

Including all families in education: school district-level efforts to promote parent engagement in Ontario, Canada

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Parent engagement plays an essential role in student achievement and well-being, but not all families are able to participate in their children's education. This article focuses on strategies for reaching and supporting parents who face challenges to engagement such as poverty and cultural diversity. Five district-level parent engagement projects were qualitatively examined through observations, document analysis, and 47 interviews with program coordinators, educators, and parents. Coordinators conducted surveys and community visits to learn about families and their communities. All initiatives had district support, and used strategies to address poverty and/or cultural challenges. Some initiatives engaged parents in teaching and learning, and others provided parenting support and links to community services and organizations for families. Provincial education departments or ministries, universities and boards need to work with educators, providing human, material and financial resources to support inclusive initiatives that promote all families' participation in their children's education.

Keywords: parent engagement; family involvement; inclusion; equity; social justice; urban education

I have a book in my head, I swear I'm going to publish it soon It's called, *We Held a Curriculum Night and Nobody Came*. You know, all those evenings that staff knocked themselves dead over, and four parents come. And then they get so defeated. Well, it's because they presumed that this was the format, they presumed this was the content that the parents would prefer, they didn't ask any questions before they started.

- Roberta Mack, District I superintendent

Introduction

A number of educators and their school districts in countries such as the USA and Canada view collaboration is an avenue through which students' needs may be met and achievement promoted (Hands, 2005). Home-school partnerships are characterized by a shared focus on students, and provide a support net assisting all children to succeed academically and enhancing positive self-esteem, independence, and life skills (Davies, 2002; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson, & Davies, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992). Moreover, learning opportunities

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and plans for school change with contributions from all stakeholders are most likely to promote student achievement, reduce achievement gaps among students, and engage families in education (Jeynes, 2005; Pushor, 2007; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005; Quezada, 2003). Yet, as this quote indicates, there is often a disconnect between educators' expectations for participation and parent engagement. Because of its potential benefits to students, attention needs to be paid to issues of inclusion in parent engagement initiatives to ensure that all families are able to participate in their children's education.

Some government education departments and funding foundations are also in agreement, and are promoting parent engagement in education. In the Canadian province of Ontario, for example, the Ministry of Education has established a Parent Engagement Office (PEO), which is dedicated to the development and support of parent engagement initiatives across the school districts in the province through research and policy-making (Ministry of Education, 2005). This article stems from research evaluating eight different strategies funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education¹ with the potential to strengthen partnerships between parents and schools and promote student learning. In examining the initiatives, a series of sub-questions were considered. They included:

- (1) What successful strategies have these projects used to reach and support parents who face barriers to engagement?
- (2) What challenges have the projects encountered?

In the section that follows, I outline a definition of parent engagement that is useful for the purposes of this study, and I describe the social contexts that facilitate or challenge parent engagement in education.

Parent engagement

Prior to discussing the initiatives, it is necessary to clarify what is meant by parent engagement. Some scholars make the distinction between parent involvement and parent engagement. For them, models of parent *involvement* place the focus on what parents can do to support goals and agendas for the school and the students established by educators in the schools and districts (Pushor, 2007). Here, decision-making is within the purview of school personnel not the families. Parent *engagement*, on the other hand, entails mutually determined educational agendas, shared power, and authority over education with an understanding that parents, too, possess knowledge that contributes to teaching and learning (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). Student learning opportunities and school reform initiatives are developed with input from families as well as educators in the schools and districts (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002). The importance of distinctions among different levels of family participation in education and the origins of decision-making are acknowledged; however, parent – or family – engagement includes practices construed as involvement as well as engagement for the purposes of this paper.

The agency required to promote parent engagement

Increased parent engagement in their children's learning is most likely to enhance student achievement and reduce achievement gaps (Jeynes, 2005; Pushor, 2007;

Quezada, 2003). Family engagement activities are driven by the actions, or agency, of those involved. The establishment of home–school interaction is facilitated through an interconnected web, or network, of associations (Hands, 2005). Through a mobilization process, individuals cultivate social relations, which give them access to other individuals and resources. Here, a reflexive relationship is possible (Datnow, Hubbard, & Mehan, 2002); just as school personnel can provide families and community members with access to their resources, the students and their families can also provide resources to the school and community (Hands, 2005). This underscores the need to include all families and school personnel to maximize resources.

