

The Rise and Stall of Parent and Community Involvement in Schools

Carl Corter • Janette Pelletier

An OISE/UT research team from the Institute of Child Study suggests now is the time to refocus parent and community involvement on the aims of education and link these aims to outcomes, processes, and programs. Parent and community involvement, they say, needs a critical look, not more endorsements.

A worldwide tide of policy, programs, and rhetoric puts parent and community involvement in the education mainstream. In the 1990s, new policies on parent involvement in education emerged at the national level in the U.S. and U.K., and in many state and local jurisdictions in the English-speaking world and beyond.

In the U.S., federal education dollars are tied to principles of parent and community involvement, whether the program is Head Start or various initiatives tied to No Child Left Behind. In the U.K., national education policy reform includes literacy and numeracy pushes with wide-scale testing and specific measures to engage parents in the process.

In Ontario, the tide began with provincial policy establishing parent school councils in 1996 and regulations mandating them for all schools a few years later.

In the education literature, reports and testimonials on parent involvement also climbed steadily across the 1980s and '90s. Many promising local school-community partnerships were reported, including some in Ontario (e.g., Corter, Harris, & Pelletier, 1998), but were not easily translated into wide-scale policies. In the popular media, the role of the parent is fodder for the public mind and is good counterpoint to the roles of teachers and schools in accounting for the failures and successes of children. Large-scale surveys, such as the *OISE/UT Survey* (Livingstone, Hart, & Davie, 2000), suggest that the public, including parents themselves, see the responsibility for children's school success as being shared between parents and schools. Report cards on parents are tabloid topics in the U.S., and parents being jailed for their children's

truancy gets similar press in the U.K. In our experience and research, teachers continue to report the frustrations of dealing with "under-involved" parents "who just don't care" and with "over-involved" parents who may present problems for educators and perhaps even for their overwhelmed children.

"Community" may not get the same press as "parents"; it is harder to think about the complex settings and interactions that surround the efforts of teachers and parents. However, the word has positive connotations not lost on politicians, and educators are becoming more attuned to the importance of community characteristics as impacting how they need to do their work. In many ways, it seems that parent and community involvement has already been the "next big thing" in education.

IS IT WORKING?

Even in this age of evidence-based education, there isn't overwhelming evidence that parent and community involvement boosts school performance. Many studies have found that parents who are involved in schooling are more likely to have children who perform better, but involvement may be correlated with other factors that contribute to academic success (higher economic status, less family stress, parental involvement in other aspects of the child's life, etc.). This doesn't mean that parent and community involvement by itself, or a program or approach promoting it, will automatically boost school performance. Some meta-reviews summarizing results across studies conclude that there isn't evidence that these programs are generally effective. As we discuss below, however, there are some successful programs that improve academic outcomes.

Even in this age of evidence-based education, there isn't overwhelming evidence that parent and community involvement boosts school performance.

WHY NOW?

Factors influencing the increase in parent and community involvement :

- Growing challenges to families
- Cutbacks in government expenditures
- Education reform
- Global demographic changes
- Migration and immigration



Furthermore, there may be non-academic goals in parent and community involvement initiatives, so the underwhelming research evidence on academic impact isn't the last word.

WHY NOW?

If it's not overwhelming evidence, what's produced the current flood of interest? Joyce Epstein (Epstein & Sanders, 2002), who has helped to lead the growing attention to parent

and community involvement across the '80s and '90s in the U.S., has written about six types of parent involvement (parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community), and argues that all are important and beneficial. She and others think the new push for involvement is partly to compensate for growing challenges to families—including single-parent status, immigrant status, widening income gaps, and working mothers. Another version of this push to involvement in the U.S. has been on closing the gap in educational achievement for children living in poverty by educating and supporting parents.

