

## Chapter 2

# PUBLIC AND PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOLING

*Based on the evidence from the countries taking part in this study, this chapter provides insights on how parents and the wider public perceive schooling. The evidence shows that education ranks as a high priority among the public, despite the often negative messages of media coverage. There tends to be greater satisfaction with schooling than might be expected, and the nearer that people are involved – such as parents commenting on their own children’s schooling – the higher the satisfaction tends to be. Dissatisfaction is voiced more by the parents with higher educational attainment and by urban parents compared with their rural counterparts. Different individuals and groups have demanding, not necessarily compatible expectations, giving schools the problem of accommodating these different agendas. If schooling is to become more “demand-led”, educators and policy makers should know more about people’s expectations; this review shows the value of understanding perceptions of schooling and suggests the need to strengthen the evidence base.*

The perception of schooling by different stakeholders provides important indications of how well policy and provision respond to different demands. It provides critical insight into how choices are made and voices exercised in education. Analysing those perceptions thus helps to clarify what demands actually are, how stakeholders express them, and whose are actually being taken into account. Which groups remain silent and what are the reasons for them not giving voice for their demands? Are they satisfied with the current provision of education? How well is their “voice” getting through to the media, the wider public, and to policy makers? In providing insights on these questions, the country reports on which this study is based

are mostly focused on parental perceptions while providing some insights on more general public reactions (which are discussed first).

This chapter brings together information from the case study countries on perceptions and attitudes. This was the subject of OECD scrutiny in the 1990s as part of the international indicators programme (INES, see OECD, 1995). Given the subjective basis of the data, it is a complex area in which to produce international comparative indicators. At the national level, several systems (such as Austria, Denmark and Finland among the case study countries), have organised surveys to monitor the viewpoints of various groups of stakeholders. Feedback from these surveys is then intended to inform educational policy-making. How and how far this process of informing policy with evidence about attitudes is actually done is a moot question when a system purports to be “demand-led”. An aspect of responding to “voice” might well be taking direct account of opinion about what is judged to be important in education and about how well the goals held by people are being achieved. The question arises then about how evidence about attitudes is actually taken on board in different OECD countries as well as what its appropriate contribution should be.

### **Schooling in the public eye**

The countries in this study vary in the extent to which demand is used in the public debate in different countries. The thrust of the debate is not always the same. In Denmark and Finland, they have focused on equity questions with a broad consensus that relative uniform provision best serves the needs of children growing up in the country. In the United States, the current debate on educational policy is increasingly focusing on the question “whether the state as a monopoly provider of educational services can respond effectively to increasingly rigorous demands placed on the public school system by parents, employers and others” (Plank, 2005). Certain countries have witnessed an intensive public debate on greater diversification of public education (discussed in detail in the next chapter), allowing for different types of schools accommodating different student ability levels or parents’ educational preferences.

Common across these countries, with their different traditions, systems and priorities, are the growing demands being made on education as a whole. Education is increasingly in the public eye, which is both recognition of its importance but also a source of pressure for those in the front-lines of responsibility for schooling. There is an increasing awareness in all countries that educational investments lead to significant returns in terms of economic growth and overall societal development. At the same time, the

debate on what society gets in return for these financial investments has intensified and has led to growing demands for the accountability of schools.

Attention to evidence regarding perceptions of education, including its priority compared with other sectors making demands on limited public resources, permits discussion of whether the generalised demands placed on education are matched by readiness to support its development. The perception of education as a priority policy sector varies but on the whole it is well up on the public's list. In Japan and most of the Central European countries, education ranks highly compared with other areas of public policy. The reports covering the countries in Central Europe in particular point out that job security and career advancement have become key motives for demanding more extensive schooling. Most school systems have responded by considerably expanding the scope of secondary and vocational education. The Czech Republic among this group of countries providing evidence for this study seems somewhat less positive in measured public support, but even here a majority of the adult population wants to see increased state funding for schooling and higher levels of educational attainment, which are regarded as prerequisites of modernising the country. Survey data from the late 1990s suggested that approximately a quarter of the Czech population was indeed willing to pay higher taxes, provided that those resources are invested in the further development of education.

In Finland, educational institutions are usually ranked towards the top when measuring citizens' confidence in public services. Attitudes differ nevertheless according to social status. Those with vocational education and in blue-collar occupations feel that comprehensive schools function well and criticise reforms as one-sided and hasty. Conversely, those with an academic background and in upper-level white-collar occupations were more likely to criticise the levelling tendency, being altogether more positive about school reforms leading to greater differentiation. Wragg and Jarvis (2003) report that in England education has consistently come second only to health care when survey respondents are asked to choose their top priorities from a list of ten areas. The public level of support for more money for education has, with minor fluctuations, increased over the past two decades. A 2002 survey identified secondary education as the sector most in need of improvement and as the sector of education which should benefit from any additional funding (*ibid.* and Continental Research, 2003). Special education is also singled out as in need of particular support.

The Japanese case interestingly also highlights generational differences in the perception of schooling. According to a "National Survey of Lifestyle Preferences", those born in the 1940s and 1950s assign greater importance to education, whereas those born in the 1960s and 1970s are more satisfied with the current state of schooling. This finding raises the possibility of

dissonance between the level of expectation and the level of satisfaction that could lead to disenchantment among the older population.

