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Opening the School to Support Children: The International Primary Case

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Abstract: *This article explores an international primary school which intentionally engages parents coming from countries with different systems of education in a relationship based on partnership in order to stimulate the personal development of children. The case study gives a voice to teachers who reflect on the approach of the school and to parents who had no previous experience of this approach, either as pupils or adults. Hence the research question: how do these parents construe their understanding of the openness of the school? Based on the interpretative phenomenological analysis of the parental accounts, the study shows that when parents start to recognise the traits of an unknown educational paradigm where the opening of the school towards the partnership with the parents represents just one means of stimulating the holistic development of individual children they recognise it not as a neutral phenomenon, but one which is good for their children, especially against the backdrop of their experiences with schools that remain closed.*

Keywords: *open school, interpretative phenomenological approach, case study, International Primary School, school-family partnership.*

1. The methodological quest: experience and meaning in education

The attempt to frame this study theoretically by means of a paraphrase of the title of the seminal work of Eliade (1969), based on the phenomenological interpretative approach, should not be ascribed to a lack of humility on the part of the author of this article but to her intention to substantiate the choice of methodology. The interpretative effort to find meaning in lived experience leads to "considerable enrichment of consciousness" and thus to a new humanism, Eliade claims. This claim, widely accepted across fields of human science, found consistent advocates in the field of education within the tradition of the so-called Utrecht School of Phenomenology.[1] More recently this approach has been applied in educational research by R. E. Stake within the case study research design (Stake, 1995, 2006).

[1] For a concise analysis of this school of thought see Van Manen, 1996.

This article seeks to explore and interpret the experience gathered in an international primary school which intentionally engages parents coming from countries with many different educational systems in a relationship based on partnership, because the school believes that this approach supports the transition, learning and development of children. The case study gives a voice to teachers, who reflect on the schools approach based on this belief, and to parents, who had often had no previous experience with such openness on the part of the school, either as pupils or adults. Hence the research question: how do parents construe their understanding of an open school and perceive the benefits of such an approach for their children?

On the basis of interpretative phenomenological analysis, the study attempts to show that parents, who had been schooled in traditional learning environments with schools perceived as institutions "closed" to parents and the public, may not have found it easy to align themselves with the concept of an open school, but after being invited and accepted as partners they started to appreciate what they understood as the benefits of this approach for their children. As their understanding of the school's openness was unfolding, their general attitudes towards education began to change as they started to identify features of a new educational paradigm.

2. Case selection and description

This case study explores the complex and diverse setting of a school. However doubtful it may seem to choose an institution rather than an individual as a case, in educational research schools can be viewed as natural cases to study "real things that are easy to visualize" (Stake, 1995, p. 1). As regards the context of the chosen case, it seems obvious that an international school, where parents come from diverse educational systems, represents a less typical case than a school firmly settled within a national educational tradition. However, this is what makes such a case atypical or even "extreme", while in case-oriented research "extreme cases often reveal more information, because they activate more actors and more basic mechanisms in the situation studied", as the case study methodologist B. Flyvbjerg (2006, p. 229) argues. The mechanisms which make the selected school a "richer" case for studying the experience of parents with an open school will be examined in the paragraphs that follow.

The case to be studied is an international primary school. Labelling themselves as international schools generally declare their intention to educate their student populations, often culturally diverse, not in relation to any existing national curricula, prescribed or not, but with respect to universal values and the cultural diversity of their student body. This dedication makes them an attractive and valuable choice for communities of professionals who work and live abroad. The very fact that a school is international diminishes the importance of its geographical location as these schools often strive to preserve their independence from a national educational system.

The International Primary opened for students after the beginning of the millennium in one of the capital cities of Europe. The profile of the school has a predictable impact on the composition of its student body: approximately 550 children of more than 70 nationalities come under the flat roof of the elegant red brick building every day. Behind its walls, which are mostly transparent, English is used as the language of instruction, which, however, is not the first language for approximately 80% of the children. Many of them do not even speak English at all when they come to the school.[2] Moreover, the composition of the student body often changes as the majority of the children only stay at the school for some years before their families move to another country.[3] In the language spoken by the people in the school, learning is an easily identifiable keyword.