Therefore, home–school collaborative activities that contribute to the development of lasting knowledge, skills and resources necessary to enable all families to be engaged in their children’s learning, regardless of who initiates them, are of particular interest.

Issues of inclusion

When examining family engagement and the elements that facilitate or challenge participation for some families, it is necessary to take a look at the role of context. Features of collectives (groups) or geographic locales such as cultural diversity, level of education, amount of physical and natural resources present, and level of industrialization and technology affect the type and quantity of resources available (Hands, 2005; Lin, 1999). The interplay of these characteristics may impact on students,’ families,’ and school personnel’s needs, their interest in family–school collaboration and the activities they seek to develop. That said, individuals occupy different social, cultural, political, and economic positions within the community structure (Lin, 1999). They have unequal access to the resources in a collective (Bourdieu, 1986; Burt, 1992) such as a community.

Families from cultural minority groups as well as those characterized as low income, may not be able to participate in their children’s education in the same ways as other families within the school community. Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2006) meta-analysis of 57 articles on parent engagement found that 22 studies reported “social class, language, race and/or economic status, were significant influences on the nature and quality of school-parent engagement” (p. 24). Family–school activities that are influenced by the dominant cultural practices in a community may limit the participation of families from cultural minorities if they are not familiar with those practices (Auerbach, 2011a; Olivos, 2006). Cultural minority or minority language status need not be construed broadly in terms of the community, state or country. The potential for exclusion exists for families if their culture or language differs from that of the majority of the faculty and families in the school. Participants’ assumptions can also play a role in exclusion. In a study of low-income, African-American mothers, the women considered school personnel to be dismissive and disrespectful of them and their children (Cooper, 2009). In their study, Quiocho and Daoud (2005) found that Latino parents wanted to participate in their children’s education, but some educators had misconceptions about the parents’ roles and ability to contribute to their children’s education. The salient feature here is a discrepancy between the school personnel’s lived experiences and those of the students and their families (Metz, 1986, 1990). Regardless of whether these perceptions of exclusion are factual, they are of concern because they make future family engagement less likely to occur (Cooper, 2009).

As with challenges affecting minority families, families' socioeconomic status (SES) might play a role in the amount and type of parent engagement at schools. For example, affluent parents have power to shape and influence schools' curricula (Goldring, 1993; Oakes, Wells, Jones, & Datnow, 1997). As well, upper middle-class families are able to promote the reputations of schools due to their influence in the local community (Metz, 1986). Conversely, parents of low SES usually do not have direct influence on their children's schooling (Metz, 1990). They may also find participating at schools in the manner requested by teachers to be difficult (Lareau, 1987). Additionally, educators may view families as being in need of resources rather than possessing any to contribute (cf. Parker & Flessa, 2011). This deficit approach to family engagement impedes authentic home-school collaboration (Auerbach, 2011a; Pushor, 2007).

Hence, the characteristics of family life mediate school-family interactions (Lareau, 1987). Leithwood and Jantzi (2006) point out that these issues challenge schools. In addition to assumptions regarding how parents should be involved and what capacity for involvement they have, some teachers who are unfamiliar with the language, economic status, and cultural traditions of their students assume that students' families and members of the surrounding community are not interested or do not care to be involved in their children's education if they fail to attend events planned by school personnel (Hubbard & Hands, 2011). The personal and professional contexts experienced by families of low socio-economic status are not always well understood by school personnel it is not always evident why parents are not more involved, and the expectations of some cultural groups for their children's education may not be in line with the training, experience, and expectations of the school personnel (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006). Possibilities for family-school collaboration, then, become increasingly elusive.

Fostering a culture that supports family-school relationship-building

Given the potential importance of parent engagement and some of the factors that are challenges to inclusive practices, what facilitates family-school collaboration? The onus for the establishment of family-school collaboration currently remains with the school personnel (Davies, 2002; Epstein, 1995, 2001; Henderson, et al., 2007; Sanders & Harvey, 2002; Sheldon, 2005). As a result, educators' expectations and interpretations of parent roles, responsibilities, and capacities can impact family engagement, as previously illustrated. More broadly speaking, the patterns of beliefs, values, social and political relations, as well as expectations that guide behavior and practices in an organization (Barth, 2002; Gilley, 2000; Steiner, 2002) impact inclusion.

