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To cite this article: Debbie Pushor & Ted Amendt (2018) Leading an examination of beliefs and assumptions about parents, School Leadership & Management, 38:2, 202-221, DOI: 10.1080/13632434.2018.1439466

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2018.1439466

Published online: 04 Mar 2018.

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Leading an examination of beliefs and assumptions about parents

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ABSTRACT
A body of literature on parent engagement has emerged over the past five decades (Mapp, K. 2013. Partners in Education: A Dual Capacity-Building Framework for Family-School Partnerships. Washington, DC: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory). Regardless of this extensive research evidence and its promise for improved student outcomes, there are only ‘random acts of parent engagement’ (Weiss, H. B., Lopez, E. L. and Rosenberg, H. 2010. Beyond Random Acts: Family, School, and Community Engagement as an Integral Part of Education Reform. Boston, MA: Harvard Family Research Project) occurring in schools across the globe. Why has the systematic engagement of parents not become integral to all schools? We believe an underemphasised and critical piece in the work to engage parents is leadership to facilitate school staffs’ deep and honest examination of their beliefs about parents, and the place and voice of parents in teaching and learning.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 4 September 2017
Accepted 1 February 2018

KEYWORDS
Parent engagement; beliefs & assumptions; school leadership; curriculum of parents; philosophy & pedagogy of walking alongside

A body of literature to support parent engagement in teaching and learning has emerged over the past five decades (Mapp 2013). Research studies link the various roles that parents play in a child’s education ‘with indicators of student achievement including student grades, achievement test scores, lower drop-out rates, students’ sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning, and students’ beliefs about the importance of education’ (p. 5). Regardless of this extensive research evidence and the promise it holds for improved student outcomes, there continue to be only ‘random acts of parent engagement’ (Weiss, Lopez, and Rosenberg 2010) occurring in schools across the globe. Why has the research on parent engagement not been acted upon by educators? Why has the systematic engagement of parents not become an integral aspect of all schools? While policies have been developed, legislation passed, books written, and professional development focussed on changing teacher practices, we believe that an underemphasised and yet critical piece in the work to engage parents has been the provision of leadership to facilitate school staffs’ deep and honest examination of
their beliefs about parents, and about the place and voice of parents in schools (Amendt 2008; Amendt and Bousquet 2006; Pushor and Ruitenber 2005).

Current context

The absence of parent engagement in teacher education curricula

The current reality in education is that ‘…most college and teacher education programs do little to prepare teachers to understand and establish relations with families (Black 2001; Epstein 2001; Graue 2005; Kirschenbaum 2001; Martinez, Rodriguez, Perez, & Torio 2005; Nieto 2002; Strand, Marullo, Cutforth, Stoecker, & Donohue 2003; Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman 2005)’ (Patte 2011, 144).

In a recent interview (Morton 2017), Harvard researcher Karen Mapp stated that she is working with the new National Association for Family, School and Community Engagement in the United States (US) in an effort to do a scan of states to determine which actually have family and community engagement standards embedded into both what pre-service teachers need to have as well as what professional development is required of practicing teachers. Mapp does not believe that family engagement is embedded in most states’ teacher accreditation standards and recognises that, if it is not in the standards, it is not something which receives attention by teachers.

This North American picture is not different than in other parts of the world. In the Australian context, Macgregor (2005), McConchie (2004), and Saltmarsh, Barr, and Chapman (2015) have noted a lack of professional preparation for teachers and principals in relation to developing partnerships with parents and families. In the United Kingdom (UK), findings from a review of best practice in parent engagement done by Goodall and Vorhaus (2010) affirmed that staff require training and coaching to engage effectively with parents, and thus should receive parent engagement training through their initial teacher education and/or in their continuing professional development. In further research about parent engagement in the UK, Crozier and Davies (2007) stated that a narrowly prescribed framework shaped by government policy, and thus school policy, defines a limited role for parents in relation to schools, causing schools to ‘inhibit accessibility for certain parents’ (p. 296). What their study demonstrated is that without foundational education regarding parent engagement, educators and policymakers at all levels of the educational system perpetuate a taken-for-granted hierarchical structure in schools and thus a marginalisation of parents’ place and voice in the teaching and learning of their children.

A curriculum of parents

To address this absence of purposeful and sustained teacher education on parent engagement, Pushor (2011, 2013) has proposed that a ‘curriculum of parents’ be
enacted which creates for teachers a broader view of curriculum and a new understanding of their role in a child’s schooling as situated in the broader context of a child’s life. Drawing on Schwab’s 1973 (1973) conceptualisation of curriculum as comprised of four coordinated and equally important commonplaces – teacher, student, subject matter, and milieu – Pushor (2013) envisioned that in a curriculum of parents ‘the lives of the teacher, children, and the significant people in the child’s life all are central in, and inform, the teaching and learning’ (p. 10).

