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The Ontario parent involvement policy analysis

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THE ONTARIO PARENT INVOLVEMENT POLICY ANALYSIS

by

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Abstract

This study examines *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* through the use of critical discourse analysis (CDA). The discourse patterns within the policy are analyzed in order to expose any implicit or explicit power relationships. As part of CDA, critical linguistics are applied, to reveal patterns of written form, such as grammar or sentence structure that may reinforce traditional social and/or educational practices which marginalize certain groups of people. The results suggest that the policy document uses both implicit as well as explicit language that disempowers and marginalizes certain groups of parents. Also, there is visible oppression of minority parents as they are inadequately acknowledged or completely unrepresented in the content of the policy. Although, the policy attempts to eliminate power structures by refocusing control over resources onto parent groups and providing vehicles for parent voice empowerment, many parents are excluded as a result of barriers preventing them from being involved in the school system. Barriers faced by parents are exacerbated for minority parents due to challenges associated with past experiences, language, socioeconomic status, supporting the needs of children with exceptionalities, and lack of familiarity with the system.

Key words: policy analysis, family involvement, parent involvement, minority parents, parent voice empowerment

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"If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor."
Archbishop Desmond Tutu

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Introduction

A vast amount of research demonstrates that parental involvement in school is positively correlated with student educational success (Flood & Lapp, 1995; Fullan, 2007; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001). In recent years, the Ontario Ministry of Education has worked closely with widespread networks of parents across the province to create "an independent, representative province-wide parent voice that is accountable to parents" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 4). Out of a multitude of submissions representing parents and organizations surfaced a recommendation to design and implement an *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*. With the use of critical discourse analysis, this research study aims to examine assumptions about diversity, language, class, ability and family composition, embedded in the policy. The policy's implicit and explicit assumptions presented in this study's policy analysis can be used to improve future parent involvement policies by fostering an awareness of potentially marginalizing language and practices.

Literature Review

Defining Parent Involvement

The term "parent involvement" is difficult to define as it is seen to comprise different activities, practices, and goals as well as avenues of family-school-community collaboration (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001; Hiatt-Michael, 2006; Pelco & Ries, 1999; People for Education, 2006; Pushor, 2007; Tichenor, 1997). Historically, the structure that dominated, and for the most part continues to dominate, the educational system in Canada and the United States, views educators as the "active experts" who deliver knowledge and prescribed practices

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to children and families, while parents are viewed as having a "passive role" in children's education (Hiatt-Michael, 2006, p. 11). The passive-active roles that are continuously played out by parents and educators respectively (Hiatt-Michael, 2006), reinforce the idea that there are professional boundaries, which exclude parents from engaging in partnerships with schools (Pushor, 2007). However, current conceptualizations of culturally responsive parent involvement (King & Goodwin, 2002), as well as "comprehensive [parent involvement] program[s]" (Epstein, 2006, p. 1) are helping families to cross the boundaries that once marginalized them (Epstein, 2006).

As part of her parent involvement framework, Joyce Epstein (2006) has identified six types of involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. All six categories incorporate partnership strategies for creating and sustaining family-school partnerships (Epstein, 2006).

King & Goodwin (2002) focus specifically on the cultivation of culturally responsive parent involvement by eliminating the misconceptions that school administrators and educators associate with parents becoming involved in schools whereby they reinforce school norms and practices that are "most responsive to parents who are middle-class, able-bodied, U.S. born, and standard-English-speaking individuals" (King & Goodwin, 2002, p. 5).

It is worth noting that "parent engagement" is an emerging term, widely used by a scholar of elementary education, Debbie Pushor (Pushor, 2007). Pushor (2007) has identified parent engagement as the sharing of knowledge between educators and parents in the process of informing: "decision-making, the determination of agendas, and the

intended outcomes of their efforts for children, families, the community and the school" (p. 3). This mutual engagement encourages an ever-changing meaning to family-school partnerships, and is responsive to the demographics of the Canadian population.

Pushor (2007) prefers the term parent engagement over parent involvement as it signifies a collaborative process of parents making decisions alongside educators. Based on a dictionary definition of engagement, Pushor (2007) found that the meaning of the word "engagement" is more suitable in representing the "integral and essential" (Pushor, 2007, p. 3) role of the parent in the process of structuring children's' schooling experiences. Contrary to engagement, "involvement" (Pushor, 2007, p. 2) implies that parents are involved in school activities without having the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. Therefore, parent involvement reinforces the power structures that support principals and educators as having roles of authority. In other words, this "scripted story of school as protectorate" (Pushor, 2007, p. 3) creates a disconnect between family needs and school practices. Unlike the philosophy behind "parent involvement" (Pushor, 2007, p. 2), the process of engaging parents in decision-making provides them with an opportunity to contribute their expertise and knowledge and create a meaningful educational experience for them and their children (Pushor, 2007).

Historical Background of Parent Involvement in Ontario

In Ontario prior to 2005, approaches to working with families in the elementary education system were piecemeal, enacted by individual boards, schools or teachers, or were simply non-existent. However, with the implementation of the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* (2005) by the Ministry of Education (see Appendix), a province wide

approach to parent involvement has been initiated. For the purposes of this policy analysis, the term "parent engagement" (Pushor, 2007, p. 3), as defined by Pushor (2007) will be used when distinguishing between the "engaged" (Pushor, 2007, p. 3) approach, and the "involved" approach (Pushor, 2007, p. 2). In addition to the focus on involving parents, the establishment of this policy has also increased the focus on teacher effectiveness in working with families, in particular in working with diverse families, in this province. Experienced teachers and staff, as well as novices coming out of pre-service education are expected to effectively engage parents in their children's education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005).

The main goal of this policy, and other parent involvement initiatives, is to make education a joint venture between professionals and parents in order to improve children's educational outcomes (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005; Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). As stated at the outset of this paper, research demonstrates that parental involvement is positively correlated with student educational success (Flood & Lapp, 1995; Fullan, 2007; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001); hence, the amelioration of parent-teacher collaboration is on the current educational agenda in Ontario.

Support for Teachers to Involve Parents

Preparation of in-service teachers.

Currently, most teachers are ill prepared to work with families. New teachers, in particular, face many challenges around teaching practices, class management and especially interactions with families (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004; Hiatt-Michael, 2006). According to the American based MetLife Survey completed in 1998, parent-teacher interactions are the second highest of teacher concerns (Binns, Steinberg, & Amorosi,

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1998 as cited in Hiatt-Michael, 2006). This suggests that teachers need expanded support in the area of parent engagement, especially at the beginning of their careers when experiences with family interactions are flourishing.

Fullan (2007) suggests that the current educational system is not equipped to support teachers' socialization into the profession and many teachers are overwhelmed at the onset of their careers (Fullan, 2007). Firstly, teacher education programs provide very little preparation for the realities of the teaching profession and secondly, the induction of teachers is still in the process of being developed (Fullan, 2007; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001). According to Fullan (2007), a large proportion of novices feel they do not get adequate resources to learn the skills needed to be teachers and about one out of every four leave the teaching profession within the first five years. Correspondingly, Pelco and Reis (1999) found that "the vast majority of teachers across all grade levels believed they needed in-service education before they would be effective in involving families in their students' education" (p.274). Without appropriate support, new teachers feel unprepared and unable to provide the quality of services that are required of them. If teachers are to meet the current demands of the education system, they require appropriate pre-service training, and continuing support and resources for working with families in an effective and responsive manner (Mogens & Lasson, 2002; Achinstein & Barrett, 2004).

As Hiatt-Michael (2006) argues, teacher preparation programs provide a foundation in teaching skills and subject content delivery, while neglecting the interpersonal aspect of the teaching profession, which include: "empathy, communication, and in-depth knowledge of the lives of the families in which their

students dwell outside the classroom" (p.12). Without appropriate preparation and professional support, beginning teachers' enthusiasm associated with involving families in the process of educating students may fade with arising challenges (Hiatt-Michael, 2006). In addition, if unprepared to form partnerships with diverse families, teachers may fear the unknown about children and families, sometimes unintentionally resisting family involvement (Hiatt-Michael, 2006; King & Goodwin, 2002). This type of resistance can undermine the fundamentals of collaboration necessary for communication between families and teachers (Flood & Lapp, 1995).

Thus, a key way to support teachers with the wide array of expectations associated with parent involvement is to rethink teacher education programs so that they can prepare teachers for sensitive and reflective practice in diverse school contexts (Fullan, 2007; Pelco & Ries, 1999; Tichenor, 1997). Indeed, Tichenor (1997) found that pre-service students, whether at the beginning or the end of the education program, recognized an overall need for more direct interactions with parents. Participants in the study also expressed a need for more classes directly pertaining to parent involvement practices and relevant program implementation. In addition to in-class activities, practicum experiences were seen as an imperative way to connect theory and practice related to working with children and their families (Tichenor, 1997).

Research by Swick (1997) supports a need for the restructuring of teacher education programs through the involvement of parents in the process of teacher education. Swick (1997) found that by drawing on the expertise of families, teachers gain various insights about family strengths and resources, have an improved comprehension of parent involvement strategies, and are more motivated to initiate

relationships with families. Likewise, in their review of research and scholarly practice, Baum and Swick (2008) support the reorganization of teacher education programs to foster key dispositions that teachers need in order to form effective and empowering partnerships with families. These findings highlight the importance of teacher preparation in terms of self-reflection, as well as the deconstruction of certain biases and beliefs. However, the suggestions for teacher education program improvements lack clarity and detail in terms of changes to the curriculum design (Baum & Swick, 2008).

Finally, in a qualitative study that used surveys from teachers in pre-service education programs, Epstein & Sanders (2006) found that most teacher education programs in the United States offer some preparation for forming school-family partnerships, but that the education and training is insufficient in preparing educators to create meaningful programs in the context of school, family and community partnerships. As with the studies previously discussed, the results from this study suggest that prospective teachers require more training and courses specific to forming partnerships.

Liaison programs.

In addition to teacher training, there are a variety of ways that in-service teachers can be supported in their efforts at increasing family involvement within the school level. In a study of school, family and community partnerships, Sanders (2008) found that liaison programs, if properly implemented, could provide tremendous support for teachers in initiating and sustaining parent involvement. Sanders' (2008) study showed that liaisons offer four direct roles: "services to families who are at risk, support for teacher outreach, support for school-based partnership teams, and data for program

improvement" (p. 295). Indirectly, parent liaisons can play a vital role in establishing the necessary components needed for sustainable parent-teacher collaboration.

School personnel.

