

Educational Policies on Family–School Relations: A Dimensional Analysis Across Five Nations

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Worldwide interest in improving family-school interactions sets the stage for examining how national reform policies have influenced the promotion of family and school partnerships. I examined the history of changing policies concerning home-school relations in five countries: The United States, Australia, Canada, Finland and Sweden. Common themes emerged that reflect two co-existing educational ideologies across the nations—collaboration and consumerism. The contradictory nature of these ideas and the ensuing confusion can weaken the implementation of family-school collaborations. Researchers in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden have already raised concerns about the weak effects of partnership policies on parent-school relations for families of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. In addition to promoting family-school collaborations, policy makers should consider developing resources and strategies for facilitating partnerships.

Keywords: Comparative study in education; Diverse ethnic and linguistic families, Family-school relations, K-12 education, National educational policies.

What should the roles and responsibilities of families in children’s educational trajectories be? And how can schools better support parents so that their children receive the help that they need? The debate over these questions has continued for more than three decades and has grown increasingly intense (Mapp, 2012). As enrollment of students from diverse backgrounds has dramatically increased around the world (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA, 2016), numerous studies have shown the potential importance of home-school collaboration for increasing the quality of schools for all students. Over 40 years of research studies confirm the value of collaboration between families and schools in terms of students’ academic wellbeing: increased student motivation (e.g., Cheung & Pomerantz, 2011); better school attendance (e.g., Stone, 2006); improved academic achievement (e.g., Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014); and sense of belonging in the school environment (Kuperminc, Darnell & Alvarez-Jimenez, 2008). As Epstein (2009) noted, there “is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for family and

community involvement” (p. 1); however, the shape and nature of family-school interactions present an image of an “unresolved issue” (Dusi, 2012, p.13) and signal the need for further exploration.

Worldwide interest in improving family-school interactions sets the stage for examining how national reform policies have influenced the promotion of family and school partnerships. While assumptions and practices around parenting, teaching, and schooling might vary based on social and cultural contexts, the role of educational policies in influencing those assumptions and practices cannot be ignored. This is especially important because “what teachers and parents interpret they ‘and others, should be doing’ on behalf of families in school is because of the ways laws and policies are written” (Kroeger & Bray, 2014, p. 1). For instance, school approaches to family-school relations might differ according to how the central goal of education is framed—whether education is concerned with global economic competitiveness or social justice and equity for all students or whether education is seen as the private interest of the family or the shared responsibility of the nation (Ravn, 2003; Castelli, Pepe, & Addimando, 2010).

Given the importance of school policies, which provide the rationale for improved home-school

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relations in schools, it is disappointing that the worldwide literature that has examined family-school policies is rather limited (Cutler, 2000; Rogers, 2006; Kainz & Aiken, 2007; Brien & Stelmach, 2009; Mapp, 2012; Kristoffersson, Gu & Zhang, 2013; Kroeger & Bray, 2014; Bennett, 2015; Saltmarsh, 2015; Bjork & Ferrigno, 2016; Lavery, 2016). This paucity of research is highly problematic because public schools around the world are not the same places that they were two decades ago. While the mass movement of people across the globe has paved the way for remarkable demographic changes, classrooms in nations around the world are now filled with a wide range of students from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. These demographic shifts worldwide entail a reevaluation of educational policies around family-school-community interactions to learn how these policies have responded to the changing dynamics of k-12 classrooms and how they have accommodated the needs of diverse students and families. With the above concerns in mind, I examine the history of changes in policy and legislation concerning home-school relations and review studies evaluating how these policies have addressed collaboration with diverse ethnic and linguistic families in five different countries, including the United States, Canada, Australia, and two European states (Sweden and Finland). To this purpose, this study is guided by the following questions:

1. How do education policies in the five countries frame parents' role in their children's education?
2. Are there any common themes that emerge across these countries in terms of policy discourse on family-school interactions? If so what are they?
3. What can we learn from these countries, when considering underlying assumptions and the efficacy of family-school policies, to guide future research and policy development?

In the following sections, I begin with a brief historical overview of policies themselves and their impact on diverse ethnic and linguistic families in the United States, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and Finland. Next, I ground my discussion on the common themes that emerged from the cross-national analysis. Finally, I conclude with a brief discussion of implications for future research and policy initiatives to encourage more inclusive environments for family and school collaboration for ethnically and linguistically diverse communities.

Methodology

I confined the scope of this paper in three respects. First, the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden were considered as a focus of analysis due to their status as countries with large immigrant populations. Australia, Canada and the United States are often characterized as classic countries of immigration, as historically each has accommodated immigrant populations for permanent settlement in large numbers (Pew Research Center, 2016). In the case of Europe, Sweden stands out as a country receiving a large number of immigrants from non-European nations, making up 11.1% of the population, compared to many other European countries whose immigrant populations are of mostly European origin (EUROSTAT, 2016).

