Promoting Inclusive School-Community Relationships: Administrator Strategies for Empowering and Enabling Parents in Diverse Contexts

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Abstract

Much has been written about the challenges that accompany increasing diversity in educational institutions in many Western societies. To deal with these challenges, the idea and practice of inclusion has figured prominently in educational reform initiatives over the past few decades. One major development has been the trend towards stronger school community partnerships that are geared towards empowering and enabling *all* parents to participate more actively in school. Research to date suggests that principals have a very important role in nurturing these relationships. Based on the findings of a study among principals, this article explores how school leaders promote inclusive community involvement in diverse contexts.

Introduction

The idea and practice of inclusion has figured prominently in many of the reforms in education over the past two decades. Among other inclusive initiatives, educational reformers have sought to include the parents of students, and the communities to which they belong, in the process of schooling in a meaningful way. Rejecting past practices that endorsed the separation of schools and the communities that they served, both progressive and conservative proponents of school reform have sponsored changes that have paved the way for parents and community members to take up roles and responsibilities that were formerly assumed by educational professionals. Not only have parents been encouraged to venture into their children's schools and classrooms, they have also been asked to participate in policy and decision-making processes. In various parts of the Western world new policies and organizational arrangements have made it possible for parents to routinely come into classrooms to assist teachers, communicate with educators on a regular basis, and raise money for various school enterprises. They have also cleared the way for parents to sit on

committees, boards and councils that make decisions about such key matters as the hiring of teachers and principals, the nature and use of curriculum materials and various organizational and policy matters.

Reformers have opted to include parents and community members in school activities for a number of reasons (See for example, Leithwood et. al., 1999 and Epstein, 1997). Of these, two stand out. The first revolves around student achievement. Reformers have sought inclusive arrangements because they believe that they can enhance student learning. These reformers base their arguments on recent research that indicates that parent involvement in their children's education can improve academic performance (Epstein, 1997). The other reason concerns matters of justice. Advocates argue that it is only right that parents have a say in the education of their own children because of the stake that they and their children have in the outcomes.

These cases for inclusion become acutely relevant in situations where children's home and community culture differs from the culture of the school. In these situations, parents have in the past had little control over the content, delivery and organization of the curriculum; they have had little choice but to accept what schools and school systems have prescribed for their children. Children have had to cope with subject matter that was often outside the realm of their experience, and parents have had to deal with institutions that were foreign to them. Unfortunately, both parents and children have not always been successful at overcoming these barriers; parents tended to stay away from schools and students struggled with the curriculum and a variety of other school practices. Inclusive school policies and practices are designed to prevent these very situations. Reformers believe that welcoming parents, establishing cooperative relationships with them and giving them power in decision-making processes will help to make schools places where all students can succeed.

Those concerned with school- community relationships can no longer ignore the challenges that accompany diversity. Diversity continues to encroach on virtually all aspects of contemporary life, including schools and their communities (See for example, Statistics Canada, 1993, 2001; Ryan, 1999). While reforms have in varying degrees outlined various kinds of community and parental involvement in schools throughout the Western world, it remains to be seen just how schools put into practice these policies in diverse contexts. It also remains to be seen what school leaders are doing to encourage community involvement in these schools. Research to date indicates that principals have a very important role in school-community relationships, whether it involves enabling (Davis, 1995) or empowering (Leithwood et. al., 1999; Malen & Ogawa, 1990) activities. This article explores how school leaders promote inclusive community involvement in diverse contexts.

Inclusion and School-Community Relationships

Those concerned with the education of marginalized groups have looked upon the idea of inclusion with favour. They have done so because they recognize the harm that past and present exclusionary practices have done to these groups. Such practices were, and in some cases continue to be, both blatant and subtle.

Perhaps some of the most obvious exclusionary practices occurred in the United States during the so-called ante-bellum period (Lightfoot, 1978). In the south, slaves were expressively forbidden from pursuing any kind of education, while Northern Whites sought to explicitly prohibit Black children from attending White schools. This latter tactic endured well into the twentieth century throughout the United States. Canada's past has also been riddled with exclusionary practices. The case of Canada's Native people stands out in this regard. Even though authorities strongly encouraged the First Nations people to attend educational institutions, missionaries and secular educators believed that they were the ones who should determine the form and substance of this education. The curriculum was exclusively European in content and input was seldom, if ever, sought from local communities, and their involvement and presence was actively discouraged (See for example, Barman et. al., 1986). More recently, attempts have been made to include the community in the education of the young as local communities have assumed greater control. Nevertheless, exclusionary practices continue not only in First Nation schools, but in other public schools, often in more subtle ways, through for example, the knowledge favoured in schools, the teaching and management practices that predominate, and the manner in which some schools and school systems make decisions.