In a study, conducted by Pelco and Ries (1999) they demonstrate that school psychologists can play an active role in supporting teachers' abilities to involve parents by: "expanding teachers' professional role constructions to include more family-school collaboration, improving teachers' feelings of self-efficacy for implementing meaningful partnership practices, and increasing teachers' perceptions of invitations and opportunities for increasing family involvement in education" (p. 274). Through working with teachers and families, school psychologists can become part of the collaboration model and apply their expertise to enhance family involvement processes (Pelco & Reis, 1999). By promoting interdisciplinary practice, schools can provide ongoing support for teacher-parent collaboration, leading to an increase in parent involvement.

Principals.

Efforts by in-service teachers at family involvement must be supported by principals as key agents of change within a school environment (Fullan, 2007). Explicit integration of family-school-community involvement strategies within teacher pre-service education and principal licensing programs are two of the major recommendations by Hiatt-Michael (2006). He found that along with teachers, school administrators play a major role in supporting family involvement by "establish[ing] the tone for parent and community involvement" (p. 17) beyond the classroom and within the entire school setting. Due to the nature of a principal's limited stay at any given school, specialized training in the area of relationship building with families and communities

can be helpful to family-school-community involvement (Hiatt-Michael, 2006). If teachers and principals are active in involving families and children in the process of education, the settings change and a new cultural model of teaching can be formed; one that is inclusive and represents the entire community (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001).

Demographics of teacher candidates; race, gender and class.

Aside from re-visioning teacher education, another issue that must be addressed is the dominant "White and female" teaching force (Hodgkinson, 1994 as cited in Edgar, Patton, & Day-Vines, 2002). In his study using narratives from pre-service teachers, Solomon (1997) emphasizes the differences between the identity constructions of white teachers versus minority teachers. Solomon (1997) found that white teachers are more likely to acquire an identity grounded in dominant pedagogical approaches, while minority teachers actively build a meaningful identity grounded in ethnicity and race. Whereas white teachers are less likely to question systemic issues around diversity due to their identification with the dominant system, minority teachers have a more acute awareness of pedagogy reflective of diversity issues (Solomon, 1997). These findings are encouraging in that research on minority teachers, although very limited (Swick, 1997; Tichenor, 1997), highlights the benefits of recruiting minority teachers and simultaneously promotes a shift towards establishing a diverse group of educators in Ontario.

Furthermore, recruitment of teacher candidates needs to be representative of the diverse Canadian population. In order to accomplish this kind of representation the Ministry of Education must provide working conditions suitable and supportive of the diverse population of teachers including minority teacher candidates, who may face

barriers to establishing an educational career in Ontario. By hiring a diverse workforce, the Ministry will endorse values that demonstrate respect for all participants of the public education system.

With regard to the issue of gender, society as a whole must begin to value the work that is done with children of all ages, including the important role that parents play in this process (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a), so that stereotypes around education being the sole responsibility of females may be eliminated (Edgar, Patton, & Day-Vines, 2002).

Finally, another concern for teacher recruitment is that the "middle-class Caucasian values and perspectives" permeate educational research, practice as well as structural conditions (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2005, p. 392). This results, in a dominant group of educators that are not only White and female (Hodgkinson, 1994 as cited in Edgar, Patton, & Day-Vines, 2002), but also primarily from middle class backgrounds (Gall et al., 2005).

Changing practice.

As part of a democratic system, all children and families should have the opportunity to fully partake in the process of education and teachers as well as principals and administrative staff are responsible for creating a welcoming atmosphere that promotes collective empowerment (Edgar et al., 2002; A. P. Turnbull, Turbiville, & H.R. Turnbull, 2000; Hiatt-Michael, 2006). In order for teachers to accomplish the aforementioned task, their domains of responsibility must shift beyond the classroom door, onto families and communities, as well as school-wide improvements (Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001). In their study, Edgar and colleagues (2002) found that teachers can

fulfill the latter duties in four ways: to collaborate with families in setting common goals; reconnect with their own experiences in order to become aware of their understanding of the world; maintain ongoing reflection in order to break down stereotypes and biases; take the time to build relationships with families in order to understand and acknowledge each family's experience.

Family Knowledge and Background within the Classroom

Cultural education is the process through which teachers authenticate and support the practices, values and languages of the cultures represented by students in the classroom (Edgar et al., 2002). The inclusion of cultural education is an ongoing debate on the path of educating children because it is a challenging task for teachers to represent all families, while remaining sensitive to and aware of everyone desiring to partake in the process (Edgar et al., 2002). For the aforementioned reasons, cultural education cannot be addressed as a separate issue from parent involvement; the two are interdependent because it is families and communities that hold knowledge and are part of the integral context that contributes to the child's disposition and cultural understanding (Ada & Campoy, 2004; Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon & Amanti, 2005; Walsh, 2005). The research project completed by Gonzalez et al. (2005) and included in the edited book entitled *Funds of Knowledge for Teaching in Latino Households* is founded on a goal of establishing a strength-based approach that recognizes and draws on family resources, rather than the more typical, pathological approach that focuses on family deficits.

This approach requires teachers to engage in ongoing reflection and critical pedagogy (Ada & Campoy, 2004), which can "produce the knowledge necessary to transform their teaching in positive ways" (Gonzalez et al., 2005, p. 91). Gonzalez et al

(2005) assert that teachers hold transformative potential by seeing households as holding "funds of knowledge" (p.). One example is bookmaking, which can be used as a way to bring in household funds of knowledge into the classroom and a way for teachers to learn about their students (Ada & Campoy, 2004; Gonzalez et al., 2005). Teacher practices reflective of incorporating household funds of knowledge into the classroom will be further explored shortly.

Another benefit of incorporating family experience into the classroom is the achievement of a mutual understanding for everyone involved. Through their study, Gonzalez et al. (2005) found that "[a]s the participants in this project become co-learners and co-constructors of knowledge, environments for a probing disposition of mind can be meaningfully and effectively created" (p. 11). Likewise, from their case study data of twenty schools, Harris and Goodall (2008) concluded that family-school partnerships are most successful when teachers remain open to the diverse range of parental beliefs about their own involvement. Furthermore, teachers must guide and support parent involvement in the learning that takes place at home (Harris & Goodall, 2008). During the process of families and teachers learning from one another, trusting relationships are formed and provide a basis for critical consciousness (Gonzalez et al., 2005); participants collaborate in an effort to construct knowledge that authenticates everyone's experience.

Barriers to Parent Involvement

The inclusion of a community's cultures within a classroom, on the level of the school as well as in home-school partnerships holds many challenges due to the multiple dynamics involved in the process. In terms of the school population, Sanders (2008) noted that "student diversity, although arguably an asset in schools, is likely to increase

the difficulty of home-school partnerships" (p. 288). Only a conscious effort to establish and maintain shared decision making by everyone can provide sustainable parent-school partnerships (Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Sanders, 2008). Similarly, Flood and Lapp (1995) found that successful parent-teacher collaboration is based on "true" parent participation, defined as "the processes, purposes, and practices of teachers' teaching and children's learning" (p. 617). In other words, sustainable partnerships require teachers to view parents as caring and essential partners in their children's educational experience.

Although successful parent-teacher collaboration is based on open communication, transparency and teacher flexibility, some teachers use favouritism by pleasing parents in order to maintain negotiation and avoid parent intrusion into their practices (Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv, 2008). Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv's (2008) study suggests that teachers tend to employ strategies, which they believe suit the unique relationship that is between them and a parent. As a result, employing uniquely matched strategies may contradict teachers' established assumptions about *best* parent-teacher relationship-building approaches and even lead to a shift in beliefs. Unless, as pointed out by Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv's (2008), the teacher's motivation to have a match between the approach and the family stems solely from a professional need to maintain classroom boundaries. In correspondence to the above findings, Achinstein & Barrett's (2004) study results suggest that teachers' pre-existing frames and beliefs guide the way they interact with parents. From the above research, it is clear that both, teachers' beliefs as well as relationship-building practices that are conducive to the professional needs of teachers, guide their interactions with parents. In light of this research, policies regarding parent involvement in schools should address the

professional needs of teachers (maintaining certain classroom boundaries) as well as their belief systems, which ultimately guide parent-teacher interactions.

When addressing teacher beliefs and professional needs, principals are an accessible gateway for the ongoing provision of support, resources and current information to teachers. As discussed earlier in the section on principals, Addi-Raccah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) report that principals and other staff in the school play a minor role in advising teachers as to their role associated with parent involvement, resulting in a lack of support for beginning teachers. Results from Hiatt-Michael's (2006) as well as Addi-Raccah & Arviv-Elyashiv's (2008) studies point out that sustainable family-school partnerships require principals to be active participants alongside teachers, providing ongoing support and professional development, while valuing family members as caring and essential partners in all educational processes. Thus, a successful family-school partnership involves a framework supportive of trusting relationships between principals, teachers and parents, while validating the needs of everyone involved.

Another barrier to parent involvement can arise from a misunderstanding of parental needs and values. Results from McDermott and Rothenberg's (2000) study reveal that some urban parents deliberately choose to remain uninvolved in school related activities. In their study they found that urban parental non-participation stems from a lack of trust toward some teachers who have shown biased kinds of behaviours as well as lack of trust for the school system, which guides itself by "established white American interests" (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000, para. 28) and does not account for the needs of minorities. Met Life's 1998 survey results also assert that families living in urban

areas demonstrate limited involvement in their children's education due to teachers' rigid concepts around family involvement (Binns, Steinberg, & Amorosi, 1998 as cited in Hiatt-Michael, 2006). As proposed in the research presented above, teacher practices based on deeply seated beliefs and assumptions about parent involvement affect the quantity and quality of family involvement in schools (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000).

Theoretical Underpinnings of Parent Involvement

In addition to a focus on equity and equitable outcomes, another underpinning of the belief that parent involvement in children's education is vital can be identified within contemporary developmental theories, such as in socio-cultural theories that suggest that culture is one of the most, if not the utmost, significant spheres of a child's experience (Walsh, 2005). Other theories that can support parent involvement are Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as well as Super and Harkness' model of the ``developmental niche`` (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008; Super & Harkness, 2002).

Socio-cultural theories of development, such as the ecological systems theory and the ``developmental niche`` are tools that can be used to explain how the social context influences the behaviour of any group of people found in any given context. Socio-cultural theories of development explain child development as an active process of interactions between the individual and multiple systems or contexts (biology, culture and history) (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008; Walsh, 2005). Unlike, Piaget's, Erikson's and Kohlberg's dominant development theories that focus on sequences and follow an ages and stages model; when looking at child development from a socio-cultural perspective, development is rather spontaneous and subjective to the context that a child is living in (Walsh, 2005).