These features distinguish one school culture from another and influence the possibilities for family engagement (see for e.g. Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Lareau, 2003). Specifically, the school personnel's openness and receptivity to family and community involvement are crucial to the success of family engagement initiatives (Davies, 2002; Hiatt-Michael, 2010; Quijcho & Daoud, 2005). As well, ongoing, two-way communication plays a role to assist in developing, maintaining, and improving family engagement initiatives over time (Hiatt-Michael, 2010; Sanders & Harvey, 2002). These types of norms, and the trust implicit in the practices (see Bryk & Schneider, 2002) are essential for accessing new, or maintaining existing resources (Lin, 1999) through parent engagement initiatives.

To date, much of the research focuses on identifying structures and cultural features that facilitate or impede family engagement (or agency) (see for e.g. Evans, 2011; Hubbard & Hands, 2011; Johnson, Carter, & Finn, 2011; Sanders, 1999). With an understanding of the elements that impact inclusive family engagement practices, more research is needed to examine parent engagement initiatives that are actively seeking to include all families, especially families that typically have difficulty participating.

Methodology

In order to reveal the perspectives of those involved with or impacted by the parent engagement initiatives, this investigation used a qualitative case study research design. Case study methodology was chosen to allow the examination of the process and consequences of parent engagement initiatives in the real-life context in which they are occurring (Yin, 1994).

Data collection

The parent engagement initiatives selected for this study were funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education for their potential to involve families in learning and teaching, with the goal to promote student achievement. In total, eight initiatives were involved in the research. Five initiatives were selected for discussion here due to their cultural and/or economic diversity, and the initiatives' focus on inclusive practices.

The districts were economically diverse. For example, 50% of the families earned more than the provincial average and 16% were classified as low income before taxes in District A (Statistics Canada, 2006). District I had a range of low- to high-income families, with the northern quadrant classified as low income. The average earnings of all the northern region's residents were between two and three thousand dollars less than the Ontario average and the median family income was below that of the overall median Ontario family income (Statistics Canada, 2006).

Three of the initiatives (District A, parent led conference, District I) were in both economically and culturally diverse communities. Between 11 and 50% + of the families spoke a language other than English or French (Statistics Canada, 2006) and upwards of 90 languages were spoken by the students and their families. The initiatives addressed parent engagement and inclusion broadly, based on the demographics. Two of the initiatives (Districts F and H) were in economically diverse but culturally pluralistic regions, in which portions of the schools' families were traditionally not well served by the education system. The initiatives targeted practices to engage these families to enhance inclusion. The other three initiatives were excluded from this paper because they did not address family engagement in education or issues related to inclusion.

Twenty-seven individual and twenty focus group interviews that were semi-structured, open-ended and approximately 45 min in length were conducted. They involved trustees (2), First Nations² educational councilors and managers (4), community members (5), teachers (4), vice principals (4), supervisory officers (9), a director of education (1), a Ministry PEO representative (1), board-level support staff and administrators (22), regional Parent Involvement Council and school council members (17), and parents (30). The interviews were digitally audio-recorded,

and detailed field notes were taken during the interviews. Observations were made and field notes were taken during site visits. Documents and other artifacts from the initiatives, such as brochures, radio and printed advertisements, evaluation forms, and PEO final reports from the project coordinators were collected during and after site visits and from the PEO. Additionally, school board and Statistics Canada websites were accessed for contextual information. Demographic information was collected on the communities and the school districts, as well as information on the parent engagement initiatives, activities, and resources for families. Multiple sources of data were sought in order to establish construct validity through triangulation (Merriam, 1998; Rothe, 2000).

Data analysis

Upon reviewing the audio-recordings and the interview notes, the archival data and the observations, the collected data were coded and analyzed for emerging categories and themes. The constant comparative method was used; the data obtained from each participant were continuously examined and incidents were compared across the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Merriam, 1998). In this way, new categories and themes were developed and existing ones were evaluated and modified.

Findings and discussion

Several themes emerged during the data analysis that served to enhance some of the initiatives' capacity for inclusivity. In the following section, I outline the challenges to inclusive family engagement, and the strategies employed by the districts and parent-led conference coordinators to enhance the accessibility of their initiatives.

Parent engagement initiatives based on families' and community's characteristics

Some of the initiatives (Districts A and I, Parent-led conference) were intended to meet the needs of all families, while others (Districts F and H) targeted families that had faced barriers to their engagement. In order to develop comprehensive parent engagement programs in schools with a range of activities that meet the families' and schools' needs, it is necessary to gather information (Epstein, 1995). This is an important step toward inclusive practices.

