

# “Parent management” or “Take care out there!”

Hanne Knudsen

The Danish University of Education  
Copenhagen, Denmark

This paper is based on a morning session at a pedagogical training course for a group of teachers at a small Danish public school. Using role-play, these teachers, under the guidance of a consultant and an actor, were practicing ‘the difficult conversation’ with parents. I had been given permission to be present and to videotape the morning’s role-play.<sup>1</sup> In this paper I inquire into the underlying assumptions behind such training in conversational skills. What is the purpose of this ‘difficult conversation’? Who possesses relevant knowledge that can be used as input in the conversation? What can teachers and parents say given these assumptions? Which management responsibility is addressed through such training of the difficult conversation? My conclusions are, briefly, that the difficult conversation is more correctly to be called an impossible conversation. It is an asking for the parent’s consent to the teachers’ description, and the teachers’ authority is very easily threatened by parents who suppose that their experiences are relevant. The training situation in itself confirms that the parents are the opponents, and that the teachers should take care.

The training course had been developed by the school’s Coordination and Development group, which consists of the headmaster, coordinators and union representative. As a basis for the discussion, the Coordination and Development Group had defined five types of difficult parents and had written them on a flip chart. The headmaster referred to them as “types that we all know”:

- The extremely well prepared mother<sup>2</sup>
- The egotistical mother
- The mother who says yes but does not follow it up, is evasive
- The angry/aggressive mother who seeks to place blame
- The disagreeing parents

One of the first things I asked myself – and a few of the teachers present – was how an extremely well prepared mother can be ‘difficult’?

## Introduction

In *The Order of Things*, the French sociologist and philosopher Michel Foucault refers to a passage in a text by Borges, who quotes a “certain Chinese Encyclopedia” in which it is written that:

*Animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e), sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies*

Foucault remarks:

*In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that. [...] The monstrous quality that runs through Borges’ enumeration consists, on the contrary, in the fact that the common ground on which such meetings are possible has itself been destroyed. What is impossible is not the propinquity of the things listed, but the very site on which their propinquity would be possible (Foucault 1994, pp. xv-xvi).*

My goal is to approach the categorization of difficult parents with equal aloofness.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Hanne Knudsen, e-mail hakn@dpu.dk

How is it possible to categorize ‘extremely well prepared’ and ‘aggressive’ under the same heading? On which site do they meet? What does the list tell us about the presuppositions inherent in the school’s way of defining the relation to parents? And under which conditions does the conversation take place when the relation is defined in this way?

### Theoretical background

My analysis will look at the inherent presuppositions underlying the encounter between the school and the parents. Pointing out such presuppositions allows us to show that the relation could be different: Parents could be articulated in different ways, teachers could be given different possibilities for action. At the training course in question, the problem is seen as being the parents (even though they are not actually present at the course). The categorization could be based on measures other than the behaviour of the parents. It could be based on the purpose of the conversation (obtaining the consent of the parents for making an unpleasant decision, discussing a difficult issue, conflict mediation, etc.), the character of the issue (academic, social, psychological), etc.

The articulation of the parents, the description of them, is in itself a construct and not merely the reflection of given facticity. Facticity, in this Foucault-inspired approach, cannot at any point appear except through enunciation. To categorize parents as difficult in different ways also means to bring them into existence as difficult. I inquire into which presuppositions are created through this articulation – and I inquire into the consequences of such presuppositions as they relate to the people to whom they are applied: Which possibilities, impossibilities, restrictions, and openings do they create for teachers, leaders, and parents?

What I am after is, to use Foucault’s term, “systems of dispersion” (Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*, Routledge Classics, London 2002, p. 41). My ambition is to uncover certain patterns in the form of conditions for enunciation – without reducing the complexity. It is important to refrain from reverting to easy explanations and conceptions such as ‘tradition’, ‘intention’, etc. (Foucault 1970, p. 148-151) and to remain on the level of the discourse.

It is precisely in spoken and written discourse that we may look for patterns of what can be enunciated. These patterns consist of differences, similarities, and relations. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault argues that the statement is the discursive minimum, its atom (Foucault 2002, p. 112). The statement consists of an object, subject positions, systems of thought, and strategy. Below, I will limit myself to the object and subject positions, because systems of thought and strategy point

to a wider field and my analysis is based on limited material.