Finland has also experienced a significant increase in foreign-born residents due to mass immigration around the world. According to statistics, its share of foreign-born residents has grown from 5% to 6% in recent years, and it is expected that immigration will further increase in the upcoming years (Connor, 2016). Even though Finland is not a long-standing destination for immigrants, it is a focus of analysis for another reason. Finland is regarded as a "global point of interest" with its high quality of education and the high achievement of its students in international student assessments (Darling-Hammond, Wei & Andree, 2010; Sahlberg, 2014). In this respect, it is worthwhile to examine how Finnish government policies frame family-school interactions and how those policies address equity in Finland's changing society to learn some lessons, if possible, that could prove useful when implementing future policies.

Second, to better understand the nature of policy discourse across the countries being investigated, I examined policy documents such as homework policies and national core curricula, official websites for departments of education, newspapers, op-eds, journal articles, and book chapters. Conceptual papers, literature reviews, and empirical research studies, including doctoral dissertations, were also included for the analysis. This set of studies varied among several dimensions. For example, some studies examined national educational policies related to home-school interactions as the central purpose of the study, whereas others included it as a relatively minor portion of a broader investigation.

Third, I restricted this study to policy approaches implemented during or after the late

1960s when school-family interactions emerged as a topic of interest and became an important consideration in the formulation of national policies in most of the countries included in this investigation (Byrne & Smith, 2010).

Family-School Policies in the United States

A growing international interest in family-school collaboration led to the construction of roles and responsibilities for parents in their children's schooling in the United States. This emphasis might be traced back to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 and the Coleman Report in 1966 in the country (Cutler, 2000).

In 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson authorized the ESEA of 1965, which was part of the "War on Poverty" agenda. The ESEA was empowered to allocate federal funding to low income schools with low achieving students to close the achievement gap between children from working-class/poor families and those from middle-class families (Cutler, 2000; Jaynes, 2011). To accomplish this task, federally funded programs such as Title 1 and Head Start were established under the provision of ESEA to remediate the discrepancy between poor/working-class homes and schools (Rodriguez-Brown, 2009). Even though ESEA (1965) stated nothing about the role of parents, these antipoverty programs framed parents as "learners" and then as "first teachers," while aiming to enhance parents' ability to foster their children's cognitive development. For instance, these programs have introduced parents to school literacy practices and have encouraged them to read to their children and to listen to their children read (e.g., The National Center for Families Learning [NCFL], 2017). However, many scholars critiqued Head Start and many other family literacy programs because they tend to regard culturally diverse and low-income parents as insufficient when it comes to ensuring the academic and social well-being of their children (Auerbach, 1995; Kainz & Aiken, 2007; Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander & Hernandez, 2013). Although some programs are helpful since they build on families' strengths and resources (e.g., Jasis & Ordoñez-Jasis, 2012), many have viewed these households as "deprived" and in need of intervention; as a result, the emphasis has often been on teaching parenting strategies that supposedly lead to the academic success of the children.

The Coleman Report (Coleman et al., 1966), otherwise known as the Equality of Educational Opportunity, set the stage for the push for further parent-school interactions when it announced that family factors are more effective than school factors in terms of student outcomes. To many educators (e.g., Cutler, 2000; Jaynes, 2008; Jaynes, 2011), this was a critical point in the development of educational theory because parents were considered more responsible for the academic achievement of their children, thus providing a rationale for prioritizing and formalizing parental responsibilities in later legislation, such as Goals 2000: Educate America Act, enacted in 1994. For example, the first goal promoted the notion that "Every parent in America will be a child's first teacher and will devote time each day to helping his or her preschool child learn; parents will have access to the training and support they need to accomplish this" (United States of America House of Representatives, 1994).

The reauthorization of ESEA, otherwise known as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002), referred to parents in several parts of the law, specifically in section 1118. Yet, for the first time, ESEA framed parents' role as partners and key actors of educational reform (Mapp, 2012). Building upon Epstein's (1995, 2002) six types of involvement framework — parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community — it made the following declaration:

- Parents play an integral role in assisting their children's learning;
- Parents are encouraged to be actively involved in their children's education at school;
- Parents are full partners in their children's education and are included, as appropriate, in decision-making and on advisory committees to assist in the education of their child (p. 538).

