International Journal about Parents in Education
2009, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1-14

ISSN: 1973 - 3518

Legal and Cultural Contexts of Parent-Teacher Interactions: School Councils in Canada

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Parents and teachers interact because of their shared responsibility for the welfare of the children in their care. Research indicates that teachers value parental involvement in their students' education. There is also evidence that parents place a great deal of trust in their children's teachers. This interaction, with significant influence on the learning outcomes of students, occurs within a complex set of legal frameworks and cultural contexts. These include such legal considerations as international treaties on family and children's rights, national constitutional rights, and statutory rights and responsibilities of parents, teachers, and the state. Cultural factors include issues of engagement, marginalization, and power relationships. Societal evolution has also led to changing rights, responsibilities, and expectations for parents, teachers, and students. Parent-teacher relationships have also been affected by recent government initiatives to promote parental involvement in education through the creation of school councils. This paper, based on Canadian research on parental involvement in schooling and an analysis of Canadian and international legal principles, will illustrate the interplay of these legal and cultural considerations. The intent of this paper is to encourage better understanding of the complexity within the parent-teacher relationship.

Keywords: Parental involvement, education law, school councils, power relationships, organizational culture, socio-economic factors in education

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How and/or whether parents' involvement in their children's schools impacts upon student performance is reported as negligible or absent by some (Krishnamoorthi, 1999; Leithwood & Menzies, 1998), and closely linked by others (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). The debate seems not to foil the initiation of policies and practices aiming to position parents as key stakeholders in children's educational experiences (e.g., Department for Education and Skills, 2005; Gorinski, 2005; Hong Kong Education Department, 2000; U.S. Department of Education, 2005; Young & Levin, 2002).

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Much of the effort to engage parents in schools is made within a reform agenda that espouses "democratic empowerment" (Krishnamoorthi, p. 7) of educational stakeholders and site-based management that includes parents as organizational approaches leading to school effectiveness. Improved accountability is an increasingly central reason for including parents (Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Robinson & Timperley, 2000). Along this vein, not only have educators dialed up their expectations of parents, but some parents have also become more vocal about their right to participate in educational processes.

A global response seems to be the legal entrenchment of parent involvement through bodies such as school councils (e.g., Boylan, 2005; Department for Education and Skills; Dom & Verhoeven, 2006; Gorinski; Ho, 2006; Hong Kong Education Department; No Child Left Behind

Act, 2001, s. 1118) and across Canada (Rideout, 1995).

At the same time, there is evidence that parents place a great deal of trust in their children's teachers (Stelmach, 2006) and that inequality of condition makes it impossible for some families to participate in their children's schooling in ways educators desire (Crozier, 2000; de Carvalho, 2001; Lareau, 2002; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). Teacher-parent interactions thus occur within a complex set of legal frameworks and cultural (norms, values, beliefs) factors. These include such legal considerations as international conventions on family and children's rights and statutory rights and responsibilities ascribed to parents and teachers. Further a matrix of socioeconomic conditions, ethnic backgrounds, and a time-honoured division of labour between parents and professionals contextualizes and complicates parent-teacher interactions.

The potential for tensions in the parent-teacher relationship is illustrated insightfully by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003): "There is no more complex and tender geography than the borderlands between families and schools" (p. xi). The intent of this paper is to encourage better understanding of the complexity within the parent-teacher relationship by examining the legal and cultural contexts of parent-teacher interactions and parent involvement in schools. Our examination of the legal and cultural factors associated with parent-teacher interactions will focus on the context of school councils. We suggest that it is necessary to rethink our understandings about policy, practice, and research in this area.

Legal Contexts of Parent-Teacher Interactions

Understanding the legal context of parent-teacher interactions requires consideration of the legal principles that govern public education in Canada and elsewhere. This includes the need to consider the rights and responsibilities of government, parents, and teachers in the public education system. At the outset of this discussion, it is important to understand a key feature of education law and policy in Canada. By virtue of the Constitution Act (1867): "In and for each Province the Legislature may exclusively make Laws in relation to Education" (s. 93).