"Learning is the core of The International Primary", the school motto reads on the cover of the handbook through which parents and the public are addressed. The teachers likewise draw the attention of listeners to learning or the "learning-oriented" aspects of school life in daily conversations with parents or visitors. It might thus seem surprising that the school does not provide information about the learning outcomes of all the student population, and nor does it compare it with any reference group from other schools, international or national. The seemingly paradoxical reluctance of a learning-oriented school to advertise assessments of the learning outcomes at the school level can be best understood when the curriculum is taken into account. Its key dimension of explicitly formulated educational aims emphasises the process but not the outcome of learning and does so with regard to an individual student, not the school.

The International Primary Curriculum or IPC was created by an expert community in 2000 and is at present used by more than 1800 schools in 90 countries.[4] Rather than a rigid curricular prescription, it is an open and complex methodological repository offering not only sources for the work of the children, but also the tools which enable teachers to follow and assess the learning process of an individual child (tools for formative assessment).

In the IPC the content is concentrated into thematic units, reflecting the interests of children. Each unit, be it dinosaurs, tropical rain forests or chocolate, usually lasts for several weeks and parents are encouraged repeatedly and in many ways to dedicate discussions at home to the topic of the unit. During the lessons in the classrooms, children are led across all subjects to active inquiry by means of hands-on activities and active research and encouraged to ask questions, identify problems and find solutions related to the theme of the unit. Three dimensions of ed-

[2] The school office records, 2012.

[3] Ibid.

[4] The Fieldwork Education community of experts is connected with and sponsored by the British-Dutch consortium Shell, C.f. IPC learning goals...

ucational aims for each child are defined for teachers in each unit: besides a deep understanding, sought for specifically in each subject, the personal development of each child and its international-mindedness are considered important.

The extent, to which the school curriculum values the dimension of personal and social development in the process of the children's learning, gives grounds for expecting that many parents do not share or understand this appreciation, come as they do from dozens of different educational systems and cultures where different educational aims may prevail. This expectation urges the International Primary to explain the developmental dimension of learning to parents both thoroughly and frequently, also because the student body changes so often. These are the features of the school curriculum which make the International Primary a suitable case to study: there seem to be more actors activated in cultivating partnerships as an experiential continuum for a child, a shared milieu where the personal and social development of the child is equally valued and supported by the school and the family.

2.1 Self-review process as an incentive for opening the school

Setting benchmarks of quality in the field of international education, the expert communities or accreditation authorities stimulate the development of international schools by a combination of tools for both external and internal evaluation, assessing quality standards in several aspects of life of the school. Among them, the ability to create partnerships with parents to support the learning and development of children is seen as an important cluster of indicators, regardless of the curriculum of the school.

Since 2008 the IPC expert community has been offering its member schools the possibility of going through a comprehensive accreditation programme, combining a self-evaluation phase with an external validation of data gathered by the school. Apart from the fact that the accreditation can be considered a quality statement per se (as well as a marketing tool) for schools, the programme stimulates the institutional growth of schools by leading the staff to collect and share evidence about the quality of the internal processes and assess them against given sets of indicators. The IPC accreditation explicitly marks the learning of each individual child as being an inner process of the utmost importance in any school. Teachers are thus encouraged to follow the individual learning of each child with regard to their deep understanding, personal development and international mindedness. What makes the IPC accreditation requirements especially relevant for this study is the fact that all nine rubrics for the self-assessment of the school consistently encourage teachers to engage parents and help them focus on the processes of the learning, and personal and social development of their child. The IPC accreditation can thus be viewed as a main impetus for opening the school to-

wards parents with the aim of cultivating partnerships for learning meant to support individual children. Although this partnership may be carried out on different levels with different parents, it is nevertheless sought for every child and this inclusiveness is emphasised as a sine qua non by the accreditation authorities.

The International Primary set an example for IPC schools worldwide in 2009, having been successfully accredited at the best possible level in all the accreditation rubrics, the first school ever to do so.

