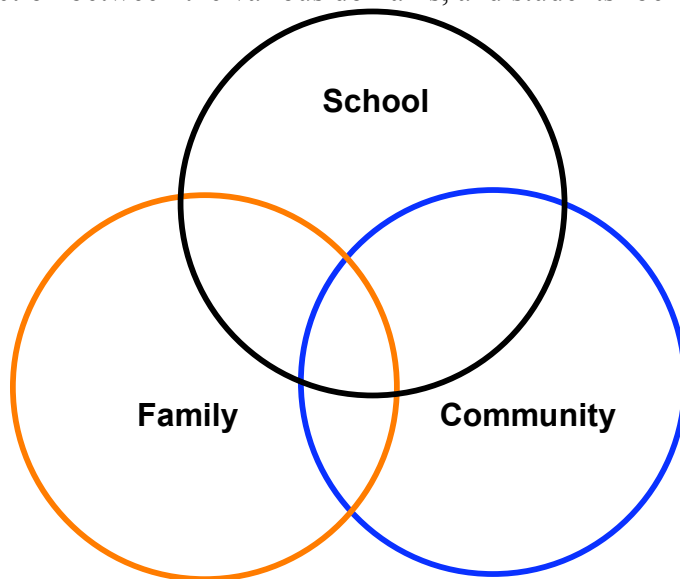


# **Strengthening Home-School Connection within The Indo-Canadian Community**

By Scott Johnson and Charlotte Siemens

As cultural diversification increases within the Canadian population, Canada's schools need to adapt and evolve in order to reflect the increasingly diverse needs of learners. In British Columbia, cultural diversity is on the rise. Statistics Canada (2001) predicts that "1 in 5 Canadians will belong to a visible minority group in 2017; roughly 1 in 5 Canadians will be immigrants in 2017 and 77% of Canada's visible minority population will live in Ontario and British Columbia." For some cultural groups, family involvement in the local school is not a common practice, nor is it seen as the role family members are to hold in their child's education. There can be differing expectations of support between the school and the home. One of the growing cultural groups in B.C. is the Indo-Canadian population. This paper focuses on the Indo-Canadian community at Harry Sayers Elementary in School District #34 and investigates means of strengthening the relationship between family and school.

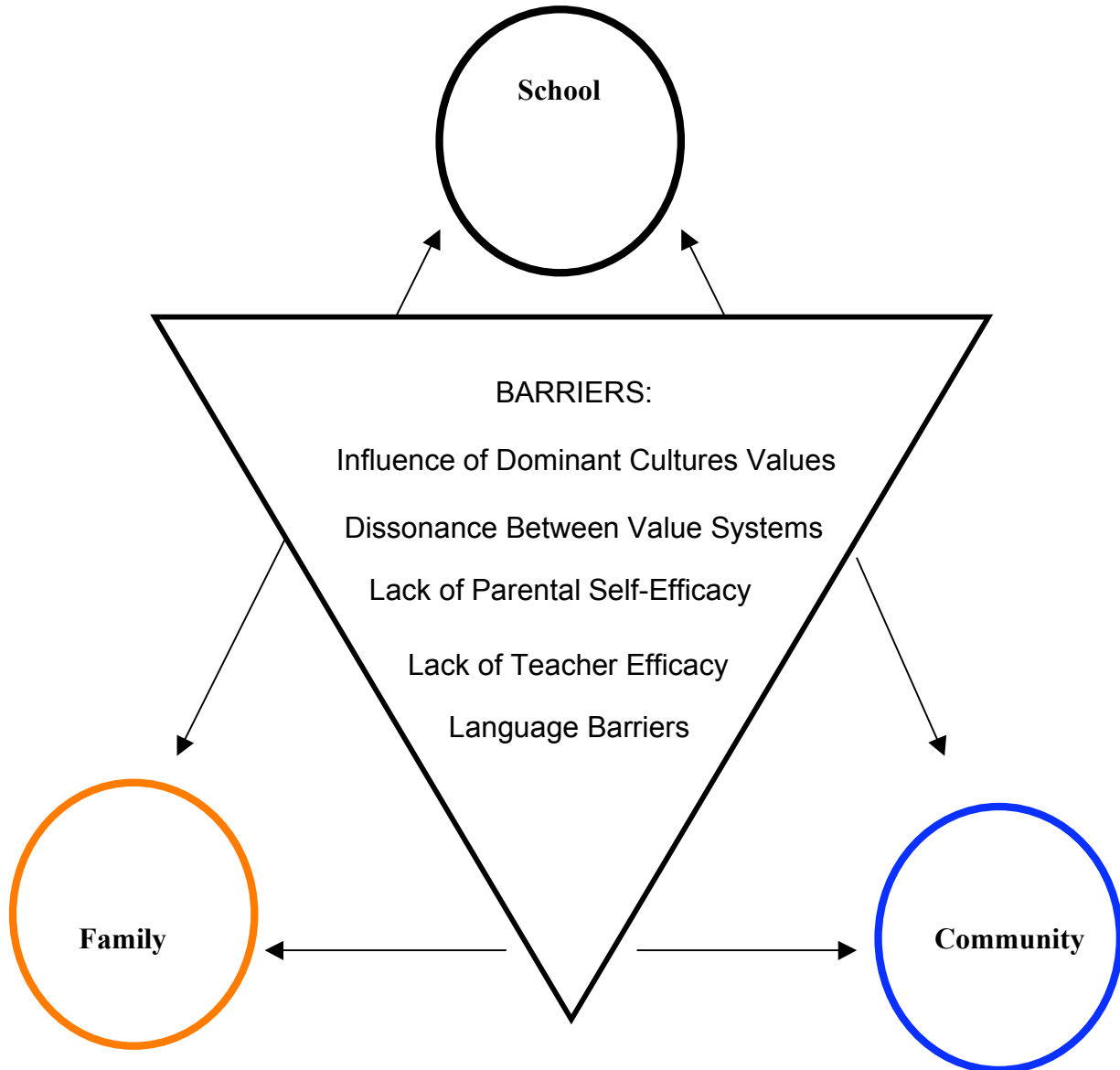
There is substantial literature that supports the need for strengthening the connection between home and school. Fostering a strong link between the school, the home and if possible, the community has a positive effect on student success. "Families, schools and communities are most effective if they have overlapping or shared goals, missions, and responsibilities for children." (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996, p. 270). When the school, family and community have similar goals and aspirations for their children, there is intersection between the various domains, and students' benefit.



