

Broadening our Conceptualization of Parental Involvement: Ethnic Minority Parental Participation as Democratic, Educational Practice

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The involvement of parents in their children's education has long been considered by researchers as a significant factor in positively impacting children's school success. Ethnic minority parents (especially low-income, ethnic, and cultural minority parents) have been often criticized by teachers and administrators in public schools for failing to participate in their children's schools in greater numbers. Specifically, school personnel have criticized minority parents for not volunteering in school fund-raising activities, attending parent advisory council meetings, and attending parent-teacher conferences (McCollum, 1996). In response to these criticisms, researchers have been investigating the reasons why minority parents have, as school personnel describe, failed to participate in schools and have been offering suggestions that could help schools improve or increase minority parental involvement.

In this paper I present the research literature that explains why minority parents "fail" to be involved in schools and present the suggested strategies schools could adopt to try to increase the participation of minority parents in school. I then briefly share the conceptual understanding underlying my research, arguing that much of the contemporary research has been misguided in its approach to finding ways of increasing minority parental involvement in school. I propose that we foster democratic, educational practices in schools. ¹

The "Failure" of Minority Parental Involvement in School

In my review of the research literature on minority parental involvement I find that two general factors are attributed to minority parents' failure to be involved in school: the individual practices of teachers and parents, and school structures. At an individual level,

¹ The conceptualization of minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice is presented in greater detail in my doctoral dissertation.

teacher ideology is identified as playing a fundamental role in excluding minority parental involvement in school. Bartolome & Trueba (2000) argue that deficit ideologies that are still held by teachers today continue to have harmful effects on teacher-parent relations. The deficit theory, popular in the 1960s, proposes that minority parents fail to be involved in schools because they are “deprived of cultural or social advantages” (deMarrais & LeCompte, 1995, p. 238) necessary for involvement. Literature indicates that many teachers who privilege dominant group experiences and ways of doing things inevitably reinforce school practices of exclusion (Ellis, 1999; Corson, 1993). Moreover, by labelling minority parents as culturally deficient, teachers reproduce inequitable relations exercising power over parents. For example, teachers encourage minority parents to alter their parent-child interactions by offering minority parenting programs that would teach minority parents the deficit skills so that they could successfully work with their children (McCaleb, 1994).

Other literature such as that of Leis (1980), Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon (1997), and Whittaker (2003) suggests that poor attitudes and behaviours of teachers towards minority parents negatively affect teachers’ efforts to involve these parents thereby further contributing to the marginalisation of minority parents. For example, teachers often demand that minority parents adopt the linguistic rules of the “dominant group if they are to support their children’s academic learning effectively, while often doing little to ensure that this can happen” (Blackledge, 2000, p. 41). Similarly, Kim (2004) and Dyson (2001) find that a deficit ideology held by teachers often affect efforts to communicate with minority parents who do not speak English. Teachers consider the problem of involvement as situated with language deficient minority parents. Instead of seeing the school as failing to support minority parents with language support services, minority parents themselves are blamed for the problem.

Related to teacher ideology, the research literature reveals that public school teachers judge minority parents’ degree of engagement with the school according to white middle-class standards and practices which assume parents have specific and similar outlooks, resources, and times available to help with schoolwork (McCollum, 1996; Leistyna, 2002). Negative teacher expectations are also found to influence teachers’ efforts to involve minority parents. Trueba & Bartolome (2000) suggest that

teacher expectations of involvement differ between ethnic minority parents and majority group parents. Robinson-Zanartu & Majel-Dixon (1996) and Hamby (1992) add that many school personnel perceive minority parents as being uneducated and poor thereby presuming parents will be uninvolved in their children's school.

While lack of time and availability due to work demands are contributing factors as to why minority parents are not involved, research reveals that there are other important factors that counter the cultural deprivation theory (Jackson & Cooper, 1992). Many minority parents are often not involved in school activities because of their own uncomfortable feelings and apprehension with school. Some parents feel intimidated by teachers while others feel alienated because they themselves have had negative experiences in school (Banks, 2001).