Epstein's (1995, 2002) typology is also strongly visible in the latest homework guidelines of the U.S. Department of Education (2005). Even if there is no national homework policy in the United States and such policy is at the discretion of school districts, individual schools, or teachers, this official document proposes detailed practices that parents should adopt to support their children's homework (U.S. Department of Education, 2005). These guidelines, which appear in the form of a parent checklist, are related to how to monitor assignments, how to provide guidance and show children about the importance of education, and

how to communicate with teachers about children’s homework.

Along with the provisions of NCLB (2002), all school districts and schools receiving Title 1 Funding must have a parent involvement plan co-created by school staff, parents, and the local community “to implement effective parent involvement activities to improve student academic achievement and school performance” (p. 1501). With an outstanding shift toward high stakes standardized testing and accountability, the NCLB act also required schools to inform parents about school progress based on national standardized testing and provided parents with the legal right to choose their children’s school accordingly. The latest reauthorization of ESEA (Every Student Succeeds Act [ESSA], 2015), acted as a successor to the NCLB act with no significant changes other than a requirement that teachers receive training on how to work with parents as equal partners and an emphasis on the importance of embracing other family members in the home-school communication. According to these policies, test accountability, school choice, and parent involvement are powerful forces that might stimulate broader educational enhancement for low-income and ethnically and linguistically diverse students. Accordingly, children’s educational success or failure is the responsibility not only of schools but also of parents, who are given a wide range of opportunities to be able to attend to this duty.

While policy narratives define parents empowered through partnership, school choice, and accountability, the reported findings show that in reality they provided diverse ethnic and linguistic parents with limited agency, insufficient information, and ambiguous roles for several reasons (Rogers, 2006; Mapp, 2012; Lavery, 2016; Evans, 2018). For example, Mapp (2012) reviewed the evolution of policy narratives on parent involvement in the United States and examined the efficacy of these policies. Through interview data and analysis of policy documents, she concluded that state, district, and school staff are provided little or no training to partner with families. Yet, there is a limited evaluation of state and school districts in terms of their implementation of parent-school activities. In a similar vein, Lavery (2016) investigated the extent of parents’ understanding of their rights and responsibilities outlined in the NCLB act. By utilizing a survey of 484 parents across 13 diverse public elementary schools in the northern United

States, Lavery found that few parents clearly understand how key provisions of the act influence their children’s school experience and their rights as parents, especially parents whose children attend schools identified for improvement.

Family-School Policies in Australia

Tracking the history of policy discourses on family-school interactions in an Australian context with its highly diverse ethnic population, researchers note that the 1970s seem to be a critical era in understanding how these interactions began to take shape. For example, Lea, Thompson, McRae-Williams, and Wegner (2011) discussed the acceleration of research studies in this time period, emphasizing the importance of the home environment in children’s school achievement. This paved the way for the advent of remedial programs designed to improve the “inferior” qualities of indigenous parents to meet the requirements of schools—similar to the many parent literacy programs run in the United States during 1960s and afterwards.

The most salient push for parent-school partnership in Australia emerged around the 1990s (Macfarlene, 2008). A policy document entitled “Focus on Schools” (FOS) in the state of Queensland required schools to maintain “the right of parents to question the aims of schooling and the influences to which their children will be exposed” (Department of Education 1990, p. 41). This statement advocated for more legal space for parents to participate in school management; however, what Macfarlene (2008) found out about this document is quite contradictory. The same document further declared that schools had to be flexible to respond to local needs, although they were also responsible for the “dominant view of society” (p. 41). Parents were invited to participate in school decisions but only in certain ways considering that the dominant view of society had priority over local social dynamics. In Macfarlene’s (2008) terms, it seemed to be proper for parents to play an active role in school activities and the decision-making process, but they were also to “remain inexpert and unleaderly” (Macfarlane, 2008, p. 705).

Over the past three decades, education in Australia has been decentralized to a greater extent, giving states and school boards greater control over educational decision-making and promoting school choice to expand parents’ options for their children’s schooling and to make parents

and teachers accountable for their children's educational outcomes. For example, school principals have more authority over staffing and budgetary decisions. (Center on International Education Benchmarking, n.d.). Additionally, the ministry of education in each state is responsible for framing student enrollment policies and for specifying the qualifications of teachers. Although Australia decentralized some aspects of its education system, it also recentralized other aspects of its educational system through the national curriculum and standardized national student assessments (Morgan, 2016). Even private schools, which accommodate an important portion of the country's students, are required to participate in national assessments and meet minimum national educational standards (Rowe, 2017). Teaching to national curriculum and emphasizing assessments seem to have become an important goal for the Australian states in the construction of their educational policies in an effort to achieve greater standardization at the national level.

