

TEACHERS' ATTITUDES TO PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

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A random sample of lay primary school teachers in Dublin city completed a postal questionnaire on parent-teacher relations. From their replies it would appear that there is not a great deal of contact of any kind between parents and such teachers in the city. There are few formal parent-teacher organizations. Fifty per cent of respondents said they would like more contact with parents but half of these thought parents would not like more contact with them. Informal contact with parents was the most frequently preferred form of parent-teacher relations, formal parent-teacher associations were least preferred. Teachers in poor centre city areas had least contact with parents and most frequently wished for more contact.

The last ten years have seen great growth in the number and quality of studies which explore the relationship between the home and the school. These studies have investigated both psychological and sociological factors and their inter-relationship (cf 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6). Their findings are among the best grounded and the most revealing in the whole of educational inquiry. We now realize, as never before, that the child's progress in school depends to an extraordinary degree on what he brings with him from his home the day he enters school, and also on the stimulus and support his home gives him throughout his schooldays.

Despite the wealth of evidence from abroad on the importance of home-school relations, the topic has hitherto been largely neglected in Ireland. The present paper reports a beginning in examining parent-teacher relationships in the primary schools of Dublin city. Its scope is limited in several respects. It treats only of what teachers have to say on the matter. Further, it depends solely on the views and practice of lay teachers in public primary schools. Finally it is limited to such information as could be gathered by means of a postal questionnaire. It does not attempt to evaluate the educational effects of different forms of parent-teacher contacts.

More precisely, the aims of the study were to obtain information on the following topics:

- (a) the form and extent of existing parent-teacher relationships

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- (b) the existence of parent-teacher associations or groups
- (c) the attitude of teachers to change in parent-teacher relationships
- (d) the form of relationship with parents which teachers favoured

In passing, it may be noted that public primary schools in Ireland (called 'national schools') are run jointly by the state and the churches. The state controls the curriculum, with the exception of the lesson on religion, it also shoulders the major part of the cost of building, part of the cost of maintenance, and pays the teachers' salaries. On the other hand, the churches, through a local manager, usually the parish priest or rector, appoint the teachers (subject to the approval of the state), supervise the teaching of religion, and accept responsibility for the remainder of the expenses incurred in building and maintaining the school. In effect, the system gives little place to parents in the running of the school.

METHOD

A random sample of eleven per cent was made of all lay national school teachers in Dublin city in the year 1966-67. A questionnaire was sent by post to each of the 160 teachers in the sample, and replies were received from 151 (103 women and 48 men). Thus 94 per cent of the sample replied. The questionnaire, the scope of which was wider than the matter discussed in the present paper, inquired about the relationships between a teacher and the parents of the pupils in his class in the period between 1st July 1966 and early December of the same year.

RESULTS

(a) *Form and extent of existing parent-teacher relationships*

Table 1 shows the number of teachers who had met parents and where they had met them. Only 25 teachers (17 per cent) had met most of the parents. Almost all meetings with parents occurred at school.

TABLE 1
PERCENTAGES OF TEACHERS REPORTING CONTACT WITH
PARENTS BY PLACE OF MEETING

		Parents contacted outside school		
		Very few parents	Some parents	Most parents
Parents visited the school	Very few parents	37	2	-
	Some parents	35	3	-
	Most parents	13	3	17

The relationship between residential area and the number of parents who visited the school is set out in Table 2

TABLE 2

PERCENTAGES OF TEACHERS REPORTING PARENTAL VISITS
TO SCHOOL BY PARENTS' RESIDENTIAL AREA

	Most parents	Some parents	Very few parents	No reply	Total
Poor city area	0	37	54	8	16
Corporation estate	12	37	44	7	50
Privately owned housing	29	41	25	4	34

In general, it will be seen that the poorer the residential district the fewer the number of parents who visited the school. In this connection it is of interest to note that (in their replies to other sections of the questionnaire) more teachers in central city areas (37 per cent) than elsewhere (13 per cent) considered that the 'lack of interest' of parents was a source of frustration in their work.