Parents comprise an important section of the overall population and their views are discussed in more detail below. It is to be expected that they will be most favourable to increasing public support for education as this directly benefits their own children. On the basis of these different findings, however, there is a general level of support for education compared with other potential sources of expenditure, not only among parents. An image of taxpayer “flight” or unwillingness to support education is not the problem it might appear from some political or media coverage: demands are high and the public tends to be a demanding one but this has not significantly dented support. Even where there is through-time evidence, as in England, far from having fallen compared with the mythical “good old days”, support for education seems if anything to have risen.

### *Priorities within education*

This study also offers some insights regarding what the priorities within education should be, though parental perceptions specifically are discussed in more detail below. To prepare students for an economy and a labour market increasingly operating on a global scale seems to be a major public concern across all countries. As a consequence, the teaching of foreign languages and ICT skills are increasingly seen as priorities. Both in Finland and in the Czech Republic, people are seriously concerned about the educational system’s ability to educate for self-confidence and independence. These kinds of finding serve to balance any blanket assumption that there is a general clamour for more emphasis on the learning and reproduction of factual knowledge as compared with developing understanding and independence. Data in the Finnish Education Barometer, a survey from the latter 1990s about attitudes towards education, shows that opinions about the aims of education differ between rural and urban populations (as do satisfaction levels – see below): urban residents assign greater importance to qualities like the development of self-confidence in students and the preparation for further studies than people living in rural areas.

Recent surveys from England also provide an insight into the priorities for education as seen by the wider population as well as views on how positive change might be brought about. Smaller class size tends to be considered the most effective way of improving both primary and secondary schools (Wragg and Jarvis, 2003). “Better-quality teachers” was the second-most popular measure and others selected by between 10 and 20% respondents were: greater emphasis on developing the child’s skills and

interests; and more resources for buildings, books and equipment. For secondary schools, more preparation for jobs was selected by 12% of respondents. These findings have remained broadly stable over two decades.

Respondents were fairly evenly divided in their predictions about standards in the future. About a quarter thought standards would be better and 29% that they would be worse (Continental Research, 2003). The five most frequently selected issues on which respondents thought the government should concentrate in order to raise standards in primary and secondary schools were: better discipline/behaviour, reducing class sizes, more teachers, improving the quality of teachers and providing more support for pupils with special needs. The key skills respondents thought that young people should master before leaving school were: English/communications, mathematics/use of numbers, personal development and social skills and ICT. In addition, in answer to an open question “What would it take to make you feel better about education?”, the main issues cited were improvements in discipline/authority, resources, funding and standards.

### *The public’s satisfaction with schools – patterns and correlates*

Several reports, including those from Finland, Poland and the Slovak Republic, point out that employers are among the most critical about the quality of the education provided in their country. In Finland this is especially clear when employers are asked to grade their education system’s ability to meet the changing needs of working life. As direct “receivers” of school graduates they depend to a large extent on the quality and standards of education the system provides and are among the most vocal groups articulating educational demands. More than other sections of society, perhaps, they depend on innovation and change for their professional success and are particularly likely to express demands geared at the content and quality of schools. According to a 2003 report by the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), 34% of employers responding to a survey were not satisfied with the literacy and numeracy skills of school leavers. This broadly fits with the two-thirds of those questioned by Golden (2002) who believed that the quality of local school leavers and of local schools was at least satisfactory. In all countries a significant minority of employers are dissatisfied with the quality of schooling and the range of skills developed in schools, though such criticisms have been a feature of educational commentary since national school systems began.

Across the countries covered in this study, then, those with higher levels of educational attainment are less satisfied with education and they also articulate different demands with regard to the curriculum, laying greater emphasis on personality development and problem-solving skills.

Inhabitants of urban areas express greater dissatisfaction with the current state of education than those living in rural areas, possibly because their proximity to a diversified and demanding labour market makes them more demanding. The lower levels of satisfaction among older people, as for example found in Japan and Finland, might be an important factor as regards the level of political support that schools enjoy in ageing societies and the growing power of older citizens to make their views heard; whether or not this reflects any justified perception of the actual state of education. Women's attitudes towards education tend to be more positive than men's, on the other hand, consistent with the "law" that those who have greater contact with schools and are more involved in schools are more satisfied than those who do not know much about what actually goes on inside them.

Taking these different patterns together, there is not a simple relationship between socio-demographic factors and satisfaction with schooling: both an informed discernment and a proximity to what is going on in education are at play as influential factors and can pull in opposite directions.

Apart from the complexities of the different correlates of satisfaction levels, these findings beg questions about what "satisfaction" means and whether it is an absolute or relative matter. Are the more educated dissatisfied because they believe schools are failing? Or are they more demanding about what schools should achieve and set the bar of success higher? While the pattern of greater dissatisfaction among the more educated is a more or less universal finding, there is no reason to expect the answers to the latter questions to be universal for they will very importantly reflect the actual state of education in different countries which, as underlined by PISA results, still differs widely.

