



# WELCOMING PARENTS: EDUCATORS AS GUEST HOSTS ON SCHOOL LANDSCAPES

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I SHARE TWO STORIES OF MY EXPERIENCES WITH WELCOMING parents into schools. The first is my own parent narrative; the second is a composite story, created from excerpts from field text of observations and experiences at Princess Alexandra Community School, a core neighbourhood school in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan.<sup>1</sup> In unpacking these narratives, I explore what it means to be 'welcoming' and I foreground elements that appear significant in creating a sense of place and engagement for parents in their children's schooling.<sup>2</sup>

In speaking of *engagement*, I use the term purposefully, distinguishing it from the more commonly used term *involvement*. *Involvement* tends to be used in the field as a term with comprehensive coverage that does not differentiate the type of relationship being lived out between educators and parents. For me, *involvement* describes those activities in which parents are invited to serve the school's agenda, to do the things educators deem important. Engagement, differently, describes activities which are mutually determined by educators and parents to be important for children and are lived out in a respectful and reciprocal relationship. Completing tasks for a teacher such as laminating or photocopying, helping with a field trip, or being an audience member at a school event are examples of parent involvement. Working with teachers to mutually establish a homework policy or practices, participating in a staff meeting or professional development session, or being invited to share information about their child are examples of parent engagement. While parent involvement often supports efforts peripheral to the core work of

schools, engagement is integrally related to teaching and learning. To truly welcome parents and create a meaningful place for them on school landscapes and in the processes of schooling, a move beyond involving parents will be necessary.

## COHEN'S FIRST DAY

My experience of my oldest son's first day of school will forever hold a place in my memory. It was a beautiful morning and the playground outside the kindergarten entrance was filled with parents and children, laughter, and the animated exchange of summer stories. As the bell rang and we made our way toward Cohen's classroom, I was struck by all the preparation educators and staff had put into getting ready for this new school year. The hallway floors were gleaming, the classroom doors had bright posters welcoming the children, and the children's names were printed on bright decals posted by their coat hooks. At the kindergarten doorway, both the teacher and the educational assistant stood with bright smiles, inviting the children into the classroom, speaking to each child warmly. The air was filled with the scent of newness and the building was electric with excitement and anticipation.

As Cohen was invited into his classroom and as he slipped through the doorway, I was flooded with a surge of uncertainty. Should I follow him in and help him hang his backpack and put away his outdoor shoes? Could I go inside and share his wonder as he surveyed his classroom for the very first time? Would it be okay if I followed him in to hug him goodbye, tell him I loved him, and let him know I would



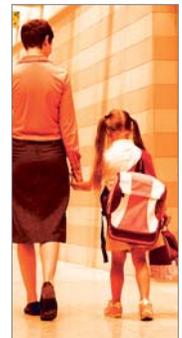
**EN BREF** Une partie du scénario scolaire dominant implique l'arrivée, dans une collectivité, d'éducateurs qui se réclament d'un champ appelé « école » et qui mettent au point et instaurent des politiques, méthodes et programmes pour les enfants locaux. Le plus souvent, ils ne consultent pas les parents ni les membres de la collectivité. Les éducateurs arrivent pourtant dans un endroit caractérisé par des relations, une culture et une histoire établies bien avant leur venue et appelées à se poursuivre longtemps après leur départ. Ils entrent à titre d'invités et doivent développer le rôle d'« animateurs invités ». Cela signifie concéder une partie de l'autorité, devenir plus vulnérable, côtoyer les parents plutôt que les dominer, accepter qu'ils puissent faire des suggestions utiles qui n'étaient pas venues à l'esprit des éducateurs et du personnel ou que leurs points de vue puissent remettre en question les suppositions et convictions du personnel.

watched as the secretary and some of the educational assistants gave out registration forms to new families. Parents were offered a coffee and a seat at a table just across the hall while they filled out their forms. A shelf with children's books and a basket of toys sat beside the table, available to young children who were waiting for their parents to finish. The staff helped parents in whatever ways seemed to be needed.

