Tracing My Research on Parent Engagement: Working to Interrupt the Story of School as Protectorate

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In this article, the author makes visible and works to interrupt the story of school as "protectorate." In examining, within this dominant narrative, educators' taken-for-granted assumptions about parents' positioning in relation to the landscape of school, the author presents research on parent engagement that provides those within the field of education with a new plotline to replace the protectorate plotline. The author uses the term parent engagement consciously to differentiate it from such notions as parent involvement or parent partnerships that also populate the literature pertaining to educators' relationships with parents and family members of the children they school. In exploring taken-for-granted assumptions, the author defines what parent engagement is, analyzes how notions of parent engagement have been enlarged and expanded over the past decade and a half, and explores how a "curriculum of parents" in teacher education—at preservice, in-service, and graduate levels—could redefine what it means to be a professional by conceptualizing it as being in relationship with and working alongside parents and families.

AWAKENING TO PARENTS' POSITIONING IN RELATION TO THE LANDSCAPE OF SCHOOLS

In 1980 I began my career, teaching in an elementary school. Over the next 14 years, I held various positions in the field of education, working as teacher, consultant, principal, and central services administrator in a large Canadian urban school district. It was at this time, with a 4-year-old son and newborn twin boys, that I took a parenting leave. I was excited to be a "stay-at-home" mom during the time my oldest child, Cohen, began his formalized public school experiences.

Having an extended career as an educator when I became the parent of a school-age child, I believed my knowledge of schools and the processes of schooling would serve me well in my new position as parent. How wrong I was! My teacher knowledge of schools, garnered through my varied experiences over time and in different places and positions, did not help me navigate the school landscape as a parent. In fact, as I tried to determine where and how to be on occasions such as my son's first day of school, my first Meet the Teacher Night as a parent, or my first parent-teacher conference, my teacher knowledge only reinforced for me how taken-for-granted

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parents' positioning was in relation to school landscapes and how much parents existed in the margins of that landscape. My teacher knowledge provided a kaleidoscopic lens, a particular way of seeing parents as one part of the many shifting and interconnected facets that factored into programming, policy, and practical decisions regarding children’s schooling. It did not provide a lens that zoomed in, which settled on parents in a way that enabled me to see them with a meaningful place or voice in their children’s schooling. Awakening to this marginalized positioning of parents as I experienced it day by day, encounter by encounter, I soon learned to drop my son in his kindergarten classroom and leave without lingering or playing a part in his morning routine as he transitioned from home to school. I learned to listen to the teacher’s review of curriculum expectations at each Meet the Teacher Night without being invited to share any of my hopes and dreams for my son’s school year. I learned to acknowledge, at parent teacher conferences, the teacher’s account of my son’s growth and progress in curriculum through his school activities without being asked to give accounts of the ways in which he was also demonstrating growth and curricular progress through the activities in which he was engaged at home. I learned to be present in my son’s school life—but not to expect a place or a voice on the school landscape in which I contributed to his learning.

My experiences as a parent unsettled me in personal and professional ways. Personally, as Cohen’s mom, I had played an integral role in all aspects of his life up until this point in time, choosing activities, experiences, books, ways of being with him that my partner and I felt would contribute to the kind of childhood we wanted him to have and to our hopes and dreams for him. Now I was being asked to drop him at school, trust in the decisions that were being made for him there, and walk away. Professionally, as an educator, I thought I knew school. In the various roles that I had held and the various places I had worked, I felt confident in my place on the school landscape and felt confident about the place of schooling in the lives of children and families. Now I was being confronted with all that I had been unwake to and did not see or question about the structures and practices of schools when my vantage point was that of an educator.

I found myself telling stories of my experiences as a parent in relation to Cohen’s schooling over and over again as I tried to make sense of them. I talked about my experiences with other parents, and I listened with great curiosity as they told theirs. I talked about my experiences as a parent with other educators, asking them to tell me their teacher stories of parents. Because I was on a parenting leave, I chose to enter graduate studies in 1997, intent on developing a deeper understanding of parents’ current positioning in relation to the landscape of schools and imagining how parents could be given a greater sense of place and voice on the landscape.