From previous research she has conducted with both undergraduate students in teacher education programming and in-service teachers in graduate programming, Pushor (2011, 2013, 2014, 2015) has witnessed and documented the profound changes which occur in teachers when they have opportunities to deepen their knowledge and understanding of parent and family engagement. Critical elements of a curriculum of parents which she has identified through her research include inviting teachers to sustain their learning over time, immerse themselves in scholarly readings and discussions, learn with and from experiences with parents and families, invest personally by reflecting upon and sharing their own family stories, position themselves as vulnerable and as learners in new learning contexts, and put their learning into practice by designing and trying something new or by remaking a former practice in a new way. Teachers immersed in a ‘curriculum of parents’ (Pushor 2013), in which they engaged in such an examination, commented that they:

“felt this work in [their] heart[s].” It became an embodied understanding. More than being something [they] understood intellectually or practically, it became … something lived, something experienced. [One teacher] affirm[ed] this as she express[ed], “Something inside of me has changed. The way I talk and the way I think has changed.” (Pushor and the Parent Engagement Collaborative, 2013)

Given that parent engagement is a mostly absent topic in teacher education and given the significant impact a ‘curriculum of parents’ can have on teachers’ philosophical stance and pedagogical approach to the engagement of parents in their children’s teaching and learning, we believe it is essential that school leaders take up a curriculum of parents with school staff as an integral aspect of their leadership role.

**The significant role school leaders can play**

In Saskatchewan, the Canadian province in which we live and work, current school improvement efforts are not interrupting stagnant provincial student achievement rates or addressing inequities in student outcomes in schools (Ministry of Education, Student Data System 2016). Self-declared Indigenous individuals total 16% of the provincial population while 90,000 new immigrants have settled in the province since 2007. In Saskatchewan, just over 40% of self-declared Indigenous students are graduating from high school on time (Saskatchewan Provincial Auditor’s Report 2017) and almost half the population in
Adult Basic Education classes are self-declared as Indigenous. Over 50% of newcomer children speak neither official language upon arrival, and require support for school transitions, cultural adjustments, family needs, as well as English language learning (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education 2016).

In 2014, 24.6% of the province’s children lived in poverty, well-above the national average of 18.5%. Those percentages equate to 64,000 children (and over 160,000 people overall) living in poverty (Gingrich, Hunter, and Sanchez 2016). The harsh realities of these statistics are that Indigenous people and recent immigrants experience higher rates of poverty than many other sectors of the population. Saskatchewan’s story is not different than the story of other provinces in Canada or of other countries in the world. School leaders, accountable for student achievement results, graduation rates, and students’ attainment of other educational outcomes, are very aware of these stories and are seeking ways to change them. Harris and Goodall (2008) stated that, ‘Engaging parents in their children’s learning has been said to be one of the most powerful levers available for improving schools’ (as cited in Goodall 2017, 1). Further, Huat See and Gorard (2015) indicated ‘that engaging with parents is the only intervention around narrowing the gap in achievement between children from different backgrounds which had a strong enough evidence base to warrant further investment and work’ (as cited in Goodall 2017, 1). With knowledge of such evidence and a desire to affect positive changes to student outcomes, school leaders are well-positioned to live out a curriculum of parents with their school staff.

In doing so, the school leader takes up a new notion of ‘leadership as interaction’ (Harris 2011, 16). In such a notion of leadership, with shifts in power and authority, what the school leader does becomes more important than the role s/he occupies (p. 16). In the same way that the school leader invites staff to take risks, to be vulnerable and honest, to be with parents and family members, the leader, too, will be engaged alongside others in these same ways. While this work may be at times messy, difficult, or unsettling, a school leader just has to return to five decades of research that attest to the benefit of parent engagement in children’s teaching and learning to remain undaunted in the face of adversity. Knowing that an underemphasised and yet critical piece in the work to engage parents is the provision of leadership to facilitate school staffs’ deep and honest examination of their beliefs about parents, and about the place and voice of parents in schools, a school leader has a clear sense of where and how to begin the journey.

