

PARENTS AND COMMUNITY, AND SCHOOL:

A GENERAL OVERVIEW

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Zygmunt Bauman (2001) writes:

Words have meanings: some words, however, also have a “feel.” The word “community” is one of them. It feels good: whatever the word “community” may mean, it is good “to have a community,” “to be in a community.” (p. 1)

This *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy* special issue, “Parent and Community Participation in Educational Improvement,” was inspired by the recognition of the ecological nature of schools; participative approaches to educational improvement, educational policy development, and school decision-making have become commonplace. It is, however, one matter to theoretically and/or philosophically accept parents and the larger community as contributors to educational goals, and rather quite another to enunciate this *Zeitgeist* of collaboration, partnership, or authentic engagement in mutually beneficial ways. In other words, this special issue is premised on the assumption that an academic exploration of parent and community engagement in education is required to strengthen the discourse beyond an uncontested and romanticized rhetoric of *school community*.

This special issue offers theoretical, methodological, and contextual diversity, which was our aim. The papers engage critical theory, social capital theory, and theories of engagement and place-based education. All papers are qualitative, but the use of approaches such as narrative

inquiry, ethnographic data collection strategies, and participatory action research give methodological breadth to this special issue. We were pleased to receive manuscripts that examined contexts of rurality and First Nations families, as well as manuscripts that examined parent and community engagement from policy, governance, and research participation perspectives.

In their work on rural parents' understanding of non-traditional literacies, and what they term "plastic texts," Corbett and Vibert introduce the concept of "risky geographies" emerging in rural communities. Parents interviewed for their research study reported new literacies as non-educational and dangerous. The independence afforded to children through contemporary technologies seemed to exacerbate parents' perception of danger; the seductive and seemingly private worlds viewed through technology contributed to the risky geographies. Corbett and Vibert's work alerts us to the dissonance between parent and educator perspectives when it comes to technology as literacy media. The ubiquity of and excitement around new texts may go uncontested among educators; however, if families have fear around non-traditional texts, school literacy goals may not be equally supported by all concerned.

Pushor and Murphy's narrative inquiry honors the educational experiences of two Mi'kmaq mothers from Nova Scotia. Weaving the two mothers' stories of their experiences with their children's teachers and administrators with the concept of a protectorate, Pushor and Murphy illustrate a divide between educators and administrators as a consequence of epistemological privileging, power positioning, and blame posturing. This work highlights Pushor's thesis that parents have unique knowledge which should be included alongside educators' professional knowledge. Through the mothers' narratives, common practices such as

parent-teacher conferences are held to a critical light, and the question of who is unconsciously uninvited into the school community through such taken-for-granted practices is forefronted.

Ippolito documents a participatory action research project involving parents from minority cultural and linguistic backgrounds as co-researchers in a study of parents' views of discipline. The action research employed a case study of two elementary schools in Toronto. In addition to learning about the views of discipline of parents from minority cultural backgrounds, Ippolito highlights the value of using research to, as he puts it, "reconfigure relationships within the school." An inherent question that Ippolito raises in this work is how social and cultural privilege impacts upon agency, and what conditions or structures may contribute to eroding the boundaries between the dominant white, middle class culture of school and the meanings and experiences of families from diverse backgrounds. Engaging parents as co-researchers proved to be empowering and power-leveling in this project.

Along a similar vein, Winton inquires into how ordinary citizens can enhance democracy in education. Based on a study of a not-for-profit group in Ontario—People for Education—Winton explores how citizens who are seemingly peripheral to policy development may influence policy text. She uses the conceptual lens of engagement—cognitive, affective, and behavioural—to examine community members' dialogue about the ideal school. Winton's work contributes to understanding that policy development occurs in an open, not closed, system, and that community members participating in policy dialogues enhance the democratizing of such decisions to which educators and policy makers often claim they are committed.

Finally, from across the Atlantic, Gibson and Simon critique *Every Parent Matters*, a policy introduced in Britain in 2007 by the former ruling New Labour Party. Gibson and Simon argue that there are subtexts of surveillance and colonization of parents inherent in this policy,

positing that *Every Parent Matters* is Janus-faced in its claim to empower parents because it essentially blames poor parenting for all social ills. This harkens to Nakagawa's (2000) notion of parents being caught in a double bind whereby they are both the cause and the solution to children's educational and social problems. By looking specifically at Sure Start centers and Academy Schools, Gibson and Simon argue that parent training and education, and quasi-legal contractual agreements are superficially supportive of families, and have colonizing and controlling effects.

A common thread throughout these papers is the prioritizing of parent voice and perspective. While not all works are critical, they collectively challenge current understanding and practices with respect to engaging parents and community in education/schools. We thank these authors for raising concerns and questions which may lead us to the sense of community about which schools advocate, and which we, like Bauman (2001), suspect "we miss" (p. 144).

We wish to thank reviewers whose comments were forwarded to these contributors so that they were able to refine their work to a polished state. Patrick and I are also grateful to doctoral candidate, Robin Mueller, for the way she enthusiastically assisted with this project and made it a seamless enterprise from the beginning to completion. We acknowledge the *University of Saskatchewan Publication Fund* for supporting this project.

References

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