

**Parent Perceptions of Obstacles  
to  
Parent-Teacher Partnerships in Education**

by

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JOYCELYN A. FOURNIER-GAWRYLUK

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## ABSTRACT

Parent involvement in education is being promoted by government and seen as a key to greater understanding of the educational system in the community. The purpose of this study was to examine why some parents who are interested in becoming involved feel excluded from their child's education.

The literature cites several reasons why parents may feel excluded. Negative sentiments build up because of the differing purposes of home and school environments, territoriality, lack of mutual understanding, preconceived beliefs, and superficiality of involvement. The interviews conducted in this study supported these conclusions and pointed to breakdown in communication as a complicating factor. It was found that supportive climates for problem solving and decision-making are essential, and that the involvement of a third party can be very useful.

In view of these findings, it is recommended that schools reevaluate present practices and establish collaborative relationships with parents in support of the children.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this research was to study, from the parents' perspective, how present paradigms for involvement exclude some parents who are interested in, and want to be involved in, their children's education. I would argue that one of the reasons for this sentiment is that events planned by the school, with the intention of encouraging parent involvement, are seen by parents as symbolic and tokenistic, and as offering them little opportunity for authentic interaction with the teachers of their children. It is my working hypothesis that the frustration expressed by some parents is related to the lack of opportunities for meaningful involvement in decision-making regarding their children's education.

#### Background of the Study

As an educator, I am simultaneously concerned, upset and challenged by the amount of negative sentiment that exists today regarding education. Newspaper articles, opinion polls and television documentaries often paint a negative image of the public school system. As Lam (1991) pointed out in his reaction to the Canadian School Executive poll on the Canadian public's current views on education:

From the data pertaining to the question "Are the schools better, worse or the same as five years ago?", we know that only 29% felt schools had improved. A substantial proportion

(42%) indicated that there had not been much change. If we combine this with the 20% who indicated that the conditions in school had worsened, we reach the conclusion that 62% of the public surveyed indicated that our schools have either remained unchanged or worsened. (p. 27)

Even governments are questioning the value of education, if one interprets funding restrictions as an indication of commitment.

This apparent lack of commitment to the education system by the public and government concerns me because I believe that excellence exists in education today. Creative and innovative teachers work daily meeting the needs of students with differing abilities in the same classroom. This is an accomplishment well deserving of recognition.

I am also a parent. As a parent, contrary to my opinion as an educator, I understand why public opinion regarding education is sometimes negative. At times, I have also felt that involvement initiated by my children's school has seemed tokenistic and superficial. If I would have had opportunities to become involved in learning activities in their classroom rather than just to assist on field trips or send baking for an event, I believe that I would feel more appreciated and have a more positive attitude toward the work being done with my children. I would appreciate as I am able to as an educator, that quality education occurs on a daily basis in classrooms and schools across our country.

Manitoba Education and Training established a strategic plan for the next five years in education in its paper "Building a Solid Foundation for Our Future" (1991). It supported the increased

participation of all partners--business, industry, communities, parents, government, individuals, and educational institutions--in education. This report indicated that governmental support exists for the development of home-school partnerships at a time when educators are experiencing a decrease in status, lessening of community support, increasingly difficult working conditions, and reduced budgets. At the same time, parents, many of whom are coping with unemployment, divorce and troubled children, are in need of support in a complex and changing society. Swap (1987) expressed it this way: "teachers and parents are natural allies in these changing times, and our children need our combined support" (p.1).

#### Educational Significance of the Study

Since parent involvement is being advocated by the provincial government's strategic plan for education in Manitoba, I am convinced that all publics need a better understanding of the current and potential role of parents in education. In addition, research on this topic has been requested by a parent (see Appendix A) who does not see himself as being a meaningful partner in his children's education. As an educator, I see the potential for true partnerships between parents and teachers if schools recognize parents as a resource to the education system.

It is my belief that not until parents of all children are involved in the development of educational goals and plans for their children will a move be made toward a meaningful partnership

between parents and teachers in the education of all children in the 1990s. In summary, research in the area of parent involvement is justified on federal, provincial, and local school district fronts. The intent of this research is to promote a better understanding of the topic and to influence decision-making regarding future involvement of parents in their children's education.

#### Key Concepts and Working Assumptions

The most well known forms of parent involvement in education have traditionally included such activities as attendance at Meet The Teacher evenings, baking for the school fund raising project, attending parent-teacher interviews, participation in Open House evenings and so on. Each of these activities are of value, "but they do not achieve the ideal goals that we seek: meeting mutual needs for support, positive regard, meaningful dialogue, sharing of resources and collaborative problem-solving" (Swap, 1987, p.14).

Swap suggested that the traditional forms of participation are tokenistic, as well as school-centred. Schools have done an excellent job of telling parents what their role will be in relation to the school. Boger et al. (1978), Morrison (1978), Seeley (1989), and Ziegler (1987) refer to this as a "one-way street" form of communication. Changing this model necessitates involvement of parents in determining educational goals for their children.

For purposes of this thesis, the involvement of parents is

regarded as a decision-making dialogue between parents and teachers regarding the goals (academic, social and physical) for the child's education. The objective of these discussions is to create opportunities for authentic parent involvement. The parents are then acting as a resource to the school system and, with this support, it is more likely that the potential of each child will be realized. The shift being advocated is from a delegation (telling) model of parent involvement to a collaboration model (Seeley, 1989). The study will centre on involvement at the classroom level and will not seek to address parent involvement in school or division-level budgetary and policy decisions.

### Literature Review

Parent involvement has been studied from both an ecological and historical perspective with recommended models of involvement changing over time. Most recent models advocate collaborative partnerships between parents and school.

#### Ecological Perspective

The interrelationship between the home and school should be one of natural allies. However, as Waller (1961) has indicated:

parents and teachers usually live in a condition of mutual distrust and enmity. Both wish the child well, but it is such a different kind of well that conflict must inevitably arise over it. The fact seems to be that parents and teachers are natural enemies, predestined each for the discomfiture of the other. (p. 68)

One reason given for this adversarial relationship is that the

purposes of these two environments are very different. The home is where the child establishes intimate and personal relationships with the attending adult, usually the parent. The emotional connection between the parent and child is a primary one (Waller, 1961) as well as one which is functionally diffuse (Lightfoot, 1978). In contrast, the relationship established with the child by the school is more formal and impersonal with defined roles in a functionally specific environment (Lightfoot, 1978).

Waller's conclusion that "the conflict between parents and teacher is natural and inevitable, and it may be more or less useful" (p.69) is supported by Bronfenbrenner's research (1979). Bronfenbrenner found the motives of families and schools to be very different. He also found, however, that there is a need for the child to have both the unconditional support of a parent and the formal and more structured support provided by the school.

Territoriality is a further reason for adversarial relationships. Lightfoot (1978) and Sharrock (1970) described teachers as being defensive about their professional status and occupational image; they are threatened by the possibility of observation and participation by outside people and as a result are most comfortable when they can close their doors to the outside world. On the other hand, parents who have been the primary caregivers for the child from birth to school age fear losing control of their children's daily lives and resent someone else becoming the expert and judge of their children's abilities. The teacher's

desire to be autonomous and free from scrutiny with their door closed, leads parents to feel systematically excluded from the life inside the school. The drive to territoriality, according to Lightfoot, is accentuated by the ambiguity of both roles and relationships due to few opportunities for "parents and teachers to come together for meaningful substantive discussion" (p. 27).

Lack of mutual understanding about respective roles is a third reason. Just as the school needs to recognize the parents as the first teachers of children, the parents need to be aware of the training and competence of teachers. This is most likely to occur if schools proactively organize opportunities for meaningful dialogue where roles and relationships can be articulated and clarified. As Sharrock (1970) stated:

The school not only needs to give information but to receive it: teachers' understanding of children's problems, learning difficulties and aspirations would be greater if they knew more about their pupils' home backgrounds and had more opportunities for meeting parents and hearing from parents themselves some of the questions that particularly concern them. (p.43)

A collaborative relationship between the parent and school can then be established before conflict arises. Although it is inevitable that teacher and parental expectations will differ; these differences can be used creatively. Still, as Lightfoot (1978) stated "creative conflict can only exist when there is a balance of power and responsibility between family and school, not when the family's role is negated or diminished" (p. 42).

Seen from an ecological perspective, families are connected to

other environments (Boger, et al., 1978) such as the neighbourhood, the community, work, school and leisure groups, whereas the school is relatively isolated. The family is a complex system which functions with other systems, while the school tends to function with its own norms and values which are not always those of the community it serves. Lightfoot (1978) observed:

It (the school) is both deeply connected with the structures in which it is embedded and strangely separate from them. It both mirrors the wider society, copying its prejudices, hierarchies and categories and opposes society's structure by offering its own set of rules, relationships and forms. (p.8)

#### Barriers to Parental Involvement

Parents have preconceived beliefs about education largely based on their experiences as students. If their school experience was negative, it is very likely that they will still hold these attitudes as parents (Sattes, 1985; cited in Ziegler, 1987). Stallings and Stipek (1986) found that parents having a negative attitude toward their children's education have been influenced by their own negative personal experiences as students (cited in Ziegler, 1987). As a result, these parents will likely be more hesitant to become involved and less willing to risk a conversation with the teacher. Clark (1983) argued that:

a family's ability to equip its young members with survival and "success" knowledge is determined by the parent's (and other older family members') own upbringing, the parents' past relationships and experiences in community institutions, the parents' current support networks. . . (p.1).

He also argued that attitudes have a greater impact than the person's socio-economic status (SES). However, Ziegler (1987)



cited research done by Cantrel in 1979 where involvement of parents from low SES backgrounds was studied. It was found that only 24% of parents with incomes under \$7000.00 participated in their child's education. Ziegler believed this to be a good reason for schools to make sure that parent contacts were meeting the needs of all parents regardless of their background. Clark (1983) supported Ziegler and applied this concept to the classroom setting by stating that:

The most pedagogically effective instruction occurs when the role demands and cognitive functioning in the classroom are compatible with, or built upon, those in the home. To the degree that the activities and experiences in these two settings reinforce each other while facilitating mutual trust, mutual goals, and personal autonomy, the child will show a greater proficiency with the basic skills (academic knowledge and social skills) that schools are expected to teach. (p. 5)

Another barrier to parental involvement is limited time for communication. School events such as parent-teacher interviews scheduled at 15 minute intervals do not allow for substantive discussions. However, since both parents are employed in 62.3% of Canadian families (Statistics Canada, 1991), perhaps no more can be expected due to the limited amount of time parents and teachers have. "Teachers and parents are stressed by the multiple demands of their professional, family and individual responsibilities and interests" (Swap, 1987, p.8). In addition, as Epstein and Becker (1982) indicated, parental attitudes toward school activities such as homework assignments can be negative when they impose on the limited time that families have together.

Schools have typically organized events that do not allow for discussion, negotiation, and problem solving between teachers and parents. Parents are invited to attend social occasions such as Meet The Teacher evenings which are promoted as opportunities for parent and teachers to meet each other and discuss mutual interests. The reality, however, is that these occasions do not provide opportunity for meaningful discussions. Opportunities for discussion are pursued only when dissatisfaction is felt on the part of the parent or teacher, a fact which only serves to strengthen the territoriality felt by the two parties. As Lightfoot (1978) stated "it is only when we view the asymmetric relationship between families and schools as a dynamic process of negotiation and interaction that we will gain an authentic picture of the nature of conflict and the potential for resolution" (p. 37).

#### Initial Efforts Toward Parent Involvement

The publication of the Plowden Report (1967) by the Central Advisory Council for Education (CACE) was considered a turning point in regard to home-school relations. The report gave recognition to the potential role of parents in their children's education. It recognized that differences in home background were related to variations in children's school achievements. As a result, for the first time it was believed to be important to involve parents more closely in the education of their children. Plowden recommended that both the principal and teacher meet the

children before the beginning of the school year, that parents meet teachers and see children's work regularly, that teachers visit homes, that parent teacher associations be formed, and that schools be used by the community outside of school hours. This report represented a radical change in the way it was thought that schools should interact with the home.

The Plowden Report's (CACE, 1967) recommendations recognized that schools need to gain an understanding of the child's circumstances and needs at the beginning of the school year. Sharrock (1970) suggested the need for communication at the beginning of kindergarten because up until that time, the home had been the major influence regarding the education of the child. Even though most of the learning in the home is informal and is achieved through modeling, imitation and internalization, parents teach children "their basic life values and their perceptions of self and others" (Kelly, 1974, p.14). Research on early childhood by Bronfenbrenner (1979) found that parents have a profound influence on the child which is largely due to the emotional connections between them. As Boger et al. (1978) stated:

This learning is embedded in everyday activities, thus it is often unconscious or at the edge of consciousness; hence, it is invisible and unrecognized. Some development of family members in the home setting is deliberate: particular efforts are made to teach and learn. This learning is more conscious and recognized. It occurs when a family member deliberately guides the behavior of another: teaches skills, disciplines, rewards or punishes given actions. Much of this learning is a "passing of information" from generation to generation. (p.8)

The school enters the picture when the child has already been exposed to many different learning environments and when parents are more knowledgeable about the child's abilities than teachers. Since both the parents and school have interest in the development of the child, they should be natural allies (Lightfoot, 1978; Swap, 1987; Ziegler, 1987). However, this is not always the case. Indeed, the relationship could be said to be adversarial.