As a result, the federal government has no legislative authority with respect to the public education system in each province, nor is there a federal department of education. Instead, each of the 10 provinces and 3 territories operates its own system of public education with each governed by a distinct legal and policy framework.

Consequently, any discussion of the legal context of education issues in Canada must recognize the existence of inter-provincial variations of school laws and policies. For the purpose of this paper, there will be specific emphasis on the legal and regulatory provisions in four Canadian provinces, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, and New Brunswick, representing some of the diversity of Canadian schooling.

Role of the State

One significant aspect of the legal context of public education in Canada has been the role of government. Magsino (1995) showed that evolving views of the family coupled with changes in the law have resulted in greater involvement of the state in family matters. Magsino described the common law principle of "parens patriae", under which the government is empowered to act to protect and promote the welfare of those, such as children, unable to act in their own best interests. He noted that, with modern laws imposing duties on parents to maintain, protect, and educate their children, the power of the state with respect to child rearing has become an established fact. Indeed, the Supreme Court of Canada affirmed the importance of education to society in a decision given in a compulsory attendance case that arose in Alberta in the 1980s.

Whether one views it from an economic, social, cultural or civic point of view, the education of the young is critically important in our society. From an early period, the provinces have responded to this interest by developing schemes for compulsory education. Education is today a matter of prime concern to government everywhere. Indeed, in modern society, education has far-reaching implications beyond the province, not only at the national, but also at the international level (R. v. Jones, 1986, para. 22).

To put it another way, society as a whole has an interest in, and benefits from, a successful public school system. This judgement reflected the belief that public schools serve the public interest in the broadest sense, not just the private interests of parents and students. Similarly, Glenn (2002), writing about the American context for a European audience, expressed his belief that the responsibility of the state in education is based on self-protection through its need for a population

with a common minimum of instruction for civic participation and economic progress.

More recently, according to Glenn, the state has looked to schooling as a means to reduce social class differences or to bring the marginalized into the mainstream.

Rights and Responsibilities of Parents

However, the government does not have unfettered control of children's education. Glenn (2002) described a significant decision of the U.S. Supreme Court on parental rights in education.

At issue was proposed state legislation in the 1920s to require all school-aged children to attend public rather than religious schools. Opponents of the proposed legislation campaigned under the slogan, "Whose is the child?" This question eventually reached the U.S. Supreme Court, which responded decisively: "The child is not the mere creature of the state" (*Pierce v. Society of Sisters*, 1925, p. 535).

In the words of the Supreme Court, "those who nurture him [the child] and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations" (p. 535). The Court criticized as contrary to fundamental liberty state laws that attempted to standardize its children by forcing them to accept teaching only from public school teachers. Parents enjoy legal rights and responsibilities to make decisions regarding the upbringing of their children.

Glenn (2002) pointed out that this statement has been reiterated in various international covenants and in the laws of various countries. For example, Article 5 of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990) requires governments to respect the rights, responsibilities, and duties of parents to provide guidance and direction to their children in the exercise by their children of the rights conferred by the *Convention*.

Similarly, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) states: "Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children" (Article 26(3)). While the norm in industrialized countries has been for parents to entrust their children's education to professional educators, Glenn pointed to the rise in home schooling in the United States and to Article 26(3) to affirm that parents might properly exercise this responsibility through the right of school choice. He described parental decisions on school choice as based on the expected advantages for their children and the beliefs and values that they want reinforced by their children's schools.

In Canada, compulsory attendance laws typically allow children to be exempted from attending a public school if they are receiving effective or efficient instruction elsewhere, which may include home, private, or religious schooling (Bezeau, 2007). In accordance with Glenn's (2002) preceding arguments, there has been some movement in Canada towards enhanced parental choice in education.

Notably, Alberta parents have the explicit legal right to enroll their children in any school operated by any school board, subject only to resource and facility availability: "A board shall enroll a resident student of the board or of another board in the school operated by the board that is requested by the parent of the student if, in the opinion of the board asked to enroll the student, there are sufficient resources and facilities available to accommodate the student" (*School Act*, 2000, s. 45(3)).