ADOPTING THE METAPHOR OF A “PROTECTORATE” TO UNDERSTAND SCHOOLS

Stepping Away from the Conceptualization of “Parent Involvement”

What I found when I engaged in a literature search in the field throughout my doctoral program (1997–2000) was that “parent involvement” was a dominant notion in the research and academic discussion. Parent involvement was then, and continues to be, a common vehicle for
bringing teachers and parents together in schools. Parent involvement programs are presented as
programs that “tend to be directed by the school and attempt to involve parents in school activ-
ities and/or teach parents specific skills and strategies for teaching and reinforcing school tasks
at home” (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, & Bloom, 1993, p. 85). Typically, involved parents are
asked to serve in roles as “audience, spectators, fund raisers, aides and organizers” (McGilp
& Michael, 1994, p. 2). Epstein’s (1995) comprehensive parent involvement framework that
includes six types of parent involvement—parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at
home, decision making, and collaborating with the community—was already well known and
shaping the discourse around parents at the time. Reflected in it, one sees the parent roles McGilp
and Michael (1994) identified as well as the parenting focus emphasized by Kellaghan et al.
(1993).

What I was reading in the literature about types of parent involvement, I was experienc-
ing simultaneously as a parent. I was being invited by my son’s teachers and principal to be
involved—to attend school council meetings, parent–teacher conferences, and parenting sessions;
to fund-raise and help with scheduled school events, to attend my son’s Christmas concerts and
sports events; to read the classroom and school newsletters and handbooks; to help in the class-
room or on fieldtrips. Although, in and of themselves, the activities I was asked to be involved
in were valuable activities with good intentions, I continued to feel peripheral in relation to the
life and purpose of the school. So often, in my experiences as a parent, I felt like just another
“warm body”:

Benson (1999) notes that [the word] “involvement comes from the Latin, ‘involvere,’ which means
‘to roll into’ and by extension implies wrapping up or enveloping parents somehow into the system”
(p. 48). Beare (1993) adds that “the implication in the word is that the person ‘involved’ is co-opted,
brought into the act by another party” (p. 207, as cited in Benson, 1999, p. 48). Parents who are
“involved” serve the school’s agenda by doing the things educators ask or expect them to do – volun-
teering at school, parenting in positive ways, and supporting and assisting their children at home with
their schoolwork – while knowledge, voice and decision-making continue to rest with the educators
(Pushor, 2001). (Pushor & Ruitenber, with coresearchers, 2005, p. 12)

The work of Benson and Beare helped me to trouble the notion of parent involvement and
to understand why my experiences as an involved parent were leaving me feeling unsatisfied
about my contributions to Cohen’s schooling and marginalized on the landscape of his school.
It caused me, in my recreational reading of the novel The Poisonwood Bible (Kingsolver, 1998) to
awaken to the parallels between my experiences as a parent and the experiences of the Congolese
who were the subjects of a White American missionary’s attempts to Christianize them. With
this new awakening, I turned to literature on colonization. I was struck by Memmi’s (1965) con-
cept of a protectorate as a colonialist structure in which those with strength (the colonizers) take
charge to protect those they believe to have little or no strength (the colonized). I saw how this
concept provided a metaphor for the typical way in which schooling has been, and often con-
tinues to be, lived out (Pushor, 2001). Educators, as holders of expert knowledge of teaching
and learning, enter a community, claim the ground which is labeled “school,” and design and
enact policies, procedures, programs, schedules, and routines for the children of the community.
They often do this in isolation of parents and community members, using their “badge of dif-
ference” (Memmi, 1965, p. 46), their professional education, knowledge, and experience, as a
rationale for their claimed position as decision makers in the school. As educators assume their
claimed position within the protectorate, they do so with the best of intentions—intentions to enhance student achievement and other educational outcomes, intentions to provide a safe and caring place for children, intentions to prepare children for their roles as citizens in a broader society. It is these good intentions that enable educators to act as protectors within the structure of a protectorate.

With parent involvement, this scripted story of school as protectorate is perpetuated. Because the school sets the agenda, educators determine what roles parents are to play within that agenda. The hierarchical structure of educators as experts, acting in the best interests of less-knowing parents, is maintained. With parent involvement, the focus is placed on what parents can do to help the school realize its intended outcomes for children, not on what the parents' hopes, dreams, or intentions for their children may be or on what the school can do to help parents realize their personal or family agendas. The viewpoint seems to be one of "seek[ing] to determine what parents can do for teachers, rather than what schools can do for families" (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 5).

It is important to note that this scripted story of school as protectorate is an historical one and has been perpetuated by the complicitness of educators and parents in how it is lived out. By accepting the taken-for-grantedness of their positions as protectors and protected in this structure, educators and parents reinforced, and were constrained and shaped by, the conditions imposed upon them. I was excited, then, when an awakening to this taken-for-grantedness began to emerge in the field as educational researchers, educators, and parents imagined how to work against these constraints and work together in new relationships. Although the language of "parent involvement" continued to be dominant in the field, contrasting conceptualizations that worked to redefine the positioning of parents in regard to their children's school landscapes could more frequently be found in the literature as the 1990s unfolded.