**Epstein's Overlapping Spheres of Influence** (Epstein & Hollifield, 1996, p. 274).

Literature also shows that barriers can impede success in creating a home-school connection ultimately resulting in poorer student performance. Some of the greatest barriers to student success in culturally diverse communities are language and cultural differences. Previous studies have examined this broad issue of the home-school

connection (Liontus 1991; Garcia 2004; Charles and Charles 2005; Epstein and Sanders, 1996; Epstein and Hollifield, 1996;) however there is no research that has explored these issues within the Indo-Canadian community per se. Spheres of influence of the school, home and community are driven apart by barriers. In a culturally diverse setting, these barriers hinder the overlap of influence amongst the spheres.



**Barriers to Overlapping Spheres of Influence.** Created by Johnson and Siemens (2005); supported by Liontus 1991; Pianta and Walsh 1996; Matineau 2002; Garcia 2004; Charles and Charles 2005

Based on the need for research within the Indo-Canadian community, the pressing desire to improve both the academic success and social-behavioral attitudes of the children within this population and the unique learning opportunity provided by the Harry Sayers Elementary School Program, our research questions were:

- What are the positive academic and social behavioural effects of an early intervention program designed to make a home-school connection on Kindergarten students within an Indo-Canadian community?
- What are some effective strategies for creating a positive home-school connection within the Indo-Canadian community according to parents within that community?

Methodology employed to address these questions were interviews with parents, teachers and staff of the elementary and preschool; analysis of a Likert style survey given to parents; breakdown of the comments from the interviews and examination of scores on pre-entry Kindergarten tests by students.

The authors examined a preschool and drop-in program at Harry Sayers Elementary, a predominantly Indo-Canadian (Punjabi) community in the Abbotsford School District. The goal was to determine if this site-based “Family Centre”, funded by the community and the school district had an effect on the home-school connection, student behavior and academic success in Kindergarten. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used. Ten parents were interviewed and filled out a Likert style survey. Of those parents, six had children enrolled in preschool in the previous academic year, whereas four did not. Four Kindergarten teachers and two preschool staff shared their perspectives of the effects of “Family Centre” on the home-school connection, and successful integration of children into Kindergarten. Upon enrollment in Kindergarten, all students took entry level tests for English language proficiency. Tests results were analyzed to determine if a preschool experience had an effect on academic performance upon entry into Kindergarten.