### ***Attitudes, public debate and the media***

The media clearly play a significant role in shaping and generating the public perception of education, and the viewpoints of specific stakeholder groups, but specifying more precisely this role is another matter. The media might be used strategically by particular groups wanting to articulate their demands and to make their voices heard. They can also serve as filters articulating certain demands effectively while downplaying others. Some key issues, such as results of international student assessments, failure in schools, student welfare issues and teacher status and salaries, attract media coverage in all countries.

Local and national media play an increasing role in providing parents and other stakeholders with information about the quality of schooling. In some countries, attainment and survey data (including PISA) are widely

published and stimulate public debate about the quality of schooling, and in some countries are said to even set the political agenda. In addition to international surveys, some media put together and publish school rankings of their own, geared towards potential customers of education. In this context, the role of the media can be “conservative”, because the publication of large-scale evaluation results and attainment data has been used as the basis to argue for returning to “basics”.

Research by Hellström and Hellström (2004) about the coverage of education in the Finnish media over the course of 2002 reveals that violence and the maintenance of order and discipline in schools feature most, closely followed by differences in learning outcomes between schools. Even if comparable surveys do not exist for all of the other countries, several background reports point out that negative incidents and findings get more media coverage than school success stories. For England, an earlier study by Baker (1994) concluded that “the middle-market tabloid newspapers in Britain helped to shape a perception of teachers and state schools that is mostly negative and derisory”. There are many press reports of employers’ views on education, many of which, but not all, are based on anecdotal evidence highlighting negative opinions.

The country reports thus paint a mixed picture about the influence of the media in shaping opinion and demands. On the one hand, increased media coverage of educational issues involves a wider public in schooling and can stimulate necessary public debate about education. On the other hand, negative stories about violence or underachievement can predominate, generating a sense of crisis about the state which schools are now in. From the perspective of education becoming more “demand-sensitive”, these are important if unsurprising considerations. Insofar as what people “want” is shaped by jaundiced reporting and little direct evidence, acting on those wants may result in a skewed and negative decision-making process. A question for education systems then is how to make themselves more transparent – an important element of accountability – precisely as a counterweight to perceptions of crisis, when these are not justified by what is going on in schools. Even parents with readier access to what is taking place inside schools can be ambivalent between these messages and their own experiences, between the negative and the positive.

## **Parental expectations about school education**

This chapter examines country evidence directly relating to parental expectations and satisfaction. Demands depend critically on what is expected from schooling. The more that expectations differ from reality the less satisfied will be the key actors, so that satisfaction reflects both

perceptions of reality and expectations. If schooling is moving towards more “demand-sensitivity” what do we know about what parents expect school systems to achieve, and how well are these being reflected in provision?

When parents are asked about what it is most important to achieve through schooling, two broad groups of responses – the academic/instrumental and the humanistic – emerge in the answers. In the first, schools should teach children, basic knowledge and skills, leading to good academic results and job opportunities; in the second, schools should cultivate children’s humanity and general well-being. How well can schooling meet these expectations of parents, in terms of their internal consistency: does responding to the first cluster necessarily mean neglect of the second or do they reinforce each other? And, how can the system respond to demands and expectations if more is expected of everything – whose expectations should then take primacy and which ones? Again, closer attention to concepts and findings underlines how complex are the elements behind any simple notion of making schools more demand-led.

### ***Divided expectations?***

Among the best evidence on what parents expect of schools in the United States (Plank, 2005) comes from a survey conducted by Public Agenda. According to Public Agenda (1994), parents want schools to “put first things first”. By overwhelming margins, parents believe that schools should place greater emphasis on providing a safe and orderly environment for student learning, and making sure that children master the academic “basics” of reading, writing, and mathematics. Nearly three-quarters of the respondents identified “too much drugs and violence in schools” as a serious problem, and three out of five identified “not enough emphasis on the basics”. This is consistent with the evidence on parents’ choices among schools. Parents who have chosen charter schools typically affirm that their choices are based primarily on teacher quality and the quality of the academic programme, and on the school’s approach to discipline (e.g. Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, 2003; Texas Education Agency, 2003). In this case, the desire for focus on academic results seems unambiguously expressed by parents, and yet the non-cognitive elements regarding behaviour and values are also strong and seen as broadly complementary.

According to a Danish Ministry of Education’s survey (2000 and 2003), parents value personal skills and social values even more than academic ones. They consider the five most important skills to be a desire to learn, reading and writing, social skills, confidence in one’s own potential, and the ability to make decisions. According to 2003 PISA data, the *folkeskolen* is



one of the best educational systems in the world at developing students' desire to learn, co-operation skills and self-confidence. Nevertheless, parents would like to see a greater focus on academic performance and individualised teaching, but not at the cost of "traditional *folkeskolen* values" of which the well-being and a life at ease for the children at school is the core. Danish parents would like to see a more flexible organisation of teaching than they remember from their own schooldays. Greater flexibility in class and group teaching is seen as a means to meet the needs of different learners. Nearly three-quarters of parents want written reports about their child and children's own participation in evaluations is regarded as essential, and exams, tests and marks are given low priority as a means of communication between school and home. A 1997 survey by the Danish Ministry of Education also suggested that all the groups surveyed thought that the requirements made of students were too low: the *folkeskolen* is perceived at being poor at making students accustomed to good working discipline. It is seen as effective in creating an environment in which children thrive but less so at creating enthusiasm and commitment.