Lightfoot (1978) hypothesized that:

some of the discontinuities between family and school emerge from differences in their structural properties and cultural purpose. In other words, conflicts are endemic to the very nature of the family and the school as institutions, and they are experienced by all children as they traverse the path from home to school. (p. 21)

One of the reasons for the discrepant state is poor communication between the home and school which often gives rise to confusion for the child who is being pulled in two directions. It is unfortunate because "neither the school nor the home can operate in a vacuum--they are inextricably linked by the child for whom they bear joint responsibility" (Sharrock, 1970, p. 9).

#### Implications of Parent Involvement

Keeves' (1974) research on achievement of students in mathematics led him to conclude that the structural character of the home had an effect on attitudes and practices in the home. He found that the major factor influencing final achievement was initial achievement, but that both the attitudes of the home and the initial attitudes of the student to mathematics made a small

but statistically significant difference. Keeves (1974) stated:

Final performance at school and attitudes toward learning are influenced not only by initial performance and attitudes, but also by the classroom, the peer group and the home in which the child works, plays and lives. The total education environment is complex, with the component parts forming a net of inter-acting relationships. (p.9)

There are many variables that come into play when studying parent involvement, but research supports over and over again that the "closer the parent is to the education of the child, the greater the impact on child development and educational achievement" (Fullan, 1991, p. 227).

Fullan's perceptions are supported by Lightfoot's (1978) research in Liberty School, an urban school enrolling black students. She found that mothers who had reported behavioural and learning problems in school found that these problems seemed to disappear when:

1. their child experienced an alliance between mother and teacher;
2. they were able to help teachers become more perceptive and responsive to the needs of their children;
3. their participation in classroom life helped reduce the workload of teachers;
4. they were able to directly perceive and fully comprehend the complexities and burdensome nature of the teaching role;
5. they could teach some of the teachers, who are not parents, something about nurturance and mothering;
6. they began to perceive the school as belonging to them. (pp. 173-174)

These findings support Ziegler (1987) and Bronfenbrenner (1979) who believed that meaningful communication between the two structures of home and school help "the two worlds of the child move closer together" (Ziegler, 1987, p.35), because both institutions are

promoting similar goals which foster mutual trust.

Epstein (1987) has conducted research on parent involvement and the effects of home-school connections for over a decade. In a study conducted in 1984, she found that 70% of parents were not involved in their child's classroom, that 40% of mothers worked full-time and that only 4% of parents were active in the school. Little contact is made between home and school while schools have promoted parent involvement in such activities as fund raising and by inviting parents to special events. As Edwards and Redfern (1988) pointed out, these activities do not invite parents to be equal and complementary partners in their children's education.

Melnick and Fiene (1990) reported a survey conducted in an urban school district in the United States assessing parent attitudes toward school effectiveness. It showed that parents who visited the schools for positive reasons such as to volunteer tended to rate the effectiveness of the school higher. In contrast, those who came to the school for negative reasons (such as to discuss discipline problems) and those who did not visit the school at all rated the school significantly lower on all scales. They concluded that "involving parents in substantive ways may result in more positive attitudes toward the school on the part of the parents" (p.22).

#### Collaborative Partnerships

Many studies (for example, Hancock, 1988; Topping, 1987) have been done regarding a collaborative role for parents in reading

programs with young children. For instance, research done in the United Kingdom by Topping (1987) found that paired-reading with parents allowed children to make three-fold increases in word recognition accuracy and five times the advances in reading comprehension in comparison to children not participating in the study. There were also positive affective results in that the majority of the children reported that they liked reading more after being involved in the study.

Lueder (1987) evaluated the results of the Tennessee Parent Involvement Program which had as its purpose the development of various models of involvement in order to discover the benefits of a strong partnership between parents, students, and the school. The models were intended to increase the amount of time parents were involved with the schools and with their children's education. The results were significant in that:

Over 95% of the 1,100 parents who completed the survey . . . either "strongly agree" or "agree" they are more involved with their children's education, feel better about the school, are better able to help their children, and would recommend their particular program to other parents. (p. 17)

It was found in the Tennessee Parent Involvement Program that building trust through collaborative partnerships was a crucial step. Rasinski & Fredericks (1989) also argued that there was a need for mutual trust between the two structures. They advocated parental involvement from the planning stage through to the implementation of a program, asserting that this is the only way that parents will become involved over the long term. They stated

that "when parents are empowered as designers of the program and not simply as implementers of the teacher's or school's agenda they are more likely to be involved and stay involved" (p.85).

### Models for Parent Involvement

In the literature there are many models for parent involvement. The model that best referred to the kinds of roles being studied in this thesis are those determined by Gordon (1976): (a) parents as audience (passive role); (b) parents as reference (active role); (c) parents as the teacher of the child; (d) parents as volunteers in the classroom; (e) parents as trained/paid aides; and (f) parents as participants in the decision making process (p.6-9). Edwards and Redfern (1988) refer to the latter role as the curriculum-centred model of parent involvement. They promoted a negotiated curriculum because "the best decisions about a child are arrived at not by the teacher alone, but by the teacher in consultation with parents" (p. 163).

An example of parents as participants in the decision-making process is the action research project that was initiated at Pike Lake and Snail Lake elementary schools both located in St. Paul, Minnesota (Gunderman and Halcomb, 1991). The project sought to improve parent-teacher relations by examining parent-teacher conferences. The process began in spring with parents filling in questionnaires regarding their child's interests and needs. This was followed up in September by beginning the year with a grand



re-opening celebration. One week later, parents were invited to grade-level meetings which stressed the value of parent involvement in goal setting for their children. In addition, teachers set out the school's goals for students at each grade level. Parents left the meeting with a form for setting goals for their own child. These goals were then the basis of the first conference which was held during the month of September. Goals were then re-evaluated at the midyear conference in January. The results of the study were as follows:

This approach actively involves children and their parents in learning; helps teachers tailor instruction, remediation and enrichment activities to the needs of individual students; and improves communication between home and school. That's no small payoff for a program that is essentially cost-free. (Gunderman & Halcomb, 1991, p.26)

It is evident that educators can no longer keep parents at a distance and consider them as being part of the problem (Rasinski, 1989) but rather as a resource to the education system.

If parents can be involved in such an effort as true colleagues a number of possible advantages may occur; including increased parent/child transaction, increased home/school understanding and conceivably, cost benefits to the overall instructional effort. (Boger et al., 1978, p.25)

As Levin (1991) points out in his article on diminishing resources in education, parents are largely an untapped resource which could provide support at a time when resources are becoming limited. As noted earlier, a collaborative model (Seeley, 1989) is essential regarding parental involvement in order to foster "mutual accountability of staff, parents, and students working together for

a common goal" (Seeley, 1989, p. 48).

### Research Questions

The purpose of the research was to examine parent involvement in education from the perspective of parents who felt excluded from important decisions made regarding their children's education. In the interest of a better understanding their point of view, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Why do some parents feel that a partnership does not exist between the home and school even though parent involvement programs are initiated by the school?
2. What obstacles exist, according to parents that feel excluded, which prevent a different kind of involvement from occurring?
3. In the opinion of these parents, what changes, if any, need to occur in order to improve parent involvement?

## CHAPTER 2

### Methodology

An interview approach was employed to address the research questions. Research has shown that participants tend to be more motivated to participate in a study regarding personal issues, particularly if negative feelings are involved, when the approach is one of an interview. As a result, it was decided that a survey approach administered to a random sample of parents would not provide the information desired for this study. As the questions were posed, each interview evolved according to the responses given by the participant. Relevant points were probed with the result being data which were very rich and meaningful because they reflected the perspectives of each of the participants.

#### Site and Sample Selection

The study was conducted in a suburban public school division which had approximately 7000 students in attendance. A reputational sample of parents having children in the school division served as participants for the study. The sample was determined according to those who had expressed concern regarding the level of parent involvement in the division. The criteria identified for sample selection were that the parents had made repeated attempts to become involved in their child's education without as much success as they would have liked and that they were

considered constructive critics of the current public education system.

A list of possible participants was secured by interviewing one of the division's teachers employed at the Learning Support Centre. Through his work, he has interviewed parents who had experienced frustration with present models for parent involvement. In addition to the names received from the division teacher, the list of participants included the parent who wrote a letter of concern to the principal of his child's school. In proposing the study, I planned to conduct interviews with as many as eight parents and no less than six. A total of 12 letters were sent to possible participants with seven returning letters which confirmed their interest in participating. Interviews were conducted with these seven parents. An example of the letter and consent form sent to possible participants can be found in Appendix B.

Parents involved in the study were chosen from more than one school in the division because I decided that the type of concerns cited in the letter are not situation specific, but rather reflect frustration with typical approaches to parent involvement by the education system. As interviewer, I sought to generate thoughtful insights as to why present models for parent involvement are perceived negatively. Even though the research did not involve all stakeholders and thus does not present the issue from differing perspectives, I believe it helps illuminate a complex reality that has been neglected to date and thus merits study.

An emergent design was used for all interviews because points made by parents were not necessarily foreseen by the interviewer and yet presented very valuable pieces of information to the study. As originally proposed, each parent was interviewed twice with the first interview being approximately one hour long and the second about 30 minutes. There were several advantages to doing two interviews. Firstly, parents were more willing to share information during a second interview when a certain amount of trust had been established. As well, in the second interview, opportunity was given for clarification and confirmation of points made in the first interview, thus adding to what had already been said.

#### Data Collection

The interview schedule used in the study is found in Appendix C. These questions were tested in a pilot interview before the study was formally begun. Information gained from the pilot was not used as part of the study.

Information from interview sessions was gathered by taking field notes and by tape recording participants. All field notes and taped interviews were transcribed as was originally intended. Since many of the transcriptions were over 40 pages in length, I have read and studied each of them and a resume has been prepared for the reader which maintains the overall integrity of the information provided during the interview. Upon acceptance of this thesis, the tape recordings will be destroyed.

Before any research was conducted, I gained permission to conduct the research from the superintendent of the division (see Appendix D). In addition, permission was received from the University of Manitoba Ethics Committee. It is my intent to share research findings with participants, the superintendent of the school division and any other interested parties.

#### Limitations of Study

Since I interacted with the participants, it is acknowledged that this had some influence on the results. It goes without saying, that I would have reacted to certain statements made or to emotions expressed. In addition, since I was both interviewer and interpreter of the data, this places limitations on the study.

Lastly, it needs to be recognized that the reputational sample presented a limitation in that opinions represent a very select group. Parents involved in the study tended to be very articulate individuals who were willing to express their personal opinions and advocate for their child. It is important to note that the study was conducted in a socio-economic area where one would be more apt to find parents who were willing to be outspoken regarding their children's education. Generalizability is thus limited, but the findings are of value in that they are indicative of the population being studied.

## CHAPTER 3

### INTERVIEWS

Seven parents participated in the study and each consented to be quoted. All interviews were conducted in the month of June, 1992; five took place in participants' homes, one in an office and another in a school. Through the stories told, each of the participants provided a personal response to the research questions. All participants were interviewed twice with the second interview having two main purposes--to ensure accurate understanding of information given during the first interview and to pose additional questions related to comments made in the first interview. As interviewer, I became involved in these stories and as a result, I have included some personal reflections on the information they presented. In the following resumes all names of participants and their respective children have been changed to maintain anonymity.

#### Interview #1

Interview Dates: June 2, 1992  
June 9, 1992

Cathy Robinson, a married parent of three children, expressed a keen interest in being involved in the study. She was a nurse by profession. She had two older daughters, 21 and 18 years of age,

and a son 16 years old by the name of John. The two older children experienced no real difficulties in school but that was not the case with her son. At the time of the interview, he was finishing Grade 10 subjects and beginning some Grade 11 subjects. John's elementary years were spent in one school, followed by a year and a half at the local junior high school. He then transferred to a different junior high where the two older children had attended school. He completed Grade 8 at that school. He then attended a private school for two years. This was followed by a move to the high school closest to their home where, at the time of the interview, he was just finishing his first year.

Cathy was very quick to offer that her experiences with regard to her two daughters were totally different from her experiences with her son. John began to experience difficulty almost immediately. As his mother said:

In Kindergarten, I recognized that John had difficulties, so I approached the teacher. I don't remember the conversation, but I ended up going almost immediately to the resource teacher and speaking with her and being assured that there was absolutely nothing wrong. John would end up at the same place as everybody else down the road.