In engaging school staff in examining, and potentially interrupting, their beliefs and assumptions about parents and about the voice and place of parents in relation to school landscapes, school leaders can be intentional in awakening staff to historical and taken-for-granted thinking which has been foundational in the operation of schools, thinking which is ‘schoolcentric’ (Lawson 2003) in its focus and reflective of predominantly white middle-class beliefs and values.
It can be a process intended to immerse staff in a new way of thinking in schools, one that is ‘familycentric’ (Pushor 2015) and focussed on truly knowing parents and families in order to honour them as lifelong educators of their children and to partner with them by incorporating their knowledge, their hopes and dreams for their children, and their contributions to their children’s teaching and learning in all aspects of the schooling process. In guiding staff through a curriculum of parents, a school leader, ultimately, immerses them in a ‘process of unlearning whereby [they] begin to question received truths’ (Williams, as cited in Loomba 1998, 66). By bringing staff alongside parents through such experiences as community walks and home visits and by working together to define shared beliefs, school staff are challenged to consider,

‘What do I believe about parents and the community in which I work? What role do I believe parents and community should play in the school? What opportunities have I given parents and community members to be meaningfully engaged in the school?’ (Amendt and Bousquet 2006).

It is in the face of such questions, and the unlearning these questions pull forward, that space is opened for staff to relearn, to imagine new ways to do their work in schools in respectful and reciprocally-beneficial relationships with parents and families.

**A curriculum of parents focused on beliefs and assumptions**

Historically, in the field of parent engagement, the focus has been on schools and on students’ academic achievement, thus the primary question typically puzzled over by educators, in relation to their work with parents, has been, ‘How can parents serve the school’s agenda?’ Lawson (2003) argued that such ‘schoolcentric’ thinking leads to parent engagement practices that are ‘structured and defined for parents by schools’ (p. 79). Further, teachers, often predominantly white and middle-class, establish expectations by which parents are to engage in their children’s schooling (Crozier 2001), expectations that are reflective of both the teachers’ ‘whiteness’ and their ‘middle-classness’ (Reay 2008, 1076). With such an inward-looking disposition, schooling is viewed by teachers as ‘the site of the main game’ (Cairney and Munsie 1992) in relation to children’s learning and parents are considered to be engaged only if they attend school functions, ensure children’s homework is supervised and completed, sign forms and permission slips, and do those things deemed important by school personnel. Albeit often unconsciously, teachers reify middle-class values as universally held and desired (Reay 2008) and perpetuate hegemonic notions of parent engagement.

Given that such hegemony preserves what are seen to be accepted and desirable white middle-class values (Reay 2008), teachers often speak of parents as a homogeneous group, as a uniform group of individuals who are assumed to hold worldviews and values similar to those of educators (Crozier 2001). When parents
do not engage in expected ways, then, they become labelled as ‘hard to reach parents’ (Crozier and Davies 2006), they are pathologized, or they are shamed, blamed or judged for their actions or inactions in relation to their children and their schooling (Crozier and Davies 2006). As Goodall (2013) has foregrounded, ‘Research has made clear that the greatest lever for children’s achievement is parental engagement in their learning in the home, and the atmosphere towards learning in the home (Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Goodall and Vorhaus 2011)’ (p. 134). When parents engage their children in cultural teachings and ceremony, when they talk with them about such things as current events or what they are reading, when they take them places and engage in activities with them, when they establish hopes, dreams, and expectations with and for their children, they are uniquely, contextually, culturally engaged in their children’s education. Crucial to the work of a school leader is determining ‘how to cultivate and grow dispositions of openness and positive recognition of the other’ (Reay 2008, 1085) with teachers and staff in order to establish parent engagement as a conscious and socially just philosophy and pedagogy, one reflective of the diverse ways race, class, culture, religion, gender, and other identity markers, are lived by parents and families within a school community.

Bryan and Henry (2012) affirmed the critical need for an examination of the beliefs of school personnel regarding the parents with whom they work, particularly parents of families living in marginalised contexts. Henderson et al. (2007) also articulate the necessity ‘for school staff to hold a set of positive beliefs about family engagement’ (p. 27) as a starting place to working effectively and relationally with parents and families – regarding building relationships, linking to learning, addressing differences, supporting advocacy, and sharing power (pp. 14–19). Basaraba (2013) noted, ‘Our first assumptions as educators build the foundation of what will destroy or create an essential family/teacher relationship, a relationship that is crucial to the successful education of all children’ (p. 94). An examination of the beliefs and assumptions of school staff is essential, then, in identifying if their beliefs are helpful or harmful in developing relationships with parents and families.

