

Engaging Minority Parents

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The intent of this paper is to examine the importance of engaging minority parents in partnership with Ontario's education system. Historically, minority parents have been an underestimated source of knowledge, a relatively quiet resource from which the education system would greatly benefit. Through a practical perspective of the Ministry's Parent Engagement and Equity documents, I will be addressing the following questions: How has parental involvement evolved through the Ministry's perspective? Why are minority parents typically remaining silent? What concerns do minority parents generally have about their children's education, in particular Native American Indians and African Americans? How can schools encourage these groups to share their voice through parental engagement? Ministry documents, personal experiences as well as leading sources on parenting in education, such as Debbie Pushor and Joyce Epstein, will be cited to help support the ideas raised in this paper.

With the influx of new immigrants into Ontario's schools, it's imperative that the education system move with the developing trends and adjust to differing school needs. The Ministry is well on their way to making this happen with their new policies entitled 'Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy' and 'A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools'.

Ministry's History of Parental Involvement

In 1980, with the implementation of Bill 82, parents began to have a voice with local school boards as a member of the 'Special Education Advisory Committee'. At this time, parents were able to share their opinions about educating students with special needs. As time progressed however, so did the need for further parental involvement, and in 1994, the Ontario Parent Council was initiated to allow parents 'a voice' in all children's education. The following year, 'For the Love of Learning' was presented to Ontario Boards of Education with the intent that unique individual school needs would be

met through the collaboration of parents and staff members (Ministry of Education, 2010). By 1997, parent councils were firmly in place and consisted mainly of parents, the principal, teachers, a high-school student (if available), and a non-teaching staff member. Their job was to advise and give feedback to curriculum issues, understand school budget and policies, as well as help with the selection of new principals (McKenna and Willms, 1998).

The idea of gaining more support from all parental groups was beginning to take shape in 2005 when Ontario's Parent Voice in Education Project was initiated. It offered parents a stronger voice in the education system by creating an inviting school climate, recognizing diversity in schools, clear-cutting an engagement pathway for parents from varying backgrounds, offering support to parental involvement in children's learning, and providing workshops and printed material to increase parental engagement.

In 2006, a Parent Engagement Office was created to further promote parental engagement within the province. Over the next four years, a total of 5,500 school councils and 200 regional organizations received grants through a Parents Reaching Out program which offered \$25 million to encourage parental engagement in schools between the years of 2005-2010.

During the years of 2007-2009, the Provincial Parent Board provided suggestions to improve parental engagement, and in the final year, the Ministry of Education produced the 2009 'Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy' to include all parents from varying ethnic and marginalized backgrounds. Within the same year, the Student Achievement and School Board Governance Act, Bill 177, was passed to ensure that each school established a Parent Involvement Committee. This committee eventually reached a regional level where parents had the opportunity to communicate with trustees and the director of education.

Finally in 2010, 'A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools' was established for which all boards, schools, and parents refer to as a current resource for parental engagement. By the end of its fourth year of implementation, 2011-2012, school boards are required to hire and promote a representation of minority teachers, offer professional development in equity and inclusion of all, and consistently evaluate the implementation of the new ethnic policy and procedures. At the local level, schools are

encouraged to assess their community's needs and choose the appropriate programs, policies and checklists to promote equity and inclusion of all represented cultures and marginalized groups.

Debbie Pushor is a leading researcher in social capital. She believes welcoming parents from all backgrounds into the school system differs depending on parental involvement and parental engagement. According to Pushor, parental involvement relates to parents assisting with teacher initiated activities such as photocopying, volunteering, or helping out with anything which follows the school's schedule. Parental engagement however, occurs when school situations are "mutually determined by educators and parents to be important for children and are lived out in a respectful and reciprocal relationship" (Pushor, 2007, p. 6). Some examples of engagement are collaboratively creating homework policies, or simply sharing personal opinions and observations during a Parent Council meeting or a yearly survey for the school board.

Inclusion of minority parents within a typically one-cultured-school setting can be challenging at the best of times. Through Puschor's research with Native American Aboriginal children, she concludes that approaches to parental involvement and engagement are dependent on the distinctive needs of the community.

Joyce Epstein, another prominent researcher, summarized parental involvement in six different steps - parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community.

Parenting refers to assisting parents with effective child rearing practices. This can take a variety of avenues such as individually talking with a teacher, attending a parenting workshop, or participating in community meetings to help understand school and family expectations.

Good communication skills are also essential in establishing a positive rapport between home and school. Through monthly newsletters and regular parent-teacher conferences, the school and home can create a positive rapport and effective form of communication.