More recently the discourse on inclusion has found its way into the area of school-community relationships. As mentioned above, reformers, academics and practitioners have sought to include parents and their respective communities in the operation of schools. These efforts have taken two forms, what Lewis and Nakagawa (1995) refer to as *empowerment* and *enablement*. Strategies associated with the former target what its advocates see as the main problem – the lack of power that various individuals and communities have over educational institutions (See for example, Carmichael & Hamilton, 1967; Levin, 1970; Fine, 1993). Proponents believe that the main culprits in this scenario are self-absorbed educational bureaucracies. They feel that these entities by their very nature seek to retain power for themselves, and in the process, exclude already powerless parents, particularly those who are poor and those who belong to particular ethnic groups. Ensuring meaningful inclusion requires the empowerment of these powerless parents. Advocates of this view believe that empowerment of this sort can only be accomplished if and when school systems display alternate structural arrangements that give parents a voice in the governance of educational institutions. They are convinced that parental empowerment will help make schools work for their children because these parents would clear the way for school efforts geared to meeting the goals of those being served. With a greater say in the education of their children, parents would be more satisfied with their children's schools and thus be more committed to the educational enterprise generally. The end result would be increased student achievement (Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995).

The other approach to community inclusion is enablement. Advocates of the enablement option do not believe that the cause of exclusion is powerful, professionally staffed, self-absorbed bureaucracies (See for example, Comer,

1987; Epstein, 1997, Lightfoot, 1978). They do, however, acknowledge that in some situations some people can have too much power, and others too little, and that power can sometimes be abused. They also admit that bureaucracies can be unresponsive and sometimes dysfunctional. But these people also believe that these power differentials and bureaucratic shortcomings can be resolved from within the system. So their emphasis is not on power *per se*, but on commitment to schools in a rapidly changing social environment. They believe that it is up to educational professionals to change themselves and the organizations in which they work in ways that will reach out to the community and draw it into the school enterprise. These educators are encouraged to provide incentives for parents to become involved in their children's education. Proponents value parental participation for educational rather than political ends. They believe that getting parents to work as an educational resources in their children's education, eliciting their commitment toward the educational enterprise, and working out more collaborative arrangements among the school, parents and the community will ultimately enhance student achievement (Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995).

Not all inclusive school-community proposals or practices turn out to be exclusively of the empowerment or enablement variety. Some include elements of both, and so-called enablement programs sometimes value empowerment. Perhaps the reforms that resemble most closely the empowerment model occurred in large urban American centres in the 1980s and 1990s. Looking for alternatives to systems that had failed the largely Black populations of these areas, various groups in such cities as Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, Detroit and Chicago banded together to make changes to what were once large bureaucratic systems (Fine, 1993; Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995). Variations among districts notwithstanding, new legislation paved the way for massive decentralization that allowed local parents a voice in the governance of their children's schools. Not all urban American centres sponsored empowerment reforms, however. Lewis and Nakagawa (1995) maintain that educational reforms in Miami and Los Angeles followed more closely an enablement model. In these cities "insiders" rather than "outsiders" controlled the decentralization process, and as a result, they were able to make changes administratively and control the inclusionary process. Many inclusive school-community reforms in the Western world have been the result of a combination of these two models. In some areas, like Ontario for example, although parental roles have been legislated, parents still remain relatively powerless. In the United Kingdom, on the other hand, legislation has provided parents with more power than what they had previously and undoubtedly more power than Ontario parents currently have. In both cases, though, a strengthening of central powers has rendered any gains parents have made relatively meaningless (See for example, Hatcher et. al., 1996, Leithwood et. al., 1999; Apple, 2000).

Despite such policies, however, schools and school leaders are often in positions to exercise considerable discretion in community-school relationships. For example, there are many different ways in which parents can be invited into schools and encouraged to become committed. And even in "enablement" jurisdictions, school professionals and community members can find ways for

parents to become genuinely empowered (Leithwood et. al. 1999). This article explores the efforts of schools and administrators to include, that is, to enable or empower, members of their diverse communities in school life.

Method

The study described here was part of a larger four-year inquiry into how principals dealt with the challenges associated with ethnocultural diversity in schools. It consisted of three stages. The first stage, described here, involved personal interviews with 35 principals. These administrators were selected from two large Canadian school districts that shared a common border. One district was urban, while the other had both an urban and rural component. The former was highly diverse and had been obviously so for a number of years. Even so, its diversity has continued to increase. In this district it was not uncommon for students in one school to identify with upwards of 50 different heritages. The second district varied in its ethnocultural composition. The urban portion of the board was as diverse as the former district, while the rural part was considerably less so. The unique characteristic of this district was the fact that diversity was rapidly moving northwards, out from the more urban part to the rural parts. Both districts had policies that were designed to discourage racism. We chose the schools on the basis of their diversity, and not the individual who occupied the role of school administrator. While most of the schools displayed obvious levels of diversity, a few, mostly rural schools, were decidedly less so. These latter schools had only a handful of students who were not Anglo. The sample included a representative number of elementary and secondary schools. The size of schools varied from small elementary schools of around 100 students to larger secondary schools with student populations of over 2000. Although we did not plan for this, the gender balance of principals was approximately even. With the exception of two administrators, all were of Anglo or European heritage.

The research team (myself and a research assistant) asked administrators open-ended questions about how they dealt with the challenges that accompanied ethnocultural diversity in their respective schools. Originally we attempted, using a Leithwood and Stager (1989) framework, to discover how principals made decisions in this area. We focussed on how they interpreted the various issues, what goals they set for themselves, what principles they followed and what constraints they experienced as they attempted to attain these goals. We directed our questions to the areas of (1) curriculum and instruction, (2) students and teachers, (3) the community, (4) school organization and structure, and (5) resource allocation. Although we wanted to explore these areas, the questions we asked were open-ended enough to allow administrators to talk about areas of concern to them that we had not anticipated. Also, as the study proceeded and various other themes became evident, we pursued them. One of the most prominent themes was school-community relationships. We recognized after the first few interviews that this issue was important, so we followed up on this theme in the subsequent interviews. After we collected all the data, we isolated the data that addressed school-community issues. We analyzed this data further, breaking it down to more specific themes.