3. Positioning of the researcher and ethical aspects

Where a complex social environment is to be studied, the position of the researcher towards the participants should be discussed and the ways of the entrée into the field being researched described. At the International Primary, the research was conducted in two phases with the researcher engaged in two roles subsequently. In 2010, data was collected from the position of an "insider" (Lofland et al., 2004) with the researcher working as a volunteering parent in two classrooms.[5] With the written permission of the school's principal to conduct the research, participant observations took place and semi-structured interviews with two school leaders, eighteen parents and eight teachers were recorded and transcribed. In the second phase, in 2013, a new data set was created, again with the use of observations in the school and of interviews, this time carried out from the position of an "outsider". While the position of an insider makes the entrée to an environment being studied easier, providing much-needed connections and knowledge, it also involves drawbacks, summarised by Lofland (2004, p. 41ff) as the "questions of distance", with the researcher sliding on a continuum between loathing the informants and identification with them. Reflection on these possible drawbacks is therefore considered as the single most important way of dealing with these challenges.

Such a reflection could not neglect the striking difference between the insider and outsider roles of the researcher in the International Primary in 2010 and 2013 respectively: the status of an insider brought about closeness and sensitivity, which was much needed for rapport with informants and for the interpretation, while it clearly demanded the awareness of the researcher of the issues of sympathy or identification. The status of an outsider brought about different challenges: it was difficult to gain meaningful data in the hectic course of the day-by-day routine in a big school, but it became evident how difficult it would be to interpret the ways in which the par-

[5] The authors argue that the "participant researcher who is already a member or insider (…) has the advantage of already knowing the 'cast of characters' or at least a segment of the cast" (Lofland et al., 2004, p. 40). Stake (1995, p. 3) also recognises this insider position of the researcher to whom "the case is given", which results in an "intrinsic" case study.

ticipants construe the meaning of their experience without the previous "membership" of the researcher in the school, where people of many cultural backgrounds co-create the learning culture.

In 2014, during the write-up of the case report, both positions of the researcher were taken into account and thoroughly reflected on in the process of interpretation which was respondent-validated in e-mail correspondence. All the original recordings, as well as their written transcript, are part of a digital database within the author's possession. The true identities of the participants and institutions were anonymised in the text.

The report of the case is presented in a narrative way, which is typical of the interpretive phenomenological approach to case studies as it strives to uphold the contextuality of the experience of cases and protagonists. For the stage of data analysis, this respect for the uniqueness of experience has important implications. Unlike case-study approaches oriented towards building theories, aiming to de-contextualise data and focus on variables or categories, the advocates of the phenomenological interpretative approach prefer interpretation in context, not an analysis without it. This approach, advocated in educational research by Stake (2006), presupposes that the data is not fragmented by creating codes or categories, but understood, interpreted and coherently re-told in a narrative form, which can be called a report.

4. The International Primary

4.1 Community of the schoolyard

The gate of the International Primary opens fifteen minutes before the school day starts. As children gather to play in the schoolyard, Mr. Sans-Frontières stands by the gate, paired with one of his deputies, welcoming parents and children alike. Parents talk to him or his deputies or to each other; some may try to find the supervising teachers, unseen in the buzz. Minutes before half past eight the teachers call the children to line up: the upper school classes in front of one entrance to the school, the lower school at the other. Classroom teachers come out of the building to meet their pupils, offering parents a chance to say whatever they think has to be said. Upon leaving their parents, the children sing or clap or just follow their teachers to the classrooms, where they usually sit on a carpet to greet each other.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, all this is repeated in reverse order. Teachers usher the children in front of the school building, meeting their parents for the second time. If there is something that has to be said, they say it. At the gate the school leadership stand again, saying goodbye to those who are leaving. For children who are not, the schoolyard remains open for the next two hours. They can play with friends or wait for a sibling who attends an after-school activity (every teacher offers one per week), while the parents… *"I was chatting this morning to the new dad and he was saying it's nice to have someone who's*

not a teacher whom you can talk to about what's in the school, what I need to know," Heather, a British mother of two, said of the schoolyard encounters.[6]

