

**Parents in Relation to Schools:
Perspectives on Power and Participation**

by

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**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree
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Master of Arts**

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Abstract

Parents in Relations to Schools: Perspectives on Power and Participation examines what motivates and what inhibits parents from participating on school parent councils. Thirty parents in three Winnipeg inner city elementary schools were interviewed with the intension of illuminating the parental point of view. As well, literature on parent involvement in schools is reviewed along with relevant literature on power differentials. The resulting analysis outlines parental perspectives on participation and uncovers thought-provoking reasons why parents do and do not participate. This thesis concludes with a list of practical recommendations intended to assist parent groups and school administrators to encourage increased parent involvement in their school.

Among these recommendations, the five most important were as follows:

- 1) Clarify the purpose and the goals of the parent council so that parents can evaluate whether their efforts are having a beneficial effect. In this study, many of the parents interviewed felt their input had little impact on school outcomes.**
- 2) Keep parents better informed about their parent council. Some parents interviewed in this study said they did not know what the parent council**

was and some did not know that it was open to all parents. Others said they did not know what was going on during parent council meetings.

3) Increase awareness among participating parents of ways in which they can include and encourage other parents to become involved and learn constructive ways to deal with conflict when it occurs. In this study, parent to parent relationships emerged as a key factor influencing participation.

4) Provide good quality children's activities and child care. Parents needed to feel that their children were well cared for and engaged in age appropriate activities when they were attending school meetings.

5) Examine the format of parent council meetings. Shorten the meetings and reduce the time devoted to school business. Look for additional forums where parents can express their opinions and ideas on specific topics.

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Secondly, my family, my daughters and my partner, encouraged me at every step of the way and for this I am very appreciative.

Finally, the parents who volunteered their time and insights were very generous contributors who made this thesis possible.

Thank you.

**For schools are, in the end,
human beings assembled
together day after day in
a shared pursuit and they
can control their own destiny.
So it ought to be and so it can be.**

Robert Cole (1992)

Chapter 1: Parents as Partners

Introduction

It's an old school, with the spacious corridors, large windows and high ceilings reminiscent of an earlier era. If you pause, you can easily picture a school tea (1950s style) in full swing. The gymnasium would be packed with parents and grandparents and young girls in black tunics would be moving among the tables serving tea and dainties to the guests. This is a major school event and clearly one of the very few times in the year that parents were invited into the school.

Today it is different. While the roles of teachers and parents were distinct and separate several decades ago, current interpretations of what the parental role in education entails and how it should be implemented are numerous and varied. Currently "parental involvement" has become a common theme and in contrast to the past, schools now have a mandate to facilitate the participation of parents. Today's parents are called *Partners* in education, but what does this mean? For many schools it means a continual struggle to merge the theory of parental participation with the reality of school life. Frequently only a small number of parents show up at parent council meetings and other school events (except school teas and concerts which are traditionally well attended).

However, when attention is shifted from the school to the parental point of view, several questions come to the forefront. Do parents want to participate in a partnership with the school? Is there enough openness between the parents and the school staff to sustain positive interaction and collaboration? Finally, what type of home and school partnership would be meaningful from a parent's point of view?

These important questions invite an open dialogue with parents to ascertain if and how they want to participate in a partnership with the school. Engaging in such a dialogue is one small step toward authentic home and school collaboration.

BACKGROUND

During the last decade considerable attention has been directed to the shortcomings of the present system of education. There is no question that schools across North America are in trouble. Achievement scores are down, violence is increasing, and teachers find themselves hard pressed to cope with the educational and social issues which confront them (Shanker 1992).

One solution put forward to reform the educational system throughout North America, and in Europe as well, is the move toward school-based management and shared decision-making. This reallocation of decision-making power to the local school level is intended to make schools more accountable to their local community and more responsive to the educational needs of their specific constituents. While this is an extensive international trend, it is far from consistent. In fact, there are many quite varied examples of how school-based management is being implemented and varied interpretations of what shared decision-making entails. Some school districts, for example, interpret shared decision-making to include extensive parental power and input while others limit parental participation within carefully defined boundaries (McAllister Swap 1993).

Another proposed solution to educational woes comes under the label of parental involvement. While this is usually mentioned in conjunction with school-based management, it does not always follow that parental involvement includes parental participation in decision-making. Nevertheless, because current research has positively linked parental involvement with children's improved academic achievement (Griffith 1996), government policy statements consistently affirm a commitment to parental involvement (see Manitoba Dept of Education 1995). Elsewhere discussion abounds about the important role that parents play in the educational achievement of their children. There are TV ads encouraging parents to volunteer in our schools and books for parents on how to become more involved. In fact, much of the prevailing discourse in the field of education states that parents and schools need to work together as *partners*. The proposed nature of this partnership however is vague.

Yet, if one looks beyond the level of current catch phrases and public relations to the reality of parental involvement in schools, what emerges is a highly complex and conflicted state of affairs.

First of all, for many schools today the mandate for parental involvement has been promoted "from above." As a result, teachers and administrators may attempt to foster parental involvement by a "hit or miss" approach with very little understanding of exactly what parental

involvement encompasses or how it may be achieved (Epstein 1986).

Secondly, parental involvement takes many forms and some schools may focus on one aspect of the parental role and overlook the others. More specifically, it seems that schools find it easier to promote types of parental involvement in which parents participate individually with their own children or with individual children in the classroom. For example, home reading programs which encourage parents to read to their children are extensively implemented. Similarly, programs which promote parents as volunteers within the school are quite common. The type of parental participation which is least mentioned is parental involvement in decision-making. Understandably, the focus here shifts from individual to collective parental involvement and as a result it brings the question of power to the forefront. According to McAllister Swap (1993), schools have striven to minimize conflict and perhaps this is why the parental role in decision-making has been the least explored avenue of parental involvement.

And yet, this is the arena in which the term *partnership* has the most potential. Given the current acceptance of parental involvement, the opportunity is there for parents to play a meaningful role on their school's parent council. Even if the parental role is limited to an advisory capacity, it is a moment in history when parents can have an impact on what occurs in their community school.

However, even a brief look at the discourse about the relationship between parents and schools reveals that the central impetus for this discussion has come from school administrators, teachers, and academics. The voice that has been heard from less frequently in this area is the voice of parents themselves (Levin 1987). What do parents think about parental involvement in decision-making? Do they want to be more involved? How do those parents who presently participate on a parent council, understand their role? What factors inhibit or motivate parents to participate in these advisory groups? These are essential questions that need to be addressed if schools are to build strong, representative parent councils and so move further along the road to establishing an authentic partnership between the home and school.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS RESEARCH

This study is valuable because it helps illuminate some of the key issues within the parental involvement debate from the perspective of inner city parents. At this particular moment in time, schools are moving toward school-based decision-making and parental involvement in schools is being widely discussed. The viewpoints of parents presented in this thesis will contribute to an understanding of parental perspectives on partnership and how to maximize parental input into the decision-making process.

Undoubtedly a strong and effective parent council is a vital asset to any school community. Collectively, parents can contribute meaningfully to school-based management and participate positively in the local decision-making process. In particular, a strong and effective parent council benefits the school and the administration in several ways. First, when the council is representative of the community, it can provide a wealth of knowledge, sharing a social and cultural perspective on school and community issues, which would not otherwise be available to school staff. A representative parent council can draw input from all the community's ethnic and cultural groups and so furnish a more comprehensive perspective as a basis from which to make decisions. In other words, these contributions could facilitate a decision-making process in which the outcomes are mutually

acceptable and appropriate for the specific student population of the school.

Secondly, parent councils can play an important outreach role by increasing the awareness of parental involvement programs, in general, and parent council opportunities, in particular. Parent councils can be very effective advocates in the development of a positive relationship between the school and the community (Stanton & Zerchykov 1979, McAllister Swap 1993).

Finally, parent council members can have a significant impact on the success of the other kinds of parental involvement programs in the school. For example, parent councils can plan and organize resources for parents, promote home reading programs, etc. The crucial issue here is for school administrators to work together with parents to design and implement meaningful parental involvement programs and not to view parents only as resources to carry out programs designed exclusively by the school (Stanton & Zerchykov 1979).

In summary, this study can be beneficial if it promotes active participation of all parents from the school community on the parent council and if it provides practical suggestions gathered from different schools. While this will not, of itself, ensure meaningful participation in the local decision-making process, it is one essential step in the direction of

building an authentic home and school partnership. It is conceivable that the interview process itself may also have increased the individual awareness of parents with regards to the opportunities for participation in decision-making which are open to them at this time. Similarly, discussions with parents on the topic of representative participation may lead to an increase in collective community involvement, which not only supports one's own children to achieve, but which is concerned with educational gains for every child.

Chapter 2: Methodology

Introduction

The vantage point of parents is the central axis of this inquiry and the first step in the research process was to clarify the research questions and to determine the best methodological approach to take. I began by formulating a list of initial questions drawn from my reading and work experience to guide the planning process. These guiding ideas which are outlined below provided the basis from which the research questions were defined.

Guiding Ideas

- A) Are parents more likely to take an active role on their school parent council when they believe their actions can affect some positive change for their children? When they think their involvement is meaningful, do they take an active role?**
- B) Do parents limit or resist contact with the school when they feel it will have negative consequences for their children? Are parents afraid of the power that specific teachers have over their children's day to day life and do they worry that their actions will have repercussions for their families?**
- C) Are parents who wish to be involved prevented by such external factors**

as poverty, language, migrancy, etc.?

D) Will parents resist involvement and contact with the school when they believe the school has an implicit agenda for them and their children, which they do not understand or agree with?

E) Do parents, who are deeply concerned about the quality of education for their children, need to be involved with school activities to support their children's academic success?

A Qualitative Approach

The initial ideas formulated above are complex and raised the question of what type of approach would be most thorough and would best elicit parent's ideas on these topics. I wanted to uncover what parents really thought and needed to provide a non-threatening situation where they were able to speak freely. I wanted them to feel sufficiently at ease to raise issues that I had not anticipated. I concluded that a qualitative approach using in-depth and open ended interviews would be best suited for this inquiry.

Before outlining the details of the interview process, the research questions will be clearly stated and a description of the research sites and the selection process will be provided.

The Research Questions

An effective parent advisory council, which is able to contribute meaningfully to the decision-making process at the local school level, requires participation from a broad cross section of the school community. The goal of this inquiry is to shed light on the positive and negative factors which affect the willingness of parents to become involved and continue to participate on their school's parent council. To this end, the study posed the following research questions:

- 1) What do parents think about parental involvement on advisory councils and in the decision-making process? Do they want to be in a partnership with the school?**
- 2) How do participating parents understand their role? What type of home and school partnership is meaningful for them?**
- 3) What inhibits and what motivates parents to participate? Is the relationship between the home and school open and honest enough to sustain positive interaction and collaboration?**

Research Sites and Sample Selection

The population for this research encompasses all parents with children attending Winnipeg's inner city elementary schools who have shown interest in their school's parent council or other parent programs at

the school.

Once official approval was received from the Winnipeg School Division #1, introductory letters were sent to the principals and parent councils of the schools which met the following criteria: They were located within Winnipeg's inner city and they had heterogeneous populations with a wide range of ethnic and cultural groups forming the school community. Initially seven schools were identified and I met with each school administrator to discuss the research process. I presented a detailed outline, answered questions and indicated that the research, once completed, would be made available to each Winnipeg School Division #1 inner city elementary school. I also posed general questions about parental participation to determine the climate of the school in this regard and the level of participation on parent councils. All administrators stated they had parent councils with four to five regular participants.