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As suggested by ecological systems theory and the model of the ``developmental niche,`` an individual's behaviour develops through the dynamic interaction of different systems, and is continuously adapting throughout the lifespan (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008). Both, the child/family and teacher/school are part of the processes and interactions that take place within the interdependent system, where all relationships have bidirectional influences. The entire system is in constant motion, affecting the continuously changing meaning of education, for the child, family, staff and school. As a result of the ongoing shift in meaning, every individual interprets education and communicates knowledge in a unique and different way across time (Edgar et al., 2002). The reason for this lies in every person's interaction with the world, which is distinctive in every case. Current research emphasizes that children are part of a complex and dynamic system of various contexts, which influence their behaviour as well as understanding of the world (Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008; Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006; Super & Harkness, 2002). As interpreted through constructivist and systems theories; in order for children to develop a positive self-identity they need parental involvement to facilitate their understanding of where they come from and what their roots are, so that they can acknowledge and make sense of their personal experience (Ada & Campoy, 2004; Gardiner & Kosmitzki, 2008).

The notion of "bi-directionality" has received increasing attention in developmental psychology. In his study, Lasky (2000) addresses the ``bi-directional`` relationships between many different variables that influence parent-teacher interactions and, therefore, the emotions that teachers experience. Lasky's (2000) findings demonstrate that a teacher's emotional experience associated with family-teacher

interactions is influenced by a mixture of variables such as their beliefs and values, which arise out of the culture of teaching as well as personal experience. Teachers often hold deeply entrenched beliefs that prevent them from experiencing emotionally positive interactions with parents (Lasky, 2000). As proposed by Ada & Campoy (2004), as well as Flood & Lapp (1995), it is through the sharing of diverse experiences, that everyone's empathy and respect is cultivated. The open exchange between families and schools leads to teachers' in-depth understanding of each family and facilitates awareness of biases, assumptions or prejudices (Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). Also, the linguistic or cultural involvement of parents provides students with affirmation of their own reality and places value on their cultural and linguistic experiences (Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). In short, the presence of parents alleviates pressures associated with students having to fit into the dominant system.

In his article, Walsh (2005) points out that early education is a multifaceted undertaking that requires sound practices based on various theoretical perspectives as well as scientific research. Unfortunately, professionals who work with children often base their practices on prescribed theoretical approaches, such as developmental psychology, from which many beliefs and attitudes are created (Fullan, 2007; Mogens & Lasson, 2002) . This can have a significant influence on the way teachers interpret family roles within the school context and around educating children. Professionals need to be aware of how they are being influenced by the dominant discourse on child development that views children contextually (without culture) and become conscious of the hegemony trickling through policies, laws and media. Such a conscientious and comprehensive approach to working with families can lead to equitable education for

students. Children need to be recognized as complex human beings, part of different systems and affected by a variety of biological, historical and social experiences that they carry around with them. Hence, professionals need developmental theories but they should also remain open to the ever-changing research, while keeping an open mind to different views on child development.

The principles behind the Bilingual Education approach to teaching, supports the concept of parent involvement (Ada & Campoy, 2004). This theory is currently emerging as an important practice in the education system (Ada & Campoy, 2004). Bilingual Education validates families' linguistic and cultural backgrounds by inviting them to use their home language throughout the process of their child's education (Ada & Campoy, 2004; Flood & Lapp, 1995). According to Flood and Lapp (1995), teachers working in schools with a diverse student population, "needed to rely heavily on parents to develop an environment that was linguistically and culturally relevant for the children" (p. 614). In order to fully engage students, teachers need to bring household funds of knowledge right into the classroom (Gonzalez et al., 2005). One benefit is that children have an opportunity to interact with a variety of parents, which leads to a more comprehensive understanding of cultural backgrounds and fosters cultural sensitivity (Lasky, 2000).

Summary and Directions for Future Research on Parent Involvement

While there is a vast amount of research and literature that includes information about the variables affecting family involvement in schools, there are still many relevant research areas missing from this body of knowledge. Overall, the available research and literature is of American origin and not always applicable to a Canadian context. Further

research that directly reflects Canadian schools, communities, children and families can be more applicable in shaping Canadian school policies. Most of the recommendations suggested in the research studies reviewed in this paper focus on teacher preparation and support (Fullan, 2007; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001; Achinstein & Barrett, 2004; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Pelco & Ries, 1999; Tichenor, 1997; Hiatt-Michael, 2006). However, there is limited literature concerning teacher effectiveness based on values, beliefs, and dispositions (Hiatt-Michael, 2006; Baum & Swick, 2008). Furthermore, there is inadequate research on how teacher education programs can better prepare teacher candidates for working in various communities. Based on their study of family involvement in urban schools, McDermott & Rothenberg (2000) suggest that teacher preparation programs must improve their curricula and practicum experiences connected to forming relationships with urban families. Research on effective structuring of teacher education programs to prepare teachers for home-school partnerships could be a potential area for further exploration.

In addition, there is limited understanding about the kinds of knowledge and expertise that parents can bring into the classroom. Insights to parental perceptions, beliefs, knowledge and experiences with school involvement may prove essential in establishing mutual responsiveness between families and schools. Parent groups such as *People for Education* and *Toronto Parent Network* may be a good place to start looking at how families interpret the notion of parent involvement. Once parents are recognized as having valuable and practical knowledge, barriers to parent participation can be removed (Pushor, 2007). In order to take into account diverse family values, needs and beliefs, it is beneficial for school professionals to learn in bidirectional ways: through

reflection, observation and listening to constructive feedback. This practice leads to critical pedagogy (Ada & Campoy, 2004); where all service providers accommodate their practice to the dynamics of the setting in a culturally sensitive way and develop a critical approach to research and information presented by the professional authority. Educators as the dominant decision-makers who shape school policies and practices (Pushor, 2007) must realize that schooling is a complex, ever-changing venture, which requires an open exchange of information between all stakeholders.

The future direction of this field requires that studies focus on schools that are successful at creating and sustaining family-school partnerships. This kind of approach may help to identify the factors that lead to successful family engagement, in order to provide an exemplar for school staff and inform teacher preparation programs. In addition, further studies may investigate the continuity of pre-service education and induction programs and the impact on family-school partnerships.

Finally, another way to understand how parent involvement is conceptualized in a Canadian context is to examine documents, such as policy documents, which is the focus of the present study. Analyses of policies using different perspectives or theoretical frameworks, such as Feminism, Critical Race, Queer and Disabilities Theory, to name a few, can uncover biases and assumptions that reinforce marginalization, entrenched in the language as well as process of policy formation. Furthermore, if policy examiners recognize policy as a process that aims to advance social wellbeing, then policy goals can be continuously adjusted to meet the needs of all families. Hence, the focus on policy as a process (creation, implementation and ongoing assessment) is critical in resolving any

impeding policy delivery issues linked to differences in the conceptualization of parent involvement.

Background Regarding the Development of a Parent Involvement Policy in Ontario

In 1993 the Minister of Education and Training established the Ontario Parent Council (OPC); a step to increasing parent involvement in schools in the province of Ontario through a provincial level parent advisory model. OPC members, appointed by the Minister of Education, were responsible for advising the Minister on various educational issues, including parent involvement. All OPC members were required to have children in the public education system and demonstrate an inclination to participate in educational improvement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). In 1994, the government required the OPC to provide a report on the functionality of school councils across Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). Two recommendations came out of this report: the first outlined the need for parental participation at the school level, and the second focused on the need to have school parent councils within each school. These recommendations surfaced to ensure accessibility for all parents and a standard approach to parental involvement throughout Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a).

In 1995, the provincial level Royal Commission on Learning (RCL) identified a need for schools to strengthen their connections with the surrounding community so that they would find pathways of collaboration that best matched the characteristics of the area (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). Following the RCL's report, the Ministry of Education decided it was necessary to establish school councils that would be accountable to individual school boards and "could assist principals by advising them

how parents can best be contacted and encouraged to participate more in the education of their children and in the life of the school" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 11).

In 1998, Ontario's Education Improvement Commission (EIC) set up by the provincial government, identified three recommendations that would allow school councils to focus on enhancing student learning: involve parents and community in education, participate in the initial planning stages of school initiatives, and impact on all decisions made by various constituents within the education system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a).

However, between 1999 and 2004, the OPC was mainly contacted by parents and school council representatives due to parental frustrations concerning the lack of an education ombudsman, as well as parental lack of access to choice in action, when faced with problems. As a result, this reflected a perceived inability on the part of parents for the OPC to intervene when problems arose (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a); potentially fostering a lack of parental trust in the power of parent council groups and the public education system as a whole. In addition, school councils were appealing for more support, clear procedures and increased control of school funds. As a result of the issues that were brought forth by parents and school councils, the OPC proposed three main solutions: create an email database of all school council members, ratify legislation that outlines how boards are to distribute funds to school councils, and create a web site with full access to parents and school councils (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a).

In March of 2005, the *Parent Voice in Education Project* (PVEP), lead by parent leaders from across Ontario, was presented to the Minister of Education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). This report consisted of suggestions made by parents as

well as recommendations from all levels of the education system (Ministry of Education, Provincial Board of Parents, Ministry of Education's District Offices, School Boards and Schools). One of the recommendations at the Ministry of Education level was to "develop and begin implementation of a provincial Parental Involvement Policy" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a, p. 20), which set out a priority of creating a partnership between parents and schools with the main goal of benefiting students. In addition to student educational success, this initiative is driven by other goals, such as a the restructuring of the Ministry, which includes an Office of Parent Engagement and parent group support from regional offices; school council involvement at the school and board level; and a new parent board that advises the Office of Parent Engagement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a).

The Ministry of Education developed the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* (OPIP) in 2005. Previous to the development of the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*, the *Parent Voice in Education Project* (PVEP) was carried out in order to collect and present policy design recommendations made by parents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). The policy came into existence within the context of educational reform concerned with "developing partners in education" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 1) and guided by insights from the *Education Partnership Table*, which is a forum that allows for policy development input from the "education sector" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, para. 1). The *Education Partnership Table* has been intended to provide participants with an avenue for collectively resolving concerns or issues before further negotiation measures need to be considered (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). Although, parents contributed their ideas to the formation of the policy

indirectly through the *Parent Voice in Education Project*, it is unclear whether parents were, at any stage, directly involved in the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* development.