In addition, Alberta school boards are authorized to offer a wide range of alternative programs, including those that emphasize a particular language, culture, religion, or teaching philosophy (s. 21(1)). Moreover provincial regulations provide detailed provisions governing charter, private, and home schooling. Particularly significant to parental choice are provisions allowing for government funding to support these schooling alternatives. These expanded choice provisions can also affect the nature of parent-teacher interactions, particularly where parents are seen as educational clients or consumers. Kachur (1999) has argued that this emerging quasi-market would also affect the professionalism of teachers, who would no longer see themselves as public servants promoting the public good, but rather as selling products to the highest bidder (p. 116).

Role of Teachers

Magsino (1995) pointed out that state supremacy in education is a comparatively recent phenomenon. In the past, the dominant legal principle governing the role of teachers was known as *in loco parentis*. Standing in the place of parents, teachers traditionally exercised delegated parental authority such that the educational mandate of the schools was to fulfill the wishes and expectations of parents.

However, Magsino argued that, with the rise of state authority in education, as in other family

matters, the importance of the in loco parentis principle has waned. As schools and school systems have become larger and more complex, the role of teachers has become increasingly defined by statutory and regulatory requirements, rather than by direct reference to parental authority. The result is that teachers are increasingly viewed as agents of the state rather than in the traditional *in loco parentis* role (MacKay & Sutherland, 2006).

The interaction of parents and teachers was considered by the Supreme Court of Canada in *Chamberlain v. Surrey School District No. 36* (2002). In commenting on the requirements of British Columbia curriculum guidelines concerning parental involvement in the selection of books to support curriculum objectives, McLachlin C.J.C. observed:

> *The curriculum guidelines contemplate extensive parental involvement at the stage of selecting books for use in a particular classroom. And indeed, this seems to be the appropriate stage at which to tailor the materials chosen for use in a particular classroom to the unique needs that particular parents perceive their children to have. This is much more easily done by parents in consultation with their children's teachers than it is by a school board, which must decide whether a resource can become available to a large number of children in different situations. (para. 32*)

Glenn (2002) observed that the role of education law and policy study is to explore the tensions that exist between two competing principles: the authority of the state to ensure appropriate education for all children and the limits on that authority deriving from the prior rights of parents. He then commented that working out this balance had become complicated in recent years by what he described as "the organized and self-conscious educational profession, which increasingly does not see itself as the mere agent of either the family that provides its pupils or the government that pays its salary" (p. 10).

The growth of teacher professionalism has been reflected in Canada by the establishment of self-regulating Colleges of Teachers in two provinces. Glenn went on to observe that conflict among parents, government, and educators may be the result of a lack of clarity about their respective roles.

The Concept of Parental Involvement

As Glenn (2002) notes, legal statutes are insufficient for eliminating tensions between teachers and parents because when it comes to the term "parental involvement," parents and teachers may have conceptually different assumptions about what it means. Though researchers such as Epstein (2001) argue for two-way parent-teacher interaction, much of what has become accepted as "parent involvement" is what Lawson (2003) calls "schoolcentric" practices whereby teachers prescribe and orchestrate the way parents participate in schools.

Volunteering at school, monitoring children's report cards, attending parent-teacher conferences, and sitting on school committees are traditional benchmarks of the "involved" parent. These practices, it has been argued, assume a homogeneous parent population who willingly accept and comply with hetero-normative expectations (de Carvalho, 2001; Stelmach, 2006), and who do not exert their influence to the detriment of others. On the surface the legislation of parental roles has a democratizing force by ensuring all parents have a right to participate in their children's schooling. Researchers who cast a critical eye on the policy discourse that surrounds parent involvement, however, challenge this democratizing intent and its effects.

Mandated parent involvement is also questioned within the context of pre-existing factors in families that come to bear on how and which parents get involved. Such critiques bring to the surface the deprivileging, marginalizing, and disempowering effects of well-intentioned legislation. In this section, we summarize research that demonstrates how policy discourses around parent involvement contradict their stated aims to empower parents as well as how factors such as socioeconomic status and ethnic background disadvantage families regardless of the existence of their legally entrenched roles.