At the out-set, one administrator declined to have her school participate stating that she felt that the research would not be sufficiently beneficial to warrant involvement with the project. The administrators of the six other schools expressed interest in the project and said they would support research of this kind in their school. Of the remaining schools one more declined to participate shortly after the initial interview, stating that the parent council was undergoing major difficulties and an inquiry of this

kind might add to the problems. As the selection process continued, I again contacted all of the five schools left, met with parent council representatives, attended parent council meetings, participated in other parent programs such as parental involvement committees and parent resource room events etc. During this time, I distributed project overviews which explained the research project and gave letters to parents asking if they were willing to be interviewed (see Appendix 4 & 5). With the five remaining schools, I examined how well each school met the criteria referred to on the previous page. I also looked at the level of response from each school and selected three schools as research sites based on a combination of these two factors.

These schools were similar in several important characteristics. Using statistics from the Winnipeg School Division #1 1994/1995 School Demographics Report, I determined that all three had high percentages of their families living below the Statistics Canada low income cut offs, with the largest percentage being 80.4 % and the lowest 68.4%. Similarly the migrancy of the school population was relatively high compared to the entire school division but similar to other inner city elementary schools. Migrancy, measured by mobility rates, is 30% for the entire Winnipeg #1 School Division, 58.1% in the inner city and between 53% and 62% in the three research schools.

Differences in the three research schools were found in two main areas. Two schools had 12 - 15 % of their families who spoke another language as well as English, whereas in the third school this percentage was 4.5 %. Similarly the same two schools were considerably larger having 600 and 500 students respectively. The third school had a population of approximately 300.

The Interview Process

Contacting Families

As stated above families were contacted in a number of ways: through parent council meetings, the parent's resource room, and other parent events. They were given letters which explained the research and I also outlined the project to parents verbally. To ensure confidentiality in the group settings, and also, because I wondered how many parents would actually phone back, I asked individuals to write their name and number on the letter and indicate a yes or no for the interview. Of the letters turned in and the phone responses received, I had only two negative returns. I received between 12 and 15 positive responses from each of the three schools and only one of these responses was by phone.

Interviews

Research data was gathered through personal interviews with parents conducted in their homes, at school, in coffee shops and Laundromats. Ten parents from each site were selected randomly from the pool of those who agreed to be interviewed. Of those interviewed 2 were male, 7 were visible minorities and 28 were mothers or grandmothers. A basic interview guide was employed but questioning was not limited to this initial outline and frequently parents provided additional topics for discussion.

All interviews were tape recorded with the exception of one which took place over the phone. They were then transcribed, labeled and sorted into categories. Next, the data were examined again and sorted thematically. As more interview data were gathered, consistent themes began to emerge. At this point, I returned to the literature to find a theoretical framework which was the best fit for the data I was in the process of interpreting. The initial emphasis was on data gathering with less emphasis on analysis. As the research proceeded the focus reversed with greater emphasis given to the theoretical framework. Throughout, the analysis took place in tandem with the data gathering.

Before turning to the theoretical literature review in Chapter 3, it is

necessary to look briefly at the scope and limitations of this inquiry.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

Obviously the major limitation of this study is its size. Having one interviewer limited the number of parents who could be heard but, on the other hand, it provided a greater consistency between the interviews which would not be possible in a larger study.

A second factor worthy of note, is that this study was limited primarily to the parental point of view although one administrator from each site was interviewed for comparative purposes. While it is recognized that teachers and other school staff have valuable insights to contribute to the parental involvement debate, it was beyond the scope of this research to include teachers in the interviews.

It is the intent of this research to examine factors which motivate and factors which inhibit parents from participation on parent councils. It does not, however, attempt to study the quality of that involvement. While issues such as conflict resolution and the democratic process have significance in relation to the nature of participation, these topics could not be examined as part of this study.

Finally, gender is an issue within the research which stands out by virtue of the low involvement rates of fathers in school activities. As noted in the following chapters there were very few fathers participating on parent councils and hence the small number of fathers involved in this study is a reflection of this reality. This situation appeared to be unquestioned and, consequently, I think it is an important issue which needs to be examined within the arena of parental involvement. However, it was not possible to pursue this issue further within this limited study.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

For the purpose of this inquiry, the literature will be reviewed in two parts. Part One will begin with an examination of trends toward school-based management and perspectives on parental involvement. Part two will look at theoretical perspectives on power and how they illuminate the parent and school dynamic. Such a review promises to be instructive because of discrepancies which were observed during the interview process. While there was a great deal of agreement that parents should be partners with the school, there were also contradictory viewpoints voiced by the same people. This incongruity raised questions about power differentials within the arena of parental involvement which will be addressed in this literature review, and then again in the data analysis in Chapter Four.

Part One: Parents and Schools

In this literature review, I will first examine the current educational trend toward school-based management and shared decision-making and then look more closely at the parallel movement toward parental involvement in schools.

School-based management (SBM) refers to the decentralization of decision-making authority from central administration to individual schools. Shared decision-making (SDM), by contrast, refers to situations in which decision-making authority is transferred from administrators to committees which are made up of teachers, administrators, and parents. Often SBM and SDM are combined into one package although it is quite possible to have school based management without shared decision-making (Ontario Teachers Federation 1992, McAllister Swap 1993).

SBM/SDM programs in the United States have been the outcome of a nation-wide education reform movement in the late 1980's. There are innumerable experiments across the U.S. which vary considerably in their structure and implementation and not all SBM/SDM developments include parents in any significant role. Perhaps the most noteworthy example in which parents are key players is the reform movement called Site-Based

Governance which was implemented in Chicago in 1988. This example is very interesting because parents were the driving force behind extensive and radical changes. The immediate results included the establishment of site-based councils headed by parents and the reduction of the central bureaucracy to an advisory role (Cooper 1992, Shanker 1992).

In Canada, Quebec is the one province that has legislated shared decision-making at the local level. According to Law 107, each school must have a "Conseil d'Orientation" which has specific areas of decision-making clearly defined. Half of the council's members must be parents, the president must be a parent, and the council cannot exist without full parental participation (OTF 1992).

Locally, the Department of Education in Manitoba has put forward a document outlining guidelines for the formulation of advisory councils for school leadership. This document advocates shared decision-making in the following areas: development of school plans and budget, school review, curriculum, and staff hiring. Interestingly, the parental role on this council, while it is labeled "participation in shared decision-making", is in fact more accurately understood as an advisory function through which parents participate and make recommendations but do not vote alongside teachers and principals (Manitoba Education 1995).

At this juncture, it is helpful to note how easily the term

***participation* can be used to refer to variety of different situations.**

Pateman (as cited in Beattie 1985) provides three types of parental participation in decision-making which are quite relevant to the discussion at hand. First, there is *pseudo-participation* in which members are persuaded to accept decisions already developed by management. The second type is *partial participation* in which the final decision, while it is made by administrators, can be influenced by parents to a significant extent. Finally, there is *full participation* in which all members have an equal say in the final decision.

On closer examination, the parental role being advocated in the Manitoba Department of Education Document described above is clearly not the *full participation* type. However, whether it can reach the level of partial participation will most likely be determined by the relationship between the individual parents and administrators at each particular school site.

In conjunction with their outline for advisory councils, the Department of Education has also assembled a companion document which advocates for increased parental involvement in schools. Before considering the content of this government publication, however, let us turn our attention to the concept of parental involvement in more detail (Manitoba Education March 1995).

Over the past several decades, notions of parental involvement have evolved through a number of different stages. In the 1960s, many parents were thought to be lacking in their ability to support their children educationally and hence a deficit model of parental involvement emerged. Programs such as Head Start in the United States are an example of this approach. The initial idea was that parents were missing educational know how, and it was up to the school to teach parents as well as children. This theory, however, did little to recognize the strengths of parents as a whole and focused almost exclusively on their weaknesses (Kellaghan 1993).

By the 1970s, the central focus of the parental involvement debate shifted from what parents were lacking to the discontinuity that existed between the home and the school. For example, if schools said that hitting was wrong and parents told their children to fight back, this discrepancy and others like it, placed the child in a difficult position. In other words, there was not something wrong with the parents that required a remedy but it was the gap between the home and the school environments that needed to be bridged (Kellaghan 1993).

Still more recently, a third approach to parental involvement has emerged. This is the idea that parents need to be empowered to participate more fully in their children's education. Parents have a wealth of resources and they need to be encouraged to utilize them for the benefit

of their children and the school (Martz 1992, Kellaghan 1993). Given this current approach what exactly does parental involvement include?

As much of the literature points out, parental involvement is not simply coming out to school events but entails a wide range of activities which take place in the school and also in the home. As already noted, this research concentrates specifically on parental participation on school parent councils. This focus is timely because: 1) this is one of the least studied areas of parental involvement, 2) at this moment in time, the current role of parent councils is under review and 3) this is the area of parental involvement which is potentially the most controversial. However, before proceeding, it is essential to clarify how parental involvement is understood within a broader context.

Several studies have grouped parental involvement into types or levels. According to Joyce Epstein, there are four different avenues for parents to be involved in their children's education: they can assist their children with learning activities in the home, they can interact with the school and keep informed about their child's activities and progress, they can volunteer in the school, and they can participate on advisory councils and other school committees (Epstein 1986).

In contrast, Kellaghan (1993) has grouped parental involvement activities into three groups: *Proximal* parental involvement includes

learning activities in the home and the supervision of homework as well as parent instruction as volunteers in the classroom. *Intermediate* parental involvement encompasses communication between home and school, non-instructional participation at the school, and attendance at school events. Finally, *Distal* parental involvement according to Kellaghan, goes beyond the confines of the school and ranges from provision by parents for children's health and well-being, to parental participation in governance and advocacy. While these categories extend further and are quite different from Epstein's groupings they too embrace a wide range of activities under the one label of parental involvement.

Another type of parental involvement, which is not always mentioned and was not included in either of the above groupings, is parent support programs. This category encompasses activities which provide for parental needs, such as parent resource rooms, clothing exchanges, parent libraries, family outings, babysitting co-ops, etc (Rich 1988, Hargreaves 1991). Sometimes the notion of parental support extends to educational programs for adults as well. These include English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, literacy classes, and parenting courses.

Why is parental involvement important? First of all, there appears to be almost unanimous agreement that parental involvement helps children learn. Again and again the literature supports the notion that

parental interest and participation in educational activities at home and at school is positively related to school achievement (Henderson 1987, Lareau 1989, Griffiths 1996).

Parental involvement provides continuity for the child between his/her home environment and the school. When teachers have contact with parents and an awareness of a child's culture and home environment, they are better able to provide appropriate learning activities in the classroom. This link between home and school is particularly significant for schools with ESL students and ethnically diverse communities. Put another way, school becomes more meaningful for children when there is integration between the home and school environments (Ziegler 1987, Kellaghan 1993).

Another reason parental participation is crucial is that it conveys the message to the child that education is important and that learning is a valuable activity. Children learn that what happens at school is important to their parents and consequently they view school activities in a similar light (McLaughlin 1987, Lareau 1989).

In addition, parents support their children's academic progress when they take an interest in their children's learning, provide educational resources and participate in educational activities at home. In fact, several studies state that what happens in the home environment is the most

significant factor affecting children's learning (McLaughlin 1987, Rich 1988, Lareau 1989). This is particularly noteworthy because it dispels the notion that all meaningful parental involvement is visible from the school's vantage point. Consequently, it is quite possible to have parents who are highly committed to their children's education, who convey positive and practical support in the home but, for whatever reason, are not visibly involved in school activities (Kellaghan 1993).