People meet in the schoolyard every day. Out of their encounters, relations may and do grow. Parents get to know the teachers just because they see them so often. Teachers can ask for some small help from a kind mother who never seems to be running away quickly and it seems much easier than having to address an anonymous mass of parents during the information evenings. *"It helps in subtle way, you can't say 'Yes, this is directly the result', but it's just the little things that make life easier,"* said Raja, an Estonian mother. Her "little help" started with a schoolyard conversation in 2004 and continued for almost ten years with just a little break when Raja stayed at home, taking care of her youngest girl.[7]

The teachers seem to accept their schoolyard burden patiently. *"It's tiring, of course, but it's part of the job. If it's good for the child then it's great. And sometimes in a small conversation in the playground big issues can be solved with parents,"* [8] said Dutch teacher B. with years of teaching experience in Oman and the Netherlands. Her colleague, who had taught in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom before, observed: *"Quite often in the morning, someone might say 'Oh /my son/ is not feeling very well today, he's feeling so and so…'"* [9] The teachers were of the opinion that the schoolyard community benefited parents, teachers and children alike.

4.2 Primus inter pares

The staff's patient acceptance of the schoolyard burden might have been lightened by the fact that the school leadership team kept standing there day by day, too. Mr. Sans-Frontières said of it: *"It's a school where I can be down in the playground picking up litter and I don't mind, I see it as part of my job. But it's not a school where people stick with the routine job, this couldn't be here, nor should it be."* [10] To set an example to his colleagues, Mr. Sans-Frontières was doing more in every aspect than people would expect. Teachers and parents did not hide their respect for him. Zora, a Romanian mother who volunteered full-time as a teaching assistant, tried to describe the qualities of the school leadership team: *"Great. Really. Great. They are so dedicated, so good at what they are doing!*

[6] 1/Int/P4/2010. The data source identifiers refer to the electronic database of the author, which consists of written and audiotaped files and relevant documents. The first and second positions indicate the ordinal number of an event and its character (e.g. 1/Int for the first interview or Corr for correspondence), the third and the fourth positions indicate the type and ordinal number of the participant (P1-18 for parents, L1-3 for leadership, T1-8 for teachers) and the last position indicates the year of the collection or validation of the data (2010, 2013 and 2014).

[7] 1/Int/P3/2010.

[8] 1/Int/T2/2010.

[9] 1/Int/T6/2010.

[10] 1/Int/L2/2010.

No, really, they…" [11] Crying, she could not finish her sentence.

One of the most experienced staff members, teacher C., who had previously taught in Great Britain and Germany, said with a tranquil laugh, meant to detract from the reverence of her words: *"The head[master] is a very good head. I mean he's really good. And it's true. He's very sensible about his recruitment, so the staff he recruits they all have the same values and I can see that from within the staff, how the people behave."* [12]

What values did the staff appreciate and share in 2010? I came back to the school three years later to conduct a new series of interviews and observations, determined to capture any possible change after Mr. Sans-Frontières' planned departure. It would have been useless to ask teachers about the change directly. There were, however, hints that no matter how determined or skilled Mr. Successor was with regard to maintaining his predecessor's level of success, his position was not easy. When I asked a fifth-grader's mother about the stealthy change of the climate, her daughter blurted: *"He [Mr. Successor] is nothing compared to Mr. Sans-Frontières!" "And besides,"* her mother added thoughtfully, *"he is not standing at the school gate all that often."* [13] I did not ask about picking up litter.

The Finnish teacher P. attributed the nurturing quality of the school culture to the fact that it was an international school, where everybody shared the experience of living in an unknown culture: *"[People] are so willing to help here everywhere. That's why we also have this 'buddy' system introduced, I think, by Mr. Sans-Frontières: the buddy family meet the new family before their children start school and that's really important for the climate as well. Everybody feels welcome."* [14]

But Heather was sure to whom the caring ethos of the school should be attributed: *"If Mr. Sans-Frontières wasn't the person he is, with the enthusiasm he has and the character he has, I don't think the school would be doing half as well as it is. Absolutely not (…), with all the support from the parents. You just wouldn't get that. And it just shows the spirit and the atmosphere of this school where everyone's welcome. It's very much a home and family atmosphere and I think that's why so many people help."* [15]

Indeed, there were many helping hands in the International Primary.