Hence even in a system as clearly attached to the humanistic and social aims of schooling as Denmark is, expectations are not straightforwardly about choices between these and more academic ones. In line with the rising expectations about education – a more demanding agenda for schooling related partly to the rising education levels of parents and the public – there is a desire to have all of these more successfully achieved at once. In Japan too, noted for its competitive system and high achievement levels, there seems to be a deal of support for the broader humanistic aims. In a 2002 survey, 5 000 parents in Japan were asked "what they expect of the schools their children attend." Most parents wanted an "education that cultivates humanity and does not overemphasise achievement scores". Asked to what kind of schools they would want to send their children, they responded "schools which train basic skills through a rich natural living experience" (53%); "schools where there is a close partnership between school, home and community and where there are lots of people caring for children", (36%); and "schools catering to different interests and abilities of children" (30%). At the junior high school level, parents wanted schools where students are able to meet different types of teachers and a diversified peer group (36%), schools catering to different interests and abilities of children (32%), and schools having a clear educational philosophy (21%). Items related to a school's potential to develop a student's personality were seen as more important than items related to students' academic achievement.

Parents of elementary school children in Japan have somewhat different expectations from parents of children in junior high schools. "Schools which provide a well-balanced education, with an emphasis upon the acquisition of

basic and fundamental skills”, are seen as a priority by 28% of parents at the elementary level and 17% at the junior high level. “Schools with high educational standards and quality learning environments, that may educate the talented in global standards”, are seen as a priority by 5% at the elementary level and 19% at junior high level. Again, however, the results are complex – such low responses for such apparently important aims of education should perhaps be interpreted in a context where these are adjudged already well achieved.

In the Slovak Republic, parents do not expect schools to prepare for all aspects of life, but they believe that schools should teach an individual to think – providing students with tools through which they can resolve problems. Approximately half of parents feel that the teaching load should be reduced because it is too demanding or too broad, and approximately half of them also think that the content needs to be differentiated better to take individual students’ interests into account. Parents expressed significant approval for the development of so-called key competencies in school. Most parents expressed their consent primarily to the support of communication skills and the use of modern information and communication technologies, the ability to resolve problems critically and creatively and to interpersonal and personal skills. The majority of parents favour the use of alternative teaching methods in schools. This does not add up to a narrow “basics” agenda – clearly academic knowledge has its place, but the focus seems to be more on developing higher-order abilities and the capacity in individuals to live autonomously and with others.

The Austrian monitoring survey asked parents and the population (whose responses are broadly similar) about the importance of a variety of different objectives of schooling. Three objectives are rated as very important by about two thirds or more of respondents: vocational preparation, individual autonomy and general knowledge. At the other end of the spectrum, two objectives are rated “very important” by about only a quarter or less of the population – cultural education and factual knowledge. The remaining items are rated “very important” by around 60% of the population: teamwork, social competence, discipline, motivation for lifelong learning, personality development, value education and gender equity, with media competence highly valued by less than half of the population.

The rating of the majority of objectives has not changed much over time. Three have gained increasing support – personality development, general knowledge and value education – while two have lost ground (individual autonomy and factual knowledge). With regards to the question about what schools should see as their primary responsibility and what should be seen as less important, again parents’ responses do not differ much from those of the wider population. Schools are seen as responsible

for vocational preparation and for general knowledge. Parents are seen as responsible particularly for discipline, individual autonomy and value education, and somewhat less for personality development and social competencies. This is not a simple picture; parents do not expect schools to do everything, and yet most things are judged to be important, there is no simple dichotomy between academic and humanistic goals.

In Poland, research suggested changes took place in parents' ambitions for their children after the political and economic transformation (CBOS, 1996). Parents have been above all determined to protect their children against the negative effects of the economic transformation, particularly unemployment, but also against other forms of social exclusion, for example an inadequate ability to use computers. A study conducted four years later shows that the majority of Polish parents would like their child to get a university education, both daughters (73%) and sons (69%) (OBOP, 2000). In England, too, evidence of the importance attached to good academic results is provided by the common expectation amongst parents that their children will remain in education beyond the statutory leaving age. Batterham (2003), for example, reported that the vast majority of London secondary parents expected their child to stay on in education and training beyond the age of 16. Three-quarters expected their child to go on to higher education. This was most strongly expressed by minority ethnic groups. Parents with a university degree or higher qualification were more confident that their child would go on to higher education (91% compared with 74% for the sample as a whole).

A Hungarian survey on parents' expectations of schooling showed variation in parents' expectations by school type and social position. Parents of lower-level secondary school and vocational training school students in Hungary find the development of competencies and skills most important, but the satisfaction level is only average. The higher the mother's school attainment, the more emphasis is given to the development of problem-solving skills. Less educated parents rather perceive schools as places where information is transferred. Parents living in urban areas assign greater importance to helping students to become highly educated while, as we see below, perceiving schools more negatively than parents in rural areas. More than half of parents living in urban areas in Hungary think that students have to learn too much information instead of learning how different things are connected. More than two-fifths of parents feel that they cannot give the necessary help in learning to their children – a strong correlation with school attainment. Especially parents living in Budapest and the more educated are of the opinion that the school does not teach students to learn.