Policy Discourses

Scholars have challenged the so-called democratic underpinnings of parent involvement policy by examining the subtle yet powerful force of language in policy discourses. For example, using discourse analysis to examine the language of American family-school compacts and parent

policy, Nakagawa (2000) argued: "Language used to discuss parents in relation to schools controls how parents get involved and creates representations of the ideal parent" (p. 447).

The policy texts in Nakagawa's study were infused with a discourse that positioned parents in what Nakagawa called a "double bind" (p. 448). Specifically, as Nakagawa argued, because parent involvement policy is primarily aimed at improving the educational performances of ethnic minority and poor children, these parents are viewed through a deficit lens. Family-school compacts and policies thus attempt to educate and/or train these parents to act as protectors of their children's educational interests.

Those parents who do not are interpreted as negligent. On the other hand, when these parents assert themselves on behalf of their children, they are reframed as the problem. The parent-as-protector and parent-as-problem metaphors seem to exist precariously along a thin and shifting border.

Spencer (2001) took a similar tack in her examination of school council policy in Ontario and Alberta. Using Foucauldian poststructuralism and Fairclough's (1992, as cited by Spencer) "textually-oriented discourse analysis" (p. 15) as her theoretical orientation, she argued that the dominant discourses of school council policy reinforce power structures, advancing state goals and agendas under the guise of democratic decision-making. Specifically, she argued that school council members are "subject/citizens."

In a Foucauldian sense, subjects of policy self-regulate their behaviour such that the state no longer requires power over them. Rather, through their self-regulatory actions, subjects become conveyors of state power; thus, the state re-invokes its power through parents. The major point to be made here is that the legislation of parental roles is meant to move parent involvement beyond rhetoric into a reality where parents' rights are protected; yet the discourse of the policy itself, as Spencer shows, actually may work against parents having an authentic voice. Governing bodies such as school councils, then, are not neutral and may privilege some parents (Caines, 2006).

Together, Nakagawa's (2000) and Spencer's (2001) focus on policy discourse help to dispel the "feel good" myth of parent involvement policy, and point out that language itself may operate against the goal of harmonious parent-teacher relationships. Though legislation regarding parents purports to put all parents on equal footing among each other as well as educators, the sub-text of the legislation which is shaped through the language may have contradictory effects.

Discriminating Family Factors

The theory of cultural reproduction has been useful for highlighting the subtle way in which schools reproduce an arbitrary cultural scheme (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) which privileges parents with dominant white, middle-class values. Much policy and practice regarding parent involvement is conceptualized irrespective of differences associated with social and economic experiences, ethnicity, gender, and domestic practices (de Carvalho, 2001; Lareau, 1987, 1996; Vincent, 1996, 2000). Yet, according to this theoretical stance, families whose material and cultural conditions do not match the social code of schools are under-represented in school-based involvement. The focus on cultural capital points to the complexity of discrepancies between working, lower class, cultural minority parents and those belonging to mainstream cultures.

To illustrate socioeconomic influences on parents' behaviour within their families and with schools, Lareau (2002) examined working and middle-class parent interactions. In this study, she concluded that social class influences how parents perceive their roles and how they understand the nature of childhood. Parents' use of language with their children, the way they organized or did not organize their children's daily lives, and the social networks families had were dramatically different for middle and working-class parents. For example, Lareau found that middle-class parents employed reasoning and negotiating techniques when conversing with their children, highly structured their children's out-of-school time, and maintained social relations with other middle-class families who engaged in similar behaviour.

By contrast, working-class parents were more instructive than inquisitive when talking with their children, left their children's out-of-school time unstructured, and associated most often with family members. Lareau described middle-class parents as engaging in *concerted cultivation* whereby they purposefully organized their children's lives in ways that fostered the development and refinement of skills necessary for school-related and eventually professional success. Working-class parents were less likely to control their children's lives, and adhered to

practices that allowed for children's *natural growth*.