4.3 Engaging parents as partners for learning

The International Primary seems to be "rich in parents" in many aspects. Always badged visibly as visitors, they are easy to

[11] 1/Int/P2/2010.
[12] 1/Int/T5/2010.
[13] Off the record, fully anonymised, 2013.
[14] 1/Int/T5/2010.
[15] 1/Int/P4/2010.

find in the cafeteria, waiting for a monthly meeting of the Parent Teacher Association, sipping coffee before they unlock the parent-run bookshop or buying a snack after a busy morning in the office, at the reception desk or in the admissions room where many parents had volunteered before some of them were offered a permanent contract.

Other parents come to the classrooms to read books to children or to listen to them read, to share their knowledge with children, tell stories in their mother tongue or do whatever is asked for by teachers. According to the teacher P. *"it's working very well, we have just an open invitation all the time, parents are welcome to come and stay. But we don't have a rule that they should be only working as 'my parents in my classroom.' They can work elsewhere."*[16]

From April to June 2010 I heard the stories of eighteen mothers who had found a place for themselves within the life of the school. All of them were remarkably gripped by their own tales, struggling to grasp moments they found important. Two patterns of experience can be distinguished in these reflections, dividing the volunteers into two groups.

The first group had offered their help to the teachers on the first day of school, or even before, as Ema (Czech) said: *"The day before Martin went to school I read in the school newspaper that they were looking for volunteers. I already had the experience from the U.S. school and I was very much into it again."* [17] Rosa from Romania, whose husband had been posted to Hong Kong, also offered help immediately. *"They needed parents then (…) because [children] were still eating in the classrooms and they were always short of supervisors. That's what I started off with. It was not my first choice but they needed it and I said 'Fine, I'll do it.'"* [18] Marion, too, started helping in her son's classroom from the beginning as she already had an intensive volunteering experience from the Dutch school of her older daughters.[19]

By offering their unconditional help, parents from the first group seemed to know what they were doing and why. *"It's such a short period of time in terms of your whole life when your children are at school! So hopefully they will look back and think 'Oh, my mum was there.' (…) They are my priority, so I'm happy to spend so much time doing stuff with them and for them. It's very fulfilling, fulfilling…"* said Sam. [20] Rosa showed similar dedication: *"With my youngest I started being a reading mum and I read with that group for three years in a row. You see them grow and (…) develop, all twenty of them, and that's a fantastic*

[16] 1/Int/T1/2010.
[17] 1/Int/P15/2010.
[18] 1/Int/P17/2010.
[19] Not all the volunteers were jobless mothers. Maud worked as a lawyer and a classroom representative of the Parent Teacher Association, John as an accountant, Heather worked for a consortium and Sam was a general practitioner who coordinated volunteers sewing costumes for the school shows.
[20] 1/Int/P13/2010.

experience. And when you help, you make a small, but still a part of it." [21]

Then there was a second group of helping parents. Their stories were different in a particular aspect: knowing the school from their home countries as a closed and remote institution, their perception of the International Primary clearly arose from what may be called an "open-closed dialectics". At the beginning, they did not notice the written statements about the school's declaring an "open door policy" towards parents and never came. They ignored printed invitations to come to the classrooms or did not understand the language of meetings during which the school representatives urged them to come in. Regardless of how open the school tried to be, these parents remained "closed" until some humane bagatelle finally "opened" them. Often it was a kind smile, a nice word or a humble request for help from a teacher.