School structures too are criticised for preventing the participation of minority parents in school. Taylor & Delgado-Gaitan (1991) find that conventional activities such as holding annual open houses and bi-annual teacher-parent conferences require parents to have specific majority culturally based knowledge about the operation of a school and the school system to participate. They state that the actual activities that have been institutionalised to involve parents "in limited ways tend to relegate all the power to the institution and have usually ignored the needs of groups, particularly those with a different language who are unfamiliar with the school's expectations" (p. 42). Cummins (2001) adds that even community involvement through institutionalised structures (another layer of bureaucracy acting to maintain the social order) such as the parent advisory committees can be exclusionary. He finds that manipulation of parental involvement through misinformation and intimidation can reinforce minority parents' powerless status. Valdes (1996) further contends that although schools have structured mechanisms such as the parent advisory council to "give" parents the opportunity to voice disapproval and have input into decision-making, simple institutionalisation has not changed the underlying discriminatory practices of some teachers, nor has it increased or equalised opportunities for greater minority parental participation.

Hamby (1992) further finds that a lack of teacher training as to how to involve parents in schools and teacher insecurity in involving parents hinder the participation of minority parents in schools. Similarly, Wolfendale (1992) finds that many teachers fear

that parents in the school and classroom will undermine their professionalism and that parents' views will clash with their views. Likewise, Dei et al. (2000) state that teachers who hold a "protection perspective" fail to encourage minority parental participation because teachers view themselves and schools as having the primary responsibility for educating children. Teachers believe that their work "must be protected against unwarranted intrusions from parents, community workers, and social activists" (p. 5). In a more general critique, McCaleb (1994) argues that it is the actual underlying mindset, goals, and assumptions of public schooling that hinder minority parental participation in school. Specifically, the basic structure of roles and relationships are bureaucratic. School is considered the authority and power resides with professionals who are not encouraged to consider parents as people who have something meaningful to say about education.

Unlike the literature mentioned thus far, critical multicultural and anti-racism education scholars argue that discriminatory, particularly racist, school policies and practices deny minority parents equal opportunity to participate in schooling. Dei (1993) argues that schools are dominated by white power, privilege, and knowledge, thus, teachers actually reproduce hierarchies of power and exclusion through their practices; we should not be surprised that few minority parents are involved in schools.

Increasing or Improving Minority Parental Involvement in School

Approaches to improving or increasing minority parental involvement in schools vary from benevolent – teachers gaining cultural sensitivity training – to critical – school-wide reform. The benevolent approach suggests that teachers will be more likely to communicate effectively with parents when teachers have acquired knowledge about minority parents' languages, religions, histories, and social class. For example, in learning about others' cultural practices, Fleras & Elliot (1992) suggest that teachers become more tolerant, understanding, and sensitive to culturally and ethnically different parents. Research also suggests that as teachers develop greater cultural sensitivity, they will be more likely to alter their practices of not involving parents in the classroom. For instance, Epstein (2001) asserts that culturally informed teachers might be less likely to apply stereotypes that discourage parental involvement in schools.

From a critical perspective, critical multicultural and anti-racism researchers argue that a benevolent approach fails to recognise structural barriers that impede the participation of minority parents in school. Rather than attributing success or failure to individual efforts they suggest a more comprehensive approach to improve parental participation is needed. In their view, the underlying Eurocentric structures of schools which create and perpetuate inequality and that inform teacher behaviours and practices must be interrogated and eliminated (Solomon & Levine-Rasky, 2003). Nieto (1996) suggests another approach. She theorises that a school-wide reform from monocultural to multicultural education could result in a more democratic model of parental involvement because a multicultural approach considers parents' culture, languages, and concerns for their children as being central to education. Similarly, from his study of an elementary school in Auckland, New Zealand, May (1994) suggests that schools can implement a school-wide critical approach to multicultural education to improve the involvement of parents in school. Dei et al. (2000) theorise that an "inclusive schooling" approach can increase minority parental involvement. In part, the approach requires that "parents, community members, youth from diverse racial, ethnocultural, and class backgrounds be jointly involved in both the decision-making and delivery of education" (p. 22). He further suggests that minority parents need to be involved in school governance: in making policy decisions, hiring staff, and determining curriculum. The difficulty with Dei's approach is that it emphasises minority parental involvement in the existing hierarchical structures that exclude minority parents in the first place rather than challenging the notion of what counts as minority parental involvement. Further, the idea of joint involvement does not necessarily mean that equality of opportunity and procedure to engage in discourse and to influence the decision-making process exists for minority parents.