### **Findings:**

The following data are our key **findings** from our research:

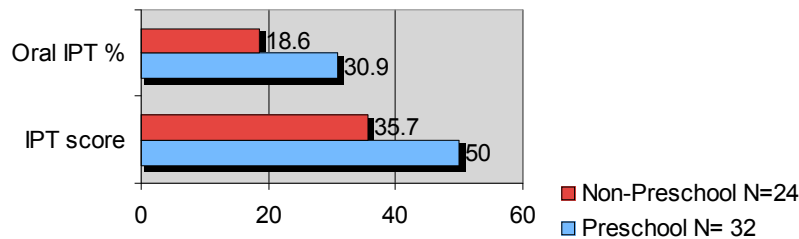
- The preschool was perceived to have a positive academic and behavioral impact on the Indo-Canadian students entering Kindergarten. The students appeared to be more prepared academically and behaviorally for the challenges of Kindergarten life.

Every student entering Harry Sayers Elementary Kindergarten class takes initial placement tests to determine his / her English skills and ESL needs. The quantitative results from the Initial Placement Test (for Kindergarten entry of the students who attended preschool) reinforce the perceptions, of both parents and teachers, that preschool has a positive impact on academics. There is a noteworthy difference in the entry scores for those students who have attended preschool and those who have not. Results of the testing clearly reveal the academic (English skills) difference that a preschool experience can have for a child. Students attended a variety of preschools, and for the purposes of this paper, the students were divided into children who had attended preschool, and those who had not attended any formal preschool. After completing the Oral Initial Placement Test which is norm-referenced and used by School District #34 (N= 56), the students

were divided, based on their scores, into three categories: Non English speaker, Limited English speaker and Fluent English speaker. They were given a percentile score, based on those results. These oral placement tests are standardized, and all scores are converted to a percentile that was obtained from the ESL / oral placement test handbook. For students who attended preschool, their scores on average were 30.9 percentile, whereas the students who did not attend any preschool were in the 18.6 percentile, as an average.

Another test administered to the students, The Initial Placement Test, designed by the Harry Sayers ESL teachers, gives important information regarding children’s fine motor skills and knowledge about English colours and letters. This test is not standardized across the district, and a perfect score on the test is 82. The mean for students on the IPT Harry Sayers test who had attended preschool was 50, whereas the mean for non-preschool children was 35.7. It is noteworthy that the quantitative research results of the IPT test mirror those of the qualitative anecdotal comments made by teachers and obtained from parent interviews. Preschool appeared to have a positive impact on academics for Kindergarten children.

**Results of preschool on academics (English skills), upon entrance to Kindergarten.**



**Percentile Scores of Preschool and Non-preschool Students**

Academic achievement was affected by attendance at preschool. The Family Centre, which is funded by the school district and the community, is serving an important purpose. Student success is affected by the child’s regular involvement in preschool.

- Although there was no difference in parental involvement in the elementary school for those children who did attend preschool, compared to non-preschool attendees, the preschool appeared to have an influence in bringing English literacy activities into the home.

The preschool created “overlapping spheres of influence”; literacy activities were moved from the school to the home. Parents and grandparents brought home ideas and concepts from the preschool that build literacy at home. Songs were sung, books were read and thematic crafts based on letters of the alphabet were shared at home with parents and grandparents.

- The parents' satisfaction with preschool and the kindergarten was very high, but teachers continued to seek more parental support. Parental support in Harry Sayers Elementary may have differing cultural connotations.

From the perspective of the parents, there was a connection between the home and the school. The school community was valued, teachers were affirmed and parents felt welcomed in the school. Parents did not appear to see a need to change, because from their perspective, there was a healthy connection between the school and home. Some Indo-Canadian parents appeared to not feel comfortable aiding in classroom activities, or working with their child on literacy activities at home. From their perspective, that domain belongs to the school.

- There appeared to be a gap between the values held by Harry Sayers Elementary School staff and the Indo-Canadian parents whose children attended that school.

The teachers and staff at Harry Sayers would like to see a greater connection between home and school and they believe the parents need to be more involved in their child's education through promoting literacy activities at home, and helping in the classroom. Although teachers feel valued by the parents, they would like "active" involvement in the school community.

- Parental perceptions of involvement at school are affected by cultural understandings.

The researchers discovered that one of the underlying issues regarding the lack of parental involvement in the school was due to different interpretations, between parents and teachers, of parental involvement at school. All of the parents surveyed felt like they were a part of, and belonged to, the Harry Sayers community. The teachers wanted more parental involvement and as a result there was a gulf between the two perspectives. We determined this discrepancy associated with differing ideals and perceptions. The authors came to understand that "support has cultural differences".

In **Conclusion**, the home, school and community can work together. The Family Centre is an example of an educational environment where parents feel comfortable participating informally in activities with their children. It also services as a model of how various sectors of the community, home and school can work together.