In Hungary, parents' main expectations are: "developing students' competencies and skills", "preparing students for the next level of

schooling” and “teaching students to learn and developing their problem-solving skills”. Of these, parents are most satisfied with their children’s preparation for the next level of schooling, while they are clearly dissatisfied with the development of problem-solving skills. Transferring information was ranked the highest concerning satisfaction but among priorities it was ranked on the middle of the scale. Parents are also satisfied with education for honesty and morality, which was ranked last but one on the list of importance. Preparation for the next level of schooling is ranked first among parents’ expectations and they are relatively satisfied with it. The expectations that got the least overall support (“providing peaceful and caring learning environment”, “developing students’ life skills”, “educating students to become honest adults with high moral standards”) – were ranked first or among the first by a sizeable minority of parents – 20 to 25% in all. There are thus some interesting signs of dissonance between what is judged important and how well they are felt to be achieved. This is in some contrast with Finland as shown by 2000 Nordic School Barometer. Most people agree that instruction in their native language, English and mathematics are important subjects and that social and natural sciences are also important. Asked how schools are succeeding in providing instruction in these different subject areas, Finns feel that schools are largely successful.

In sum, there are some differences between countries, but it is not possible to conclude that there is either any simple division between countries or between parents on what they think is important. That said, areas of education which parents judge to be consistently modestly or poorly achieved, despite their assessment of their importance, can provide very useful indicators about how well school systems are performing. There is a subtle underlying relationship between objective conditions and subjective assessments – the Polish example of shifting support towards the instrumental “survival” ends of education in rapidly-changing conditions is a good illustration. What also comes out of the results is a sense of stability of both aims and ratings which, were the system to be genuinely “demand-led”, might add up to a rather conservative agenda for schools. The groups which might be expected to be the drivers of change – the middle classes being wooed by politicians – are also those who have tended to do best with the system as it is. The issues of equity are explored further in the discussion of satisfaction next. It is not clear how far the orientations to the demands of the “clients” of schooling (if this means the parents), however refreshing the contrast with “supply-led” may sound, adds up to an agenda of reform.

## Parental satisfaction with schooling

Are parents satisfied with schools in view of what they regard as their key aims? What do parents think about the schools their children attend and what do they think about the state of education in general? Are some sections of the parental population particularly positive or disgruntled? The English evidence on these questions is among the most detailed of the country reports. Here, parents of school-aged children tend to be more positive about standards in schools and education than the general public. Eighty-two per cent of parents of primary school children rate the standard of primary education as “good” or “very good” compared with 60% of all adults (Continental Research, 2003). Similar differences are found regarding standards in secondary schools albeit based on somewhat less positive assessments: 69% of parents rated standards as “good” or “very good” compared with 41% of all adults. Parents’ views on some aspects of education, however, tend to be less positive than those of teachers (Continental research, 2004): only just over a third of parents agree that primary school standards has improved over the last few years compared with 45% of teachers who think so. Whereas 42% of parents thought their children were “very well” taught, 81% of teachers and governors opted for “very well” taught.

Data from Spain (Ombudsman, 2003) show that the majority of parents in Spain express a high level of satisfaction with their children’s schools and again with significantly higher levels of satisfaction with primary schools than with secondary ones. A survey conducted in 2000 (Danish Ministry of Education) indicated three-quarters of parents as satisfied with their children’s schools. The Danish report notes a paradox between the high levels of user satisfaction on the one hand and the widespread criticism of *folkeskolen* in the public debate on the other hand: the satisfaction survey from 2002 showed that 78% of parents were satisfied or very satisfied with schools in Denmark. According to a University of Turku study (2001), seven out of ten Finnish parents were fairly or very satisfied with the standard of instruction provided by schools. Just over a quarter of all respondents gave a very positive feedback about their children’s school, while about one in seven respondents were dissatisfied. Parents seem to be more critical in Poland, as in “Do Polish Schools meet their Goals?” (2001), there are almost an equal number of parents satisfied and dissatisfied with the Polish educational system – 43% and 42% respectively.

Nevertheless, the common finding in the countries included in this study is for parents to be relatively positive, and more positive about schools than the general public, of which they are only a section. US and English evidence is in line with a related finding which has been noted in many

countries: that parents tend to be more satisfied with the schools that their own children attend than with schools in general. In the United States, parents consistently rate their own children's schools higher than schools in general. These findings may be related to parents' sources of information about schools. According to Public Agenda (1997), nearly three out of four parents rely on "personal observations and conversations" for information about their local schools, while three out of five rely on the media for information about schools outside their own community. Parents who choose their children's schools are consistently more satisfied than those who enrol their children in the schools the state chooses for them (*e.g.* Texas Education Agency, 2003; Arizona State Board for Charter Schools, 2003).

Batterham (2003) found that among secondary school parents in London 51% were very satisfied with their own schools compared with 16% with London schools in general. This may be because London parents tend to exercise deliberate choice of schools more than elsewhere in the country – they both feel the need and are able to do so – or it may be another example of gloom regarding the general state of affairs despite personal experience. There is not everywhere, however, findings consistent with the pattern of (greater) "distance from school" (negatively) influences attitudes about schools. In Austrian education surveys, no marked differences are reported in most questions between the assessment by parents and the assessment by the general public. Some Czech research findings even go against the "distance" thesis: a 1997 survey showed that just over half of general public respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of schooling but the proportion of satisfied parents was smaller (45%). Teachers, far from being favourable, formed the most critical group, with less than a third (31%) happy with the state of education (Goulliová and Průšová 1997). Perhaps they feel most affected by reforms or such factors as low salaries, though it is interesting that such dissatisfaction does not find an echo in the assessments of parents of the students under the charge of those teachers.