Some initiatives included surveys of the parent community. This involves consulting families directly when determining what they need and the types of parent engagement activities that would be appropriate (Henderson et al., 2007). As a District I superintendent with parent engagement in her portfolio, Roberta Mack stated:

Teachers have a perception of what a good parent looks like and does What I really want is for all of us to stop assuming, and know first. Get to know first, then make your plans and do your outreach, or whatever, or your joint planning. Base it on fact, not on perceptions.

Other initiatives (Districts A and F, parent led conference, District I's *Get Involved: Volunteer in Education* (GIVE) program) gave families opportunities to provide feedback after the workshops or activities in which they were involved. Their

opinions and suggestions were considered and implemented where possible in future events.

Several parent engagement initiative coordinators collected data on the surrounding community in order to have an understanding of the context in which the schools were located. Sandra Jones, the district consultant and New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) initiative coordinator, stated:

Something that I think is very important for teachers is to start asking themselves questions and to confront their own biases and prejudices. That's really important that they recognize those. You'll often hear them say, "Oh, it's a single-parent family" They make such assumptions based on that that are not based in fact. They may in actuality be talking about socioeconomic levels –

Roberta: But even then, classism kicks in, and it's just wrong. We speak from a real position of privilege.

Sandra: We do. And they need to recognize that in themselves.

To address preconceptions, for example, the school council training initiative in District I advocated collecting demographic information, district data on the population each school served, surveys of the school community and an audit of parent engagement practices to get a more complete picture of families' needs and levels of parent engagement.

Prior to developing the speaker series to promote literacy among aboriginal families in particular, social services representatives, and school and central office personnel in District H conducted community visits. Tom Brant, the school district's aboriginal educational leader and event coordinator, noted that First Nations people historically did not have good relationships with public education educators and administrators. As a result, families of aboriginal heritage were on the periphery of the school system; First Nations students' school attendance was lower than that of their White counterparts and their graduation rates were low, yet the proportion of aboriginal students was growing relative to that of White students in the district. Tom recalled, "We did what they call community visits, and they were very, very successful. You know, we would be in the communities from nine in the morning until six at night, talking with parents, that kind of thing." They gained a clearer idea of the families' community context, their strengths, and the challenges they experienced. The speaker series' coordinators were then better able to tailor the program to the families' needs.

Strategies to promote inclusion

Several common challenges to parent engagement were identified across the districts, and the people who coordinated and participated in the initiatives used a variety of strategies to address those challenges.

Poverty issues

Recognizing that the cost of events and programs for parents to attend might exclude some families, the initiatives were free of charge. For example, the conferences (District A, Parent-led conference), the GIVE program (District I), the speaker

events (District H) did not cost the participating families any money. In some cases, the school districts covered the costs. For some initiatives, some of the expense was defrayed through partnerships with local community organizations.

Another related issue was childcare. Families with small children may not be able to participate in event activities if they do not have access to childcare (Mackety & Linder-VanBerschot, as cited in Faircloth, 2011). One initiative provided childcare during the events (parent-led conference). Another initiative was family-friendly; that is, all members of the family were welcome and the activities appealed to family members of all ages (District H). Yet another initiative (District I's GIVE program) was offered for half-days during school hours when fewer families would be affected by childcare needs. These strategies enabled more families to attend the events, with the potential to increase parent engagement.

Similarly, the cost of transportation needed to participate in the initiatives may be problematic for some families. Recognizing this, some initiatives attempted to minimize or eliminate this cost to the families. District H's speaker series took place in the communities it served. The GIVE program and the parent-led conference were held in central locations in the regions and were accessible by public transit, for example. District A's annual parent conference provided transportation to the event. The school district established several bus stops across the city and provided buses to serve them. The parents could be picked up before the conference and dropped off afterwards.

Cultural issues

Several of the districts serve multicultural communities. Parents who are newcomers to the country and are unfamiliar with the Ontario education system, or who do not speak either of the official languages fluently, may not be able to participate in their children's education to the degree they might like (cf. Auerbach, 2011a; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Quiocho & Daoud, 2005). As indicated in the research (see Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006; Quiocho & Daoud, 2005), translation services were found to be valuable in a large urban center with multicultural communities; however, they were needed in other districts with multicultural populations.

