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## Parent Marginalization, Marginalized Parents: Creating a Place for Parents on the School Landscape

*In this article we lay Debbie's research on the positioning of parents in relation to the school landscape alongside Bill's classroom work with Aboriginal parents. Our work challenges the view that parents are given place and voice in their children's schooling experiences. We question assumptions on which the term partnership is used with parents and argue that although many parents are positioned in marginalized ways in regard to their children's schooling, this situation is more pervasive for Aboriginal parents than for parents of the dominant culture. The narrative of Bill's home visit program and the telling of his home visit with Helen's mother create a new story of Aboriginal parental participation: a story that shifts thinking and practice.*

*Dans cet article, nous jetons un regard à la fois sur la recherche de Debbie quant au rôle des parents dans le contexte du cadre scolaire et sur le travail que Bill a accompli en salle de classe avec des parents autochtones. Notre travail remet en question le point de vue selon lequel on accorde aux parents un rôle à jouer et une voix dans les expériences scolaires que vit leur enfant et nous contestons les hypothèses à base de l'emploi de l'expression "partenariat" pour décrire le rapport entre les parents et l'école. Alors que beaucoup de parents occupent des positions marginales dans le contexte éducationnel de leur enfant, cette situation se retrouve plus fréquemment chez les parents autochtones que chez les parents de la culture dominante. L'exposé que fait Bill de son programme de visites à domicile et son récit décrivant sa visite avec la mère d'Hélène créent une autre version de la participation des parents autochtones: une histoire qui offre une autre perspective sur les idées reçues et la pratique.*

### *Images of Parent Involvement*

Positioned as researchers, as educators in schools, and as parents of school-aged children, we hold strong images of parent involvement. We see parents there in the audience beaming up at their children as they sing, act, or recite in the annual Christmas concert; listening attentively to the teacher's words as their child's progress is being discussed in a parent-teacher conference; making and selling raffle tickets to raise funds for new playground equipment; sitting

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beside young children listening to them read; accompanying small groups of children as they make their way through exhibits at the museum; and cooking and distributing hot dog lunches to children during track and field day. At the elementary school level parents typically laminate, photocopy, fundraise, attend field trips, help in classrooms, read with children, and work with individual students or small groups. McGilp and Michael (1994) categorize these kinds of parental involvement as "audience, spectators, fund raisers, aides and organizers" (p. 2). Carrying out the tasks the staff determine to be needed is the common story being lived by parents in schools. As a parent volunteer in her son Cohen's (pseudonyms are used to protect the anonymity of children, parents, staff, and schools; actual names are used for our family members) elementary classrooms, Debbie recalls beginning her volunteering by asking Cohen's teacher what she would like her to do. Whenever given a choice of task Debbie consistently responded by asking the teacher what would help her the most. The story of parental involvement is a well-known and well-rehearsed story. Both teachers and parents assume their character roles easily and continue to relive the same plot line.

In the characterization of teachers and parents in this plot line, teachers are often cast as the protagonists, the principal performers who advocate for conditions that support and encourage the learning and development of their students. Parents are often cast as antagonists, being seen as doing, or not doing, things that interfere with the quest of the protagonist to enhance learning. Parents most certain to be cast as antagonists are those who do not meet the white, middle-class values and expectations of the school system (McCaleb, 1994). In such a characterization emphasis is placed on the education of parents. Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez, and Bloom (1993) see these education programs falling into four types: family support, parent education (relating to the school), parenthood education (relating to the home), and parent involvement/parent participation.

The first type, family support programs, generally includes nutrition, health care, and social services components. "These programs recognize that for many families the first step toward improving home conditions for children's cognitive development is to meet the family's basic physical, economic, and social needs" (Kellaghan et al., 1993, p. 85). Although we have not lived the story of family support programs in our positions as parents, we lived that story as a teacher or a principal. Debbie remembers making calls to social and community agencies to get winter clothing for children who came to school in the winter wearing spring jackets and with bare feet in rubber boots. Bill remembers speaking to his principal about a child in his classroom who lived in a situation where the basic necessities of life were being provided sporadically to request assistance and support from Mi'kmaq Family Services. Although the children and the situations may be different in the stories being lived at our children's schools, it is certain that family support is being provided.