However, the push to parent and community involvement is global and it reflects multiple, global social forces. Cutbacks in government expenditures and services through the '90s fuelled ideas of using parental, community, and business resources to take up the slack. Interest in school-community service integration was partly motivated by looking for efficiencies in the face of cuts. Market models of parent choice and accountability grew alongside cutbacks in services and growing pres-



*... policy needs to go beyond
whether parents are involved;
it needs to focus on how they
are involved and what happens
as a result.*

OISE/UT RESEARCH PROFILE

Evaluation of Toronto First Duty An Innovative Early Childhood Initiative

Research Objectives

Carl Corter, Janette Pelletier and others have been carrying out a longitudinal evaluation of an innovative early childhood initiative that brings together childcare, Kindergarten, and parenting supports in a school-based model of seamless-day programming in five pilot sites in Toronto. The project, known as Toronto First Duty, is a collaboration among the City of Toronto, the Atkinson Foundation, the Toronto District School Board, Human Resource Development Canada, and many community partners.

Methodology

Evaluating the impact of integrated, multiple services to children and families has required unique and broad-based research methodologies and a large team of investigators. The research team includes faculty from the Institute of Child Study, the Atkinson Centre for Society and Child Development and Ryerson University, as well as OISE/UT graduate students and U of T and Ryerson undergraduates. The researchers began by becoming participant observers in meetings, then by carrying out interviews and focus groups with key informants that included funders, policy makers, school board administrators, front-line staff working with children, and families and community members. Data gathered include meeting notes, field observations, document analyses, interview and survey analyses, as well as direct measures of children's outcomes.

Preliminary Findings

The Toronto First Duty project is still underway. Preliminary results show the complexity of trying to bring together services organized under different auspices, different funding sources, and different regulations. In addition to system factors such as these, there are striking personal issues that arise as professional roles grow and change. In spite of the challenges, the benefits are wide-ranging. Parents report that the integrated system is working to provide seamless and integrated care and education for the children and seamless service support and parent education for themselves. Children in the program are beginning to understand school as a place that links closely to their parents and community.

Larger Implications

Early childhood learning and care works best when they are seamless. Children avoid spending their days moving from one system to another, often in different locations. Parents avoid the frustration of negotiating a "non-system" of fragmented services related to their children when services (care, education, health, recreation, and others) can be co-located and even integrated in their local community school. The implications for the new federal and provincial funding for early childhood are enormous.

References or links for more information

Toronto First Duty website: www.city.toronto.on.ca/firstduty.

A Harvard network on families and schools:

<http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/projects/fine/resources/digest/parents.html>



asures to spend public funds more wisely; involved and informed parents should improve the quality and efficiency of education. The continuing global search for educational reform and improvement fostered various forms of involvement from accountability to alliances for school governance and learning. Parents and the public have been sensitized to the instrumental roles of education for job preparation and economic competition in the global knowledge economy. Global demographic changes make a difference. Postponed parenthood and smaller family size increase the potential for parental investment in children and their education. Worldwide increases in migration and immigration make a difference. Immigrant parents are working for better lives for their children and believe that education is the key (e.g., Pelletier, 2002). The diversity of their beliefs about education and their circumstances challenge traditional ways

of schooling and of handling home-school connections.

WHAT'S THE AIM?

Boosting student learning and development are primary aims of practices and policies promoting parent and community involvement, but there are mixed to weak results. To be effective, parent and community involvement promotion through practice and policy needs to go beyond whether parents are involved; it needs to focus on how they are involved and what happens as a result. What does the parent do differently and what does the teacher do differently—how do the child's interactions and environment change as a result? How do these changes affect changes in the child's attitudes, emotions, and thinking that contribute to academic gains or more general developmental gains? And/or how does the child learn directly as a result of these interactions and experiences? In short, what is parent involvement and what are the processes that might link it to student outcomes? There is surprisingly little research examining how different forms of parent involvement change children's environments and their learning or motivation, and almost no research that shows how context may alter these links. These are questions for practitioners and schools as well as for researchers.