Questioning the Language of "Parent Partnerships"

As I consciously stepped away from the philosophical and practical premises of parent involvement in my doctoral research, I struggled to find satisfactory language to capture this new understanding I was developing of the significant place and voice parents could have on school landscapes, a place and voice that would be beneficial to children, families, and to educators. The work of Cairney and Munsie (1992) spoke strongly to me. They directly challenged myths held by educators about parents in ways which exposed deficit thinking, class and cultural stereotypes, and a privileging of teacher knowledge and judgment over knowledge that resides in parents and families. Their belief in "a sense of partnership, of accepting that each has much to learn from the other" (p. 34) reflected my own beliefs. Like Lewington and Orpwood (1995), though, I was concerned with use of the word partnership.

Partnership is the overworked word of the day, as education leaders attempt to demonstrate their willingness to move beyond the historic divide of "them" and "us" that separates parents and teachers. But in the experience of some parents, the paradox of education is that, in practice, the system is resistant as ever to building real bridges to the outside world. (p. 4)

In the school newsletters and school division materials that Cohen brought home in his backpack, the rhetoric of "parents as partners" was common. Nonetheless, I had not had an experience that
took me out of my role as parent volunteer or assistant and into one in which I was positioned
equitably, as the word partner implies.

Seeking Language to Name a New Positioning of Parents: “Parent Participation”

Wolfendale’s (1992) work also spoke strongly to me at this time. Although she continued to situate her thinking using the language of parent involvement, she spoke to a commitment to a number of key principles: rights (parents’ fundamental right to be a participant in some educational decision making), equality (parents as partners), reciprocity (that all involved gain from their interconnections on behalf of children), and empowerment (parents, too, should learn and grow from their encounters with the school and with educators) (pp. 2-3). These were principles that reflected thinking different than that which maintained the protectorate, thinking that suggested attention to more than solely the school’s agenda. Returning to the work of Benson (1999) and Beare (1993), I found their use of the language of “parent participation” more reflective of the conceptualization I was trying to name and capture in my own research.

The word “participation” . . . implies that parents actually “have a part in.” Thus a participant has a right to be included, whereas someone who is involved is there by invitation. (Beare, 1993, p. 207)

The fundamental question asked by Beare is whether parents should be included as part of the life of the school because it is convenient or useful to have them there, or whether they are there “by right, so much a part of the action that it is impossible to exclude them.” (Benson, 1999, p. 48)

During my doctoral research, I spent a year in a large urban elementary school, living alongside the principal, educators, and parents. As I observed the positioning of parents in relation to the landscape of this school, I reflected on whether parents were “involved” in the life of the school or were “rightful participants,” positioned in an integral way in decision making around policies, procedures, and programs that affected their children and their families. Questions of ownership, of “who decides?”, of welcoming and hospitality, trust and relationships, inclusion, and the taken-for-grantedness within schools all became focal points in my program of research (Pushor, 2001).

Fine-Tuning the Conceptualization, Fine-Tuning the Language: “Parent Engagement”

In 2004, when I extended my program of research on the positioning of parents in relation to the landscape of schools, with research at Princess Alexandra Community School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, I was taken with the staff and parents’ use of the term engagement. As Beare (1993) had done earlier with the terms involvement and participation, I searched the etymology and definition of the word engagement.

“Engagement” . . . comes from en, meaning “make,” and gage, meaning “pledge” – to make a pledge (Harper, 2002), to make a moral commitment (Sykes, 1976, p. 343). The word engagement is further defined as “contact by fitting together; . . . the meshing of gears” (Engagement). The implication is that the person ‘engaged’ is an integral and essential part of a process, brought into the act because of care and commitment. By extension, engagement implies enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching
and learning, with teachers' knowledge. With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial. (Pushor & Ruitenberg, with coresearchers, 2005, pp. 12-13)

The language of "engagement" captured a deeper aspect of my conceptualization of the relationship between parents and educators than did the language of "participation." I liked, in the definition of engagement, the introduction of the notion of moral commitment. Rather than working together because of educators' responsibilities to provide a "rightful" place for parents, because of a sense of obligation to one another, engagement offered the lived expression of a mutual desire by educators and parents to be in relationship with one another and with children, reflecting an enmeshed or webbed sense of their care and commitment for and with one another. Although parent participation challenged dominant practices of involvement, I believed parent engagement offered real change to the scripted story of school. In this changed script, there was no longer a protectorate, no longer a protector and a protected. No longer were educators entering a community to claim the ground of school. No longer were educators working alone to design and enact policies, procedures, programs, schedules, and routines for the sole benefit of the children of the community. Instead, in the new script, educators were entering a community to create with parents a shared school landscape—a landscape in which "parent knowledge" (Pushor, 2001) and teacher knowledge informed decision making, the determination of agendas, and the intended outcomes of their efforts for children, families, the community, and the school. Within such a shared landscape, there was a sense of reciprocity in their mutual engagement, a sense of benefit for families and the school.