My empirical material is different than Foucault’s in that it consists of video footage of people talking with each other. I have chosen to look at the interaction between people because the interaction makes it possible to pinpoint places of fracture and resistance; places that challenge the ‘regularity’ – and hence make it stand out more clearly. Interaction expresses more than what is said directly. There are reactions in the form of laughter, for example, which is as telling of the discursive regularity of the training as are the actual words. In some of my analysis, I have found inspiration in the micro-sociologist Erving Goffman for ideas about how to analyze the type of interaction in which there is more at stake than merely the spoken words. Erving Goffman speaks of embarrassment - and laughter is seen as one possible indication of embarrassment along with blushing, fumbling, stuttering, etc.

*By listening for this dissonance, the sociologist can generalize about the ways in which interaction can go awry and, by implication, the conditions necessary for interaction to be right (Goffman 1982, p. 99).*

### The role-plays

The teachers team up in pairs - in the teams that they usually work in at the school. Before the role-play begins, the two teachers and the actor step outside the room, into a small hallway passage, and organize the role-play: The teachers may choose a specific child and a specific mother and tell the actor about them. Or they may invent a fictitious child with whom they both have particular associations. They also tell the actor which of the five categories her role belongs to as the mother of either the real or fictitious child. In the meantime, the consultant selects 6-8 teachers who will function as a ‘reflecting team’. They get together after the role-play and comment upon what they have heard and seen. The consultant emphasizes the fact that they are to only comment upon what they have seen and heard and not be critically judging.

The two acting teachers and the ‘mother’ then turn their backs to the audience and the reflecting team. After listening to the comments of the reflecting team, they are told to turn around and relate how they experienced the conversations and whether they are able to recognize some of the things that the reflecting team said.

There is time for three teachers’ teams during the morning session. One from first grade, one from fifth grade, and one from seventh grade. The actor plays the role of ‘the mother who says yes but does not follow up, is evasive’, ‘the angry/aggressive mother who

seeks to place blame’, and ‘the extremely well prepared mother’ respectively. What follows is my analysis of the first role-play and a summing up on all three role-plays<sup>3</sup>.

The first conversation is between two first grade teachers and the mother of a girl, whom I will refer to here as Sally. I refer to the teachers as Jette and Anette and to the mother as mother<sup>4</sup>.

The mother is categorized by the teachers as the type who ‘says yes but does not follow up, is evasive’. The teachers have called the meeting because Sally, who is in first grade, had refused to be in a group with another girl from the class:

*Jette: She was very upset about the fact that I felt like I had the right to put her in the same group as Clara. She walked to the other end of the classroom and stood there like this (arms crossed); she would not do it. The other children started their projects, and Clara was sitting there waiting. It was a rather unpleasant situation. [...] We have experienced on several occasions that Sally wants to decide everything for herself. We cannot tell her what to do (M: no), and we cannot tell her who to work together with or sit next to. It is the same trouble every time they are assigned new sets; if she is not allowed to choose whom she wants to sit next to she becomes very upset. It is hurtful to the children she counts out, they are upset, and it is also not so constructive that she constantly tells the teachers ‘no!’. That affects so many other things, so... It is a question of respect for the classmates, respect for the teacher.*

This is the part of the conversation with the most expanded arguments. In the rest of the conversation there is more repetition and more examples than explaining.

*Jette: Last week we divided the class into smaller groups, and they had to do some minor dramatizations. And the groups were selected at random. And Sally was to be in a group with Clara. The problem was that she refused this. She simply would not work together with Clara (Mother: no).*

The mother does not acknowledge that this is a problem. She could have said ‘really, she would not do that?’ or ‘that is not so good’. But throughout the conversation, she never confirms the teachers’ formulation of the

problem. Instead she seems to understand why Sally did not want to be in the group with Clara. And the teachers do not inquire into the mother’s norms; they might have asked her if she agrees that it is a problem that Sally behaves the way she does.

The teachers do not clearly communicate what the conversation is about or what they want the mother to do. But what they are aiming at seems to be the mothers consent to their description of her daughter. Throughout the conversation, the questions addressed to the mother are designed to make the mother confirm what the teachers have just said: ‘Do you recognize this behaviour?’ The questions do not seek clarification or do not allow for the answers to correct or contribute to the teacher’s perception of the child or the situation.

The teachers only inquire into whether the mother recognizes their description. And to the extent that she – nevertheless – offers up her experience of her daughter in enthusiastic descriptions, the audience responds with laughter:

Mother: No, she is simply so sweet and well behaved (laughter from the audience). This weekend, for example, she completely surprised us when she had figured out to put on coffee all by herself (laughter), and then she brings us a good morning drawing that she has made for us; she calls it that....