In addition to the changes being called to teacher practices and school structures, research indicates that other strategies and approaches can improve the involvement of minority parents in school. These include broadening the term parental involvement, building partnerships and collaborative relations, empowering parents, and taking political action.

First, Nieto (1996) argues that the term minority parental involvement needs to be conceptualised to include the “intangible” ways that parents are involved. By acknowledging that people are involved in their children’s education in non school-directed ways, minority parents would finally be given recognition for their involvement. Lopez (2001) concurs adding that schools should be focusing on identifying some of the unique ways that many minority parents are already involved in their children’s education and recognise ways schools themselves can benefit from such parental participation.

In examining some of the forms of minority parental participation in the education of their children Delgado-Gaitan (1994) finds that many parents talk to their children about their values, traditions, and their position in society; parents also “imbue their children with a sense of confidence that they are important enough to receive their parents’ attention” (p. 146). Nieto (1996) contends that many minority parents are involved in their children’s education through consistent communication, vocalising high expectations, instilling pride, fostering understanding, and demonstrating enthusiasm for their children’s school experiences. She also reports that many parents support their children’s education using their native language and family cultural values. Lopez (2001) finds that many minority parents constantly talk to their children about their high expectations and focus on instilling their work ethic to their children by emphasising the importance of hard work. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco (2000) assert that many minority parents impress upon their children the importance of maintaining their own cultural “attitudes toward authority, discipline, homework, peer relations, and dating” (p. 19). Minority parents supervise their children’s activities, emphasise high expectations to them, and continually talk and listen to their children, states Kim (2002). Similarly, Mitchell (2001) finds that many minority parents emphasise family values as an important aspect of education.

A second approach to improve minority parental participation in school recommends that school-parent partnerships or collaborative relations be built (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Hidalgo et al., 1995; Hidalgo, Siu, & Epstein, 2004). In this area of the literature, though, the concepts of partnership and collaboration are not well developed. Both ideas simply imply that parents and teachers should work together. Unfortunately, neither approach critically takes into account hierarchical relations between the schools

and parents that seem to be one of the fundamental problems in the first place. Before partnerships can begin to be created, argues McCaleb (1994), teachers must transcend their prescribed roles and behaviours. Similarly, Cummins (1989) contends that real changes in schools can begin to take place only when the relationships of power become less hierarchical and when parents move out of a position of subordination. Wolfendale (1992) adds that equality is an important feature of a collaborative relationship between home and school. She states that even though relations are unequal, the principle of equality stipulates that parents and school personnel must “think and act as though each person brings different but equivalent experience and expertise to that joint relationship” (p. 3).

The third approach recommended to improve minority parental participation is for teachers to empower parents. Delgado-Gaitan & Trueba (1991) consider empowerment as the “process of transition from lack of control to the acquisition of control over one’s life and immediate environment” (p. 138). In their study examining minority parental participation in a literacy program, they find that a group of parents became more involved in their children’s schooling once they became empowered through learning English. In learning English with their children through an organised literacy program parents’ self-perception and efficacy increased. Delgado-Gaitan (1991) indicates that critical reflection is one process that is central to empowerment. Through a process of critical reflection parents who have been historically underrepresented can organise to recognise their “potential and state their goals for access to resources, thus power” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994). In her study of an elementary school in California, Delgado-Gaitan (1994) reports that parents who engaged in the process of critical reflection created change in the schools through improved programs and policies. She, unfortunately, fails to describe how.

Although the empowerment approach is popular in the parental involvement literature, I contend that it too is problematic because of its similarity to the deficit approach. The empowerment approach assumes that minority parents lack awareness of their social position, lack voice, and have no agency; the more knowledgeable, emancipated teachers are the ones who can give this empowerment to parents. Additionally, with the focus on the empowerment of minority parents, teachers’ own

class, ethnicity, and gender interests fail to be critiqued. Critical of empowerment approaches Valdes (1996, p. 195) calls them “warmed-over parent education programs” in which families are persuaded to change their behaviour to become more like the mainstream family.