Furthermore, volunteers are vital partners in many school situations. Epstein refers to volunteering in a similar fashion to Pushor's parental involvement, where

parents help the teaching staff fulfill their school obligations through telephone trees, lunchroom responsibilities, and classroom parent duties.

On the home front, schools continue to assist parents in setting up a homework program for students to complete with their parents. Teachers usually send home the school's homework policy at the beginning of the year, followed by monthly assignments, and a calendar with due dates. Grade expectations can be accessed via the Ontario Ministry website, and individual goals can be set and reflected upon by parents, teacher and student.

The next step, decision making, takes on a greater leadership role and responsibility in the school's decisions. Parent Councils and parental leadership positions at the board level are two examples of giving parents a greater voice in the reform or daily routines of their children's education.

Finally, collaborating with the community relates to strengthening the home-school connection through community services and resources. Such examples include summer school programs, cultural services, as well as business connections with the school system.

Although Joyce Epstein's six step process of parental involvement originated in the mid 1990s, her ideas still prevail today, and are often referred to in scholarly articles. Similarly, Debbie Pushor's theory about parental involvement and engagement is relevant for all parents; however, she takes it a step further to focus on the unique needs of minority parents.

Minority Parent Concerns

To better understand the significance of minority parents, it is important to appreciate their differences in cultural identity, language, birthplace, religion, and lifestyle (Wikipedia, 2011) from the majority of parents who live within the same school boundaries. Each minority parent brings forth a wealth of cultural diversity from which the school and community at large would greatly benefit.

However, this untapped resource may go amiss due to a lack of minority parental engagement within Ontario schools. Many immigrants or minority parents may feel intimidated by a school system which could be foreign to their own educational

beliefs. A limited use of the English language may interfere with minority parents' abilities to communicate with staff, other parents, and even students. Minority parents' cultural or religious beliefs may coincide with others' platforms, resulting in a conflict of interest or hostility among community members. These examples represent a few concerns which may influence minority parents to shy away from engaging in their children's school environment.

Old school perceptions still exist today in some form or another. Within the school community, cultural or racial biases can influence teacher, student and parental behaviour, possibly limiting positive minority engagement. This appears to be a general concern among certain ethnic groups such as Native American Indians and African Americans, as pre-conceived notions from statistical data of high dropout rates and low graduation percentages can taint the perceptions of many. Historical events therefore must be revisited, better understood and bridges mended in order to better engage minority parents within the school system.

For many years, Native American Aboriginals were either forced to adapt or chose to assimilate within the mainstream culture's educational system. Canadian Residential schools were in existence from 1870 – 1950s, in order “to remove and isolate (150,000) children from the influence of their homes, families, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture. These objectives were based on the assumption Aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal” (Toronto Star, 2011, p 1). The results were disastrous however, with Native students attaining minimal levels of education or dying from unexplainable causes. Hurt feelings still surface, even after the recent public apology from our Prime Minister Stephen Harper.

In order to maintain their culture and language rights while receiving a solid education, Native American Aboriginals independently established the First Nations School in Toronto in 1977, and it wasn't until 1983 that the school was acknowledged by the Toronto Board of Education. “The focus of the First Nations School is to offer a tradition-based curriculum that meets the requirements set by the Parent Council, the Toronto District School Board and the Ontario Ministry of Education. First Nations Public School is unique in that Native values, spirituality, culture and Ojibwe language are integrated throughout the school curriculum” (Toronto District School Board, 2011).

Debbie Puschor believes that Native American Indians generally have a wonderful approach to inviting parents into their schools. In her article, 'Welcoming Parents: Educators as Guest Hosts on School Landscapes', she compares her own experience of her son's first day of kindergarten, and describes her feelings of being a stranger and unwelcome within his school environment. Later while researching parental involvement in a Native American Aboriginal school, she found a completely different situation where all parents, students, and staff shared a pancake breakfast together to help celebrate the beginning of school. She summarized that welcoming meant becoming part of the native community, and feeling comfortable with students, staff and other parents (Pushor, 2007).

Similar to the Native American Aboriginal culture, African American parents are equally concerned about maintaining their culture and heritage, but more importantly, knowing that their children are treated as an equal to other students within the same school system. Challenges still exist as one prominent African American Professor, Dr. George Dei, explains that students from his culture still face high dropout rates due to poor levels of motivation, low teacher expectations, overgeneralization of minority and working-class students with regards to their skin colour or religious background, limited respect for authority figures, and low commitment interest in the community (Anderson, 2009).