While other districts (District A, for example) had smaller populations of individuals representing diverse ethnicities, these families were not all being reached effectively. While efforts to translate school-home communication may be in place, translated information about activities involving parents or during the activities in which the parents are participating would likely make it easier for all families to be involved. For example, the organizers of the parent-led conference in Districts B and C had advertising materials translated into the most commonly spoken languages or dialects in the city, and had government settlement workers at the event to translate the proceedings in the speaker sessions and workshops for families. Also, workshops on the Ontario education system were specifically included for parents who were newcomers, and DVDs in multiple languages were made available for attendees on participating in parent-teacher interviews. These were some of the ways that the conference coordinators enhanced the accessibility of this initiative and promote parents' engagement in their children's education. Similarly, Quiocho and Daoud (2005) found that translating school newsletters and bulletins, hiring a school-based community liaison to assist parents, and having staff members who speak parents' first languages help to include all families.

Educators at other districts (Districts F and H) observed that some families' needs were not being met, and developed parent engagement initiative to address their needs. As a result, certain types of families were targeted by the initiatives. For example, District H's speaker events to promote literacy were aimed at families of aboriginal heritage. Because it had been a challenge to engage aboriginal families in school activities, the sponsored events were held in the families' community, and they were culturally relevant with a message to families to promote literacy activities in the home. Likewise, Quiocho and Daoud (2005) note the effectiveness of the practice in other communities, and recommend holding meetings involving the parents not only in schools, but also in the community, in order to open up communication.

Therefore, with an appreciation for the challenges to participation, parent engagement initiative coordinators in this study created opportunities for parents to engage in their children's education. The families were also able to effectively communicate the types of activities wanted or needed to the educators. Consultative procedures, such as the use of surveys, played an essential role in this, and made it possible to include as many parents as possible in their children's education (Epstein, 1995, 2001) through the initiatives. With an understanding of the social context within the broader community as well as the characteristics of the families, it is possible to tailor parent engagement practices to suit the schools and families (Epstein, 2001; Henderson et al., 2007).

Home-school collaboration to promote parent engagement

In all of the initiatives, the family unit was targeted, with an understanding that the initiatives enabled families to support their children together with the school. Some of the family engagement activities enabled families to become directly involved in learning, teaching, and decision-making, while others focused on building family strengths to facilitate parents' engagement in education.

Initiatives that engage parents in learning and teaching

Several of the initiatives in this study had the potential to enhance parent engagement in ways that can impact student achievement (Jeynes, 2005; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). They provided capacity for parents to be involved in school or educational decision-making to some extent, as well as student learning. For instance, some of the parent-led conference workshops focused on strategies for enhancing communication with school educators. Other examples of initiatives from this research included training for parents in assisting children at home or in the schools with curriculum, and opportunities for school council members to create parent engagement programs to address specific student achievement goals.

District F, for example, was a French-language school district³ located in a community with primarily English-language families. Noting the importance of developing strong literacy skills in the primary grades, and acknowledging the parents' key role, the district personnel designed workshops to teach family members strategies for reading and writing instruction in the French language, and assisted the parents as they worked with their children.

In District I, school councils - primarily made up of parents - were charged with the responsibility of developing a variety of parent engagement initiatives based on

school community needs and linked to school goals. The GIVE program also provided opportunities to participate in teaching and learning. As one parent, who was a newcomer to Canada, stated:

They have three hours of training for us first, and they give us more information, they have a very thick article to read, you have to know what you should do, ... how to deal with children. And after the training, you will feel comfortable [to] volunteer After that, you volunteer two days a week in the schools. It's like you're teaching. You have some responsibilities I help [with] reading, I help Grade 1, Grade 2, because for me, in grade 6, [the] students, they teach me!

Initiatives that build on family strengths, and provide community links

The data collected from parents at the conferences and the GIVE program in this study indicated that parents want information on parenting, in particular. This is consistent with parent engagement literature that advocates for programs to support the development of parenting skills and knowledge in order to build on family strengths and enhance families' capacities to become engaged in their children's education (Epstein, 1995; Harvard Family Research Project, 2002). Moreover, not everyone has equal access to resources (Lin, 1999) in a community. This may be particularly true of newcomers to the country, who may not know what services are available nor how to access them.

