

“Maybe it’s time I change ...”

Challenging Our Assumptions: A Starting Place for Engaging Parents

by Debbie Pushor and Claudia Ruitenberg

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Erin McCall, Editor

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About the Authors

Debbie Pushor is an Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum Studies at the University of Saskatchewan. She is the principal researcher of this narrative inquiry into parent engagement and leadership, as well as of a SSHRC-funded study into parent knowledge.

Claudia Ruitenberg completed her Ph.D. in Education at Simon Fraser University and currently teaches as a sessional lecturer at the University of Saskatchewan. She is a research assistant in the “Parent Engagement and Leadership” inquiry.

Introduction

Much about schools is consistent from one building to another, from one place to another. Walking into a school in which you have never been before, you would easily identify it as a school: the messages posted inside and out, the flow of children and adults, the displays on the walls, the use of space, the activities being carried out. Because we have all attended school, worked in schools, perhaps accompanied our own children to school, attended community meetings and functions in school buildings, hearing the word ‘school’ pulls forward a fairly consistent image and understanding for all of us. It is this familiarity that creates a taken-for-grantedness about school, a sense of becoming so comfortable with the “landscape”¹ (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) of school that we stop asking questions about it.

We invite you, an educational leader, to disrupt this taken-for-grantedness by walking through your own school as if you are a parent new to the school. Stop and take a careful look at each of the messages. What do the signs say? What messages do they send to you as a parent? How do they make you feel? Walk up and down the hallways. As a parent, do you see yourself represented? Can you see yourself in the displays, the photographs, the activities – particularly if you are a parent of Aboriginal or minority heritage? Walk in and out of the spaces of the school. Where are you welcome to be? How do you know?

It is likely that on your school landscape you will see signs that say, “Staff parking only,” “Drop off zone, 5 minute limit,” “Visitors please report to the office,” and “Please remove wet and muddy footwear.” It is likely inside, that as well as seeing spaces labeled with room and grade numbers and teacher names, you will see spaces labeled “Staff Room,” “Staff Workroom,” and “Staff Washroom.” It is likely that you will see beautiful displays of student work and

photographs of students engaged in classroom and extracurricular activities. It is likely you will see photos of current staff members or at least former principals, school board members, or the namesake of the school. How will you come to see yourself as a parent within that school landscape? Will you see yourself at all? What will you determine your position within that school is?

While generally in education we speak of parents as partners, tell parents in our school newsletters that we have an open door policy, and talk about parents as their children's first teachers, we unconsciously send other strong messages to parents. With our signs, our displays, our activities and our labeling of space, we position parents in marginalized ways in our school buildings. At best we extend them the privileges of guests and at worst we treat them as unwelcome or bothersome interlopers.

Challenging Assumptions

In the research we have done (Pushor, 2001; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005), we have come to see the activity of challenging the assumptions underlying our educational practices as critical to the work of engaging parents. Everything we do in schools is based on assumptions – sometimes explicitly translated into practice and other times implicitly inferred. While administrators can legitimately justify signs about visitors reporting to the office and removing wet and muddy footwear as being important to safety and to cleanliness, we need to ask ourselves what those signs also say about the position of parents on school landscapes. If we truly believe parents are our partners, is it possible to ensure our schools are, as in the above example, safe and clean, and a place for parents as well as children and staff? We believe it is. We want to share with you work being done to engage parents at Princess

¹ Clandinin & Connelly use the term “professional knowledge landscape” in an expansive way to capture a sense of all the diverse people, things, and events interacting in different relationships within schools. It is a term meant to

Alexandra Community School in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan as a way of examining how one school is creating new possibilities for the positioning of parents.

About Parent Involvement

Although the common term in this field of research is “parent involvement,” we choose to use the term “parent engagement.” For us, the term is different in meaning and intent.

Benson (1999) notes that “‘involvement’ comes from the Latin, ‘involvere,’ which means ‘to roll into’ and by extension implies wrapping up or enveloping parents somehow into the system” (p. 48). Beare (1993) adds that “the implication in the word is that the person ‘involved’ is co-opted, brought into the act by another party” (p. 207, as cited in Benson, 1999, p. 48). Parents who are “involved” serve the school’s agenda by doing the things educators ask or expect them to do – volunteering at school, parenting in positive ways, and supporting and assisting their children at home with their schoolwork – while knowledge, voice and decision-making continue to rest with the educators (Pushor, 2001).

