

**SPACE OF ENCOUNTER,
THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE SCHOOL: ENABLING SELF-EMPOWERMENT OF
PARENTS AS CO-EDUCATORS OF TEACHERS**

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Although parents are seen as the ‘first educators’ of the child and teachers as pedagogues being second, in every day practice it’s very often just the other way around . In the history of the Dutch educational system, though, parents are the roots of the school’s foundation. Parents were the founders of the so called pillarized educational system in the Netherlands, a system rooted in Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution guaranteeing freedom of education to all, irrespective of their religious or secular worldview. Since the start of the ‘pillarized system’ parents are actively involved in the school community as members of the board of their schools. Due to processes of professionalization of teachers and principals, and a growing number of families where both the father and the mother actively participate on the labour market, parents were pushed back from their position as ‘first educators’ to a second place.

The growing complexity of society and today’s challenges of education have resulted in a renewed recognition and appreciation of parents as co-educators. Teachers increasingly become aware of the importance of collaboration with parents to reach the goals of education – not only with regard to the three R’s (reading, writing and arithmetic), but even more so regarding acculturation in the multicultural and multireligious society of the Netherlands today.

In our presentation we inform about a safe space at the heart of three school for primary education, three schools in the metropolitan context of Amsterdam – a safe space contributing to the self-empowerment of parents as equal partners in the education of their children. A safe space to let

freedom ring!, that means: to invite teachers and parents to explore what freedom means in their collaboration in the child's education.

Five years ago the three schools (a Roman Catholic school, a state school and an Islamic school in primary education) had to think about new buildings for their schools because of renovation of the Bijlmer district – the a deprived area in the South-Eastern part of Amsterdam. The principals decided not to build three separate new buildings, but to design one building as the new accommodation for their three schools. With this decision they concretised their plans for close cooperation in educating their pupils, all living in a context of poverty and broken families. They put their shoulders to the wheel of the shared problem of cultural deprivation. Instead of complaining about all the problems these three principals decided to empower each member in the development of self-empowerment and enable processes of learning from and with each other, making use of the strengths of all people involved: teachers, parents and pupils. The architecture of the newly built housing for the three schools mirrors this educational vision and the pedagogical strategies of the schools in which openness, encounter and respect for each other's freedom are central.

A coherent and consistent educational policy flourishes not only because of familiarity of the participants, but even more so because of appropriate distance; commitment and distance should be flexibly balanced. In the accomodation in the Bijlmer district of the city of Amsterdam, the three different primary schools, from three different 'pillars' (Christian, Islamic and public education), each have their own territory, recognizable by their own colour of wall decoration, orange, green and yellow respectively. The heart of the school building consists of an open space, where communal activities can take place. Neighbours of the school use this place for the choir's practices, there are gym classes after school hours for all children of the three schools, the schools' orchestra has its rehearsals in the open space preparing for their yearly performance in the 'Koninklijk Concertgebouw' (Royal Concert Hall) in Amsterdam, parents use the place for mothers' meetings and conversations, and the teachers of the three teams of teachers have their common meetings in the open space. The place is left undecorated and unfurnished, there is no given 'identity' to this place, not a given 'label' that might colonize future users. The open place, symbolizes the freedom of each participant to bring

in an own unique element in the culture to be created in togetherness. Any (future) user of this place is invited to give the room an own flavor. The urge to do that makes the users aware of the image they wish to transmit and the way they can do that best. As such this is part of the self-empowerment policy of the schools.

The open space in the heart of the school building demonstrates to be more than just a bridging element (intersection); from the start the space has been a meaningful place in which the pedagogical views are concretized and experienced by the users. The open space is not only a physical space situated within the three schools, but also and more importantly an intermediate area between the micro system of the family and the meso system of the school. The open space being at the heart also symbolizes that it is the child that is in the centre of attention. Parents and teachers meet in this in-between-area as co-educators – inspired by different religious and secular world views and the respective perspectives of ‘the good life’. Inspiration inside the school to set into movement outside the school as (future) participants of the multicultural Dutch society. The architecture of the accommodation represents this educational vision, the ‘Bijlmer Blik’ (‘Bijlmer View’) articulating freedom and openness towards ‘the other’, connectedness and individuality: three schools living apart together. The open space is a meeting place, connecting parents’ stances with teachers’ interpretation of ‘schooling’. An important aspect of articulating one’s own stance and consequently of self-empowerment of parents is familiarity with other parents and teachers, and trust that ‘the other’ will take care and include one’s own interests in the general educational aims of the school. In the open space parents and teachers have conversations on topics of shared interest regarding the education of their children, and their learners respectively. Familiarity with other parents grows during different meetings, at different places in and around the school, with different people, for example in the schoolyard when they bring their children to school, as guides in school outings, of collaborating in one of the schools’ projects like the project of the ‘Verteltas’(‘Story Bag’). The architecture of the building allows for this, what is coined as

‘structured complexity’. Respect for the uniqueness of each parents’ contribution and the ‘otherness’ of the other is pre-conditional and safeguarded by all participants.

Our focus in the presentation is on the interrelatedness of the architecture of the housing of the school with its characteristic open space, and sharing stories in open encounters contributing to the self-empowerment of parents regaining their position as co-educators of their children.