The mother’s descriptions of her daughter are seemingly not received as relevant information: Either because they are descriptions from home and hence irrelevant in a school setting, or because the mother’s perception – that is, her enthusiasm and positive judgment – are considered faulty. The mother’s story about the daughter’s ‘good morning drawing’ is given in response to the following inquiry:

Jette: Do you recognize this behaviour? Do you see any...

Mother: No, not at all.

Jette: Situations at home, with her little sister, or...

The mother rejects the teachers’ description of her daughter – at least to the extent that the description is linked to a negative perception of her or when the daughter’s behaviour is described as problematic. She is in agreement as long as the teachers’ descriptions merely state the facts; the mother confirms that Sally did not want to be in the group with Clara. And the mother is in agreement as long as the teachers’ description of her child is positive – when they talk about how smart or good she is, for example:

*Jette: Sally usually keeps up really well, and she is very engaged when we tell stories; she is good at retelling stories. She is a smart child (Mother: yes, she is).*

The ‘evasive mother’ depicted in this conversation is a mother who confirms the teachers’ description of her child when it is positive or simply factual, but rejects descriptions of her child as ‘wrong’ or problematic. Either she does not share the teachers’ norms or she does not understand them. In any event, she does not relate to the implied coupling between the fact that Sally does not want to be in the group with Clara and that this is a problem. The mother describes her daughter as remarkable and as someone who has any right to refuse to engage children like Clara.

Thus, the evasive mother is constructed as a mother who does not see the school’s implied expectations of her as reasonable or obvious. She accepts the description of the facts but does not recognize the implicit norm, which suggests that the description requires subsequent action; her act of directing her child. The ‘reasonable’ and obvious expectation is rejected. She is evasive in that she does not accept the ‘obvious’ implications of her ‘yes’. An alternative description of this mother could be to say that she expects a division of labour whereby the teachers deal with problems in class, while her most important role as a mother is to support her child with unconditional love.

The teachers are constructed in the conversation as having very little room for action. Perhaps they have called the meeting with the mother because they need her acceptance of potential intervention vis-à-vis the child? Perhaps they have called the meeting in the hope that she will change Sally’s behaviour? Regardless of what it is they seek the mother’s approval for, either the teachers’ actions towards Sally or the mother’s responsibility in the situation, it is exceedingly difficult for them to get this approval because they do not explicitly state the norms according to which Sally’s behaviour is seen as problematic. The teachers expect the mother to naturally share their norms, and to the extent that she does not, they are unable to accomplish anything.

### **The impossible conversation and the amenable mother**

I have gone through one conversation. The other two I will only go through briefly and then analyze how the non-difficult mother might look considering the definitions of the five difficult types. Subsequently, I discuss what the training is a training of, before I conclude by showing what is made the object of leadership through this training.

The three types of parents that are created in the conversations are all defined as being simply what they are; the difficulty does not change from situation to situation but is inherent in the mother.

The mother who says yes, but does not follow up, is evasive is constructed as one who does not take the school’s reasonable expectations of her seriously. She agrees to the description but not to the implicit judgment in the descriptions.

The angry/aggressive mother who seeks to place blame is constructed as one who does not accept the teachers’ descriptions (the boy as deviant), their explanations (the problem is with the boy), their judgment (the solution to the problem is to change the boy), or their assignment of responsibility (the mother is responsible for this change). The mother delivers criticism, which is meant to shift the problems away from her son and onto the school, the teachers, or the class. She does not acknowledge the notion that the problems lie within her son and she describes him as either normal or places the reason for his deviant behaviour outside him.

The extremely well prepared mother challenges the teachers’ authority by questioning the truthfulness of their experiences, and she insists that her experiences and knowledge have relevance. Moreover, in this conversation she challenges the teachers’ authority by showing that their assumed right to interpretation is not founded on arguments and is not tied to the responsibility for solving the problems.

The three conversations share the fact that the site on the basis of which they are perceived as difficult is a site where only teachers are given access to the description and judgment of reality. Using Michel Foucault’s concepts of veridiction and jurisdiction (Foucault 2000a, p. 225), it is a question of examining what the prescribing effects are for possible knowledge and required action. In this context, the possibility of knowledge is defined by the experiences of individual teachers from the classroom. The required action is to adjust the child/student in relation to his or her divergence from the presupposed norm. A norm that might even be seen as so obvious, that it defines, in effect, the scope of possible knowledge. Perhaps this knowledge is always based in the norm and hence cannot be separated from it?

