

“It’s not about colour-coordinating the napkins with the table cloth”

hospitality and invitation in parent engagement

by Claudia Ruitenberg and Debbie Pushor

Introduction

“Invite, invite, invite.” We don’t know how often these words were repeated during our research on parent engagement at Princess Alexandra Community School. Whenever we talked about ways to make parents feel welcome, ways to help parents decide to attend a school event, ways to encourage parents to share their thoughts in a staff meeting, the same words could be heard: “Invite, invite, invite.” They weren’t just words, a formula that sounded good but meant little: behind these words a whole world of meaning lay hidden.

Princess Alexandra Community School is an urban, public elementary school (pre-Kindergarten to grade 8) in Riversdale, an inner city or “core” neighbourhood in Saskatoon. The statistical odds for parent engagement are stacked against the school: unemployment is higher and average income is substantially lower than in the city of Saskatoon as a whole; there are problems with substance abuse and many families move several times a year, often from one inadequate living space to another. But statistics tell very limited stories, and Princess Alexandra has been quite successful in developing lasting relations with parents and other community members. So how did they do it?

Over the 2004/05 school year, we met regularly with a large group of teachers, administrators, parents, and teacher associates at the school. They were not research participants but co-researchers, which meant, for instance, that they went out and talked with parents and former staff members, made observations and took photographs during school events. The

conversations were taped and transcribed, and in reading and discussing the many pages of transcript, one of the central themes that emerged was *hospitality and invitation*.¹

Hospitality

For some, the term hospitality might suggest ownership. It might suggest that if we are the ones extending the invitation, we are the ones who own and dictate the space into which guests are received. Hospitality might conjure up an image of a host who is in control of who is invited, what they should wear, when they should arrive and depart, and so on. But that is not how we are using the term hospitality here. When we talk about hospitality at Princess Alexandra, it is not about teachers and administrators who invite people to their place, but about creating a place that is owned as much by students, parents, and other community members as it is by staff and administrators. In the words of Brett Adams, who was a school counsellor at Princess for many years,

It's open door as opposed to saying, this is an institution, it's a castle, and you can't come in, it's just for kids.

Lambros Kamperidis (1990) writes that “only when we know how to behave as guests will we have the honor to act as hosts” (pp. 10-11). Teachers, teacher associates, administrators, and non-teaching staff members are not the owners of the school community. On the contrary: they, themselves, are guests. They have been received into a community with relationships, culture, and history that began long before they, as “school workers,” arrived at the school, and

¹ This research was made possible by a grant from the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching. A complete report of the research will be published by the McDowell Foundation later this year.

that will continue long after they leave. When we say “hospitality” we mean the open door and outstretched hand extended by hosts who realize that they, themselves, are guests.

This kind of hospitality may be a daunting prospect. School staff and administrators who are used to keeping the school agenda firmly in their own hands may wonder what might happen when parents are a legitimate presence in the school and when their voices are truly heard in decision making processes. What might happen is that long-standing practices or obvious “school truths” are questioned. What might happen is that parents become teachers and teachers learners.

I had a father spending about an hour and a half ... helping me understand different ways of working with children rather than suspending them. (Yves Bousquet, former principal)

In the words of John Caputo (2000), “hospitality ... means to put your home at risk, which simultaneously requires both having a home and risking it (p. 57). Offering hospitality to parents means being willing to take the “risk” that parents may have valuable suggestions school staff and administrators had not thought about, or that parents’ perspectives may challenge common assumptions.

The positions of “host” and “guest” are not fixed identities, but rather roles which different people can assume. We have already asserted that school staff are guests in the community, but parents and other community members can also be positioned as hosts in the school. At Princess Alexandra, elder Ina Ahenakew might be the one welcoming visitors, and both parents and staff play a role in making a new secretary feel welcome so that she, in turn, is able to welcome parents registering their children, by offering them a cup of coffee and a place to sit. Hospitality, then, is a practice that is shared not only by staff and administrators, but also

by parents and students. Yves Bousquet talked to us about the importance of including students in the practice of hospitality, and of explaining to them why it is important.

If you went to another school, how would you want to be treated? If somebody comes to your home, how do you treat them? This is our home during the day and so when people come here, how should we treat them? We referred to our substitute teachers as guest-teachers, and every year we talked to the students about that.

In October 2004, we had an opportunity to observe for ourselves how the practice of hospitality was shared by students. It was “Read-on and Count-on” morning at Princess Alexandra: parents and community volunteers were invited to come to the school to read stories and do math and science activities with the students. Teacher associate Aleta Hillier sat behind a table in the front hallway of the school and welcomed the parents and other volunteers. She checked in a binder what classroom they had been assigned to, and asked one of the older students to escort them to that classroom. She instructed the students to take the visitors’ coats and ask them if they would like coffee. This was an explicit lesson in hospitality. When a small boy came running down the stairs, put his hands on the table in front of Aleta, and yelled, “What are you guys doing?!” Aleta smiled and answered calmly, “Welcoming visitors.” She quite rightly made that sound like a project onto itself: “welcoming visitors.” And the “visitors” notice that they are truly welcomed, whether they come to the school for a special event such as the “Read-on, Count-on,” or just to see how their child is doing.