Findings

Enablement Strategies

Much of what has been written and legislated in the area of school–community relationships over the past two decades has favoured an enablement approach. Moreover, some of the legislation that has been initiated outside education bureaucracies and geared to empower parents and community members has turned out to be mere window dressing. In Ontario, for example, recent legislation designed to find a place for local school councils has left parents with little real power – they are simply advisory in nature. Aside from authentic and superficial empowering efforts, legislators, academics and educational practitioners have also looked to other inclusive strategies. Instead of approaching matters of inclusion from “outside” the system, they have worked within the current system to find ways to get parents and the larger community involved in children’s education. The nature of this involvement has largely revolved around efforts at communicating and collaborating with the community. This was true in the cases of the administrators in this study. Given their limited knowledge of many of the communities that they served, it was all most of them could do to simply make contact with parents and community members, understand them, and to communicate with them. One principal, for example, maintained that she was frequently forced to make decisions in these areas, by the “seat of the pants” because of her very limited knowledge of community groups and of the novelty of situations associated with diverse communities.

Administrators in this study talked almost exclusively of partnerships, collaborations and cooperation when speaking about including their diverse communities in school enterprises. Little thought was given to empowerment. These principals conceptualized these efforts in a number of ways. Generally speaking though, the metaphors that they used to describe school–community relationships reflected the importance they attached to them. A number of principals spoke of these relationships as partnerships. Many saw this partnership as an equal one, not so much in terms of rights, but responsibilities. In this regard, they believed that each partner had a responsibility in the relationship, based on what Wilbur, an elementary principal, saw as a “division of labour.” Jake, on the other hand, felt that there were not two, but three partners – educators, parents, and children – and all three had an obligation to “pull their own weight.” While these principals may have thought of these partnerships as equal, it was generally the school that initiated these sorts of partnerships, and it was the school that set down the terms for them. In this regard, administrators recognized the need for the school not to wait for the community to come to it, but to be proactive in establishing relationships.

Administrators spoke of the importance of getting to know the other partners in these relationships. This, however, was not always easy within these diverse communities; educators sometimes knew less than they should about community groups, and many of these groups did not know how schools in this part of the world operated. Getting to know one another then required that the school, parents and the community share information. For many of the principals in this

study, information sharing was a key element in their interaction with parents and communities. They saw it as a two way process; they provided the community with information about the school, while at the same time, seeking out information about the community. Most principals had more to say about getting information about the school to the community. Jerod, for example, maintained that “you must know what you are doing in a school and you must be able to articulate it to others.” Others saw the need for “parent education.” Tom believed that “parents have to be informed of the gaps that exist within their children when they enter a system such as this one.” He went on to say that “as much as we require education in terms of learning about some of these differences within the school setting, they too have a lot of learning to do when it comes to understanding the norms, the values, the expectations of a North American culture and, specifically, of a North American school setting.”

Administrators also stressed the need to get to know the community. So the information sharing also moved in the other way – from the community to the school. In this regard a number of administrators felt that listening skills were very important. Janice, for example, believed that it was crucial for a principal to be “a good listener and talk to all the partners in the system. Talk to kids, talk to parents, talk to teachers, the other support staff in the building you work with. In education we may be good observers, but we’re not good listeners. “Although sympathetic to an inclusive ideal, the statements of many of these principals also demonstrated a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, as Janet’s statement reveals, administrators believed that schools needed to value their respective community’s cultures, including some of them in the operation of the school. On the other hand, however, many also took for granted the fact that many of these groups would have to acknowledge and accept the values embedded in “North American school culture.” It is this latter culture that would inevitably prevail, excluding by necessity, often implicitly, the culture of other groups.

As described above, getting to know one another requires the exchange of information. This next section outlines the manner in which administrators sent out and acquired information from their diverse communities.

Sending Out and Acquiring Information

Administrators had a number of strategies for sending out and acquiring information. Much of this sharing involved personal interactions with members of the community. These kinds of transactions will be outlined later. For now, I want to describe three more-or-less technical or impersonal means – the use of newsletters, handbooks and surveys.

A number of principals who we interviewed used school handbooks and newsletters to convey information about the school, the community, and other matters to parents and community. School handbooks generally contained information about such things as school personnel, school programs, schedules, rules and regulations. They were often sent home with students at the beginning of the school year. High schools tended to employ handbooks more so than newsletters. But they also produced student-generated school newspapers, and although principally directed at the student body, were also a useful source of

information for the community. Generally speaking, school newsletters were more common at the elementary level. Many principals of these schools believed that newsletters played an important part in conveying information about the school and community to parents. For some, these newsletters were used to increase awareness of parents about the school and other relevant matters. Janice, for example, said that “what I have tried to do is, through my newsletters ... to heighten awareness.” In cases where portions of the community were new to the country, principals felt that they needed to be made aware of things that most Canadian-born parents would take for granted, like dressing for the cold weather.

