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PARENT INVOLVEMENT AS EDUCATION: A CASE STUDY

EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHERS HAVE URGED SCHOOLS TO PURSUE PEDAGOGIES WHERE LINGUISTIC MINORITY FAMILIES CAN BE COMMUNITY PARTNERS IN THEIR CHILDREN'S EDUCATION.

As in Europe and elsewhere, large-scale migration has introduced an unprecedented multilingual and multicultural dimension to North American society and its systems of formal schooling. And as North American society, in particular its urban centres, has become increasingly diverse, educational critics have called for an elaboration of pedagogies, programs and thinking in relation to linguistically and culturally diverse students. The key role played by families and communities in the education of such students is central to this proposed elaboration. For instance, in the area of classroom practices, it has been suggested that in matching students' background knowledge with lessons, teachers need to expand their *own* knowledge of their students' cultural and class-based experiences;[1] in the area of teacher education, there is a call for culturally-responsive teachers who know about the lives of their students and design instruction that builds on what students already know;[2] and in the area of literacy, home languages have been identified as key to the school literacy learning of students of diverse backgrounds.[3]

In the area of language and literacy acquisition specifically, educational researchers have urged schools to pursue pedagogies where linguistic minority families can be community partners in their children's education.[4] Among the benefits identified in such approaches are the overcoming of barriers to communication and increased parent confidence when offering input to practitioners and supplementary educational support to their children. Teachers, too, it is argued, begin to change as they move closer to their students' lived experience of society and community[5] and recognize the multiple benefits of parent participation, developing an image of parents as effective participants in their children's education.[6]

In the literature on family-school relations, the concept *parent involvement in education* has become a common lens through which to explore and understand differing views on this crucial relationship. As part of this ongoing conversation, the research project to be discussed here is a sustained effort to bring together caregivers, teachers, and educational administrators into a space of inter-generational learning. This learning, understood more broadly as literacy enrichment, has taken shape in our four-year action research initiative in public elementary schools in Mississauga, Ontario.

Project Overview

We have chosen to name our ongoing after-school literacy program *Parent Involvement as* (not *in*) *Education*, or *PIE*. From the outset PIE envisioned four main objectives: enhancing the learning and achievement of immigrant, linguistic minority students; familiarizing immigrant parents with their children's education system; facilitating the acquisition of English on the part of immigrant parents; and providing practicing teachers with a forum for elaborating their own pedagogies and perspectives.

Informed by these objectives, the participants in our program include elementary school students and their parents; teachers volunteering to teach in the program; school principals who monitor the program and interact with families; school board resource personnel – reading or writing or math consultants; settlement workers who access community services for families; and university-based researchers who both contribute to curriculum design and facilitate discussions and activities.

Our after-school project invites parents to study with their children as the children learn English literacy and numeracy skills. Typically, parents work with their children for one hour and then, for a second hour, parents participate in presentations and discussions around topics *they* identify as important, topics such as report cards, parent-teacher interviews, homework, health and child management issues, the transition to middle school and high school; awareness and prevention of bullying; and the place of primary languages in child and adolescent development. On this last topic specifically, the program explores opportunities for parents and students to use primary languages as a resource by incorporating primary languages into information-sharing sessions.

The project comprises three research sites – all public schools in the linguistically and culturally diverse city of Mississauga, Ontario. Two of these schools are junior schools, one with students 5 to 10 years of age and the other with students 5 to 11 years of age. The third school, the subject of the following case study, is a senior-middle school with students 11 to 13 years of age. This third school (which we will refer to as Pineview) is, like our other two schools, highly diverse. Pineview's 550 students represent more than 70 cultural backgrounds and approximately half of the students receive English as a Second Language (ESL)

support. Prominent among the languages spoken at home by these students are Urdu, Tamil, Chinese, and Arabic. This means many of the students' families are either from South East Asia or the Middle East.

Case Study: Pineview Senior Middle School

Pineview is located within the Dixie Bloor Community of Mississauga in Peel Region. In a recent study, 30 percent of children living in this community were deemed to be living in households facing multiple social risks with the potential to affect child growth and development.[7] Included here are risks such as unemployment, proportion of families headed by a lone parent; and percentage of population speaking neither of Canada's official languages (English and French). As part of the school's efforts to promote students' academic success in this environment, each term Pineview offers

a non-mandatory extra-curricular literacy/numeracy program for students in Grades 7 and 8. In addition to this existing program, the PIE program at Pineview was established in 2003 as a separate and unique after-school program for ESL students and their parents. The program is unique in that it actively solicits the participation of parents. It is held one day after school for two hours: a first hour from 4:00 to 5:00 p.m.; a dinner break provided by the program from 5:00 to 5:30, and a second hour from 5:30 to 6:30.

Program Resources

With respect to printed resources for students, the program has made extensive use of Ontario Ministry of Education (2003) publications such as *Think literacy*.[8] This document is used primarily for oral and visual communication teaching strategies and has been useful for responding to various curriculum strands

in language. For example, drawing on this resource, we have used strategies such as four-corners, think pair share and interviews. Accordingly, our first four sessions focused on exchanging information in a co-operative and communicative learning environment. Having this theme first allowed us to get to know the parents and students better and to solicit their views on what they wanted to address in future sessions. Other themes have included strategies for academic success, vehicles for cross-age parent/student learning, and inter-generational community resources.