Research Questions

1.   How does or does not the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* represent the diverse families of Ontario?

2.   How is parent involvement discussed implicitly and explicitly in this policy?

3.   Who is included within the policy and/or who is silenced? Are certain stakeholders ignored?

4.   How does or does not the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* promote parent involvement?

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this study, I adopt the use of critical theory in that the focus of my analysis will be on looking at power imbalances in the Ministry's *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* document. Critical theory research involves a set of approaches directed at the close examination and critique of society. Critical theory involves examining issues of equity and explicit and implicit power relationships within government established agencies, services, as well as the overall community (Ada & Campoy, 2004; Gall et al., 2005).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) "emphasizes the relations between language and power and the role of discourse analysis in social and cultural critique" (Wood & Kroger, 2000, p. 205). CDA will be used to analyze the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*. While theoretical approaches to conducting CDA vary, and the appropriateness depends on the type of study, CDA will be adopted in this study as it is arguably the best

suited for thoroughly and consistently identifying the dominant discourses embedded in the policy document (Wood & Kroger, 2000).

More specifically, for the purposes of this research study, the focus will be on the analysis of written language text, while remaining aware of the other two forms of analysis: "analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 2 as cited in Wood & Kroger). Through the use of CDA, the discourse patterns within the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* will be examined in order to expose any implicit or explicit power relationships (Gall et al., 2005; Widdowson, 2007). According to Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999) discourse can be described as "language used to construct some aspect of reality from a particular perspective" (p. 63). In this case the language used in the policy document is influenced by the perspectives of the policymakers. As part of CDA, critical linguistics will be applied, to reveal patterns of written form, such as word use within different parts of the document (Wood & Kroger, 2000), that may reinforce traditional social and/or educational practices which marginalize certain groups of people (Gall et al., 2005; Ada & Campoy, 2004). Three different discourses present within the policy are identified: **good parenting; parents as barriers to normative practice; parents as a uniform group.** Also, unsaid discourses are also identified. These include: **issues concerning communication between parents and schools; and families with children with special needs.**

Widdowson (2007) suggests that there is a disjunction between the intention of the written text producer and interpretation by the receiver. In the context of this study,

the former is the educational system and the latter are the stakeholders (educators, principals, families, students). The disconnection between the intended policy function and its interpretation by stakeholders can occur if texts are constructed solely by the producer without input from the receiver(s); leaving a piece of writing susceptible to biased messages, assumptions and omissions that oppress the receiving group of people (Gall et al., 2005). By analyzing the design process of the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*, any potential for disconnection between producer and receiver will hopefully be born out. Gall et al. (2005) argue that through the process of critical analysis one can reveal "the role of schools and other institutions in silencing or muting the voices of nonprivileged groups and thereby perpetuating hegemony" (p. 392). For this study, I will also use CDA to determine the presence or lack of input from stakeholders, and if the potential input and/or suggestions have been incorporated into the policy.

Through the application of CDA, I will engage in deconstructing the implicit and explicit policy components that may hold underlying assumptions about parent involvement (Ada & Campoy, 2004; Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999). By uncovering potential issues around equity and lack of inclusion, I can suggest potential changes to the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* (Ada & Campoy, 2004).

Fairclough and Wodak (1997 as cited in Wood and Kroger, 2000) propose eight different ways of applying CDA: "French discourse analysis; critical linguistics, social semiotics; sociocultural change and change in discourse; socio-cognitive studies; discourse-historical method; reading analysis; . . . the Duisburg School [; and critical feminist studies]" (p. 205). All of the abovementioned approaches differ in various ways, such as the comparative weight placed on the text versus the social and the linkage

between these two media (Wood & Kroger, 2000). Under the critical linguistics branch, there are three separate approaches; the first, social semiotics is used for analyzing socially constructed processes; the second, sociocultural change is the connection between linguistic and social deconstruction; and the third is socio-cognitive studies determined to uncover political hegemony (Wood & Kroger, 2000).

Analysis of the Discourses Identified in the OPIP (see Appendix A)

Discourse One – "Good Parenting"

Within the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*, parent involvement is defined as: "good parenting, helping with homework, serving on school councils and board or provincial committees, communicating and meeting with teachers, and volunteering in the classroom or on school trips" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 3). This definition is problematic for many reasons that will be further explored.

When looking at the Ministry's use of the term "good parenting" it is unclear what this concept comprises (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). Furthermore, by using such a broad term as "good parenting," the Ministry leaves it open to the interpretation of individual parents, as well as all other stakeholders, which may lead to the formation of very different beliefs about the concept (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). Furthermore, it is unclear where this concept comes from and according to whose definition of "good parenting" has been incorporated into the policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). Based on the policy and the above analysis it is fair to suggest that the policy makers have incorporated this term into the policy based on their own assumption of what constitutes a "good" parent or "good parenting."

When looking at the definition's assumed parental responsibility for helping with homework it is important to note that there are many parents in Ontario for whom English is not the first language (Statistics Canada, 2009), which poses a challenge for parental input in homework assignments. This kind of Ministry imposed parental responsibility may be overwhelming and disempowering for many parents in Ontario as they often do not have the language skills needed to clearly understand classroom practices, the functionality of the educational system, and various strategies incorporated into the school curriculum (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Bernhard, & Freire, 2001).

Social class is another barrier that deters parents from helping with homework tasks or maintaining communication with the school, and may work against the policy stated definition of parent involvement. McDermott and Rothenberg (2000) found that depending on social class, there are differences in parental views of roles and responsibilities associated with school involvement. Families living in a low socio-economic status feel disempowered, due to a lack of understanding of the system and perceive education as the sole responsibility of the school (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Whereas middle class families feel more at equal footing with the school and are more likely to collaborate (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Furthermore, parents are more likely to participate if they recognize their input as valuable and their skills as helpful in the process (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Depending on previous experiences with the school system and existent assumptions, parental feelings of ineffectiveness may jeopardize any chance of their contribution to children's learning (McDermott & Rothenberg, 2000). Both, social class and parental feelings of efficacy work as variables that either promote or discourage parental engagement in schools.

In Canada, besides language or social class barriers, parents often experience "strong assimilative pressures," which is another challenge imposed upon them by the dominant educational institution (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2001, p. 128). Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2001) argue that in order to accomplish a shared vision between diverse families and schools, the educational system must enforce democratic practices that support the cultivation of all children's "cultural and linguistic backgrounds" along with recognition for challenges of learning English as a new language (Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., 2001, p. 138). All families must be respected and honoured in the process, even if parents choose to remain uninvolved or involved at a minimal level.

The underlying belief that appears to be guiding this definition is that all parents have the same kinds of needs in terms of school involvement and all parents are willing or able to act out the Ministry's expectations. The definitive statement outlining parent involvement draws attention to the Ministry's subjective and limited notion of what parent involvement is supposed to look like. Overall, the Ministry's definition is a very limited notion of parent involvement if, for example, compared to Epstein's (2006) definition, which explicitly identifies six types of involvement, including various partnership practices; or when compared to Pushor's (2007) definition of family engagement, which is founded on an awareness of various boundaries that prevent meaningful parent participation within the school system. "Parent engagement," as described by Pushor (2007) is a practical approach that also involves taking a closer look at the process of involving parents and establishing respect through mutual collaboration.

Since the activities are suggested for all parents, it is evident that there is an embedded assumption that all parents have an understanding about the benefits of

volunteering within the school and other school related activities. The definition seems to be founded on a desire to benefit the school system, as most parents prefer to be involved in informal ways, rather than participating in education by serving on large-scale, formal committees (Russel & Granville, 2005).

The policy implies that there must be universality within parent involvement, by suggesting that "all parents will be asked to become involved to some extent" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 4). Once again, there is a prescribed notion that *all* parents should value practices connected to parental school involvement and it must be a mandatory requirement, otherwise there will be substantial risk posed to students. Additionally, within the aforementioned expectations, there is no consideration for parent schedules or responsibilities outside of children's education, such as work or other obligations, for example, childcare, elder care and so forth.

Finally, as part of the Ministry's definition, parents are expected to join in and participate in the previously established school structures, activities and routines, which leaves no room for a broad range of parent suggested genre of participation. In other words, parents are delivered a definition through the policy, and are not offered an opportunity to create a common vision of meaningful parent involvement. Perhaps a better understanding of parental needs, values and expectations would set the tone for creating a vision that would sustain partnerships between schools, parents and communities.

Examining explicit and implicit policy outcomes in the OPIP

The OPIP notes the potential challenges that may surface as a result of this parent involvement initiative taking place in a province as diverse as Ontario and hopes to

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"improve the dynamics within the system to overcome barriers, anticipate the potential issues, and foster new attitudes about healthy levels of parent engagement" (p. 2). When addressing the formation of new attitudes, it is unclear as to whose (parents, teachers, students, principals, or school boards) attitudes the Ministry is referring. In terms of fostering new attitudes in parents, the Ministry does not offer an operational definition that may guide professionals and parent groups in this process. Such a statement is left for the interpretation of individual stakeholders and may result in a patch-work of attempts to carry out this objective. In contrast, if the process to fostering new attitudes in parents is left open-ended, as it currently stands, it may not be as dogmatic and may encourage innovative ideas or approaches.

Russel & Granville (2005) surveyed parents in Scotland, particularly those of minority groups who would not typically contribute their opinions related to parent involvement. Russel & Granville (2005) found that parents had variable ideas about what their involvement in children's education should look like and what frequency as well as duration of participation they should contribute, for example many parents were aware of the school's requirement of their participation and were willing to offer a minimal and basic contribution into the education of their children. The concepts around school involvement that parents hold are founded in deeply rooted beliefs and assumptions about the role of the teacher versus the role of the parent (Russel & Granville, 2005). Parents construct beliefs and assumptions as a result of past experiences with the school system or due to a lack of factual information about the positive impact that their role can have (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a; People for Education, 2009; Russel & Granville, 2005). According to the aforementioned findings most parents are willing to participate

in their children's education on a fundamental level that encourages positive behaviours, such as respect and punctuality. When looking at the composition of the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*, the policymaking body must remain aware of their assumptions around parental expectations versus parents' willingness to participate at the expected level and their understanding of what is required of them.