Amendt (2008) documented community education practices in a suburban elementary school and an inner-city school. In both settings, the school staff were able to move from parent involvement practices, where the hierarchy of the school was maintained and parents were asked to serve the school’s or teachers’ agendas, to parent engagement practices, where parents were given a voice in decisions and programming which affected them and their children. Upon examining and re-establishing their beliefs and assumptions, the school staffs developed new relationships with families and adopted community education practices. It is clear in this research that making belief statements explicit and living out these beliefs was helpful for schools to develop deeper, more meaningful relationships with families.
The role of the school leader

In this article we pull forward an element in our research in order to collaboratively define and detail the role of a leader in facilitating educators’ examination of beliefs and assumptions about parents. What is it essential for a leader to do to prompt school staff to honestly, vulnerably, and openly make conscious and visible, interrogate, and then either affirm or challenge, their beliefs and assumptions about parents and families? Critical elements of this work which we explore include creating a learning environment in which it is safe to risk, the importance of scaffolding authentic experiences for teachers that occur with parents and in community contexts which are unfamiliar or unlike their own lived experience (for example, going on a core community walk led by members of that community), unpacking those experiences alongside readings and concepts in the field of parent engagement, working with parents and community to co-construct a shared vision and values, and then co-construct new school practices which translate that vision into lived action. Finally, we attend to the importance of embedding parent engagement as a systematic aspect of school life so that it is sustained over time, and through potential changes in teaching staff or school leadership. While it is clear in the literature that an examination of beliefs and assumptions is foundational to successfully engaging parents in their children’s schooling, research that details how a leader is to do this work, what the critical elements of the work are, and what theory and pedagogy underpins those elements, will address a gap that we believe currently exists in the field.

A process of interruption

In facilitating an examination of educators’ often unconscious and unchallenged beliefs about parents and families, it is important for leaders to ‘interrupt’ teachers’ thinking and dispositions, creating an opportunity for new ways of being and doing to be put in place (Pushor and Ruitenberg 2005, 55). It is when the ‘taken-for-grantedness’ (Pushor and Ruitenberg 2005) within schools becomes visible that possibilities are created for relationships to be formed between educators and parents in new ways, for power and decision-making to be shared, and for parents to be given a voice and place in their children’s schools, and in the teaching and learning that happens within them. Knowing that five decades of research evidence attests to the positive impact of parent engagement, interrupting taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions about parents, then, is work that is significant for children, parents, teachers, and school administrators.

The word ‘disposition’ is often used as a noun to mean a person’s prevailing qualities of mind and character, referring to temperament, inclination, attitude or outlook (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/disposition). Above, we discussed how teachers’ dispositions are often schoolcentric, reflecting a predominantly middle-class and white mind and character. To interrupt such a
disposition, we believe it is important for a school leader to consider the notion of disposition as a verb, as an act. Taken up in this way, such an action becomes lived as a carefully designed and implemented professional development process. The school leader guides teachers to become awake to their current disposition, thus enabling them to consider what is taken-for-granted in their stance and what may require informed rethinking. The leader’s intended outcome becomes a process of ‘dis-’/positioning – prompting a move by teachers which enables them to step ‘apart’ or ‘away from’ (http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/dis-) assumptions about parents and families and take up a new position, one that shifts a school-centric stance to one that is familycentric in nature.

In researching such a process of interruption which was scaffolded by school leadership at Princess Alexandra Community School in Saskatoon (Pushor and Ruitenber, with co-researchers 2005), we saw a significant shift in the disposition of teachers and staff as they moved from a stance of ‘looking outward’ to one of ‘looking inward’ (Pushor 2011, 65–66). When teachers look outward, they look to parents, families, and the community to find explanations for what they perceive to be low levels of parent engagement, parents’ lack of interest in or concern about their children’s learning, or parents’ lack of support for teachers and their efforts. When teachers look outward, it is not uncommon to hear, ‘These parents don’t care,’ ‘If only these parents would … ,’ ‘If only these parents wouldn’t ….’ When teachers look inward, they look to themselves – their own disposition, actions, or inactions – to find reason for lower levels of parent engagement than they desire. Rather than judging, shaming or blaming parents, they ask themselves, ‘Perhaps if I had called and personally invited each parent,’ ‘Perhaps if I had offered transportation, childcare, a meal,’ ‘Perhaps if I had planned this activity with parents,’ ‘Perhaps if I had made home visits instead of expecting parents to come to the school.’ When teachers look inward, they take responsibility for getting to know the particular parents, families, and community in which they are privileged to work and, also, for learning to engage with families in ways which are respectful and contextually responsive.

So, what are critical elements of such a dis/positioning process? Drawing on our individual research inquiries as well as our shared research, teaching, and staff development experiences with parent engagement, we delineate and discuss elements of a dis/positioning process which we feel are essential if a school leader is to facilitate teacher/staff development in regard to establishing strong philosophical and pedagogical foundations to underpin their work with parents, families, and community.

**Critical elements**

**Creating a safe and educative learning environment**

Exploring assumptions and beliefs with teachers and staff is work that requires an establishment of trust and a willingness to risk and be vulnerable. As Bryk
and Schneider (2003) affirmed, it is strong ‘relational trust’ that makes it more likely such initiatives will be accepted by a staff as such trust reduces the sense of risk that teachers feel or perceive. Given that assumptions and beliefs arise from lived experiences and that they often reflect deeply engrained and often unexamined values and understandings, we have found that an interrogation of those assumptions and beliefs is work of both the heart and the mind, and thus it is emotional and demanding work. Creating an environment that is safe for vulnerable conversations and that has clear educative purposes is key in a school leader’s work to move forward.