In the Toronto Afrocentric Alternative School, the Ontario curriculum is taught through an African perspective. For example, students understand how Africans contributed to European history. By receiving an education through a cultural perspective, these students might have a better opportunity to relate to the curriculum while gaining a greater appreciation of their own heritage; both situations which appease the parental need for their children to academically succeed and understand their cultural background. Recent EQAO results reflect an academic improvement in Grade 3 students from the Afrocentric Alternative School.

Research states that student academic success, improvement in behaviour issues, fewer problems of truancy, and a reinforced optimism are directly related to parental involvement in schools (Ministry of Education, 2010). With this in mind, would greater

minority parental engagement in public schools lessen the need for alternative schools within the same board?

Conclusion

Luckily in today's society, equity issues pertaining to minority parents are interwoven through the cultural fabric of the Ministry's policies. Welcome Centres, effective communication strategies, and supportive staff members at the local school and board levels engage parents to share in the education of their children.

Welcome Centres provide new immigrants with connections to services which are intended to help families adjust to their new environment. In York Region, how to enrol a child in school, general information about the school system, ways to assist new students with a successful transition into the school system (such as an ELL assessment), and how parents can become involved in their children's school community are translated into 14 different languages (Welcome Centres, 2011).

Communication is the key to pulling the school and community together as well as breaking down any discriminatory barriers. Through translated newsletters, one-to-one chats with staff members (including translators), and informative workshops, parents and students will more likely feel welcome and a part of their school environment. By starting with the nucleus of minority representative parents, schools will soon realize that parental and student involvement may quickly blossom as these parents encourage other typically silent minority parents to engage in school activities.

Principals can also hire minority teachers, form equity Parent-School Councils, provide cultural holiday calendars, share newsletters or homework assignments via e-mail, and even showcase different cultural groups through International Nights. Taking a grassroots approach, staff may encourage minority parents to share in their multicultural vision through these school activities and board initiatives. However, it is important to continually assess the school's vision by analyzing data such as the percent of parents coming out to Parent-Council meetings, results from parents' bi-annual surveys, as well as an understanding of what's working and what needs to be changed.

Also at the local level, a school buddy system is very effective in helping new immigrants adjust to an unfamiliar school environment. Community volunteers, who

speak the same language, greet new families and explain the logistics of the school. This may include a walk about the building, assistance during a school event, or translation during a parent-teacher interview. Understanding that new families may be coming from a different school system, volunteers help both immigrant parents and students adjust to their new school environment.

It's important to harvest the parental strengths from within the community boundaries in order to reach the Ministry's expectations. By inviting immigrant parents to share their own cultural or professional expertise, the school at large benefits from this rich resource of differing view points and cultural ideologies from a global perspective. Furthermore, parents who feel their contributions are successful may be further inspired to continue participating in their local school.

To also help parents adjust, schools can provide workshops which cater to Minority parents' concerns. Some students, for example, may try to assimilate too quickly as a means of 'fitting in' and their parents may not understand the sudden change in their children's behaviour. To help alleviate parental worries, schools can provide workshops, from similar minority hired teachers or experts in the field, to assist in understanding any cultural differences which may exist between their homeland and their new place of residence in Canada (Cheong, S. (2011) [Interview with TDSB Vice Principal]).

Certain boards within the province of Ontario have already been proactive in regards to minority parents in the school system. Two to mention are York Region District School Board and the Durham Region School Board. To help increase parental engagement, York Region District School Board has created, as part of their York Region Plan for Continuous Improvement, an audit based on Epstein's 6 needs of parents, to be completed at the end of the school year. The results from this survey help York Region schools understand the areas in which further parental engagement needs to take place. Similarly, minority parents in the Durham Region benefit from this board's initiative to communicate all home information, such as packages for new families or school information, into nine different languages. Furthermore, they offer a 'multilingual literacy' guide for many minority groups, and school information such as report cards,

the Ontario curriculum and assessment practices for Muslim families (Ministry of Education, 2010).

Education not only exists between the confines of the school walls. After school hours, children's minds can be enlightened with a multitude of educational opportunities through extra curricular activities, additional support with homework, and cultural traditions in the home. A child's education is therefore a shared responsibility between home and school. The more involved minority parents become within the school system, the further developed their ownership and interest in their own child's academic achievement will become. The Ministry of Education's flexible policies truly reflect the changing parental perspectives on educational, cultural, and ethical issues today, and in turn appear to have a true understanding of cultural pluralism.

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