This did not fit with the information Cathy had regarding John, but that was not being taken into consideration by the teacher. She and her husband had adopted John when he was three years old. As she said:

he had no speech at that time, but I never really put much emphasis on it. We just sort of thought that it was a result of his first three years. We had been connected



with a speech therapist... but we ended up leaving the province and coming here before we actually connected. But, it wasn't hard to look up and find out what sort of things you should do and so I made up scrapbooks and pictures and ... it wasn't long before his speech just took off.

A report from a speech therapist in Ontario indicated that John's language was age appropriate. The parents provided the school with the report which indicated that his language was actually fairly well developed for his age. In Kindergarten and Grade 1, even though Cathy felt that John was "bouncing off the wall", the message from the teacher was that nothing was wrong. Cathy had a sense of urgency that something needed to be done, but as she said, with animosity, she now realizes that the system does not work that way. When asked how she felt the system worked, she responded "everything in due time". She said she has only learned this of late, since she had been very "innocent" and "ignorant" at the beginning. She was innocent in that she trusted that the professionals would know how to deal with the situation. As she stated:

I think I looked at the school and the teachers, they were the professionals, they knew. I was very trusting and very accepting of what they said and what they told me and I was looking for advice from them. I didn't get it. So I started looking beyond the school.

Cathy's urgency came from the fact that she felt there was something different about her child.

He didn't read, he didn't write, he didn't do any of the things that the other children did. But the school reinforced to me that there was nothing wrong. That this was me. You know, maybe it was the fact that he was adopted, or maybe it

was this, or maybe it was that, but that John would learn like everybody else. One of the things they said was, "Don't teach him. You leave that to the professionals".

Cathy said with resolution she learned from these experiences that she had to get her own information and deal with her own problems. She supported this statement by mentioning that by the time John was in Grade 2 she had started her own library of both human and material resources which were available. As well, since her concerns were not heard, she said that John and she have learned to solve their problems together. Now that John is older she has decided:

when a problem arises, John and I try to solve it together rather than going to the school. If I do go to the school and I encounter a teacher, if my impression is that this isn't somebody who is going to understand, I move on.

She referred to a high school teacher who had a definite perception of John. When Cathy went to the school to explain concerns regarding John, the teacher was quick to indicate what John was capable of, what he was not doing, as well as why he acted and reacted the way he did. After many years of frustration in similar situations, she no longer accepted a teacher's unwillingness to understand and, as a result, she said she ended the conversation.

Cathy said she is now able to recognize when the teacher is willing to see the problem only from one perspective, and she is no longer willing to put in the effort to make it work. When asked why this is so, she responded with conviction, "frustration, anger,

my own sanity". She said that she has explained to John that he will not get along with everybody in life and that he should work with those who are willing to work with him.

Cathy compared this more recent situation to John's Grade 2 teacher who was willing to admit that she found John to be a challenge. It was at this time that testing was done by a psychiatrist. The report came back recognizing that he had a lot of problems; with one of them being Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

Cathy was relieved at this point because she felt that finally there was a diagnosis and that there was something concrete with which to work. She alluded to her own profession as a nurse where a diagnosis provided information as to how to treat a patient. Once he was on Ritalin, a marked improvement was noticed. The Grade 2 teacher was "wonderful, and she was open and honest...it was a first name basis". She was willing to say that she had a difficult day with John, but she also saw the good things.

It was her impression that here was a bright little kid, but that in many areas he was a challenge. She acknowledged that John had a problem. In fact, her wording was that she'd "never had a child like him before".

Cathy recognized that many teachers were probably glad when John moved on to the next grade. Her interest and involvement in her son's education can be attributed to her statement:

They have my child for one year; I will have my child for many years. I'm looking at the past, present and future. They are looking at the present.

Even though Cathy had volunteered at the school, she felt that she did not know much about the education system. She also was "very trusting and very accepting of what they said, I was looking for advice from them". The advice she got was that he was doing fine and not to worry. She trusted them and left it with them. However, John's ability to read and to write did not develop. She mentioned she had looked at John's Grade 3 report not long ago and that the comment from the teacher was he was "attempting to make sense of his scribbles". She felt let down because in leaving it up to the professionals, John's learning had not progressed. Later in the interview, she cited the teachers' lack of knowledge regarding learning disabilities as being an obstacle to parent teacher partnerships. In her opinion, lack of knowledge led to teachers denying that special considerations had to be made regarding her son's education. As she said:

I think it was lack of knowledge on their part. John has certain problems and if they had been identified, there were certain things that could have been done to help him. Yet, as the professional authorities, they exclude me.

Before the interview had taken place, she had made a written list of obstacles that exist in the school system which make the parent feel excluded. Her lengthy list exemplified her many frustrations and areas where she felt changes could be made to enhance parent involvement. They were:

1. the school's philosophy of generic children; that is, they are all heading to university;
2. lack of ability to be creative and innovative in teaching

- children with different learning needs;
3. the exclusion of parents in decision-making regarding their child's education;
  4. denial that the child has a learning disability;
  5. lack of knowledge regarding learning disabilities;
  6. educators see themselves as the experts--not willing to listen to the parents;
  7. time for communication with the parent and time for the teacher to teach the child with a learning disability;
  8. defensiveness--defend the system;
  9. lack of recognition of the knowledge and skills that the parent has regarding the child;
  10. lack of acknowledgement by the system that the parent would be upset, angry and frustrated;
  11. lack of alternatives--there are no options, the child must attend school.

Several of these points are illustrated by an example given by Cathy Robinson. She referred to John's Grade 10 typing class. He experienced difficulty in learning how to type according to the traditional methods of instruction. He could type, but he had to look at the keys. The ability to type without looking was something that the students needed to master before going on to working on the computer. Since he could not do that, he was left behind while the rest of the class moved on to working in the computer room. This was frustrating for Cathy because she recognized that computer knowledge was important for her son because of his language problems. There was an unwillingness to accept that he learned differently. As Cathy stated, "My son would

never type according to the rules and regulations, but who cares? He will learn...". The teacher was unwilling to alter the expectations for this student. This supported Cathy's point on the philosophy of generic children, the lack of willingness/ability to be innovative, the educators seeing themselves as the experts, and a denial that the student had a learning disability.

She also referred to the exclusion of parents in the decision-making process during meetings held for the Individualized Student Education Plan. It was her feeling that:

The decision had already been made as to the plan; and the purpose of me being there was to give me an opportunity to say something, but it was not incorporated because it had already been decided what the plan was, because they are the experts. That sounds cold, but that's the way I feel now as a result of all of these years.

She was also critical of ten minute parent-teacher interviews. She felt the time was adequate if the child was not experiencing any difficulties. However, she said if there was a problem to be addressed, requiring problem solving, "it was a waste of my time to get prepared and go out to those meetings. I did it for appearances to show that I was an interested parent". Cathy preferred to have input regarding decisions made because she believed she had a "high level of expertise" regarding her son, and she wanted that information incorporated into planning for his education. In order to accomplish this, more time was necessary.

John needed to be supported by someone who understood his learning disability and had training in his learning needs. As

Cathy stated, "I want the highest qualified person working with my son. You can give the teacher assistants to my daughters who do not struggle like my son does". Cathy expressed frustration due to the fact that John was kept after school at times when just another approach would have made the assignment so much easier for him to complete. As well, he was often labelled as unmotivated and lazy, when the problem was that he didn't fit the mold as other students do. She mentioned that she had had good experiences with resource teachers because typically they have more background regarding learning disabilities. She felt that more training should also be given to teachers in order to build their understanding as well.

Cathy Robinson compared her frustrations regarding John's education with the positive experiences she had with her two daughters in school. As she summed it up:

They had good relationships at school, they had positive experiences, they took advantage of things that were offered within the school system. They were valued by the school system (and were) contributing members of the school community. They both have so much self-confidence. My two girls, they will be successful no matter what. They're going to have their ups and downs, they have their strengths and weaknesses, but they are going to exit the school system as confident, assured young women.

In contrast, she believed that John has very little self-confidence, and that "many of the practices destroy a child". He had a positive experience for one year at a school that specialized in students with learning disabilities, but the cost on a yearly basis was prohibitive. As she said:

There are no alternatives to school. I have to send my son. There were times when I felt I was the abuser. I sent my child into a situation that was destroying him. And, day after day I continued to send him back.

The inability to improve things for her son was frustrating because she said as a parent:

I have hopes and dreams for my children. That doesn't mean that I see each of them going off to university, but it is more that they are happy and healthy children with the self-confidence to be contributing members of their community--the ability to live within a family structure, if they so choose, to afford the basics of life, and that they are happy with whatever career they choose, be it a profession or trade.

In concluding Cathy Robinson was asked about an ideal parent partnership. She responded with:

the relationship I had with regard to my daughters. (That the school) have the beliefs and values that I have, that they treat my child with dignity, preserve his self-confidence, assist him to move forward, accept my son for whom he is, don't put limitations, don't lower expectations. You don't know what the future holds for my son. They don't know what the future holds for my son. I don't either, and I will keep all doors open.

She said she did not want to work against the school, but that she wanted her children to realize that there are no limitations. She was her son's advocate and as she said, "I am an educator too, and I'm fighting to teach my son to believe in himself".

### Interview #2

Interview Dates: June 4, 1992  
June 9, 1992

Susan James, a mother who works at home, was an artist



specializing in water color painting which she does from a studio in her basement. She was married and had three children. At the time of the interview, her eldest son, Ryan was 13 years old. He was at a large junior high school in Grade 7. She also had an 11 year old daughter, Kate, who was in Grade 5, and a son, Kevin, in Grade 1. The two younger children attended the local K-6 school. The family had lived in the area since the oldest child was in Kindergarten.

During the two interviews, Susan James referred to two situations where she felt excluded and frustrated regarding her children's educational experiences. She related her story from a very thoughtful perspective, indicating that she had spent a fair amount of time thinking about the situations even before the interviews.

The first example of frustration with the school system involved her eldest son, Ryan, during his last year of elementary school. She set the scene by describing her son's characteristics. She said he was not a very motivated child, he had always looked for shortcuts, he liked sports, but in general "was not a school kid, didn't enjoy school".

She began by describing the situation as one where she approached the teacher about three weeks into the school year, as she had done in previous years. She hoped that having his first male teacher would be a good experience for Ryan. A meeting was held early in the year at which time Susan gave the teacher some

information about her child which she felt was important; for example, that he could be a procrastinator and that his organizational skills were weak. She also cited areas of academic concern. From the teacher she wanted to know if he saw any behaviour problems, even though Ryan had not had any particular problems in the past. The third purpose for the meeting was to open lines of communication, mentioning that the parents would support the teacher from the home front. Susan James believed that Grade 6 was a very important year to work on skills in preparation for junior high. As the Grade 6 year progressed, Susan noticed that Ryan was coming home with very little homework. She then went to the teacher to request more homework. She recalled saying to him:

you know he has his weak areas, please give him some extra work, or give us some extra work, and we weren't getting it. And, I'd go in again, and he'd say, well he's coming along alright here and there so... I really didn't know whether to continue to pursue it.

In regard to organization, Ryan had been using a homework reminder book in Grade 5, but this was not continued in Grade 6. Susan James felt that this book was an important organizational tool which he would be using at junior high. The students were finally allowed to purchase one from the junior high about January. She showed more emotion when she began talking about an incident that occurred around a project that was given to the class as an assignment. In this case, her son wanted to do well. He took the initiative to go to the library on his own and assumed the

responsibility for the project. The project was handed in, and then she noticed that:

time would go by and we weren't getting a mark on the project. So I asked the teacher when he was getting his mark and... there's piles and piles of paper, it's chaos around his desk, it's unbelievable.

The teacher's response was that he had them on his desk and that he would be working on them any day. However, almost a month went by and so Susan asked again. She received a similar response to the first time. This was very frustrating for her, so she immediately requested that a more immediate response be given to projects and unit tests. She recalled she said to the teacher:

he needs to know what he got and be able to respond to what he had. I think he lost all the enthusiasm that had been generated with the loss.

The teacher's response was that that was a fair request. However, other tests and papers came along and marks were not received for them either. She wondered if this was just a problem for her, so she asked other parents and they had had the same experience. Towards the end of the year, she became resigned:

I kind of gave up and thought, well let's ride through the year, we'll do our best for our son. We gave him work in his weak areas ourselves.

Susan James said she felt excluded because she had clearly indicated to the teacher what her son needed, but in her mind "he was not willing to do his job. I think that was what really frustrated me; and my son losing out on an opportunity to learn because of it".

When asked about pursuing administrative support, she hesitated for a few moments and then said, "action is not generally taken, so I've almost learned to avoid that step". Past experiences had taught her that there would be no support there. She mentioned that in some situations she had taken it further to the School Board level and found that helpful. Susan James cited involvement of parents in teacher evaluations as being one way of alleviating some of the frustration regarding the feeling that there is very little a parent can do.