During the last decade, Australian primary and secondary schools have been criticized for the decline in student academic performance documented in the Programme for International Student Assessments (PISA) (Thomson, 2013). A number of key policy reforms and initiatives were enacted by the Australian government to stop the decline and improve the ranking of Australian schools so that Australia might place among the top five countries in the PISA 2025 scores (Australian Education Act, 2013). Promoting greater parent-school collaboration was one of those initiatives (Povey et al., 2016). For example, the Australian Government Department of Education and Training (2017) recently recommissioned the Family-Schools Partnership Framework (FSPF) as a response to the above concerns. Inspired by Epstein's (2002) six types of involvement framework, the document declared six principles for a powerful family-school partnership, some of which are as follows:

- Families are the first and continuing educators of their children;
- Community engagement expands responsibility and resources;
- Partnerships grow from mutual trust, respect and responsibility;
- Partnerships need committed, collaborative and creative leadership.

This document is significant for two reasons. First, the term *family* was used repeatedly instead

of *parent*. This indicates an extended view of a family's position in children's education. Parents are also framed in the language of partnership through "mutual responsibility," "collaborative leadership," and "collective decision-making." Inviting parents to greater visibility and participation in children's learning, school programs, and school governance, the FSPF (2017) constructs parents as striving for the ideals of child development and as working to achieve established academic goals for their children. As Saltmarsh (2015) has argued FSPF (2008), this idealized form of commitment depicts parenting as a "positive and ambitious enterprise" (p. 45) that is always aligned to the vision and goals of Australian schools.

Extended roles for parents are visible in homework policy documents as well. For example, in the homework policy document framed by the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities (NSW DEC) in 2012, each school develops its own homework policy that should be

- relevant to the needs of students;
- developed in consultation with key school community stakeholders including teachers, parents/caregivers and students;
- communicated to staff, students, parents/caregivers, particularly at the time of student enrollment (NSW DEC, p. 3).

The document continues to describe the responsibilities of teachers regarding homework, which include discussing with students and parents any developing issues regarding students' homework and supporting families experiencing difficulties with homework with resources and materials. Given the aforementioned policy document that considers parents active participants in the development and implementation of students' homework, some studies have revealed problematic relations between Australian schools and parents in relation to homework. For example, Hallam's (2009) study pointed to inadequate communication between home and school, and parents' dissatisfaction with how schools assign homework, including limited information and guidance as well as a lack of consultation about the amount given. In a similar vein, Sainsbury and Renzaho (2011) documented the concerns of Arabic speaking immigrant parents who struggle to meet the expectations of helping with their children's homework due to time pressure related to their employment demands and limited English language proficiency. Recently there has been an increase of homework tutoring

centers in Australia as a response to these concerns. Operating as either school or community-based, the homework tutoring centers function as afterschool programs, helping mostly low-income and ethnic and linguistic minority students with their homework. These tutoring centers were found to be useful in meeting the needs for student diversity, targeting those with varying family resources and promoting students' school engagement. Such facilities have been recommended for the communities in the most need (Bond, 2009).

Family-School Policies in Canada

Findings from nationwide studies and educational policies in Canadian education add an important dimension to the international literature on the importance of recognizing existing education systems in understanding the legal context of family-school relations. Thus, at the outset of the discussion, it is important to mention briefly how schools are organized and regulated in the Canadian context before discussing the legal discourse on family-school relations.

Based on the Constitution Act (1867), there is no national department of education in Canada, and the national government has no control over the public education system in each province. Rather, each of the 10 provinces and three territories is responsible for governing its own education system (Canada Council of Ministers of Education, n.d.). While great variations exist across the provinces and territories, similarities exist in terms of how they organize and deliver their education systems, such as the presence of provincial standardized assessments and school accountability (Copp, 2016) and school choice (Bosetti & Gereluk, 2017).

In the province of Quebec, there have been a proliferation of policy documents and publications on parent-school relations. For example, with the adoption of Act 180 in 1997, parents were envisioned as an integral part of the educational system (National Assembly of Quebec, 1997). According to Schaedel, Deslandes, and Eshet (2013), this act provided parents with greater roles through representation in school governing boards. Along with Public Instruction Act 124 in 2003, the Ministry of Education of Quebec reiterated the importance of integrating parents and communities into the schools by giving parents more active positions in the school management process (National Assembly of Quebec, 2003).