Since the parents in our program have opportunities to work with their children in the classroom for part of the session – or, if they prefer, simply to observe and listen – resources, topics and pedagogies used with students have, at least indirectly, been shared with parents as well. Having said that, we have also selected resources and discussed topics primarily for parents. For example, with respect to printed resources, we have made extensive use of *The Newcomer's Guide to Elementary Schools in Ontario*.[9] This document, available in 18 different languages, has provided us with information about issues such as report cards or parent teacher interviews and, more generally, the broad contours of the education system in Ontario. Importantly, this multilingual resource affords the opportunity to distribute material in English and a home language. In addition to printed resources, we have also tapped into local community resources such as local libraries and social services agencies.

Observed Effects

Our evaluation of the program is based on findings gathered from students and parents over the course of four years from multiple sources: audio-taped, semi-structured interviews; video-taped focus group discussions; informal classroom discussions among research participants; end-of-year surveys; and the research team's ethnographic field notes.

To begin with the students, we have observed many of them overcoming a reluctance to participate in group activities. They have become contributors in a variety of ways, such as volunteering answers and information, participating in group activities, leading dis-
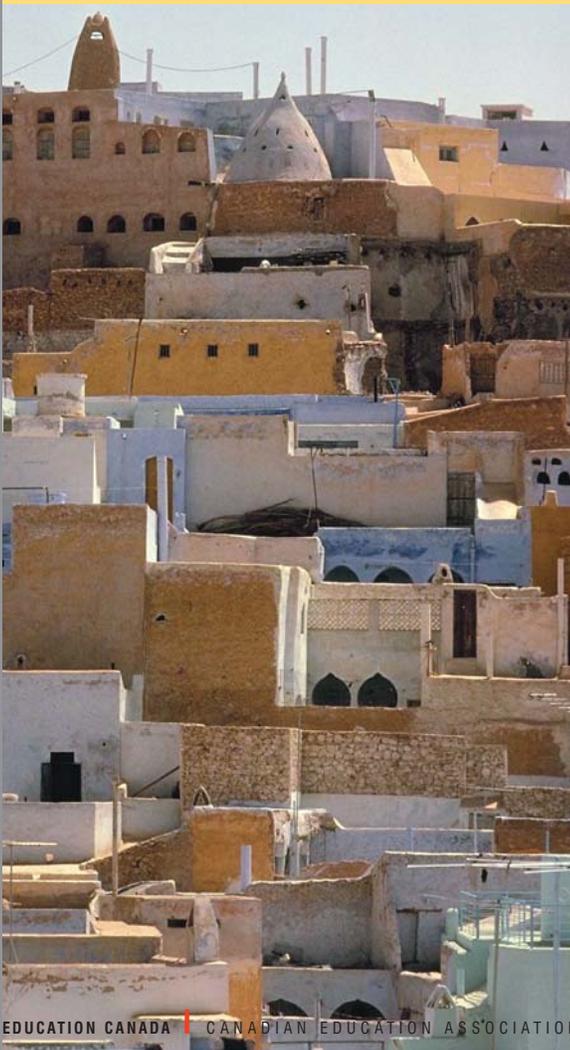
EN BREF Une initiative de recherche-action de quatre ans entreprise à Mississauga, Ontario, réunit les parents et substituts, les enseignants et les administrateurs scolaires dans le cadre d'un programme parascolaire intergénérationnel d'enrichissement en alphabétisation. Le programme *Parent Involvement as Education* ou *PIE* (Participation des parents en tant qu'éducation – *en tant* et non *dans*) comportait quatre grands objectifs : rehausser l'apprentissage et les réalisations des élèves immigrants de minorités linguistiques; familiariser les parents immigrants avec le système d'éducation de leurs enfants; faciliter l'apprentissage de l'anglais par les parents immigrants; fournir aux enseignants en exercice une tribune pour élaborer leurs propres pédagogies et perspectives. Le succès de l'initiative à l'école intermédiaire Pineview Senior indique que cette approche peut jouer un rôle pour prévoir des possibilités sociales, culturelles et économiques pour les différentes collectivités du Canada dans le cadre des politiques scolaires et publiques.

STUDENTS REFER TO BOTH UNEASE AT THE POSSIBILITY OF NOT KNOWING THE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS WHILE THEIR PARENTS WATCH ON AND RELIEF AT THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THEIR PARENTS ARE GAINING A GREATER UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT THEY, AS STUDENTS, ARE DOING AND LEARNING IN SCHOOL

cussions, reading a variety of unfamiliar texts out loud in front of their peers, leading and teaching games, and participating in drama and debating activities. We have also witnessed confidence-building between peers and between students and teachers, as is the case, for example, in students gaining a willingness to ask clarifying questions and to relate insights from personal experiences. Students' homeroom teachers have also indicated that some of our students are now demonstrating an eagerness to participate and volunteer ideas and responses in their mainstream classes. They have also noted that students participating in the program are beginning to initiate conversations with others outside their own cultural and linguistic groups.