Student greeters, also positioned in the front hallway, extended their greetings enthusiastically to everyone as they came in and pointed newcomers toward the gym to find a table for breakfast or took them to locate their children's classrooms.

Inside the gym, the noise level was a low rumble as parents, children and staff conversed. A teacher on maternity leave visited with a small group of moms, talking and laughing as her baby was passed from one set of arms to another. Staff and students were busy clearing and wiping tables and keeping the coffee and juice supplies refreshed. The head custodian was having a chat with a group of students about the start up of his early morning open gym time. A parent, also participating in this conversation, was talking about his plans for continuing with after school soccer intramurals.

As breakfast ended and children were invited to make their way to their classrooms, some parents lingered in hallways throughout the school while others began to make their way out of the school. I wondered what sense parents had of their place on the Princess Alexandra school landscape. Would these parents feel comfortable to enter their child's classroom, to share in the experience of a first day or a new classroom, to say goodbye or to make after school arrangements? Would they know what to do, where to be, and how long they could stay? With the multiple informal and friendly opportunities that morning to talk with staff – custodian or principal, teacher or educational assistant – and to ask questions of or exchange stories with other parents, it seemed they would have a good sense of what their place at Princess Alexandra could be.



be there waiting to meet him at lunch time? How was I to know what my place was – or was not – that morning?

As the teacher pulled the classroom door closed, as announcements began over the public address system and messages to children and teachers sounded through the air, I felt like an intruder in someone else's space. This was my first day as the parent of a child attending public school and there was so much I realized at that moment that I did not know – what to do, where to be, how long to stay. Furthermore, no staff members were doing or saying anything to help me develop any sense of my place. I felt invisible, peripheral, ignored.

### **PRINCESS ALEXANDRA COMMUNITY SCHOOL<sup>3</sup>**

As I walked up to the front entrance of the school, I was greeted by the smiles of staff who were flipping pancakes on large grills or bustling to ensure the large containers of syrup, strawberries, and whipped cream were replenished as children, parents, elders, and community members made their way past the breakfast tables. Kookum Ina, the school's elder, warmly grasped my hand and greeted me with "Tansi," asking me about my summer and inviting me to come and sit with her for tea one day soon. Parents were milling about visiting, drinking coffee, or making their way into the gym with their children to find a seat to eat their breakfast. Staff not currently engaged with the cooking or serving were welcoming back parents and children they knew and introducing themselves to families and children new to the school.

As I made my way into the front hallway of the school, I

**IT WAS NOT A MORNING OF BELLS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS OVER THE PUBLIC ADDRESS SYSTEM OR OF MESSAGES INTENDED ONLY FOR CHILDREN OR STAFF. IT WAS A MORNING OF PERSONAL CONTACT, OF RENEWING AND BEGINNING RELATIONSHIPS, OF ATTENDING TO CHILDREN IN THE CONTEXT OF FAMILY AND COMMUNITY.**



It was not a morning of bells and announcements over the public address system or of messages intended only for children or staff. It was a morning of personal contact, of renewing and beginning relationships, of attending to children in the context of family and community. I believe parents left the school that morning feeling visible, central, and important to their children's lives at school.

### BELIEFS AND ASSUMPTIONS

When exploring the differences in the experiences storied above, it is easy to see practices in play at one school that are not a part of the landscape of the other – the pancake breakfast, the coffee, the student greeters, the table for completing registration forms situated with children's toys and books. While all these practices are significant in and of themselves, they are not enough to create a sense of welcome and place for parents. It is the beliefs and assumptions underlying them that are critical to positioning parents on the landscape of schools. It is the work of making these beliefs and assumptions conscious and explicit, and of challenging or affirming them, that is the key work in creating a place for parents in schools.

There exists a dominant story of school, rooted in history, in which educators are positioned as holders of professional knowledge of teaching and learning, as experts in the education process. Within this scripted story, parents are peripheral to the school's core agenda of teaching and learning, positioned only to support educators in helping them realize the school's intentioned outcomes for children. This story of school is often taken for granted, left unquestioned, and it gets lived out in repetitive cycles of meet the teacher nights, parent teacher conferences, reporting processes, volunteer activities, holiday celebrations and so on. It is not until something or someone interrupts this story that beliefs and assumptions are rendered visible and open to re-examination.