"[My older son's] teacher was always so smiling and she explained everything and sometimes (but just sometimes!) she asked for some help, maybe to prepare something at home," [22] an Italian mother Acatia told me about how she had started to bake, draw, cut, laminate, glue, copy or cook for the teachers and the classrooms of her two sons in 2007. After three years, she could be seen rushing to school every morning to assist just anyone who needed it: a handicapped boy, the librarian, the physical education teacher, the teacher who had to label new books or whoever else was in need. In 2010 she started working on a permanent basis as the teaching assistant in one of the classrooms and kept this job up to 2013.[23]

Ivanka's series of volunteering years also began with her classroom teacher's personal request: *"Some of the teachers require help. The teacher of year three wanted us to come and help with the reading, so… He had the system that every morning one or two mums came and read with the children, one by one."* [24]

No matter how reluctant or reserved they had been at the beginning, after they started volunteering for the school, these mothers were as thankful for being offered a chance to witness the school life of their children as the mothers from the first group. Estonian mother Raja thought: *"It's nice to see what [children] are doing and how and with whom... I've never… we've never had anything like this. Our parents came to school when we had a Mothers' Day concert or a Christmas concert at the end of the year and that was it."* [25] Ivanka, a Bulgarian living in Hungary, framed this experience geographically. *"Coming from Eastern Europe, I was not used to being allowed to go to school and help. In the beginning it was new and strange, but I like it because you can have a sneak peek into*

[21] 1/Int/P17/2010.
[22] 1/Int/P1/2010.
[23] 2/Int/P1/2013.
[24] 1/Int/P7/2010.
[25] 1/Int/P3/2010.

your kid's school life and see how it goes. And it's really interesting." [26]

The more these mothers valued their new experience, the more they seemed to dismiss the closeness of schools in their home countries. Stanka, a biologist from Croatia who prepared activities with a microscope for the six-year-olds in her daughter's class, complained: *"In Croatia you send a child into the school and then you're told: Hands off!"* [27] Zineb also became critical of what she described as the common practice in Egypt: *"At the beginning it was a bit strange to me because back home it was not allowed to be in the school. If you want to meet someone you have to make an appointment but you're never allowed in the classes."* [28]

Some mothers realised that they had changed their views on education after observing the teachers for months or even years. *"Maybe my biggest achievement here is that I see how… they teach and approach the children,"* Ivanka pondered hesitatingly. *"They treat the kids like equals, as a person that still has to learn. And with this approach they have enormous patience with the kids because they don't consider them stupid but just small persons who have to learn. In Eastern Europe sometimes we are very impatient with the kids because we think – oh, you're that old and you should already know this and that…"* [29]

Zineb thought that the school helped her to educate her own child: *"My son is easy to put in a track, so if he had gone to a school with a rigid system, like a German school, it would have influenced his character. Here it's a chance for a child's character to evolve and get matured. Here… he was forced to have freedom to show his character."* [30]

The pattern which showed in the mothers' narratives was the experiential dimension of partnership for learning, in which the school engaged parents intentionally and consistently.

4.4 Engaging *all* parents

Although not everyone in the school was helping as a volunteer, dozens of parents were coming when different classes were organising "knowledge harvests" with children, showing parents what they had learnt in the last six or eight weeks of focused inquiry within a thematic unit. [31] Teachers kept inviting parents so often that it seemed impossible for any mother or father to miss the news that the school valued their participation and welcomed their presence. And yet: *"What's your personal dream*

[26] 1/Int/P7/2010.
[27] 1/Int/P6/2010. The accented exclamation with other non-verbal means of expressing anger can be understood as a strong condemnation of closed schools, where physical contact between parents and children is not considered desirable.
[28] 1/Int/P8/2010.
[29] 1/Int/P7/2010.
[30] 1/Int/P8/2010.
[31] The children use neither textbooks nor too many notebooks, as their work is based on hands-on activities and active inquiry.

about parents in education, if you have any?" I asked the deputy head when we were sitting in her office one afternoon in late May 2010. It was meant as a prelude to saying goodbye and ending the interview, but her answer struck me. With a deep sigh, this mother of four children, caring for hundreds of others, said: *"I'd like to have more parents involved… Maybe I want to offer more to parents, actually… I'd like to offer them more understanding of our curriculum, (…) more understanding and then probably more of them will come in."* [32]

To elucidate this dream, one has to take seriously the international dimension in the International Primary. Knowing that second language acquisition is closely related to mother tongue development and the cultural identity of the children, these schools encourage parents to support their children as much as they can in this respect. Teams of evaluators, recognised in international education, consider the inclusion of all parents into this support for their children an important indicator of quality.[33]

It was difficult to imagine how the International Primary could possibly engage more parents than it actually did at 2010. Three years later, however, when I visited the school for the new sets of observations, it looked as if there really were more of them around. *"Yes, there are more of them, definitely. We use their help in many ways,"* the same deputy head assured me, smiling.[34] The school's experience of engaging the parents as partners was clearly a cumulative one.

