MINORITY PARENTS AS RESEARCHERS:

BEYOND A DICHOTOMY IN PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN SCHOOLING

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This article documents the work of parent-driven research teams in two school boards in the Greater Toronto Area. Motivated by a desire to move beyond a school-centred/family-centred dichotomy, this parent-lead project explores a middle space for collective learning among multiple stakeholders in publicly-funded schooling. Drawing on participatory action research and social capital theory, I outline a generic research approach and then provide a more detailed sketch of one full research cycle focused on the theme of *discipline*. I evaluate the relative successes of the project and conclude by prioritizing the quality of relationships within the research.

The parent-driven research at the centre of this discussion was part of a larger project situated in two elementary schools in two respective school boards in Greater Toronto. Since the 2005/2006 academic year, this broader research project has made a sustained effort to expand lines of communication between two schools and their families, most of whom are from linguistic, cultural and racial minority groups.

The work at the schools began as a series of after-school, town-hall type community forums involving the respective school communities (parents, their children, in-service and pre-service teachers, the school's administration, local community agencies), and a university-based research team (a lead teacher from the school, myself as the principal investigator and two graduate student research assistants). Discussions addressed issues parents considered significant

or pressing in their families' experience of public schooling such as authority and learning, equity policies, the place of minority languages in dominant language schools, the experience of immigration, and inter-generational relationships. I report in detail on these community forums in Ippolito (2010).

At the end of the third year of the project, 2007/2008, some participants in the community forums expressed a wish to pursue issues raised there "in more depth" (Parent). In response to this request, I asked parents if they would be interested in forming a parent research group to investigate, in depth, one or more of the priority issues identified by parents during the community forums. The research teams would provide small groups of parents a chance to investigate their children's schools by documenting views of other parents. It would also give other parents a chance to share their views in the research. The response from parents was positive and, at each of the two schools, the project established research teams of four parents. At one of the schools, positions were filled on recommendation of the school's Adult Education teacher, who made an informal announcement to parents in her class. At the other school, positions were advertised in the school newsletter. In each case, the method of recruitment deferred to the preferences of the particular school, although initial steering committees – which included me as the principal investigator, one teacher, one administrator and, at one of the two schools, a board-based field researcher – made a deliberate attempt to select parent researchers who had language skills to conduct interviews in a minority home language, who had English-language skills to take part in research team discussions, and who were willing to consider a longer-term role as researchers in future peer research. In this paper, I focus on the parent research teams and their relationships with the broader school community.

Parent-Driven Research: An Emergent Concern Around Discipline

In Fall 2008, the research team at the K – 5 school went to its school community to solicit a focus for the next cycle of parent-driven research (where a cycle begins with an initial research mandate from the school community and ends with a final report back by the research team). At the inaugural community forum for the year, the school community discussed and deliberated on several possibilities and finally chose *discipline* as the preferred research focus. They instructed the parent research team to find out how parents are thinking about discipline in relation to their children's schooling and, more generally, to find out what challenges parents face in connection with discipline.

The research team took this mandate and, under my research supervision and with logistical support from the on-site research coordinator, began the process of drafting an interview protocol. I list the interview questions below, prefacing them with the observation that, apart from minor modifications requested by the school board's research review committee, the questions were authored entirely by the parent researchers:

1. What is discipline?

2. How do you discipline your children?

3. Do you give the same discipline to all of them?

4. If you were in your country, would you discipline you child the same way as in Canada?

5. What is effective discipline?

6. Do children learn new ways of behaviour by disciplining them?

7. Whose discipline do they listen to?

8. Are teachers allowed to give discipline?

9. Do you think discipline would interfere with the relationship you enjoy with your child?

10. Do you trust other people to give discipline to your child?

This paper details the findings of this research and discusses the value of using parent-driven research methods for fostering parental engagement in schools.