I was an educator for 15 years before I was the parent of a child attending public school. Although I had experienced many first days of school, it was not until I stood outside Cohen's classroom on his first day of school that I was awakened to the lack of place for parents on a school landscape.

Welcoming parents onto a school landscape ideally begins with a conversation among all staff in a school. "What do we believe about the place and voice of parents in our school? How can we see our beliefs being lived out? Is there a match between what we say we believe and the practices we have in place? What unconscious or implicit assumptions may be at play in our practices?"

At Princess Alexandra, the challenges of working in a core neighbourhood school related to issues such as transiency, student behaviour, and the need for culturally reflective programming interrupted the staff's taken-for-granted story of schooling and prompted them to create a new story. As they examined their policies and practices, they challenged implicit assumptions such as, "These parents don't care," or "These parents don't have the skills to support their children's learning." They met in soup and bannock sessions with parents, senior students, elders, and community

members, in a process that unfolded over a year's time, to explore their individual beliefs and to define their collective beliefs. In the end, four words emerged to capture their beliefs: respect, connectedness, safety and self-esteem.

Revisiting my story of Princess, and knowing the staff's beliefs and their intention to live them in practice, more becomes visible than solely a pancake breakfast on the first day of school. It can be seen through the priority and time afforded this event and through the respect shown for children as part of a family unit and for parents' role in their children's lives. Connectedness in the sharing of food and the exchange of greetings and stories, and in the investment in building and maintaining relationships, becomes evident. Safety can be seen in the creation of an environment that is warm and welcoming of all, where people know one another, where asking questions or sharing information is not judged. Self-esteem becomes apparent in the ways that individuals are positioned as skilled and holding a place of importance – the role of the student greeters, the attention to pre-school children, the sharing of parent stories between the teacher on maternity leave and the group of mothers.

Making beliefs and assumptions visible and explicit can be a process filled with risk and vulnerability, conflicting views and discomfort. While difficult, it is this discomfort that signals the change and growth critical to creating a new story of school. Time, support, thoughtful planning and collegial processes all make these conversations productive and rewarding. Talking about beliefs and assumptions becomes, over time, the core of and the starting place for every school discussion.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE "WELCOMING"?

Part of the dominant story of school involves educators entering a community, claiming the ground called 'school,' and designing and enacting policies, procedures, and programs for the children in the community. Most often they do this in isolation of parents and community members. Because they have professional education, knowledge and experience, their claim on the ground of school is accepted and they take ownership of this ground. This implicit ownership can be seen in my story of Cohen's first day of school. We entered the school only when the bell rang. When Cohen entered his classroom, I remained in the hallway, not having been invited to join him inside. Hearing announcements directed only to students and staff, I left the school feeling like an intruder in someone else's space. I had a strong sense there was a host who was in charge of when I came and went, where I went, and what I did while I was there.

A re-positioning of educators and staff as guests in a community is needed in order to interrupt this common story of educators as owners and to create a new story in which parents are welcomed into schools. When educators enter a community, they are entering a place with relationships, culture, and a history that began long before they arrived and that will continue long after they leave. They are entering as guests. As Lambros Kamperidis writes, "Only when we know how to behave as guests will we have the honour to act as hosts."<sup>4</sup> To welcome parents to a school, then, means that staff members open the door to the school as hosts who recognize they are simultaneously guests.<sup>5</sup>



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The J8 2007 winning team for Canada has been announced!

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**TO BE 'GUEST HOSTS' MEANS GIVING UP SOME CONTROL, BECOMING MORE VULNERABLE, AND STANDING ALONGSIDE PARENTS INSTEAD OF OVER THEM.**

In the story of Princess, the guest host positioning can be seen in the way Kokum Ina, an elder and long-time community member, stood alongside staff welcoming parents and children to the school and in the way student greeters also assumed responsibility for the welcoming. It can be seen in the conversation in which both the custodian and a parent spoke to students about activities they would be leading in the school that year. The guest host positioning can also be seen in the absence of bells, announcements, and a formal address by the school principal. To be 'guest hosts' means giving up some control, becoming more vulnerable, and standing alongside parents instead of over them. It means being willing to accept that parents who have been welcomed into the school may have valuable suggestions educators and staff had not thought about, or that parents' perspectives may challenge staff's taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs.