OTHER AIMS AND COSTS

Stronger student achievement and learning are not the only potential benefits of stronger parent and community involvement. Constituency building for education may also result. If parents and other community members understand more about the contributions schools make and the challenges they face, they may contribute public support and community resources to schools. Clear accountability and communication with both parents and community may have similar effects by increasing public trust in schools. This is in addition to the role accountability may have in directing attention to, and improving, the learning of individual children and school-level performance. Community building may also result from parent and community involvement. Better relationships with parents and community build a sense of caring and community, both within the school, and beyond the school; better relationships

The findings from Ontario

thus indicate that school councils are not achieving either reform and learning aims or democratic aims.



between teachers and parents can build parents' self esteem (Pelletier & Brent, 2002), and can inspire teachers (Pelletier, 2002). More effective parenting may result from parent education provided through schools with benefits for child learning, child management, and health. Principles of parental rights and democracy may be served by parents' roles in governance and decision-making. In market models of education, better information for parents resulting from parent involvement should support wiser educational choice. Parent/community/student satisfaction may be enhanced. Beneficial economic outcomes may include efficiencies and reducing costs of services or augmenting services with low-cost parent labour.

Nevertheless, potential benefits come with potential costs. Critics have pointed out that advocacy positions for parent and community involvement usually fail to consider the costs of instituting programs. These costs include money and time spent—increases in workload as well as opportunity costs. Just as financial costs of parent and community involvement are rarely scrutinized, potential negative outcomes are rarely examined. These could include compromising classroom ethics when parents are in the classroom unless they are properly trained and monitored, student

POTENTIAL COSTS & BENEFITS

Stronger parental and community involvement may have a wide-range of impacts, positive and negative:

Benefits

- Stronger student achievement and learning
- Support and resources from informed parents and community members
- Increase in public trust
- Community building
- More effective parenting
- Establishment of principles of parental rights
- Wiser educational choices
- Enhanced satisfaction
- Efficiencies, reduced costs due to parental involvement

Costs

- Increase in budgets and time requirements
- Increase in work load
- Compromising classroom ethics
- Student unease
- Greater disparities if programs are not evenly accessed
- Loss of focus on achievement
- Negative effect on family life with increased pressure from schools



unease, greater disparities when programs are not evenly accessed, loss of focus on achievement, and negative effects on family life when pressures for home school-learning disrupt other legitimate activities of families.

DIVERSITY AND OUTREACH, OR ONLY THE RICH GET RICHER

Programmatic approaches to parent and community involvement may be universal, as when a school reaches out to all parents or when a nation mandates parent involvement at a national level linked to universal educational reform (e.g., England). It may also be targeted to “high risk” groups as happens in the U.S. Title 1 programs for children in poverty, with requirements for involving parents. Whether programs are universal or targeted, outreach is still required to ensure the children and parents most in need receive potential benefits. Don Davies (2002) offers several ways of increasing outreach. Beyond producing a welcoming climate at the school, schools and educators should consider moving out into the community to find parents where they are, and they should consider using parents and other community members to connect to otherwise disengaged parents. Another strategy is cooperating with other agencies serving children and families to increase points of contact. In multicultural urban communities, integrated service alliances based at schools increase the number of professionals able to work in the parents’ own language/culture and help break down barriers between schools and marginalized groups. This is one principle at work in the Toronto First Duty Project, an integrated services model for early childhood operating in school-based hubs (Corter, et al., 2002).

EVIDENCE ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND CHILDREN’S SCHOOL READINESS

There is a substantial amount of research on parent involvement in preschool programs and the part that parents play in “school readiness” or “transition to school.” Some of the research shows an impact on children’s development.

One finding is that benefits for children occur more often in programs that are clear on the inputs to children, either directly, or indirectly via parents and parent education. Programs that simultaneously modify children’s environments in both home and school should maximize effects. This principle appears to have support from successful inter-

*Governance roles may serve
democratic and communitarian
aims in education but may not
link directly to student outcomes.*



ventions in which parents and teachers are simultaneously trained in the same approaches to interacting with children, for example in preventative child management approaches or in home and school early literacy activities.