The country reports also provide some insights on those aspects which parents feel are achieved more or less well at different levels of the educational system (primary, secondary and other). The majority of parents of children going to secondary schools in London thought that the schools their children attended were delivering well on the range of subjects taught, the quality of school management, teaching, security and resources. In general English secondary schools are considered by parents to be more in need of improvement than other phases of education: about half consider it needs improvement compared with only about a fifth who judge this for primary education (Continental research, 2003). The parents' main reported priorities for improvement were: reduction in class size (selected by over 50%); more teachers in schools (selected by over a third); and a greater

focus on literacy and numeracy (selected by more than 25%). Other priorities were: more support staff help; improving the quality of teachers; support for students with special needs; a curriculum relevant to the 21<sup>st</sup> century; and support for “failing” schools.

A survey conducted in 2000 (Danish Ministry of Education) showed parents in Denmark are most satisfied with their communication with teachers, teachers’ proficiency and attention to individual children. Parents would like to see better cohesion between day-care centres, schools and recreational arrangements, more opportunities for parental involvement, more attention given to the abilities and needs of individual children and better books and teaching material. An earlier parental survey in Denmark (Danish Ministry of Education, 1997) showed that there is a widespread perception that *folkeskolen* are better suited to younger students than to older ones. With regard to teaching students fundamental skills, parents of children at these schools feel that this is done well, although they want schools to focus more on fundamental reading and arithmetical skills. Parents in Finland are more satisfied with teaching and assessment and less about catering to the needs of individual children. According to a University of Turku study in Finland (2001), instruction was considered to be better at lower secondary level compared with primary level, not worse.

In the Slovak Republic, in six crucial areas of schooling – overall level of the school, level of training and care of children, quality of teaching, individual approach to children, quality of information on students’ attainment and personal development of children – the most positive evaluation went to the kindergartens, then secondary grammar schools, then primary schools and last vocational schools. The compulsory primary school was ranked one before last in three evaluated areas (in overall level, level of training and school’s care of children and in the quality of informing parents about students’ learning results). In all types of schools, the personality development of children received the worst ratings.

Countries vary widely in how they see schools to be dealing with the challenges they are facing. Among the Czech parents surveyed for the 2003 PISA study 37% expressed total satisfaction with the school attended by their child and another 54% of parents said they were fairly satisfied. Czech parents believe that the school maintains discipline well and do not see any socio-pathological disorders in the children (drugs, alcohol, and violence). However, while parents are generally satisfied with the operation of schools, almost one third of the respondents believe that schools fail to make full use of their students’ potential and that there is a lot of room for improvement. Asked how the Austrian education and training system cope with important challenges – equal opportunities for both sexes, integration of disabled students, integration of migrants, support for gifted students, support for less

able students, information about drugs, coping with difficult students, reduction of the volume of the syllabus – about half positively rated the way schools are coping with these challenges. The assessment of coping with challenges is less favourable than the overall satisfaction with schools. In the United States, nearly three-quarters of the respondents identified “too much drugs and violence in schools” as a serious problem (Plank, 2005, see next section). Shaw (2004) reported that about half the English parents in that study think that bullying is a problem and nearly half consider truancy to be problematic. Hence, even generally positive parental assessments do not translate into a perception that all is equally well achieved.

Some of the country studies refer to trends. In England (Continental research 2004), only just over a third of parents agree that primary school standards has improved over the last few years though 45% of teachers think so. In Japan, according to a 1995 survey of 3 600 presidents of Parent-Teacher-Associations (National Congress of Parents and Teachers Associations of Japan, 1995), some two-thirds of those surveyed answered that they were “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with Japanese schools. But while in 1979, 27.5% of those surveyed said that they were “very satisfied” with primary education, only 21% were in 1995. For junior high schools, this high satisfaction rate dropped from 26% in 1979 to 16% in 1995.

In some contrast in Hungary, most believe that today’s children are expected to work much more than students of their generation were and three-fifths of parents say that schools prepare students for further studies better than schools did when they went to school. This opinion is held especially by the less educated, older parents and those living in smaller settlements, while less than 50% of parents living in the capital and those with higher education agree. This might reflect either the objectively lower provision for the rural population and those with lower attainment in earlier times, or the more demanding expectations among the better-educated and urban population. Whereas overall, two-thirds of parents in Hungary said they were more or less satisfied with teaching, this also was lower among the more educated parents, older ones and those living in Budapest. The next section focuses on these social patterns.