**BEING GUESTS**

Being guests means learning about the community which educators are entering, spending time and energy to know the context, the history, the culture(s), and particularly the people who reside there. Educators as guests ask what they can learn from parents and community members about their children and about teaching and learning, rather than positioning themselves as people with expert knowledge to share. As an example, as staff at Princess Alexandra explored different programs to help them strengthen student behaviour in the school, they invited parents, elders and senior students to be a part of the professional development. A first program was rejected because parents and elders felt it was not aligned with their cultural beliefs and practices. Another program was supported because it honoured the teachings of First Nations cultures.



Being guests also means going off the landscape of the school to create relationships in places where parents may be more comfortable – perhaps their homes, a local coffee shop, a community or cultural centre. Parents at Princess Alexandra School planned a professional development day for staff in which they led them through a sweat. It was an opportunity for staff to gain cultural knowledge and experience with and from parents.

Parents' lack of presence in schools may be the result of many factors: unpleasant school experiences, a lack of transportation or child care, a work schedule that does not enable them to come to the school, language or cultural differences, and so on. Being guests means welcoming all parents into the process of schooling, those who are marginalized in relation to school as well as those who feel comfortable on the school landscape. This might mean visiting a home to do a parent teacher conference or to personally invite parents to a classroom or school activity. It may mean attending a child's extra-curricular activity or dropping into a community event. Instead of looking outward and assuming "those parents don't care," being guests means educators look inwards at their own beliefs and practices and ask themselves, "What is it we need to do to cause more parents to feel welcomed? What is it we are

doing that may be keeping some parents away?"

Being guests also means knowing and honouring the many ways that parents may be supporting their children's learning off the landscape of school. López and Vásquez profile Latina/o parents' belief that their role is ensuring their children learn appropriate patterns of behaviour and socialization rather than attending school events.<sup>6</sup> They are deeply committed to their children's success and engaged in their learning, although they rarely visit their children's schools. A parent at Princess Alexandra told me he works extra jobs to afford brand name clothing for his children. He expressed his feeling that his children already have strikes against them in being Aboriginal and in being poor and that, by having brand name clothing, he was increasing the chances they would fit in and stay in school. Welcoming parents means more than welcoming them in the school building; it means welcoming them into the processes of schooling in the multiple ways they may deem significant.

**BEING HOSTS**

Being hosts means extending invitations multiple times and in multiple ways. It means moving beyond typical means of extending written impersonal invitations to extending personal invitations. Invitations made in person with a smile, or over the phone, where there can be a warm interchange, have the most meaning. These can be spontaneous: as a parent drops in to pick up a child at the end of the school day, the teacher invites him to join in the family reading event in two days time. Or they can be planned: each staff member commits to making five home visits or phone calls to invite parents to a supper meeting to seek input into the school's continuous improvement plan. Extending invitations may also mean encouraging parents to invite other parents. An invitation extended by a friend or neighbour to accompany him/her to a school event may have different significance than an invitation from a staff member.

Repeated invitation becomes particularly important in a neighbourhood in which there is distance between the school and the community – perhaps because of cultural or language differences or because of individuals' negative experiences with schooling. It takes a great deal of time and contact and repeated evidence that the school is truly a welcoming place to build trust and relationships. It is important not to take a lack of response to an invitation as a lack of interest but instead to see the interaction as an investment in building a relationship.

Being hosts also means ensuring guests know one another and feel comfortable together. As well as working to build positive relationships between staff and parents, it is valuable to create opportunities for parents to get to know one another. Lareau's research demonstrates the importance of cultural and social networks that include other school families as they become a means through which to share information about schooling and an additional source of information about their child's school experiences.<sup>7</sup> Princess Alexandra's pancake breakfast, supper meetings, talking circles – events that have an element of socialization as part of the agenda – help to promote the building of such networks and relationships among parents.