Similar to the Ministry of Education of Quebec, the Ontario Ministry of Education also prioritized parent-school relations with the purpose of raising student performance. The latest Ontario Parent Engagement Policy identified four strategies for action to accomplish this goal (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010):

- Foster and sustain a positive, welcoming school climate in which all parent perspectives are encouraged, valued and heard (p. 17);
- Identify and remove barriers to parent engagement that may prevent some parents from fully participating in their children's learning and to reflect the diversity of our students and communities (p. 19);
- Provide parents with knowledge, skills and tools they need to support student learning at home and at school (p. 20);
- Review and expand communication and outreach strategies such as local workshops, presentations, tools and resources to share information and strategies related to supporting learning at home and parent engagement in schools (p. 22).

As in the United States and Australia, the report seems to be inspired by Epstein's six types of involvement framework, as it references Epstein and her colleagues (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders & Simon, 1997) several times. The document also includes a list of responsibilities for schools, school boards, school councils, and the Ministry to achieve the above strategies. However, there is no mention of teachers' responsibilities in the document other than a statement indicating the responsibility of the Ministry in "providing training opportunities and developing resources and tools to foster parent engagement and leadership among parents and committee members, students, administrators, school staff and volunteers" (p. 32). Taking this document into consideration, Wong (2015) examined teachers' experiences in working with immigrant parents of high schoolers in the province of Ontario. Even though the Ontario Ministry of Education required schools to encourage teachers to collaborate with parents, the researchers found that teachers still felt the need to have training opportunities on communication skills that would help them partner with immigrant parents. Wong also investigated whether or not there existed a difference between actual and desired parent engagement activities that parents determined. Surveying 185 immigrant parents and conducting 12 follow-up interviews, she found a disconnect between the aspirations of

parents and the Ministry. For instance, parents ranked decision making/volunteering activities as low in importance, partly because of the lack of information or inconvenient timing of those activities, whereas the Ministry put more emphasis on parents' engagement in decision making/volunteering activities.

I would like to call attention to another policy document that includes the 12 most recent competencies that preservice teachers must cultivate before starting the profession under the Quebec Ministry of Education (MEQ, 2001). According to competency 9, teachers should be capable of involving parents through a wide range of practices that include keeping parents informed about their child's academic progress, about homework expectations, about school programs, and about school rules as well as providing guidance on how to support their child's schooling. In addition, there are expectations for teachers to "involve parents who have specific resources or fields of interest, by acknowledging and validating their contribution to a given project and to the school's pursuit of its objectives" (p.106) and to "build a trusting relationship with parents (p.107). Despite the strong desire for family-school collaboration in the above policy and official documents, some researchers have demonstrated that family-school relations have not changed much over the past fifteen years (Dumoulin, Thériault, Duval, & Tremblay, 2013; Deslandes, Barma, & Morin, 2015). Deslandes and colleagues' (2015) research in Quebec with practicing teachers revealed that communication with parents is unidirectional and only attempted by certain teachers. Their study illuminated the circumstances of teachers who experience heavy workloads, pressures related to efficient student performance, and a lack of principal support and professional training for collaborative teacher-parent relationships, all of which hinder the development of effective partnerships.

The expansion of school councils across Canada as a way to promote school-parent partnerships is another subject of debate for Canadian researchers. For example, Brien and Stelmach (2009) investigated the purpose of the school councils in the provincial policies of Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario and New Brunswick, and they found two emerging themes across all four provinces: "performance and accountability" (p. 7). The aim of the school councils as framed by provincial policies is to prepare parents "to play an active role in directly affecting student learning

outcomes and reciprocally, that educators are prepared to support parents in such a role" (p. 7). Further examining research focusing on parent's experiences in the school councils of the four Canadian provinces, they found discrepancies between parents' beliefs about the role of the school council and legal descriptions. For example, parents viewed school councils as places that they should visit if they had an issue or concern about their children. They regarded their role as different from that of teachers, seeing themselves as supporters who could help when needed in indirect ways.

Family-School Policies in Select European Countries—Sweden and Finland

Sweden

Global competition and the expansion of cooperation with European countries prompted an educational reform agenda that has had great impact on the Swedish education system (Holmgren, Johansson, Nihlfors & Skott, 2012). Over the past 30 years, Sweden, like many other European countries, altered its education system, promoting competition both in the national and international arenas. According to educational scholars (Meyer, 2014; Bjork & Ferrigno, 2016), since the 1970s, transnational organizations such as the European Union (EU) and international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have promoted competition among European countries as a response to increasing globalization.

As a result, three significant political goals were established in Sweden to make schools more efficient and at the same time responsive to the nation's economic growth: the promotion of independent schools along with school choice, the granting of greater municipal responsibilities over education reform, and giving parents a greater voice in their children's education (Government Bill, 1993; Government policy, 1999). In the last decade, however, the persistent deterioration of student performance in PISA assessments, which peaked in 2012 assessments (OECD, 2013), has stimulated interest in increased centralization through national standardized assessments and stricter national curricula (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2013; Löfgren & Löfgren, 2017).