Interestingly, parental involvement in school decision-making through parent council participation is the one area that has been least examined and to date has not been directly linked with improvements in student achievement. Wagenaar (1977) notes that schools with more community involvement and support have better academic levels. Yet he also states that parental participation in decision-making is unrelated.

From a different perspective, Derek Toomey, in his study of schools in Australia found that achievement was higher for students whose parents had a high level of contact with the school. Interestingly, he suggests that this outcome occurs because teachers are biased toward families who are active participants and this, in turn, results in positive gains for those particular children (Toomey 1986). This idea is reflected in a recent publication by Manitoba's Department of Education entitled Parents and Schools: Partners in Education, 1995. It states that one of the benefits of

parental involvement is that "teachers and principals are more positive toward the children of involved parents."

Considering the benefits of parental involvement mentioned above, additional questions come to light. First, do all types of parental involvement result in positive benefits? Lareau(1989) suggests that there is a "dark side" to parental involvement which adds stress to children's school experience rather than enhancing it. This occurs when parents become overly anxious about children's performance and are unable to allow their child to learn and grow independently. Secondly, if parents are concerned that their involvement could result in negative attitudes of teachers toward their child, do they limit or alter their participation? For example, if a parent is concerned that they will be pre-judged by their appearance, etc., they may decide it is to their child's benefit to stay away. Lastly, do the "benefits" of parental involvement for some families result in negative repercussions for others? Toomey (1977) suggests that this tendency to favor involved parents serves also to relegate other parents to the periphery. This noteworthy suggestion, which may explain why some parents are inhibited from becoming involved with the school, will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

As the literature reports, there are other factors which create barriers to parental involvement. Significantly, it is recognized that not all

parents have the same resources to support their children's learning. According to Lareau (1989), this is one reason why there are significant differences in levels of parental involvement between middle class and working class families, with middle class families having significantly higher levels of participation. She found differences in "cultural resources" which she felt allowed middle class parents to participate in school activities more fully. In light of the fact that this study is investigating participation on school councils and is seeking to understand why some parents do not attend, it follows that working class (inner city) schools provide the most appropriate juncture to undertake this inquiry.

Other studies also suggest that there are differences in the cultural and material resources that parents have at their disposal to further their children's educational development at home. For example, parents might not know how to read with their children (Connell 1993). Further, families whose language and culture are different from those represented within the school will encounter additional obstacles to effectively support their children's learning (Lareau 1989). Establishing positive and productive communication between the home and the school is not always easy. Open communication is emphasized throughout the literature as a key factor in the implementation of effective parental involvement.

Still low levels of literacy, cultural differences and language barriers,

can become obstacles to communication unless the school accommodates itself to these particular aspects of their community (Maring & Magelky 1990, Vandergrift 1992, Moss & Rutledge 1991).

Although it could be assumed that parents who do not visibly support their children academically, do not care or value their (children's) education, many researchers state that this is usually not the case. Parents may not be aware of the importance of their role or they may want to be involved but do not know how to go about it (Vandergrift 1992, McLaughlin 1987, Comer and Hayes 1991). Other parents do not get involved simply because they are preoccupied with other more immediate concerns. They may want to do more but cannot because they have to work long hours and are too busy making ends meet and putting food on the table (Landerholm & Karr 1988).

Migrancy is another central issue effecting parental involvement. When families are living in sub-standard housing, they frequently have to re-locate and this often means a change of school for their children. Similarly, for parents, each move means a transition where they have to get to know a new group of parents and teachers and start all over again in a new environment. When moving is a constant pattern for some families, parents may conclude that participating in school events is not worth the effort.

What is it, then, that makes parental involvement worthwhile?

Martz suggests that parental involvement grows significantly when parents and children alike have a "sense of hope" about education, and when they believe that what is happening in the school has meaning for them in their daily life (Martz 1992, Stanton & Zerchykov 1979). This is very interesting in light of Lareau's research on the effect of class differences on the levels of parental involvement. Is parental involvement more meaningful for middle class families than for working class families? One of the central points of inquiry in this study is to ask working class parents if their participation has meaning and, if it does not, how this might be changed.

If meaning is of central importance for effective parental involvement, it is a noteworthy fact that the parental vantage point has been most often overlooked. As the literature demonstrates, it is schools and educators who are defining what parental participation should look like and how it should be implemented (Levin 1987, McLaughlin 1987).

Similarly, the type of parental participation least discussed in the literature is parental involvement in decision-making. Perhaps this is because it is the most controversial, or because educators are, for the most part, looking for a perfunctory level of parental involvement which does not extend to sharing any decision-making power. McLaughlin (1987)

notes that, in reality, many school advisory boards and parent councils function merely as a rubber stamp to what the administration dictates. Sarason (1995) describes how parental participation in decision-making requires mutual respect and trust between parents and school staff. When this is lacking, it can become a "power game" wherein the administration endeavors to maintain the status quo, avoid all conflict with parents, and avoid threatening ideas. Undoubtedly, it is at the point where parents seek participation in decision-making that questions of power and control become most crucial.

Consequently, brief mention should be made here of two different theoretical models of parent-school relationships. Most often in the literature, the ideal version of parental involvement is described as a *partnership* in which teachers and parents are assumed to have the same goals and they simply have to work together to attain them (Johnson 1983, Rich 1988, Vandergrift, 1992). While this may be partially true, the major difficulty here is that it creates a glowing picture of the relationship between the home and the school which is not realistic. It does not account for the legitimate differences that do exist between parents and teachers and how these differences effect the relationship between home and school.

As mentioned above, many parents whose children attend inner city

schools are recent immigrants to Canadian society and are in the process of becoming familiar with the language and cultural norms of their new environment. The situation places these individuals at a disadvantage and could contribute to power differentials between themselves and school staff. Similarly, as cited in Lareau (1989), class differences in the "cultural resources" that parents have at their disposal may also have an impact on the power dynamics at play within home/school relationships. Finally, Lareau (1992) also notes that there are differences in parental participation by mothers and fathers in school activities. She found that working class families had distinct roles for men and women with mothers being exclusively responsible for their children in relation to the school. The fact that working in the school as a volunteer held low status, in Lareau's view, contributed to non-involvement by fathers. She further suggests that, for working class families, the term parental involvement is incorrect and it should be more accurately labeled "mother involvement" (Lareau 1992). Interestingly, Lareau also found that school staff showed gender bias in their response to parental involvement. She says that while "mothers volunteering was routine, fathers visits were newsworthy " (Lareau 1992: 220). Therefore, it is reasonable to expect that gender is a significant factor influencing the power relationship between parents and schools.

In contrast, another notion of parental teacher relationships is a "conflict" model. Here the emphasis is on conflict and struggle between parents and teachers who are seen to have opposing goals and perspectives. This view posits that schools and teachers act as guardians of the status quo and acknowledges the existence of serious differences in power between parents and schools. This model provides a more realistic view of parent-school relations in many respects and places schools as institutions within a broader social and political perspective (Mallea 1989, Levin 1987).

In a similar vein, another point of conflict which appears less frequently in the literature but which I think is essential to mention here, is the fact that some parents do not become involved with their child's school because they are afraid of the repercussions this will have for their child. In other words, parents hold back from acting as they would choose (particularly when there is a problem) because they are worried their child will suffer as a result (Levin 1987). For example, a parent might want to complain about a teacher or an incident but does not act because he/she believes that the teacher would not act fairly toward their child in the future. Similarly, a parent may feel that they do not have the interpersonal skills to deal with the situation effectively and so conclude that the most positive thing they can do for their child is to stay away (Lareau 1989).

The degree to which this is a factor affecting parents' willingness to

participate candidly in the decision-making process will be discussed more fully in the following chapter. Suffice it to say that it is a noteworthy issue which needs to be pursued in further detail, in order to determine it's relevance to this research.

The themes identified in this part of the literature review will be revisited again in Chapter Four in conjunction with the analysis of the research findings. However before proceeding, it is essential also to examine literature which focuses on the theme of power. This topic was discussed briefly in Part One of the review but needs to be addressed in further detail before proceeding with the analysis.

Part Two: Power Differentials

The task of reviewing the entire corpus of prevailing theories of power is beyond the scope of this research. Such a review is not really necessary and, accordingly, only a few theoretical perspectives of power will be considered here in light of the particular insight they provide for the parent-school relationship. Specifically the work of Lukes, Blalock, Wartenburg, Mallea and Schmitt will be discussed as well as the following related topics: power through control of knowledge and information, covert forms of power, the power of ideology, powerlessness, school power, and the concept of power-in-relation.

To begin, the first and most obvious question to pose is: What is power? According to Lukes, power over occurs when one agent "in some way affects" another agent in a non-trivial or significant manner" (Lukes cited in Wartenberg 1990). Certainly the most obvious form of power is through physical force but, in the context of the education system, this is not a central area of concern. For the purpose of this study, the types of power that are subject to inquiry are more related to ideology and the circulation of ideas.

In Schmitt's view, power is not something that individuals possess and wield over others but is more correctly described as a 'structure'

(Schmitt 1995). This structure takes the form of an intricate network of social assumptions and practices which shape our daily existence (Cocks as cited in Schmitt 1995). In turn, the social framework described facilitates power differentials which situate some individuals in a dominant social position and others in a subordinate role.

Schmitt further elaborates on the concept of power when he asserts:

except in cases of using physical force to make someone do something, all power works through the understanding and the choices of the persons affected . . . the exercise of power results in choices that are not free but compelled.

(Schmitt 1995: 155)

One way to exert power and limit the understanding, and so the choices of the persons affected, is to control their access to knowledge and information or to classify certain types of information as more valuable than others. In our modern society, power is accorded to experts who have technical or professional knowledge and this serves to justify and maintain social inequalities. Put another way, those who "know" are able to make decisions which affect and control others who do not have the prerequisite knowledge (Schmitt 1995).

Another way to maintain power over others is to make it's use covert. This can be achieved by disguising relations of power or by denying that they exist. Wartenberg clearly describes how on-going domination is concealed when it is presented to the dominated as a natural

state, one that is "unavoidable and necessary" (Wartenberg 1990: 128). When this misperception occurs, the role of the dominating agent is obscured. Lukes also reaches a similar conclusion that "power over" is frequently masked or intentionally hidden from view. He uses the term "latent conflict" to describe a situation in which the subordinate is not aware that power has been exercised over him/her and does not understand that his or her interests are being threatened. The contradiction between the "interests of those exercising power and the *real interests* of those they exclude" goes unrecognized (Lukes 1974: 24).

Paternalism is also a form of covert power. Here the dominant agents act on the belief that they know "better than the subordinate agents what is best for them" (Wartenberg 1990: 62). Regardless of whether the actions of the dominant group have beneficial results they still must be recognized as acts of power over. More importantly paternalism undermines the confidence of the subordinate agents and communicates that they are unable to evaluate and to make decisions on their own behalf (Wartenberg 1990).

A final way to disguise power differentials is to create an ideology or belief system that everyone comes to accept as the truth. According to Wartenberg, the dominating group develops ideologies which are "conceptual attempts to describe the situation of the dominated agents in

such a way as to conceal their domination" (Wartenberg 1990: 127).

When subordinates accept these descriptions as reality, the domination goes unacknowledged and this significantly reduces the likelihood of overt conflict.

Further, Wartenberg notes that one particular way to create an "ideological cover for domination" is to make the claim that the relationship of domination serves the interests of all when in reality it serves only the dominant group. The ideology functions to make the subordinate group believe, mistakenly, that they are also beneficiaries in a situation.

