

# Parent involvement in education: models, strategies and contexts

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In this paper, we explore the conceptual, empirical and strategic literature related to parent involvement in education. Parent involvement in schooling has traditionally taken many forms including parents helping their children with homework, parent-teacher interviews, parent nights, special consultation on student problems, parent councils, and parent volunteer help in the school and the classroom. Some evidence suggests that activities of this nature can have beneficial effects on student learning. From a socio-cultural perspective, however, we will review other evidence indicating that traditional relationships between teachers and parents can also perpetuate a power imbalance in favour of teachers. In recent years, teachers' relationships with parents have become more uncertain and contentious. Parents are becoming more questioning and critical about issues of curriculum, the quality of instruction and practices used to assess and evaluate their children. Home-school relationships are changing for a multitude of reasons including greater diversity of the parent population, changes in family structures, increasing school choice, more parental involvement in the governance of schools, new methods of assessment and reporting, and special education legislation. These developments have implications for parent involvement and student achievement. Formulating new strategies for involving parents in their children's learning is particularly important during this time of profound social change and educational reform in Ontario, nationally and internationally. Since parents are not a homogeneous group, conflicts concerning expectations between parents and teachers,

culture between home and school, and institutional barriers are bound to arise. Involving parents as partners requires an understanding of parents' perceptions of schooling, their aspirations for their children, their approach to parenting, their expectations of teachers, and their concept of their role and responsibilities. We first examine child-parent interactions both inside and outside the home through the theoretical lens of stages in a child's cognitive, emotional and social development, explore the barriers that divide teachers and parents, parents and schools, and parents and their children, identify the socio-cultural factors that influence school-parent understanding, and propose strategic approaches that can enhance communication, community and partnerships between parents, teachers and schools. In our consideration of the empirical literature, we paid special attention to exemplary studies and models which have received authoritative recognition in the field and cutting edge research that provides new insights into parent-teacher interaction. *We argue that the structures of schooling must shift from closed and protectionist to open and inclusionary if parent-teacher partnerships are to flourish over time and benefit children.* Second, we consider the implications of the conceptual and empirical literature for the organization and substance of the EQAO (Education Quality and Accountability Office) grade 3 and grade 6 Home Questionnaires. Surveys are important, commonly used tools for gathering information about how parents are involved in their children's learning and the kind of modelling they provide in the learning process. The validity and reliability of such instruments is

important if the data are to be trusted for making claims, predictions, and policy decisions. The Home Questionnaire operates concurrently in a wider context of demographic and educational change. Socio-cultural meanings embedded in the questions may resonate with some parents, but confound others. We analyzed the Home Questionnaires in relation to literature on parent involvement and what is known to date about best practice. *We argue that the Home Questionnaire needs to reflect the socio-cultural experiences of parents as a diverse group and that the ability to disaggregate these parent data according to key demographic variables can deepen our understanding of the dynamics of parents' involvement (or lack thereof) in the home and in the school.*

Finally, our review takes place in a climate of tumultuous change on the educational landscape in Ontario as well as concurrent sweeping educational changes in other Canadian provinces and countries. These changes reflect paradoxical forces of centralization and decentralization. In Ontario, for example, the ministry has centralized educational taxing and school funding while decentralizing power to school councils. It has centralized and standardized curriculum and reporting while decentralizing responsibilities for implementing these new policies. The reform scenario has provoked spirited debate in the province on the future of public education including the role of parents in schooling. Some claim that current educational changes in Ontario are 'progressive' in response to changing community demographics, the need for greater accountability to parents, and the requirements of a competitive global economy. Other observers, however, are critical of current reforms as narrow in scope, regressive in terms of teaching and learning, and insensitive to the day-to-day realities of teachers' professional lives. In any event, educators, parents and students are caught up in a time of political crisis and uncertainty in education, which is affecting their relationships in

significant ways. Our review explores where parent involvement is conceptually and structurally positioned within the educational change process. In this regard, the experiences of educators and parents in other jurisdictions can be highly relevant in the Ontario context. The changes occurring in public schooling in Ontario today are, in part, the result of pressures from parents themselves. We need to keep this in mind as we explore the concepts, models and contexts of parent involvement in education.