She had another example which illustrated very poor communication on the part of the school. The same year, Ryan had a different teacher for French. The second term report which was issued in March came home with a very low mark. When she accidentally met the French teacher in the hallway and asked about Ryan's mark, she said that the reason was that he had not handed anything in since January. This information shocked Susan James, because she was totally unaware of what had been happening. She asked for him to be kept back after school if work was not complete, but due to the teacher's circumstances, that was not going to work. The teacher had another plan which would mean Ryan would bring home a sheet each evening which had to be turned in to her by nine o'clock each morning. He followed through with the plan because as she said, "He needs that kind of accountability".

As Susan believed would happen, Ryan was not prepared for his move to a large junior high for Grade 7. She was very upset that

this had occurred, and she felt it had an impact on her son. He was upset and worried about the transition. Nevertheless, the year turned out to be a positive experience with Susan seeing a lot of personal growth. In reflecting on their year, she said she followed the same plan with the teacher.

After about three weeks of school, I contacted his homeroom teacher and gave her the same background, the same concerns; we immediately started to work together very well. There's a lot of phone contact. We've done bi-weekly reports, written reports. We've met with resource, and we've tried a lot of different things. Quite frankly, it's been an excellent year for Ryan.

When asked about communication with other subject teachers, Susan responded that it wasn't a problem.

What we found worked the best was to have one person, one contact, being the homeroom teacher. Her willingness to contact the others...and gain information from them was invaluable.

The Grade 7 example where there were at least three or four teachers communicating through one key person was very different from the situation in Grade 6 where only two teachers needed to communicate, and it did not occur. In examining the difference Susan offered a partial solution when she said, "it would depend an awful lot on the individual". In addition, there appeared to be a desire on the part of the Grade 7 teacher to problem solve and carry through with the plans that were made. As she stated:

We've had a good year with the teacher. He's got an excellent homeroom teacher and we've worked closely with her. We've had several different plans that we've put into action with him, involving him and then we evaluate and if we found that it wasn't successful, we would try another one, with the end goal being Ryan's ownership for his responsibilities.

Susan James was very realistic in acknowledging that there had not been a complete turn-around in Ryan's behaviour, but that "he'd shown some signs of accountability and ownership now towards the end of the year". Later in the interview, Susan said that she believed one of the reasons for the change was the commitment and dedication of the Grade 7 teacher to her profession. This was not the impression given when the Grade 6 teacher was described.

We have a teacher who teaches for a lot of years. He has a business, another business that he runs, and is more successful financially than even his teaching position, and I think his focus is in that direction. I think he really wanted to do as little as possible to get through the year.

She was not of the opinion that he carried out his responsibility. When asked about the roles of parent and teacher, Susan expressed that she did not think they were well defined. She suggested that roles be defined by responsibility and in that way it would be very easy to see where responsibility rests. As she stated:

We need to clearly know what is going to be provided at the school level and we can either make a decision about whether we feel that is adequate for our child or not.

Susan fulfilled her responsibility as a parent and because she was very involved and vocal, she was convinced that she presented a threat to the teacher. She felt he was thinking "I'm the teacher, I've been teaching for a lot of years, and you're telling me how to do my job".

Susan's second example of frustration and feeling of lack of support revolved around her daughter Kate. Due to a learning disability, she was only beginning to read when she was at the

Grade 4 level in school. At the time, Susan felt a need for resource help in order to improve her daughter's reading ability. Support was not available at the school level, so she then moved on to the division level where she was put in contact with a divisional support person. Planning meetings were held, some assessment was done, and then it was decided that Kate would attend school for part of the day and the rest of the day she would return home where her mother would teach her to read. Susan received training as well as support from the divisional support person. When road blocks were met, problem solving sessions occurred over the phone or in person. Susan summed it up by saying:

We did that for the whole year; boy, did she improve. She went from reading very, very simple things with picture books at the beginning of that year, to chapter books at the end of the year... she's gained a great deal of independence, and part of our goal was to educate her on how to become her own advocate as well, because she's in Grade 5 now, one more year of elementary school. She's doing very, very well, so I'm not worried about her anymore. I think she'll be just fine.

Upon original request for help, the school said they didn't have the resources or time for the request Susan James made. Interestingly enough, she provided most of the time and really just needed the guidance to carry through with a plan. The divisional support person provided a contrast to the school's response, and when asked what the difference was, she responded with assurance:

his willingness to work toward a solution. It really was his dedication and willingness. When I think back, I think it's something the school could have provided. Especially with my willingness to give my time as well... like, we could have worked together. When there was a problem and

the plan wasn't working, it was somebody you could call and say this isn't working and he would find something else. I really believe a resource teacher in a school has those options as well.

This example reinforced the need for the parent and school to work together, be creative and solve problems. Such was not the case on the part of the school, but fortunately other support help was found. All in all, the solution was not that difficult. She regretted not having gone outside of the school in her son's Grade 6 year. She reflected on her son's year and said with conviction:

he (the teacher) didn't do his job. My son did not receive the education he was entitled to... I've made awfully certain my daughter doesn't get him for a teacher. I'll stand on my head and scream in front of the school before that ever happens. She won't, but there are other children who will.

When questioned about opportunities for communication that are provided by the school, Susan had obviously thought about this because she provided insights on several of the events planned by the school. She valued the "Meet the Teacher Night" at the beginning of the school year because of the involvement of the children in such activities as showing their new classroom to their parents. As well, it provided an opportunity to talk to the teacher in a "relaxed way". In regard to parent-teacher interviews, she would prefer having one at the beginning of the year where an adequate amount of time is allowed for in-depth discussion and then throughout the year ongoing contact by phone, bi-weekly reports, homework book, notes, report cards and meetings determined on an "as needs" basis. She summarized her thoughts by



saying:

I think if a parent wants to be more in touch with what is happening, they need to be contacting the school between those periods. It is too long a break from report card one to two. Three (reports) a year are not enough information for a parent to really be aware.

She also valued the course outlines sent home at the beginning of the year at the junior high level. She found them to be a valuable tool for knowing the expectations of teachers in certain subjects. She thought that reporting at this level was more exact, and thus gave a better understanding of her child's standing. At the junior high level there is a five level (A-F) grading system, whereas the elementary has only three levels (1-3).

Susan realized that her child was only one of many students in the classroom. She said she recognized that "the teacher has a classroom to deal with rather than only an individual". She was also able to see the positive things that happen at school. When asked about what would make her feel valued by the school system, she responded that just an acknowledgement of her concerns and a response in action were adequate for her.

At the conclusion of the second interview, Susan James was asked what an ideal parent partnership with the school would be like. She saw many areas where improvements could be made:

I would like to see some definite planning for the child at the beginning of the year. I would like to see the teacher being provided with a written report of the child's strengths, weaknesses, abilities prior to the start of the school year, and that the teacher would have an opportunity to read that. Then, I would like to see a meeting with the parent and the child very early in the school year where

some definite goals were set. I'd like the child involved in that to some extent so that they see it is a team and they are part of the team. I'd like to see a regular form of communication between the parent and the teacher throughout the school year--whether that is worked out through daily agenda books, bi-weekly reports, whatever, it needs to be more frequent than we have now. I'd also like to see an evaluation at the end of the year with the same team. Were our goals met? What could we have done differently? Then look at goal setting for the next year with the same report being passed on to the next teacher. I'd also like to see a supportive administrator, a mediator, somebody where concerns could be taken to in the event that this team is not functioning for whatever reason.

### Interview #3

Interview Dates: June 8, 1992  
June 15, 1992

Gail Duckworth had three children; a daughter who was 16, a son 13, and a younger daughter who was 8. The elder daughter was in Grade 10 at a high school, her son was in Grade 8 at a junior high school and the youngest child was in Grade 3 in a K-6 school. The family had had several moves from a city to a small town and from one province to another.

The elder daughter had experienced success during her school years. During the interview very little mention was made of her. The area of concern centred on her son, Brody. As Gail said:

Basically, our son Brody is our biggest concern in the entire school system. He has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder, (ADD), and the frustrations we have encountered are just beyond imagination.

Gail Duckworth's husband appeared to be involved in school meetings at times, but the interviews gave the impression that she

took greater ownership and had experienced greater frustration than he had. She expressed some concerns regarding her younger daughter, but without the same frustration that she demonstrated when discussing her son's situation.

It wasn't until Grade 4 that Brody was diagnosed as having ADD, but early in the interview she stated that she had had a sense right from the beginning that something was different.

I knew almost from day one with him that he had some kind of a deficit... He was always difficult as a toddler... If he didn't want to do it, it could take three humans to make him do it. You know for a simple matter of putting on a snow suit, I know I can remember it took two of us to get it on.

When he had been in Kindergarten he was assessed for hyperactivity. The results from this came back negative. Gail agreed with this assessment. She said:

He didn't seem to be hyper. I've seen hyper kids and they can be bouncing off the walls, but he wasn't like that. But I also knew he was very different from my daughter. I knew there was something deep down.

At the same time as this was occurring, Gail was being assured by the Kindergarten teacher that he was fine. The message she received was that he wasn't concentrating and seemed to have too much of a mind of his own, but they felt that since he was a December baby that he was immature and not yet ready for school. Gail attributed some of her concerns to moves that were made during Brody's early years. Since they moved to a community where a French Immersion Program was not offered, he had to switch to an English Language Program. She felt his ability to read suffered as

a result. She thought that perhaps holding him back, which the system would not consider, would have been helpful in order to get more of the basics; but then wondered whether it would have been of any help.

When Gail was questioned about her feelings regarding the ADD diagnosis, she said with great emotion:

It was a hell..., a heck of a relief to know, for someone to acknowledge that my husband and I weren't crazy. You know that you weren't dreaming up all this stuff, that there really was something. You know you are going to get some help at least. You realize that someone is listening to you, but then it is hard because you feel such overwhelming guilt.

At this point in the interview Gail began to cry, so it was evident that there was a great deal of emotion and frustration that had been associated with the situation.

Gail Duckworth believed that by the time Brody left his elementary school, he was labelled as a problem student.

They told us that when he left elementary school to start junior high, none of his past behaviour would follow him, they wouldn't prejudge him. But the moment he stepped through the door, he was prejudged... There's hundreds of examples I could go into. If he would be late for, or missing a class, or late for school, he would be suspended. Right from the start, they looked at his record and clamped down on him... He didn't have that clean slate, there's no way.

Labelling concerned Gail Duckworth a great deal. She was convinced that her son's behaviour was overly documented because he had ADD and that he was not given the chances that other students were given. She saw her son being labelled in two ways. He was labelled with the medical terminology and he was also labelled as a

trouble maker and disruptive student. In her mind, these labels influenced how the school responded to him.

An example of Brody not having a fair chance revolved around being excused early from school for a doctor's appointment. On the way to the appointment he missed the bus, so he returned to the school and phoned his mother. Since she was busy at work, she asked the secretary to just give him the message to go home. Before he left the school, he went into the gym to watch a basketball game that was being played. Other students who were to be in class were also watching the game. When the teacher came in to the gym, even though other students were there, it was only Brody that was taken to task. She said he was the only one suspended from school.

When asked if Brody had been in some other trouble just before this incident, Gail responded very definitely with a "no!". When she took issue with the vice-principal's decision, the response was that they would have to agree to disagree. In a meeting called by the vice-principal, it was very clear to Gail and her husband that it was the school's agenda being followed. As she said with frustration:

Basically, she wanted to tell us that they were making the rules, their decisions were final and that they would not be revoking any of their decisions and we're not to be pressuring them into doing that.

When asked if they had had an opportunity to express their point of view, Gail responded that her "husband told the vice-principal

quite firmly how we felt, but she wasn't interested in hearing our side... She actually just dismissed us".

When questioned as to what could have been done differently by the school to change how they felt, Gail responded that if the school would have acknowledged they also had an opinion and listened to their side of things, they wouldn't have pressed the issue. At this point in time, there was a breakdown in communication, and a fair degree of defensiveness on the part of both parties. When I suggested that perhaps a third party could have been an asset in the meeting, Gail agreed. She said:

There is no question about it, and this resource teacher (an adult in the building who had a good relationship with Brody) could have been a mediator...It would have been helpful then to point out that we were just sticking up for his rights, but to also support the school that he has to follow the rules.

Gail believed that schools need to have rules and actually stated that she felt that the students have too much control. She was of the opinion that it is difficult for teachers these days, and in comparing schools to when she was a student, she said, "When I was in school, we had the fear of God in us". From these comments, Gail supported the need for rules and regulations, but perhaps questioned the enforcement of them, the lack of consistency, and the lack of communication regarding decisions made.

Discussions of a more consultative approach between home and school brought Gail to talk about her younger daughter. She said that she also has experienced behaviour problems, but that a very

good relationship has existed with teachers and resource: "everybody is really working hard together". When the school noticed there were problems developing, parents were contacted and from that time a support team from the school, as well as the parents, were "brainstorming to try different things". As Gail said, "they asked me what my opinion was, I told them some of the things that went on and it kind of put into perspective...". During this part of the conversation, Gail was much more relaxed and she showed satisfaction with what had been done by the school.