Within the Literature

I recently used a new search tool at my university that scans a wealth of databases simultaneously. When I typed in the search term parent engagement, I found it interesting to note that prior to 1996, the year in which Cohen began as a full-time student in the public education system and that, correspondingly, prompted me to begin doctoral studies, 3,205 items emerged. Of these items, which were mainly reflective of research in the fields of social work and developmental psychology, only 43 of them pertained to elementary and secondary education. Of those 43 items, main foci included topics of parent engagement in matters of inclusion, exceptional children, health education, and assessment, areas that have historically prompted advocacy for children by parents. In contrast, my search for items on parent engagement after 1996 yielded a count of 47,332. From this count, it is apparent that the term engagement—and the conceptualization it represents—has gained in usage in the field. Many researchers, educators, school division leaders, and Ministry of Education officials across Canada are attending to the theoretical and practical differences between parent involvement and engagement. A review of Ministry policy and curricular documents, school division priorities, mandates of School Community Councils, and individual schools' continuous improvement planning documents reflects, in many instances, an expressed desire for the meaningful positioning of parents in their children's learning and development, and stated outcomes intended to create stronger and more equitable relations between educators and parents.
CRITICAL ATTRIBUTES OF PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Parent Knowledge

In 2004, at the same time I began my research on parent engagement and leadership at Princess Alexandra Community School, I began another strand of research on “parent knowledge.” I was keenly aware of how, within the metaphor of a protectorate at play in many schools, teachers were positioned as knowing professionals while parents were positioned as unknowing or less knowing about children, teaching, and learning. I was also keenly aware of the fact that there was an extensive body of literature on teacher knowledge, but no corresponding body of literature on parent knowledge. Funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), I engaged in research, coming alongside three parents in their home and family contexts for over a year, as I explored the questions, “What is parent knowledge? How is parent knowledge held and used?”

The intention in my inquiry was to know parents from their own perspective. By listening to their stories and by spending time with them in their homes, I came to an understanding of the embodied, tacit, experiential knowledge they hold as parents. Looking at what the parents did and said, I saw within their parent knowledge many facets of knowledge and ways of knowing (Lyons, 1990). Given the very personal and particular nature of their home landscapes, the parents expressed an intimate knowledge of their children—a deeply situated, contextualized, and multifaceted understanding of their children’s skills and abilities, emotions and responses, qualities and characteristics, their ways of being in the world. I observed the parents extend or expand their children’s knowledge through moments of intimate teaching when they were engaged with their children in conversations about topics such as body development, personal relationships, or safety. I witnessed how they brought their knowledge of self, their own sense of identity, into what they did as parents and how they did it. As an expression of this knowledge, I saw them consciously determining parameters and boundaries to guide the daily living and decision making within their family, making apparent to their children their values in the context of specific situations and experiences. I noted how, in the complexity and busyness of their daily lives, they figured out, and lived out, rhythms, patterns, routines, and rules around holiday and cultural traditions, and such things as bedtimes and meals, allowances and household tasks, and friendships and curfews. I was struck by how the parents’ passions were centrally embedded in the way they lived their lives and shared their lives with their children. Throughout all of their living and telling of their experiences as parents, I became awake to their personal philosophies and narrative unities expressed and reflected in statements such as, “My children’s childhood is so important to me,” “I’d rather do things with my children than buy things for them,” and “I follow the Red Road.” All of this knowledge which parents constructed about children, teaching, and learning, “the complex, practically-oriented set of understandings which they use actively to shape and direct the work of [parenting]” (Elbaz, 1983, p. 3), is what I named as parent knowledge.

In the midst of research on parent engagement and parent knowledge simultaneously, I came to see that parent knowledge is the key attribute that differentiates involvement from engagement. Involvement requires a capable adult; it is something any “warm body” can do. My son Cohen is finished school; he is age 22, not yet a parent. He is fully capable of supervising children on a fieldtrip, assisting with sports activities, or engaging in fund-raising activities. He is entirely
capable of being involved in schools. In contrast, engagement requires the contribution of an individual, in the capacity of a caregiver, who has lived experience with children, and knowledge of children, teaching, and learning garnered over time and in a variety of contexts and situations. Unlike me, or the parents in my inquiry, Cohen does not have a parent's intimate knowledge of children or experience with the intimate teaching of children that he could bring to an analysis of students' achievement results, a determination of outcomes for the school's continuous improvement plan, or the development of a classroom's homework policy or practices. Never having been positioned as a parent, never having had responsibility as a caregiver for nurturing and guiding the growth and development of a child, Cohen does not have parent knowledge to lay alongside teacher knowledge in shared decision making regarding school policies, programs, or practices. From my combined strands of research, I learned that a critical attribute in the differentiation of parent involvement from meaningful engagement in teaching and learning is the contribution of parent knowledge.