Conceptualization: Beyond a Dichotomy in Parent Involvement in Schooling

The place of parents in publicly funded schools is part of ongoing discussion and debate in Canada and elsewhere, with the contours of this discussion shaped by a range of views for mediating relationships between families and schools. At one end of the range, literature documents a set of views that families be encouraged and given the resources to more fully align themselves with the extant practices of their children's schools (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1986; Rosado, 1994). These approaches assume that successful participation in schools and, more broadly, publicly funded systems of education are contingent on these families meeting the school's expectations. At the other end of the range one finds views where expectations for change are placed on schools rather than on the families they serve (Delpit, 1995; Johnson, Jiang, & Yoon, 2000; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). These latter views suggest that schools should not exert normative pressures on families but rather evolve in relation to their curricular and pedagogical needs.

While endorsement of parent involvement in education remains constant across this range of views, the nature of this involvement varies dramatically between school-centred views and family-centred views, the former arguing for families aligned to schools and the latter arguing for schooling aligned to families. The parent research I discuss here eschews the school-

centred/family-centred dichotomy and explores a middle space for collective learning and mutually-specifying relationships.

Parent-driven research was undertaken with a view to the insights it could glean into experiences of minority families as they navigate their children's publicly-funded schooling and, crucially, the ways in which those insights could be shared with and shape the views of educators, administrators and policy-makers. The more immediate objective for this research was to assess viability of parent-driven research about school communities and, as a longer term objective, to determine whether this research could enable more inclusive decision-making processes and governance of schools and education systems. In this paper, I privilege the former objective.

Social Capital Theory

The process by which research-derived knowledge holds potential for the betterment of communities can be understood within the logic of *social capital*. Social capital theory suggests that "networks of relationships are a resource that can facilitate access to other resources of value to individuals or groups for a specific purpose" (Balatti & Falk, 2002, p. 282). In this case *networks of relationships* are those between and among participant stakeholders, *resources of value* are multiple and include the value in parents sharing with teachers a perspective on their children's home lives, and *specific purpose* would include, but not be limited to, successful educational outcomes for children. This last point is qualified in that the parent-driven research is also centrally focused on the adult education of parents.

A further qualification pertains specifically to *parental* social capital. The degree to which parents can leverage social capital is stratified by the very disparities in socio-economic

capital that social capital is meant to redress: "[P]arents from lower social class positions still struggle to build and/or use formal social networks that might be leveraged on behalf of schoolchildren" (Ream & Palardy, 2008, p. 258). This concern was reiterated by Lareau and Shumar (1996), and by Lee and Bowen (2006) who observed in their study of parent involvement and children's academic achievement that the kinds of involvement by parents from dominant groups had the strongest association with student achievement. These studies identify crucial stratifications between parents that may mitigate the potential benefits of networks and resources, specifically in the case of poorer and minority parents.

Nonetheless, Ream and Palardy (2008) and Lee and Bowen (2006) chose not to discount social capital theory in the face of such stratifications. Rather, they advocated for commonalities across demographics so as to realize the value of networks as resources for *all* parents. In this way, networks realize the transformative potential of parental social capital, even, and perhaps especially, in urban schools (Noguera, 2001).

Methodological Framework: Participatory Action Research

The parent-driven research can be intelligibly located within, and drew direction from, two related methodological frameworks. The first of these frameworks comprises two variations on the theme of *participatory action research*.

In a general sense, the research was an attempt to "generate knowledge about a social system while, at the same time, attempting to change it" (Elden & Chisholm, 1993, p. 121). More specifically, and to begin with *action research* proper, the parent-driven research was "transformative rather than legitimating" (Noffke, 1997, p. 334). Noffke (1997) continued:

> While some action research embodies technocratic models of teaching and
> learning, the majority of works push at the boundaries of curriculum, offering at

> least the possibility of changes that address not the legitimation of practices
> structured by existing conditions of schooling but the transformation of education
> through continuing thought and action. (p. 334)

As a research-based intervention, this parent-driven exercise was fertile ground for policy and program change emerging from research-induced shifts in thought. It was also an opportunity for multiple stakeholders – parents, educators, administrators, university-based researchers – to push at the institutional boundaries that define understandings of publicly-funded schools and schooling.