While the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005b) recognizes the benefits of parent involvement on student success, but "also believes that a proper parent involvement program will be a tremendous asset to the education system with benefits for teachers, principals, supervisory officials, directors, ministry officials, and the public" (p. 3). The focus on parent involvement seems to be lost when it is approached as an organized venue for school improvement. Parents are mainly interested in providing a good education for their children (Fullan, 2007; Golan & Petersen, 2002). However, the policy expectations go beyond parental interests in their children's education and venture into a cost-benefit perspective on parent involvement. Perhaps, the policymaking body operates in a neo-liberal economic context that thrives on deregulation as one of its components (Martinez & Garcia, 2000). With an educational context that is under the pressures of deregulation, policymakers may feel pressured to focus policy goals on increasing profits to the government; and what better way then to engage parents as cooperative volunteers in education (Martinez & Garcia, 2000).

The Ministry of Education asserts in this policy document that "there is general agreement within education that parents have an obvious contribution to make from their close and valid perspective on the system" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 3). However, according to the parents that were interviewed for the *Parent Voice in*

Education Project, the input or opinions from parents are rarely accepted, encouraged or valued (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). Therefore, there cannot be "general agreement" on this issue if according to the *Parent Voice in Education Project* parental opinions are usually denied (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). In addition, the former part of this quotation concerning the "general agreement within education" is unsupported by research data and is simply a generalization that is unclear about who are the people that demonstrate "agreement" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 3). Likewise, the latter part of this statement is not only unsupported by research but is in contradiction with findings postulated by established researchers in the field of education. From her research on family and community involvement, Epstein (2006) notes that due to widespread parental unfamiliarity with the school system, parents are often intimidated to approach teachers with questions. Furthermore, parents are unsure of what the content of their communication should be as a result of their lack of information about the meaning of education (Epstein, 2006). Similarly, Fullan (2007) suggests that parents of different social classes and with various levels of education are often "bewildered . . . [and] uncomfortable in dealing with the school" (p. 188). Although, parents who are highly educated may have an easier time communicating with the school, than parents who are not educated, it is still difficult to grasp the complexities of educational change (Fullan, 2007).

Perhaps what the Ministry of Education is implicitly suggesting through this policy is that parents *should become* part of the process of school system reform. Perhaps, the Ministry intends to involve parents in school reform initiatives and even recognizes the potential benefits. From the perspective of parents however, what seems

to be overlooked is that the concept of educational change can be very overwhelming for parents, especially when manageable information has yet to be provided to families in a systematic way (Fullan, 2007; Turnbull, Turbiville & Turnbull, 2000). As noted in the PVEP, one of the major parental concerns was the need for the Ministry to deliver information in a more consistent and comprehensive way (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). That way, parents can remain up-to-date with the current school-level as well as provincial-level activities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). As outlined by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005a) in the *Parent Voice in Education Project*, parents "wanted more regular updates on their individual children's education, and they wanted access to information about the education system as a whole – about how the system works, who is responsible for what, how education is funded, what the appropriate channels are to address specific concerns, and how to be meaningfully involved in their children's education" (p. 4). In other words, parents would like to have uncomplicated information about their children's education, opportunities to provide feedback, and be aware of specific ways to support their children. Although, the above stated parental recommendations are all woven into the objectives within the OPIP and addressed as part of family-school communication outcomes for school boards; a concern here is that the objectives are created from the policy makers' perspective and do not necessarily represent what is meaningful from the parents' point of view.

Due to the movement toward private education, a goal on the policy agenda is the augmentation of student enrolment (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). As stated in the policy, the publicly funded education system has recently suffered a 50% increase in children moving to private schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). This may be

a result of many parents losing faith in the education system and feeling like they are

inadequately represented or not welcome to participate in ways that are suitable and

meaningful to them (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). The dissatisfaction with the

education system in Ontario is evident as parent concerns have not been taken into

account for many years and as a result parents are opting out of publicly funded

education.

Collaboration and parental choice.

Current research on school reform demonstrates that successful change can occur

if all constituents are involved in the process (Edgar, Patton & Day-Vines, 2002; Fullan,

2007; Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). In the preamble of the document, the Ministry

refers to the "new three R's: Respect, Responsibility, and Results" (p. 1) that have been

set in place as a means to creating "real partnership" (p. 1). Although, the words respect,

responsibility and result are used within the document, they do not specifically

correspond with the "new three R's" (p. 1) concept. There is no further reference to the

concept associated with the "new three R's" (p. 1) anywhere in the document or an

explanation of how it will manifest in practice.

If appropriately included and explained throughout the document, the concepts of

the "new three R's" and "real partnership" (p. 1) have the potential of opening a doorway

to the inclusion of all stakeholders in the process of change. With such a doorway in

place everyone can have the opportunity to partake in setting a common goal, which can

sustain motivation from all to meet commonly agreed-upon objectives (Edgar et al.,

2002; Fullan, 2007). The preamble also includes the word "partnership" (p. 1) four

times, emphasizing the importance of this concept at the beginning of the document.

However, when looking at the body of the document, "partnership" is only mentioned twice. Furthermore, the references to "partnership" included within the policy do not explain this concept and do not provide a vision of what it is supposed to look like in practice.

Although there are references to the concept of "partnership" within the preamble as well as body of the policy, it is unclear what the Ministry's vision is and how the concept of "partnership" will be facilitated in a meaningful way for everyone. The provincial grant model, as outlined in the OPIP, is based on the idea that "school councils . . . [need funding] for initiatives to reach parents who may find involvement more challenging due to language, recent immigration, poverty, newness to the system, or other factors" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 5). On page five, where the policy explicitly addresses diversity, as quoted above, there is an assumption that immigrant families, families for whom English is a second language as well as families living in adverse conditions, desire to be involved to the extent expected by the Ministry. The assumption is that the reason for a lack of involvement could only arise from potential barriers, not from intended parental behaviours and, thus hard to involve parents need to be *reached* and *convinced* to participate because they are bound by the challenges associated with the circumstances they are living under. The Ministry of Education fails to place value on parental choice in this matter or embrace the idea, as suggested by Golan and Petersen (2002) as well as McDermott and Rothenberg (2000) that parents may be deliberately choosing to stay uninvolved with the school system. Therefore, this policy sets out parent involvement as part of the school culture that parents must assimilate rather than starting from "real partnership" (p. 1).

The assumption that if barriers to parent involvement are alleviated, parents will be disposed to participate in the ways expected by the Ministry is inconsistent with findings outlined in the *Parent Voice in Education Project* report (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). As outlined by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005a), an approach to ensure "successful parent participation efforts. . ." (p. 10) consists of collaboration with parents and recognition of parental choice in how they would like to participate. Although, the organization of parental groups is encouraged in the policy, parents from minority groups may not even have the opportunity to contribute their opinions due to the same barriers that prevent them from participating in their children's education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). If there are barriers preventing parents from participating in school activities then such barriers also prevent parents from contributing to the formation of policies associated with parent school involvement, including the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*. Through this policy, the Ministry of Education portrays an abundance of family participation as a universal protective factor that fosters students' academic success. Whereas, families choosing not to participate in their children's schooling in the ways expected by the Ministry, are indirectly deemed inadequate. The policy is founded on a belief that parents of all backgrounds are responsible for the education of their children (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). However, this belief may contradict parental beliefs as "parental involvement is not commonly sought in school systems in other countries" (Golan & Petersen, 2002, p. 5). Although it is beneficial to provide an inviting atmosphere for parents to participate in their children's education and inform them about the benefits, pressuring parents to do so may prove to be discouraging to them.

School councils.

The Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes that currently school councils may not be fully representative of the diverse parent community (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). The Ministry suggests that "special appointments" (p. 2) may temporarily relieve this issue, until school councils recruit more representative groups of parents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). The idea of "special appointments" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 2) may unintentionally perpetuate the exclusion of marginalized groups of parents by making the appointed parents feel different and, therefore, potentially intimidated to fully partake in school council meetings. Also, the people responsible for appointing parents of minority groups are most likely part of the Caucasian, middle-class group that dominates educational institutions (Gall et al., 2005). Therefore, the suggested method of making intended appointments for parents of minority groups is subject to the biases of the person responsible for selection. Furthermore, the need to make "special appointments" perpetuates the notion that marginalized groups of parents are "special" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 2). Consequently, parents of minority groups are propagated as an addition to the group, instead of an integral part of the whole.

Discourse Two - Parents as Barriers to Normative Practice

An important question that is not answered in the policy is: how can the education system remain sensitive to all parents, with the increasing numbers of diverse families coming into Canada, particularly to major urban centres like Toronto? In the OPIP, parents are implicitly represented as a burden on the education system through two different referrals to "mediation" methods for solving disagreements as an integral part of

the parent involvement initiative (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). The Ministry (2005b) states that "A special provincial committee of parents and principals will be asked to address mutual issues at the school level including the use of mediation to resolve disputes" (p. 2) and "A special principals' and parents' project team will be established by the Minister to provide advice on a range of issues such as the use of mediation to resolve disputes and best practices for parent - school relationships" (p. 5).

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2005b) also makes an explicit reference to parent involvement as a "burden on principals for parent development" (p. 5). Also, it is unclear what the policymakers mean by "parent development" as there is no explanation of this term in the policy (p. 5). The explicit use of the word "burden" (p. 5) to describe parents reveals the policy makers` assumptions about parent involvement as an added inconvenience to principals' regular routines and usual functioning of the school.

In addition to the notion of being a "burden," parental behaviours are indirectly described to be resistant when they are labelled as "underlying resistances" in the policy document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 3). This notion of parents as *resistors* reinforces an *us versus them* approach to education; the former being the school system and the latter being the parents. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2005b) does note that teachers may play a role in this "resistance" when the document notes that in previous years, teachers' perceptions of parents with concerns as "problem" or as "super" parents may have led to an overall parent resistance to involvement initiatives (p. 3). However, the Ministry (2005b) document also states that in previous years "parent agendas" have been "overwhelming the main education agenda," which may also affect stakeholders' willingness to accept parent involvement initiatives (p. 3). It is important

to note that categorizing "parent agendas" as separate from the "main education agenda" reaffirms the, *us versus them* approach, as previously mentioned (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 3). It is evident that the representatives of the education system recognize parents who challenge teachers, even if it is with valid questions, as a threat to the school structure. Therefore, within this policy, parent involvement can be inferred to be a form of a *parent aggression prevention strategy.*

Based on these quotations from the policy, one can argue that the initiative to involve parents stems from the embedded assumption that if parents are denied the opportunity to participate in the school reform decision-making process, they may resist the initiative and pose a risk to teacher reputation or the entire structure of the education system. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2005b) suggests that any parental conflicts arising from concerns are to be avoided through "proactive [instead of reactive] measures" (p.3). For example, as set out in the policy, this must take the form of a parent group that is organized and has a conflict prevention plan in place (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). In this case, the Ministry of Education's vision of parental involvement potentially includes an expectation of parents to withhold personal opinions in an effort to avoid conflict. Research by McDermott and Rothenberg (2000) supports the idea of conflict avoidance by administrators as they found that "Administrators would bow to the easiest solution, and encourage [urban teachers] to avoid future problems with parents" (p. 11). A lack of urban teacher support, promotes the notion of parent concerns as a burden that must be avoided at all cost.