Initiatives such as the conferences, the speakers' events, and the GIVE and *Families and Schools Together* (FAST) programs in this study had the potential to reach many families across a district, as well as to provide access to community resources. The conferences, for example, had representatives from community organizations and social services present to speak with family members. The GIVE and FAST programs were both designed to introduce families to the educational landscape in Ontario and the services available to them in the community. As a result, they included representatives from social services in the planning and delivery of the programs. These examples highlight that parent engagement initiatives can facilitate families' access to an array of resources in the community. This enhances families' social capital (cf. Lin, 1999) and their ability to participate in their children's education.

Supporting a culture conducive to parent engagement and inclusive practices

In order to promote agency among parents and school personnel regarding home-school collaboration, issues or organizational culture need to be considered. As Sanders (2007) found, an active superintendent and school district support are necessary to provide accountability and high expectations as well as financial resources for parent engagement programs. Moreover, the commitment of a district leader whose primary responsibility is the development of a district-wide partnership program is needed for sustainable parent engagement initiatives to be established at the school level (Sanders, 2007; Van Voorhis & Sheldon, 2002). Central office staff, at most of the districts' were demonstrably supportive of parent engagement in this research. They had central office staff whose primary responsibility was to liaise with families and the community to develop collaborative activities with the schools.

District support for parent engagement is important; however, for initiatives to be implemented at the school level, there needs to be support and a shared understanding of family-school-community partnerships in the schools (Hands, 2005;

Sanders, 1999). This may be particularly important when developing or newly implementing parent engagement programs. To encourage educators to develop and implement parent engagement initiatives, one of District I's initiatives entailed the creation of a handbook on parent engagement for new teachers. It was to be distributed to the teachers during a district-wide workshop on parent engagement as part of the NTIP. Sandra stated:

The big goal for me is to make new teachers understand what a gift it is to have parents who are engaged, how it can absolutely change your relationship with the children, with the parents and for student achievement. The kids will do better What this is going to do is help our teachers be better teachers, to reach the children more effectively by understanding where they're coming from and the assets that they have in their home and in their community.

Strategies such as this are a start toward providing learning opportunities around parent engagement for school personnel. Regardless, the training for new teachers was optional, and took place after they had begun working with students and their families. It is necessary for teacher candidates to have access to training in engaging families in education before they get to the classroom.

It was noted by some of the participants in this study (parent-led conference organizers) that not all educators are in favor of parent engagement, and it was evident that participants held differing opinions regarding what constituted parent engagement. Yet, as the literature and some of the interview participants (District I's GIVE program and engagement audit) in this research note, a welcoming school environment is essential (Sanders & Harvey, 2002). Opportunities for all school personnel to develop their understanding of family and community engagement and its relevance to education and student achievement would be helpful toward this end.

This points to the crucial role that teacher education programs can play. In their meta-analysis of parent engagement initiatives, Henderson and Mapp (2002) noted when training was provided to teachers and other school staff, the level and nature of contact between themselves and families changed in ways that improved families' perceptions of the school and their relationships with teachers. It also affected how families were involved in their children's schooling (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Yet, few teacher preparation programs provide direction on how to partner with families and encourage parent engagement (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). What might this training look like?

In their review of recent trends in educating professionals for collaborating with parents, Dotger and Bennett (2010) highlight the importance of providing not only the theoretical context, but the practical application of strategies to engage families. Having preservice teachers communicating with parents regularly about common parent-teacher issues (Murray, Curran, & Zellers, 2008), developing opportunities for new teachers to role-play with parents and caregivers to develop their communication skills (Dotger, 2010; Symeou, Roussounidou, & Michaelides, 2008, as cited in Dotger & Bennett, 2010), and creating spaces for teachers and families in the community outside the school to provide a broader social context in a shared environment (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Quiocho & Daoud, 2005) are all possibilities for professional development. These are some of the promising, action-oriented practices to provide educators with an understanding and the skills to engage families and community members in various capacities in educational issues

(Dotger & Bennett, 2010). Without the structures that shape culture and influence agency, such as teacher education, a shared understanding and common philosophy of parents as partners will likely be elusive.