Attending to Education off the School Landscape

With my research on parent knowledge, I came to a broader understanding of what comprises parent engagement off the school landscape and of how significant such engagement is in a child's education. When children are born, parents are immediately and authentically engaged in their care and learning. In ways which are reflective of their culture, context, personal knowledge, and beliefs, parents begin their children's education immediately, perhaps by talking with their babies, singing them songs, and/or telling or reading them stories. From birth onward, parents take their children places, introduce them to people, provide them with toys and learning materials, play games with them, and immerse them in a range of experiences. When parents bring their children to school, their engagement in their children's education has already been underway for 3 or 4 or 5 or 6 years.

What I came to see poignantly in my research on parent knowledge is that parent engagement in children's education off the school landscape begins at birth and continues forever. My field text is filled with stories and observations of parents' cultural teachings; their conscious planning of nature experiences; their engagement with their children in music, dance, art-making, and sports; and their intimate teaching and guidance with their children, who ranged in age from newborn to late adolescence. From this research, I learned to enlarge my conceptualization of parent engagement by attending thoughtfully to what happens off the school landscape, in the world of the home and community, as well as what happens in school. I came to delineate schooling from education, understanding schooling to be only one aspect of a child's lifelong care and education. Because schooling is the formalized and, for the most part, mandated component of a child's education, educators tend to see schools as "the site of the 'main game'" (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 1). Living out the notion of school as protectorate, they consider parent engagement to be those things parents do on the landscape of schools to support the school's agenda. It is common to hear educators speak of the number or percentage of parents who attend school meetings and activities as the primary indicator of the level to which parents in their school community are engaged in their children's learning. When educators, though, attend to parent engagement off the school landscape as well, there is the possibility to create a new script of school. When educators see themselves as walking alongside parents for a short while in the parents' lifelong journey to educate their children, rather than seeing themselves as the "main game" in that education, the
notion of “meshing together” in an act of engagement begins to be realized. When educators see their teacher knowledge and expertise as a complement to parent knowledge and as support in the parents’ lifelong work to realize their hopes and dreams for and with their children, it is then that the structure of schooling shifts to one of relationship, shared authority, and mutually determined and mutually beneficial outcomes.

Situating Schooling in the Lives of Children, Families, and Communities

From my research on parent engagement at Princess Alexandra Community School and my research on parent knowledge, it became apparent to me that when schools attend to children, as situated in the context of family and community, there is much greater promise for educational achievement in the broadest of senses. Although it is important to engage parents on the school landscape, I witnessed how it is equally important for educators to move comfortably in the worlds of families and communities, off the school landscape. What educators at Princess Alexandra learned from home visits and through their engagement in community and cultural activities provided them with insight into the knowledge, strengths, and capacity inherent within families and the community and a sense of how to bring their own teacher knowledge, strengths, and capacity alongside the knowledge that was already shaping the lives and education of children in their school community.

When educators knew children in the context of families and community, and they brought knowledge that was in play off the school landscape onto the school landscape, we saw—such things as the difference culturally appropriate programming [made] to school attendance and participation, and to positive identity formation for both students and their parents; the influence adult education classes [had] on student engagement and retention and on parental success and well-being; [how] the provision of easy and open access to computers, internet, newspapers and resources [enhanced] both school and home literacies; and [how] the provision of opportunity for voice, for sharing [parent knowledge], for influencing decisions of personal, family, and community consequence [strengthened] students’ and parents’ sense of personal power and autonomy. (Pushor & Ruitenber, with coresearchers, 2005, pp. 14–15)

It was when the boundaries between school, home, and community became permeable and multidirectional that the creation of a new story of school that honors and enriches children’s lives was realized.

In this new story of schooling, situated in the context of families and community, what became foregrounded was how parents and families, as well as children, were strengthened through parents’ engagement in their children’s schooling. In our research at Princess Alexandra Community School, it was the first time I witnessed conscious attention by educators to ensure parents gained from their engagement in their children’s schooling. In this inner-city community, the benefits for parents were sometimes a cup of coffee, a safe place to be, or someone to talk with. Other times the benefits were their fulfillment from sharing their knowledge or expertise with others, having a voice in decisions which affected them, or taking advantage of learning opportunities. Although recognizing that there will be a real sense of particularity and contextuality for every community and for individual parents within a community, our research at Princess Alexandra elucidated the importance of reciprocity as another critical attribute of meaningful parent engagement. Acting in reciprocity, we learned, is acting with responsiveness. Rather than with the mindset of charity,
privilege, or expert knowing, acting in reciprocity reflects a relational and caring engagement in the lives and education of children, as well as in the lives and education of the children’s family and community members.