Some of these newsletters go home in English, while others, or parts of them, are in a second and sometimes third language. While many administrators recognized the value of second language newsletters, not all had the resources to employ a language other than English. One principal found a way around this obstacle. She would have teachers read the newsletter with students before they took it home, so that children would be able to explain or translate it for the parents. In some cases she would have someone call home and explain what was in the newsletter.

Principals also employed various methods to gather information about the community. One technique that proved useful to some of the participants was the employment of questionnaires or surveys. These techniques allowed the principals to acquire information from a large number of people and to capture it in a concise way. They used questionnaires to gather information on a specific issue or on more general things. Ronda, for example, found surveys useful in finding out what the community wanted in terms of religious celebrations. Most pressing for her was to try and get a sense of what her school community expected of the school at the end of December.

Principals also used these surveys for other ends. Bob, for example, used a questionnaire to create a school vision. In this two-year endeavour, he solicited information from parents, students and members of the business community. Besides the surveys, he had the parents’ group and teachers phone parents to come in for an information meeting where parents voiced their preferences about what they wanted to see at the school. At times, principals would get information from these techniques that they had not anticipated. Janice, for example, found that one of her questionnaires revealed that there were several groups in her community that she had not known about. She said that “there were a couple of Ba’hai families that I didn’t know existed. They were very quiet, low-key about the whole thing, and I didn’t know too much about the religion”. So in order to learn more about them, she invited one of their church elders to come to the school.

Connecting with Individuals

Sending out and acquiring information through impersonal means like surveys proved to be an efficient means of getting to know the community. However, most administrators realized that they had to find other ways to exchange information and develop relationships. One strategy that they used was to

attempt as much as possible to interact on a personal basis with parents and community members. Administrators believed that “making connections” with individual parents and community members was the best way to get to know the community and to have the community know them. As a result, many administrators spent considerable time interacting with these individuals.

Some administrators believed that achieving good relationships with communities of people required that they get to know certain individuals within those communities. Heather, for example, felt that “you have to make connections with those key people or else you continue to make mistakes.” She learned over time, and after some errors, that there were certain protocols that helped her communicate with the Somali community in her school area. She discovered that it helped if she learned who the “men in charge were” or which people were willing to be spokespeople. She found out that communications were facilitated if she connected with these people or with others who had been in the country for longer periods of time. Edward, on the other hand, discovered that developing a good relationship with the nearby Native community required that he connect not only with the parents of students, but also with the elders. He came to recognize the importance of elders in Native culture, and as a result, found ways to convey this respect in his overtures to the community.

Principals also emphasized that they needed to spend time interacting directly with parents. They also felt it was important to make themselves available and accessible. Janice, for example, said that “one thing we need to do here is spend a lot of time in direct contact with parents.” She said that she spends a lot of time on the phone and in person. Other studies have indicated that much can be accomplished on the phone. Davis (1995), for example, maintained that he placed 23,000 positive calls to parents in 15 years, most of these outside of school hours. Walter also felt that it was important that he make himself available to parents and community members. As principal of a large high school, he made every effort to see that parents got through to him when they felt the need.

But principals also said that they cannot just wait for parents to approach them in order to begin to establish relationships. They also stated that they have to be the ones to initiate contacts. Administrators had a number of strategies for doing this. Heather, for example, an elementary principal, kept an “eye out” for parents before and after school (See also Davis, 1995). She watched for parents because she knew that there was generally somebody walking the children home. Heather said “I’m always on the lookout for so-and-so’s dad or so-and-so’s uncle. I stop them and say ‘Do you know that this happened or that happened’ or ‘we’re having this at the school.’” Besides her after and pre school vigilance, Heather took other measures to make sure that she got to know parents. Among other things, she made sure that she was always around the reception area, took kids home when they were ill, and generally kept up “that constant communication.”

Other principals attempted to get “out into the community.” Among other things, this involved meeting parents on their home turf, approaching community organizations and speaking to community groups. Malcolm, for example, was

one of many principals who believed that it was important for principals to move out beyond the school walls. One of the first things that he did after being appointed principal was to go out and learn about his very diverse community. He remembered telling his vice principal “I’m going to take three months. I’m going to visit classes; I’m going to talk to parents; I’m going to learn about the community, drive the community.” He went to a few community meetings, just as a visitor and a listener. He also made himself visible and let people know who he was. Malcolm did much of this on his own time, mostly in the evenings. He wanted to meet parents “on an equal basis” and to be able to put “a name to a face, and a face to a name.”

Roberta had other strategies for getting to know parents and community members and for maintaining these relationships. One of these strategies included sitting down with members of a particular community and having coffee with them. On one occasion when problems arose she remembered calling up a particular parent, and asking if she could come over to talk. The parent agreed, and when she arrived, was offered a cup of coffee. Roberta said that she had learned never to refuse anything that is offered, even if the offering wasn’t to her liking. Refusal would be considered bad manners and could potentially impair dialogue and even disrupt relationships.