Parekh (1987), who is also critical of the empowerment approach, contends that minority peoples cannot wait for internal structural change as suggested by critical multicultural and anti-racism education theorists because many of them assume that with greater representation of minority parents in school governance, that is, with the “mere presence of different people, [comes] presence of mind or that with color coordination [comes] ideological diversity” (Leistyna, 2002, p. 31). Phillips (1993) concurs stating that increasing the representation of ethnic groups that were previously excluded does not at all guarantee that the needs and concerns of ethnic minorities will be articulated or taken into account. Further, greater representation does not mean that there will be equality of participation. Instead of relying on greater minority parental representation in school governance, Parekh (1987) suggests that schools can be pushed to change through organised, direct community action. He contends that sustained external pressure can produce social and institutional change; no reform can be secured without powerful and constant pressure. Political action, the fourth approach to increasing the involvement of minority parental involvement, according to Parekh must take place both inside and outside the institution. From another perspective, in his research on educational change, Leistyna (2002) argues that minority peoples already have voice, ones that are often critical; the challenge he states, actually rests with whether teachers and administrators are willing to create dialogical spaces where all lived experiences and world-views of parents can be genuinely addressed. In one way Parekh’s and Leistyna’s ideas support envisioning minority parental participation as democratic practice: they both recognise non-institutionalised means’ of participation as playing a significant role in producing school change.

Re-conceptualising Minority Parental Involvement

I concur with Parekh (1987) and Leistyna (2002) and contend that as educators one of our responsibilities is to find non-institutionalised ways to support minority parental

participation in education in school; this is something schools have failed to do since the development of public schooling. I submit that one way the research literature has hindered the conceptualization of a more inclusive notion of minority parental involvement has been in its use of the terms ‘involvement in school’ and ‘involvement in education.’ Both of the terms are commonly used but ‘involvement in school’ specifically refers to parental and family involvement in school-directed intra- and extra-curricular activities. The term minority ‘involvement in education,’ however, is used problematically in that the literature often refers to it as parental and family involvement in specific scripted school activities, such as involvement in bake sales and fundraisers, and involvement in activities at home that support classroom activities (Lopez, 2001). In defining minority parental involvement in education as such, education is equated with schooling; the literature fails to recognize that schooling and education are not synonymous. Thus, by failing to differentiate between schooling, education, and the intertwined notion of participation, the literature in the area of parental involvement advances a paternalistic concept (as Epstein, 1997, 2001 does) of minority parental participation.

I believe that recognizing the difference between the concept of education and that of schooling is important to gaining a broader and more inclusive understanding of minority parental participation even though scholars and bureaucrats often associate education with public schooling and use the terms interchangeably. Philosophers Hare & Portelli’s (1996) and Peters’ (1973) ideas help in clarifying the difference. Hare & Portelli note that at a general level education is “concerned with learning that which is considered valuable; but beyond this definitional point lies great controversy which ultimately involves our views on what constitutes a good person and a worthwhile life” (p. 81). Varying and often conflicting conceptions of education are shaped and influenced by the views held and the “values, attitudes, and beliefs we wish to see fostered in children and about the kind of society in which we wish to live” (p. 182). Peters states that education consists essentially in the initiation of people into a worthwhile and good form of life. It entails the learning of values, virtues, norms, skills, knowledge, and rules needed to live together with others in a common world. Unlike education, schooling is defined as a “process of learning and management of socially

approved knowledge, involving an approved curriculum and pedagogy, paid professional educators, compulsory attendance of pupils, and school grouping” (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 1998). It has been criticized for reproducing “race -” and class-based inequalities and for reinforcing White political and cultural hegemony (Perry & Fraser, 1993; Henry & Tator, 2005) as only the dominant group has been involved in establishing and normalizing the “approved” knowledge, curriculum, and pedagogy. Matters of educational concern – of ethical and moral concern – have failed to be determined through deliberation with minority peoples or in any other manner that has been genuinely inclusive of their concerns.