DEVELOPING AND TEACHING A CURRICULUM OF PARENTS

Beginning in 2001, alongside actively researching parent engagement, I have been a teacher educator at undergraduate and graduate levels. Concerned with the strength and history of the scripted story of school as protectorate, throughout this 11-year period I have developed and facilitated purposeful and sustained educational experiences in all of my courses intended to challenge preservice and in-service educators to rethink and reconceptualize the school landscape in relation to the positioning of parents. I consider these purposeful experiences elements of a “curriculum of parents” (Pushor, 2011), a curriculum that attends to the exploration of preservice and in-service teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding the engagement of parents in children’s learning. I invite teacher candidates and teachers to understand this curriculum of parents as a curriculum of life (Portelli & Vibert, 2001): a life lived in relationship with others. I invite them to reimagine the work of a teacher as centered on a “co-construction of curriculum with parents, children, and other family members” (Pushor, 2011, p. 221). Such a coconstruction “acknowledges that children are cared for and educated at home and they are cared for and educated at school. It invites teacher candidates [and teachers] to consider their work . . . as intertwined with that of other caregivers and educators who hold a place in the lives of children” (p. 226).

I use the term parent consciously as I speak and write about a curriculum of parents. Many researchers in the field have switched their language to the use of family in place of parent to honor the diverse nature of families and family forms as, for example, in family engagement rather than parent engagement or family partnerships rather than parent partnerships (Constantino, 2006; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007). With the use of family in place of parent, they are recognizing that the individual responsible for the care and learning of a child may not be a biological parent but may be a nonbiological guardian, an aunt or uncle, a grandparent, a sibling, a family friend, and so on. I, too, recognize that many individuals fill a caregiving role in the lives of children, but I choose to demarcate the significance of the caregiving role in a family, regardless of who fills it, with the use of the term parent.

While children live in the complex contexts of families and communities, and with other individuals in their homes positioned in multiple and varying ways, there is typically a role lived out in a family by someone/s who have more responsibility than others in the family for the care and wellbeing of the family members. It is a care giving position unique to others in the family, which are primarily care receiving positions. It is also a care giving position that is in a relationship with educators and school personnel unique to that of the positions of other members of the family. As parents of our three sons, it is my partner Laurie and I who are invited to parent teacher conferences, called to excuse our children’s lates or absences, required to sign permission forms and pay student fees. While there is no doubt our sons’ lives are shaped by their relationships with their brothers as well as with us and by the context of our family as a whole, their brothers’ relationship with each other’s schooling is different than Laurie’s and my relationship with it. I am using the term ‘parent’ to signify this unique positioning and to have it consciously represent all individuals who fill this particular role in their family, regardless of their non/biological relationship to the child/ren. (Pushor, 2011, p. 226)
Through a John Ranton McIntosh Research Grant, awarded by the College of Education, University of Saskatchewan, I have begun research into how living out a curriculum of parents in some of their courses within their teacher education program may have shifted or changed teachers’ beliefs and assumptions about parents and enhanced their practices of engaging parents in children’s teaching and learning. I continue to be engaged in recorded conversations with four former teacher candidates who are now at differing stages in their teaching careers. In these conversations, we are discussing their current practices as educators to engage parents in their children’s learning, and we are exploring how projects or assignments they did as they lived out a curriculum of parents in some of their former coursework may have influenced their current practice.

One key thread that has arisen from this inquiry is that living out a curriculum of parents has redefined the teachers’ notions of what it means to be a professional (Pushor, 2011). The teachers shared accounts of their experiences which told of their dis/positioning as they came to “un-know” (Vinz, 1997) their understandings of professional as someone with power and control and to reknow it as an act of standing together with parents; as a reflection of the “person to person” (Dignean, cited in Pushor, 2011, p. 233). Experiences in their teacher education coursework that put them in direct relationship with parents were significant in beginning this process of reknowing. As one example, which illustrates a reknowing of parent-teacher relationships gained through her experiences with a parent book club she was facilitating, Cat Terleski shared,

I remember leaving a lunch [at a parent and I] had together and thinking, “Wow, this woman had this life that seems so extreme and so hard and with so many challenges, and yet here we are together talking about Where the Heart Is (Letts, 1995). It really makes you take a step back and think about things that are important. Honestly, I would have never thought I could connect in the way that I did with someone who had a life so different than mine. It was humbling. I realized how we can come together and connect over our commonalities.