The upshot of socioeconomic differences is that middle-class parents are more likely to capitalize on opportunities to interact with and have influence over their children's schooling.

Mandating parent involvement through mechanisms such as school councils, for example, would feed into these parents' sense of entitlement to take part. Working-class parents, on the other hand, would be less likely to respond to opportunities—formal or informal—to interact directly with their children's teachers because they do not consider school as their place. Bourdieu would explain this by pointing out that the habitus of working-class parents does not correspond to the behaviours and practices of schools, as they are middle-class institutions. It is well documented that parents from lower socioeconomic groups, who often also are of minority ethnic status, do not participate in their children's schools in the traditionally expected ways, and that formalizing parent involvement has negligible effect on increasing these parents' involvement (Beck & Murphy, 1999; Caines, 2006; de Carvalho, 2001; González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

In Canada, particular attention has been paid to Aboriginal parents given the overwhelmingly negative statistics associated with their children's school performance. Language and culture are prohibiting factors to the involvement of these parents as they are for other parents who are outside of the dominant culture. Yet, Pushor and Murphy (2004) also argue that Aboriginal parents' domestic practices are critiqued because they do not correspond to mainstream cultural practices. In effect, because Aboriginal homes do not mirror those of mainstream educators, who are primarily of the dominant culture, Aboriginal parents are considered negligent, and are subject to educators' "fixing." Such posturing by educators, they argue, works against healthy parent-teacher relations.

Pushor (2007) advocates for leveling power hierarchies in schools by reconsidering teachers as serving simultaneously as hosts to parents and guests in a school whose community essentially encompasses parents. This argument sheds light on the complex nature of parent-teacher relations because, even though legal structures claim to provide opportunities for all parents to participate in their children's schooling, Pushor clearly spells out the irrelevance of legality in the face of cultural conditions. The necessity to reconceptualize the hierarchical relationship between parents and teachers is a philosophical and ideological shift that must happen outside of—or perhaps in spite of —legal structures.

Research findings make clear that educational policy constructs parent involvement in ways that privilege educator expectations; rarely stated, although implicit, are educators' assumptions of a division between professionals and parents in terms of roles and what counts as knowledge. Tutwiler (2005) observed that issues of authority, control, and responsibility have been major sources of friction between parents and school personnel, with this shadow of discord serving as a backdrop to calls for improved parental involvement in the education of children (p. 139).

In this area, the focus has been on which, how, and why parents are involved or not in their children's education. Studies have examined various parent involvement practices, including school governance structures in Canadian (McKenna & Willms, 1998) and international (Kelly-Laine, 1998; Ravn, 1998; Sanders & Epstein, 1998) contexts, organized programs such as *Head Start* (Allen, Thompson, Hoadley, Engelking, & Drapeaux, 1997; Smith, 2004), and schoolcentric practices like volunteering and doing homework with children (Deslandes & Rousseau, 2008; Lawson, 2003). This research indicates that, with rare exception, teachers restricted parents' involvement to non-intrusive or teacher-directed activities such as providing basic needs, reading at home, visiting the classroom, and performing miscellaneous tasks (Allen et al. 1997).

These findings have been useful for decentering the issue of parent involvement away from so-called uncooperative parents, suggesting that the challenges to parent involvement are located in teacher resistance and control. Regardless of the existence of formal opportunities for parents to get involved, institutional barriers such as deeply rooted beliefs about professional expertise prohibit parents from getting involved beyond non-intrusive ways (Stelmach, 2004).

Parent-Teacher Interaction and School Councils

In light of the preceding discussion of legal and cultural factors affecting parent-teacher interactions, we now consider the widespread requirement for the creation of school councils. Our discussion will show that well intentioned and

clearly expressed purposes set out in formal laws and policies may not be achieved because of tacit or explicit understandings and assumptions existing within the organizational culture of schools. Bauch and Goldring (1998) described the restructuring efforts that have led to mechanisms to change the traditional relationship between parents and teachers, including the creation of school councils. According to Tutwiler (2005), some education reformers believe that this enhanced empowerment of parents and teachers and the resulting redistribution of power between the two groups will result in improved education for all children.