Of particular relevance to the parent involvement aspect of our program is the students' perspectives on their parents' role in the program. Their responses are complex in that they see both drawbacks and benefits or, as one grade eight student puts it, "it's kind of good and kind of bad." Students refer to both unease at the possibility of not knowing the answers to questions while their parents watch and relief at the knowledge that their parents are gaining a greater understanding of what they, as students, are doing and learning in school. In fact, in commenting on what he likes best about our program, one student says, "parents come here and then they get to know how to teach their children how to do their homework." (For their part, parents offer a less equivocal perspective on this, claiming, as one parent explains, "he wants my presence here... he is happy that I am around and he is not ashamed that I am there.")

Some parents suggest the literacy skills and methods taught and used in our program give them opportunities for dialogue at home with

their children. This is not to say parents always work with their children explicitly, either in class or at home. In fact, parents are sometimes reluctant to get involved or interact with children during class unless teachers have designed specific activities for it. However, when parents are with their children in the program, they do observe with keen interest their child's learning styles and social interactions, as well as teacher pedagogies and teaching resources. And at home, even if, once again, opportunities for dialogue with their children do not always translate into working with children on school work, the dialogue around our program does provide opportunities to discuss school assignments and, more generally, the experience of schooling.

Some parents speak about their children's increasing level of confidence and interest in school and schoolwork since joining our program. For example, in response to the question of whether she has observed changes in her child's schoolwork, a mother offers, "I would probably say amazing [changes] because he seems to be engrossed, very engrossed in making his assignments or doing it before it is due... I think this program is teaching about the importance of doing homework and, of course, the importance of education."

Challenges
Notwithstanding these encouraging findings, we are also facing two core challenges. The first challenge is in retaining 100 percent of the original parent and student group attendance. While we do have an enthusiastic core of participants, attendance can be variable. Since the school serves an area with many newly arrived immigrants, the number of families moving into the area is often matched by

the number of families moving out. Shift work, too, can be a barrier to fuller participation.

The second challenge is in adapting our program to institutional structures. Working within the framework of the existing literacy/ numeracy program mentioned earlier, the research project started quickly and efficiently; we assumed the existing program, targeted it at ESL students, and broadened the participant pool to include caregivers. However, this institutional identification with an existing program constrained our participants' perspectives on the project and their contribution. Although not so specified in government guidelines, initially student and parent participants (and even guest presenters – subject matter specialists from the school board and community service providers) understood the PIE program within the framework of remediation, and so initially, some students resisted participating in the project for fear of being stigmatized as weak students. In response, the point made by program teachers and university-based researchers is that, rather than being in a remedial situation, these families are in an especially rich learning space for taking full advantage of *all* their linguistic and cultural resources.

Policy Implications
The promise and challenges of our program are highly suggestive for systems of formal education. As part of a trend to develop social, cultural and economic opportunities for diverse communities within Canada, our literacy initiative may have a role to play in school-based and public policy. Indeed, we feel a cohesive extension of our project's goals includes the embedding of such inclusive strategies into the day-to-day curriculum of publicly-funded schools. In this regard, our research also targets our provincial government's mandate
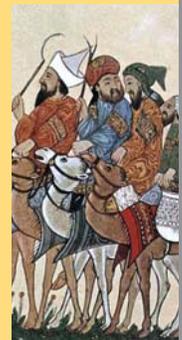
pertaining to English as a Second Language and English Literacy Development.[10] In particular, it responds to the call for school-wide supports for ESL and ELD students; for communicating effectively with their parents; and for promoting inclusive and supportive school environments. A core strength of this approach to policy development is that it emerges from the context and best practices of an existing and successful ongoing program with its own knowledge and participant base. The next phase of our work will translate what this collaboration has taught us about inclusive strategies and practices into broader policy implications for education.

Suggestions relating to such responsible educational provision for minority families would be most welcome and can be directed to John Ippolito (jippolito@edu.yorku.ca) and Sandra Schecter (srs@edu.yorku.ca). ▌

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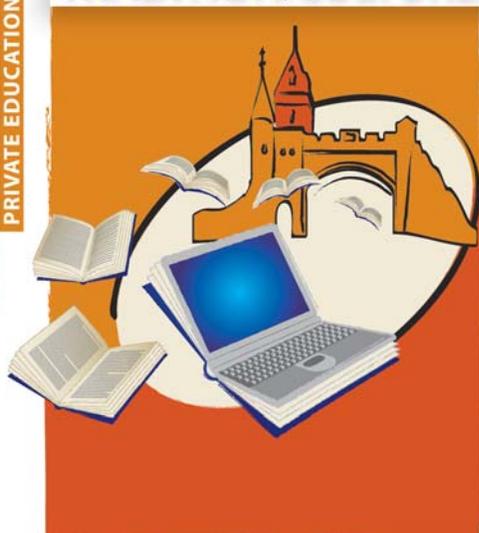
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Notes

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