In the context of national development attempts and competitiveness, the value of collaboration between schools and parents has

become an ever more critical issue in Sweden (Dalstedt, 2018). Sweden's recent Education Act, adopted in 2010, calls for "cooperation with parents, promoting children's and pupil's comprehensive personal development towards active, creative, competent, and responsible individuals and citizens" (Swedish Parliament, 2010, Ch.1, section. 4). These needs are also expressed in national curriculum documents (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2011). For example, schools are required to have "individual development dialogue" meetings where students, parents and teachers come together to discuss students' academic performance; furthermore, they must make plans that clearly demonstrate how they will fulfill students' individual needs so that the students may achieve academic success. In addition, school leaders and teachers are expected to "clarify and discuss the core values of Swedish society and its consequences for individual behavior together with pupils" (p. 12) and "collaborate with the home in the education of the pupils and in doing so is to clarify the school's norms and rules as a basis for this work and for the collaboration" (p. 13). In this respect, parents are active partners and valuable resources in the education of their children, but their responsibilities should be in accordance with national core values and the predetermined conventions of the school system.

School boards in Sweden have been considered another pathway for parent-school participation. The promotion of parental participation in school governance has been a central tenet of the Swedish education system since 1996 (Holmgren et al., 2012). Local school boards, district school boards, and independent school boards, each based on national regulations, have provided parents varying opportunities to participate in the education decision-making process. However, an examination of parent participation in local school boards reveals problematic findings. Kristoffersson (2008) found that parents displayed little interest in the boards because of the amount of time they had to spend with the boards and the small impact they had on the decisions made. Thus, local school boards have made little progress in improving parent participation (Kristoffersson et al., 2013). With the rapid growth of immigrant students in the country over the last decade (EUROSTAT, 2016), a number of research studies of Swedish schools have also documented that stereotypical representations of immigrant parents are quite normalized among many school leaders and

teachers in Sweden (Gruber, 2007; Mulinari, 2007; Dahlstedt, 2018). For example, Dahlstedt (2018) found that immigrant parents were not viewed as proficient to help their children in their school work due to their perceived limitations regarding knowledge of the Swedish language, culture, and school system and their lack of presence in school. Dahlstedt claimed that deficit perspectives about immigrant parents are partly the consequence of partnership policies that take place on the school's terms rather than those of the parents.

Finland

The Finnish education system is unique in terms of the history and ideology motivating its schools and local community for several reasons. Like the education systems in other nations, the Finnish education system during the 1970s and 1980s followed global trends regarding competition and centralized systems of education. However, during the 1990s, it implemented a series of reforms, leading to the devolving of a great deal of authority to local municipalities, schools, and teachers (Sahlberg, 2014). Since the late 1990s, the school system of Finland has been regarded as one of the highest performing school systems in the world, as measured by PISA assessments (OECD, 2016). According to Sahlberg (2012), Finland never actually aimed for this top ranking in the world as it had embraced the ideology of collaboration above all (even if it had also displayed an interest in competition). Finland has rejected all the policy reforms currently popular in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden—for example, high-stakes testing and accountability. Giving schools and teachers the responsibility of evaluating student outcomes and not evaluating teachers based on students' test scores shows that Finland has little interest in the ideology of competition.

The notion that parents have responsibility in the education of their children has been a shared cultural value in the Finnish education system for years according to Bjork and Ferrigno (2016). The Finnish Basic and Secondary Education Act of 1998 required public and private schools to collaborate with parents (Basic Education Act, 1998; Sliwka & Istance, 2006). This requirement was reiterated in a wide range of national policy documents such as the Finnish National Board of Education (FNBE) reports of 2004 and 2016. Based on the recent FNBE report (2016), schools are responsible for developing policies to guide parent-school collaboration based on local needs. Furthermore,

parents must be offered opportunities to participate in the reform of schools' educational activities. To this end, parents must be informed of school curricula and their child's rights and responsibilities.

According to Bjork and Ferrigno (2016), one of the most important platforms for parent-school collaboration has been the Finnish Parents' Association, established in 1907. The researchers attributed the association's long existence to Finland's long-term promise to observe parents' and students' rights and respond to concerns with regard to quality of education. In Finland, local parents' associations have an active role in the assessment of school programs, the maintenance of school buildings and decision-making with regard to local curricula. The national core curriculum is flexible and less specific allowing local educational authorities and individual schools to frame their own curricula to be responsive to local needs (FNBE, 2016). Given this flexibility, parents have much say in the development of local curricula, even if it is not clear how much parents influence the decision-making process. Examining national survey results, Risku, Bjork, and Browne-Ferrigno (2012) found that the majority of primary schools have active parents' associations and that parents who are members of the parents' association participate in a wide range of topics regarding their children's education. However, in another study Bjork and Ferrigno (2016) concluded that the amount of parental participation in schools fades as children transition from elementary to secondary education. As Finland has increasingly become a new home for immigrant populations, the extent to which these findings represent immigrant parents' participation is unknown and further investigation is needed.