Blalock supports this description of how ideology functions. In his view, belief systems, when they are successful, socialize members to believe "so strongly in the 'facts' or explanations that they go basically unchallenged." Questions are suppressed and the underlying assumptions are concealed. Further he states that those who do question these assumptions are "immediately defined as traitors, foes or scoundrels" (Blalock 1989: 141). Interestingly, he points out that subordinates may not be influenced by "sophisticated ideological systems " as much as they are by simple slogans. He gives the example of the slogan "Making the World Safe for Democracy" which was linked to a more inclusive belief system and which historically influenced millions. In sum, Blalock claims

that there are numerous instances where belief systems have been used by the dominant group to inhibit the subordinate group from rebelling or asserting their interests (Blalock 1989).

Powerlessness is one outcome of subordination. When individuals are misled, given insufficient information, fed on slogans, or told that experts know more about their lives than they do, their experience and perspective is nullified. As Schmitt describes it:

there are few injuries more serious as denying the capacity of ordinary people to understand their lives. If I cannot understand what is happening to me, if I cannot be confident that I can draw reasonable lessons from my experiences, if I need to wait for another to tell me what just happened and what I should do in response, then I am completely powerless.

(Schmitt 1995: 160)

As noted earlier, the power differentials contributing to powerlessness are often kept well-disguised or unacknowledged. However, Schmitt points out that when oppression "becomes invisible so do the oppressed" (Schmitt 1995: 164). They have no voice partly because they have been socialized not to ask questions and partly because they are not recognized as having a contribution to make. Because their condition of inferiority is thought to be inevitable, there is no reason for discussion (Schmitt 1995).

How then does this general discussion about power and its manifestations inform the day-to-day relations between parents and schools? What relevance do these power dynamics have in light of the

notion of "parents as partners in education?" These questions will be addressed in full in the next chapter where I will examine the research data in relation to these theoretical perspectives on power.

At this juncture, however, it is necessary to look briefly at the literature which examines power specifically within the context of schools. As Cibulka points out, schools currently have come under attack and their effectiveness has been called into question. He states that school authority, in the past, was anchored in the "professional-technical model of schooling" which based its authority on the notion that schools were autonomous and need only rely on the professional expertise of administrators and teachers to make sound and unquestioned decisions (Cibulka 1994). In the present situation, however, schools can no longer say "leave us alone. We are the experts who know what is best. Trust us" (Cibulka 1994: 4). While this approach was accepted for decades, it is now under review.

Cibulka (1994) cites four major changes in modern society responsible for this recent decline in school authority: the decline of the family, loss of cohesive neighborhoods, the question of how effectively schools are being run by professional experts, and a reaction against alienating features of modern society.

How can schools respond to this recent decline in authority? As

discussed in the earlier part of this literature review, schools now have a mandate to promote parental involvement and, as Rogers notes, "From coast to coast provincial governments are eagerly looking for ways to get parents more involved in education" (Rogers 1994: 11). Undoubtedly, new interest in parental involvement is directly linked to the decline of the professional-technical model and the fact that schools need the support of their local communities. It is a time when education is under fire and schools require parental support to survive. Cibulka asserts that public schools depend on local community support and "cannot function effectively without the direct and indirect support of that local community" (Cibulka 1994: 3).

There are a number of different viewpoints on how to approach the goal of achieving greater parental support. According to McAllister Swap (1993), the principal of each school plays a crucial role in the type of relationship that is undertaken between the home and the school. She/he can adopt a "facilitative, collaborative role" or conversely refuse to share authority and "punish individuals who disagree with him or her" (McAllister Swap 1993: 143). From Cibulka's point of view, when schools are still attempting to operate on the professional-technical model discussed above, they need to preserve their autonomy and maintain control of everything within their reach. If they are not able to do this

Cibulka asserts, they tend "to marginalize programs so they pose no threat to the on-going activities of the school" (Cibulka 1994: 10). Stanton and Zerchykov in their observations of public schools in the United States noticed that principals paid more attention to "not letting the council get out of control than to supporting it" (Stanton & Zerchykov 1979: 16).

Similarly, McLaughton found that most school administrators did not exert any effort "to organizing or supporting parent advisory councils." From his viewpoint, most councils functioned as "window dressing merely rubber stamping the decisions of the administrators" (McLaughton 1987: 158). Finally, administrators wanting to maintain the status quo are faced with the challenge of meeting their mandate for parental involvement and at the same time keeping parental input to a manageable level. Participation must be sufficient to furnish the necessary support but small enough to minimize conflict. Interestingly, this scenario parallels Blalock's description of strategies which dominant groups have historically used to maintain power. These methods will be outlined more fully in connection with the data analysis in the following chapter. At this point it is important to note that, in some schools, small manageable parent councils may serve an important purpose. It is conceivable that, in some cases, the small numbers of parents traditionally attending parent council is more a result of covert power than disinterest in the school community.

What are the alternatives to the approaches which seek to reduce conflict, maintain control, and still garner parental support?

Unfortunately, the literature did not have ready examples or innovative suggestions for parents and schools who want to acknowledge their interdependence. However, to turn for a brief moment to the research data, it is encouraging to note that the administrators interviewed during this study displayed a different attitude to parents in their schools. One administrator expressed the need to "check the pulse of the community" and recognized the importance of information that parents had to share with the administration. Another principal referred to parents as "fresh thinkers" who were not as bound in their thinking by policies and rules as the school staff and who were able to draw attention to important information that might otherwise go unnoticed. In both instances, it is clear that these administrators have realized that schools and parents need each other.

What then will be the outcome if schools do not take up the challenge to rethink parental partnership and enter into authentic dialogue with parents? Sarason suggests that "slowly and surely public schools will get worse . . . urban schools will become day care centers (at best) and containing untoward social dynamics (at worst)." As public dissatisfaction with schools grows "monetary support will shrink" (Sarason 1994: 116).

Cibulka echoes this view when he states that schools and educators can no longer "stand apart in splendid isolation" (Cibulka 1994: 3).

Communities, he asserts used to provide moral, cultural, economic, and political support for schools but these schools can't take the community for granted any longer. In fact, he suggests that schools have the "unenviable task of recreating community or finding a suitable alternative for it " (Cibulka 1994: 3). For Cibulka, community involvement in schools is not a "passing fad." He maintains that this is one of the most critical challenges facing society today (Cibulka 1994).

Mallea expresses a parallel viewpoint when he states that there is a growing need for community which must be recognized and will not go away. In addition, he argues that "ethno-cultural groups have a vitally important contribution to make" to the school in this regard (Mallea 1989: 2). Put another way, schools need the support of the community but the community also needs the assistance of the school. Recognition and articulation of this interdependence between neighborhoods and schools is crucial for schools in the future. As Sarason posits, the outcomes will hinge on how well schools and communities have "forged a tradition of mutual trust and respect through no-holds-barred discussion, in which substantive issues, not power ones were the focus, where you learned from them and they learned from you"(Sarason 1994: 87).

While it is true that both parents and schools have the interests of children at heart, it still cannot be assumed that they automatically will become partners. Their perspectives may be very different and often in opposition. Denying that this conflict exists and that power differentials are at play in the day to day life of the school will not further the process of building mutual trust and respect. Power is an ever present force in the home and school relationship and must be recognized and addressed overtly.

One concept of power presented by Schmitt states that all power is relational or as he calls it "power-in-relation." He argues that power, even when it appears to belong to separate persons, is really in-relation. Put another way he asserts that "the power of some depends on the actions of others" (Schmitt 1995: 165).

Further he says that power which is openly in-relation is empowerment. However, he is careful to point out that empowerment is not something that can be given to another. It is not possible in his view to "empower" someone else. The power that is needed to overcome alienation is the power to "acknowledge who one is, what one stands for and what matters most" (Schmitt 1995: 166). Still, this is not a separate or individual matter and cannot be understood as simply altering one's state of mind or one's perception of a situation. Empowerment comes only

with new ways of being in-relation to others. Schmitt suggests that it is the interplay between people that is important. For him being in-relation goes beyond the individual people involved (Schmitt 1995).

To conclude, it has become apparent throughout this discussion of power and its manifestations, that one of the first steps for power in-relation to be realized, is to seek out authentic interactions with others. In schools this means welcoming and paying close attention to all points of view and entering into authentic dialogue. To begin to counteract some of the power differentials referred to above, Sarason offers three criteria to ensure meaningful exchanges between parents and school staff:

a) expression of strong differences is not inhibited, b) the right of participants to represent their views is acknowledged, and c) no penalties exist for expressing points of view (Sarason 1994: 107). Keeping these ideas in mind, let us turn now to what the parents in this research study have to say.

Chapter 4: Paying Attention to Parents

Analysis of Research Findings

I am in no position to define for others what is good for them without paying a great deal of attention to their perception of the world and their feeling and experience of it. For those reasons the motives of others are not easily transparent to me; nor can I fully appreciate experiences if I have not had similar ones.

Schmitt 1995

Parental Perspectives

The purpose of this research is to determine what motivates and what inhibits parental participation on school advisory councils. Parents were interviewed to determine their perspectives and to gain insights which will be helpful to parent groups and to school staff in their approach to parental involvement in the future. Throughout the interview process, it became evident that power differentials were a significant factor which had an impact on parental perspectives and actions in relation to the school. Consequently, a power grid based on John Gaventa's 1980 model (see below) is used to further illuminate the parental point of view. This grid allows for an examination of power, resistance and powerlessness along three dimensions: a) overt b) covert c) unacknowledged and provides a framework for the analysis of the interview data.

Before proceeding with this analysis, it is essential to clarify three important points which emerge throughout the chapter. First, as the title of the chapter indicates the interview data provides us with parental perspectives in relation to their child's school. Clearly it is difficult to draw conclusions from these perceptions because what parents perceive regarding the school may not necessarily reflect reality.

However, as noted in part two of the Literature review (Lukes

1974), disguising power or denying its existence is one mechanism used to maintain power differentials. In such cases, perceptions do affect outcomes and it would be expected that discrepancies between perceptions and reality would be frequent. Similarly as Schmitt's argument in Chapter 3 demonstrates, if power is in-relation and perceptions affect relationships, then perceptions in turn are a central component in power dynamics. Put another way, the goal of this research is to illuminate parental perceptions and my analysis suggests that this can best be accomplished through a lens of power differentials. At the same time, it is beyond the scope of this inquiry to verify how closely these parental insights mesh with the reality of school life.

A second point to note is that while the research questions deal specifically with parent councils, parents in their discussions had difficulty separating their areas of involvement. For this reason, I have included all general comments regarding parental involvement as well as those specific to parent council participation. Interestingly, this lack of specificity is, in itself, a characteristic of the interview data which will be examined more fully as the analysis proceeds.

Finally, the proposed power grid is theoretically informed. It outlines a complete range of theoretical possibilities in this regard. It is not necessary that actual instances be found in this research for each cell of

the grid. The analysis will proceed by considering each theoretical cell in terms of the actual responses of parents in this study. Some cells are more important than others in informing this analysis.

Power Grid

	<i>1st dimension Overt</i>	<i>2nd dimension Covert</i>	<i>3rd dimension Unacknowledged</i>
<i>Power Over</i>	A has power thru superior resources	A constructs barriers against the participation of B	A influences or shapes the consciousness of B through myths, information control, and ideologies
<i>Powerlessness</i>	defeat of B due to lack of resources	non-participation of B due to real or perceived barriers and due to anticipated defeat	susceptibility of B to ideologies, legitimations myths: sense of powerlessness, uncritical consciousness about issues
Resistance	open conflict clearly defined issues	mobilization on issues, action on barriers	formulation of issues and strategies

A = schools/administration & staff B = parents

Source: adapted from John Gaventa's model in Power and Powerlessness (1980).