About Parent Engagement

“Engagement,” in comparison, comes from *en*, meaning “make,” and *gage*, meaning “pledge” – to make a pledge (Harper, 2001), to make a moral commitment (Sykes, 1976, p. 343). The word engagement is further defined as “contact by fitting together; ... “the meshing of gears” [syn: mesh, meshing, interlocking]” (Engagement). The implication in this word is that the person ‘engaged’ is an integral and essential part of a process, brought into the act because of care and commitment. By extension, engagement implies enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, of teaching and learning, with teachers’ knowledge. With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be

capture much more than the physical nature of the building and the grounds.

shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial.

Princess Alexandra Community School

We invite you to take another walk through a school, this time through Princess Alexandra Community School² rather than your own school, still imagining you are a parent new to the school. As you approach Princess Alexandra, you note that the school building itself is a non-descript long, low yellow-brown brick building located immediately beside a fenced industrial yard. The barbed wire at the top of that industrial fence catches your attention as it provides a backdrop to two large murals – Aboriginal paintings entitled “Harmony” and “Education.” As you approach the front doors, trimmed in the same purple paint as the windows and eaves along the school’s front, you wonder if you are at the right entrance as there are no signs directing you to report to the office; in fact, there are no signs directing you at all.

Inside, the entranceway is lined on both sides with large posters. Faces peer out at you from these posters – brown, white, young, old, female, male – telling a story of how they try, as parents, teachers, students, elders, administrators, community members, to live a certain value in their daily lives, perhaps of “love”, or “good child-rearing”, or “obedience” or “respect.” Student work in the glass cases foregrounds the importance of the circle and the number four to Aboriginal people: the four directions, the four seasons, the four elements of wind, water, fire, and air.

As you step out of the entranceway and into a central corridor on the main floor, you see more photographs. Rows of family photos, which have been matted and clustered within

² Over the 2004-2005 school year, we were engaged in research funded by the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching with a large group of co-researchers from Princess Alexandra; a group of teachers, administrators, parents, teacher associates, the community school coordinator and the adult education coordinator at the school. We were inquiring into their practices of parent engagement and leadership.

composite frames, stretch down the long corridor. As you pause to look more closely, you see large and small families, single parent and dual parent families, extended families, children alone without adults, families in which teen children are holding their own children, families headed by grandparents rather than parents.

While you are standing in this space, someone comes by and welcomes you. “Hello,” she says, “Tansi.” She wonders if you’ve come to attend the staff meeting. You quickly mention to her that you are a parent new to the school, there to find out about registering your children, not a teacher. She laughs at the confusion she’s caused with her language and explains that at Princess staff meetings are open to everyone – all teachers and staff, parents, community members and senior students. Everyone is invited to sit in the circle and to take a turn, or to pass, in raising items for discussion, sharing comments, or asking questions.

As you are talking, an elderly Aboriginal woman passes by. She takes your hand warmly, smiles broadly, also greets you with “Tansi” – and more Cree words that it seems okay you don’t understand. You are introduced to “Kokum Ina,” and told she is an elder who spends her days in the school, sometimes just visiting with students, staff, and parents; sometimes working in classrooms telling stories and passing on Aboriginal teachings.

Considering the Contrasts

As an imagined parent on this second school landscape, ask yourself once again the questions you asked during the tour of your own school. What do the signs at Princess say? What messages do they send to you as a parent? How do they make you feel? As a parent, do you see yourself represented? Can you see yourself in the displays, the photographs, the activities – particularly if you are a parent of Aboriginal or minority heritage? Where are you welcome to be within the physical spaces of Princess? How do you know?

As we stated earlier, everything we do in schools is based on assumptions – sometimes explicitly translated into practice and sometimes implicitly inferred. The practices you observed during your school tour of Princess – the murals, the purple trim, the “Honoring our People” posters, the Aboriginal content, the family photographs, the staff meetings, the presence of an elder – are examples of conscious ways the staff at Princess are working to live their positive assumptions about parents, and the engagement of parents within their school, in practice. It has involved a process of holding everything they do up to scrutiny and of asking themselves why they do it; of affirming practices which reflect their beliefs and which reflect positive assumptions about parents; of discarding practices which, when examined, are found to be in contradiction to their beliefs or based on negative assumptions of parents; of being open to new possibilities; and of being cognizant that because times, people, and context change this process of challenge and affirmation will be a continuous one.