What is unique about Finland's education system is the long-term and ongoing professional development opportunities and significant amount of time that teachers can spend on nonteaching activities, leading them to build stronger bonds with the local community. Based on recent OECD data, Sahlberg (2014) concluded, that the average teaching load of high school teachers in the United States is double the load of high school teachers in Finland. For example, Darling-Hammond et al. (2010) found that teachers in Finland spend half of their time in local curriculum preparation, joint lesson planning, and collaboration with parents. These findings show that Finland exerted great efforts to provide the necessary conditions for family-school partnerships.

Discussion of Recurring Themes

In this section, I summarize the analysis of current national educational policies related to family-school relations and discuss the reported findings regarding how these policies have influenced the nature of those relations in the United States, Canada, Australia, and the two selected European countries of Sweden and Finland. Although each given country is distinct in terms of its historical, social, and cultural contexts, common themes have emerged that reflect two coexisting educational ideologies across the nations—collaboration and consumerism. One calls for collective action between school and family shaped by the diverging intentions of these nations; the other focuses on individualism governed by market principles that aim to educate citizens to contribute to the economic wellbeing of society in national and international arenas. Collaboration ideology as embraced by the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden appears to be a more of a mechanism intended to stimulate student academic achievement and public school improvement, whereas in Finland serves as an instrument to actually advance local democratic practices to develop good citizens, which I discuss in detail in the following sections.

Ideology of Consumerism

Over the past three decades, it appears that globalization has heightened awareness of the global economy in the countries being investigated, prompting them to change their educational policies in favor of long-term economic survival. Daun (2015) characterizes globalization as a "meta ideology" that comprises the values of the western ideologies of individualism and neoliberalism (p. 34). During the past decade, the OECD-sponsored PISA assessments served as a significant tool for spreading these ideologies (Meyer, 2014). PISA assessments that involved the countries presented provide a cross-national comparison of students' math, science, and reading literacies, holding national governments accountable for how they influence student performance according to PISA scores.

Even though each country made certain movements toward decentralization, giving greater authority to states and municipalities, the growing concern for global competition prompted the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden to recentralize their education systems through the adoption of national curricula and national

standardized testing and to provide parents with opportunities for school choice and decision-making. Based on this logic, *parents* are defined as “consumers” who purchase quality education on behalf of their children. In this market-oriented ideology, parents are provided national data on school progress and make decisions regarding which school best fits their children’s needs accordingly. Providing school choice also positions parents as monitors of teacher and school accountability and makes parents primarily responsible for their children’s educational outcomes. In this respect, the education of a child becomes the personal self-interest and responsibility of the parent rather than the collective interest of the local community (Ravn, 2003).

Across the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden, the considerable appeal of parents’ market-based options to transfer their children from low-performing schools has drawn attention to a point of concern. Research examined in this study reveals that school choice seems to be beneficial to only certain groups in a given society. A lack of knowledge about school policies and uncertainty about their role prevent low-income and ethnic and linguistic minority families from exercising their rights (Lavery, 2016). Complicated application forms, language barriers and a lack of transportation are among the hindrances (Andre-Bechely, 2005). Consequently, school choice puts low-income and ethnic and linguistic minority families at a further disadvantage by promoting unequal access to school resources and opportunities.

Ideology of Collaboration

While the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden have framed parents’ roles as consumers in favor of market-driven competition, they have also embraced the idea of collaboration between family, school, and community for educational reasons. In this respect, parents’ role has been framed as that of “partners” who assume shared responsibility, who trust the system, and who engage in two-way communication to improve student achievement and school productivity. To this end, a wide range of policies have been adopted, and lists of responsibilities were compiled for parents across these countries. The national policies have also required schools to train their teachers to partner with parents. However, interest of these nations in retaining control of the educational system through national curricula,

standardized assessments, and teacher accountability inevitably diminishes the role of collective action between school, home, and community in students’ educational and personal development. There is a growing consensus about the problem that the immense pressures placed on school leaders and teachers to meet state and national standards create enormous challenges to the facilitation of family-school partnerships (Deslandes et al., 2015; Nichols & Harris, 2016). The extent to which practicing teachers have been given time, space and training to partner with families and communities is unclear across these four nations (Mapp, 2012; Wong, 2015; Deslandes et al., 2015). It is a challenge that is further compounded by a lack of investment in monitoring of states, municipalities, and school districts in their levels of compliance with national family-school policies, signaling that collaboration ideology is not a high priority (Weiss & Stephen, 2009; Mapp, 2012).