When the mother insists on her active interpretation, it is seen as resistance. And when the mother does not take responsibility for solving the described problems, she is perceived as the ‘evasive’ type. In both cases, she is seen as difficult.

The teachers, on their part, need not present an argument. Thus, there are only few and rather loose arguments in the conversations for the fact that deviations from the norm are a

problem<sup>5</sup> in the same way that the norms are never explicitly stated. In the first conversation, the fact that Sally does not want to be in the group with Clara is seen as a problem. It never actually becomes clear whether this is a problem because it shows her lack of respect for Clara, because it makes it difficult for the teachers to divide the children into groups, because it demonstrates Sally's lack of respect for her teachers, because it upsets Clara, because Sally's actions means that she becomes unpopular, or because ... Therefore, it becomes difficult for the teachers to respond when the mother obviously disagrees with their assertion that it is a problem that Sally does not want to be in the group with Clara.

In none of the three conversations does the mother accept the teachers' description of her child even though the purpose of all three conversations seems to be precisely to obtain the mother's acceptance of the description presented by the teachers and her support for the implicit norm that the descriptions are based on. The child is deviant. The mother 'defends' herself by seeking to place the deviation with the teachers or the other children or by saying that it is normal (non-deviant) e.g. for a boy in seventh grade to have other interests than school.

The teachers invoke their authority, in the sense of a one-sided right to speak, know, and make judgment, in all three conversations. "The one who refers to his experiences, claims to authority" (Luhmann 2006, s. 84, my translation) In the conversation with the 'extremely well prepared mother', their authority is challenged by the fact that the mother expects her knowledge to be relevant; she challenges the teachers' descriptions and assumes that if the teachers are able to recognize the problem they must also be able to solve it. The fact that they are not makes everyone uneasy and causes a great deal of laughter, both among the acting teachers and in the group of teachers in the audience.

My proposal is that the difficult parents are the ones that challenge the presupposed right of the teacher to know and make judgment. Perhaps we can describe the discursive practice of these conversations as one in which possible knowledge (veridiction) and possible actions (jurisdiction) are based in the experiences of the individual teacher. The experiences from the classroom are transferred to the parent-teacher conversation: The teachers' experiences with the children from the classroom give them the authority to describe problems and solutions, even in relation to the parents. This form of authority renders the teachers vulnerable to alternative perceptions. If someone challenges their experiences, he also challenges their authority.

The knowledge – the descriptions – presented by the teachers springs from their experiences, and their assessments and

descriptions of what should be done are based in these and in an implicit and shared norm. Thus, arguments are rendered irrelevant in the same way that the mother's perception is irrelevant. On the other hand, the teachers become rather vulnerable because challenging their experiences means challenging their authority. 'The extremely well prepared mother' delivers a threefold criticism: she draws from non-personal experience, she uses her own perception to question the teachers' specific experiences, and she does not immediately accept the norm that the teachers' descriptions are based in. The teachers are left in a position that makes it impossible for them to argue against her statements, because their knowledge is tied to the experiences of the individual teacher. That is why the support that the teachers show each other is in the form of support for the teacher as a person (as the owner of the experiences) – and not in the form of factual arguments. The extremely well prepared mother upsets the very site on which the conversation takes place. So does the aggressive mother. The mother who says yes but is evasive, does not upset the site in the same way; instead, she never fully enters it.

If the difficult mother is one who in different ways challenges the authority of the teachers – by questioning their experiences and interpretations, by not accepting their norms, and by insisting that their own knowledge and points of view are relevant – then the non-difficult mother has to be a mother, who listens when the teachers speak and accepts responsibility for solving the problem as described by the teachers.

#### *An amenable mother.*

The amenable mother accepts the teachers' invitation and responds to the teachers' description of her child and its problems with an "I'll take care of that" and goes back home and fixes it. The amenable mother passively receives information and is actively engaged in solving the child's problems. She agrees to the teachers' description, to their implicit norms, and to the image of her child as deviant from the norm as described by the teachers, *and* she accepts responsibility for solving the problem at home. This role in the conversation is a rather narrow one. May be the difficult conversation is actually impossible?