It’s a good thing to know I can connect [as a teacher] with people that I don’t know – based on something that can be set up, like the book club. I can create situations or circumstances that can enable relationships to be formed. I can break down barriers that might happen with assumptions and beliefs that I’ve grown up with, that I’ve been engrained with. (personal conversation, April 20, 2010)

It is apparent how significant the shift was that occurred in Cat’s positioning as a teacher candidate, given her opportunity to engage with parents during a teacher education course. In contrast, it is typical for teacher candidates to receive little or no preparation for working with parents in their teacher education programs (Morris & Taylor, 1998; Shumow & Harris, 2000). Although research has suggested that teacher education coursework enhances prospective teachers’ comfort and confidence levels in working with parents (Morris & Taylor, 1998; Uludag, 2008), Daniels and Shumow (2003) believed there is a need for more descriptive studies to determine under what conditions such coursework has an impact. Through inquiring into teachers’ stories of experience, I intend that my research into the curriculum of parents that preservice teachers first live out in their teacher education courses with me and then in their teaching will contribute a rich element of specificity and particularity to this growing conversation in the field of teacher education. Understanding how and why these teachers are coming to a redefinition of what it means to be a professional, working alongside parents in relational ways, has the potential to inform teacher education coursework more broadly.
Two years ago, I had the opportunity to introduce a curriculum of parents in my graduate teacher education courses as well. I developed and taught three courses: Re/Presenting Families in Schools, Engaging Parents in Teaching and Learning, and a Practicum in Parent and Family Engagement. The intent of Re/Presenting Families in Schools was to invite teachers to explore dominant social, cultural, and institutional narratives that underpin the representation of families in literature and media, in our lived experiences of family and stories of others’ experiences, in curriculum documents and subject matter materials. I hoped that teachers’ deep consideration of the influence these representations have on curriculum making and decision making in schools would instill a desire in them to interrupt the living out of these dominant narratives in schools as they discovered ways to use knowledge that resides in families to co-construct educational experiences for and with children. Engaging Parents in Teaching and Learning was designed to enhance teachers’ understanding of what parent engagement is—and is not, conditions which invite engagement, the complexities and multiplicity inherent within it, and possibilities within their curriculum making for working alongside parents in respectful, caring, and committed ways. The Practicum in Parent and Family Engagement provided the opportunity for teachers to put into practice, with mentorship from me as I visited their classrooms and with mentorship from their “support circle” colleagues, their rethinking of curriculum and curriculum making in light of their multifaceted revisiting of conceptualizations of family in one or both of the other two courses.

What I saw happen in this graduate coursework, which held up for interrogation the typical positioning of parents in relation to school landscapes, was that the teachers came to challenge the taken-for-grantedness inherent in the structure of school as protectorate and that they shifted and changed in their beliefs and assumptions about parents and families, and in their curricular practices. The impact of these changes was so significant that we decided to write a book together, focusing on the teachers’ narratives of experience as they planned and implemented new or refined practices to reflect a conscious translation of their beliefs into more meaningful engagement of parents and family members in curriculum and curriculum making in their child’s classroom or school. As Kroeger and Lash (2011) stated, so often “language and cultural practices that differ from the school’s, parents’ and children’s identity development, familial roles and structural differences in families . . . are devalued and negated” (p. 270) and “resources of the community . . . are underutilized” (p. 270). What the teachers’ stories do is foreground possibilities for changing practices in ways which honor, value, and utilize the strength and knowledge inherent in all families. Specifically, the chapters include narratives of such things as the teachers’ work with family photovoice projects, their remaking of parent-teacher interactions such as Meet the Teacher or Kindergarten Orientation, their use of home learning portfolios, and experiences with home visits. Collectively, the book challenges representations and hegemonic notions of family (Heilman, 2008; Miller Marsh & Turner-Vorbeck, 2010) and the explicit, null, and hidden curriculum of family in schools (Miller Marsh, 2008; Turner-Vorbeck, 2008). Further, addressing the need for descriptiveness (Daniels & Shumow, 2003) or the “how to actualize” (Kroeger & Lash, 2011) that is called for in the field, the book makes visible what authentic parent and family engagement actual entails and looks like when it is lived out in practice.