Community of conscience. Linda Christensen’s (2000) work, in which she shares her process of inviting students’ lives into the classroom, can be patterned by school leaders as they invite the lives of teachers into the work of dis/positioning. Beginning by asking teachers to share stories of how their homes and cultures were (or perhaps were not) brought into the school when they were students, experiences that will have emotional connection for them, is a personal way to evoke considerations of how school life can ensure they feel ‘significant and cared about’ (p. 18) as teachers on a school landscape. Using Hilliard and Pine’s (as cited in Christensen 2000) notion of a ‘community of conscience’ (p. 18), a community which ‘prefigure[s] the kind of democratic and just society we envision’ (p. 18), a school leader can lead staff in generating a listing of the characteristics they desire – and commit to live by – in their own community of conscience. In our own past experiences engaged in such work, we have found that teachers generate such statements as:

- To listen without judgment
- To take responsibility for own learning
- To support the learning of others
- To challenge ideas, not people
- To speak openly and honestly
- To interact with respect
- To engage with all members of the staff.

Keeping the Community of Conscience posted and using it as a touchstone becomes integral to the school leader’s work. At the beginning of each gathering of staff, the school leader can ask teachers to review the Community of Conscience and to set for themselves a personal and private goal for that session. At the end, teachers can be given time to reflect on their participation as a team member and on the contributions they made to both the work of the day and to building a community of conscience. If or when it happens that a member of the staff is not living in accordance with the collectively established expectations, a school leader can use an attribute as an entry point into a growth conversation, ‘Thinking about your comments in our session today, how do you feel they demonstrated respectful interactions?’ By establishing and maintaining
an environment in which trust is built and it is safe to risk, the school leader is grounding the examination of beliefs and assumptions in an environment of ‘social respect’ (Bryk and Schneider 2003, 41). The important and vulnerable work the leader is engaged in with staff can be accomplished as s/he continues to cultivate respectful exchanges marked by genuine listening and an openness to others (Bryk and Schneider 2003).

Scaffolding authentic experiences for staff
Developing relationships with parents and community members begins with creating professional development opportunities to ‘mingle’ and begin to understand each other. What we have found in our research (Amendt 2008; Amendt and Bousquet 2006; Pushor 2011, 2013, 2014; Pushor and the Parent Engagement Collaborative II 2015) is that when the professional development being done with teachers has embedded within it the opportunity to engage in a new practice, through an experience that is both scaffolded and debriefed, shifts in teachers’ beliefs and assumptions occur during the experience, prompting a dis/positioning which then leads to changes in their engagement practices with parents. Time and contact between teachers and parents build a sense of trust and relationship. Taking teachers into the community and into families’ homes is especially important in low socio-economic communities where families have been marginalised, and media fuels a looming sense of despair for the community and its residents. Some staff may have entered into such a school setting or context for the first time. Armed with only media reports or their own preconceived biases, staff members may enter the community with a sense of fear of the community or, alternatively, come with a rescuer mindset – neither of which are particularly helpful to building relationships. Once teachers have spent authentic and meaningful time with parents, they awaken to the richness and gifts which exist within the family, and begin to see parents and the community as assets, rather than deficits.

Community walk. To this end, a school leader can create an experiential professional learning opportunity for school staff by allotting an hour or two for a community walk in the neighbourhood surrounding the school. With such an experience, each staff member can be given such purposes as to identify two or three assets in the community and to introduce themselves to a few parents and community members they meet on their walk. The school staff can then return to the school and report back on the strengths of the community of which they may not have been aware prior.

A school leader can assist with the success of this process by marshalling a few community members in advance to lead a guided walk, or by making contact with directors of a few local community resources (natural gathering places) and ask them to be prepared to greet the school staff as they find their way through the community in pairs or groups. As examples, the executive director of the local food bank can be approached to be prepared to talk to school staff; a
long standing local business owner can be invited to provide his/her reflections on the community; the local health clinic director can be prepared to talk about the philosophical principles of a harm reduction strategy; a well-known grandparent can situate her/himself in the school park to chat with school staff. Advance planning efforts such as these can lead to a positive experience for the school staff and community. Such an activity can create professional learning for school staff by shifting the power imbalance, by placing school staff in a position of discomfort, and by building relationships between the school and community through a strength-based and asset-focused approach.