To begin now with the task at hand, let us now turn to the interview data to determine how parental perspectives fit within this framework. Beginning with an examination of power over in its three dimensions, this analysis will then be directed at overt, covert and unacknowledged powerlessness, and end with a consideration of the three categories of resistance.

Power Over

Overt Power Over

Overt power over is the first category on the power grid to be considered in relationship to the interview data. This dimension of power is defined as "the prevalence of A over B due to A's superior bargaining resources." While there were no direct comments from parents concerning the power of the school, this power was first evident in their perceptions of the administration. In all three schools, 90% of parents interviewed spoke favorably about the administration at their school. They thought the principal was a key figure in establishing the school climate. The following comments reflect this viewpoint and demonstrate how parents feel the principal plays a major role in making people feel at home. One parent noted the administration's positive approach and said "if they had not been there I'd have felt at a loss." Another person said "our principal is

quite open" and a third noted "they make you feel welcome." A different mother observed, "He was there greeting all the parents and the kids and it made you feel welcome." While these views speak highly of the administration at all the research sites, they also illustrate the pivotal power position that the principals hold in each school.

In a similar vein, 85% of parents interviewed said they would go to the principal first if they had a problem before bringing it to the parent council. This viewpoint can be interpreted in two different ways. Parents are choosing the principal either because they have confidence in him/her or because they see him/her as having more power to make decisions or resolve issues. Undoubtedly, the viewpoints expressed here do not, in themselves, indicate a power over situation. They demonstrate that the principal is seen as an authority figure in the eyes of the parents but do not show that she/he actually exerts overt power over parents. While it is theoretically possible that this apparent lack of criticism of the administration is a result of quiescence on the part of parents along with unquestioned authority exerted by the principal, it is not supported by the interview data. This situation also reflects the technical-professional model outlined by Sarason in Chapter 3, in which it is assumed that because teachers and principals have professional expertise they should not be questioned in their managing of the school.

Control over resources and information is another characteristic of overt power over according to Gaventa's model. There can be no question that the staff of each of the schools participating in this inquiry have economic and cultural resources far beyond those available to parents in the same schools. As noted earlier, 68 - 80% of the families in the catchment areas of the schools in this research, were living below Statistics Canada low income cutoffs for 1995. In practical terms, this means that the parents as a group have lower incomes, less education, and have to devote more time and energy to the basics of their day to day survival. Moreover, the principals, by virtue of their positions in the schools, have much greater access to information through computer networks, interdepartmental communications, etc. Whether the administrators choose to share this information with parents, does not negate the fact that the information is in his/her control and a choice can be made either way.

Finally, as determined by the Manitoba Department of Education, there is a provincial mandate to involve parents in an advisory role. Alongside this mandate, however, is a clear statement declaring that the principal in each school always has the final decision-making power and can override parent wishes if need be (Man. Dept of Education 1995).

While these points have illustrated the power of the school over parents, it is also important to note that the one area where parents have

overt power is over their own children. In all three schools, a predominant motive for participation by parents was to support their children at school. This motivation was verbalized in a variety of ways but the underlying theme was similar: when children see their parents at the school they understand that what happens there is important and has their family's backing. Similarly 50% of parents in this inquiry noticed that their children were happier and did better in school when they were involved. They attributed this to the fact that their presence in the school gave their children a clear message that they (the parents) valued their education and were behind them a hundred per cent.

The following comments illustrate this parental standpoint most clearly. As one mom puts it "They know you care, they know you're interested and I think *that* makes a big difference." Another parent felt, "When my children see me at school this helps them feel that they are supported . . . also they enjoy seeing their mom there . . . they feel more secure." A parallel view was expressed by one individual who thought that coming to the school "makes me closer to my kids and I like that."

This idea was reiterated throughout the study and the following are a few more examples of what parents said:

" I volunteer once in awhile and he likes it when I'm there."

" My children think "My mom cares about my school, I should too."

" If I show an interest, they will show an interest."

" My children see that I know what they're doing and I'll back it up."

Backing up your children's educational achievement however is not necessarily limited to the school environment. While it was not evident within this study, it is significant to remember that parents can take an active interest in their children's education solely on the home front. This fact was documented by Kellaghan's (1993) work cited in the literature review in chapter 3.

Moreover it is also important to note that the power of parents over their children in the arena of parental involvement is not always a positive factor. Children can get different messages from their parent's involvement which are sometimes negative but are equally as powerful. Lareau in her 1989 study, talks about the "dark side" of parental involvement in which parents affect their children through inappropriate educational interventions or by communicating anxiety and stress regarding the child's education. In this study, 15% of the families noticed this "dark side" and had witnessed times when a parent in the school added stress rather than support to the child's situation. Still no parent said that they thought their own involvement had had a negative impact on their child.

Covert Power Over

Covert power over is the 2nd dimension on the power grid to be examined. From the outset it is essential to acknowledge that this dimension of power is more difficult to discern due to its covert characteristics. According to Gaventa this dimension of power occurs when "barriers against participation of B are constructed."

Before elaborating further on the interview material, attention needs to be drawn to possible ways in which barriers might be created. Blalock in his examination of power looks at dominant groups historically and the ways in which they maintain dominance without conflict. He suggests that one means dominant groups use to maintain control is to keep subordinates in groupings that were just large enough to provide loyalty in times of crisis but small enough to eliminate "any serious likelihood of their attempting to turn the table or form effective coalitions" (Blalock 1989: 152). Further he demonstrates how dominant groups sometimes need the help of subordinates to achieve their ends and convince segments of the subordinate group to contribute to their own domination. For example, some individuals in the subordinate group are afforded a certain degree of upward mobility and given visible rewards. These examples of success serve to demonstrate to everyone that cooperation and collaboration have

direct advantages. Congruent with these select instances of rewards given for cooperation, Blalock notes, is a belief system which is designed to "exaggerate the probabilities of upward mobility"(Blalock 1989: 152).

It is worthy of note that a similar message underlines the term "parents and partners", i.e. if parents act in partnership with the school, their children will reap benefits. The idea that collaboration with the school can have direct advantages for particular individuals and their children is stated clearly in the Manitoba Department of Education document Parents and Schools (1995). As mentioned previously in the literature review, this publication articulates the positive outcomes of parental participation saying "teachers and parents are more positive toward children of involved parents."

In contrast to the subordinates who become part of a select group and are given a slightly more privileged position, there are also the others who are conversely excluded. When this in-group/out-group dynamic occurs, the subordinate group becomes divided amongst itself. Some are part of the in-group and others are labeled as outsiders (Blalock 1989). Understandably it follows that this schism destroys the cohesion of the subordinate group and reduces their chances of resistance.

In this study one theme which emerges consistently throughout the interviews is the relationship of parents to other parents. While there are

two examples of parents supporting one another and making an effort to make others feel welcome in the school, there are many more instances of parent to parent conflict. Conflict or negative feelings between parents is a significant factor inhibiting participation on parent councils in the view of 75% of parents interviewed. These are some of the comments parents voiced about parent to parent interaction:

"One thing that might prevent people from getting involved is if they know someone there that they don't care for, for whatever reason."

"Everyone wanted their own people in."

"He wanted to seem like he was doing it all."

"If she's going to be there, then I'm not."

"It was a very negative experience . . . when I spoke I was black-balled."

"Going there caused too much hardship."

"Other parents were not being honest, not running it properly."

"I don't go because I don't like the people there."

" Sometimes the conflicts of the neighborhood carry over into the school."

Exclusion is another theme that emerges strongly in the research data. In all three schools, 40 - 50% of interviewees saw the parent council as a closed group that did not want other parents to come in. This is of particular interest in light of the previous discussion of power and control maintained by creating an in-group dynamic within a subordinate

group. The in-group has a slightly elevated status and has a vested interest in maintaining their position of privilege.

In this research, there was no evidence, however, to support the premise that administrators were cultivating animosities between parents in order to divide and conquer or that the active council members were deliberately or consciously keeping people away. Nevertheless, what does emerge in the research data is the fact that the actions of parent council members have, in some instances, been interpreted by other parents as exclusionary. Here are some examples that demonstrate what individual parents have to say:

" If people on the parent council want to remain, it's very easy *not* to share the information with other parents."

" You get the same parents going all the time together at everything and outside people get intimidated by that."

" They all know each other . . . it's difficult that way."

" It was almost like newcomers were invading their territory."

" The group develops a closeness and it's like, you know, trying to get in on a group that already knows each other."

" I felt a little strange they knew each other from before."

" I don't know if they see it themselves . . . I think that any council will need new people but this council doesn't."

" It's the same people year after year with a little bit of variation but not enough to think that we're going anywhere."

"I just felt overwhelmed by other people . . . people who are there and know what's happening can make you feel very incompetent."

" I found it was a cliquy group . . . your ideas didn't count for anything."

As noted above, these comments are not necessarily evidence of the administration's efforts to exert covert power over and may be explained in a number of other ways. Parent council members may be enjoying the camaraderie of a few other council members and they may not have the time or interest in getting to know other parents. Or these parents may be gaining self-esteem through their parent council role and be reluctant to give up or share a role that is personally beneficial. Whatever the explanation, whether it is covert power or whether it is for other reasons, the issue that is clear in this research is that some parents feel uncomfortable and excluded. This in turn affects their willingness to participate in parent council activities.

Critical comments about uninvolved parents are another noteworthy topic present in 45% of interviews in this study. Three parents stated that other parents did not come to parent council meetings because they "can't be bothered." Another said, "I don't see how they wouldn't know, it's

publicized properly.” Someone else said, “You can't say it's because they don't have babysitting because we paid two girls to come and we let them know.” One council member said, “It's very disheartening, we've tried everything . . . in my opinion they don't care.” Someone else said, “It really gets me sometimes . . . it's very discouraging when only a handful of people come.”

Clearly conflict, perceived exclusion, and criticism among parents emerged as significant factors in all three schools. The parental viewpoints expressed here suggest a split or schism between active and less active parents. This divisiveness appears to be a barrier to participation. However, because this inquiry is limited to parental perceptions it is not possible to ascertain the degree to which covert power dynamics contribute to this situation. The central point to recognize is that some parents feel excluded and perceive the presence of cliques while others have negative feelings toward those parents who do not attend. These are barriers to parental participation and can be addressed as such.

Unacknowledged Power Over

Unacknowledged power over is achieved according to Gaventa by “influencing or shaping the consciousness through myths, information

control, and ideologies.” In this study, one of the first observations to emerge from the interview data is that parents are well-versed with the vernacular of parental involvement. The phrase “parents as partners” is very familiar to them and only one parent said she does not feel that she is in a partnership with the school. For 83% of the interviewees, the notion of “parents as partners” appears to be an unquestioned idea. When asked about the benefits of such a partnership, these same parents spoke in general terms saying that it would “give their children a better education” or “they had been told it would help their children in school.” Even though these parents are positive about their relationships with the school, the notion “parents as partners” seems to be no more than a catch phrase without much substance. One possible explanation, emerging directly from the literature review, is that “parents as partners in education” is a slogan which serves to garner the unquestioned support of parents for the school. It implies that parents and schools have common goals but fails to articulate specifically what these goals might be. On the other hand, the vagueness of the term “parents as partners” may reflect the fact that this is a new approach in the relationship between schools and parents and it has yet to be fully developed. Certainly the idea of a partnership between parents and teachers is a positive goal which some schools may have the good fortune to develop in the future. However, for whatever reason, an

articulated partnership is not a reality in any of the schools participating in this research.