What is not considered in this policy is that such a mediated setting may discourage parents from expressing personal opinions, thus, suppressing various

concerns. This kind of suppression may distance parents from teachers as well as the educational system and place constraints on parents' inclinations to provide fundamental support to their children's educational careers (Russel & Granville, 2005); potentially leading to parents moving from public to private education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). Only in a trusting partnership between the principal, teacher and family can parents feel safe to voice their concerns and teachers feel effective in their ability to meet those concerns.

Another example of parents being presented as a hindrance to normative practice is through two references to parents as a group that must be *"dealt"* with. In the body of the policy document under the section entitled "A Welcoming Environment for Parents" the policymakers suggest that "dealing with parent issues" (p. 4) is part of improved communication between educators and parents. Also, under this same section there is another reference to "dealing with parents" (p. 5) as a priority challenge for new teachers. The notion of "dealing" (p. 4-5) with parents contradicts the title of this policy section, which is supposed to represent ways to make the school environment a welcoming space for parents. Instead, references to parents as a group that needs to be *"dealt"* with represents them as *impediments* (and, once again, a "burden") that invade the school structure instead of merging with it as they should be invited to do in accordance with a collaborative model. A suggestion is to use terms that represent parents as collaborators within the school structure, some examples of possible phrases are: "working with," "combining forces with," "collaborating with," "teaming up with," or "cooperating with."

Discourse Three – Parents as a Uniform Group

Consideration of diversity within policy.

On the one hand, the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* does address diversity and the fact that some parents face obstacles to school involvement by explicitly listing the following challenges: language, immigration, economic status, and non-familiarity with the system (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). However, aside from stating that full parental involvement will be encouraged with the input of parent organizations designed to improve its quality and funded by the "provincial grant program," there are limited methods and processes set out in the policy to accomplish this goal (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 5). In short, there is a lack of sufficient information on how the public education system will consider the dynamics of the current population, while implementing the desired changes.

Family composition.

The use of the word "parent" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b) throughout the policy discriminates against families with a variety of compositions, where the sole caregiver can be a guardian, an aunt, uncle, grandmother, grandfather or another member of the family. Other members of the family may be discouraged from participating in the school as it appears to be the expectation of the Ministry that it should be the parent of the child involved in the activities and playing a role in the child's education. By solely using the term 'parent,' the Ministry maintains domination over various groups by exerting power in structuring and defining who is supposed to be involved.

Teacher education.

There is no mention in the OPIP regarding pre-service education and training. Pre-service program curriculum changes should fully reflect the current state of the education system and the current student population as well as social, historical and contextual influences on the system's functionality. Furthermore, teacher education programs should provide extensive training on skills required for achieving trusting relationships with families, while allowing teachers to become fully aware of their biases and stereotyped thought patterns related to family school involvement.

Unsaid Discourses in the OPIP

Issues concerning communication between parents and schools.

As noted earlier, the dissemination of information is a major parental expectation stated in the PVEP, and that expectation has not been thoroughly addressed in the policy and thus continues to be of concern to parents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b; People for Education, 2009). First, it is important to recognize that the OPIP makes repeated references to "parent voice" on pages two and four. This statement represents parents as *one voice* and does not provide space for the dialogue between diverse voices present within Ontario families. Second, the provision of information to parents is mentioned one time in the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*. In the part of the policy entitled "Parent Voice Empowerment", the policymaking body states that the Ministry will provide "greater access to high quality, understandable, and timely information about education initiatives at the provincial, board, and school level"; dissemination of information will happen through a web portal, parent handbook and an e-network (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 4). The Ontario Ministry of Education (2005b)

also outlines strategies for maintaining positive school-family communication by: sending "messages . . . to parents, dealing with parent issues and inviting parents to participate" (p. 4-5). These practices support the idea that parents often prefer communication with the classroom teacher who has direct contact with their child (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b; Russel & Granville, 2005). Furthermore, parents would like to maintain ongoing communication about school related activities in consistent, flexible, frequent and informative ways (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a; Russel & Granville, 2005). However, after surveying Ontario school councils, People for Education (2009) found that when receiving feedback from parents only 6% of councils used a web-site, 48% used surveys, 11% used suggestion boxes and most of the councils depended on face-to-face communication. If sustainable home-school partnerships are to exist, the scope of communication strategies must accommodate parents' changing requirements, in light of circumstances coupled with living in the 21st century (People for Education, 2009).

In the *Annual report on Ontario's schools 2009*, People for Education (2009) found that school councils are focusing efforts on improving home-school communication, although their original role as mandated by the Ministry of Education was to ensure continuous student achievement and accountability to parents. The increased school councils' focus on family-school communication is driven by current research on the benefits of parent involvement on student achievement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b; Pelletier & Corter, 2005; People for Education, 2009). There is rising acknowledgment from school councils of the crucial role that family engagement and/or involvement plays on improving students' overall educational experiences (People

for Education, 2009). Such awareness of possible benefits is leading school councils to shift focus from student achievement to parent involvement, which actually steers schools toward better quality of education and increased educational success in students (People for Education, 2009).

Pelletier & Corter (2005) argue for an educational structure that places the school as "the hub of the community" (p. 36). In their research on *Toronto First Duty*, which sought to provide seamless service delivery to children and their families in five project sites, Pelletier & Corter (2005) advocate for "the school as the hub" (p. 36) model as they found it to be helpful for diverse families who may find barriers to any kind of engagement with the system exacerbated. By having a seamless service delivery arrangement, parents feel more at ease, familiar with staff and as a result are more willing to participate in school related activities (Pelletier & Corter, 2005). Besides benefits to parents, Pelletier & Corter (2005) found that children have an advantage of experiencing a smoother transition to school, due to their early exposure to "early childhood services in a school-as-hub model" (p. 30). Although this model is proposed for children up to the age of six; it sets the tone for the rest of the child's educational career and is a potential model that should be considered during future parent involvement policy development.

Russel & Granville (2005) found that even though most parents would like to maintain some form of ongoing communication with the school, the majority prefer infrequent involvement that is of an informal nature. When parents feel that they can participate at their own comfort level, whether through at-home activities or at the school level, they are more likely to take the first step, especially if they are intimidated by the school system (Golan & Petersen, 2002; Russel & Granville, 2005). Parents are also

more likely to engage in school activities, if they perceive their involvement as being beneficial to the well-being of the child (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a; Russel & Granville, 2005). Policy developers should consider parent assumptions and mindsets about school involvement, which often result from a lack of coherent information about its benefits. Russel & Granville (2005) highlight "overcoming the established assumptions" as "[o]ne of the biggest challenges facing" the Scottish educational system (p. 9). Similarly, for the Ontario key stakeholders, proving to parents that there is added value in their increased contribution to education may be one of the major challenges that need to be addressed in the OPIP.

Families with children with special needs.

Generally it is parents are the closest caregivers and the first teachers of their children. Due to extensive knowledge of their children's needs, abilities, behaviours and an overall expertise regarding their children, parents have pre-set assumptions about practices that best suit their children's development (Forlin, 2006). Forlin's (2006) research includes an analysis of excerpts from a story of a parent with a child with special needs. According to Forlin (2006) enforcing legislation, such as the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*, "may actually heighten rather than alleviate [parental] concerns" (p. 59); especially concerns of parents who are responsible for daily support needs of their children with exceptionalities (Forlin, 2006). Parental concerns can be addressed in a respectful and responsive way only if schools promote authentic partnerships through: "mutual engagement" (Pushor, 2007, p. 3); meaningful collaboration; and trusting relationships that are focused on achieving a shared vision as well as implementing shared goals and objectives (Forlin, 2006; Gallimore & Goldenberg, 2001; McDermott &

Rothenberg, 2000; Pushor, 2007). Children with special needs are not mentioned in the OPIP.

Strengths of the OPIP

New teachers must successfully integrate all knowledge and skills relevant to working with families, which are acquired throughout the teacher education program and practicum (Achinstein & Barrett, 2004). One of the major strengths of the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* is that it outlines the need for professional training of new teachers as part of the "New Teacher Induction Program" (NTIP). As part of NTIP, teachers are linked to an experienced teacher mentor who provides individualized support for the beginning teacher (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). Such development opportunities can prepare novices for building relationships with families and provide them with strategies for involving parents in their children's education. If teachers receive this kind of support, it can facilitate the process of parent-teacher relationship building; minimize teachers' feelings of anxiety around interactions with parents; maximize parents' feelings of trust and acceptance in the classroom (Golan & Petersen, 2002; Lasky, 2000; Kalyanpur & Skrtic, 2000). Hence, appropriate training, support and mentoring for teachers can provide capacity building for both the teacher and the parent. In addition, it is recommended that other members across the system, such as office staff, consultants, principals and superintendents, should be provided with training that will enhance their ability to mobilize parents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b).

A further strength of this policy is the attempt at eliminating power structures. As outlined in the OPIP (p. 1), much of the control over resources provided for parent involvement is to be refocused onto parent groups. An example of direct control is that

school councils have the flexibility of choosing how they will make use of the grant program available for special initiatives. On the other hand, an example of indirect control is parent advice and consultation on new initiatives through ``Parent Involvement Committees`` that each school board is responsible for organizing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). This provides a vehicle for parents to include their voice in the process of reform design and delivery. Additionally, the policy outlines the need to eliminate the previously established parent council that has been selected by the Minister, and replace it with a Provincial Parent Board to be composed of parents who are chosen by other parents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). Thus, parental perspectives have a possibility of influencing the future of education if the objectives associated with empowering parent voice are modified to include all parental voices and are allowed to come to fruition.

Barriers to Parent Involvement and Evaluation of the OPIP

The Ontario Ministry of Education recognizes structural barriers that prevent parents from participating in the education system and as a result there is funding allocated to parent involvement initiatives. This funding is distributed to the school councils and it is the parent members that decide how to most effectively use the resources to engage parents at each individual school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). Likewise, the mandate set out by the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*, expects all staff to effectively participate in engaging parents in their children's education. Participation in this undertaking is required from all levels of the education system. However, the main responsibility is placed on the decision-makers (principals) and the parents. The latter is explicitly stated in the policy, while the former is reflected

in the way the policy's implementation is assessed for success and used as a "new performance measure to be expected of the publicly funded education system" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 1).