Conclusions and implications

This paper provides strategies used in diverse communities across the province of Ontario to ensure that all families had opportunities to become engaged in their children's education. As such, the findings of this research may not be broadly applicable beyond the districts in the study. Indeed, the generalizability of the results from this research is limited, due to the qualitative nature of the investigation (see for e.g. Merriam, 1998). Moreover, transplanting initiatives is challenging because the initiatives need to fit the specific context in which they are being implemented (Datnow, 2002). Initiatives undertaken by districts, schools, community agencies, or any other action group are selected based on the districts' or schools' needs and those of the parents (Epstein, 1995, 2001). Similarly in this research, the initiatives targeted different aspects of engagement to address these circumstances. That said, aspects of these projects may be determined to be transferable to other districts through an examination of the implications for policy, practice and research.

In the section that follows, the components that are important to the development of comprehensive parent engagement programs that may be more broadly applicable are outlined.

Building parent engagement programs and enhancing inclusivity

In order to address high student achievement and reduce achievement gaps, it is essential to engage all families in their children's education. There are implications for provincial- or state-, and district-level policymakers in this area.

Resources for parent engagement

District-level policies and support to engage all families in education are needed for all educators in the form of training, money and time during the workday to develop collaborative relations (Sanders, 1999). Once initiative coordinators have assessed the families' and school's needs, it may be that translation services, child-care, transportation, and free programming offered at flexible times are needed for all families to be able to participate in the parent engagement initiative, for example. These features come at an additional cost to the schools or the districts above and beyond the expense of the initiative.

Support from provincial- or state-level education departments to mitigate the cost of providing services as well as administrative and production costs may enable the schools or districts to create an inclusive program with a wider range to reach more families and community members where they might not otherwise be able to do so. It might also be possible for provincial ministries or education departments, for example, to provide guidance to districts interested in writing proposals for grants from community organizations to support their initiatives.

Parents as knowledgeable co-constructors promote inclusion

Yet, having policies and support in place to promote parent engagement is insufficient. Parents need to be seen as knowledgeable about educational matters, and included in decision-making processes as advocates and active contributors (Harvard Family Research Project, 2002). Initiatives that are co-constructed by parents and school personnel have the potential to enhance parent engagement (Jeynes, 2005; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). Towards that end, policies are not always implemented at the school level the way they were intended (Clune, 1990). Also, they may not be implemented effectively when mandated by a governing body such as a provincial education department or school district, and not developed at the school level (Hands, 2005).

In this study, initiatives that were co-constructed or developed by parents, or included capacity for parents to contribute to the development of initiatives through surveys and feedback forms were reported to be successful and useful by the school personnel and responding families alike. Educators at all levels and families working together at the school level to first define what family engagement entails in each particular environment or context would be a helpful start to developing any parent engagement program.

Building capacity for parent engagement

To support this work, it is necessary to provide educational and professional development opportunities in post-secondary institutions for pre and inservice educators (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The provincial and state education departments, professional organizations, the districts, and the schools can also take a role in improving the quality and quantity of parent engagement possibilities. They can provide the human, material, and financial resources needed to develop professional learning opportunities around parent engagement. Yet as Henderson and Mapp (2002) observe, other school staff need training as well as teachers. Administrators, teachers, and support staff are all candidates, since all of these school community members have opportunities to interact with parents and citizens of the broader community. If they are not included in these efforts, engaging families in educational matters will likely remain within the scope of those educators who have an existing interest in doing so.

In conclusion, this study brings together some informative ideas around parent engagement in the province. That said, further learning around parent engagement practices is needed in order to more widely establish programs that enhance parent engagement and have an impact on student achievement. There needs to be an understanding and support of initiatives in Ontario and beyond that provide families with the skills necessary to advocate for education (and school reform) that meets the needs of their families as well as those of others (cf. Harvard Family Research Project, 2002). These initiatives also need to present opportunities for families to be involved in education at the school level that are directly linked to teaching and student learning (Jeynes, 2005; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). When that happens, all families will have the capacity to be fully engaged as partners in their children's education.

The biggest thing to be gained is not that parents come in and volunteer or help you with managing the child. When you partner with parents and they feel respected, a lot of times they become strong advocates for schools and communities. You cannot have a high performing school without strong parent advocates. (Auerbach, 2011b, p. 235)

Notes

1. Both the parent engagement initiatives and the research on them were funded by the Ontario Ministry of Education's PEO.
2. Canada's aboriginal population is commonly identified as First Nations.
3. As Canada's official languages, both English- and French-language schools are publicly funded. Catholic schools as well as non-denominational schools are also publicly funded.

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