According to Gaventa, the third dimension of power includes non-decisions gaps and omissions but he acknowledges the fact that it is difficult to study "what does not happen" (Gaventa 1980). In this particular case, there is one obvious absence that needs to be considered. Nowhere in the interview data does the topic of gender emerge. As Lareau asserts, parental involvement in working class schools would be more accurately labeled as "mother involvement." Her findings are supported by this research study in which 93% of the participants were female.

Powerlessness

Overt Powerlessness

In contrast to the first dimension of power over which recognizes power through superior resources, this category on the grid is characterized by "B's defeat due to lack of resources" (Gaventa 1980). As demonstrated earlier in the chapter, there is an obvious disparity between the material and cultural resources afforded school staff and the minimal resources available to parents. The impact of this lack of material means is evident in some parent's interaction with the school. Lack of time, lack of

child care options, transportation, migrancy, and other immediate concerns of survival, are all factors which inhibit parents from participating in school activities. These are the realities of the day to day life of parents which go beyond their relationship with the school. For this reason they will not be addressed within the framework of the power grid. These more practical topics will be discussed later in the data analysis.

Covert Powerlessness

This dimension of powerlessness is described on the power grid as “non-participation of B due to real or perceived barriers and due to anticipated defeat.” Throughout this inquiry, parents expressed feelings of powerlessness. Of the parents interviewed, 60% expressed the view that parental input had little effect on the actions of the school. Parents voiced this sense of powerlessness in the following ways. Some said that they felt the administration basically made all the decisions and then informed the parents. Others thought that parental suggestions would not alter any decisions that were made by the school. Another parent, who had tried participating on a parent council, concluded that “it doesn't matter . . . I'd rather stick to myself.” Someone else described similar perceptions about the parent council saying, “Nothing I had to say was important.”

Thirteen per cent of parents interviewed had extended their

participation from their local parent council to the inner city advisory.

This advisory council is a group of parent representatives from each inner city school who meet with the inner city Superintendent once a month.

They review school division policies in the process of implementation.

Parents have an opportunity to give feedback and are expected to report back to their school's parent council. Here these parents interviewed were not confident that their role was productive. While all those who had attended this committee as representatives from their school had enjoyed the experience because of the information they received, they still said they had very little effect on outcomes. This standpoint is reiterated in the comments below:

"I couldn't understand why we discussed and discussed . . . what difference did it make?"

"It's (inner city advisory) just a place to make people feel like they're doing something but it gets stopped somewhere."

"Nothing actually happened. There was a lot of discussion on what was already decided."

"It's not going to make much difference."

"We talk a lot but it doesn't make much difference unless the right person hears it and responds. There's a lot of talking and not a lot of action."

Certainly all of these descriptions belong in the category of *pseudo participation*, described in the literature review, where parents endorse decisions that they perceive have been already made by administration. In sum, all the parents interviewed said they thought their participation on parent council had had little impact on the decisions made by the school. One notable exception to this line of thought occurred when two individuals participated in the hiring process for school principal. In this specific case, these parents said their involvement, while strictly advisory, had had an effect on the final decision.

Interestingly, one father who believed that a good principal was critical, said he did not think that an advisory council made much difference. He posits,

“You can have as many advisory councils as you like but the buck stops right on the principal's desk . . . if you've got the right type of principal to begin with you don't need a formal committee to advise. He will seek it out . . . if you've got the wrong type of principal you can give him all the advice you want and he's not going to listen.”

Along with feelings of anticipated defeat, insufficient or inaccurate information can also contribute significantly to a situation of powerlessness. As Wartenberg points out, dominant groups can control information to secure their position and create "misunderstandings among the dominated about what is happening to them"(Wartenberg 1990: 127).

By limiting information or by making the information vague or difficult to interpret, they secure their role and mask the power difference. The subordinate group can never fully realize what is going on (Wartenberg 1990).

To be sure, lack of information is a recurring theme throughout the interviews. Parents did not appear to be well-informed in general and were particularly lacking information in connection to the parent council. This lack of information may be the result of covert power as Wartenberg describes. Certainly the school staff, as noted earlier, have control and access to the information which parents receive. This relationship, however, is difficult to prove and was not evident within the data analysis. Nevertheless, what is essential to note is that regardless of the causal factors, lack of information results in lack of parental power.

In the interviews, 6% of parents stated that they did not know what the parent council was, while two others said that they arrived at the first meeting because someone else suggested they come. They had no idea what they were going to. Another mother said that she came to the parent council meeting by mistake. She said,

“I went to one meeting because I thought it was parent teacher night, I didn't know it was for other people too. I thought it was just for parent councillors . . . so I didn't know anybody could get in there . . . I thought it was something else when I went down there and I sort of got surprised.”

Another 16% of parents said they did not know that the parent council was open to all parents. This misperception is illustrated in the following statements by parents:

"I didn't know it was for anybody."

"I didn't know I could just go to a meeting . . . I thought it was for parents who were part of the group already."

"I wasn't sure exactly what it was. I thought it was just parents volunteering."

These sentiments are in direct contrast to the comments made by parents actively involved in the school who said that the parent council meetings were well-publicized. In each of the schools in this study, the dates for the parent council meetings were publicized in the school newsletter and sent home with every child once a month. This was the primary method of publicizing the meetings. Posters around the school were put up only when a special event was planned for the parent council meeting.

Lack of information was also an issue for parents once they arrived at a parent council meeting. Eighty percent of parents interviewed had attended at least one parent council meeting but still 50% of this group did not feel they were adequately informed. This lack of information was verbalized in the following examples:

"I didn't know what they were talking about."

"They didn't elaborate enough to keep people informed."

"I am not so interested in the workings of the parent council because I don't have a clue as to what the parent council is supposed to be."

Similarly a different parent said, "I am not clear where the parent council can be involved." Another mother expressed the concern that parents, in general, knew very little about the parent council, "I don't think they know necessarily what it does or what the purpose of it is." Finally a parent who had never been to a meeting said, "I have no idea what they do."

In many ways, even those who were actively involved did not have sufficient knowledge about parent council goals. They were able to describe the parent council activities but had considerable difficulty going further. In all three schools the parent council activities, as described from the parental point of view, were: lunch program, parent council budget, learning about school activities, parks and recreation programs, and field trips. All said that they didn't do a lot of fund-raising and they liked it that way. One school had more focus on community issues than the other two but, in all three schools, this was expressed as an area that was of great interest to everyone.

As well, 50% said that their meetings were boring, that they were

too long and drawn out, and that there was too much emphasis on business. For example, one participant said that the meetings were too long because they got off topic frequently and everyone felt they had to get in their two cents worth. Parents said they would like a parent council to have discussions of community concerns such as gangs, bully proofing, and racism.

It is interesting to note that while these parents were able to voice what they would like, they did not make a connection between the purpose of the parent council and their own interests. In other words, they had not yet defined their own goals in relation to the parent council.

At the end of the literature review, it was asserted in Schmitt's analysis that all power is in-relation. Power is a dynamic between two parties whether it is acknowledged openly or it is covert. For power-in-relation to be overt, both parties in the relationship need to define for themselves the terms of their own participation. In the data analysis, it is clear that all the parents interviewed had not considered what they hoped to accomplish through their involvement with the parent council nor had they defined for themselves what role they wanted to play.

As illustrated on the power grid, covert powerlessness is also characterized by real or perceived barriers to participation. During the interviews, parents stated that fear was another significant reason why they

did not get involved with parent councils. The situations in which fear was noted as an inhibiting factor fall into three groups: 1) fear of the school institution because of negative associations with it, 2) fear of the perceived power of the school staff to negatively affect their children, and 3) a general fear or shyness about speaking out in public or in groups of people. As we saw in the previous chapter, all three of these situations were referred to in the literature review.

In the first instance, fear of the school can be a result of a parent's previous childhood experiences. Levin (1987) called this "fear tinged residue" and it was also evident in this inquiry. Obviously, the interviews did not include those who had never entered the building to participate in school life. However, 16% of parents in this study referred to others who they knew were afraid. For example, one woman stated, "My husband hates school and he just won't go in there." Another parent suggested that "Even though parents say they are busy, I think it's because they are scared."

Similarly, someone else suggested that families she knew didn't come into the school because "They see it as an institution that they don't see as positive . . . it's an institution that they fear." Finally, a different parent said that she thought that when people's past experience in school has not been good, then being in the school building "brings back bad memories."

Secondly, as noted in the literature review, Levin (1987) described how parents were afraid of the power that schools are able to exert over their children. This parental concern, in his view, is a critical factor which limits their contact with the school. Levin's analysis was born out further in this research where 20% of parents interviewed voiced this concern. As one parent described it, parents are afraid to speak out because they are "afraid that their children are going to suffer." On a similar tack another woman felt that "if I say something, I'm going to be attacked or my kids will be." Someone else explained that " My husband is worried that I'm going to say something that's going to disrupt their schooling."

A general shyness or lack of confidence is a third way that fear becomes a barrier to participation. In the literature review, Lareau (1989) notes that working class families have limited "cultural resources" with which to fully participate in school life. If parents have little or no experience speaking in front of a group or articulating their viewpoint among unfamiliar adults, it is understandable that they will feel intimidated. Lack of confidence and reluctance to speak up was another theme running throughout this research. Of those interviewed, 23% said they had experienced or witnessed this type of inhibition. These views are illustrated in the examples below:

"I see different parents at meetings . . . they get there and then they don't

even try to speak.”

“If you don’t know anybody, it’s a hard step to take.”

“A lot of people are just too shy.”

In sum, it is clear that fear is an inhibiting factor influencing parents’ willingness to participate in school activities. These parental perceptions may have resulted directly from interactions between school staff and parents or they may have historic or personal roots well beyond the confines of this particular study. Either way, it seems that actions to alleviate this type of parental fear may be one way to increase parental participation.

Unacknowledged Powerlessness

Uncritical consciousness and susceptibility to ideology and myths are the description provided for the third dimension of powerlessness. In this inquiry, it became apparent that the slogan “parents as partners in education” was accepted by parents without question. As mentioned earlier, parents accepted the premise that parents were partners and they said that they were involved because they felt it was important for their children’s education. Still no one was able to extend this idea to explain exactly how this benefit would occur.

In contrast to this very general and unexamined notion of

partnership, each parent was very articulate as why they were (or were not) involved and cited a variety of reasons for their participation. It is important to note that the parent comments in this area which specified the details of their day to day involvement did not corroborate the idea of a home and school partnership. In fact, throughout the data analysis, one view that is expressed repeatedly is that parents participate in the school because they want to be watch dogs on their children's behalf. Seventy-three per cent of the respondents said they wanted to act as monitors in the situation, to see for themselves how the school operates, and make sure that their children are being treated fairly. This role of a watchdog is illustrated in the following points of view:

" I can't just sit at home and send them off . . . I have to make sure they're ok."

"I want to *know* what they're doing . . . I want to know the teachers and the principal and their ideas and stuff. I want to know who's teaching my children."

"If we're not involved in what's happening no one is protecting them . . . we are the only ones who are protecting our own kids."

Keeping a watchful eye on the school in this manner seems a far cry from the notion of "parents as partners" referred to above .

Only one parent interviewed disagreed with the idea of partnership

and expressed herself this way:

I don't see it as a partnership. I feel these are my children. I'm their advocate. If something goes wrong, I have to make it right.