Another example comes from our work in an Ontario school board. In a recent two-year design research experiment in ten school-based readiness centres (Pelletier, 2002; Pelletier & Corter, 2004), families attended the Jr. Kindergarten Readiness Centre three times a week for 12 weeks. Extensive outreach efforts brought in families who otherwise would not have participated. The curriculum followed the Ontario Kindergarten Program. Parents and their preschoolers took part in traditional “circle” time, follow-up activities, and play times. Workshops on child development, learning, and community services were provided for parents and teachers. In Year 1, the research focus was on implementation of the program as measured by direct observations, interviews, questionnaires, environment ratings and teacher reports. In Year 2, implementation research continued and evaluation of the program was carried out by following the children to Sr. Kindergarten the next year. A battery of direct readiness measures, as well as the Early Developmental Instrument, were

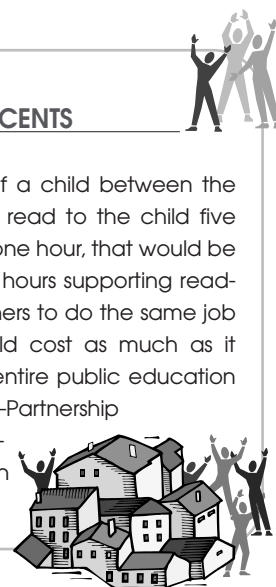
administered. Overall results showed the powerful impact of the readiness centre program which we believe came about by building relationships between parents and teachers. Teachers reported that their views of parents changed in positive ways; parents reported increasing feelings of self-efficacy as a result of participation (Pelletier & Brent, 2002). Children’s Kindergarten readiness scores were higher for children who had participated with their parents in comparison to a group without this experience. There were interesting differences between English First and Second Language groups. ESL parents reported more learning goals for themselves and their children and EFL parents reported more social goals. ESL children also made significantly greater gains in Kindergarten readiness. The design research allowed us to describe the pathways through which children’s school success is mediated by home-school partnerships and active outreach to include parents in their child’s earliest school experiences.

GOVERNANCE, SCHOOL COUNCILS, AND SCHOOL-BASED REFORM

Participation in governance and decision-making by parents and communities takes different forms. In many jurisdictions parents and community members vote for school board officials; in others parents may vote with their feet where school choice is offered. They may be appointed to parent or community advisory boards at the state/provincial or federal level. In an analysis of parents as partners in schooling, the OECD (1997) reported that parents’ legal rights to have policy input vary enor-

DOLLARS AND CENTS

If every parent of a child between the ages of 1 and 9 read to the child five days a week for one hour, that would be 8.7 billion annual hours supporting reading. To pay teachers to do the same job one-on-one would cost as much as it costs to run the entire public education system in the U.S.—Partnership for Family Involvement in Education



mously across nine member countries. In Spain, France and Germany, parents are represented on policy-making bodies at all levels: the national, state/provincial, local, and school levels. At the other extreme, in Japan there is no representation at any of the four levels. It would be hard to argue that achievement suffered in Japanese schools as a result of limits on parents' roles in governance. Governance roles may serve democratic and communitarian aims in education but may not link directly to student outcomes.

Nevertheless, one trend in the rising global tide of parent and community involvement in the '90s was school reform based on site-based management models with participation of parents and communities through local school councils. Despite their pervasiveness, the effectiveness and impact of parent councils have been called into question in a number of empirical reports from London to Chicago. In an Ontario school board, Parker and Leithwood (2000) found that teachers' estimates of the impact of advisory school councils were in the low-positive to low-negative range, despite this board's support for the councils and inservice supports for members. While the overall picture shows marginal effects, councils were reported to be more effective in some schools. A constellation of school level factors appeared to support the council's work in these schools; these were: capacity building among staff, building a sense of community at the school, and a focus on student learning and leadership.