(b) Parent-teacher associations

Twenty per cent of the respondents (10 per cent men and 25 per cent women) reported that there was some type of parent-teacher association or group in their school. Meetings when held were usually at the beginning of the school year or before First Communion or Confirmation, or before pupils left the primary school.

(c) Teachers' attitude to change

Table 3 gives details of responses to questions concerning change in parent-teacher relationships. Replies are almost equally divided

TABLE 3

DESIRED AMOUNT OF CONTACT WITH PARENTS
(PERCENTAGE REPLIES)

Amount of contact	Men	Women	Total
More than at present	60	46	50
No change	33	53	47
Less than at present	6	1	3

between 'no change' and 'more frequent contacts than at present'. However, it should be noted that fewer women than men teachers want

change Table 4 presents this information in relation to the residential areas where parents lived. The tendency is for more teachers in poor than in better off areas to want increased contact with parents.

TABLE 4

DESIRED AMOUNT OF CONTACT WITH PARENTS BY RESIDENTIAL AREA (PERCENTAGE REPLIES)

	Amount of contact desired (percentage)			Total
	More	No change	Less	
Poor city centre area	63	33	4	16
Corporation estate	56	43	1	50
Privately owned housing	37	59	4	34
Total	50	47	3	100

Teachers were also asked if they thought parents would like more or less contact with teachers. Responses to this question show some interesting differences from responses to the last one. Some 60 per cent thought parents wanted no change, only 28 per cent thought parents desired more contact with teachers. Of the 50 per cent who said they desired more contact with parents (Table 3), half of these felt that parents did not desire more contact with them. It would be interesting to investigate whether this constituted faulty perception on the part of the teachers. Further analysis revealed that teachers felt fewer parents from poor than from wealthy areas would like more frequent meetings with teachers. Thus, in general, it is the teachers of the poorer children who are most anxious to meet parents, but these teachers also feel that the parents are least anxious to meet them.

(d) Form of relationship with parents favoured by teachers

Teachers were asked to rank six specific forms of parent-teacher relationships in the order of their choice. The order of preference for different types of relationship was as follows:

- 1 No special arrangement — teacher to see parents if they call to school
- 2 Period of ordinary school time to be allotted to meeting parents

- 3 Special meetings, once or twice annually, of parents, teachers and managers
- 4 Teachers available to meet parents in school one evening per month
- 5 Formal parent-teacher associations
- 6 No opportunity for parents to meet teachers

It is interesting to note in these preferences that the more informal types of contact with parents are favoured. The very low rating of formal parent-teacher associations is also noteworthy.

CONCLUSION

There are a number of interesting implications in these findings. One is that parent-teacher relations appear to cause greater problems for teachers in poor centre city areas than elsewhere. Teachers in these areas have less than average contact with parents and are keener than average to extend such contacts. In addition, a considerable number of teachers in these areas see parents' lack of interest as a source of frustration in their work. It would thus appear to be a matter of considerable urgency that plans for the improvement of parent-teacher relations in centre-city areas should be developed and indeed discussion of the means whereby such improvements can be effected is under way during the present school year.

The overall impression one receives from this investigation is of teachers working in relative isolation from parents. However, half of the teachers in this survey desired more contact with parents, apparently they have informal contact in mind rather than parent-teacher associations. In view of this, it might perhaps be wiser to extend informal contact between parents and teachers rather than to set up formal teacher-parent associations.

One can only speculate as to why teachers showed such lack of enthusiasm for parent-teacher associations. It may be that they fear that parents might attempt to dictate on the work of the school. Alternatively, teachers may feel that there is little for parents and teachers to discuss since the Irish primary school system can be characterized as one of very strong central control in which the planning of school works rests with the state. Obviously these and many other questions cannot be answered from the present investigation, but they are raised by it. It

would have been particularly interesting to have sounded opinion in a complementary sample of parents. Indeed, in an area so important for all educational advance it would seem imperative to pursue the investigation which has only been begun in this study.

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