### Objectives

- conduct a critical review of the conceptual and methodological literature in order to assess parent involvement and its relation to school achievement, including the role of family and school demography.
- evaluate empirical findings concerning the relationship between different forms of parent involvement and student motivation, learning and success.
- elucidate how patterns of parent involvement in education vary according to differences in social class, language, traditions, ethnocultural background, and family type (e.g., single parent, blended family).
- engage critically with the EQAO grade 3 and grade 6 parent surveys based on the literature.
- conceptualize alternative models of parent involvement in education from a synthesis of theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and practical considerations.
- identify strategic implications of empirical findings for enhancing communications between parents and teachers and promoting parent involvement in their children's learning.

### Design and methodology

We began with a global search of the literature on 'parent involvement' - including databases and websites. We also searched the most current editions of about 20 of the most relevant journals of education for relevant articles that would not

yet be on the ERIC database. Then, we organized studies according to major questions under investigation: parents' views, models of parent involvement, school demographics, reporting, and best practice. In so doing, we focussed on what the concept of 'parent involvement' means from the perspectives of parents, teachers and researchers as well as different levels in the system - home, school, board and province. As we probed deeper into the literature, we identified barriers of culture, language, race, power, and bureaucracy that tend to keep parents safely on the margins of schooling. In our analysis of findings concerning parent involvement across a multitude of school and home contexts, we identified key themes. Theory helps to explain variability in findings across contexts. For example, Waller's assertion that parents and teachers are natural antagonists (parents being oriented to their child and teachers oriented to a child as part of a group) gets to the heart of the dynamics of many parent-teacher struggles. However, Waller's notion does not fully account for differences in how parents and teachers perceive one another through different socio-cultural lenses. Motivational, cultural and organizational theories also come into play. We intentionally selected exemplary studies, a few of which provide rare, revealing glimpses into the social organization of parent-teacher interaction. Ideally, parents and teachers can learn to understand and appreciate the world from the other's perspective. However, our examination of parent-teacher relationships suggests that simply bringing parents into the teachers' world may actually increase tensions without effective strategies professional development and parent education.

We examined the process as well as the substance of parent involvement. Process refers to the constantly changing dynamics of parent-teacher relationships and parent-child relationships over time. We have not attempted to create a definitive dictionary of 'parent involvement' or 'best

practice'. Rather, we identify and discuss alternative strategies in relation to empirical findings, concepts and authoritative models. There are some excellent handbooks that suffice as strategic guides. *However, research findings suggest repeatedly that understanding particular family cultures, particular school environments and particular teachers' perceptions is essential to designing effective approaches to parent involvement.* In this regard, we found some case studies where claims of successful partnerships are made. We also discovered some unsettling accounts of parent-teacher conflict and alienation, where partnerships have failed to materialize because of distrust and political tensions - sometimes bitter and prolonged. As well, conflicting beliefs about rights, expertise, abilities and cultural stereotypes cast teachers and parents into 'adversarial' rather than collaborative relationships. Although, prescriptive guidelines cannot be expected take into account all these complexities and variabilities, clearly written, informative documentation for parents is an important component in communicating with and supporting parents involvement in their children's learning. In summary, the specific steps in our methodological approach were as follows:

- A. *Assessment* of empirical research findings on parent involvement according to:
  - demographic and cultural variation in types of parents by class, race, culture, gender, and family type;
  - ecological variation in school size, structure, location (rural, urban, suburban), student population, and setting (elementary/secondary).
- B. *Search databases* (e.g., ERIC, including Canadian Educational Index, Australian Education Index, British Education Index; ONTARIS) with focus on research on primary care giver / parent / parent involvement.
- C. *Review* books and refereed journal articles, including publications and reports connected with International Centre for Educational

Change extensive research studies and findings concerning parent communication, relationship and involvement.