To demonstrate the powerful learning that can occur, we share a specific example with you. During one such community walk, it was planned that teachers would eat lunch with other guests at a neighbourhood community centre where people can access breakfast, lunch, a family worker, as well as information on topics ranging from health to the law. Given how busy it was at the community centre that day, though, many of the staff decided not to line up for lunch but instead just to sit with members of the community and visit. One little girl, noticing that the teacher she was sitting with had not had anything to eat, broke the cookie she was eating in half, and offered half to the teacher. Even though she did not know when she might eat again, she willingly shared what she had with someone who was a stranger to her. During the debriefing after the experience, the teacher, with tears in his eyes, told the story of the generosity of this little girl, and of how her act had been a moment of dis/positioning for him. He admitted that he came into the community with stereotypes about parents and children who live in a context of poverty. He spoke of how the generosity of spirit, the sense of community, the caring for others which he had witnessed and experienced had challenged him to his very core, and that he now saw richness to which he had been unawake previously. ‘Getting to know the community is a first step in marshaling valuable community resources’ (Bryan 2005, 224) and, to do so, first requires the school staff to see the gifts of minority and at-risk community members.

**Bringing together experience and education**

In the example above, the teacher’s tears indicated how powerful his experience in community had been. The little girl’s offer to share her cookie with him opened both his heart and his eyes to new learning. What becomes important, for a school leader then, is what to do to facilitate a staff debriefing of such an emotional experience in intellectual ways as well. The sharing of a moment such as that one creates an opportunity for the school leader to introduce concepts to the teaching staff from academic and professional literature, and to use these concepts as a means or a frame to deconstruct lived experience in order to build philosophical and pedagogical knowledge of parent engagement. It is when one is able to name an aspect of one’s lived experience that one is able to bring deeper meaning and understanding to one’s knowing. Therefore,
when teachers are able to discuss the experience of their community walk in light of concepts of welcoming and hospitality, of invitation, and of being guest hosts in a school and community (Amendt 2008; Amendt and Bousquet 2006; Basaraba 2013; Pushor 2007; Pushor and Ruitenberg, with co-researchers 2005), to follow on our example, they are able to internalise and embrace their work to engage parents in ways that are personal and theoretical.

School environment scan. Then, once that learning is established, how is it reinforced and embedded more deeply? How is it translated into practice? A simple activity to accomplish this translation into practice, with the concept of welcoming and hospitality, can be to engage school staff in an environmental scan of their school building and grounds. By asking them to do a walk through and around the school and grounds, the school leader is awakening them to the messages they are collectively conveying to parents and community members, consciously and unconsciously, through the many aspects of the school environment, both what is present and what is absent. Questions for staff to consider during the environmental scan and in reflection upon it after, may include:

- What do the visual displays on the walls say about what ‘we’ value and believe in?
- What visual cues exist about the importance of the community in this school?
- What signs are visible, and do they convey a welcoming message?
- What is the feel in the building – one of invitation or one of regulation?
- Who greets visitors and how are they greeted?
- Are there comfortable spaces for parents and community members to gather, to linger?

As a school leader fosters critical reflection through this conversation, the physical environment of the school can be critiqued using the now personally embodied and professionally understood academic concepts of welcoming and hospitality to bring teacher knowledge into practice. The question can be posed to teachers, ‘Now that you know what you know and you see what you see, what do you believe needs to be changed or enhanced?’ Bringing together the ‘organic connection between education and experience’ (Dewey 1938, 25), the school leader can scaffold ‘the kind of present experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences’ (p. 28). Through designing a process of dis/positioning that touches teachers’ hearts with experiences and opens teachers’ minds for new learning, a school leader ensures that resulting shifts in teacher practices are deeply enough rooted to become a part of their philosophy and pedagogy of parent engagement.

Joining together
Bryan and Henry (2012) affirm the critical need for collaboration amongst school staff and families in collectively examining and establishing shared beliefs. This
collaboration becomes even more important when staff are working with marginalized families who have different life experiences than theirs and, correspondingly, potentially different worldviews, positioning, and perspectives than those of the teachers. Once the staff have had the opportunity to interrogate their own beliefs and assumptions, to challenge and rethink their understandings based on experiences in and with community, and to consider the application of their dis/positioning in relation to their practices of engaging with parents and families, they are well-situated to create a shared vision and plan in relationship with parents, family, and community members. Joining together in this significant way can create an opportunity to build trust and relationships and can serve as the foundation for ongoing school-parent-family-community partnerships.