Gail affirmed that Brody had received support in the school at the resource centre and through an out-of-school learning support centre. However, she questioned why students were removed from their school setting, placed in the learning centre for a period of time (3-4 months) and then returned to the school setting where problems existed. She found that at the learning centre they began to develop skills and self-confidence and then when they were moved back to the school, progress made was lost. As she said, "I think it would take a year to get a child back on their feet again... to get self-esteem built up in a person". At the very beginning of the interview, Gail stated with conviction yet discouragement that she was aware of a private school:

that would suit his learning needs, but we don't have the \$14,000 per year that it costs to get him into that school, and he is doing without a proper education.

She saw a need for a special program, but questioned whether the regular school system could provide it. The system has a process

for an individualized education plan which should address particular learning needs. Parents were invited to planning meetings for Brody's individualized program, but they did not feel that their input was solicited. The school's goals were put on the table and the parents gave a general nod regarding their support. She wanted academic goals to be laid out by the school because she believed the teachers had a better understanding of her son's academic standing and areas where he could be challenged. In regard to behavioural goals, Gail said she would like to be able to provide input, but she did not recall ever being asked for her goals.

In regard to suggestions of ways to mitigate the conflict that existed, Gail advocated for a program, for those students who experienced major difficulties, being located in the school rather than at another location. She believed students would not have as major a transition back to the regular classroom and they wouldn't be singled out. She also mentioned the need for communication of achievements. She recalled many telephone calls received regarding negative situations, but did not ever remember a situation when she received a call to inform her of a positive situation. As she said:

As soon as there is the least amount of trouble we're contacted. However, we are never contacted over the good things... I think it could be an important thing for a child to know that they're not getting just the bad calls, there are also good things going on.



When questioned as to what worked for her son Brody, she mentioned the learning support centre where the teacher/student ratio was very small, and the program was quite individualized. Brody experienced greater success in this program, and as a result his self-esteem began to increase. However, he was put back into the regular program at his home school once he showed signs of being able to succeed in the learning centre. Gail believed as soon as that occurred, all strides toward future success were lost because he was in a situation where he could not function. She felt that the program needed to be located within the local setting so that the transition would be less traumatic and secondly, that students needed a longer period of time in the program, such as a year, in order to gain the confidence and basic skills necessary to function in a regular program. She said with frustration:

These kids were all learning very well in the learning centre and they go back into the junior high and start getting into difficulty again... I know that one of Brody's very good friends has been in and out of the centre all year long. He doesn't even last a month in the school system. I can't understand why these people are not putting two and two together.

She also indicated a need for recognition of the type of learning disability that her son has. She believed that greater training for teachers was essential as well as recognition by the school of the parents' point of view.

She concluded:

They have to start listening to parents with kids with learning disabilities. Just because they're not missing a limb or something like that, they're not considering it to

be a valid disability. But let me tell you, it's his future being carved, and his education, and he's not getting it.

Throughout the two interviews, Gail Duckworth's opinions were expressed very strongly with a high degree of emotion and frustration. There have been many years of struggles and she does not envision a bright future. As she declared:

Our big concern is when this boy is sixteen years old he is going to drop out due to frustration. We are doing everything we can to get him educated, but it isn't a bright picture.

Gail did not necessarily know what changes could occur to improve parent involvement but she saw three areas of concern; lack of two-way communication, lack of knowledge and strategies regarding students with "invisible learning needs", and lack of funding to support a consistent individualized program for children who need specialized programming over the long term.

#### Interview #4

Interview Dates: June 10, 1992  
June 18, 1992

Unlike most other respondents in this study, Linda White did not have a major incident involving one of her children which made her feel excluded by the system. Rather, she had found that certain practices in the school gave parents the message that meaningful involvement in their children's education was not desired. She had become so frustrated that she was pursuing an alternate education program being offered in another school

division. As a result, much of the interview centred on her thoughts regarding present practices and on ways in which parents could be invited into partnership with the school.

As a stay-at-home mother, Linda White had the time and interest in being involved in the school where her two daughters attended. Her elder daughter, Carmen, was 11 years old in Grade 5, and Erin who was almost 6 years was in Kindergarten. They attended a small K-6 school and all of their school experience, except nursery school, had been in this setting.

When asked what it was that made her feel excluded from her children's education, she immediately said that not being able to volunteer in her own child's classroom was something that caused her a great deal of concern. When her elder daughter started Kindergarten, she just assumed that she would volunteer in her classroom as she had always done in the nursery school. When she asked about this, the response she got was "we would love to have you volunteer in the school, but not in the classroom". She even brought her concern up at Parent Council meetings, but every year she met with the same answer, with the administrator going so far as to state that it was division policy that parents could not volunteer in their own child's classroom. She later found out that this was not true at all. This limitation led her to question why the school would block parents being allowed into their own child's class. She questioned, "Is it because the teacher doesn't want you to see what she is doing with your child? Or, do they have

something to hide? Like, I didn't really know what it is". She also very quickly added that:

On field trips and things like that, then you are very welcome to go, so it wasn't like they were excluding you totally. And if the teacher wanted some baking done for a special day or something like that, she called on you, but as far as the weekly, once a week, or whatever, that was not happening.

Part of Linda's frustration revolved around the fact that she wanted to be able to support the teacher and the school, and in addition, felt by volunteering in the class, she would have a good understanding of what was being done. As she mentioned, often children don't share much with their parents regarding their school day, so she felt being involved gave background information in order "to reinforce what they are learning and show an interest in what they are learning so that their interest will grow". Through the years, Linda and her husband had become aware of the elder daughter's ability with mathematics which they decided to support with computer programs at home. She was pleased they could offer her this challenge, but recognized it was only one part of the curriculum. She also felt Carmen was really not being challenged at school. If she finished her math work early, she was to do some reading. Linda would have preferred her being challenged in the area of math during math time. She mentioned a very simple idea that was used during her Grade 5 school year. Basically, it involved Carmen doing peer tutoring with a small group of students. Her daughter was very happy to be able to serve in a leadership

role and as Linda said, "it was a real reinforcement of what she had learned and it is sure better than reading a book for the rest of the period". She also saw math games, computer games, and logic problems as being ways of reinforcing the concepts being taught. She was not sure if these resources existed in the room and as she said, rather sarcastically, "I don't think they have (them) in her room, of course, I wouldn't know except for going at hamburger day and looking".

Linda and her husband were being supportive of their daughter's learning but in many ways it was very separate from the school. She questioned why the school did not capitalize on the resource role that parents could serve. As she said, "If you think about all the parents, they couldn't all be nothings, everybody has a talent and they should try to use these abilities to make the teachers' life easier". She illustrated this point with an example of a theme such as Lower Fort Garry. In studying this theme, Linda suggested that parents could be requested to participate or contribute in many different ways.

If you had ancestors that worked there, lived there; perhaps antiques. Do you have books? Would you be prepared to go on a field trip, come and read a story about it? Do you want to make a play with the kids? There are a lot of things they could be doing. They could even do something in the evening like write up something or invite some of the kids over to write a skit.

Acting as a resource in this way would be meaningful involvement for her. It would also increase communication between the school and the home because:

the more you are involved the more you feel you are working for the same end; instead, they are doing their thing, and we are doing our thing. You start feeling like it is them and us. The child is in-between.

According to Linda, the message given by the school was we want to work together, pull together for the same goal, respect the students. However, she believed that message was not evident in practice. In situations such as discipline and decision-making, parents were told how it was going to be rather than being consulted as to their opinion. One example she cited was in regard to the evaluation process. In general, she was supportive of the process except for the fact that she felt the first interview should occur much earlier than November. At the November interview in her daughter's Grade 5 class, it was decided that it would be student-led. Linda was unfamiliar with the idea and her initial reaction was negative. As she said:

I don't know why they're trying to do this. But that's sort of the feeling you get with a lot of the stuff that comes home from school because you're not involved in any decision making process and because they don't tell you a lot about why they decided to do this.

Once she had experienced the process she was very supportive of the idea because it showed how the work evolved rather than just the end product, and in addition, it promoted the student to do some self-evaluation. More information regarding the shift in focus at the interview would have increased understanding and limited negative reactions. She believed the need for teachers to have "total control" was an obstacle to development of parent

partnerships.

As stated earlier, due to frustrations experienced at her daughters' school, Linda began to explore the alternate education program. During the second interview, I asked her to give me some information about the program. She had visited a school with the program and what she found remarkable was:

the atmosphere and the attitude in the classroom. The kids were really happy. They were really involved. There was real respect between the kids, towards the teacher, from the teacher to the kids. I just looked at this multi-age setting and I couldn't believe that everybody was so considerate and there was a real sense of community in the classroom.

She went on to describe a situation she had observed:

They were doing a writer's workshop and the teacher came over to two boys who were working together and said, "Would you like to come, we're going to share" and they said, "well, we need about five minutes". I watched them and everybody else went in to the meeting area and was taking turns. Little grade one's had written poems, I couldn't believe some of the description, it was really neat! They were all raising their hand; "Pick me! Pick me!", but they weren't noisy doing it. They were just so excited, and so enthusiastic and really comfortable in wanting to share what they had done. Meanwhile the little boys were still working away in total silence with barely a whisper to communicate. They (the rest of the class) would read their poem or story and then they would ask, "Are there any questions or comments?". Students were saying "Where did you get the idea? I liked your description of this.". The kids were so respectful...

The description of this early years classroom was congruent with the philosophy of teaching young children. There was really not anything happening in this class that could not have taken place in a regular early years classroom. Perhaps the largest difference was the attitude of the teacher. Linda said the

teacher expressed that she wanted "the kids to be really comfortable, feel really safe, and willing to share their ideas". In Linda's estimation "the teacher was a really confident person, she really likes the kids and really likes her job". In speaking to the teacher in the Grade 4-6 room, she found the same attitude with a lot of the responsibility and credit for what was done being given to the students. Linda did not sense the need for the teacher to be in control as she did in her daughter's school. She also sensed a real openness on the part of the teacher and students to share with visitors to the classroom.

When she summed up her comments regarding the alternate education program she said that the teachers were "teaching them how to learn". The students were interested in exploring the physical world and the print environment around them. They were inquisitive and thus asked many questions; they were willing to research to find answers to their questions; and they wanted to analyze and form solutions to problems. Her interest in the alternate program was based on her belief that:

It's really important to me that kids know how to learn, because they are going to be learning all their lives. When they're on the job, they are always going to be learning, and hopefully because they are learning more they are experiencing more. And, I think the attitude in these classrooms is really conducive to learning and being comfortable with learning.

Linda indicated changes which needed to occur to improve parent involvement when asked what she felt would be an ideal parent-teacher partnership. She said:



I guess if I am entrusting my child to a teacher, I think ideally it would be nice to know that person well, to trust that person. In order to do that, you have to establish some kind of relationship. I would want the teacher to feel that I was approachable. I think when you share common values and goals and methods of attaining those goals and you both understand each other. I'd like to have confidence in the teacher to do the right thing with my child and I would want the teacher to have enough confidence in me that if a situation came up they could feel they could phone and say, "This has happened; what do you think we can do about it?" or, "Why do you think this has happened?". I think the more the parents are in the classroom, the teacher would gain confidence in you as a parent. You could show her you had a genuine interest and that you could be an asset to her.

Linda White had given a great deal of thought to her role in her daughters' education. She would like to be a valued partner to the school but felt she had been excluded because the school did not recognize her as a resource and an asset.

#### Interview #5

Interview Dates: June 16, 1992  
June 23, 1992

Suzanne Bridge, the mother of two sons, aged 13 and 11 was very interested in participating in the study because of frustrations she had regarding her elder son's education. They both have attended the same K-9 school for the past 7 years. Jordan was in Grade 8 and Peter was in Grade 7.

The family was posted in the Carribean for 5 years. Both boys began school there in a private school setting. When they arrived back in Canada, they looked for a home in a neighbourhood where the

school was relatively small and the children could easily walk to school. Jordan was 7 years old at the time and Peter was 5. Both boys had had a very good start to school and Peter appeared advanced for what was being done in Kindergarten so he was placed in Grade 1. Her sons fit in well at their new school and really enjoyed it.

In beginning to relate her story, Suzanne mentioned that Jordan developed very normally as a baby and toddler but a change occurred when he was 4 to 5 years old. He had had a lot of health problems in the Carribean and as a result received strong medication. The medication brought on a lot of confusion. More specifically:

he could not make a simple sentence anymore, some behavioural problems, he had literally lost his speech at that point...he would be walking up a flight of stairs and miss one or two constantly.

At the age of 8, Jordan was diagnosed as dyslexic. His teacher felt that he was:

a very intelligent boy but he had a problem with the output, and she said the output was not compatible with his knowledge and his understanding...Needless to say I was devastated.

Suzanne had observed that something was different with her son but it wasn't until the diagnosis was made that she felt the full impact of Jordan's problem.