While administrators acknowledged that it was important for them to make contact with parents and community members, some also recognized the importance of encouraging teachers to do the same. Clarence, for example, maintained that “we actively encourage our teachers to establish ongoing dialogue with the parents if there is an issue. They’re strongly encouraged to call home, talk with the parent.” Clarence and others recognized, though, that these dialogues should not begin only after problems arise, but be an ongoing thing. Tom encouraged this type of contact in his school. He said that “every teacher on this staff is in communication with parents, not just over difficulties with the youngster, but also over the good things the youngsters contribute to school life. And they’re on the phone constantly. So parents know, when they hear from the school, it’s not just because there’s a problem.” Davis (1995) also maintains that it is important to have something positive to say to parents during these sort of interchanges. To do this, he devised a weekly award system that provided him with a reason for phoning home with positive news about students.

Connecting with Community Organizations

While many principals saw value in getting to know parents and members of the community on an individual basis, they also felt that it was important to connect with community organizations. Many of these administrators attempted to establish relationships with religious, cultural, social service and business groups because they believed that these relationships had much to offer the school and community. Among other things these kinds of connections can help the school and community get to know one another better, provide adjustment supports for new Canadians, supply various services, promote cultural celebrations, furnish resources for the school and community and provide assistance to educators.

Administrators connected with many kinds of organizations in the community. Perhaps the ones that they sought out the most frequently were religious and cultural organizations. Many found connections with groups that were preoccupied with religious functions or heritage activities provided ways for them to get to know the community and vice versa. Principals also found that dealing with social service agencies could also benefit the community and school, as could efforts to connect with local business organizations. One important reason for connecting with these community organizations is to help both school and community become familiar with one another. Barry found that the local Catholic Community Services group was helpful in this regard in a number of ways. One of the things it did was provide venues where new Canadians could learn about their new country, including the education system. Others looked to organizations like the West Indies Caribbean Association, the Spanish Multicultural Council and the Christian Alliance Church to facilitate relationships with their respective diverse communities, and to help new families adjust to their new country, and in some instances to provide them with resources.

In recent years there have been a number of initiatives that have attempted to integrate a range of social services and community organizations with the school (Smrekar & Mawhinney, 1999). While laudable in their intent, many of these efforts have fallen short of their goals. Among other things, Furman and Metz (1996) maintain that they do not strengthen weak links between schools and communities. Despite the fact that these collaborations are designed to empower families, their bureaucratic structures do little to ensure the empowerment. While the principals in this study did mention the difficulties that they had with trying to get cooperation with and between government agencies, they also indicated that they had good success when they approached agencies on their own, as principals of individual schools and not necessarily as agents of larger (bureaucratic) entities. Furthermore, they were often rewarded when they asked for help from these organizations.

School Contact Processes

While principals felt that establishing relationships with individuals and community organizations was important, they also employed other methods to connect with the community. In this regard most of them described processes that they or their predecessors had set up for bringing the community into the school. These frequently revolved around mechanisms for arranging various meeting situations, assistance scenarios and learning opportunities.

The most obvious contact situation was the traditional parent-teacher night. These events do not always attract parents in diverse communities, however. Delgado-Gaitan (1991), for example, in a study conducted in a diverse school community, noted that conventional events like parent-teacher nights, were not successful in attracting many parents. Most administrators in our study also admitted that these events had mixed results. Some attempted to make adjustments in the ways in which these occasions were conducted. Stephanie, for example, changed the form that these parent-teacher conferences took. She

instituted a plan that attempted as much as possible to include the student in these interchanges. The student would take a leading role in the process, a move Stephanie believed would benefit all the parties.

Many administrators attempted to introduce other sorts of events that were designed to attract parents who would normally tend to stay away from the school. Roberta was one of a number of principals who spoke of orientation activities. She was particularly fond of her school's grade nine barbecue. Administrators may also hold periodic meetings through the year to inform parents about what the school is doing. Tom, for example, said that he organizes these events to "educate" parents about such things as the school curriculum, mediation services and other special services and resources that are available. He also offered opportunities for parents to learn about other kinds of things not directly related to school matters, like understanding North American culture and child rearing practices.

While a number of parents, in this case, indicated an interest in this type of "education", it remained to be seen how effective it was. Other more nontraditional methods may prove to be more successful. Delgado-Gaitan (1991), for example, described two successful strategies. In one preschool teachers worked to make parents co-teachers. They did this by using the parents' native language, culture, concepts and practices in their instruction. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) also describes a situation where parents organized their own instruction. Weary of waiting for school officials to do something constructive, Spanish-speaking parents came together, on their own, to learn about the school. They looked to those among them who had both knowledge and skill. In doing so, they sought to understand the school system and their rights and responsibilities as parents. Among a number of learning exercises, this group of parents rehearsed communicating with educators in order to learn how their children were doing in school and to advocate for them.

A number of administrators attempted to find ways to inject levels of comfort into these school-community interchanges. They found that providing translation services not only in the advertising bulletins, but also in the meeting itself encourages more parents to attend. Other principals talked about other arrangements that they believed helped to get parents and community members into the school. Juanita, for example, started a "drop-in centre for multicultural folks". She did so to entice grandparents and parents who walked their kids to school to come to the resource centre, to have a cup of coffee or tea, to read a magazine in their language while they waited. Heather, on the other hand, introduced what she referred to as an "ESL coffee hour."