To help you make sense of some of the practices we have shared at Princess, we will provide you with a little more background. Princess Alexandra Community School is a public elementary school (with students attending pre-Kindergarten through grade 8) in Riversdale, an inner city neighbourhood in the city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. 97% of the students attending Princess Alexandra are of Aboriginal descent. Within this neighbourhood, unemployment is higher than the city’s average and income is substantially lower. Families face all of corresponding problems associated with poverty: food insecurity, housing insecurity, violence, crime, and substance abuse.

While this information, commonly cited in news reports and stories of the community, tells you one story of parents in Riversdale, your tour through Princess tells you another story. Consider the contrasts. Alongside the barbed wire, you see murals of harmony and education.

Alongside the standard conventional bricks of the school, you see purple frames (the color of harmony). In a community said to be one of the least safe in the city, you see no signs directing visitors where to be and what to do. Alongside news articles which paint a dire picture of urban Aboriginal demographics, you see a featuring and honoring of First Nations culture and ways of being. Alongside teachers and staff who are positioned with more education, income, power, and privilege, you see parents given an equal voice within the circle.

Moving Inward

Place yourself back in your position as an educational leader and again imagine yourself at Princess Alexandra Community School. This time imagine you are sitting in the circle within the staff room, engaged in conversation with the community school coordinator, some of the teachers, and a former school counselor about engaging parents.³

Laureen Sawatsky, Community School Coordinator: One thing we try to do is we ... challenge each other to look at where our hearts are, and ... where you are with your own ... whether it's racism or whatever because, really, where your own heart is it's going to come out in your behavior and in your actions and in your attitude.⁴

Sandi Harper, former teacher: You have to really want to be here for it to work, you have to *really, really* want it. You have to be genuine. And the people who can see whether you're genuine or not are the families and the parents.⁵ ... And if you ever get the ... uncomfortable feeling that you're ... that you don't fit or it's not fitting for you or something's not working well, then it's time to look at yourself. It's time to say, "Well,

³ This conversation, as presented, consists of a compilation of excerpts from a number of taped research conversations.

⁴ Taped research conversation, January 17, 2005.

⁵ Taped research conversation, May 16, 2005.

then, I've got some changing to do." ... And I think for most teachers, it's really hard to look at yourself and say, "Maybe it's time I change" ⁶

Brett Adams, former School Counselor: Our attitude [has changed], that these people aren't just on welfare, aren't drunks, aren't 'no goods,' okay? The attitude switch is that these people have potential. These people do care about their kids. These kids do have abilities. Instead of saying that these kids will never learn, these kids will always be in poverty, will never amount to anything in their education, to turn around and say, "They can be doctors, lawyers, and anybody they want to, we just have to believe in them and provide." And so it's an attitude change. It's also an invitation to go out and say, "I don't know the answer." To actually say, "I don't have the answer to bullying, I don't have the answer to attendance problems. I need your help." To honestly go out and say [to parents], "I need your help, can *we* find a solution? As opposed to [us] as the experts saying, "I have the answers, you'll listen to me, this is what [we're] going to do." That's not engagement. Engagement is going out and saying, "I truly don't know the answer, help me and we'll work together and go in a direction." ⁷

What we keep hearing in conversations with the staff at Princess Alexandra is a sense of moving inward, of educators asking themselves, "Who am I as a person? What kind of respect do I have for the parents I work with? How do I see them?"

Questioning the Taken-For-Grantedness

While literature in the field on parent 'involvement' typically focuses on what to do to bring parents into the school, we feel the more important questions are, "Why do we currently do what we do? What assumptions underlie our practices?" As an educational leader, having

⁶ Taped research conversation, February 28, 2005.

⁷ Taped research conversation, April, 2005.

‘toured’ Princess Alexandra Community School, you can return to your school with new ideas and you can paint murals, take down signs, make posters which honor people in your community, hang family photos in the hallways, and invite parents to your staff meetings. You can ‘do.’ Alternatively, you can return to your school and begin a thoughtful dialogue with your staff about your current practices. Why do we have these signs posted? Why do we call it a ‘staff room’? Why do we hold our parent/teacher conferences for five minutes? Why do we as educators plan the agenda for ‘Meet the Teacher’ evening? You can ask ‘why’ and you can question assumptions at play in your school. You can, instead of looking outward at parents or looking outward at what other schools are doing, consider looking inward, both individually as staff members and collectively as a team, at your own assumptions: What assumptions are we making about parents? In what ways do we need to challenge these assumptions? How can we better align our practices with our beliefs? It is this kind of work that has the potential to awaken all of us to the taken-for-grantedness of our school landscapes and to truly create possibilities for engaging parents in their children’s schooling.

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