The Ontario Ministry of Education has set-out to evaluate how the policy is being carried out by identifying "effective parent involvement" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 1) as a variable in assessing overall school performance. Such an approach to parent school involvement is results-based and focused on productivity. Here the Ministry implies that the performance of the school depends on the quality – which has not been defined - of parent involvement within the school. As stated by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2005b) in the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*, the entire education system, including "the Minister of Education, the Ministry, school boards, schools, and their staffs [are] to contribute to successful outcomes" (p. 1). It is unclear what "effective" or "successful" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b, p. 1) parent involvement looks like, which may result in school-to-school inconsistencies in attempts at fulfilling this school performance requirement. The lack of definition for successful parent involvement and what it is supposed to looks like may lead to inconsistencies in school practices and result in unfounded performance measures. Such a process may place strain on school administrators and staff, causing them to refrain from taking risks or trying new family involvement initiatives.

Although the performance measure can be limiting for schools, the diversity of families present in Ontario schools requires that principals and educators remain creative, responsive and innovative within their practices. Due to differences, such as ethnicity, language, social or economic status, family composition or other reasons for which

families are marginalized by the educational system (Gall et al., 2005); caregivers may face various barriers that can potentially create exclusionary power structures. Turnbull's et al. (2000) study showed that a collective empowerment approach, which is founded on a power-through structure, can break down barriers and sustain synergy (combined action) as a crucial component to the effectiveness of a group. Synergy can only exist when there is both empowerment as well as collaboration (Turnbull et al., 2000), which can have a positive impact on parent capacity building. With the presence of multiple pressures, teachers need parents in the journey of educating children. In other words, schools must work toward a "synergy of focus" (Fullan, 2007, p. 194) that will perpetuate the mutually-benefiting interactions between schools and families.

One of the main barriers to parent involvement appears to be the lack of a welcoming atmosphere within the school, which is grounded in a lack of recognition for parents as collaborators in their children's learning journeys (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). Parent submissions for the *Parent Voice in Education Project* reveal that parents are dissatisfied with the way that principals are uninvolved in the creation of a school culture (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). Parents, who value school involvement, would like to be viewed as partners within the school context and would like to be included in the processes of working alongside principals and teachers (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). Another discouraging factor for parents is the structure of the school system, where bureaucracy seems too thick to be infiltrated by parental voices. Parents appreciate being able to have direct contact with the Minister of Education as they feel that their opinions are being heard (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). The transfer of parent advice to the board is possible through the Parent Involvement

Committees (PICs) that every board is under obligation of establishing (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005b). Such provincial level communication between parents and the Minister of Education can be empowering for parents.

However, in their *Annual report on Ontario's schools 2009*, People for Education (2009) reported that since the release of the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* in 2005, "the ministry's Parent Engagement Office has not developed an official guide for Parent Involvement Committees, so policies and practices vary from board to board" (p. 27). The quality of all parent involvement strategies and practices may be sustained or improved with a cohesive approach, outlined by the Ministry. As suggested by People for Education (2009) both school councils as well as Parent Involvement Committees would benefit from a "review [of] the role and mandate" that is guiding practice (p. 27).

According to the budget outlined in the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy*, "[s]chool councils can apply for up to $1000 for school-based projects designed to reach parents who may experience barriers to involvement" (People for Education, 2009, p. 27). However, out of less than half of Ontario schools that chose to participate in the *Annual report on Ontario's schools 2009* related survey, only 33% received the Ontario Parent Reaching out Grant (People for Education, 2009).

Research shows that only a democratic approach can improve and sustain parent involvement (Kalyanpur & Skrtic, 2000; Lasky, 2000; Turnbull et al., 2000; Fullan, 2007). Unlike the obligatory strategies chosen by the Ministry of Education, this approach empowers parents because they can be part of the decision-making process, during which parental beliefs are acknowledged and valued (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon & Amanti, 2005). One of the main parental suggestions made in the

Parent Voice in Education Project was to empower, welcome as well as recognize and address differences among families and communities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005a). As part of a democratic approach, the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* should have an evaluation in place and the Ministry should be held accountable for the policy's efficiency and effectiveness. All stakeholders have the right to partake in such evaluation as they are affected by the policy. If such a policy evaluation was in place, then it would reveal whether parental suggestions from previous surveys, such as the *Parent Voice in Education Project*, are salient in the policy and its implementation.

Current attempts at involving parents in the OPIP are missing an essential ingredient: collaborative partnership (Harvard Family Research Project, 2000; Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). A true partnership cannot exist if bureaucracy and reform agendas driven by the dominant educational establishment (Fullan, 2007; Lasky, 2000), take precedence over collective empowerment (Turnbull et al., 2000). In order for the process of collaboration to work effectively, teachers must have an open-minded, reflective approach to working with parents, and be aware of the diversity within the Canadian population and the various needs of children and their families (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2006; Longwell-Grice & McIntyre, 2006). Ongoing self-examination is a key factor in delivering culturally responsive curricula because the dominant theoretical underpinnings of the education field, stemming from often outdated theories on child development that dominate teacher education programs, can - whether subconsciously or consciously - influence professionals' beliefs and practices, and consequently impart their interpretation of parental practices (Lasky, 2000). As previously mentioned, the OPIP

does not address teacher pre-service education programs or curricular content that deals with parent involvement in schools.

Gall et al. (2005) reported that when analyzed through a critical theoretical framework, most of the educational research related to policy formation emerges from a middle-class Caucasian perspective. In their discussion of critical-theory research, Gall et al. (2005) "question the role of schools and other institutions in silencing or muting the voices of nonprivileged groups and thereby perpetuating hegemony" (p. 392). During the development of a policy, all stakeholders must be aware of the underlying system structures as well as personal beliefs and biases that may influence the policy design. Such procedures minimize the chances of prescriptive practices, guided by the dominant Canadian culture, from being interjected into the document by policy writers.

One way to ensure that the *Ontario Parent Involvement Policy* is meaningful to families as well as schools is to have an evaluation program in place. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2005b) does support accountability and explicitly states this in the policy: "The new parent vehicles will ultimately need to be accountable to parents through democratic processes" (p. 2). This statement is contradicted by a call on parents to take onus for the policy's successful implementation. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2005b) states that "Ultimately . . . it will be the interest and energy of parents themselves that will make the parent involvement policy succeed" (p. 2). The above inconsistency between the Ministry's promise of accountability and the assignment of policy devolution onto parents leaves room for interpretation regarding success of the policy and, therefore, inconsistent conclusions around policy effectiveness. An evaluation of the policy would allow for a system of accountability to parents that

simultaneously provides feedback to policy developers for consideration during future projects.

Recommendations for Improving Future Parent Involvement Policies

In conclusion, a *Parent Involvement Policy* recommendation is to focus on parent capacity building, rather than applying pressure by measuring levels of parent involvement within each school. Capacity building can be fostered by recognizing parental strengths and valuing any input that they are able to provide (Gonzalez et al., 2005; Harvard Family Research Project, 2000), rather than assessing for parental deficits. Fullan (2007) suggests that teachers can be more effective at promoting collaboration if they value "parents as part of the solution" (p. 192) and acknowledge that parents know more about their children than anyone else. Hence, the policy would benefit from a strength-based, rather than ``pressure-based`` approach that places the ownership for policy implementation on principals as well as parents. In the OPIP, parent involvement is presented as an expectation placed on all parents. By the same token, principals, who are responsible for adopting reforms (such as OPIP) and represent individual schools within each school board, are expected to successfully involve parents. A respectful recognition and focus on existing parental involvement practices would allow parents to feel valued and treated as partners without specific involvement expectations placed upon them. At the same time, a focus on the school's strengths in the area of parent involvement may limit the amount of pressure placed on principals. Perhaps if more ownership was allocated to policy makers it would lead to an assessment for the effectiveness of the actual policy design, so that it can be adapted and possibly flourish even under non-ideal circumstances. By creating an alternative discourse dominated by a

vision of *parents as partners* rather than as *challengers* of the education system; the

Ministry can provide an authentic basis for creating "real partnership" (p. 1).

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Ontario Parent Involvement Policy

Ontario Education excellence for all

Developing Partners in Education
Part of a series of mini discussion papers prepared for the Education Partnership Table to permit wide input to the direction of education in Ontario.

December 1, 2005 (v. 2)

The Ministry of Education has been striving for a new relationship among all the groups that make up the publicly funded education sector that is based on the "new three R's": Respect, Responsibility, and Results. There should be common respect, mutual responsibility-taking and agreement about results: in other words a real partnership. While the word "partnership" has been much in use before, genuinely creating a partnership to replace prior years of conflict requires substantial change that does not take place easily or without groundwork. This paper is one of several setting out proposed government policy changes to ensure that the conditions exist for such a partnership to thrive.

Ontario Parent Involvement Policy

SUMMARY
Parents play a vital role in the development and education of their children and in the success of schools. The Ministry of Education appreciates that the needs and contributions of parents have been undervalued and the education system needs to create several new points of reinforcement in order for the "parent factor" to realize its potential. The Ministry's ambitions for increased student success make this advance not only desirable but necessary.

A new provincial Parent Involvement Policy will recognize effective parent involvement as a new performance measure to be expected of the publicly funded education system. It lays out requirements for the Minister of Education, the Ministry, school boards,

schools, and their staffs to contribute to successful outcomes.

The main thrust is an onus on decision-makers to create the conditions for parents' engagement in their children's education to take place by way of the right environment, supports, and attitudes. For the first time, parent groups will be provided with exclusive or joint control over new vehicles and resources that will act as reinforcement for a shift to the full welcoming of parents in the system. Included will be resources to help develop involvement from the full diversity of parents. Training for parent mobilization will be provided across the system, from parents themselves, right through to supervisory officers and Ministry staff. Together, these measures will effectively "set the table" for parents to more fully participate.

Ultimately, however, it will be the interest and energy of parents themselves that will make the parent involvement policy succeed.

The new parent vehicles will ultimately need to be accountable to parents through democratic processes. Special appointments may be needed to ensure diversity while school councils strive to be more fully representative of the broad parent community.

Most of the effort and resources supporting the policy will reflect parents' own interest to have some influence over conditions at their children's schools. It is proposed that the existing vehicle of school councils be made more flexible to accommodate parents' interests, but the main focus is on improving the dynamics of how school councils work.