Parental attitudes to schooling are not as negative as often portrayed in the media. The overall satisfaction of parents with education systems is high throughout all countries, even if there are noticeable regional and gender differences with regard to the perception of educational quality. In most countries, parents of school-age children tend to be more positive about the quality of schooling than the general public. Women are more likely to perceive themselves as being involved in their children’s schooling than men, and research in several countries indicates that women/mothers express greater satisfaction with the content and quality of education than



men/fathers do. The parents involved in schools are more positive than those who are not. All this suggests a relationship between “distance” from schools and the levels of (dis)satisfaction about schooling. Those who do not have much day-to-day interaction with schools and teachers can develop stereotypical images of schooling. They rely on the media images described at the beginning of this chapter which tend to be negative. Those who meet school leaders and teachers, especially if they interact and collaborate with them, are better able to appreciate the work the school is doing. Even parents who report negatively about the general state of schooling can be much more positive about the local school.

### ***Issues related to equity – background of parents and different types of schools***

The Polish country report describes how parental opinions on how schools meet educational goals are related to their level of education: the better educated the parents, the more likely they are to express a negative opinion. The most critical are parents living in larger cities who hold high expectations that schools will start their children on a professional career. However, parents from small towns and villages are also critical when it comes to ensuring a high level of knowledge and equal standards for students from different social groups. A great majority (72%) of the polled parents from towns with fewer than 20 000 inhabitants believe that schools do not provide for equal chances for better life (CBOS, 2001). This might reflect a growing disparity between the perceived quality of educational provision in urban areas and in the countryside. While in cities availability of choice between different schools provides exit options and enhances the quality of schooling, the inhabitants of rural areas are constrained by the limited number of schools available to them.

Spanish families, whose children are schooled together with less than 10% of children with a distinct ethnic origin, tend to be more satisfied (64%) than those families whose children are in a school with more than 30% immigrant children (Ombudsman, 2003). Only 48% of them consider the school to be good or very good. A different pattern emerges in the case of immigrant families. They express a high level of satisfaction with those schools which their children attend, independent of this factor. This might indicate that satisfaction with the education of younger children is higher, possibly because labour market demands for “employability” do not impact on parents’ judgement of schooling at this early age.

According to a University of Turku study (2001), seven out of ten parents were fairly or very satisfied with the standard of instruction provided by schools. In terms of the effects of background variables, the most

considerable differences appeared to be in line with educational background and occupational status. The most positive attitudes towards the Finnish education system were held by those with vocational education. Attitudes became steadily more critical among respondents with higher levels of education. On the other hand, respondents with an academic background and in upper level white-collar occupations are more satisfied with the fairness of schools than those with vocational education and in blue-collar occupations, despite the latter's reluctance to seek reform.

Hence, there is thus a complex – contradictory? – set of attitudes which is by no means specific to Finland. Those with lower levels of attainment will often judge that a system which is serving others well has not fairly dealt with them and yet have higher recorded satisfaction levels. Those with higher attainment are satisfied with their advantaged access to educational benefits and do not wish to see that threatened, but their lower satisfaction suggests that they wish that what they (or their children) have access to could be even better.

A Danish parental survey showed that older parents were more positive than younger ones; it also mirrored the findings elsewhere in reporting the lowest level of satisfaction with *folkeskolen* was found in the Copenhagen area, whether reflecting objective or subjective differences. As regards types of school, parents of children at *folkeskolen* who also had experience of private schools were less positive in their assessment of the former than parents whose children had only been to the first. Parents whose children attend private schools tend to be more satisfied (more than half very satisfied) than parents of children at *folkeskolen* (only 20%), and almost a quarter of them had considered moving their child to a private school during the previous year. Parents of children at private schools are, in particular, more satisfied with the adaptation of teaching to the abilities and needs of individual students, academic requirements, social atmosphere in the classroom and class size (Danish Ministry of Education, 1997).

In the Slovak Republic, the country report refers to as many as four-fifths of parents agreeing that the state should run primary schools. Ten per cent of parents, mainly private entrepreneurs and parents with only one child, express a preference for private primary schools. Relatively few parents supported church-run primary schools. Three-quarters of parents agree with state secondary schools, though nearly half of them believe that the parent should have the right to choose the best school for their children. One-third of parents – especially men, parents from cities, parents with university education, private entrepreneurs and parents with a single child – supported the development of private secondary schools, with a higher proportion (40%) of parents against the development of private schools.

In Poland, among parents of students at the newly-created *gimnazja*, more than half were glad that their child attends a *gimnazjum* rather than a lower-level secondary school and a quarter was disappointed because of that (Konarzewski, 2001). Few parents see the *gimnazjum* as a place for separating good students from weaker ones but rather as a place which can help their child achieve a high level of education (Konarzewski, 2001, p. 143). On the whole, parents' opinions on how schools meet educational and social goals are more positive in the case of the non-public, namely civic and private schools in Poland (Putkiewicz, Wilkomirska and Zielinska, 1997). The perceived advantages of non-public schools are seen to be the smaller class sizes, a focus on developing students' individual interests, and innovative curricula and methods of teaching as fostered by young teachers.

This section has drawn attention to the complex nature of the relationships that are involved as regards satisfaction and its relation to expectations. We have noted the strong relationship between knowing what is going on inside education – “proximity” as described here – and positive appreciation of what is achieved. But we have also seen that this cuts across two other “laws” or tendencies. First, is that the urban middle classes are the least satisfied, which in turn may reflect the difficulties faced by schools in urban areas or else be a more subjective generality about setting benchmarks higher. Second, those who have most gained from schooling – precisely the educated parents and their children – are most likely to believe that it is fair.