From the authors' perspective, in this Indo-Canadian community, there is high regard for the teacher and the role of the teacher is paramount. From the parents' perspective, the teacher has the right to educate the child on all levels, and so a parent might ask the teacher to tell their child not to watch so much TV at home, or in the case of the preschool aged student, to tell the child not to drink coke for breakfast. The domain of the school comes into the home, and the parent is not offended, and at times welcomes input from the teacher. Whereas the teachers would like to see greater involvement from parents in the classroom or even in the preschool, the parent is content to be a participant, but hesitant to take a leadership role within the school setting.

There are barriers to overcome to foster an effective working relationship between school, home and community. Effective strategies need to be developed to create a home-school connection; it is important to identify some of the barriers that impede that relationship. The authors found that Indo-Canadian parents in this study did not feel confident helping out at school, nor are parents always clear about expectations surrounding parental involvement in school.

Based on the data and observations gathered, the authors have several **recommendations** for Districts with Indo-Canadian (Punjabi) students. These recommendations are not limited to any particular group, however, based on the research within this community we recommend the following:

**1) Schools need to find new and creative ways to foster interactions that can help bridge the different cultural ideals or understandings.**

Some Indo-Canadian parents may not feel comfortable in some of the traditional parent-teacher interactions. There need to be places to interact that are non-formal and non-threatening. The community needs to feel affirmed for their dedication to education, and to use that as a springboard for further involvement. Schools could work with the local temple to host events or to publicize school assemblies.

**2) The school community or the district needs to create incentives for teachers to run dual language PALS (Parents as Literacy Supporters) program and evening educational programs that teach parents about the school system and educational programs (science fair, home routines, literacy circles, etc.)**

An option might be to give teachers “time in lieu”; for an evening activity which strengthens the home-school connection, the teacher would receive the next morning off, or be able to come in at recess. In culturally diverse settings, teachers could be asked to do more to build the home-school connection without being compensated. Adding to the workload will not strengthen connections, only cause frustration affecting teacher efficacy.

**3) The English as a Second Language teacher(s) should have a portion of their time to work directly with families. At least one of the ESL teachers should speak Punjabi.**

In addition to the child receiving direct instruction from the teacher, creating bonds with families could have great long-term impact for the child. An added benefit would include educating parents about the importance of literacy activities in the home in both languages. Raising awareness with the parents that skills in the first language will transfer to aptitude in the second language would be an important goal for the ESL teacher. Buying additional dual language books would be one of the strategies to promote a strong home-school connection.

**4) A multicultural worker should be placed in the elementary school with a primary focus on working with families.**

The authors believe that the role of the multi-cultural worker would be most effective if the job concentrated on working with families, and not individual students. The focus of the job would be on parents and how to strengthen the home school connection between schools and communities. A large percentage of the time would be elementary school based, because it is easier for parents to get involved with the child's education at a young age. Research clearly shows the benefit of such parental involvement in schools and the success of implementing programs, when done in earlier years. The multi-cultural worker would be a "human newsletter" getting to know families, standing with grandparents waiting in line for the school doors to open, and the worker would be an active participant in the dual-language PALS (Parents As Literacy Support) program.

**5) An after-school home work club for students should be started and run by the district.**

Our interviews with parents suggested that as children get older, parents are no longer able to help them with homework. Parents commented that they were not always certain that the money paid to tutors paid off in student achievement. Parents want the assurance that if they are paying money for tutors, that the children are receiving solid educational support. Providing an after school program, run by the district (fee for service), may help to support students and relieve parents. However, we do not think it would promote a closer home-school connection for the school. It would strengthen the bonds of the families toward the school.

**6) The Harry Sayers Neighbourhood Place Family Centre consisting of: preschool, drop in and Pajamarama Literacy Night should continue.**

Family Center plays a role in building the home-school connection and promoting literacy activities at home. It also aids in making parents and grandparents feel at home at the Harry Sayers Elementary School.

**7) Punjabi cultural lessons with the school for all students.**

Punjabi cultural classes can be an effective way of educating all staff and students at the school about the traditions, customs and history of the community. It also allows members of the community to come into the classroom and be the educational expert.

**8) English as a Second Language for adults should be explored.**

In the parent interviews, there were numerous requests for ESL classes in the evening for adults. Coupling ESL classes with homework support would be an additional way of building the home-school connection. This would need to be a joint venture between community, school and home.