One of the ways to attract more parents and fulfil the deputy's dream was the practice of home visits. Before the school year starts every year for children in the first grade, the classroom teachers and teaching assistants arrange home visits to all the families. *"The year for [the youngest] children starts a few days later and they only do half days for the first week so that the team had time to get as many of the visits done in 'school time',"* the deputy explained the routine that resulted in a crucial school policy document.[35] Home visits, apart from being a key part of the transition procedure,[36] also help to *"start a very good relationship with all parents from the very beginning,"* [37] as the deputy assured me.

5. Open versus closed schools: the meaning of the experience

The narratives of the parents highlighted the *strange* (Ivanka, Zineb), *new*

[32] 1/Int/L2/2010.

[33] For details on the accreditation procedures see the Guide to School Evaluation and Accreditation by the Council of International Schools. Also accessible from https://www.cois.org/uploaded/Documentation/For_Schools/Accreditation/Standards_and_Indicators_-_8th_Ed_%28V8.2%29.pdf

[34] 2/Int/L2/2013

[35] Corr/L2/2014

[36] *"It is about giving the children the best possible start at school."* 2/Int/L2/2013.

[37] Ibid.

(Raja) or *just perfect* (Zora) encounter with the openness of the school. This was not a random observation of the behaviour of some teachers, made by a random parent, but a powerful experience, documented among parents throughout the school. Even the parents who had already met open schools in their home or host countries considered the International Primary *unbelievably open* (Ema), *welcoming* (Sam) and *warm* and *caring* (Rosa) not only to children, but to themselves as well.

It was shown that stemming from the curriculum and the accreditation procedure, this openness of the school was consistent and intentional and aimed at cultivating partnerships with all parents in order to jointly support the transition, learning and personal development of each individual child. Interpreted from the perspective of the school as an institution, this intention can be labelled as a means of support for children and called partnership for learning. This paper, however, aimed to suppress the institutional perspective in favour of the phenomenology which is traditionally believed to have "powers to disclose the worlds in which we dwell as fathers, mothers, teachers, students, and so forth" (van Manen, 1996, p. 9). Disclosing thus the **experiential** dimension of the openness of the school, as it was lived by many parents in the International Primary, the interpreter found them overwhelmed by their new experience; a pattern of astonishment was repeated in their accounts and reflections. This allowed for the interpretation that many parents perceived this openness of the school literally as if something new was opening in front of them, an unknown phenomenon was manifesting itself to them, inviting them to understand it better. This could seemingly be explained by the fascination of mothers by the possibility of observing the hitherto unknown school life of their own children. However, there is a substance to the claim that their fascination went beyond this: apart from the school life of their own child, the parents witnessed the process of the learning of all the children as it was conceived, planned and realised by the staff. It may therefore be suggested that a whole new educational paradigm manifested itself to these parents, a set of theoretical assumptions and practical attitudes and values which the openness of the school was in tune with and which they had not experienced, or even thought of, before. Which paradigm was it, breaking into what was hitherto the closed horizon of their understanding?

Kohlberg and Mayer (1972) identified three radically different educational paradigms in all Western educational thinking.[38] Let us put aside the first of them, which the authors call romanticism, ascribing it to Rousseau, and focus on the remaining two for their supposed pertinence to the interpretation of the case under study. Kohlberg and Meyer contrasted the paradigm of cultural trans-

[38] The authors called them ideologies, not paradigms, arguing that these schools of thought include both theoretical and value assumptions about how children (should) learn and develop. This text will nevertheless use the term 'paradigm' for reasons which cannot be fully discussed here.

mission with the developmental paradigm, in which the experience of the child plays a crucial role in creating knowledge, which facilitates development. While the former is called *"society-centred", "rooted in the classical academic tradition of Western education"* and aiming to transmit the *"knowledge, skills and (…) rules of the culture",* the latter, drawing on Dewey and Piaget, is child-centred, seeing learning as an active change in patterns of thinking brought about by experiential problem-solving situations. Beneath this developmental paradigm, the authors assert, is the belief that the mind is dialectical and its psychological structures reorganise as a result of the interactions between the organism and environments in sequential stages of development.