## General discussion

This study is based on different national case studies in their turn based on datasets particular for their countries. In practice this means that there are problems in comparing the results and that there are many blank spots because countries do not collect systematic evidence on attitudes, expectations, or satisfaction, whether of parents, employers or the public at large. This review has shown the value of exploring this area and of making the evidence base more robust. If education systems wish to be both more “demand-led” and more “evidence-based”, this is a terrain where there is much work to do in terms of data collection and of developing mechanisms for feeding the results into the broader debate and decision-making process.

This chapter has brought together a body of, albeit rather sketchy, evidence relating to both the public's and parents' attitudes towards schooling. Should improved evidence relate to everyone in order to clarify the general patterns and findings? How far to focus on particular sections of the population, such as those who gain least from education at present, for instance, or employers? Do parents and the public deserve an equal voice?

This is not so much a data collection issue as one about who should be listened to if schooling is to be more “demand-led”. In the context of this chapter, this concerns how attitudinal data should be used to inform decision-making.

The most obvious argument can be made for it to be parents, on the grounds that it is their children at school – they have the greatest stake in ensuring the “best outcomes” as the school’s “clients”. But as this chapter has shown, parents will naturally be most concerned about those outcomes relating to their own children, which may or may not coincide with the best interests of children as a whole, still less society as a whole. We have seen that privileged parents – whose voices tend to count most in the political process – are more likely to perceive the educational system as fair, in part precisely because it has served them relatively well and may oppose reforms designed primarily to serve others. Theirs may be a conservative agenda, in a literal sense of the term. And, of course, it is not at all clear that schooling should be viewed as an area of social life which is about responding to “clients”, a market metaphor which is anathema to many.

If not of parents, then whose demands? There are many candidates. It might be those who pay – the taxpayer. It might be those with a particular stake in the competencies and values of who emerges from schooling, including the higher education sector and employers. It might be a more general notion of the public and of society. And, of course, there are the learners themselves, as discussed in Chapter 5. The case can be made for all of these, and no doubt others. At one extreme, the problem in the face of such diverse “demands” is that being “demand-led” may be no more than a smokescreen for defending the status quo: responding to parents, children, employers and the public at large is what all education systems already claim to be striving towards. Hence without much clearer notions of what “demand-led” means, and whose demands should be listened to, this direction for reform risks being an empty slogan. At another extreme, seeking to respond to diverse demands, schools may be pulled in many different directions at the same time. This will make it difficult to schools to devise coherent strategies.

What about the evidence itself and what it reveals about attitudes towards schooling? First, there are some general messages. There is a stronger belief in the value and achievements of schooling than many might expect. In many places, education is a higher public priority than other calls on the public purse. Even where satisfaction is lower – in part because objectively the quality of provision is cause for concern – belief in education’s value tends to be high. This should reassure many working in education who may often feel beleaguered but it can also contain an anti-reform message (“if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it”). Those responsible for education need to weigh up the implications of these essentially positive judgements.

There is another general message to be underlined. There may be some differences of emphasis, but people want more of everything that is good: in other words, they are very “demanding” about education. Within the lack of clear message that is the high (and possibly rising) expectations about schooling is another which is more pointed: neither parents nor the public have simplistic agendas that can be summarised either with terms like “basics” or with their opposite about making young people “happy”. In fact, the different publics when asked have complex, demanding agendas not slogans. Dealing with the different demands will cause tensions, for the system and for individual schools.

Second, there are differences to be highlighted. What comes through clearly from the available data on satisfaction is that the closer people are to schooling provision or the education system, the more satisfied they tend to be about it. This “rule” is manifest in different ways: parents with children going to school are on average more satisfied with schooling than other parents and the public; parents who are involved in school governance are more satisfied than other parents; women (who tend to participate more in school life) are on average more satisfied than men; the younger are more positive than older adults. Again, the message is generally positive, as knowledge of or experience with education leads to higher levels of satisfaction. However, the long-term legitimacy of schooling and the willingness to pay taxes to support it rest on the satisfaction of all. Increasing accountability and transparency of school systems may actually serve to “spread the word” about the achievements which are most obvious to those closest to what takes place in schools and classrooms.

There are other differences related to satisfaction highlighted by this chapter. First, parents in urban areas tend to be less satisfied with schooling than parents in rural areas. An issue for policy is to ascertain how far this is a reflection of the difficulties faced by schools in urban areas or instead whether there are more demanding standards set by urban parents. What also comes through in the review is that the more educated tend to be less satisfied than the less educated parents. There might well be some overlap between these two patterns, as those with higher attainment levels tend to congregate in urban and suburban areas. Such differences may serve, in a demand-led system, to exacerbate inequities – an issue to be addressed in the following chapter on choice and diversity. As regards parental perceptions and equity, it will be especially important to make sense of the apparent contradiction between educated parents saying that they are less satisfied but believing the system is fair as against the less educated expressing satisfaction with what is on offer but with a greater sense of exclusion from the benefits.

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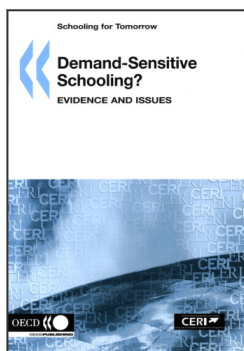
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