With respect to the participatory nature of the research, the project was very much about two teams researching themselves and their own schools and communities. This peer-mediated approach shaped processes of data collection and informed the work of data analysis. The project shared methodological and conceptual commitments with *community based participatory research* (Berge, Mendenhall, & Doherty, 2009; Bloom et al., 2009; Fisher et al., 2010; Flicker, 2008; Greenberg, 2006; Wallerstein, 1993); in particular, a view of research as a collaborative effort

> that equitably involves all partners in the research process and recognizes the
> unique strengths that each brings. CBPR (community based participatory
> research) begins with a research topic of importance to the community with the
> aim of combining knowledge and action for social change. (Minkler &
> Wallerstein, 2003 as cited in Flicker, 2008)

Shared commitments between community based participatory research and the parent-driven research I discuss here are multiple and immediate: both took direction from a topic generated by the community, both recognized the unique strengths brought by participants, and both aimed at using research-derived knowledge for the betterment of communities.

Research Context

The parent-driven research and discussion forums preceding it took place in two schools in two school boards located in the Greater Toronto area. The first school was a large elementary school (Kindergarten – Grade 8) with a student population of approximately 800. The second school was also an elementary school (Kindergarten – Grade 5) and had a student population of just over 500. While both schools were situated within culturally, linguistically and racially diverse neighbourhoods, the composition of diversity varied. The K-8 school was in a neighbourhood which included both recent arrivals to Canada as well as families who had educated one, and in some cases two, generations of children in local schools. Many parents lived in single family bungalows close to the school. Predominant languages in the neighbourhood included Tamil, Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Punjabi, and Chinese. Most of the families were originally from Sri Lanka, northern India, Pakistan and mainland China. In contrast, the K-5 school was in a neighbourhood where many families were recent immigrants and lived in government-subsidized high rise apartments close to the school. As many as twenty minority languages were spoken by children at home. The predominant languages were Vietnamese, Somali, Punjabi, Tamil, Urdu and Spanish. Most of the families wee from south-east Asia, Africa, northern India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and central and south America.

Method

In the first cycle of parent research, the steering committee provided input and direction as to whom the researchers should select for interviewing, hoping the participant pool would be representative of the broader school demographic; however, by the second cycle of research the

parent researchers assumed almost complete autonomy in selecting the individuals with whom they wanted to conduct interviews and/or focus group discussions.

While in the first research cycle most of the interviews and focus group discussions took place within the respective schools, by the second cycle data collection also took place off-site in venues that the researchers found most appropriate; for example, neighbour's homes, coffee shops, and places of worship. The interviews and focus groups themselves were typically about 30 minutes long and guided by open-ended questions. Discussions were audio taped and translated when required, and transcribed in their entirety.

Once the data had been collected, the research team turned its attention to interpretation. As the team's university-based researcher, I began by providing the researchers with a rudimentary introduction to and, in some cases, review of developing *coding categories* for qualitative data interpretation (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Since the composition of the research teams typically varied from one cycle to the next, this discussion was an introduction for some and a review for others. My goal was modest: to lend some sense of how identifiable issues and related sub-issues could be teased out from a larger data set of participant reflections and thematized into intelligible strands.

Interpreting the data was a multi-stage process: the research team, which included parent researchers, an on-site research coordinator, a school board-based field researcher, and myself, collaboratively reviewed the data as it was being collected. These discussions informed subsequent data collection in a process akin to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) *constant comparative*; individual members of the team continuously shared informal observations about the data through the processes of transcription and translation, and once the data was transcribed I brought in a fresh researcher at arm's length from the project to review it. Finally, the full

research team reconvened to pool, cross-reference, and distill the data into discrete findings, implications, and recommendations. Ethics protocols – both university initiated and school board-based – were strictly adhered to so as to protect both the anonymity and contributions of participants.