Parent education programs, the second type outlined by Kellaghan et al. (1993), "concentrate on the role of parents as partners in their children's education and attempt to alter some aspect of parental knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors, with a view to improving children's cognitive and school perfor-

mance" (p. 85). At Cohen's school a session on literacy offered for parents of kindergarten and grade 1 students falls into this story line. In this session a district reading specialist spoke to parents about such matters as reading to their children every day, engaging in open-ended conversation, and creating an awareness of environmental print.

The third category, parenthood education, "is designed to help parents or prospective parents learn about child rearing and child development principles" (Kellaghan et al., 1993, p. 85). A session on Lion's Quest Skills for Growing, a prosocial skills program sponsored by Bill's son Raymond's elementary school fits into this third story line. Teachers from the school presented to parents a session focused on the beliefs and premises of prosocial skills.

The fourth type, parent involvement and parent participation programs, "tend to be directed by the school and attempt to involve parents in school activities and/or teach parents specific skills and strategies for teaching or reinforcing school tasks at home" (Kellaghan et al., 1993, p. 85). A session Debbie attended at Cohen's school on study skills is an example. As part of a school council meeting two of the teaching staff spoke about the use of an agenda book, the creation of an environment conducive to doing homework, and the organization of time and materials.

All these activities tell a story of how in parent education parents are being positioned as deficit and off the landscape of schools: their presence seemingly invisible in the narratives being composed. In and of themselves the activities described are good and with good intentions. It is interesting to ask though whose agenda is being served and why. In each instance the purpose of the agenda was to further the school's mission to enhance student learning. In each instance the service or the session was delivered by school personnel or professionals in a support field. We wonder about the assumptions that underlie an agenda that is unidirectional in its intentions.

A comprehensive parent involvement framework developed by Epstein (1995) appears to perpetuate the same story. Epstein outlines six types of parental involvement that reflect the roles McGilp and Michael (1994) identify, as well as the parenting focus emphasized by Kellaghan et al. (1993). She describes the roles parents play as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community.

Thinking of Epstein's (1995) delineation of the six roles parents play in schools, we search for memories that tell of our experiences as parents involved with our children's schooling. Bill's experience in the parenthood session, where he is the passive recipient of information on how this prosocial skills program works and the effect it should have on his children, speaks to his involvement in attending a *parenting* workshop. Images of *communicating* come to mind as we share stories with each other of Debbie's participation in Cohen's student-led conferences, or of her reading his class newsletters or school newsletter. Other images come to mind as Bill tells of his attendance at Raymond's Meet the Teacher night or of his efforts during an after-school meeting to have his daughter Alley's teacher recognize his concerns about Alley's reading development. We earlier created images of *volunteering* as we spoke of listening to young children read, of attending field trips, of making

and selling raffle tickets, of cooking and distributing hot dog lunches, all activities we have been engaged in as parent volunteers. Thinking about Debbie's attendance at the study skills session, we see her involved in working to enhance her son's *learning at home*. Both of us have been involved in our children's school councils. Some of the *decision-making* Debbie recalls being involved in as an executive member of the school council includes decisions about student agenda books, school t-shirts, the parent handbook, and fundraising events. Bill's input into decision-making through his attendance at school council meetings includes making a suggestion to include a Department of Education Web site address that provides parents with information on school programs in a handout developed by the school for parents. Recalling experiences in which we were *collaborating with the community* is harder. We wonder if Debbie's effort arranging for Parks and Recreation to lead activities at Cohen's school's family barbecue would fall into this role. We wonder if Bill's involvement with the Drug Awareness Resistance Education (DARE) program sponsored by the RCMP would fall into this role. The intention, through Epstein's model of parent involvement, is to forge strong school-family-community partnerships. We are struck by the fact that we are involved in most if not all of the parent involvement roles Epstein outlines, and yet we are not feeling like partners in our children's schools. We continue to feel in our roles as parents as positioned in subservient and relatively unimportant ways with regard to teaching and learning. In our roles as parents we continue to feel positioned off the landscape of schooling.