Immediately upon enrolling him in school in Canada, it was realized that the resources that were available in a private school in the Carribean were not in a public school. He began

school in Grade 2 and was really struggling so, they took it upon themselves to go to New York to see Dr. Levinson, a psychologist who had done research in the area of dyslexia. As well, a great deal of reading was done by the parents in order to better understand their child.

Jordan's Grade 3 teacher was a wonderful person in Suzanne's eyes. He understood that children had different learning styles and was willing to make accommodations for the differing learning needs in the classroom. With encouragement and hard work, Jordan was able to recite a poem in front of many people at the Festival of Learning. Suzanne considered Grade 3 to be one of the highlights of Jordan's school years and she summed it up by saying:

One of the things we needed to work on was his self-confidence. His Grade 3 teacher really gave Jordan a lot of time, beyond the call of duty, and that boy really just blossomed and bloomed.

The success story did not continue however. Between Grades 4 and up until Grade 7, Suzanne felt very little support was available. She felt that only lip service was given to their needs from resource. She felt that teachers were not willing to make accommodations for her child's specific learning needs. An example that Suzanne gave was the science fair in Grade 5. She had asked the teacher to explain the project to him individually because general classroom instructions were easily confused.

Written instructions are far better for him than verbal ones because with a verbal instruction he will say "oh,

I forgot" or "I don't remember" in a space of moments, and you know that really contradicts with the child that we know at home. he is very hard working,...very helpful, never, ever says no.

Jordan did not become involved with the science fair. When Suzanne visited the school, and mentioned that she had asked for some extra attention to be given to Jordan and they would help out at home for the science fair, the teacher responded as though surprised, as if she had never heard of a problem for Jordan. It was at this point in the interview where Suzanne indicated her first sign of extreme frustration and the beginning of shutting down. Her statement was:

What we decided was this child is not getting anywhere and so we did not go back in to see the teacher anymore to discuss anything. We just decided to work with him at home whenever we could.

The fact that he was very capable in many areas of his learning was cited by Suzanne as one of the reasons for not being taken seriously and for lack of understanding on the part of the teachers. He was "a very good reader, comprehends very well...he has problems discussing it or putting it on paper, but he reads very well".

In Grade 6, Jordan started questioning and resenting his younger brother who was very bright, popular and made friends easily. He came home crying one day and asked why Peter had skipped a grade. In telling this story, Suzanne Bridge also became very emotional. She explained that her two sons meant a great deal to her and it hurt her to see one resenting the other.

She spent a lot of time talking to Jordan and encouraging him. She talked about the differences between all people and that he had many strengths. However, at the same time, Jordan received his first term report for Grade 6. Suzanne felt Jordan had received:

the same comments all over again - not trying hard enough, disorganized, you name it. You realize you're not getting anywhere and that this child is wasting his time and years in school.

Suzanne felt the teacher did not understand Jordan's problems.

Grade 7 brought major problems in the area of organization because Jordan no longer just had one homeroom teacher, but rather a teacher for each subject. There was also greater responsibility given to the child for completion of assignments and preparation for tests. Suzanne accepted that as being a reasonable expectation, but if a child was "struggling, it's only going to compound their problem". Extra support was sought in the school once again, but it appeared to lack consistency. Jordan became very discouraged at this point, and Suzanne was becoming more frustrated. Animosity built up between Suzanne and her son because she was constantly nagging him regarding his work and he was resenting her involvement. It was not until she realized what this was doing to their relationship that she stood back and recognized that she needed to be supportive of him. The family began to seek help outside of the school system. She recalled saying to her son:

There is help for you out there and I want to know if you are really interested, but we will have to go out of the school system. If you are interested and you're not self-conscious about it, then we can go and see. He said, "Yes, I'd love that!"

Suzanne started to look for support and found a strong network in the community. She got the name of Mrs. Jones who had a degree in special education. She also explored a private school setting but decided to go with Mrs. Jones. The knowledge she had regarding children with different abilities was very helpful and supportive. In Suzanne's opinion, this was in sharp contrast to her understanding of the teachers' knowledge in this area:

I still believe they had no understanding of Jordan's problem. It's best to describe it as ignorance on their part, because they don't know how to deal with it; understand it.

This lack of understanding on the teachers' part made Suzanne Bridge feel very excluded. She had worked very hard to support the school and her son, but she believed teachers needed to:

keep an open mind and listen to the parents sometimes. You get the impression, if you are a parent who is quite involved, they can sort of label you, and if you decide to not take an interest in your children's activities, you can also be labelled. It's like you're in a no win situation.

When Suzanne elaborated on the labelling she felt was occurring, she mentioned that it was interesting to note that with her other son there wasn't the frustration. She did not feel that she was a parent who was never happy with the school program. However, she did suggest that there was lack of understanding due to differing purposes. She was concerned about her son yet the

school did not seem to respond. As she stated:

I was asking them to give him more attention and they didn't feel it was needed. I thought I was labelled as an over-protective Mom. It was pretty well said by the counsellor that Jordan's problems were probably due to my involvement.

The degree of involvement on the part of the home was much different than the school's. The school did not necessarily see a need for extra support, but the parent did.

Mrs. Jones suggested assessment for Jordan, which the parents did pursue through the school system. Suzanne was also given the name of a divisional support teacher. She felt that the waiting period for assessment and receipt of information from the division support teacher was very long. It had been initiated at the beginning of the school year, and by May they still did not have results. At the same time Jordan began working, once a week for an hour, with Mrs. Jones. This time spent one-on-one with Mrs. Jones was a very positive experience.

She was teaching him how to organize, study habits and just work with him in the areas that he needed help in. Jordan's grades started coming up. He just loves her. She is a very understanding woman. She shouldn't be doing this on her own, she should be in the school somewhere because she'd be just the perfect resource teacher.

Suzanne felt that Mrs. Jones identified well with Jordan, and as a result, strides were made in his progress. The assessment results did come in near the end of the school year. They confirmed that Jordan was a very bright boy, but he had a problem with some concepts. He needed extra time on some things.

Suzanne did not have a direct response to the question regarding ways in which parent involvement could be improved but rather identified situations where parents and teachers worked well together. When asked what the difference was in these situations from when they were not working well together, she referred to the attitude and the personality of the teacher. The professionals showed that they liked children and their job; they recognized that the children needed extra support and they believed in them. She returned to the Grade 3 teacher and said that "he believed in him. He believed that Jordan could do it and since Mr. Van Horn believed, that made Jordan believe it too".

Suzanne Bridge advocated for teachers to take courses on learning styles and learning disabilities. She did not feel they had enough background in this area. It was her belief that this knowledge helped teachers to understand and to make accommodations for children. She also supported the need for teachers to look for the strength in each child and to build on it. One of her final statements was "I'm a very strong advocate for children on the whole, I really believe in kids".

#### Interview #6

Interview dates: June 16, 1992  
June 25, 1992

Bill Last was a teacher by profession and had two adopted children. His son was 11 years old and in Grade 6, and his



daughter who was 6 years old was in Kindergarten. The daughter, Janet, was in a French Immersion Program and she was experiencing no difficulty whatsoever in school. Mike had attended three different schools; a private school, a K-6 elementary school, and was presently in a special program designed for Grade 5 and Grade 6 students with learning difficulties.

Before Kindergarten began, Bill Last and his wife felt that Mike potentially had some special needs, and so they questioned enrolling him in the local elementary school because the classes were very large. As a result, he went to a nearby private school for Kindergarten, but the following year he moved to the neighbourhood school because the Grade 1 classes were smaller. He attended school there for four years. In Grade 1, Bill and his wife were exploring the possibility that Mike could have some type of learning difficulty. In October of that year, Bill found some information that led him to believe that Mike was Attention Deficit Hyperactive (ADHD). He then sought medical advice and Mike was diagnosed as ADHD. Ritalin was prescribed as the medication. Bill and his wife approached the school with the diagnosis. They also had articles regarding ADHD. The response they received was very non-committal. Bill felt that the reason for the response was:

an unwillingness to listen to what we had to offer. They may have just been basically defensive that parents can't tell teachers how to do their job. I didn't consider it as telling them how to do their job but (rather) I'm aware of something that I don't think you're aware of, and this will make your situation better for you, for the students, and of course, for my son.

As Mike's father, Bill had invested a lot of time trying to understand his child's needs and was frustrated with the fact that the school did not seem overly interested. When mentioned that the literature (Waller, 1961; Lightfoot, 1978) supported that there were two different kinds of relationships, he agreed, but he could not understand why they would not want to take advantage of this information.

They began to administer the medication in Grade 1 and within four days the school reported that Mike was better able to concentrate, had less bothersome behaviour in relation to his peers and the teacher.

The medication seemed to cause a settling. He was able to concentrate on his work better, he would have less bothersome behaviours in regard to his peers. He began taking the medication and we did not inform the school for about four days because we wanted to make sure that there was not a self-fulfilling prophecy in place.

Parents were happy that the medication was being helpful and accepted the need for it. Bill had done a great deal of reading in this area and learned that ADHD is a biological disorder due to insufficient blood flow to the frontal lobes of the brain. The stimulant medication increases the blood flow to these areas, and since there was a physical reason for it, he was very comfortable with administering it.

During Grades 2 and 3, Mike had the same teacher and Bill did not feel they were particularly well informed. Generally, due to the medication, Mike did not present a behavioural problem and the

teacher had a good rapport with him. They became concerned that some learning difficulties were surfacing and that they were not being addressed. In a parent-teacher meeting which included resource, and administration, Bill felt that the school was basically trying to appease his uneasy feeling regarding Mike's learning needs. In retrospect, Bill felt that perhaps some information was being kept back in order for parents to assume that all was going well. If this was the case, it did not enhance relations or promote open communication between the two parties.

Grade 4 began with a crisis. On the second or third day, Mike had a petit mal seizure. His parents immediately contacted the psychiatrist who had diagnosed the ADHD and prescribed the Ritalin. He advised them to stop the medication immediately, and to arrange to have Mike examined by a pediatric neurologist. Results came back fairly quickly with information that Mike had a very mild kind of epilepsy but that it would be alright for him to go back on the Ritalin. They started to wonder if he had been undermedicated during Grades 2 and 3. The dosage had been lowered from Grade 1, but since they hadn't been informed of any difficulties, they assumed that things were going fine. In Grade 4, the dosage was experimented with to a certain extent, and through documentation received from the teacher it was found that Mike had better days when he was receiving the higher dosage.

Because I had some concern, I had asked the school to give us a daily report. We alternated the dose between 10 and 15 mg. but did not tell the school which days he

was getting the higher dosage in order to get a more objective description. So, the Grade 4 teacher started to do a five line report each day and it was very interesting. We very quickly realized that it had to be 15 mg. to be reasonably effective.

The daily report was also very helpful for Bill in that he was much better informed than he had been.

It was during the Grade 4 year, however, that Bill began to consider that Mike was experiencing serious academic difficulties:

He was bringing tests where he was getting 25%, 30% and we were quite firmly convinced that he had reasonable ability. However, he was not entitled to any resource, he had not been tested by the resource staff, he wasn't being dealt with to any degree by the counsellor.

When Bill asked why his son wasn't getting any resource help, the school responded that there were other students with more major difficulties. Bill could not accept the academic results his son was getting and he began to get frustrated. In speaking to other parents who had children with ADHD, he found out that some had teacher assistants helping them and that the school received funding from the government.

Bill Last wondered whether the school supported that Mike had ADHD. He questioned if his son "was being written off as a bad kid or a troublemaker". Bill and his wife continued to insist that Mike had special learning needs and they wanted to know how they were being addressed. When asked if the school attempted to make accommodations, Bill responded:

I'm not aware, I have little evidence that it was done. I don't have much evidence that it wasn't done but in the class placement there wasn't the proximity to the teacher,

opportunities to associate with strong academic kids who would provide a positive role model and help interpret instructions where he had difficulties.

At this point in time, frustration also evolved around the reports that were being sent home. These reports did no more than list the traits of ADHD which was not helpful in any way. As parents they needed to know what had been done, what strategies had been tried in order to better understand how they could help. This kind of information would be helpful in:

trying to come up with some creative solutions that while they help the school flow better and reduce the teacher's stress level, also address the needs of the "at risk" kid.

This same approach to reporting occurred when Mike was in difficulty in the program for students for learning disabilities.

Since Mike's academics appeared to be suffering, Bill and his wife explored a special program where the ratio was eight students to one teacher. Mike was accepted into the program. There, he received one period of resource per day, was given reading assistance and, in many ways, it was successful. The first year in the program went quite well until spring, when he had three petit mal seizures. They began to investigate another medication which resulted in Mike beginning to take the medication in September during his Grade 6 year. They weren't aware though that it took a month to six weeks for the medication to take effect. There never was any evidence of a positive effect and in contrast he started showing negative side effects. As Bill described the situation:

He became clinically depressed. There were other difficulties, and to describe the Fall as horrendous is perhaps understated. We were called in on three different occasions to have meetings, he was suspended a couple of times for different situations that developed.