Principals also sought to include members of the community and parents by inviting them into the school to help out with various activities. They made it possible for parents to help out in routine ways or on special occasions. Many schools provided opportunities for parents to help out in classrooms or libraries or on field trips. Heather, for example, maintained that her "Middle East Mums" particularly enjoyed checking out books in the library. Cathy, on the other hand, told us that in her school parents came in to help with the school's "publishing house", typing manuscripts and binding the final products. Others mentioned

that parents of elementary school children were happy to come in and help teachers in the classroom, while others helped patrol hallways, lunchrooms and schoolyards at various times during the day. Administrators also involved parents in less routine ways. For example, they arranged for parents and community members to come in for “cultural” displays or days. Principals also made use of parents for their expertise in other areas. Jake, for example, had one parent come in to talk to students about racism.

Some principals also noted that parents came to school by virtue of their status as students. Indeed some schools offered ESL courses that were attended by parents of the regular day stream. In these situations, parents could either work towards a diploma or simply learn the English language. One school had three generations of a family that was in one way or another associated with school programs. A grandmother and her daughter took language lessons, while the grandson was enrolled in a regular day program. Some principals, however, found that shrinking budgets made it difficult to offer programs for adults, despite the fact that they recognized the value of them. Noreen was one of these principals. She noted that there was a need for these programs, but this need had not been acknowledged by other community organizations.

Empowerment Strategies

The other side of school-community inclusion is empowerment. As alluded to above, there is no definitive way of distinguishing empowerment practices from enabling practices. This is because empowerment is a relative term. Some might see helping out in the classroom or supervising in the schoolyard as empowering; others might not. The latter would probably view substantive input into decisions regarding personnel, finances and curriculum as genuinely empowering. Anything less would be superficial, at best. Of course, in Ontario parents or school councils do not have legislative authority in these areas, except in an advisory capacity. Leithwood et. al. (1999) in fact go so far as to say that these school councils do not empower parents. They also state, however, that schools, like one in their study, can extend to parents and school councils some “unofficial” decision-making powers. While most of the principals in this study spoke of enabling measures, some did allude to measures that they took to extend to parents a role in policy decisions. At the same time, however, more than a few indicated that they did not wish to see parents or school councils with power over such things as personnel. Pat, for example, maintained that his school community wouldn’t go along with a council that made decisions in this area. He maintained that “in terms of hiring and firing of teachers and so forth, we [as a school council] certainly don’t do that, nor would we as a community, support that sort of thing.”

Principals spoke of a number of ways in which they extended a measure of power to parents and community members. Perhaps the most cited strategy involved getting information from parents and then acting on it. One way of gathering information, as previously mentioned, was by means of surveys. Another means of giving parents and community members input into school decisions involved giving them the opportunity to participate in large group

discussions of policy issues. Ron spoke of doing this sort of thing when he first took up his position at his high school. He noted that the school had many problems, and believed that his administration needed to get input from the community in order to address them. He advertised a meeting and many parents came and voiced their opinions on, for example, the general treatment of students, issues of racism, behaviour codes and so on. Over the course of the next few weeks, Ron worked with a representative committee to work out new school policies in some of these areas. Other principals did this sort of thing on a more regular basis. Edward, for example, said that he runs what he refers to as a "bear-pit session for parents to come out and talk about whatever." He noted that he runs sessions of this sort every term so that "people could come out and air their beefs."

At the time of this research school community councils were in their infancies. Many principals already had experience with Parent Teacher Associations of various sorts. Some had initiated them on their own. Stephanie, for example, began with a couple of parents and expanded from there. With the help of these parents, she canvassed the community about their needs, asked for volunteers and approached people. Others simply sent home notices with students, asked for volunteers and went from there. Some principals said that they still had difficulty filling all the seats on their school councils, and they sometimes found themselves encouraging people to put their names forward.

Another inclusion issue here revolves around the identity of the participants on school councils. Other jurisdictions have reported that not only do certain parents tend not to serve on local school councils (Hatcher et. al., 1996), but that when they do their voices are dominated by others (Malen & Ogawa, 1990; Fine, 1993; Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995). These patterns also surfaced in this study. While principals tried as much as possible to ensure that their school councils were diverse, many admitted failure. Some, however, were successful in this regard. Gail, for example, said that she was fortunate in that her school council had "members of visible minority groups." She confessed that this didn't happen by design, "it was just the way it happened and that was good." As it turned out, there were many "minority" parents in the community who were "very interested" in the school, and as a consequence, made efforts to become involved. For most principals, however, this was not the case. In most cases principals said that "visible minority" groups were generally underrepresented on these councils. This was particularly the case when it came to Chinese parents. Clarence was just one of many principals who maintained that "Caucasian parents are much more involved in the school than non-Caucasian parents generally." He also found that "Black and Indian parents will still be more ready to involve themselves in the school than the Chinese will."

Principals had various explanations for why Chinese parents are not involved in school councils and schools generally. Pat, for example, felt that it may be uncomfortable for Chinese parents to approach the school, given some of the differences in language and culture. Some, he believed, may be intimidated by the school and its practices. Others have different theories. Donald maintained that language insecurity plays a part in Chinese parents' reluctance to get

involved in school organization. He also felt that parents believe that it is the school's responsibility to educate their children, and as a consequence, prefer to leave educational matters to professional educators. In this regard, Edward thought that some parents feel shame when they have to approach the school. Other principals also noted that it is not just Chinese parents who are reluctant to get involved in school organizations and activities. Many groups of immigrants, particularly those from Asia and Africa, are also not always anxious to approach the school (Hatcher et. al., 1996; Wang, 1995).