The training of the difficult conversation outlines a discursive practice in which the position of the teacher is also precarious: authority based on individual classroom experiences. The teacher's authority does not need to be justified, nor does it have to include or call for the mother's experiences and interpretations. This means that the teachers become rather vulnerable vis-à-vis someone challenging their description of the problems: it becomes a challenging of their experiences and hence of their authority. Perhaps the teachers

can even be said to be powerless? The teachers are not responsible for solving the problems. That role is assigned to the parents. However, if the mother does not accept the description and does not solve the problem, what can the teachers do? Repeat the description and hope for the best?

It is actually striking how many times during the conversations the teachers repeat themselves, and it is striking how many times the teacher ensures the parent that they like their child (“we really care about him”, “he really is a good kid”). This might be the only means that the teachers have to persuade the mother. Perhaps, the repeated assurances from the teachers that they really like the child are really about the fact that what can be defined as knowledge does not have the character of shared experiences but of individual experiences? There is no knowledge in the conversations that is embedded in a ‘we’ with generalized experiences: ‘we know as educators that this is important because...’

What takes place is referred to as a conversation, the difficult conversation. This invites expectations about the relevance of the different viewpoints and assessments of all the involved parties. However, in reality the conversation is based on one-way communication because the right to interpret is placed exclusively with the teachers. The parents work merely as a talking object. These elements of the conversation are not reflected upon. There is no opening towards meta-communication in the sense of a discussion of the relation between the conversation parties (Bateson 2005, p. 193). It could have been made the subject of an open discussion among the participants in the audience to discuss the purpose and aim of the conversation, its topic, its parties, their rights, etc. But the relation between teachers and parents is not up for discussion. The teachers interpret; and it is not discussed whether their right to interpret is better justified than the mother’s. Thus, the teachers also do not have to present any justification for their interpretations. There is no indication of a limit to the teachers’ knowledge, and the teachers assign themselves the right to interpret without asking the mother’s acceptance. With Bateson’s terminology from his analyses of communication in families with a schizophrenic child we might describe the communication to the parents as double-binded in the sense that it loins two incompatible statements (Bateson 2005, pp. 208-282). “We are having a conversation – you have nothing to say”.

### **Training the difficult conversation: Take care out there**

What is the purpose of spending a morning on such training? What takes place in terms of training? What is trained?

The principal concludes the session by saying:

*The focus has been on you. A focus on how we take care of each other, how we take care of ourselves, the way we act as professionals in order not to get hurt. That was the background for choosing this seminar, because I have often had someone come to me, or someone has been in an unpleasant situation and has come to me and said, ‘I am unable to handle this’. [...] How does one take care of oneself in a situation in which one is required to do something difficult? That was the main reason for this. So I think that, if I were to say where all this leads to, I would say: the team. Use the team!*

The principal’s aim is to build an esprit de corps. The message from the day could be something along the lines of ‘Let’s be careful out there!’<sup>6</sup> And: Support each other. We are happy to support you at the office, but you should also use your team! There is no reflection of any changes to the purpose of the conversation, the perspective on the parents, the teacher’s role, etc. On the contrary, what is emphasized is that it *is* difficult, we *are* hurt, and so we have to find different ways to protect ourselves.

### **The regime of reasonability**

The school trains its relation to the parents – but only as a way to counter resistance. The sole effect of this might be that the only thing that the group of teachers comes to share is the image of these phantom parents. It does not seem as if the purpose of the training is to make the difficult conversations less difficult – rather the purpose seems to be to acknowledge that it is difficult for everyone. The uneasiness of maintaining an untenable role of authority, based on personal and individual experiences from the classroom remains a personal matter for the individual teacher. What becomes a common concern is to construct a protective shield intended to protect the teachers from the dangerous parents. Many of the employed metaphors are taken from war: Attack, aggressive, defusing, tactic – words that all portrait the encounter between school and parents as a battlefield, where the goal is to support each other in the resolve to stand firm.

The collective embarrassment associated with the problems of having the unilateral right to describe and make judgments in the context of what is referred to as a conversation is not brought up for shared reflection or discussion. It is left to the individual teacher – with the support of the colleagues if necessary – to manage the relation to the parents. The very impossibility of the conversation and the positional fixing of the participants are not discussed. “Social structure gains elasticity: the individual merely loses composure” (Goffman 1982, p. 112) The individual teacher or team is expected to find a solution to the situation – with embarrassment as elasticity. The teachers are put in a situation that produces embarrassment, stomachache, laughter – but it is defined as something that the individual teacher has to cope with, with the support of his or her colleagues. The situation itself, the social structure, is maintained.