Establishing shared beliefs with parents and community. At one core neighbourhood school, the school staff took up the school leader’s challenge to work with parents in new ways. As a staff of about 40, they each set out to personally invite a minimum of two parents to a school event to discuss, ‘What collectively can we do to help our students do better?’ They arranged childcare and prepared a small meal. After extending many personal invitations, multiple times and in multiple ways, the stage was set for a community gathering. The evening rolled around, and a Canadian blizzard set in with high winds, snow, and temperatures hovering near $-40^\circ$C. Because many families did not have personal transportation, it meant that, if they were to attend, many of them would need to walk to the school, bringing young children with them. Despite the trying circumstances that evening, over 100 parents and community members arrived. Following the meal, the school leader shared some recent school student data demonstrating that students in the school were collectively not achieving. Instead of blaming each other, staff and parents were invited to join one of approximately 10 talking circles$^2$ of up to 10 people, situated throughout the school. The talking circle process was a natural format for the school given its high Indigenous population. Such a process respected who the community was and, as well, it served as an effective means of giving voice to the entire community. Staff members simply opened the discussion in each talking circle by asking participants to share their insights about what they could do to help students achieve. Staff members kept notes during the event to ensure all voices were recorded. The event lasted a couple of hours, in which a rejuvenation of energy and relationships occurred between staff and community. At the end of the evening, the school leader assured parents and community members that the school staff had listened and would immediately implement certain changes based on the advice they had received. He also committed to them that those changes that would take more time would be worked on collectively and collaboratively by parents and school staff.

Because the school leader recognized that establishing shared beliefs was a critical part of the process, this was one of the first actions in which he
engaged the school community. Through a process of student, staff, and parent engagement which unfolded over a period of a few weeks, together they collectively established four beliefs to guide the work of the school – respect, connectedness, self-esteem, and safety. While these beliefs were visually displayed in prominent ways around the school, what was most important about them is that they became part of the narrative of staff, students and parents. These shared beliefs were embedded as a touchstone which guided the work of the school community. It was commonplace at staff and community meetings to hear people respectfully challenge practices or processes by stating such things as, ‘If we believe in connectedness, then why are we doing …?’ or ‘How would that decision reflect a sense of connectedness?’ In times of conflict, these shared beliefs were also a means to determine possible solutions and to make decisions that honoured and reflected the four core values and commitments. As an insightful school leader, the principal of this urban core community school was mindful of the power imbalance typically at play in schools and how parents and community members often perceive teachers to be holders of power. Using a process in which all voices were heard and were equitable in contribution, the school leader worked to share power with parents and community members. Through establishing shared beliefs, a strong sense developed that ‘this school belongs to all of us’ and ‘we will all work together in ways that reflect what we mutually believe is best for children.’

Co-constructing new school practices
Once relationships have been established between staff and parents and there is a sense of consciously defined and shared beliefs, an open space is created for everyone to come together in new ways. What it is critical for the school leader to attend to is that the parent engagement efforts made by school personnel do more than ‘tinker around the edges’ (Brown and Moffat 1999), enhancing experiences for parents on the school landscape, for example with the provision of childcare and transportation, but not actually creating systematic change in how parents are positioned, in the place and voice they are given in decisions which affect their children and themselves.

Parent and staff school meetings/shared professional development. Many important decisions are discussed and made by a school leader and staff in staff meetings and in professional development sessions. In some instances, the staff decisions are later proposed to parents and community members at a school community council meeting to seek their input or approval as well. Often, though, parents, who perceive themselves as lacking the professional knowledge of teachers or the language of the educational community, ‘rubber stamp’ the decisions with which they are presented, providing no authentic or meaningful input into the decision-making process.

When a school leader maintains a two-step process in schools such as this one, parents continue to be peripheral to the critical and shaping conversations.
To address this tiering, the school leader can instead interrupt current staff meeting or professional development event structures to put different ones in place. Changing ‘staff meetings’ to ‘school meetings’ and inviting parents and community members to attend is an effective way of achieving this. Because parents and staff bring their own talents and experiences to conversations, bringing these unique and divergent perspectives together enriches school planning and ensures all voices and positions are represented.

In many instances, when professional development opportunities occur in schools, staff members learn new strategies which they then work to implement in their classrooms or in the school more generally. When change occurs as a result of their learning, teaching staff find themselves in a position of informing, or perhaps even convincing, parents of the merits of their new approach. Again perpetuating a tiered structure within schools, an alternative approach to this is for a school leader to invite parents to join staff members during professional development opportunities, keeping in mind scheduling which will afford many parents access, and providing childcare, transportation, or a meal to address any barriers that might prevent or limit their participation. In this way, the power imbalance is addressed as both parents and staff are beginning on an equal footing as they learn together. Following the professional development, staff and parents can then collectively plan a strategy to translate the new learning into action, increasing the likelihood of successful implementation. By inviting parents and community members into professional learning events, a school leader is creating meaningful opportunities for parents and school staff to walk alongside one another, sharing more of who they are, what they value, and bringing together knowledge of teaching and learning with knowledge of community.