In another Canadian study, we surveyed teachers, parents and parent representatives on school councils across several Ontario school boards (Corter, Harris & Pelletier, 1998). The survey focused on the desirability of various forms of parental involvement and experiences with school councils. Governance roles for parents were rated as moderately important by teachers and parents in general; parents ranked support for home learning and home-school communication as more important forms of involvement. Parent representatives on school councils placed more emphasis than other parents did on political roles for parents on volunteering and on fundraising; their views were closer to those of teachers than parents. On the other hand, parents and parent representatives were united in seeing parent participation in curriculum and behaviour codes as much more important than

teachers did. Thus there was evidence of parent representatives being selected or socialized to school points of view—but not completely—since their desire for input on programming and behaviour persists despite contrary teacher views. Although the survey revealed that parent representatives' views were modestly discrepant from those of parents at large, there were other more serious problems of representation. Most parents did not know their parent representatives and most were not personally interested in serving on school councils. Parent council members did not represent the cultural diversity of parents at large in the sample schools. None of the sampled parent representatives were visible minorities or had minority first languages, even though approximately one-third of the sample of parents at large were visible minority and/or language minority members.

The findings from Ontario thus indicate that school councils are not achieving either reform and learning aims or democratic aims. Leithwood and colleagues (Leithwood, Allison, et al., 2003) suggest that the effort to involve parents in school improvement planning needs to go well beyond single solutions such as school councils.

NATIONAL SCHOOL REFORM—THE U.K. EXAMPLE

In the U.K. there has been national attention to parents as contributors to children's academic success since research in the early '80s linking parents' reading and children's learning, along with recommendations for engaging parents in nursery education. Until recently this national interest had not moved beyond patchwork impact on practice. Now a grander role is seen in the recent national educational reforms that include universal and concrete parent involvement activities as a central feature of England's National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies. These measures include required home-school agreements on how parents and schools will raise standards in partnership; required annual school reports to inform parents' decision-making; encouraged participation as parent governors or voicing views in parent organizations; and information/media including Web sites and a parent-school magazine. The overall reform strategy has substantially improved national test scores with a combination of pressures and supports, but it is not possible to tear apart how much parent involvement efforts have contributed.



*... parents ranked support
for home learning and home-school
communication as more important
forms of involvement.*

The parents' perspective on parents' roles in U.K. reforms is provided in a large-scale survey commissioned by the Department of Education and Skills (Williams, Williams, & Ullman, 2001). One example of the findings on reform measures concerned home-school agreements, which were designed to formalize home-school partnerships. Even though all parents should have signed such an agreement, 35% of parents said they had never heard of them. Among those who knew about them, views varied on their meaning: "An agreement between the parents and the school"; "It's a paper exercise and serves no purpose"; "Your part of the bargain is to check for head lice and homework" (p. 35). The external evaluation of the U.K. reforms carried out by an OISE/UT research team gives a complementary, mixed picture of how parent involvement is going from the standpoint of educators (Earl et al., 2003) through surveys and case study interviews. When asked about parent support for the literacy and numeracy strategies, about half the teachers and three-quarters of the headteachers thought that parents were supportive. On the other hand, they also reported

WAYS TO INCREASE PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

- Provide a welcoming environment at schools
- Move into community to find parents where they are
- Cooperate with other agencies to increase points of contact
- Increase number of professionals able to work in languages/cultures prominent in schools



doubts that parents were helping more with literacy and mathematics as a result of the strategies. In an interview a first-year teacher said: "Parents come to assemblies and I think they're quite surprised at the sorts of things that their children are learning and the quality of work they're doing and the high expectations. They come to parents' evenings and things, so they've learned more about what their children are doing, but I don't see parents being very involved beyond that" (p. 106). On the whole, then, England's ambitious efforts to develop a coherent national approach to parent involvement have received mixed reviews from parents and educators.

CONCLUSION

Parent and community involvement deserves a critical look, not more endorsements. We suggest that it is time to refocus parent and community involvement on the aims of education, with backward mapping on to outcomes, processes and programs. This kind of analysis could show whether practice and policy in the

area are achieving the desired educational and societal aims. This refocusing would mean more research examining the processes that link aims, practice and outcomes and more attention to specific outcomes that go beyond client and practitioner satisfaction. The refocusing would also renew attention to the need for schools and teachers to conduct local examinations of the effectiveness of their practices in the area. Parent and community involvement in education is here to stay, but its role in boosting achievement should not be over-simplified nor over-sold.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the graduate students and colleagues who have helped us think about parent and community involvement in schools, and to the parents, children, teachers, and principals who have participated in our research. Special thanks go to our research partners in the Peel District School Board and Toronto District School Board. We would also like to thank the sponsors of our research and development projects described in this article: Atkinson Charitable Foundation, City of Toronto, Deutsche Bank, Ontario Ministry of Education, and Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada (grant file 410-2002-1625, awarded to JP). Preparation of this article was supported by the Dr. R.G.N. Laidlaw Centre at the Institute of Child Study; thanks especially to Christine Davidson. Finally, we would like to thank Michael Fullan for the pun which inspired the title of this article. **O**