We might say that this training of difficult conversations takes on a form, which expresses both the acceptance and exclusion of responsibility. It is an acceptance of responsibility within the given presuppositions: The teachers have to protect themselves against unpleasant and extreme situations with difficult parents. There is a recognition of the importance and difficulty of this and that it has to be dealt with in a professional manner. It is an exclusion of responsibility because the responsibility only pertains to the school's portion of the conversation – and hardly that. However, the school also defines the possibilities of the parents. There are no initiatives, which allow for the teachers and principals to consider the parents' possible role in the conversation. The teachers are not instructed in how to create agendas that open up towards subject positions other than the amenable or difficult parent.

The teachers are also not instructed in how to create agendas that allow them to use other subject positions than the one based on individual experiences, implicit norms, and the responsibility of making the parent assume responsibility, that is, the one that decides what is 'reasonable'.<sup>7</sup>

The background for the training of the difficult conversations is a 'monocontextual' world. The world is the way it is perceived by the teachers. They are the ones who decide what is 'reasonable'. That seriously restricts the possible scope of leadership and ways in which teachers might prepare themselves for difficult parents. There is no 'polycontextual' awareness of the fact that a child, a problem, a conversation can be many different things, depending on the perspective one takes. There is no reflection of the possibilities for the relation between parents and school. There is not, for example, a mutual discussion of what parents can reasonably expect of the individual teacher, or what is reasonable to expect of the parents. In this kind of 'monocontextual' world, good leadership

means to be able to assert one's perception despite resistance.

My suggestion would be for the management of the school to implement their leadership on the level of metacommunication and try to see the world as 'polycontextual'. In that way, the management would transform the school from an institution to an organization (Åkerstrøm Andersen, this book) in that an organization, as defined by Åkerstrøm, is characterized by the fact that it makes decisions about its relation to its environment, whereas the institution represents a part of a larger whole with a pre-defined relation to its environment. In the institution, management is limited to operational management, whereas management in and of an organization also includes the establishment of the social sphere that the school constitutes. In relation to the parents, this would not only constitute a – difficult – attempt to assert leadership, but an effort to manage one's own leadership effort in relation to them; a reflection of the desired and possible relation to the parents. On the other hand: Is it 'reasonable' to place the responsibility for defining the relation between parents and school as such with the individual school, principal, team? Perhaps it is more 'reasonable' than leaving it with the individual teacher, or to define the relation as so self-evident that only the teacher's experiences from the classroom can be used as valid knowledge in this 'conversation'. Either way, it is by no means easy.

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> I followed this school's work with school-home cooperation and management in the period from December 2005 to May 2006 as part of gathering empirical material for my Ph.D. project. The school is characterized by two things that are relevant to my project: First, it is a school that is emphasized in different contexts as well-functioning in terms of leadership and internal organization; teaching staff, management team, etc. This is important because it means that tensions and difficulties cannot be related to simple explanations such as poor leadership or being outdated. Secondly, it is a school with a socially and ethnically diverse student group and hence also parent group. This is important because tensions and difficulties cannot be simply explained with reference to a specific group of parents.

<sup>2</sup> It says 'mother' because the actor who played the part of the parent is a woman and insisted that she would only play the role of a mother.

<sup>3</sup> It says 'mother' because the actor who played the part of the parent is a woman and insisted that she would only play the role of a mother.

<sup>4</sup> An analysis of all three role-plays is available by contacting the author

<sup>5</sup> All names are fictitious in order to ensure anonymity

<sup>6</sup> Toulmin (1958/1994) pp. 94-146 for the ‘layout of the argument’.

<sup>7</sup> The television series *Hill Street Blues*. These are the commissioner’s words to his officers at the end of each morning meeting before he sends them out into the world of criminals. Occasionally, a different commissioner who uses a somewhat more rough tone will say: ‘Let’s do it to them before they do it to us’.

<sup>7</sup>When I wrote my first draft for this article, I did not place ‘reasonable expectations’ in quotation

marks. As I thought of some of the actual parents, whose parent-teacher conversations I witnessed, where the issues were that they did not send their children to school with lunch, did not make sure that the children brought clothes for PE, did not come to parents’ meetings, etc., then ‘reasonable’ seemed reasonable to me. However, the word ‘reasonable’ is a strong word and one which rules out a great deal of issues in a discussion and makes it possible to believe that one’s own description is the only valid one.

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