Benson's (1999) work affirms our feelings of being positioned off the landscape of schooling as parents. Benson focused on recording and emphasizing the personal knowledge and voice of parents about the school system. She writes,

As the stories were collected the picture of "how it is for parents" became clearer. The education ministry rhetoric of "parents as partners" was generally not what was being played out at the school level. Or as stated by Lewington and Orpwood (1995), "Partnership is the overworked word of the day, as education leaders attempt to demonstrate their willingness to move beyond the historic divide of 'them' and 'us' that separates parents and teachers. But in the experience of some parents, the paradox of education is that, in practice, the system is resistant as ever to building real bridges to the outside world." (p. 6)

When we first read Epstein's (1995) work, we were encouraged by her attention to families. We hoped that this attention signaled an exploration of partnerships. Yet we saw the typical partnership being preserved.

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families. If educators view children simply as students, they are likely to see the family as separate from the school. That is, the family is expected to do its job and leave the education of children to the schools. If educators view students as children, they are likely to see both the family and the community as partners with the school in children's education and development. Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students. (p. 11)

Educators at Cohen's, Raymond's, and Alley's schools do not believe that we should leave our children's schooling solely to teachers. We are asked to read at home with our children, to practice spelling words and math facts, to sign agenda books each day, to assist with homework assignments, and to volunteer. We believe our involvement enhances our children's opportunities for learning. We do not believe these roles make us partners with their schools. We do not believe these roles position us on the landscape of their schools. The agenda is set by the school, and we serve that agenda. We receive information from the schools about our children and their programs; we are rarely asked to give information. What Debbie knows as Cohen's mother, what Bill knows as Raymond's and Alley's father, and how the schools could learn from what we know is not a recognized part of the agenda. Cohen, Raymond, and Alley are positioned on the landscape of schooling outside their families.

In Epstein's (1995) model, in all the models described in the work of McGilp and Michael (1994) and Kellaghan, et al. (1993), and in how parents are asked to work in schools, knowledge, voice, and decision-making rest with educators. The parents' role is to support schools in realizing their goal of improved student achievement through positive parenting at home, through home support of and assistance with children's schoolwork, and through volunteer work done at school. The schools' view seems to be one of "seek[ing] to determine what parents can do for teachers, rather than what schools can do for families" (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 5).

#### *Looking Beyond These Images*

These images of parent involvement develop a sense of some unstated assumptions inherent in how parents are involved in schooling: assumptions about roles, responsibility, power, and control. Kellaghan et al. (1993) believe a prevalent assumption held in education before the 1970s was that school culture and environment were superior to home culture and environment in situations where schools were located in other than white, middle-class communities. They believe that a transition took place from this "deficit model" to a "cultural difference model" where it was recognized that school environment and culture were different from the home, but not superior to it. We wonder how these two models are lived in current practice.

Cairney and Munsie (1992) express concern about the following myths held in relation to parental involvement: some parents are not interested in their children's education; middle-class parents are better parents; it is difficult to get parents involved; you only get the parents you do not need to see; parents do not have the expertise needed to facilitate their children's learning. These myths address deficit and cultural difference models as well as highlighting other assumptions. When parents are not engaged in schooling activities, the assumption is that fault rests with the parent rather than with how the school invites involvement. Believing that there are some parents whom schools do not need to see is based on an assumption that a partnership is needed only with parents who do not conform to the school's agenda rather than with all parents. Believing that parents do not have skills to assist in their children's learning assumes that parents' ways of knowing are of lesser value than those of experts or professionally trained people. Two main assumptions in many schools seem to prevail: "parents have only a limited responsibility in relation

to their children as learners [and] ... the school is the site of the 'main game'" (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 1).

*Focusing on Aboriginal Parents*

Although many parents are positioned in marginalized ways in regard to their children's schooling, this situation is heightened for Aboriginal parents, for whom the relationship with schools is at best exclusionary and at worst hostile (Cummins, 1996).

Aboriginal parents are often storied as "difficult" when they are advocates for their children or as "apathetic" or "uncooperative" by teachers and administrators when they do not become involved. "Aboriginal parents, through their nonparticipation, are held partly responsible for the overwhelmingly negative statistics concerning Aboriginal education without a comprehensive understanding of the reasons for the phenomenon" (Friedel, 1999, p. 139). Statistics in the literature paint a bleak picture of the Aboriginal public school experience. Forty percent of Aboriginal students drop out due to teachers' low expectations, poor tracking of the progress of First Nation students, few Native teachers as mentors and role models, and a disregard by public schools for diversity in course content and assessment standards (Cleary & Peacock, 1997). When students have experiences like these that cause significant numbers to leave school, it is no wonder there are low levels of participation in schools by Aboriginal parents.