While the decision of governments to give parents more defined responsibilities in education through the establishment of school councils is intended to enhance parental involvement in education, this can also be perceived as an attempt by government to regulate more clearly parental involvement in schools. Furthermore, though they purport to provide opportunities for all parents to participate, cultural factors inhibit some parents' ability to take up these opportunities. This section will examine selected legislative provisions in Alberta, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Saskatchewan with respect to the purpose of school councils and consider the effects of these provisions on parent-teacher relationships. In this way, we will demonstrate the interplay of cultural factors with these legal mandates.

The purpose of school councils is described in the Ontario regulation on *School Councils* (2000): "The purpose of school councils is, through the active participation of parents, to improve pupil achievement and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents" (s. 2(1)). The Alberta *School Act* (2000) gives discretion to school councils in several areas. For example: "A school council may, at its discretion, … consult with the principal so that the principal may ensure that students in the school have the opportunity to meet the standards of education set by the Minister" (s. 22(4)(c)). The Act also gives school councils a more pragmatic purpose: "A school council may, at its discretion, … consult with the principal so that the principal may ensure that the fiscal management of the school is in accordance with the requirements of the board and the superintendent" (s. 22(4)(d)).

In New Brunswick, the *Education Act* (1997) defines the purpose of school councils, known as Parent School Support Committees (PSSC), in terms of school improvement plans: "A Parent School Support Committee shall advise the principal of the school respecting the establishment, implementation and monitoring of the school improvement plan" (s. 33(1)). In Saskatchewan, the last Canadian province to legislate school councils, the *Education Act* (1995) requires that every school community council (SSC) "facilitate parent and community participation in school planning" (s. 140.5(a)).

More specifically, under Saskatchewan's *Education Regulations* (1986), SCCs shall "in co-operation with the school staff, develop and recommend to its board of education for approval a learning improvement plan that is in accordance with the school division's strategic plan" (s. 3.92(b)). In all four provinces, two themes are clearly apparent in the purpose of school councils: performance and accountability. School councils have a role in the improvement of student learning and in the accountability of schools to parents and the public.

The purposes of school councils as laid out in these provincial regulations assume that parents are prepared to play an active role in directly affecting student learning outcomes, and reciprocally, that educators are prepared to support parents in such a role. Research by Stelmach (2004, 2006) on the roles of parents in Alberta school improvement and by Stelmach and Preston (2008) into Saskatchewan's SCCs both suggest an overwhelming departure from that notion. In these studies parents considered their roles in ways that clearly separated them from the work of classroom teachers and curriculum. These parents were more likely to see their role as behind the scenes, supporting their children indirectly in their learning, or advocating for their children when they perceived them to need special support. Interestingly, some parents in the Alberta study, where school councils had existed for over 10 years at the time the study was completed, reported that they did not attend school council meetings because they were either satisfied with their children's teachers or did not have any issues or concerns. They seemed to view school councils as venues to raise controversial or problematic issues, rather than as sites of collaboration for students' learning. This illustrates that parents' perceptions of the purpose of school councils may be radically different from the legal description. Creating a legal space for parents to be part of school decisions does not necessarily mean that parents will see that space in the same light.

Teachers can be equally ambivalent or opposed to allowing parents into decision- making processes (Krishnamoorthi, 1999; Stelmach, 2006; Stelmach & Preston, 2008). This has been demonstrated from various theoretical positions. Dom and Verhoeven (2006), in an examination of school councils in Belgium, used negotiation theory and micropolitical theory to show that a change in the parent participation law had mixed effects on the relationships among principals, parents, and teachers because some parents were perceived as over-exerting their influence.

Stelmach's (2004) study of a parent school improvement team employed new institutionalism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Rowan & Miskel, 1999) to demonstrate how institutionalized, unquestioned practices act as a buffer to reinforce a traditional separation between parents and teachers. Additionally, Crozier and Davies (2007) and Chikoko (2007) argued that teachers erect barriers through their social capital and their perceptions of parents' capacity and skills to make contributions to decision-making in schools.