- D. *Analysis* of grade 3 and grade 6 parent questionnaire instruments in terms of the conceptual and empirical literature on parent involvement.
- E. *Professional contacts* with key researchers and centres in the field for collaboration and research advice (e.g., Joyce Epstein, Centre on School, Family and Community Partnerships, John Hopkins University).

### Key questions

Our review of the literature was organized around a number of key questions outlined in our original proposal to EQAO:

1. What are the most effective forms of parental involvement in relation to parents' point of view as well as demographic and ecological factors?
2. What are the authoritative models of parent relationship and how do they inform strategies for parents' involvement in their children's learning?
3. How do parent and school demographics modify the relations among other variables such as parent interest and motivation to become involved in education?
4. What is the role in reporting to parents in fostering assessment literacy and motivation for parents' involvement?
5. What are best practices in terms of communication and involvement of parents in their children's learning?
6. How well do the dimensions of the parent questionnaires for grade 3 and grade 6 reflect concepts in the literature, tap into parents' life experience, enhance parents' understandings and motivate parents' involvement?

### Discussion and conclusion

Parent involvement is an amorphous concept that can mean very different things to parents and

educators depending on their ethno-cultural point of view. In this regard, a very prominent theme in the literature is the need to ground concepts of parent involvement in relation to particular individual and school demographics. The literature we reviewed also reflects both the psychology and sociology of parent involvement. On a psychological level, the focus of study is on the individual's experiences, perceptions, feelings, expectations, memories and aspirations for the child's education and their role in it. Almost all parents regardless of background, for example, want the best education for their children and try to be conscientious about helping them succeed. At the same time, parents often report feeling powerless, frustrated, and marginalized from teachers and the schooling process. Parents' expectations of their children, the teacher, the school and *themselves* are a reflection of their own ethnocultural background and their own experiences of schooling.

Likewise, teachers' expectations of parents are shaped by their own ethnocultural experience, by their concern and responsibilities for 'other people's children, and also by their professional acculturation.

A socio-cultural perspective has been the main focus in our analysis of the literature on parent involvement. In this regard, the literature indicates that the cultural understandings and realities of parents can conflict sharply with those of teachers. Absence of or breakdown in communication between parents and teachers is documented in many case studies and surveys. Particularly, linguistic and bureaucratic barriers can silence minority parents voices. The evidence also suggests that training is lacking for both parents and teachers on how to work together. Preservice and inservice have not kept pace with rapidly changing demands and new partnership roles in working with parents. On top of all of this, administrators and teachers in Ontario are under intense reform pressure from government and parents to open their doors, change their

practices, structures, curriculum, and, in general, be more 'accountable' to the wider public. EQAO is playing an important role in this process of educational change. The evidence we reviewed suggests that schools are having difficulty transforming themselves into 'learning organizations', which are flexible and responsive to the forces of demographic and political change. *Reform demands on teachers in Ontario over the last three years have been crushing and relentless. This has resulted in many of teachers retreating from parents to protect themselves, rather than joining forces with them. In contrast, research on communication and best practice points time and time again to the need for the structures of schooling to change to more open, inclusive systems where partnerships between teachers and parents are the norm, rather than the exception.*

We have compared parents' views with those of teachers and identified some of the most significant factors in their relationships in terms of children's achievement. In this regard, the conceptual literature suggests that parents see their child and teachers see a child as part of a group. The empirical literature tends to support Waller's thesis to a point, with parents often asking for individualized, personal communication. In addition, there is ample evidence of the cultural, linguistic and institutional barriers that keep teachers and parents in their own separate worlds. At the same time, the empirical literature offers some persuasive evidence that partnership models can create 'bridges of understanding' between the home and the school. Specifically, some critical studies draw our attention to protective and school-centred structures of schooling that pathologize parents and keep them at a distance from the core functions of teaching and learning. The 'deficit' model and the 'partnership model are conflicting orientations each with quite different implications for parent involvement. While the demographics of family can create

significant barriers to parent involvement, the power for change rests mostly with schools and teachers where institutional power lies. The exception to this assertion is parent political activism.