The first meeting in early November went quite well. Bill and his wife explained the new medication to the teachers and had some questions that they wanted to discuss. In Bill's view, the school was most concerned about Mike's behaviour. It was only three weeks later that a second meeting was called. At this stage in the interview Bill's tone of voice and his choice of words indicated anger and frustration:

We were called in and my wife and I were an audience. We were told this is the problem, this is what's happening, keep him home in the afternoons. We said we've talked to the psychiatrist, these are negative side effects. He'd become school phobic and the reply was complete disinterest.

The school's message was, "we have a problem and we want it solved". They requested the superintendent remove him from the program. A week later a meeting was called and the story was about the same:

My wife and I were pulled out of school to go mid-morning with the psychiatrist to a meeting. We were simply spectators. I mean, we were very disturbed by the way we were treated... We had no opportunity for input... There was absolutely no discussion at all.

Since Bill felt there had been no opportunity for dialogue, he wrote a letter to the superintendent expressing his frustration. Shortly after, it was decided that Mike would continue in the program.

The medication was a "dismal failure" and just before Christmas he started on Ritalin again. The following months were much better, but due to the experience during the Fall, the teachers appeared to have "shut down". They had to allow Mike to continue in the program, but:

their reply seemed to be, "You can force us to keep him, but you can't force us to help him". I realize they are beaten down, they're extremely frustrated, but I really believe they were blaming him for being ADHD.

In retrospect, Bill wouldn't have done anything differently because he felt that supports would not have been put in place for Mike if he would not have been his advocate. Emotional involvement would not allow him to sit back.

When Bill was asked what could have been done differently by the school to change how the situation evolved, he quickly responded:

They could have believed that ADHD is real. They could have believed that the information we were offering was going to make the situation better for everybody... That the information was valid.

A less defensive attitude on the part of the school as well as a less territorial attitude would have been helpful. As he said:

Maybe its territoriality, maybe its insecurity, but I believe they weren't willing to admit that perhaps we know more on that particular subject than they did, and therefore they wanted to shut us out completely.

Bill acknowledged being a strong advocate for children with ADHD. He was very knowledgeable on the subject and interested in sharing the information he had gained over the years with others.

He had had a few opportunities to provide inservice sessions to parents and colleagues, and enjoyed them very much. He admitted that since having had children, he has become more humble and does not believe he has all the answers. However, he saw how he could be a threat, especially to someone who felt insecure. He believed his "expert" knowledge could alienate people and lead them to become territorial. In his opinion, the answer to improving parent involvement was a willingness to communicate openly and to consider the child's abilities because there is always something positive upon which to build. In this way parents and teachers can be supportive of each other and work to find solutions to difficult situations.

#### Interview #7

Interview Dates: June 23, 1992  
June 26, 1992

Greg LaFleur was the parent who had written the letter which was referred to in the introductory part of the thesis. Since he taught music in the private and public school system for eleven years, he had an understanding of the inner workings of a school. He was very quick to recognize that teaching is a challenging profession, and bearing that in mind, he wondered whether support could be provided by tapping the resources available in the home and community. He saw a major role for parents as volunteers in the school and more particularly in their children's classrooms in



order to provide support with the end result being an impact on the quality of education. Since his children had not experienced any difficulties in the school system, Greg LaFleur approached his concerns from a more philosophical standpoint than the majority of parents who were interviewed.

Greg LaFleur and his wife had three children aged 11, 10, and 8. The two elder children were boys and they were in Grades 6 and 4 respectively. The youngest child was a daughter who was in Grade 3. All three children attended the same school. His two sons spent the first couple of years at different schools, but most of their experiences had been in a suburban K-6 dual track school. Two of the children were in the French Immersion Program which he felt naturally provided a challenge to children. He questioned whether students were adequately challenged and since the demands on teachers are high, he saw a role for parents, businesses and the community to provide the human resources for extending children's education.

He recalled, as a university student in music, a professor who had promoted the idea of teachers forming parent/band associations. As a novice teacher in a rural community he did call the parents and encourage them to become involved. He mentioned that many parents were positively surprised that he had called. Greg LaFleur would like to see this kind of communication initiated by teachers early in the school year. He also saw a place for a meeting of parents and teacher(s) in September. The purpose of the meeting

would be for the "teacher to lay out goals for the year and solicit the parents' help in achieving those goals". In his letter he wrote, "I am presupposing that teacher and adults are able to work together in a cooperative manner for the common good". It would also provide an opportunity to establish student behavioural expectations for the year and consequences for not following through. In addition, the volunteer program could be initiated with a variety of differing roles that parents could fulfill. In the letter he stated "the parents represent the values, the home situations, the resources, the attitudes toward education which significantly impact the child who comes to fill a seat in the classroom". Greg recognized the extra work involved in planning a meeting of this nature and also realized that some teachers could feel intimidated by parents who were not supportive. In regard to expectations, the public school system services a pluralistic society and Greg mentioned:

One danger of inviting parents to meet is that you might find out that their value systems differ quite a bit. You can open up a big can of worms that could be very difficult to close.

When it was suggested that this would be an opportunity for parents and their child to set out individual goals (academic and behavioural) for the year and more particularly the term, Greg was very supportive of this idea and responded by saying:

Well, that would make a lot of sense. The trend in my years of teaching was toward individualization and this would certainly do that, and it would involve the parents because they set the goals with the child and with the teacher.

They would see everything that came back from school in light of those goals.

Greg's response indicated that goal setting would provide an opportunity for meaningful involvement in his children's education. It would also allow for open communication which is important at all times, and in particular if problems evolve. A meeting could be held if the teacher was experiencing difficulties with the class. The comfort level would be there from previous meetings to discuss concerns "frankly and openly".

He illustrated his point by referring to a situation that developed in his elder son's Grade 5 class. An incident occurred where his son was picked on by a student in his class. Greg felt that the school handled the situation well, and that he was well informed by the vice-principal as to what had happened. In thinking about the incident, he thought this class would have benefitted from greater parent involvement. As he said:

There was considerable difficulty on the part of the teacher in keeping order. It was largely due to the mix of kids, and I guess that's where I started thinking that a meeting called where the teacher stated frankly the problem and asked parents "What can we do about it?" would have been an ideal situation for problem solving.

When questioned about the role of Parent Council meetings, Greg responded by saying that he hadn't made them a priority and the reason for his lack of interest in these meetings was that he did not:

have the impression that they deal with the substantive issues... not to negate that raising money for extra equipment really makes a nice difference or there are

decisions to be made, for example the lunchroom policy. As a former educator the kind of thing I'm interested in, I don't see on the agenda.

Greg equated the issues discussed at Parent Council meetings with those labelled in the literature as superficial. He did not see purpose in these meetings because they did not directly impact on his children's education. He also said that opportunities for his wife to become involved had been superficial; for example, baking cookies. She would enjoy helping with the music program, but this resource had never been tapped.

Greg cited one time when he felt meaningfully included in his child's education was when he was invited to come to his son's classroom to share his interest in bird watching. He brought some bird books, shared information and responded to questions. This was a very positive experience for him because, as he said:

it helped me to see what the classroom is like... I appreciated her patience all the more after I saw the activity level of the kids... She was getting somebody from the community to talk about a branch of knowledge that everybody should know a little about and some people, of course, know more.

Greg really saw a role for the community as a resource in the school. He referred to a book that he had just read, Human Brain, Human Learning that promoted using more community resources. He saw many avenues from which to seek resources such as the local stores, businesses, elderly people, etc. which could extend learning experiences for children. As his letter stated:

What would be the exciting results if one person at the division level were given the task to contact churches,

service clubs, senior citizens, businesses, etc. to offer persons therein the opportunity to make an impact on an impressionable life? I think there would be persons willing to help students with reading and writing, to help teachers with routine corrections, to tell their personal stories, to give tours of their business establishments, to share the joy of learning as they have known it.

Greg was satisfied with the communication he had received from the school. He mentioned the curricular summaries that were sent home, the debriefing he received from the school regarding an incident of aggression toward his son, the work sent home, etc. He was also generally satisfied with the report card and parent-teacher conferences. He noted such things as the number system for marks as providing a motivation, the number of categories, the value of the comment section, and the student-led conferences in which he had participated. He would like the school to provide more information on the parents' role in being supportive of the learning process. For example, he saw the need for more sessions on such topics as how to support learning at home, how to provide opportunities for learning when the family is together (e.g. on a trip, at the grocery store, etc.) and others such as supporting reading at home. He envisioned greater information as a way to improve communication and understanding of the educational process. He believed parents need to be the source and support for building the desire for education and then the school should provide it. It should be the parents' responsibility to motivate their children to learn and to teach basic values (such as respect). Greg LaFleur felt that parents are not being responsible for this, and as a

result, more and more responsibility is falling into the hands of the school. By supporting each other and working together he would see more mutual support and "there wouldn't be a "we/they" kind of feeling".

In concluding, Greg was asked what changes needed to occur to improve parent involvement. He listed several characteristics of an ideal parent-school partnership. They were:

1. communication about the goals and objectives of the school for the child, but also listening to the goals and objectives that I have for my child, both academic and behavioural terms;
2. mutual feeling of excitement and ownership about school; development with the parent community; of a mission statement, coat-of-arms and slogan;
3. openness, ownership and involvement;
4. requests to be involved that are of interest to me and tap my expertise;
5. personal contact through parent training sessions on how to use the home as an educational resource;
6. personal contact where teachers are encouraged to call me, drop in at my home;
7. a commitment to excellence, a mutual search for excellence;
8. a sense of responsibility on the part of parents to encourage teachers morally and emotionally;
9. a commitment on the part of the teacher to the profession;
10. an interest on the part of the teacher to develop a close relationship with students and the class as a whole with educational experiences being meaningful and fulfilling.

From the interview, it was evident that Greg LaFleur was committed to education and desired excellence. In his opinion, one way in which this could be achieved was through parent and community involvement, thus enhancing educational experiences for all children.

## CHAPTER 4

### Analysis of Research Findings

The purpose of the interviews was to determine why parents felt excluded from their children's education and why they felt no partnership with the school, even though parent involvement programs were initiated on an ongoing basis by the school. The literature offered several obstacles to parent involvement such as: differing purposes of the two environments, territoriality, lack of mutual understanding about roles and relationships, differing norms and values, preconceived beliefs about education, limited time for communications, superficiality of involvement, and lack of involvement in decision-making regarding the child's education. All of these obstacles were not embedded in each of the participant's stories but many shared common experiences and concerns. This chapter of the study will draw together the common themes presented in the data collected through the personal interviews. As well, I will seek to discover possible reasons for the sentiments of exclusion and offer thoughts as to ways in which these conflicts could be addressed.

Before beginning to draw together the common themes represented in the literature, I believe it is necessary to state that all interview participants indicated a genuine interest in the school system. They also found their experiences to be completely



different when no conflict existed, but once communication broke down it seemed almost impossible to arrive at reconciliation. Most of the participants had at least one other child in their family who had "fit the mold" presented by the school system and as a result, no real problems developed. In one case, that of Linda White, there appeared to be more of a breakdown in communication with the school than between her and a particular teacher. All participants very willingly became involved in the study with the aspiration that their input would be influential in the evaluation of policies and practices that impact on parent partnerships. In most cases there was little blaming by participants of the school system or teachers; rather the dominant theme was frustration due to their inability to be influential in improving situations for their children.

#### Differing Purposes and Perspectives of Parents and Educators

All participants had an intimate connection with their children, and a primary concern that they receive an education which would serve them well in their adult years. Some participants, Cathy Robinson, Susan James, Gail Duckworth, Suzanne Bridges and Bill Last felt the same degree of concern was not expressed by the school. On many occasions when they expressed a need for recognition of their children's individual learning and behaviour needs, they met an unsatisfactory response from the school--either "things were alright" or that, "in time, the child

would adjust to the classroom situation". Cathy Robinson, Suzanne Bridges, and Gail Duckworth felt from the beginning of their school experience with their child that modification to the program or extra support were necessary; however, this need was not acknowledged by the school. As parents, they were emotionally attached to their children which contrasted with teachers who had more formal and impersonal relationships (Waller, 1961; Lightfoot, 1978). The parents' opinions were that the reassurance on the part of teachers that, in time, the children would make the necessary adjustments, gave the appearance of a lack of concern. They said that once it was recognized by the school that individual programming or assessment should occur, they were relieved. They then felt they could begin to improve the situation for their children. This suggests that schools need to place greater value on the information parents have about their children and consider it seriously in planning for students.

Cathy Robinson, Susan James, Suzanne Bridges, and Bill Last all sensed that their concern for their children and attempts to help them may have been interpreted by the teachers as threatening. Both Susan James and Suzanne Bridges felt that the message they were getting from the school was that they were more involved than was necessary. However, as Cathy Robinson said, the teacher only had her child for one year whereas she was his parent for life, so she naturally had a much higher level of concern for and emotional attachment to the child. This supports research findings in the

literature which found that primary relationships naturally are different than secondary relationships established at school. However, if Bronfenbrenner's (1979) argument that children need different types of relationships is taken into consideration, then in order to maintain a working relationship, there needs to be recognition of the differing roles played and acceptance of each party's perspective. All too often both parties are quick to be critical of the other perspective. It would be more beneficial to recognize "where the other party is coming from" and be supportive of the different roles that can be played. Schools could capitalize on the parental concern by taking their perspective into consideration when problem solving and decision-making. In addition, the parent could act as a resource or support to the programming occurring within the classroom.