PLANS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

One of the issues in the field that remains unaddressed is that parent engagement is typically characterized by “random acts” (Weiss & Lopez, 2009) or isolated promising or laudatory practices
rather than a systemic approach to schooling. Although educational leaders such as Constantino (2006) argue that family engagement has to be looked at in the broader context of “systemic cultural change,” there continues to be an absence of research on how a systemic approach to parent engagement could make its way through a school district as a means of positioning parents, families, and community members as a meaningful component in their children’s educational life. With Dr. Joseph Flessa from the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto, in Ontario, Canada, I have proposed to inquire into how administrators, educators, staff, parents, and students within two Canadian school systems understand and/or enact parental engagement. By narratively inquiring into subtle aspects of stakeholders’ lived experiences in each school system, including senior administrators and elected school board trustees as well as educators, staff, parents, and students in an elementary and a secondary school/community, we believe we will come to understand how parent engagement is defined, expressed, and lived out in policy, planning, and practice. We have proposed to invite a narrow, deep strand of stakeholders in two school districts to tell stories of their personal and professional responsibilities, interactions between parents and staff within a particular school district, and within the walls of the school, a neighborhood, and parent/family community.

In this planned inquiry, we are interested in “capturing the complexity and disorder of social reality” (Wrigley, 2000, pp. ix–x). By listening to stories of stakeholders’ experiences with parent engagement, and by attending to what they say and do, we believe we will come to an understanding of the knowledge they hold and what constraints they experience or opportunities they see to act on that knowledge. Keeping in mind Cuban’s (1998) observation that system actors are just as likely to influence policy as policy is to influence, we are interested in learning how participants may be both agents and objects of parental engagement policy. How these roles shift and change according to school context and institutional power and relationships is part of what our inquiry aims to attend to.

With this proposed inquiry, another interest of ours is in research with and for parents, rather than on or about parents. Noting the lack of research in the field that examines parent engagement through the eyes of parents, rather than through the eyes of educators or educational researchers, we have established a research team with parent members to ensure parent voice in all aspects of the research, from the intellectual development of the research program through data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings and communication of results. Believing in the richness of using parent knowledge alongside teacher knowledge in the coconstruction of curriculum for and with children, we similarly plan to coconstruct and live out our program of research in such an interwoven relationship.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The story of school as a protectorate is a story that has outlived its time, for so many reasons. We know that the public education system is not meeting the needs of all students. Student achievement data shows striking gaps between socioeconomic classes (Carpiano, Link, & Phelan, 2008; Green & Kesselman, 2006; Lin & Harris, 2008), as well as between diverse populations such as Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, n.d.). At the same time, an extensive body of research shows that parents’ engagement in their children’s education positively affects students’ achievement (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001;
Regardless of this knowledge, parents continue to be an untapped resource within each community. Although parents could assist educators in addressing the gaps that exist in public education (Raible, 2008), the story of school as protectorate continues to prevent educators from taking advantage of this resource.

Parents’ engagement in their children’s education is a democratic right. Although raising student achievement is one of the legitimate aims of parent engagement, the democratic participation of parents in their children’s schooling, through decision making and leadership processes that are representative and socially just, is a valued outcome in its own right (Auerbach, 2010; Ippolito, 2010; Schecter, Ippolito, & Rashkovsky, 2007). Although no parents are currently positioned in an integral or systemic way on school landscapes, because of the authority and status with which teachers are positioned in the story of school as protectorate, parents often do not feel comfortable to speak out or to challenge their marginalized positioning.

Research on parent engagement provides the field of education with a new plotline to replace the story of school as protectorate. I think about the understandings that have arisen from my program of research on parent engagement over the past 15 years. Conceptualizing parent engagement as reflecting a moral commitment, as drawing upon parent knowledge, as taking place on and off the school landscape, and as being based in acts of reciprocity has broadened and deepened the notion of parent engagement in the field of education, and its differentiation from parent involvement, in multiple ways. Through teacher education founded on research about working with parents, and through continued inquiry into the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students in a curriculum of parents, possibility exists to create a new story of school. In this non-protectorate story of school, it is possible to imagine a landscape on which educators and parents are positioned, as they lay their knowledge alongside one another in the schooling and education of children to support and enhance learning outcomes and to strengthen parents, families, schools, and communities.

As my program of research continues to unfold in the midst of a rich field of research, I look forward to a day when the engagement of parents is as valued and as commonplace on school landscapes as the teaching of math or reading. I look forward to the day when teachers’ understanding of their role as professional educators includes the notion of being in relationship with and working alongside parents and families, and their teacher education coursework provides them with opportunities to develop the beliefs and practices that enable them to live out this notion of professionalism with confidence, capability, and a moral commitment to children and families.

REFERENCES


Debbie Pushor is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan in Canada. In her program of research, Debbie has engaged in narrative inquiries into “parent knowledge” and into “parent engagement and leadership.” In her undergraduate and graduate teaching, Debbie makes visible and central an often-absent or under-represented conversation in teacher education about the positioning of parents in relation to school landscapes.