One might view communication as the cause of the disjuncture between parents, teachers, and policy mandates. Yet, in a study of how principals and parents viewed the transition to SCCs in Saskatchewan after they were legislated in 2005, Stelmach and Preston (2008) found that, despite various attempts to inform parents and the community about the formation of the SCCs, parents had a weak understanding of the purpose of these new bodies. Some parents believed SCCs were to continue functioning as social organizers like "home and school" associations; others suggested SCCs were to approve teacher field trips.

An exceptional few parents were able to recite the purpose of the SCCs as having to create a learning improvement plan for the school, but these parents balked at the notion that they should have input in curricular decisions without having professional expertise. One parent viewed her participation on the SCC as volunteering and remarked that having to review student achievement data constituted "a job" rather than a volunteer position. Mandates to include parents in school governance blur the line between teacher and parent responsibilities. As noted earlier, Canadian and international research outlines the difficulty of involving parents in school governance because of the implicit gate-keeping that teachers perform and the way in which parents typically comply (Caines, 2006; Kelly-Laine, 1998; McKenna & Willms, 1998; Ravn, 1998; Sanders & Epstein, 1998).

Conflicting loyalties for teachers and parents may also contribute to the difficulty of involving parents in school governance. Legislation and policy adopt a presumption of neutrality in their aim for collaborative school improvement planning and school governance; however, as Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978, 2003) has pointed out, parents' and educators' views about children's welfare are shaped by their roles. While much literature assumes that parents and teachers share similar aims for children, Lawrence-Lightfoot's work suggests how these aims can be interpreted differently by parents and teachers. Using Waller's (1932) typology, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978) emphasized the distinction between parents' *particularistic* interest in their own children compared to teachers' *universalistic* concern for the success of all children. A parent from Stelmach's (2006) study demonstrated this tension when describing her dilemma over a school improvement decision:

> *It was really hard for me to sit there in those meetings and vote for a fee increase, which I knew the school needed… I was thinking that means whatever less for me, you know? But I always voted for the fee increase because that was what the school needed; it was the best for the school even though it had a negative impact on me personally. So I think it's hard for parents to set themselves aside and not relate everything to their own son or daughter, and do what's best for the school and community. Maybe that's what scares some people away. Maybe it's too difficult for them to do that. (p. 164)*

This example accentuates the complexity of parent involvement in school-based decision-making. While parents might agree in principle with programs and policy frameworks that focus on helping students do better, they also find that the method and resources required to achieve such goals have practical consequences not only for their children, but also for themselves. From a teachers' perspective, there is a fine line, in Brighouse and Swift's (2008) terms, between parent actions justified as promoting familial relationships and those that tip the distribution to disadvantage other children. Law and policy that emphasize parents' rights and responsibilities with

respect to getting involved in school councils rely on rational choice as parents' modus operandi, but the personal and affective dimensions of parental choices cannot be overlooked.

Rethinking Policy, Research, and Relationships

School councils represent one mechanism created by governments to provide opportunities for parental involvement in education. Hood (2003) has pointed out the widespread increase in government policies in Europe and elsewhere to promote the involvement of parents and the community in schooling. Since these policies seek to redefine the roles of parents within the school system, they undoubtedly affect interactions between teachers and parents. As we have described in this paper, these interactions take place within a complex framework of legal and cultural factors, often with implications and results that may not reflect espoused purposes or intended descriptions. Inherent in current understandings of parent involvement is the assumption that parents should take up quasi-teacher roles and establish "school-like homes" (Epstein, 2001, p. 32). The misconception that parents must "be" a certain way results in a dichotomization of "involved" and "uninvolved" parents. This is problematic considering the cultural factors that contribute to parents' feelings of marginalization and powerlessness in light of traditional hierarchies between professionals and non-professionals. We suggest that rethinking policy, practice, and research with respect to parent-teacher interactions needs to occur in three areas:

- the scope of law and policy
- implications for teacher education and leadership preparation
- a focus on relationships in practice and research.