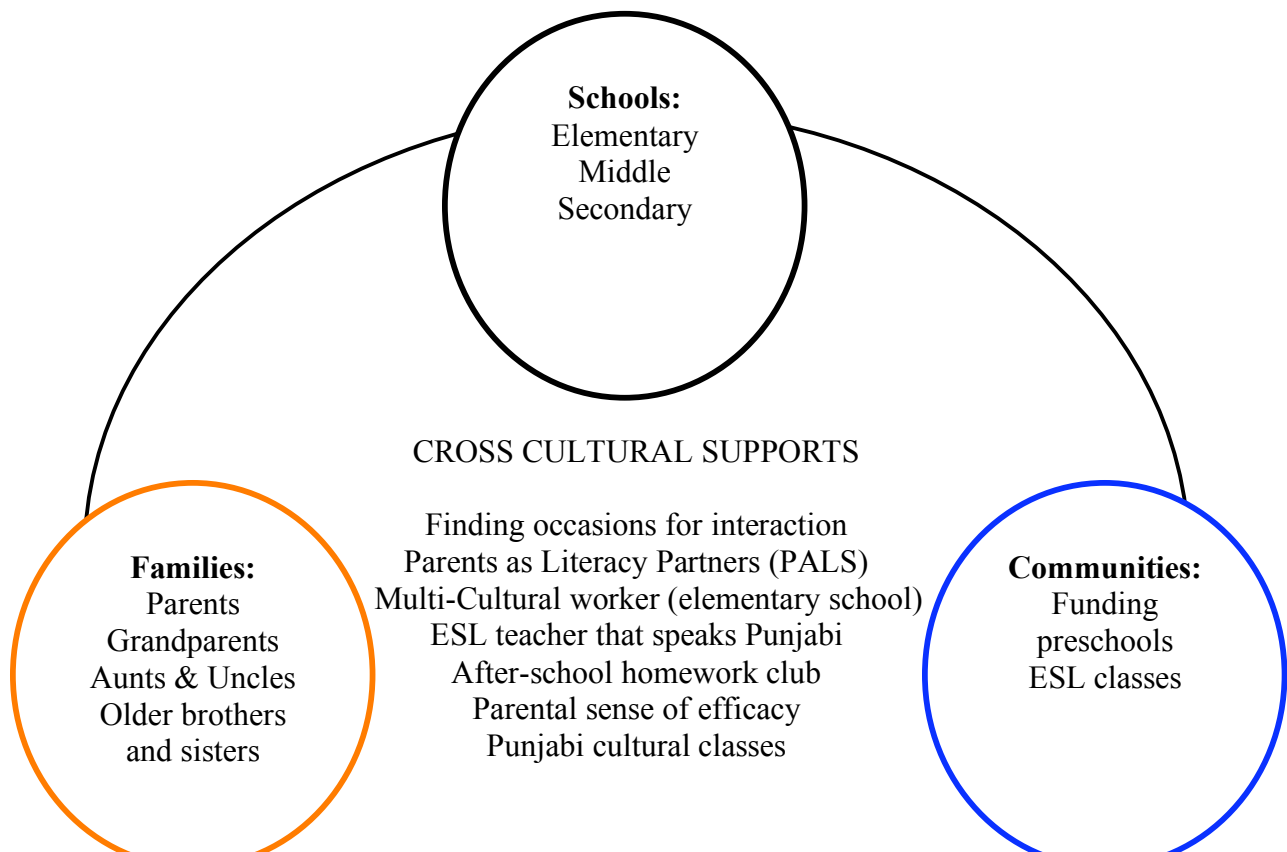
**9) Harry Sayers Parent Advisory Council, and the School Planning Council should discuss the benefits of freeing up one of the ESL teachers or hiring a part time multi-cultural worker to work directly with families.**

Involvement at the family level in building trust and educating parents about how to read with their child at home could have long-term benefits. Having one individual responsible for coordinating functions within the school and building a home school connection could encourage other teachers towards further involvement, thus providing teachers with a deeper insight into the culture of their students and therefore helping them respond more appropriately to student needs.

When working with culturally and linguistically diverse communities, adaptations need to be made in order to foster a home-school connection. Typical parental involvement at school such as helping in the classroom and leadership at PAC meetings may be difficult to foster. In addition, parents may not be accustomed to promoting literacy activities in the home. In order for Epstein’s overlapping spheres of influence between home, school and community to be effective there needs to be a center of cultural sensitivity that actively addresses the barriers inherent in strengthening the home-school connection. Family includes grandparents and the extended family. School connections involve the elementary school along with the Middle and Secondary. Community involvement reflects the needs of the community: The preschool, the drop-in programs, adult ESL and the need for outside agencies to help fund the cross cultural supports. All sectors: family, school and community working in harmony with the overlapping sphere of cross cultural understanding will result in a greater connection between the school and the home.

**Cross cultural background to support Overlapping Spheres of Influence**

Created by Johnson / Siemens



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