The research team's dissemination efforts targeted three broad audiences: *intra*-school audiences that included parents, students, teachers, support staff, and administration at the two schools; *inter*-school audiences that included neighbouring school communities, school superintendents, school board trustees, student achievement officers, school board curriculum departments, equity offices, and social services agencies; and *extra*-school audiences including the academic community and varied scholarly forums. The varied audiences raised multiple possibilities and formats for dissemination; these are possibilities that the research team is still exploring.

Researchers and research participants were given a monetary honorarium for their work. On this issue, many of the participants told me that, while they appreciated the gesture of compensation, they would take part in the research regardless. In two communities where poverty was an issue, I found *their* gesture humbling.

Following the method outlined above – a method which became generic for each of the teams at the two schools – data gathering for the study on discipline took place over a period of three months in spring of 2009. In total, twelve mothers and two fathers of children at the school were interviewed by the parent researchers (four mothers from the school). The minority language backgrounds of the researchers included Spanish, Vietnamese and Somali.

Data interpretation began in the spring and continued, after the summer break, in the fall of 2009. The results were presented at a community forum in the school in January, 2010. The

forum was attended by approximately 75 adults, including parents, teachers, administrators and school board representatives. The children remained with the larger group during the catered meal and then moved to another room for supervised play and/or study time. This child care arrangement was standard practice for the community forums.

Findings

The data from this research cycle fell into three categories: parents' *motivation* for discipline; parents' focus on *communication* in discipline; and parents' concern with *language* in discipline. A sampling of data provides a sense of the insights gleaned in these three areas.

Motivation

Parents felt that discipline was an information-sharing process with children. Responses such as the following from a Somali mother were common: "You have to communicate with your children and talk to them every single day." Parents believed discipline should not be used negatively, or as a punishment, or only to correct behaviours. A Spanish-speaking mother explained that, "in order to discipline my children, I first try to talk with them and explain to them the *why* behind certain things." Discipline, the parents added, should help a child to grow up to be a good person. The Spanish-speaking mother continued, "...[d]iscipline, I think, is applied so that the children become good citizens, good children, good spouses, good parents . . . we have to be conscious of the fact that discipline has to be applied for them to become better human beings." A Spanish-speaking father echoed this feeling: "My daughter is being disciplined in a way that is good, that inculcates values, inculcating principles that are essential

and never changing, the value of work, the value of having respect for others, which are implicit in all cultures and all nations."

Finally, there was a very strong emphasis on *love,* with parents expressing the view that discipline comes out of love. For instance, another mother noted, "I understand that I have to discipline my children with love [strong emphasis on love] . . . when I teach them that there are rules, and such rules are taught with love, it will be very different the relationship among parents and their children."

Communication

The data demonstrated that parents' core strategy for discipline is communication. A Vietnamese-speaking mother suggested that, "the way to improve relationship with the child is to get closer to them and talk to them and listen to them and play with them and understand them and to let them understand parents." Parents reiterated the point by placing special emphasis on talking to children, having more communication with children, and explaining why certain behaviours are wrong. A mother from Mexico, for instance, claimed that, "children have to understand why they have to do these things. . . we have to explain these things to them like parents and tell them 'this has to be done for this reason.'" A father from Mexico added, "well, ever since she was very small, I have spoken to her a lot, and I have always tried to communicate in the most modest or in the simplest ways for her to understand."

Crucially, parents considered discipline to be a communication exercise with high stakes. For example, a Somali mother insisted that, "you have to communicate with your child, no matter what. If they are good, or if they are bad, you have to communicate with your child and you have to know whoever their friends, whoever they go with, you have to know." Parents

considered communication to be a strategic asset in the work of discipline, as a Spanish-speaking

mother explained: "That line of communication has above all else served as a platform that can

be shared with them [children], to explain the *why* to certain things. . . this is good because it will

help you do this."

Language

The data showed that minority parents use their first language to discipline because they

do not know English well enough. A mother confided, "...yes, since my English is not something

that I am very strong at, I think the best line of communication that I have is Spanish, so it is

more effective than me disciplining her in English or a language I am not strong in." However,

parents who did not feel comfortable speaking in English still felt a need to discipline in English,

as this Somali mother reflected: "I speak to them in both Somali and English, both languages

because, you know, sometimes when I speak the Somali language, my son, he doesn't

understand." Parents pointed specifically to the demands of their new linguistic reality, as a

mother originally from Afghanistan related: "I think my language in my family is the best, but

English is important, too, because we live in Canada."