In following Peters’ conceptualization of education, it can be said that ethnic minority parents have always had particular notions of education; ones that were consistent with their own ideas of who they were as Peoples, what virtues they wanted their children to acquire, and generally of what they themselves considered to be a worthwhile life (Ashworth, 1979). For example, prior to European contact Aboriginal parents, family, and community members guided children to learn how to live a good life through an organic (Wotherspoon, 2004) approach to education. Aboriginal peoples each had their own distinctive bodies of “indigenous knowledge supported by social practices to preserve and transmit core beliefs, values, and competencies” (p. 55). With European settlement and the development of public schooling, however, Aboriginal children were forced by the state to attend residential schools where their knowledge and social practices were denied as residential schooling was oriented “primarily to the replacement of indigenous lifestyles and knowledge with European concepts of morality and consciousness” (p. 56).

Other ethnic minority children such as those from Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian cultures were not forced to attend residential schools but they did attend common schools where many minority parents found that education as they knew it, which in part involved the teaching and learning of norms, values, and knowledge (what theorist Jurgen Habermas calls the lifeworld) they deemed significant was not what public schools legitimized. Instead, schools reinforced a Eurocentric curriculum and were oriented to assimilating minority peoples into Euro-Canadian culture (Henry, Tator, Mattis & Rees, 2005). School-teachers facilitated the assimilation of children by discouraging the

involvement of minority parents in schools and school-related activities because many teachers were of the opinion that parental influences were a hindrance to the development of ethnic minority children as useful citizens (Osbourne, 1999; Banks, 2001). Thus, from the onset of public schooling minority parents' concerns and notions of education – of what is good, meaningful, and worthwhile for their children – were excluded from its structures, policies, and practices. I contend that democratic, educational minority parental participation in schools today could begin to genuinely reflect minority parents concerns within schooling processes.

Conceptualizing minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice requires us to recognise that education, democracy, and participation are inextricably linked in that they are concerned with a moral conception of how people ought to live together. In multicultural societies such as ours there is a plurality of individual conceptions of the good life, of what is right, and of what is worthwhile, as well as multiple ideas about what the best means are to achieve our goals. School is one place where divergent understandings of education converge on a daily basis, thus, it seems reasonable to think that schools would be places where differing aims, values, norms, ideas, and concerns would be collectively discussed and worked out to a solution resulting in understanding or compromise. Unfortunately this has not been the case. Many public schools have not been places where educational questions – those of ethical and moral concern – posed by minority parents have been settled by democratic means: through discussion and dialogue with parents and others associated with schools. Instead, schools have treated ethical and moral questions (those concerned with what should be done) as though they were technical ones (questions concerned with how something can be done) (Levin, 1998). I contend that in working towards making schools democratic and educational, questions of ethical and moral concern must be recognised and treated as such.

In working towards genuinely accounting for minority parents' concerns and notions of education in schooling structures, policies, and practices poses many challenges. Democratic, educational participation requires minority parents (traditionally excluded from decision-making contexts), school personnel, and concerned others to cooperatively discuss and deliberate issues of education and decide on questions of

rightness and goodness. In doing so, they must respect particular idealized rules and conditions that are necessary to democratic participation (Habermas, 1998). This conceptualization of democratic participation – all people engaging in the freest, least restrictive communication possible for the purposes of coming to mutual understanding on matters of common concern, such as education – is unique because it suggests that all concerned minority parents, not just bureaucrats, teachers, and representatives, would have equality of condition and procedure to influence judgments made on common matters of ethical and moral concern. This conceptualisation significantly differs from the notion of participation underlying current institutionalized processes and practices in schools (such as parent advisory meetings and school planning councils) where deficit thinking and coercion negatively affect the participation of minority parents.

I suggest that in thinking of minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice, we must first examine our current provincial, school district, and school policies, programs, and practices and question: who decides what constitutes participation; when and where does participation occur; and who benefits from participation. We must also assess the degree to which: our current policies, programs, and practices of minority parental involvement marginalize minority parents' ways of participating and their judgments of what they deem as worthwhile; emphasis is placed on parental participation in school-directed activities with little or no regard for involvement in educational activities and processes beyond those directed by the school that lead to personal growth, self-understanding, building community or those that may be formulated through alternative epistemological and ontological frameworks; our practices account for historical forms of minority parental involvement, forms that parents have considered vital to the education of their children well before the development of public schooling in Canada; and the notion of involvement we adhere to focuses on parental participation in education as an ethical and moral act. It is after this assessment that we can begin to examine how minority parental participation in education in school can be fostered.²

² I explore the question of how schools can realistically foster minority parental participation in education in a forthcoming paper.

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