Public schools are alien to many Aboriginal people, both children and adults, because they do not culturally fit with their experiences at home and in their communities. Public schools do not encourage Aboriginal core values of sharing, of being other-centered, of harmony with nature, of noninterference, of patience, of circular time, of nonconfrontation, or of a broad view of family (Coggins, Williams, & Radin, 1997).

Because of differences between the dominant white, middle-class culture and the Aboriginal culture, public schools remain closed to Aboriginal parents (Friedel, 1999). Administrators and teachers act according to myths that they believe about parent involvement. When Native parents do not attend school events; when they do not make or keep appointments for parent-teacher conferences; when they are resistant to attending specific meetings about their child's progress, behavior, or attendance, educators assume "Native parents don't care." Parents are blamed for their lack of attendance. Educators seldom ask why parents do not attend or about what they could do differently to invite Aboriginal participation.

When Native parents do not parent in white, middle-class ways, they are often criticized for being negligent about accepted practices—like bedtime routines, homework, or work ethic. In parent-teacher or case conferences, parents are blamed—and shamed (Gorman, personal communication, 2000)—for their Native ways of knowing, being, and doing (Tompkins, 2003). Educators seldom engage, metaphorically speaking, in "traveling" between "worlds" (Lugones, 1987, p. 11). Such traveling would require educators to enter Aboriginal parents' worlds, to see Aboriginal parents through Aboriginal parents' eyes, to attend to Aboriginal parents' own sense of themselves from within Aboriginal parents' worlds, and to attend to Aboriginal parents' construction of educators from within Aboriginal parents' worlds. Only as we

travel to the other's world can we identify with one another and "understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes" (p. 17).

Debbie recalls an experience from her own schooling in a rural community in northern Alberta. During a winter cold spell, an outbreak of lice was reported in the school community. In her classroom children of the dominant-class farm families were given a thick, strong-smelling, medicated substance to take home with an accompanying note to parents explaining how to use this substance in the shampooing of their children's hair. All the Aboriginal children were taken to the pump room where the caretaker's large industrial sink was located, and the teacher cut their long hair short and then shampooed their heads with the lice treatment. If the teacher had at that moment traveled to the Aboriginal parents' worlds, what might she have learned about what it is to be them? What might she have learned about what it is to be herself in their eyes? What might she have learned about roles, responsibility, power, and control in a school landscape? What might she have learned about living in the margins of a landscape?

Standing in judgment of Aboriginal parents, blaming and shaming them for how they are or are not involved in their children's school experiences continues to keep Aboriginal parents in the margins of the school landscape. Perhaps to begin to address this marginalization a core question to be asked is How do public schools with First Nations populations facilitate the participation of Aboriginal parents in the public school experience of their children in fair, meaningful, respectful, and culturally relevant ways? A story of Bill's experience as a teacher in a First Nations community helps us begin to see possibilities for such meaningful participation by Aboriginal parents.

*A Practice of Possibility: Bill's Story of Home Visits*

I remember my first impression of Fort Liard as it came into view from the window of the small five-seater aircraft that was about to deposit me there. I was in awe of the place; so isolated. It was like nothing I had ever seen before; a small collection of homes and buildings surrounded by countless kilometers of forest and mountains. I was excited and nervous, not knowing what to expect and unsure of how I would handle my first teaching assignment. In 1989, Fort Liard, a Dene Community in the Northwest Territories, was a small town of 500 people, with all the homes in close proximity to the school.

As a new teacher to Echo Dene School, and as mandated by the Local Education Authority (LEA), I was faced with the responsibility of visiting the homes of students who would be in my classroom at the beginning of the school year. This tradition, strongly encouraged by the LEA, was a response by the community to a situation in which teacher turnover was extremely high. Usually teachers were in and out of the community in one or two years. It is my understanding that the LEA established this policy because it was felt teachers new to the community needed to become familiar with students and their families quickly. Second, all teachers were from other parts of the country, usually one or two years out of university, with no knowledge of life in a small, isolated northern village. The home visits were a quick and effective way of helping teachers begin to appreciate the new environment in which they found themselves.