Resistance

Overt Resistance

Resistance, in all its three dimensions, was the area least evident throughout the interviews. There were particular examples, however, which are worthy of note. In the interview data, there were four examples of parents exercising power in opposition to the school. Throughout the interviews, these were the only parents who articulated views which demonstrated an awareness of their ability to exercise some power in this relationship. One individual discussed the option of taking issues to the school board and she previously had experience exercising power in this way. She felt that this course of action had been successful and was satisfied with her role. Another person articulated the view that parents should take on a questioning role and "not go along with everything the school says." Further she suggested that if enough parents didn't like it they could go to the school board.

Finally, the choice of a school principal was an activity in which parents said they should play a role. They wanted to make sure that they

had someone in charge of their school who was open to learn about their community and would be ready to listen to what they had to say. Two parents interviewed had participated in the hiring process and were extremely optimistic that this was a positive role to play.

Covert Resistance

According to the power grid, covert resistance takes the form of mobilization on issues and action on barriers. In contrast to the action described as overt resistance, two parents said they would change schools if they did not like the school's approach. One interviewee expressed this view in saying that "If they were doing something in this school I didn't like, I'd just pull my kids out." While this action may not be viewed as a conventional approach, it is a workable strategy if, as a family, you are highly mobile anyway and it is one way that this parent felt she could take action against the school.

Unacknowledged Resistance

The final category to examine within the power grid is unacknowledged resistance and is defined by Gaventa as "formulation of issues and strategies." Throughout this research, there were no examples from parents which fit in this group. However, there was one assumption throughout the study that is noteworthy in this regard. It is the idea that

non-participants do not understand the importance of parental involvement. One parent said, "We need to go to them and tell them how important parental involvement is." Someone else thought, "If they knew how important it is, they would come." It is curious that no where did anyone credit that a parent might consider the arguments for parental involvement and decide that they disagree.

Beyond the Power Grid

At this juncture it is necessary to look beyond the power grid to further explain what inhibits and what encourages parental participation on school parent councils. To this point, the power grid has provided a framework to theoretically understand the parental perceptions within the interview data. For the most part, parental viewpoints meld with the theoretical framework and suggest that power dynamics in schools are a pivotal factor affecting parent-school relationships.

Still, the exertion of power, in any of its three dimensions, on the part of the school, was not verified within this study. Perhaps it is so subtle and ingrained that it is very difficult to detect. Certainly a different research design, which explored the history of the relationship between parents and schools, would be required to uncover the roots of power differentials more clearly. On the other hand, perhaps there are simply

more mundane reasons why parents do or do not participate.

In this regard, several points emerge in the data analysis which do not fit within a framework of power differentials. They are more practical reasons cited by parents and are presented below.

Firstly, 66% of parents in this study voiced the opinion that they wanted to know what's going on in order to help their children successfully navigate their day to day life at school. This parental standpoint was voiced in the following examples:

"I know the teachers and when they say something I know what they are talking about . . . usually . . . that I think helps."

"I think it is important to be involved in your kids school because you can't complain or agree with something when you don't know what's going on."

"It also made me feel part of the school because I know more things about it."

"It's beneficial because I get to know the school better and understand what is going on there. I get to know the teachers and learn what they are like."

In particular, parent council participation was seen to provide information to parents that was more extensive than what parents could learn through other forms of involvement. Some of the views expressed

here were:

“It just broadens your view of the school and knowing what’s going on.”

“I’m involved on the council because it is important to know what’s going on in the school. Being on the parent council involves a little more because you are not just dealing with the school but the whole division so you know a little bit more about the administration process.”

One individual declared that the reason parent councils were important was because it is the one place where parents can get information. She says “You don’t have that information exposed to you just by being involved in the school.” Another mother felt that her participation on the parent council made her more aware of the “inner workings of how they make decisions.”

While gathering information was a primary reason why parents participate, a few parents also felt that they had important information which would benefit the school. While no one expressed an interest in influencing what was happening inside the classroom, 15% of parents interviewed said that they had useful information about the community to share with school staff. They felt their input would assist decisions concerning the school community. For example, one mother said, “If something happens in the community, we can bring it to the principal’s attention.” A different parent articulated this viewpoint as follows,

“I think parents should have the right to voice their opinion because it will affect our children in some way, be it good or bad . . . I don’t think the principal should make decisions based on his own feelings because if a principal is at our school and lives in Southdale, the ideas he has wouldn’t be the same as a parent who lives in the inner city . . . it’s just different areas of the city will always have their own cultural things and economy wise it’s different.”

In a similar vein, 80% of parents in this study said that they thought schools should be responsive to the community although no one said that their present parent council represented the community. They noted that different ethnic populations were not represented at all. This was an issue parents said they wanted to address and some parents did have ideas as to how to overcome this situation. One parent suggested inviting input from the community leaders of the different ethnic organizations, as one way to address the issue of representativeness. Another suggested that parent council members should be drawn from the community at large, as well as from the parent body.

On the other side, parents suggested that the lack of participation had some very practical reasons as well. The two reasons that were mentioned most often were: 1) time and 2) the availability of child care.

First, time is a critical factor which emerged consistently in the research as a reason why parents do not get involved. They are busy working and attending to the immediate needs of their family. As well, time is an inhibiting factor for families who have more critical issues

demanding their time and their energy. Thirty-three percent of mothers in this study said that their lack of time kept them from being more involved.

These are some of the views articulated by parents in this regard:

"I have no time. I'm running back and forth with the two of them as it is."

"If I had the time I would - do whatever . . . but I work full time and have little ones."

"I work and I just can't do any more."

"I wanted to become more involved but I was going to school myself and with three kids I was finding it too hard."

"A letter came from the school but I just couldn't go."

"I have been involved previously but this year I have just too much, I couldn't go."

"If I had the time, I would get more involved."

"I knew about the parent council when my kids were at another school but I was not interested . . . I was too involved in surviving."

Most schools including the ones within this study provide child care for their parent council meetings. This is seen as a positive step toward encouraging parents to come out. In this study, 50% of the parents interviewed voiced concern that the child care was not adequate. For older children, it was suggested that there be a planned program to coincide with

the council meeting because these kids "are older and don't want to go to a babysitter." Other parents with younger children said they were not happy with the quality of the care. The following examples best illustrate this dissatisfaction:

"Child care is available but it's not responsible."

"I know there's child care but its not on a level that I'm comfortable with."

"They need the right people handling the child care."

When parents have limited resources, as noted earlier, they may not be in a position to find alternate child care arrangements. Consequently, they may choose to stay at home rather than leave their children in a situation they are not comfortable with.

Throughout the analysis of the research data several factors have emerged to explain, in part, why parents do or do not participate in their schools parent council. At this juncture, these findings will be summarized and accompanied with some brief observations.

Chapter 5: Summary and Reflections

Summary

The goal of this thesis is to illuminate parental perspectives regarding what motivates and what inhibits parental participation on school parent councils. The key issues that parents expressed as barriers to participation and the central motivating factors will be briefly summarized. I will then include my own reflections and observations which are primarily the result of my work with this research inquiry but are also the outcome of my work experience as a home visitor and teacher in a variety of inner city settings and my own observations as a parent. I will conclude this chapter with a few brief recommendations for further research.

To begin, the use of Gaventa's power grid as an analytical framework proved useful in part but it could not fully account for all the research data. I will focus first on the areas in the data analysis for which this grid held the most explanatory power and then address the areas which could not be explained in relation to power differentials.

Power over, while a definite theoretical possibility, was not borne out in the research data. This may be due to the fact that power over in these school settings is so subtle or so historically ingrained that it is very difficult to detect. The other explanation is that, in the particular schools

in this study, it is simple not a significant factor. Put another way, the data did not indicate that the school staff in question was exerting power over parents.

Still, there are a number of points concerning the power of the school which should be reiterated. First, the principal is a key authority figure with the ability to make parents feel welcome and encourage them to become involved. Secondly, control of information is most definitely in the hands of the school staff. They choose the ways that this information is communicated to parents. This, in turn, has an impact on parental participation. Thirdly, school staff in this study, have superior economic and cultural resources to those available to the parents in this study.

Powerlessness was the section of Gaventa's grid which held the most explanatory power in relation to parental participation. First, and most significantly, parents in this study expressed the belief that their actions and efforts on parent council would have little effect on decision-making in the school. Secondly, parents did not indicate that they had a clear of idea what their role on the parent council was nor were they able to articulate the goals or purpose of their parent group. Thirdly, fear was expressed by parents as a barrier to participation on parent council and other school events and included a generalized fear of school authority as well as fear of speaking up at meetings.

Finally, divisiveness among parents, unresolved conflict, and perceived exclusion on the part of some parents, were significant reasons, from the parental perspective, which inhibited participation. Again, deliberate exclusion or attempts to create divisiveness were not borne out in the data analysis. However, regardless of the roots, it is clear that relationships between parents is sometimes a barrier to participation.

In conjunction with the perceptions noted above, there were also other reasons inhibiting and motivating parental participation which did not fit within the framework of power differentials. Parents suggested that there are more mundane reasons that kept them from becoming involved with their parent council. Time was a critical issue for many parents who worked long hours and felt they could not afford more time away from their families. Others were too busy dealing with the demands of their day-to-day survival. Child care was also cited as another reason which kept people away from parent council meetings. Some parents thought that the child care provided was not adequate and others felt it was not appropriate for the age of their children.

On the other hand, the primary reasons, parents said they were motivated to come out, can be summarized as follows: First, they wanted to visibly support their children and help them successfully navigate the day to day life at school. Secondly, they wanted to act as watch dogs and

protect their children from potential harm. Finally, they said that they participated because they wanted to be more informed and know more about the school and it's staff.

To conclude, this summary will consider one final question. Do parents see themselves as partners in education? Within this research, parents accepted the idea of parents as partners without challenge but this notion was not substantiated when they talked about their reasons for participating as outlined above. In sum, parents in this particular inquiry were not yet participating in an articulated partnership with the school. Consequently, I will end this summary with some reflections and observations which in my view should prove helpful for parents and schools who together want to pursue the reality of an authentic partnership.

Reflections and Observations

Reflecting on the parental standpoints presented in the data analysis and my own observations from my inner city work experience, I have compiled the following observations which I hope will prove instructive for both parent groups and schools administrators.

1) In general, communication with parents was a central issue within this study which needs to be looked at carefully. Parents may read about the

council meetings in the monthly school newsletter but they may not know what the parent council is or what it does. Some parents, as the interviews revealed, may not know that it is a group open to all parents. As well, parents may not read or may have a first language other than English. Perhaps other mediums of communication could be used. Maybe a short video could be made which explained the parent council and outlined what parents might contribute by attending. Similarly, translated invitations could be made which explained the parent council and its role in different languages. These invitations could also have a tear off section where people could specify if they required a translator to attend the meeting. These invitations and/or the video could be available at "Meet the Teacher" night or other school events.

2) Many parents in this inquiry were unclear as to the purpose of the parent council. The raison d'être of the parent council needs to be closely examined and clearly articulated, as does the role that parents want to play in this regard. One of the central motivating factors expressed by parents was their desire to ensure the well being of their children in the school setting. While parents in this study were able to see direct benefits for their children from their general presence in the school, only a few directly stated that any benefits accrued from parent council participation. In my view, it would be helpful for parents and school staff to put into words

exactly how parental participation on parent council contributes to their children's well being.

3) Once the purpose of the parent council is clarified, it needs to be communicated to all parents, not just the parents attending parent council meetings. In this regard, the school could send out profiles of council members in the school newsletter which would say a little bit about how that particular person understood their role and why they thought it was important. At the same time, the caption could invite others to join in.