The cross-national analysis also revealed that collaboration-oriented policies in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden embraced mostly school-centric practices that parents were encouraged to take up for their children. These included, but were likely not limited to, participating at school activities, participating in decision-making processes, taking representative roles in school boards/associations, and monitoring children’s homework. In a similar vein, the teachers’ responsibilities listed in the nations’ policy documents seems to reinforce the school agenda, which included informing parents about school expectations, their children’s progress, and expectations regarding their children’s homework (MEQ, 2001; NSW Homework Policy, 2012; Kristoffersson et al., 2013). What is missing across the national and local policies is the recognition that not all parents might share the same resources and goals and be interested in participating in school-centric parent-school partnerships.

The influence of Epstein’s (2002) typology on the countries’ parent-school collaboration documents, particularly in the United States, Canada and Australia, cannot be understated. These countries directly cited or built upon Epstein’s (2002) six types of involvement framework, which details practices related to parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Considering that these countries are diverse in terms of their sociocultural and

sociohistorical contexts, how these sets of practices will be helpful in recognizing the dynamic and complex nature of families is a matter of question. Yet this approach does not take into account the intersection of race, class, and immigration, which are very significant in addressing the interests, needs, and concerns of parents from diverse backgrounds. These limited forms of partnership might serve to even further alienate low income and ethnic and linguistic minority families and might result in mutual distrust between home and school (Evans, 2018). Researchers in the United States (e.g., Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Adair, 2013), Canada (e.g., Guo, 2012), Australia (e.g., Lea et al., 2011), and Sweden (e.g., Dahlstedt, 2018) have well documented how ethnic and linguistic minority families were seen to be shaped, taught, changed, acculturated or reconfigured to be considered successful in education, since these families' strategies stood outside of the traditional involvement models.

Finland—one of the top performers on international tests—has gone in the opposite direction from the above countries in their educational policies by prioritizing cooperation over competition, civic engagement over marketization, teacher autonomy over accountability, and local needs over standardization (Auren, 2017). Finland's collaboration ideology has been grounded in the democratic aspects of school-family-community partnerships to contribute to the common good rather than workforce development. From this perspective, parents have been framed as active agents of democratic society whose roles range from participating in planning the local curricula to assessment of educational programs. With its long-term ongoing professional development opportunities, flexible curricula, and extended amount of nonteaching time devoted to teachers, Finland serves as a role model in its determination to facilitate the development of family-school partnerships and offers inspiration for others hoping to build on the ideology of collaboration and joint action between families and schools.

Conclusion

This examination of family-school policies in the United States, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and

Finland suggests that the rise of the global economy provided an international arena for the process of "policy borrowing" in education (Crozier, 2014, p.280). Globalization has seemed to play a major role in the homogenization of prevailing ideologies and educational strategies to accomplish the goal of borrowing educational policies. A consumer-oriented mentality has taken hold to varying degrees across the nations' family-school policies represented here and seems to co-exist with the notion of collaboration that is shaped by the diverging motivations of the nations. However, the development of a consumerism that promotes individuality contradicts the notion of collaboration that advocates for collective action. This ideological paradox has been referred to as a key reason for the limited progress of family-school relations (Crozier, 2014).

Researchers in the United States, Canada, Australia, and Sweden have acknowledged the weak effect of partnership policies on parent-school relations for families of diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds (Kristoffersson, 2008; Hallam, 2009; Sainsbury and Renzaho, 2011; Wong, 2015; Deslandes et al., 2015; Evans, 2018) and have noted the limited implementation processes (Mapp, 2012; Lavery, 2016). However, the paucity of studies in this area suggests that further research is needed to learn the extent to which these policies have been implemented and the extent to which they have become successful in improving the nature of parent-school-community interactions in schools across the nations being investigated.

As another concern, the implementation of policy frameworks on school-home partnerships will likely fail to bring about meaningful change as long as the narrative of partnerships is framed narrowly. Families enter schools with different experiences, aspirations, needs, and resources. Rather than disregarding these differences, policy-makers should enact reforms that recognize and accept these differences to avoid further inequity in classrooms. In addition to promoting family-school partnerships through the publication of official documents, policy makers should also consider developing resources and strategies that can facilitate these partnerships. This is especially significant because, without the necessary conditions, strong policy narratives will be unlikely to achieve effective results.

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