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Writing a new story of schools, through translating conscious and explicit beliefs and assumptions about parents into practices that truly welcome parents onto school landscapes and into processes of schooling, will be messy and sometimes even difficult work. There will not be uniformity in what opportunities parents want or in their responses to opportunities offered. The complexity and multiplicity within parents' voices will challenge educators to create opportunities for diverse parents to be engaged in diverse ways. Not all parents will be able to or will want to accept these invitations – and that is okay. If educators stand alongside parents, remembering their role as guest hosts, together they will create rich opportunities that enhance schooling experiences and successes for children, their parents, and for educators themselves. |

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## Notes

- 1 During 2004–2005, I was conducting research at Princess Alexandra Community School, along with Claudia Ruitenberg and a team of co-researchers, exploring parent engagement and leadership, which was funded by the Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching.
- 2 D. Pushor and C. Ruitenberg, with co-researchers from Princess Alexandra Community School, *Parent Engagement and Leadership*. Research report, project #134 (Saskatoon: Dr. Stirling McDowell Foundation for Research into Teaching, 2005).
- 3 Princess Alexandra was designated a community school in 1980. This designation was based on a number of factors including a high percentage of Aboriginal families in the community, the educational level of family members, and the high level of transiency and poverty. Princess Alexandra offers programming from pre-kindergarten through grade eight.
- 4 L. Kamperidis, "Philoxenia and Hospitality," *Parabola* 15, no. 4 (1990): 4–13.
- 5 D. Pushor, C. Ruitenberg and co-researchers.
- 6 G. R. López and V. A. Vázquez, "Parental Involvement in Latina/o-impacted Schools in the Midwest: Recognizing the Role and Function of Home-based Knowledge and Practices," *Journal of School Public Relations* (2006).
- 7 A. Lareau, "Social Class Differences in Family-School Relationships: The Importance of Cultural Capital," *Sociology of Education* 60, no.2 (1987): 73–85.

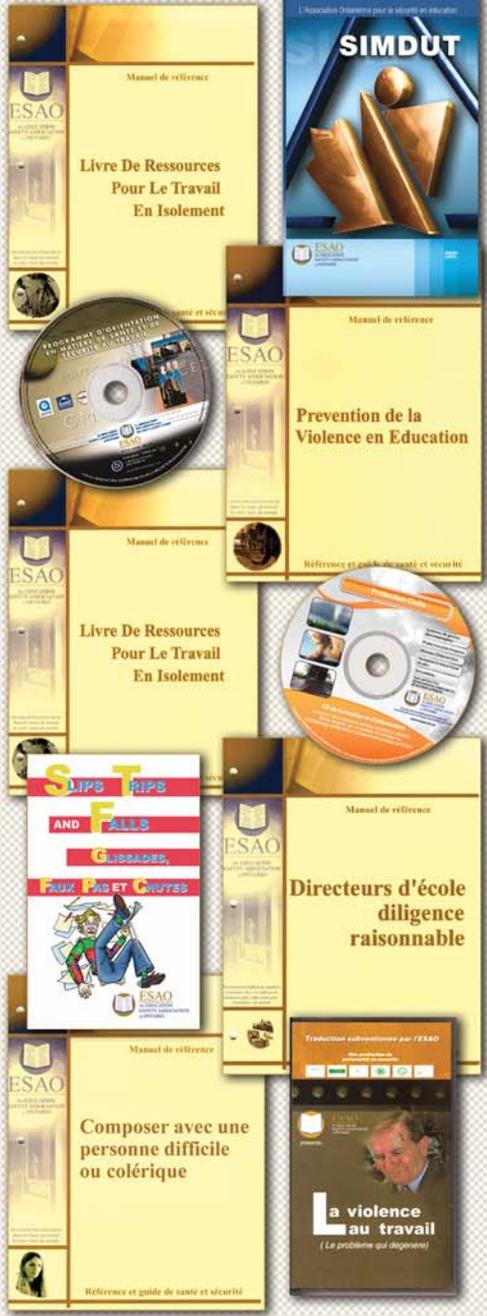
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