4) Many parents in this study held the viewpoint that their input did not effect outcomes in the school environment. To be motivated, we all need to feel that our effort makes a difference. Perhaps parent groups could participate in setting yearly goals and objectives and then evaluate whether these goals were reached. The goal setting process would also be a helpful way for parents to definite what role they wish to play.

5) Another area which I think requires some re-thinking is the format of parent council meetings. Is it necessary to have meetings that deal primarily with business and budget or can some of these things be decided at the committee level? Parents in this study said they liked being informed about school programs and perhaps parent council meetings could be utilized more for an exchange of ideas and for discussion of issues of vital importance to parents. I think that if parent council meetings are

tedious then it should not be surprising that parents do not want to attend.

6) In general terms, more dialogue is needed between parents and the school and amongst parents. Parents want to have their voices heard and have information about the community which would be very beneficial to the school decision-making process. Perhaps parent council meetings are not the best setting for this type of exchange. What about focus groups or workshop formats which would elicit discussion on one specific topic?

Maybe these could be held on a Saturday when more parents could come.

7) Conflict among parents is another issue that needs to be addressed.

Councils could discuss some ground rules as to confidentiality and group process or perhaps the council members might look at in service training in conflict management and facilitating teamwork. In addition, parent councils and school staff will need to work hard to overcome real or imagined cliques and ensure that inclusion is a conscious action on everyone's part. In particular, extra effort needs to be made to include new parents at council meetings and to bring them up to speed concerning the discussion topics. Maybe one council member could be assigned the job of explaining to newcomers the ins and outs of the council. They could also follow up with a personal phone call to the newcomer a few days after the meeting for feed back, questions, and an invitation to the next parent council event.

8) Outreach is also an area where parent-to-parent relationships are vital. As this study illustrates parents have a great deal of influence on other parents whether they know it or not. Combined with some of the other suggestions above, brainstorming about different ways to communicate with other parents and making them feel included will go a long way to increasing parental participation.

9) Similarly child care and children's activities should be considered carefully. One parent suggested it would be helpful to have something exciting planned for the children to do so they would feel enthusiastic about coming as well. The well-being of their children was a central reason which parents expressed for becoming involved with the school. If they feel that their children are discontented or anxious, then it seems to defeat the purpose of attending the meeting.

Recommendations For Further Research

At the conclusion of this research study, it is appropriate to suggest specific research ideas which would further illuminate the parent school relationship and expand on topics which were brought to light but not addressed sufficiently within this thesis.

1) This study uncovered the fact that the relationship between parents was

a significant factor affecting parental participation. Further research which probed the nature of the interpersonal power dynamics between parents, in my view, would be an informative and valuable endeavor. As well, power differentials within this thesis were examined using a dichotomous framework (i.e. Gaventa's power grid). Perhaps a different theoretical model could be developed which would examine power dynamics as a "pecking order". This type of model could account for situations in which individuals or groups would in one instance exert power over and in another instance have power exerted over them. A framework of this nature, in my opinion, would be well-suited to a study of the relationships between parents and school staff as well as the dynamics between parents.

2) Conducting similar research on parental participation in middle-class schools would be another way to expand on this current work.

Comparative research of this kind, in my opinion, would further illuminate our understanding of parental involvement in general and provide insightful contrasts between parental participation in inner city and middle-class schools.

3) To further understand parental participation in schools, there are a number of important questions which were beyond the reach of this thesis but which, I think, should be explored. What are the effects of racism on parents' willingness to participate in school activities? What are the

differences in the participation of single parent families, two parent families or families with alternative life styles? What is the nature of the difference in participation between fathers, mothers and grandparents? Finally, what is the nature of parental participation for visible minorities and how do they interpret their relationship to the school?

Concluding Remarks

For the respondents in this inquiry, while the idea of parents as partners in education holds an essential truth, it does not seem to be developed beyond a slogan or a catch phrase. To build an authentic partnership, however, we cannot accept the notion that we are all partners in the education of children without reflection nor can we assume we are all working toward the same ends. Oversimplifying the parental involvement debate ignores the fact that the viewpoints of many parents may be considerably different from the position of the school. Until now parents have had little opportunity to consider their part in a partnership or consider what contribution they want to make to the education of their children. Currently, however, the opportunity is at hand for parents to take part in school decision-making. It is hoped that this inquiry will prove useful to any parent council and/or administrators who are searching for ways to rethink the idea of "parents as partners" in order to get on

with the day-to-day business of building school communities. To this end, perhaps school administrators and parent councils could begin by engaging in workshops which would explore the various levels of participation possible. If school administrators, who only want pseudo-participation, were unwilling to engage in this type of dialogue perhaps these workshops could happen at the level of the inner city advisory council. Either way, an authentic partnership between parents and educators will not emerge overnight and must struggle through a long steady process of development. One facet of this development will be listening and learning from what parents have to say about parent council participation.

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Appendix One

a) Definition of Terms

Parental Involvement: for the purpose of this study parent involvement has been defined as follows: Any activity or attitude on the part of a parent, at home or at the school, which positively assists children to develop academic skills, to develop positive attitudes to learning and to identify themselves as learners.

Parent councils: I have used this term to refer to an advisory group of parents within a school who meet regularly and carry out activities approved by the administration. I include under this heading other groups with names Advisory Council, Community Council etc

b) Assumptions

Because I have worked with inner city parents for a number of years, I embarked on this research project with a number of assumptions. These are personal biases which for me are based on my experience and values. I will note three here.

First, I believe that parental involvement can be positive but it has to be effectively implemented and thoroughly understood. Many things are undertaken in schools in the name of parental involvement that have little directly or indirectly to do with the education of children.

Secondly, I think that inner city parents have lower levels of parental involvement than other areas of Winnipeg, regardless of the efforts of

the school. However I believe that together with parents, schools can have a positive effect if they listen to what parents have to say in this regard

Finally, I believe that all parents, with very few exceptions, care about their kids even though their actions may at times, be interpreted otherwise.

Appendix Two

Interview Guide

These questions were used as a guide for the interview process but were not necessarily adhered to completely. Interviews were intended to be open ended.

Questions:

1. What do you think parents should do to help their children do well in school?

Are there things parents should do at home?

2. What do you do to help your child learn?

3. Are there things you would like to do but are unable to do? Why?

4. Do you think it is important to participate in events and activities at your child's school? How do you participate? in what ways?

5. Do you think it helps your child when you come to the school? How?

Do you think it is ever harmful for your child?

6. Would you like to be more involved at the school? What things has the school done which encourage you to participate? What things has the school done which keep you and other parents from being involved?

Are there other reasons that you cannot participate?

7. Would you like to have more say in what happens at your child's school? In what way?

8. Do you think parents as a group should participate more in decisions which affect the school and their children's education? How might this take place?

What things might stop this from happening?

Appendix Three

Ethical Considerations

INFORMED CONSENT

Once parents agreed to be interviewed I outlined very specifically what an interview entails.

Parents were informed before the interview began that:

- a) the interview will be taped (I was willing to conduct it without recording if they objected but none did)**
- b) that the interview could last as long as an hour and a half.**
- c) that the interview would be completely confidential (see next section on confidentiality)**

Secondly, parents were given a signed consent form which I explained verbally as well.

Finally, I gave each parent an opportunity to look at the interview questions and asked if there were any questions which they did not feel comfortable answering and would like to omit from the interview.

CONFIDENTIALITY

For parents to agree to be interviewed, they had to feel sure that their confidentiality would be protected. To ensure that this occurred I took the following precautions:

- 1) At the initial parent council meeting that I attended I talked about confidentiality as part of my introduction to the project. I stated clearly that**

there would be three schools included in the project but that the names of the schools would not be identified in the final research document. I also said that the identities of the schools would be held in strictest confidence. Similarly I emphasized that neither the principal nor parent council members would have access to the names of parents who participated in the interview process. In addition, the information which was presented in the final document would not be distinguished by school site.

2) I clarified at the beginning of each interview that what was said in the interviews would be confidential and I would be the only one listening to and transcribing the tapes. Tapes were not identified by name and I was the only person with access to that code. All tapes were destroyed after use.

AVAILABILITY OF COMPLETED RESEARCH

A copy of the final research document will be provided to each inner city elementary school in Winnipeg School Division # 1 including the schools that participated in the project. I will inform all parents who took part that a copy of the research will be available to them through their school's parent council.

Informed Consent Form

This research project is sponsored by the University of Manitoba, and has been approved by the Dept. of Sociology Ethical Review Committee and the Winnipeg School Division #1. The purpose of the study is to find out what parents think about Parental Involvement in Schools. Approximately 30 parents from three Winnipeg Schools will be interviewed and each interview is expected to last about an hour and a half. One shorter follow up interview may also be requested. Information given in the interviews will be confidential and will be used only as the basis for Valerie Block's Masters Thesis in Sociology. Copies of the completed research project will be sent to all inner city elementary schools in Winnipeg School Division #1, so they can be made available for interested parents to read.

I, _____ agree to be interviewed by Valerie Block as part of research she is doing on the subject of Parental Involvement in Schools. I understand that the interview will be tape recorded and that Ms. Block will use the recorded information as part of her masters thesis at the University of Manitoba. It is also my understanding that my identity will be kept completely confidential and the tapes of this interview will be destroyed when this project is finished. It is clear to me that my participation is completely voluntary and I can end the interview at any time.

Signature _____ Date _____

Any complaints about this research project should be directed to the Dept. of Sociology, University of Manitoba - 474 9260.

Appendix 4

Dear Parents:

I am doing a study about parents and their participation on school parent councils. I am interested in talking to parents who are part of a parent council, to learn why they choose to be involved. I also would like to talk to parents who are not part of a parent council to learn why they have made this choice.

I am asking parents who are willing to take part in an interview, to call 582 1804 and leave their name and number so I can call them to set up an interview time. The names of parents who participate in interviews will be completely confidential. Interviews will be tape recorded but will not be available to anyone except the researcher (Valerie Block).

This project has been approved by the University of Manitoba, Department of Sociology, and by Winnipeg School Division #1, Research Department. The purpose of the study is to learn what motivates and what discourages parents from participation on the parent council at their child's school. I hope this study will provide useful information which will help schools and parent groups understand parental points of view more fully.

I hope to hear from you. Thanks for your time and attention.

Appendix 5 Project Overview

Parent Perspectives on Partnership: An Inquiry into Parent Council

Participation is a research project which will look at what motivates and what discourages parents from participation on their school parent council. It will study what has been done and what can be done in the future, to encourage parents from all parts of the school community to become involved on parent council. The point of view of parents is the primary focus of this study and this will include both parents who have participated on the parent council and those who have not. The purpose of the study is to discover what affects the willingness of parents to become involved and to continue to be active parent council participants.

Parent Perspectives on Partnership is a small study which will take place in three of Winnipeg's inner city schools. The main method of research will be interviews and it will include attendance at a few parent council meetings. At each school site 10 parents and one administrator will be interviewed. Interviews will last approximately 1 1/2 hours and will be completely confidential. Participation is completely voluntary and the names of the participants and the names of the schools will not appear in the final study. Also interview tapes and transcripts will only be accessible to the researcher, Valerie Block.

The completed research from this project will be written up as

a thesis by Valerie Block, to fulfill the requirements for a Master of Arts Degree at the University of Manitoba. It has been approved by the University of Manitoba, Department of Sociology and by the Winnipeg School Division #1. Copies of the completed research will be available to the parent council and administrator of each participating school as well as all other elementary inner city schools in Winnipeg School Division #1.

Any comments, concerns or inquiries should be directed to Valerie Block.

Thank you.