The functions of school councils vary from school to school, even though their mandates are inscribed in legislation. Some administrators noted that many of these organizations are still involved in fund-raising activities and other issues in which they were involved before school councils were legislated. Others are more concerned with program matters. Sometimes the suggestion that school councils concern themselves with matters other than fundraising can come from the principal. Pat, for example, said that she actively discouraged her school council from almost exclusively pursuing fund raising, something that members wanted to do. On the other hand, councils may insist that they do not become preoccupied with fund raising. Bill, for example, maintained that the council at his high school maintained that they had enough of this kind of thing at the elementary level. Among other things, this council used its time to provide feedback on board policies.

Discussion: Inclusive Community Practices

Most, if not all, principals in this study favoured practices that included parents and community members in the operation of their respective schools. The ways in which they followed through on these beliefs varied, and so did the extent to which parents became involved. Most principals said that they were preoccupied with strategies that enabled rather than empowered parents and community members. They were more concerned with simply making contact with individuals and groups, understanding them, and encouraging them to become involved in their children's education in whatever way they could. Given the situation of many of the groups in these diverse communities and the structure of education in the province that extends to parents little more than an advisory role, principals were less concerned with extending to parents a role in governance matters.

Principals concentrated mostly on enabling parents and community members to participate in their children's education. They did so because of the gulf they saw between school culture and the culture of many community groups. These mostly Anglo principals found that they frequently knew very little of the sometimes upward of 50 different groups in their communities, let alone knowing about the actual presence of some groups. Language, values, cultural practices, religious beliefs, attitudes towards education were frequently sources of puzzlement for them. On the other hand, these principals also found that parents and community members did not understand how schooling in this part of the world worked. Among other things, parents regularly struggled with the English language, understanding both the content and processes of school, and their roles

in the education of their children. For these principals, then, closing the gap between the school and parents in these diverse communities required that they establish a dialogue with them. A dialogue, many believed, would allow the respective parties to get to know one another better, help parents and educators learn about each other, and in doing so pave the way for parents to become involved in the education of their children.

Principals did many things to establish dialogues, to learn about the community and to educate the community about the school. Establishing these dialogues required that principals first forge relationships with individuals and groups. To do so, they placed themselves in positions that would bring them into contact with members of the community. Spending time on the phone for positive reasons, making themselves available at all times, hanging around areas that parents frequent, going out into the community for meetings and to see parents in their homes, were just some of the strategies that the principals in this study employed to get to know their respective school communities. They also employed strategies for exchanging information. They used surveys to acquire knowledge about the groups in the community and to discover how they felt about selected school matters, and newsletters, school newspapers and meetings to get information out into the community. Many also made efforts to get parents and community groups to come into the school to meet teachers and to help out in various capacities. Unfortunately the more traditional of these events, like parent-teacher nights, were not terribly successful in attracting parents. Principals in this study and in other situations (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Davis, 1995) found that more parents came to non-traditional activities.

While enabling tactics and events are important in getting parents – particularly those who are reluctant – involved in school activities (Dehli, 1994), they only constitute part of inclusive practice. Inclusion goes beyond bake sales, cultural events, parent nights and the like. Enabling strategies of this sort are designed almost exclusively to help diverse groups adjust to what will be new and very different environments. The educators who use them generally take for granted that it will be these families and not the school that must change; diverse community groups are expected to acclimatize themselves to practices that do not include their ways. In other words, educators endorse these enabling practices because they acknowledge – often implicitly – that the formal education that goes on in their schools is exclusive. And while some schools may make valiant efforts to include the languages, cultures, values and knowledge of the respective community groups in the content and process of schooling, given current realities, there is no guarantee that any of this will occur. So if school knowledge is to be consistently inclusive in way that empowerment advocates would recommend, power relationships cannot exclusively favour an (Anglo-European based) school system. Rather, these power relationships must make it possible for community groups to make decisions that will allow school knowledge to be inclusive. If schools are to pay more than lip service to the idea of inclusion, then these groups need to be genuinely empowered. But can the participation of parents in governance at the school level ensure this sort of inclusion, and can it ensure that traditionally marginalized students will succeed at school?

For some time now a number of scholars and politicians have believed that local and community managed schools represented a solution to the problems that many “minority” students faced in schools. They were convinced that the input of parents and community members would unhinge schools from their bureaucratic and impersonal tendencies, make them more responsive to local needs, and in doing so, boost student achievement. Inevitably these beliefs were put into practice, although the configuration of these structures varied considerably. And so did the potency of local parent input – from weaker forms in Ontario to stronger ones in places like Chicago. Recent research on school councils in Ontario (Leithwood et. al. 1999), Chicago (Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995) and in the United Kingdom (Hatcher et. al., 1996), however, indicates that these local school councils have not fulfilled their mandate. It seems that even in situations where parent councils have power over finances, school programs and personnel, relationships between community and schools have not changed all that much (Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995) and student achievement gains are inconsistent at best (Hess, 1999; Shipps et. al., 1999). In this regard, local community management generally has floundered in three areas – participation on school councils, power on the school councils and the relationship of governance to teaching and learning.