As I reflect on those encounters with families at their homes over my eight years in Fort Liard, I realize that I learned a great deal about the children. Most homes I visited were plain dwellings with two or three bedrooms. Some children lived in small houses with wood heat. All the homes were in close proximity to the school and all the children walked to class every day. The school itself was a relatively new building with all the amenities.

While walking around the neighborhood, I was guided by Jane Timbre, one of the local people who worked at the school. Jane had a long history in the community as a leader and in the school as a student program assistant. With the benefit of her experience and stories of families, I was able to gain first-hand knowledge about the children and their home lives. As we made our way from house to house, meeting parents and children, Jane would speak of the students living there, sharing her stories of particular families. I was able to create a history, a narrative, that I could put to each face in the classroom on the first morning of school.

During my first year I sometimes visited with parents of students who were having difficulties. Almost always Jane would come with me as a well-respected and trusted person in the community. On the other hand, I occupied a different place on the community and school landscape. I was "from away," white, male, a person to be wary of. The trust of families was something I would have to earn over the years I was teaching in Fort Liard.

As time passed, I became comfortable enough to make home visits on my own. More and more I came to see the value of parents' knowledge (Pushor, 2001). Establishing regular communication with parents became an integral part of my practice. For eight years I grew to know families on the reserve and they came to know me. These families became my neighbors and friends, people with whom I hunted, boated, traveled in the bush, watched hockey, feasted, grieved, and shared every aspect of community life.

My experiences of school shared with families in Fort Liard produced close relationships and, very often for me, a strong sense of purpose, accomplishment, and satisfaction. I felt very connected to students and their families, and these positive feelings further fueled my desire to build relationships. During my years in Fort Liard I became convinced that establishing communication with the home and accessing a parents' knowledge about their child were critical elements in my teaching practice. The teacher I was when I arrived in Fort Liard was not the teacher I was when I left eight years later. My identity had shifted. I no longer saw myself as working alone with children in a classroom, the primary holder of knowledge regarding teaching and learning. I now saw myself working with parents, placing their voice and their knowledge of teaching and learning alongside my own in the classroom.

In 1998 I found myself back in Nova Scotia, teaching grade 4 in a primary to grade 6 school. The population served by this school (75% white, while the remaining students were of Mi'kmaq ancestry) was very different from Fort Liard. The school community also differed dramatical-



ly from Fort Liard in terms of geography, serving a much larger area. Visiting homes would be a greater challenge logistically and thus more time-consuming.

As the 1998 academic year started, I had to decide whether I would adopt the practice of making home visits. Unlike in Fort Liard where personal contact with parents was encouraged, I expected the positioning of teachers and parents in relation to each other to be well defined and very different from Fort Liard. I expected to find teachers speaking to parents at parent-teacher conferences or when the school was experiencing difficulties with a child behaviorally and/or academically. I expected a home visit by a teacher or an administrator would be a rare occurrence. With this in mind I had to decide if I was going to make home visits and if so, whether I would visit just the Reserve or visit all the families of my students. As I mulled over this situation I wondered what my principal would think about such an enterprise from one of his new teachers. I wondered how my colleagues would react.

In the end I decided I would make home visits and that I would visit all my students' homes, Native and non-Native. Having contact with parents had become such an important part of my practice and such an important part of who I was as a teacher that I felt it was essential to continue that work. I firmly believed I should not single out First Nations families by visiting only on the Reserve. The benefits of a positive working relationship between parent and teacher were important for all students (Cairney & Munsie, 1992).

I talked about my home visitation idea with my principal and told him I was just going to introduce myself as I was new to the school and community. I then sent a letter home with each student announcing my intentions to drop by for a brief visit to introduce myself. I informed parents I would be visiting homes after school during the first part of September. I noted that any parents who would be more comfortable making an appointment for me to drop by could do so by indicating convenient times for possible meetings on the letter. Also, any families who were uncomfortable with my visiting their home could arrange to meet me at school. I ended the letter by saying that if the note was not returned or if no preference was given, I would assume it would be okay for me to drop by any time after school.