Curiously, while the mothers interviewed were particularly sensitive to the distinctions

between disciplining in a minority language and English, the two fathers interviewed seemed less

concerned. As a Spanish-speaking father put it, "I think that the language shouldn't make a

difference in the discipline. The discipline will always be the same . . . the values will always

remain the same whether they be in English or in Spanish. It's the same thing." A second father

spoke of the interchangeability of Spanish and English: "I would like to mix them [Spanish and

English] because it is always important to not lose your language, being Spanish, but yes, we are always trying to improve our English."

These views on language marked a distinction between mothers and fathers, participants who, in other areas of the findings, appeared to share similar views on the motivation for discipline and the place of communication in discipline.

Preliminary Interpretation and Further Study

In terms of the findings of the study on discipline, the parents in the K – 5 school held very progressive ideas around discipline. They understood discipline as a process of communication and information-sharing with their children, which was not always an easy task while many of them were simultaneously trying to acculturate to Canadian society. Perhaps the key challenge in this process was posed by the interface of minority languages and English. Parents painted a picture of situations where, precisely when they most needed to communicate and build relationships with their children, language stratified and complicated this relationship.

This, then, is a sampling of the findings of one cycle of parent-driven research conducted by one research team at one of the two schools in this study. As a footnote, at the community forum where this work was shared there was further discussion about the issue of discipline, a discussion involving parents, educators, and administrators. From my own field research perspective it was fascinating to witness these multiple stakeholders, who have never before had an opportunity to take part in this type of research-generated conversation within the school, navigate unfamiliar discursive spaces. The research team has since expressed its intention to contextualize the challenges of *discipline* within broader challenges of acculturation, which the parents suspect are codified within the dominant language and its forms of life.

In terms of the value of parent-driven research, the stated rationale for the larger research project within which the study on *discipline* is situated was to eschew the school-centred/family-centred dichotomy and, in so doing, open a middle space for collective learning and mutually-specifying relationships. Is it realizing this goal? More generally, can this type of parent-driven research function *as* research and, if so, can it broaden and make more inclusive decision-making processes and governance of schools and systems of education?

On the issue of its ability to function as research, the cycle of parent-driven research focused on *discipline* demonstrated that it can indeed generate insights into a specific aspect of the school community's experience. In this immediate sense, then, it stands as a legitimate research method: It can identify a priority area for investigation; it can explore the focus in a methodical, purposive way; it can subject the data to a comprehensive, multiply-referenced interpretation; it can represent findings intelligibly; and it can make these insights available to a broader audience.

As to whether it can affect decision-making processes, this remains an open question. Especially important in this assessment, however, is that the research be understood as part of a larger process of knowledge creation, a longer term conversation where the school community learns to talk with *itself*. In learning to talk with itself the question emerges as to whether the research is opening a middle space for collective learning and mutually-specifying relationships, and whether it is generating a new set of perceptions among and between the research team and the broader school community. Once again this is difficult to gauge, but there are indications that the research context allows multiple stakeholders to begin to fashion new relationships with one another. For example, at a research BBQ held in the spring of 2010 and attended by approximately 130 adults, it was the research team members who held the privileged positions.

They were the community experts, they were the fact finders, they were the coordinators of the event – an event held at the school and attended by the very teachers and administrators who are typically in decision-making positions.

Having addressed the issue of relationships, can the research translate into proposals for collaborative change? Based on the work thus far, the parent-driven research, in conjunction with the community discussion forums, certainly has the potential to accomplish this. And in some respects, it already has. For example, at a recent community forum where the research team at the K – 8 school shared some of its preliminary findings on the issue of *safety – inside and outside the school*, the follow-up discussion provided the principal with an opportunity to share plans around the re-construction of the school's entrance and to invite further input from the parents. In this case, the research team's findings are informing the day to day function of the school.