*Home visits.* Knowing that when school meetings and professional development sessions are opened up to parents not all parents will be ready or able to attend, another approach an insightful school leader may consider for seeking input from parents and community members into decision-making processes is to support teaching staff to conduct home visits (Smith 2013). When school staff conduct such visits with humility and respect, introducing themselves and expressing a sincere desire to work with parents, they acknowledge the key role of parent as a holder of important knowledge about children, teaching, and learning (Jocelyn 2013; pthvp.org, nd). General questions staff may pose may include:

- Tell me about your own educational experiences.
- What does your child do when s/he is not in school?
- What are your hopes and dreams for your child?
- What are your expectations of me as your child’s teacher?
- What gifts do you have that you might be willing to share with our class/school?
Once trust and a relationship is established, in future home visits a teacher may invite parent voice on a school meeting agenda item, an upcoming professional development topic, or an aspect of curricula that the school community is exploring, encouraging the parent/family to share their knowledge about the topic, either in that moment or perhaps upon reflection, having been left some introductory information to consider. A home visit sets the stage for a relationship that will provide benefit to the parent and the school staff throughout the school year, in the best interests of the student.

In research done by RTI International (2017) on the Parent Teacher Home Visits Program (PTHVP) in the United States, researchers found, ‘Many educators recognized that previous deficit assumptions about families and students were unfounded,’ ‘reported new found understanding and empathy,’ ‘incorporated students’ interests and culture, information obtained from the home visits, to improve student engagement and motivation,’ and increased their ‘efforts to communicate with families’ (p. ix). Home visits are a proven practice that interrupt teachers’ often taken-for-granted or unconscious or implicit beliefs and assumptions about children, parent and families.

**Embedding parent engagement in core structures**

Schools are busy places, with much happening at any one time, and often with multiple agendas competing for the school leader’s time and attention. It therefore requires committed school leadership to retain and to foreground parent engagement as a conscious and ongoing priority for the school. To move parent engagement from a ‘random act’ to a systematically embedded philosophy and pedagogy within a school landscape, a school leader must ensure it is integral to all key school planning and continuous improvement frameworks. How does the school leader situate parent engagement as ‘an add in, not an add on’ (ARACY Parent Engagement Conference Presentation 2017) seen to be an integral approach to achieving all specified and desired outcomes, rather than an additional outcome to be achieved? We believe that essential to parent engagement becoming a belief system and a way of living those beliefs in practice is a school leader’s concerted effort to ensure it is:

- embedded throughout the school’s continuous improvement plan,
- reflected in at least one growth goal set by each staff member in his/her professional learning plan,
- an ongoing focus in staff professional development,
- a topic of exploration in teacher’s collaborative inquiry teams/professional learning communities,
- an aspect of the school leader’s performance evaluation,
- an aspect of teacher performance evaluation, and
- a regular item on staff/school meeting agendas.
Regardless of what the research tells us about the importance of parent engagement to student achievement and their attainment of other educational outcomes, and regardless of the best intentions of school leadership and teaching staff, in an environment of accountability where efforts will be directed and what will get done will be determined by what is written in the school planning and improvement documents. Without such an anchor, parent engagement will become (or remain) another ‘nice to do’ but not a ‘need to do.’

Further, Henderson et al. (2007) noted that ‘before we can create strong and effective partnerships with families, we have to believe not only that it’s important but also that it can be done – and that we can do it’ (p. 27). By attending to the critical elements of a process of dis/positioning, central to a curriculum of parents in which parent engagement is understood as a philosophy and a pedagogy, school leaders can do this important work of leading an examination of beliefs and assumptions about parents. While each school leader is different, each school and school staff, each community, and each family, these foundational elements provide a school leader with a conscious and proven approach that can be lived out in each context in unique socially and culturally responsive and reflective ways.

Notes

1. The University of Saskatchewan (U of S), where Pushor teaches, is a university of almost 22,000 students of whom approximately 2550 are of self-declared Indigenous ancestry. The U of S is situated in Saskatoon, a city of approximately 250,000, in the province of Saskatchewan with a population approaching 1.2 million. Of the 1.2 million residents, 55% live in urban centres while 45% live in towns and rural settings. Students engaged in Pushor’s undergraduate and graduate programming and research were representative of this demographic. Graduate students were comprised of early, mid, and end career teachers. The largest proportion of the graduate students were early childhood educators, while others taught in elementary or secondary contexts.

2. A talking circle is a traditional way for Indigenous people to discuss issues and solve problems. As everyone in the circle is equitable in position, and whoever is holding the talking stick is able to speak freely without interruption, it is a structure that removes hierarchical barriers and invites honest and open expression.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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