I was pleased when I received only four notes asking for a meeting at school. Three parents I encountered by chance at the school. The remaining 16 families welcomed me to their homes. Every visit was a positive experience as parents were receptive, pleased, and curious about my intentions. I was fortunate to be able to visit all the parents of my Mi'kmaq students, and a couple of families assured me I was the first teacher who had ever visited their home on the Reserve. Many were interested to hear about my work in other Aboriginal communities.

My sense of how I was perceived by the families I visited, both on and off Reserve, was one of an educator who approached teaching children differently. Those first visits were a curiosity for many parents who, I am sure, wondered about my motives and perhaps what it was I intended to

accomplish. In fact at the end of the school year, I had an opportunity to discuss this with a mother with whom I had developed a positive and on-going working relationship over that first school year. I remember her exact words as we reflected on our initial encounter at her home, "We did not know what to make of you. We thought you were coming around to find out how we lived."

*Unpacking Bill's Story of Home Visits*

As a teacher of Aboriginal youth, Bill wished to find a way to access and honor Aboriginal parents' knowledge. He wanted a closer working relationship, a possible partnership, between parents of his students and himself. He wanted to create a place of comfort, trust, and relationship between himself and Aboriginal parents with whom he worked, believing this would result in improved performance on the part of students and would create a space intentionally to invite and affirm Aboriginal parents' ways of knowing, being, and doing on the school landscape. He made a point of visiting the homes of his students in September with follow-up visits throughout the year in an effort to build relationships and partnerships. He facilitated the acknowledgment of parent voice and parent knowledge, which produced extraordinary experiences and significant improvements in students' performance. "The key to Aboriginal input is not simply getting people to attend meetings, but exhibiting a true willingness on the part of decision makers to listen and act on what has been said" (Friedel, 1999, p. 155).

With Friedel's (1999) statement in mind, Bill shares a second story: about a Mi'kmaq mother who welcomed Bill into her home.

*Bill's Story of Visiting Dorothy*

Helen, a child from the Mi'kmaq reserve served by the public school where I teach, had been displaying a marked aversion to daily routine and schoolwork. I discovered she was performing academically two grade levels below grade 4. Even after I made major adjustments to her program, Helen still displayed a complete lack of interest in her work. However, when it came to gym class or fun activities in the classroom, she would participate and apply herself fully.

By the end of September I had already made two visits to Helen's home. The first, early in September, was the initial introductory meeting. The second, although positive, focused on difficulties Helen and I were experiencing in class. After the second visit I felt a certain level of trust was being established, and Helen's mother Dorothy was very willing to discuss her daughter's work habits.

Despite my best efforts, by early October Helen's disruptive behavior and lack of effort were becoming a serious problem. I made a decision on one particular day that Helen would not be allowed to participate in free time and fun activities in the classroom until she made an effort to do some academic work that I knew she was capable of doing. By the end of the day, Helen was angry. She told me as she was leaving, that I was a mean teacher, and that she was not coming back to school.

I decided an immediate home visit was necessary. There was no phone at Helen's home so I arrived on the doorstep unannounced shortly after

school. I asked Dorothy if I could come in, and to her credit she invited me to sit. I am sure that without the two previous visits I would not have been invited to come into her home. It was clear to me from her mom's glare that Helen had already explained her version of the day's events and that her mom had already decided her daughter would not be going to school the next day.

Dorothy was upset but reserved. While she worked in the kitchen, I sat at the table and explained my perspective on Helen's behavior and attitude since my last visit and in particular the difficulties of that day. I ended my telling with the comment that I was worried about Helen and very concerned that she was going to miss school. I asked Dorothy if she had any ideas about how I could help her child have positive experiences in the classroom.

To this point Dorothy had said very little. Finally, with my question her input began, not with a rationalization of Helen's behavior or with berating me, but with the following comment, "Helen will not wear her glasses to school." I had not known Helen required glasses. I responded by suggesting I move her desk closer to the front of the class and that together we work on finding ways to encourage Helen to wear her glasses. This was agreed to by Helen's mother. Her next suggestion was that Helen might work harder if she was sitting beside her neighborhood friend Jessie. To this I readily agreed.