When I walk into some place where people don't know me, I'm always looked at and asked what I'm doing there because I look too big and scary. But when I go

to the school, they're saying hello, like 'Hi!,' shake your hands, and they ask, 'How can I help you?' (Vernon Linklater, parent)

Invitation

When parents, staff members, and former staff members told us, “invite, invite, invite,” the repetition was not merely for emphasis. Invitation literally needs to be repeated, both before and after it has been accepted. A single statement in the school handbook or newsletter that “parents are always welcome” is most certainly not enough. And a single remark made by the principal on registration day or meet the teacher night will have little more effect. Parents and other family members and caregivers of students need to be invited over and over again.

For it to be successful with parents you have to be inviting on a daily basis, not just when you need somebody for a field trip, or for this, or for that. You constantly have to be open to having parents in your room. (Sandi Harper, teacher)²

Repeated invitation is important especially in the context of an aboriginal community in which many people have had negative experiences with schooling, residential or not. Some parents' believe they are “invited” to the school only when there are discipline issues. As Sandi Harper described it, many parents and grandparents will need repeated “affirmation that they're actually welcome here” before they are comfortable enough to enter the school and participate in its activities.

² Sandi Harper has worked both in Princess Alexandra's central building and in its satellite program in the White Buffalo Youth Lodge.

Change seems to be the only constant in the lives of many of the families in Riversdale. Whether it is a household move, an unexpected visit by members of the extended family, a health crisis, or the beginning or end of a job, many families have learned to be flexible and respond to who or what needs attention at any given moment. We heard numerous examples of parents and other caregivers not being able to confirm whether they would be able to participate in an event or meeting until shortly before. A lack of response to an invitation sent home in advance, however, should not be mistaken for a lack of interest. If a family does not come to a meeting or event for which they were invited, this does not mean that the family is not interested and that it is not worth the trouble inviting them for future events or meetings.

People assume that parents aren't interested, that they don't want to take part. I can think back to a few years ago when I was at another school, and they wanted to get a family in. I was in the meeting and they were saying this family wouldn't come, and finally I spoke up and said: 'Has anybody gone and asked them? ... Really, have you gone to the door and asked?' And it's like: 'No, why? You know, they just won't.' And so I said to them, 'Well, let me go.' Well, I came back that afternoon with that family, that very afternoon, you know, and it was just such an eye opener to that school. (Laureen Sawatsky, community school coordinator)

But what does “invitation” look like? Is it a notice on a bulletin board? A message in the school newsletter? A pretty card with curly print asking one to RSVP? From the stories that the staff at Princess Alexandra shared with us, we learned that the most effective invitations are personal, face to face, so that they can be accompanied by a smile and a handshake. Invitations can be extended in any personal encounter: when a father comes to pick up a child at the end of the school day, it may be the community school coordinator who greets him, and reiterates that it

would be wonderful to see him at the family reading event two days later. Or when an older sister comes to register her little brother, it may be a teacher associate who asks her if she would like to come to the pancake breakfast the next morning.

Both the aboriginal and non-aboriginal staff at Princess have learned about culturally appropriate ways to invite aboriginal guests. For example, for significant events, such as a community feast, important guests must be invited personally, and the invitation must be accompanied by an offering of tobacco. The elders who are asked to say opening prayers must be invited with a piece of cloth that is symbolic for the quilt that would have been offered in earlier times. Because personal relationships, built and sustained over time, are what keep the Riversdale community together, parent leaders are asked to extend personal invitations to other parents.

And invitations extended to parents by other parents are often more effective than those extended by school staff. As we said earlier: parents, staff, students, and administrators can all fill the roles of “host” as well as “guest.” Michelle Timm, pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten teacher, told us that word of mouth is very important because many people in the community are related to each other and they trust each other’s opinion more than teachers’ or administrators’ opinions.

You can tell them as a teacher, ‘Come out, it’s great, you’ll love it,’ and yet, they need a little bit more back up, to hear it from someone else too.

When school staff tell parents that they have a “standing invitation” to come into the school, this invitation may not “stand” on its own, and may need considerable scaffolding. In certain contexts it is in fact unlikely that parents will attend or participate in school activities on their own accord. Laureen Sawatsky observed that

during a feast or a powwow, it is hard for the parents to say, 'I am going to come and help. I hear there is a feast and I want to help.' It is an honour system, for someone to come to you and say 'We need your help.' That is when you get the help.

Sheila Kennedy, Cree teacher, explained,

The respect comes from asking, an invitation, asking and requesting, you know, and then honouring that request by doing the job that you were requested to do.

Final thoughts

More than anything, our co-researchers and participants told us, hospitality must be a genuine attitude and invitation a genuine gesture. Cec Chambul, a teacher associate who used to work in Princess Alexandra's satellite program in the nearby Friendship Inn, captured this beautifully when she said,

It's not about colour-coordinating the napkins with the table cloth, it's about how you welcome people when they come through the doors.

That is why we do not want to suggest any "best practice" of hospitality and invitation. An invitation becomes a reflection of a true shift in the values and beliefs of the staff when they come to see the school not as their territory, but as a space shared with parents and others who care for the children who attend the school. In much of the literature about parent involvement and engagement, suggestions are offered for drawing parents into a space and an agenda controlled by the school. We suggest, however, that many parents will not feel welcome unless school administrators and staff are willing to create the school space and agenda *with* parents and other caregivers as well as with the students. Hospitality and invitation remain empty gestures until they are made with the genuine intention to open up the school space and agenda.

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