A special provincial committee of parents and principals will be asked to address mutual issues at the school level including the use of mediation to resolve disputes.

New board, regional and provincial mechanisms will ensure that the parent voice is taken seriously at all levels, and that parents are linked across the province.

INTRODUCTION - PARENT VOICE IN EDUCATION PROJECT

Last December, a group of parent leaders from around the province were constituted by the Minister as the *Parent Voice in Education Project*. Members were given the tasks of devising an effective provincial voice for parents and recommending the provincial assistance required to greatly improve the number of parents active in education. The group consulted widely with other Ontario parents and completed its report in April.

The Parent Voice report affirmed that parents do not want to run schools, but they do want to have a voice that they can be assured will be taken into account at the school, board, and provincial levels. While there are many examples of successful parent engagement in Ontario today, many parents still perceive inadequate respect, and feel they are not taken seriously.

In response to the Parent Voice recommendations, the Ministry is bringing forward a comprehensive Parent Involvement Policy to increase parent involvement with their children's education, with their school, and with the education system. In keeping with the recommendations, the Parent Involvement Policy is focused on how to improve the dynamics within the system to overcome barriers, anticipate the potential issues, and foster new attitudes about healthy levels of parent engagement.

The reasons for a genuine partnership with parents are self evident. Parents are the most important influence in child's life outside of school, and this is also true for a child's education. Long after direct learning from parents in a child's early years gives way to formal education, parents continue to play a key role in student success through the attitudes they help to shape and the direct supports they provide.

Good schools are better where there is a stronger connection with parents as part of the learning community. In fact, one of best means of nurturing parental involvement at the secondary level is to bring the family and school closer together by creating a genuine partnership between the two. Research shows that positive results can include improved student achievement, reduced absenteeism, better behaviour, and restored confidence among parents in their children's schooling. The government views enhancing the role of parents as an important and practical consideration and as an important part of building the capacity of schools to help students achieve.

The ongoing confidence of parents, not only in local schools, but also in publicly funded education, is an important objective. Over the last decade unmet parent concerns about publicly funded education contributed to a 50% increase in those who moved their children to private schools.

There are an estimated 2.3 million parents of students in publicly funded education, who make up both a formidable potential resource and the largest single "constituency" for publicly funded education. According to one survey, just 11% of parents consider themselves active at schools, while another survey indicates nearly half would become involved if asked.

The busy lives all parents lead today means that it is more challenging to become involved. We know parents today are no less concerned for their children, but there may now also be less of a culture of involvement than there once was. Education itself has become more specialized and therefore may seem to parents more

insular. In order for these difficulties to be overcome new approaches and supports will need to be put into place.

While there is general agreement within education that parents have an obvious contribution to make from their close and valid perspective on the system, consideration of this policy also recognizes that there are also underlying resistances. Some resistances arise from the lack of resources in the system in previous years, concerns about "parent agendas" overwhelming the main education agenda, lack of training for new staff, and increasing references to a small number of "problem" or "super" parents.

While the main beneficiaries will be students, the Ministry of Education also believes that a proper parent involvement program will be a tremendous asset to the education system with benefits for teachers, principals, supervisory officials, directors, ministry officials, and the public. The mediating presence of organized parents is a welcome development at schools. Proactive measures are far more effective for modern public services than is simply reacting to complaints or problems as they arise.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT POLICY

Policy
Parent involvement includes a range of activities from good parenting, helping with homework, serving on school councils and board or provincial committees, communicating and meeting with teachers, and volunteering in the classroom or on school trips.

The province will make the successful involvement of parents one of the provincial outcomes expected of schools boards. Success in engaging parents will be embedded in the public performance measures and evaluations at all levels in education. All parents will be asked to become involved to some extent, and organized parents will be given a direct say over parent related resources. Please see expected outcomes in Appendix I.

Parent Voice Empowerment
The Minister of Education will undertake annual regional forums with parents to listen and converse about parent concerns.

New communications for parents will be developed at the provincial, board, and local levels, including a Parent Portal on the web with concise and authoritative information, an expanded e-network to provide updates and receive feedback, and a new parent handbook.

Parents will get greater access to high quality, understandable, and timely information about education initiatives at the provincial, board, and school level.

It is proposed that all necessary legal steps be taken to transform the pre-existing Minister-appointed parent council into a Provincial Parent Board, selected by parents, to represent parents and guide provincial efforts to mobilize parents. The Board will initially be selected by parent nominators, but will make a rapid transition to election by parents.

A provincial Office of Parent Engagement will be established to support provincial efforts, and Ministry Regional Offices will assume a role in supporting parent engagement.

School boards will be required to establish Parent Involvement Committees with a direct link to the Director and Trustees, to provide parent advice and to support parent engagement. Base provincial funding to support the work of the committee will be provided, and additional funding scaled to the size of the board.

Elected school boards play a vital role in representing and communicating with parents and the broader community. Their knowledge and expertise will be instrumental in leading the transition to a stronger parent involvement policy.

Ongoing support will be made available to provincial parent organizations that are able to enhance parent involvement.

A provincial fund will support projects that enhance parent involvement at a provincial or regional level.

Francophone parents will continue to be involved in the implementation of the Aménagement linguistique policy, a major commitment to make French-language schools the cultural hubs of their communities.

The Ministry and school boards will work together to ensure broad parent consultation takes place on relevant new policies, particularly those which directly impact family life. Some progress has already been made in this respect in areas such as school closures.

A Welcoming Environment for Parents

Research shows that parents will participate more freely in a welcoming environment. To help make this welcoming environment, schools can include practicing better school-family communication; taking care with messages sent to the parents, dealing with parent issues, and inviting parents to participate.

A school council outreach program for parents will be funded with a base amount to each school council help to cover costs. A grant program will be available for special initiatives at schools around the province.

Provincial and board assistance will be available to relieve some of the burden on principals for parent development. Parent involvement training will be provided to parents, teachers, principals, supervisory officers, and ministry officials.

School councils will be asked to focus on engaging parents and fostering parental involvement within their school community as a key factor in assisting student achievement.

Schools councils will be encouraged to broaden opportunities for parents, and to recognize active members among the parent community. School councils will also be asked to help recognize parent and community volunteers and to report on levels of parent engagement.

School councils will be provided with the flexibility to associate with related not-for-profit organizations, and to vary their structures where that conforms with the wishes of a majority of parents. Community-use-of-school agreements will specifically include

preferred access for a variety of parent groups.

The Office of Parent Engagement will work with the Board of Parents to establish provincial standards of excellence for parent engagement and recognition programs.

A special principals' and parents' project team will be established by the Minister to provide advice on a range of issues such as the use of mediation to resolve disputes and best practices for parent - school relationships.

A fundraising policy will guarantee school councils control over funds raised and limit fundraising by ensuring education essentials are provided by the system, allowing parents to focus on supporting student success.

It must be noted that surveys indicate that the most important relationship for parents within the school system - the one with their child's teacher - is also one of the most successful. Parents report high levels of satisfaction with the access provided and information received from their child's classroom teacher. At the same time, dealing with parents is high on the list of challenges for new teachers, and professional development in this regard will be part of the New Teacher Induction Program for beginning teachers.

Addressing Diversity

The provincial grant program will be available to school councils for initiatives to reach parents who may find involvement more challenging due to language, recent immigration, poverty, newness to the system, or other factors.

The Provincial Parent Board and
school board Parent Involvement
Committees will be supplemented with
appointments to ensure representation
of diverse parents until the
development of local school councils
has sufficiently progressed.
All parent vehicles will be asked to
report annually on the effectiveness of
measures to develop full
representation.
The Minister will also hold direct
forums with diverse communities to
encourage their full engagement within
the system.

Appendix I: OUTCOMES

Ministry
Responsiveness as evaluated by a Provincial Parent Board
- Consultation of parents on relevant policy
- Support for parent engagement
- Information transparency
- Communication responsiveness
- Boards combined parent engagement

School Boards
Responsiveness as evaluated by a board Parent Involvement Committee
- Consultation of parents on relevant policy
- Support for parent engagement
- Information transparency
- Communication responsiveness
- Combined school / parent engagement

Schools
Participation of parents as measured by local School Council
- Vitality of school council: parents voting, number of parents on committees, parents as active members, accomplishments
- Contribution to student success
- Survey of parents – parent welcome, information and communication
- Attendance at parent-teacher meetings, school events, return of report cards
- School volunteerism – hours contributed, persons engaged, accomplishments

Appendix II: SUMMARY OF NEW PROVINCIAL SUPPORTS/RESOURCES

Ministry
Confirmed Parent seats at provincial Education Partnership Table
New Parent Board
Office of Parent Engagement
Support for Parent Board
Training
Grants for Provincial and regional projects
Research
Regional Office Support for Parent Groups
Minister's Parent Forums
Assistance with regional parent conferences
Training for Ministry staff
Performance standard for Deputy Minister and key staff
Base funding for provincial parent organizations.
Policy of Fundraising limits
Principal Parent Committee – jointly examine issues of mutual Interest
Aménagement linguistique Parent and Community Involvement working committee (francophone)
Parent web Portal of convenient authoritative information
Interactive e-network on education developments
Hotlines for homework, bullying

School Boards
Parent Involvement Committee
Provincial funding to support
District Meetings and inter-school council communication
Training for supervisory officials and trustees
Performance standard for Director, Supervisory Officials

Schools
Base grant for school councils – for local communication and engagement activities
Grants for parent engagement projects
Training in parent interaction for principals and teachers
More flexibility for school councils
Performance standard for principals and teachers

Investing in Parent Involvement

Component of the Ontario Parent Involvement Policy	Investments	Amount	Total
Local	New provincial grant program being made available to school councils for school-based initiatives to reach parents who may find involvement more challenging due to language, recent immigration, poverty, newness to the system, or other factors.	$1,000,000	
	New base mobilization and outreach budget for school councils to support local communication and engagement efforts ($500 per school)	$2,400,000	$3,400,000
Board and regional	New base provincial funding to support the work of the Parent Involvement Committee to be established at the school board level: district meetings and inter-school communication ($5,000 per school board + $0.17 per student)	$717,000	
	New provincial fund to support provincial and regional projects aimed at enhancing parent involvement.	$750,000	$1,467,000
Provincial	Funding to provincial parent organizations that are able to enhance parent involvement, including an inflation adjustment	$60,000	
	Provincial Parent Engagement Office	$250,000	$310,000
Total Cost			$5,177,000