REFERENCES

- Corter, C., Bertrand, J., Griffin, T., Endler, M., Pelletier, J. & McKay, D. (2002). Toronto First Duty Starting Gate Report: Implementing integrated foundations for early childhood. Toronto, ON. <http://www.city.toronto.on.ca/firstduty/reports.htm>
- Corter, C., Harris, P., & Pelletier, J. (1998). *Parent participation in elementary schools: The role of school councils in development and diversity*. Toronto: Report to the Ontario Ministry of Education and Training on Research Support by Transfer Grant Funding to OISE/UT.
- Davies, D. (2002). The 10th school revisited: Are school/family/community partnerships on the reform agenda now? *Phi Delta Kappan*, 83(5), 388-392.
- Earl, L., Watson, N., Levin, B., Leithwood, K., Fullan, M., & Torrance, N. (2003). *Watching and learning 3: Final report of the external evaluation of England's national literacy and numeracy strategies*. Toronto: OISE/UT.
- Epstein, J. L., & Sanders, M. G. (2002). Family, school, and community partnerships. In M. H. Bornstein (Ed.), *Handbook of Parenting*, 2nd edition (Vol. 5: Practical Issues in Parenting). Mahway, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Leithwood, K., Allison, P., Drake, S., Laveault, D., McElheron, Hopkins, C., et al. (2003). Enlisting parents in the school improvement wars. Final Report of the Parent Participation in School Improvement Planning Project. Toronto: OISE/UT.

Livingstone, D., Hart, D., & Davie, L.E. (2000). *Public attitudes towards education in Ontario. The 13th OISE/UT Survey*. Toronto: OISE/UT.

OECD. (1997). *Parents as partners in schooling*. Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Centre for Educational Research and Innovation.

Parker, K., & Leithwood, K. (2000). School councils' influence on school and classroom practice. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 75(4), 37-65.

Pelletier, J. (2002). Parents come to kindergarten: A unique junior kindergarten program for four year olds and their families. FINE Harvard Family Research Project. www.gse.harvard.edu/~hfrp/projects/fine/resources/digest/parents.html.

Pelletier, J., & Brent, J. (2002). Parent participation in children's school readiness: The effects of parental self-efficacy, cultural diversity and teacher strategies. *International Journal of Childhood Education*, 45-60.

Pelletier, J., & Corter, C. (2004). Design, implementation and outcome of a school readiness program for diverse families. Submitted for review.

Williams, B., Williams, J., & Ullman, A. (2001). Parental involvement in education. Research report number 332. London: British Market Research Bureau International.



JANETTE PELLETIER teaches in the M.A. program in Child Study and Education, one of OISE/UT's two-year graduate teacher education programs. She began her career in education by teaching in Kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms. Her current research looks at early childhood development and education. Specific projects include School Readiness for Diverse Families, Family Literacy, Reading Comprehension in the Institute of Child Study Laboratory School, and Toronto First Duty, a pilot early childhood project that brings together Kindergarten, childcare and parenting services on school sites.



CARL CORTER is Director of the Institute of Child Study at OISE/UT where he teaches pre-service. As Director, he led the establishment of the M.A. in Child Study and Education as the first program of its kind in Canada and one of the few in the world that combines training of new teachers, early childhood education, and graduate research training in child development. He has also led collaborations in teacher education and early childhood education between OISE/UT and the Hong Kong Institute of Education and the Aga Khan University in Pakistan. He is currently leading the evaluation of the Toronto First Duty early childhood program on behalf of the City of Toronto and the Atkinson Charitable Foundation.