During the next 30 minutes of our conversation we discussed Helen's work habits and how I managed my classroom. Helen was called out to join us, which she did reluctantly. My visit ended with Dorothy assuring me that Helen would be in class the next day. She made it clear to her daughter in front of me that she expected a good effort from Helen the next day. She then looked at me and said, "Please tell me if she is not doing her work." I thanked Dorothy, said goodbye to Helen, and left the meeting feeling very positive about what had transpired.

The next day I received a short but wonderful note from Helen's mother that simply said, "Mr. Murphy, could you please let Helen stay in for recess today, she has a cold and thank you for coming to our house yesterday." When I read the note, I experienced an intense feeling of appreciation and satisfaction. I could not help but believe that this was a significant event in the partnership beginning to develop between Helen's mother and me. Helen worked much better that day, and I wrote a positive note about her work, showed it to her, and sent it home to her mother.

Over the course of the school year Helen performed very well. We certainly had days that were less productive than I preferred, and I did have to make the occasional follow-up visit. Good work was often acknowledged with a positive note home, and Helen began to see herself as a learner as she started to make significant gains in her skills and abilities.

*Unpacking Bill's Story of Visiting Dorothy*

Until the moment Bill went to see Helen's mother, this family did not have much influence or voice when it came to the structure of Helen's daily school work or much opportunity to be a support for Helen in the classroom or the school. In previous years the only communication home was in the form of

letters telling of Helen's detentions or suspensions. The message in these letters was often "Helen needs to conform to school expectations." Dorothy was not invited to be present when any decisions were made about Helen or Helen's program. Dorothy was not invited to the school except through general public invitations.

In Bill's visit to Helen's home Dorothy's knowledge was welcomed, valued, and incorporated into daily planning. Dorothy was given a voice. Decisions related to creating a more positive classroom environment for Helen were made collaboratively with Dorothy. Responsibility for Helen's future actions in the classroom was shared. Dorothy shared power with Bill and exerted a degree of control over what happened the next day in the classroom.

The chance to participate and contribute ideas and knowledge about Helen, Bill believes, empowered Dorothy and influenced Helen in terms of her recognition that teacher and mother were working together for her benefit.

In altering the relationships between teacher, student, and parent, Helen began to become successful in school. Helen knew her mother and teacher were in communication. Helen began to trust that the teacher knew what he was doing, and because her mother had a personal relationship with Bill and supported him, it was all right for Helen to trust the teacher, to engage in daily tasks, and to become a part of the learning community. The empowerment of her mother—her influence and voice—motivated Helen to work harder and cooperate with the teacher. The power did not rest with Bill alone; power was shared between mother and teacher working in concert to motivate and support Helen. Real changes in school will only begin to take place when relationships of power begin to change, that is, when the voices of parents and the community are heard and the direction of the school reflects the values of all (Cummins, 1986).

*Conclusion: Creating a New Story of Aboriginal Parent Participation*

Bill's home visits give us a new story of parental participation in which roles, responsibility, power, and control are shared by parents, educators, and students. We are hopeful that stories like this will replace the current story through which parental involvement is being lived. To create new stories in which parents are positioned in integral ways on the school landscape, it is important that we attend consciously to beliefs that shape these stories.

"Parents must not be involved simply to fulfil the school's purposes" (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 34). In speaking of Epstein's (1995) model for school-home-community partnerships, we express concern that although we are engaged as parent participants in our children's schools in all the ways Epstein outlines, we still do not feel like partners with our children's teachers and administrators. We believe that the unidirectional nature of schools' agendas is the reason for this. Until the agenda becomes reciprocal and we begin to explore how both schools and families can benefit from parental participation, we will be caught in reliving the "old story" of parents, just in new ways. In Helen's story the school's agenda was served in that Helen developed into a student who performed better and was less disruptive. The family's agenda was also served in that Helen developed into someone who began to see herself as capable and as a learner, and Dorothy had a voice in the kind of learner Helen became.