Concluding Observations

This parent-driven research responds to the widespread call for schools and governing bodies to capitalize on linguistic and cultural resources that minority parents bring to their children's mainstream, dominant language schooling (Au, 1998; Cummins & Schecter, 2003; Ippolito & Schecter, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992; Schecter & Ippolito, 2008). As one piece of a larger set of schooling practices at these two minority demographic schools, this research can be an exemplary practice, capable of transforming a school community's view of itself and its constituent elements. In school-based, parent-driven research, parents can be experts, administrators can be parents, and teachers can be

intellectuals. On this last point in particular, the aim for the next research cycle is to bring one teacher into each of the two parent-driven research teams.

When I first proposed the possibility of teachers taking part in the research team's data collection and analysis, parents' responses ranged from blank stares, to grimaces of concern, to groans of trepidation. As the principal investigator, these reactions speak to the dichotomy between parents and schooling that this research project is meant to address and redress. The gulf between mainstream schools and families, in particular minority families, can be vast, but bridging this gulf by pulling parents on to the shores of the school or, conversely, pulling the school on to the banks of the home is short-sighted. Both options diminish possibility for schools and families to mutually-specify each other in ways that promote balanced, progressive, respectful, and ethical relationships. The parent-lead research method accomplished this by shifting the focus of parents and schools away from themselves and on to a common, research-informed conversation.

The insights emerging from this conversation are based not on anecdotal evidence of one or more participants but rather on the weight of research evidence – multiply referenced, extensively deliberated, and relevant. Such evidence cannot be dismissed as the well-intentioned but misinformed observations of emotionally invested parents. When this evidence is gleaned with methodological rigour, it commands legitimacy and demands to be heard. For example, findings about discipline reported here can serve as firm ground for follow-up study, not only because they are methodologically and substantively rooted in parents' experiences at this K-5 school, but also because they carry currency as research-based evidence. In other words, they are a form of parental social capital with purchase beyond the parent community.

The value of using this research approach lies not only in its ability to encourage parental engagement but also in its ability to reconfigure relationships within the school. In the first instance, it has generated momentum for itself in each of its two project schools, meaning it is now recognized by the respective school communities as an ongoing project. Parents and teachers recognize it as a research undertaking that works in consort with periodic community forums where research mandates are shaped, where research findings are reported back to the school community, and where at least some parents and some educators feel an equal right and responsibility to take part in collaborative discussions about their school. And while not everyone in the school chooses to take part in these discussions, it is not uncommon for the periodic community forums, where the work of the parent-driven research team is vetted, to attract anywhere between one to three hundred participants.

This momentum has taken time and effort. Since 2005/2006, the project has worked to build trust between the university-based researchers, educators, and families. It is within the context of this trust that the parent research has been possible and productive. From my perspective over these last five years, the research has been successful precisely at those junctures where multiple stakeholders, stratified as they are by their varied institutional positioning, have yet been able to meet each other as equals in research-informed conversations around their school community's experience of mainstream, publicly-funded education.

Lest I consider too simplistically my own perspective as principal investigator, part of my own responsibility has been to look carefully at my own privilege, limits, and agency in the work. As a white, male, academic, what care do I need to exercise in my relationships with racial, cultural, and linguistic minority participants, most of whom are women? Conversely, as a first generation Canadian, what identifications and understandings of immigration and

acculturation can I draw on to inform and nuance my interactions with the school communities? In Pillow's (2003) terms, how do I "use reflexivity in a way that would continue to challenge the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning" (p. 192)?

The quality of relationships, my own included, enables the middle space between schools and homes that the parent research is creating. It is in this middle space that the quality of relationships becomes central to the functioning of schools, schools that come to resemble the highly successful, caring, public elementary schools populated mainly by low socio-economic status children of colour that Scheurich (1998) reports on. Like these schools, these two research-site schools can offer parent-driven research as part of a model for schooling that is actually *better* than that found in schools catering mainly to a dominant group demographic.

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