This distinction, elaborated deeply by the authors, allows for an interpretation of our case. Parents who had come to the International Primary from educational systems where the pivotal aim of education corresponds with the educational paradigm of cultural transmission expect schools mainly to transmit knowledge and attitudes which the specific culture has traditionally cultivated, with the schools remaining "closed" to parents. The experience of parents at the International Primary sharply contrasted with their a priori expectations formed by this paradigm. Upon experiencing a school which is open, inviting them to cultivate an experiential and value continuum between home and school as a means of support for the development and learning of their children, these parents recognised new and unexpected features of the developmental paradigm.

The power of the tension between the two paradigms, manifested through an open-closed school dialectics, was perhaps best documented in the reflections of Zora who had been trained as a teacher in Romania and volunteered at the International Primary as a full-time teaching assistant before she was offered a permanent contract. *"What I learnt in the university and did in the classroom in Romania was totally different. It is another system, another world. It would be mean if I said that in Romania they don't treat the kids right, but it's not like here. It is another world. That's why I'm saying this is perfect. It did not change me; it changed the way I used to see school."* [39]

Zora felt that all her professional knowledge and skills were challenged by her new experience of a school where the priority is seen as supporting the learning and development of children, in which partnership with parents is just a means, albeit an important one. The same holds true for Acatia who also pointed to her changing view of education in general: *"There is a huge space for every child and their personality. (…) I came to understand here that schools can teach in a different way compared to what I experienced in my childhood. I feel as if I am being taught here too, as if I was a child."* [40]

[39] 1/Int/P2/2010.
[40] 1/Int/P1/2010.

In education, theoretical paradigms include or at least naturally attract value assumptions, about which Kohlberg and Meyer write in their article on *"the fallacy of value neutrality"* (1996, p. 464). The parental accounts of the International Primary show that when parents started to recognise traits of the unknown educational paradigm where partnership with parents represented just one means of stimulating the holistic development of individual children, they recognise it not as a neutral phenomenon, but one which is good for their children, especially against the backdrop of their experiences with schools that remain closed'not to parents, but to the child-centred or developmental educational paradigm.

6. Open schools in open societies: an ongoing debate

This case study sought to understand the experience of parents coming from different countries with an *"open"* or *"welcoming"* school which is trying to engage parents in a relationship based on partnership in order to let them understand and share the values which had shaped its educational aims. The accounts of the actors showed that the meaning of the new experience had been construed against the backdrop of their previous reverse experience of *"closed"* schools, mainly in their home countries. An existing theory of three educational paradigms *"in all Western educational thinking"* (Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972) allowed for the interpretation that parents came to understand this openness of the school not as an isolated and value-neutral phenomenon, but as a trait of the child-centred developmental paradigm to which they assented.

It is one of the main features of phenomenological research based on the interpretation of lived experience that the researcher brings in his (or her) own understanding which may interfere with the understanding of the participants. Although the attempts to minimise this risk by means of the critical reflection carried on this research were described above, this study can still be considered *"engaged"* writing in the sense that the author acknowledges the importance of aligning the openness of schools with the dialectics of open societies.

The fact that this study explored the meanings of the experience gathered by parents in an international environment also opens the question of its relevance for a national educational discourse. Perhaps the grateful acceptance of the openness of the school, captured in the accounts of the parents who dismissed schools in their differing national systems as closed and thus distant from children and themselves, may offer a perspective on debates on the openness of schools in other open societies, where educational and other institutions tackle the rising cultural diversity of their student bodies a challenging task which is likely to endure.

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