Below, we summarize briefly our thoughts on each of these areas.

Educational reform efforts often include emphasis on law and policy to create structural conditions as a means to achieve intended outcomes. The creation of school councils and associated policies were designed to redefine parental roles and enhance parental engagement in education. For the most part, however, law and policy ignore power discrepancies and are premised on the assumption that as long as parents are provided with equal opportunities to get involved in schools, they can take them up. Missing from legal and policy frameworks is the realization that not all parents share equal conditions to capitalize on formal arrangements for parent-teacher relationships. While Pushor (2007) argues for a leveling of the hierarchy, we question whether harmonious and equal parent-teacher relations can be created by fiat. Research or professional development that focuses on identifying strategies for engaging hard to reach parents (Epstein, 2001, p. 275) is symptomatic of a false binary that results from the expectation that opportunities enhance engagement.

Is there any way in which law and policy can account for all cultural conditions? We believe it may be overly optimistic to think so; however, we do believe that law and policy could heed more closely the realities of some parents who fall outside of Euronormative paradigms.

One example of this is the expectation that parent involvement means that parents come TO the school to work FOR school goals. Improved implementation of policy regarding parents may have to reconsider its starting point; that is, rather than a schoolcentric view of parent involvement, policy makers may have to release control of school planning and reconsider traditional and current structures, including school councils. Furthermore, it is incumbent upon educators, particularly educational administrators who lead policy implementation, to examine laws and policies within their specific school community contexts and to interpret the spirit of such documents to reflect school community characteristics.

This examination of legal and cultural factors affecting parent-teacher interactions needs to be included in teacher education and leadership development programs. Studies have indicated the importance to teachers and administrators of having competence and confidence in their knowledge of relevant laws and policies (Brien, 2005; Findlay, 2007). Parent-teacher conflicts in such areas as student discipline, teacher performance, and curriculum can lead to situations where it is especially important for teachers and principals to understand and apply the appropriate legal principles and remedies (Brien, 2007). MacKay and Sutherland (2006) described growing concerns among Canadian teachers about increased levels of parental harassment as a result of changes in the nature of parent-teacher interactions, especially with growing parental expectations for increased accessibility to teachers

and schools. However, teacher and principal education programs must also confront the assumptions of the privileged place of educators in the parent-teacher relationship.

Courses on parent-teacher interactions at the undergraduate and graduate levels could include the examination of the works of such writers as Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), Pushor and Murphy (2004), and Goddard and Foster (2002) particularly with respect to minority and marginalized populations.

In spite of their importance, perhaps law and policy are not the most appropriate ways to engage parents and teachers. MacKay (2005), one of the leading authorities on Canadian education law, has described *relationships* as one of the new set of "3 Rs" of public education, along with rights and responsibilities. As Pushor and Murphy (2004) and Pushor (2007) argue, relationship building is central to establishing effective parent-teacher interactions. The current audit culture narrows educators' and policy makers' visions about the purpose of involving parents; the goal of parent involvement has increasingly become part of accountability tactics, such that the focus on the end of student performance blocks out the necessity of engaging in appropriate and effective means.

Much of the research focuses on the effectiveness of, or barriers to, parent involvement, resulting in lists of strategies or typologies of parent engagement. Less research has honed in on whether or how educators and parents can build relationships based on sometimes contradictory aims and assumptions. It is assumed that the best interests of the child are the central assumption for both parties; however, more work must be done to tease out exactly how parents and educators define and plan for children's welfare. Policy and practice focus on the "what" of student achievement, without considering that the dynamics of parent-teacher relationships contribute intricately to the "how."

In our minds, a research focus on how parents and teachers make transitions within a new accountability framework to work together (or perhaps not) on goal setting and decision making, and what constitutes an appropriate relationship within the context of school reform, is necessary.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the support of the Summer Scholar program of the Faculty of Education at the University of New Brunswick in the development of this article.

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