“The starting point for parent programs must be a sense of partnership, of accepting that each has much to learn from the other” (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 34). In speaking of the need to challenge myths that are currently held by educators about parents, we questioned the privileging of experts’ knowing over parents’ knowing, and in particular Aboriginal parents’ knowing. When we look at Bill’s home visit to Helen’s mother, we see that both Bill and Dorothy were holders of knowledge. Bill had knowledge of the curriculum continuum and where Helen was in relation to this continuum. Dorothy had knowledge of Helen’s history as a student, the importance of her relationship with her neighborhood friend Jessie, and the need for Helen to wear eyeglasses. Bill’s “expert” teacher knowledge combined with Dorothy’s parent knowledge helped to determine the environment in which Helen would become a successful learner and what would motivate her to participate in class. Through sharing what they knew and understood, they arrived at solutions that neither could have determined alone.

“The overriding purpose must be to bring about positive ... benefits for children” (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 34). Although we speak of reciprocity and the need for an agenda that serves both schools and families, we keep children central in our thinking. Although we recognize that a significant purpose of schooling is to improve student achievement, we strongly believe that this purpose is best achieved in contextual and relational ways that reflect and build from knowledge and practices of communities, cultures, and families that comprise the school. The benefits for Helen in her grade 4 year were greater because Bill worked alongside Dorothy in determining what strategies would engage Helen. The school’s agenda of improved student achievement and behavior was attended to, as was the family’s agenda of having a voice and a part in shaping the kind of learner Helen was to become.

“All strategies must consider the needs of parents” (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 34). We mention above the blaming and shaming of parents that often occurs when they do not attend school events or meetings; when they do not parent in ways that meet our white, middle-class expectations; when they do not attend to their children’s homework or personal care as we expect. We note that educators often make judgments at these moments rather than ask questions. What do we learn when we seek understanding by asking questions about the *whys* behind parents’ decisions? What do we learn when we begin to look closely at who the parents are, at what they see and know, at what they can contribute? In Helen’s story Bill went to Helen’s home. He talked with Dorothy as she continued to prepare dinner. He told of the day he and Helen had had and asked Dorothy for help in figuring out what to do next. He did not ask her to put aside what she was doing to come to the school; he did not disrupt the rhythm of their family’s evening; he did not impose his judgments or solutions on Helen or her mother. Bill’s home visit attended to Dorothy as a person and as an important participant in Helen’s schooling.

“All initiatives should lead parents to assume greater involvement in their children’s learning” (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 34). Given the privileging of expert professional knowledge, combined with infrequently scheduled opportunities to meet with parents, teachers often take control of the agenda at Meet the Teacher nights, at parent-teacher conferences, or in meetings with parents.

In such moments teachers overview curriculum, report on student progress, or share concerns about student learning or behavior, with little time provided for parents' voice or input. In Bill's home visit with Helen's mother, Bill asked Dorothy if she had any ideas about how he could help Helen have positive experiences in the classroom. This was the first of a number of exchanges over the course of the school year that created an opportunity for Dorothy to be more knowledgeable about and more involved in shaping her daughter's classroom experiences.

"Wherever possible, parent expertise and knowledge should be used" (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 34). When we advocate for using parents' knowledge, we are not downplaying the importance of teachers' knowledge or suggesting that it be replaced with parents' knowledge. We believe that teachers hold professional knowledge about teaching and learning that arises from their education and their experience. At the same time, we believe that parents hold personal, practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) of teaching and learning that arises from their experience of living with children. What interests us is exploring possibilities for laying parent knowledge alongside that of teachers. Dorothy's knowledge of the importance of Helen's relationship with Jessie and of the need for Helen to wear her glasses was knowledge Bill did not have: knowledge that when acted on made a difference to Helen's comfort and success in school.

In the living and telling of Bill's stories, we begin to see the emergence of a new story of parents in relation to the landscape of schools. We see how as Bill's contact with parents became an important part of his practice and an integral part of who he is as a teacher, his sense of identity as a teacher changed. With this shift in identity, and with the development of consciously held beliefs, we see how Bill shifted the living out of a unidirectional and hierarchical school agenda to the living out of an agenda in relationship with parents in reciprocally beneficial ways. As Bill came to know what parents could bring to schooling, he created space for their voices to be heard and their knowledge to be acted on in decisions about their children's teaching and learning. As we continue to retell and relive Bill's stories, we begin to imagine what other stories might be told on the landscape of schools if educators were to write parents' knowledge and parents' place and voice on the school landscape, into their plot lines.

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