Deficit models view parents and students from a clinical position of greater knowledge and professionalism. Schools that reach out, open their doors and implement practices of parental inclusion in part by adapting the school culture to more closely fit the surrounding community culture, on the other hand, are laying the organizational groundwork for meaningful, parent-teacher partnerships. Our review suggests that the deficit model is alive and well when it comes to inclusion of minority, single-parent and low socioeconomic status families. Proactive approaches to parent involvement are difficult and demanding for administrators and teachers. The evidence suggests that partnerships will not automatically produce harmonious relationships. First, parents are a very diverse population reflecting many assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and images of schooling. Second, it would be naïve to expect educators and school boards to simply hand over institutional-based power to parents. Third, conflicts grow more intense as parents get more closely involved in the classroom and in making decisions concerning core functions, curriculum, staffing and school governance. Fourth, some parents want no part of such core decision-making roles and consider them the prerogative of administrators and teachers. In a multiracial, multicultural and multiethnic society, such as Canada, these issues are interlinked in complex ways that play out in each individual situation. Nevertheless, the literature suggests that partnerships offer a path to work collaboratively which can foster parents and teachers understanding of the world through one another's eyes. *Teacher development programs need to be designed and implemented that develop in teachers the critical reflective skills to see their own biases, to develop communication*

*skills that will help teachers talk with an increasingly more diverse parent population, which cultivate the value of involving parents and provide teachers with a wide array of strategies for how to do this.*

The literature on parent involvement suggests a world of 'multiple realities'. The challenge for educators and parents is to find ways to work collaboratively on the basis of each other's reality in the best interest of the child's development, achievement and success. Partnership models - particularly as formulated by Epstein, Ogbu, Comer, Cummins and Hargreaves - provide conceptual scaffolding upon which collaborative relationships between parents and teachers can develop. While each partnership model has its strengths and weaknesses, their common feature is practices of two-way communication between home and school. *Partnerships need to be adapted to fit particular conditions of family demographics, student developmental needs, school structures, and community resources.* Innovations - such as parent centres, homework 'hotlines', home visits, parent coordinators, teachers as 'ethnographers', parent-teacher teaming, parent education and training, three-way conferences, and 'schools in the community' - are particularly promising ways to foster two-way communication, emotional understanding, cohesion between school practices and parent support roles, and involvement of community resources. The potential of technology for improving reporting, networking, and parent involvement has yet to be fully explored, and this means giving access and resources to all parents.

*However, unless real rather than illusory power is shared with parents, who are willing and able to accept the responsibilities that go with it, the notion of parent-teacher partnership will be 'hollow words' (Benson, 1999).*

Finally, there are significant gaps in the research on parent involvement. First, the role, responsibility and expectations of students themselves are mentioned in only a few studies. However, the place of students within partnerships needs more conceptual definition and empirical emphasis. Practices such as three-way conferences point to the value of students' voices in their own learning experience, for their parents' participation and parents' 'assessment literacy'. Second, best practices of teachers' professional development, parent training and inquiry in the context of the partnership process needs to be documented more thoroughly in the Canadian schools, including models where the parents and teachers learn together (e.g., Paideia seminars). Third, we have only scratched the surface in understanding the micro-dynamics of power and authority in interactions between parents and teachers. Particularly, studies are needed that focus on the social organization of partnerships in institutional settings - especially parent involvement in the school, the classroom and in decision-making roles. The research we reviewed clearly indicates tensions between professional and personal realities when parents become closely involved in the day-to-day activities of teachers' work. These tensions have to be confronted openly and honestly, not ignored.