The principals in this study noted that their school councils tended to be populated by Anglo and middle class parents and even when “minority” parents did participate, they tended to have difficulty with the group interaction. These findings are consistent with the findings from other studies (Hatcher et. al. 1996; Dehli, 1994; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Chambers, 2001). These studies indicate that minority parents are often under-represented on governance councils. Hatcher et. al. (1996), for example, contend that in the United Kingdom this happens because “minority” parents are not part of the influential informal parent, business, political and educational networks that generally place individuals on the councils. They also maintain that Asian parents do not participate on school councils because they lack confidence in their language abilities and in their ability to interact in the white dominated formal environment of the school. Work commitments and the reluctance of women to go on their own also account for this low turnout. But even when “minority” parents do show up, they often find that they are unable to penetrate the forms of language and interaction that councils generally adopt.

Those with little experience of formal meetings, like many of the “minority” and immigrant parents to which principals in this study referred, have difficulty with the procedures of chaired meetings (Hatcher et. al. 1996; Dehli, (1994), with “middle class proceduralism” (Lewis & Nakagawa, 1995). Not only do many of these parents have to struggle with language barriers, but they also have difficulty with the peculiar type of interaction that this setting engenders and with the informal ways of talking that goes on. These incongruences routinely obstruct the voices of parents and block or filter issues of race (Hatcher et. al., 1996). One Philadelphia council member expresses his frustration with the process by saying that:

Due to the fact that the participants of the Governance Council are from a very specific situation – all are teachers/administrators, are from the same school, and have been oriented through the years to a particular system and culture – the language, thinking and dialogue left me always playing catch up ball with such important subjects as meaning of words and concepts, philosophy of education, and contextual questions that relate [to this high school]. This promotes a high level of frustration (Fine, 1993, p. 468).

While parents – particularly “minority” and working class parents – generally do not have the resources or skills to influence governance situations, principals do. Leithwood et. al. (1999) maintain that principals have demonstrated a remarkable capacity to either derail community-dominated councils (Dehli, 1994) in order to retain decision-making control for themselves (Malen & Ogawa, 1990) or ensure council effectiveness (Hess, 1995). On the positive side, they can help create participatory decision-making structures and foster collaborative work among council members (Odden & Wohlsletter, 1995), clear defining goals and roles for parents and for the council, and act as an information provider, motivator, and friend of the council (Odden, 1995). On the other hand, the principal’s unique access to information, their positional power, their ability to use abstract language to talk about educational issues, and to set meeting agendas makes it possible for them to smother or exclude individuals and initiatives that do not meet with their approval. Of course in situations where councils have the power to dismiss principals the relationship between council and principal may be different, even though principals still have access to resources that council members do not.

Given these power imbalances, what possibilities do these forms of inclusion offer for the resolution of issues of diversity and “race”? Lewis and Nakagawa (1995) are decidedly pessimistic about the prospects of urban decentralization for rectifying racial inequalities in the United States. They maintain that decentralization has masked rather resolved issues of “race” and class in inclusionary policies. It has done so by using the ideology of inclusion to give the appearance of change without much resource redistribution; Whites maintain their hegemony, while Blacks maintain their “control” of the public schools. Lewis and Nakagawa (1995) maintain that, despite all the changes, the relationship between educational institutions and parents has not changed, and this had made it difficult for parents to assume a role (in governance) that they neither wanted nor were prepared for. In addition to this, decentralization has not had a noticeable impact on student achievement; changes in student marks have been inconsistent at best (Hess, 1999; Shipps et. al., 1999).

Obviously, changes in the relationship between schools and communities will also require changes in society generally. Not only do parents need to organize and school and communities be restructured to work towards democracies of difference (Fine, 1993), but everyone needs to work to develop conditions of life that facilitate these inclusive practices. But in order to achieve this end, parents,

community members and educators have to work together. Parents should not be saddled with running schools, nor should they be subordinated to the existing structure. Lewis and Nakagawa (1995) maintain instead that a model needs to be developed that allows for parents and educators to collaborate in certain parts of children's education. But this involvement should not be mandated; rather policy should merely set the stage for parents and schools to work together. Moreover, this collaboration needs to prioritize children's learning. In this regard it needs to acknowledge the necessity of finding a way to accommodate both professional and "nonprofessional" commitment and expertise.

Conclusion

Long-term improvement in student achievement will require the development of the capacity of professional educators (Shipps et. al., 1999). This is because constraints on the exercise of these capacities will inevitably limit the improvement in student learning opportunities. So management or organization changes and administrative practices must be geared toward improving the professional expertise and commitment of educators. But these practices cannot be exclusive, as they have traditionally tended to be. Rather, professional teaching practice needs to be inclusive, that is, it must incorporate a range of diverse community knowledge, practices and values. And in order to ensure that this happens, aside from their many other potential roles, parents and community members also need to play some part in collaborative governance arrangements. Only in this way can parents, community members and educators expect to improve student learning for all students, and to address and alleviate the racial inequalities that have plagued educational institutions and the conditions of life generally.

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