also the element of change and improvement in the whole body of the school organism: more confident and conscious parents who know how and why it is meaningful to trust and support the school, the relations between people strengthened. I mean that this explicit, common understanding processed in Foreldreakademi can have an elevating effect, it can become an impulse to the well-being in the school.

GK: I have no figures or any systematic follow-up about this. But sometimes teachers and parents have told me about improvement in atmosphere and that it has even gone through to the pupils. This sense of life, that there is something living in the community, is very interesting.

EM: You have been working with parents in many other countries too. Once you said that these current questions and feelings and situation of the parents are similar in every countries. It was very interesting to hear that. So it is the same in Norway, Latvia, Slovenia although the countries are so different in many ways. One would not expect that, in arrogance we here often can see especially those Eastern European countries as a backward societies, living like we did decades ago...

GK: No. Not at all, they are listening the same music, they have the same movies, reading the same novels, wearing same clothes, having the same idols... We are living in the same cultural situation very much. The tradition is different of course, the background where we come from. For example people in the Baltic states are now quite atheistic, whereas in Hungary and Slovenia they are usually deeply catholic. There is difference although they had basically the same communist rule for decades.

Also the gap between generations can be noticed: my parents were also living in a certain state of strong consensus structure in their society, as they did in the Eastern Europe. I must say that it really is the same in regard to families, too. The parents have the same situations here and everywhere, this insecurity, for instance. And when I tell them that this is the same in Norway and Switzerland, they are very astonished.

The economical situation is of course another element. In some countries only the wealthy people can have their children in Waldorf schools. That makes a different profile for the school.

I can imagine that it would be interesting to let parents from different countries listen to other parents: how do they live, what are their questions.

There is really something universal and new going on.

Appendix 2 Questionnaire for Parents

Questionnaire for teachers and parents about parent's evenings

This questionnaire is part of my studies in masters course in Waldorf education. I am writing my thesis about the co-educating community of adults around the children; parents and teachers. This is a quality-project at our school, but also part of international initiative to develop new ways of co-operation. I would be glad if You could use some time to answer my questions and comment some statements.

Please feel free to write comments in the free space after each section, if you find it necessary to define more closely your opinions.

All Your answers will be handled confidentially and no personal identification information is gathered. But in case You would like to participate in personal interview, please send me your contact information. Please return the questionnaires before 15.11.2007

Thank You for Your answers!

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**RETURN TO SCHOOL OFFICE OR MAIL TO
 Esa Mäkinen , Knuusitie 28, 04130 SIPOO**

A. BACKGROUND QUESTIONS

Please give some information about your current status as parent or teacher.

1. Age:
2. I am: father mother teacher
 (please fill in 2. separate questionnaires, if you want to answer as both teacher and parent)
3. I have a child/children in class
 1-3 4-6 7-9 10-12+13
4. How many years have you been involved in Waldorf education?
 (Children at kindergarten, own education, active interest, work experience etc.)
5. Who from Your family usually attends the parents evenings?
 the father the mother
 both parents none
6. Do You have any other occupations in the school besides being a parent:
 member of the school board
 member of some working group
 active in some other voluntary work
 teacher or member of staff (office, kitchen etc.)
7. Space for Your free comments:

B. STATEMENTS

Here are several statements concerning the co-operation between the teacher and the parents. Please cross the number that is the best match to your opinion or experience.

(1: never correct, 2: sometimes correct, 3: usually correct, 4: always correct.)
You don't have to answer all statements.

Concerning parent's evenings:

1. I like parent's evenings 1 2 3 4

2. I get good information about what is going on in the classroom
1 2 3 4

3. I get good advice to my parenting or teaching
1 2 3 4

4. We have good discussions 1 2 3 4

5. Teacher talks too much 1 2 3 4

6. Some parents talk too much
1 2 3 4

7. I usually sit quietly and listen
1 2 3 4

8. Everyone is welcome to speak up
1 2 3 4

9. We can talk freely about difficult things too
1 2 3 4

10. The questions are answered and problems solved.
1 2 3 4

11. The evenings are well prepared 1 2 3 4

12. The atmosphere is encouraging 1 2 3 4

13. Some parents "test" or question the competence of teacher
1 2 3 4

14. We have conflicts and serious disagreements
1 2 3 4

15. I would like to "go deeper" in the Waldorf education
1 2 3 4

16. The overall perspective is "problem-centered"
1 2 3 4

17. Space for Your free comments:

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Esa Mäkinen , Knuusitie 28, 04130 SIPOO