#### Territoriality and Trust

As noted above, the degree of parent involvement may have caused teachers to feel threatened. In the case of Cathy Robinson, she also sensed an unwillingness on the part of teachers to recognize that her child had special learning needs. They assured her that her son was fine. She was not allowed to pursue her concerns because the message she got from the teachers was that they did not see a need to be worried. Gail Duckworth had similar concerns and she was also addressed in the same way. Cathy Robinson said that in hindsight, she was "innocent and ignorant" at

that time and wished she would not have trusted the professionals. She was even told not to worry about teaching her son, that they would "take care of it". When her son was in Grade 2, Cathy began her own research and discovered useful resources at the Department of Education and at different support agencies. Another parent, Bill Last, was well read in the area of ADHD. He believed that his expert knowledge became a threat to the teachers. As well, he did not feel that his understanding of his child's learning needs was recognized by the teachers. These parents believed there was a perception, on the part of the school, that the teachers were the experts and that the parent knowledge base posed a threat to their understandings. In the parents' opinions, the teachers should not have felt threatened because the parents' expectations were not that the teachers should be totally knowledgeable about their child's learning needs. Instead, they saw their parental knowledge as being an assistance to teachers in understanding their children.

Cathy Robinson, Gail Duckworth, Suzanne Bridge, and Bill Last all indicated that the school could have been more willing to acknowledge the knowledge which they had acquired (through readings, support groups, courses, etc.) regarding their child's particular learning and behavioural needs. They sensed that teachers did not feel comfortable with someone other than themselves in the expert role. Rather than admitting that they were not knowledgeable about a situation, they glossed it over by telling parents that everything was under control, or they were

working it out. There appeared to be pressure, perhaps imposed by the organization and the hierarchial relationship for the teacher to be all knowing. However, the parents said they would have had greater respect for the teacher had they been open and honest in their communication.

Another type of territoriality existed in the story told by Linda White. There was an unwillingness on the part of the school to allow her, as well as other parents, into their children's classrooms. Linda questioned whether there was a need to hide something and said this approach built up and reinforced the "we/they" type of mentality. She saw the role of the parent as a resource to the teacher and the direct contact as a means of achieving ongoing communication, thus allowing the home and school to work together. She mentioned she was very welcome to help at hot dog days, to go on field trips, or bake for an event; but inclusion in the educational setting, which was the reason her children attended school, was discouraged. These comments reflected the literature (Henderson, 1988) which indicated that schools have been more than willing to have parents involved in the superficial events they sponsor, but meaningful involvement in their child's education was not encouraged. Boger et al. (1978), Morrison (1978), Seeley (1980) and Ziegler (1987) addressed this in their research and referred to it as one way communication. This approach to involvement built up barriers and reinforced them.

### Lack of Mutual Understanding

With the exception of Greg LaFleur, all participants had been involved in situations with the school where there was serious breakdown in communication. Cathy Robinson had become so frustrated with the inability of some teachers to understand that, if possible, she just removed herself and her son from the situation. Suzanne Bridge began working with a private support person due to frustrations she experienced with the public school system. Susan James made it very clear that she would not support her younger children being in the class of the teacher who she felt had made little effort to help her son during his Grade 6 year. As well, she did not seek support from the school and administration due to her negative experiences in the past.

There also appeared to be a need to establish more clearly the roles and responsibilities of the school and the parent. Susan James and Linda White both experienced frustration with not knowing how they could be involved and influential in changing the situation for their children. Susan James suggested that parents should perhaps have a role to play in teacher evaluations. All participants sensed a need for clarification of their roles and responsibilities, as well as those of the school, in order to enhance relationships.

Literature (Smith & Williamson, 1977) on interpersonal communication refers to relationships established with institutions as being formal; with the rules and roles of interested parties

being defined by the structure of the organization. As a result relationships are more likely to be complementary; that is, hierarchial, rather than symmetrical. One must question whether a balance of power and responsibility, promoting what Lightfoot (1978) termed creative conflict can ever exist between parents and the school. It is my belief that it is the school's responsibility to encourage supportive climates for meaningful dialogue to occur and in the interest of developing collaborative relationships. This is definitely an attainable goal because all participants recognized situations where their involvement had been valued. They had sensed mutual concern for their children and an openness to communication and problem solving. Furthermore, they saw specific instances where supportive, collaborative relationships could have been possible.

#### Differing Norms and Values

In my opinion as an educator, the values of the parents interviewed were very similar to those espoused by the school. This was exemplified by the parents who said they had a high need for their children to be productive members of society upon completion of their education. School values were supported by the parents. They saw a need for education but had not necessarily felt that their children were receiving the education needed in order to have the skills necessary for life in the community. For example, Susan James expressed concern regarding her son's ability

to function in a setting where greater organizational skills were necessary as well as good work habits. Her frustrations centred on the teacher's lack of concern regarding preparedness for the next grade. Cathy Robinson and Gail Duckworth also had serious concerns whether their sons would be prepared for the work world if they did not receive the basic education required. As parents, they wanted the best for their child and in order for this to be achieved, they saw a need for education.

It was very evident in the interviews with Susan James, Linda White, Suzanne Bridge, Bill Last and Greg Lafleur that they valued education, they supported the role education played in the development of their children, but that they did not always see the flexibility and collaboration necessary for enhancement of educational opportunities for their children. Each of them, expressed a desire to be a resource to the school in differing ways, but all sensed their support role was being blocked by the school. As Levin (1991) pointed out, during times of financial constraint they are an untapped resource upon which the system should capitalize.

#### Preconceived Beliefs about Education

Participants' preconceived beliefs about education tended to be very positive. They had faith that the education system worked for the benefit of all children. Generally, their own school experiences had been positive and they believed the same would be



true for their children.

Cathy Robinson said that when she first became a parent of a school-aged child she was innocent, trusting in the system to be knowledgeable and concerned about her child as she was. This was a preconception which was shattered when her child was in Kindergarten and Grade 1. She found that the school did not have all the answers to the problems, and did not seem overly concerned about her child. Suzanne Bridge tended to be of the same impression and had similar experiences.

Linda James' initial belief was that once her children entered school she could continue in a supportive role as she had during their nursery school years. She very quickly found, though, that the door was closed. She could not understand why her presence would be any different in a school classroom than in a pre-school program. As she said, from these experiences, children were very comfortable with and used to having parents in the room so this would be just a continuation of past practices.

Gail Duckworth's impressions of schools were that educators had great control, but this was not what she experienced. She felt that students had too much control today in comparison to when she had attended school. Her preconceived belief was that education should be as it was in the past.

There were no participants who said that they had had negative personal experiences as a child which could have brought fear and negativity to their adult perceptions of schools. They wanted to

be involved but had received messages in many different ways that their involvement was not desired.

### Superficiality of Involvement

It was Linda White and Greg LaFleur that were the most outspoken regarding the kind of involvement encouraged by the school system. Their experiences led them to believe that, in general, the school only wanted involvement in such activities as field trips, hot dog or hamburger days, baking for an event, or attending a school concert. They saw an important role for the parent as a resource to the teacher and both expressed a need for a divisional or school-based staff person to be a coordinator of these resources.

In order to be able to support classroom programming, Linda White explained that parents needed to receive information regarding themes being addressed and then be requested to serve a role in support of the theme. There might be a personal interest, a professional connection, or an ability to support individuals or small groups during the learning process. Both Linda and Greg recognized that teachers have very heavy work loads and that tapping expertise in the community would be of assistance to teachers and would help to provide enrichment to programs. Greg LaFleur's example of meaningful involvement was when he was asked to visit a class and give students information on birds; a personal interest of his and one in which he felt he had expertise to share.

This experience made him feel valued. Parent involvement literature would support this thinking in that it speaks of "parents as resource" as being a valuable asset to the school. Research (Keeves, 1974; Lightfoot, 1978; Melnick & Fiene, 1990) has proven that student achievement and parent attitudes toward school improve with meaningful involvement.

Greg LaFleur also saw a need for parents to be involved in goal setting for and with their children. He envisioned a role for classroom meetings where parents and teacher discussed classroom expectations and guidelines for discipline. He wondered whether this would be feasible in a society with differing norms and values, but at the same time, he could see a real benefit for both parents and teacher if it were done. It is interesting to note that these comments reflect some of the more recent literature (Boger et al., 1978; Edwards and Redfern, 1988; Gunderman & Halcomb, 1991) in the area of parent involvement. As well, in the introduction of the thesis, it is stated that meaningful involvement in decision-making is integral to parents feeling included rather than excluded. This begs the question whether too much ownership is assumed by the teacher, thus prohibiting students and their parents to assume greater responsibility through goal setting, student-led conferences and classroom meetings. Parents generally want to feel involved in, and be knowledgeable about, the program and meaningful involvement is one way of achieving this understanding.

Involvement in Decision-Making and Time for Communication

All participants wanted to be heard and to have their point of view taken into consideration when plans were being made for their children's education. McConkey (1985) supported this point of view by stating that "joint decision-making epitomizes a partnership in action. When one or other partner starts making all the decisions, the partnership has dissolved" (p.45).

Cathy Robinson, Gail Duckworth, Suzanne Bridge and Bill Last had been involved in meetings where educational plans were being made for their children. They felt excluded from the process because their input was not requested so their presence was basically to be told what was being done and going to be done. They felt very uninvolved in the process. As McConkey (1985) said, if a person is not involved in decision-making, they are not a partner. Gail Duckworth indicated that they were invited to meetings only to be told what was going to happen to their child and received the impression that the school had little interest in hearing the parents' point of view. Both Cathy Robinson and Bill Last stated that they had information regarding their child's learning needs which was not considered in the planning process. Gibb (1961), cited in Smith & Williamson (1977), set out "Categories of Behaviour Characteristic of Defensive and Supportive Climates". A supportive climate is described as one that: (a) is open to new information, (b) does not have predetermined solutions or attitudes, (c) exhibits behaviour that is honest, forthright and

respectful of other's feelings, (d) expresses comments with empathy and care, (e) is respectful of the role and perspective of the other party, and (f) is open to change of personal perceptions (for a detailed comparison, see Appendix E). It is through the establishment of open lines of communication that collaborative relationships can be established and parent-school partnerships developed.

Interestingly, parents did not feel a need for greater time for communication if their children were meeting with success. It was only when time was needed for problem solving that they valued longer opportunities to discuss. In fact, Cathy Robinson said if things were going well, there was no need to meet with teachers because her daughters would succeed with or without that communication network.

#### General Commentary

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, all parents interviewed were interested in the school system and were willing to support the system in cases where no conflict had occurred. However, with the exception of Greg Lafleur, it was apparent that these parents had experienced extreme frustration in dealing with the school when different opinions existed regarding their children's education. The stories they told were filled with emotion and passion. This was indicated by their interest to be involved in the study, their emotion-filled choice of words, the

frustration and animosity in their voice and the thoughtful, articulate message they had to tell. Their emotion was most evident when they addressed the two key barriers of lack of involvement in decision-making and differing purposes.

Lack of involvement in decision-making was inherent in each of the stories told. In many cases, parents were not provided with opportunities to give the school information regarding their children's learning needs and to participate in decisions; whether it be in initial contact with the school, in individualized student planning meetings or in meetings held to discuss issues. My original argument in the thesis was that meaningful involvement was not solicited by the school but rather superficial events were planned which were tokenistic in nature. These events were promoted by the school as opportunities for parents to be involved but in reality they were not. Rather, as Gordon (1976) said, they were occasions to observe as an audience or to receive information. The parents interviewed were frustrated with this superficial involvement and were requesting opportunities to be involved in goal setting and problem solving at meetings. As well, many desired to serve as a resource to the school as volunteers in their children's classrooms on a regular basis or to act as a resource to the teacher in areas of particular personal interest. These ideas fit Seeley's (1989) model for collaborative parent involvement rather than the model which has been the traditional approach used in the school system.

These findings lead one to question how this fundamental barrier to the teacher-parent relationship can be addressed. It is necessary to examine the degree of involvement desired on the part of parents and determine whether it is dependent on the situation. A continuum exists from superficial to collaborative involvement. Clearly, the parents interviewed were unhappy and frustrated with the superficial end of the continuum, specifically in situations where their child did not fit the mold of the school system. There are many factors to consider in deciding where the school is perceived to be positioned along this continuum: the individual teacher, the school administration, the parent council of the school, the school division resource personnel, the division administration, the school board, the provincial government (particularly, the Minister of Education and Training) as well as the teacher education system. It is in consideration of these factors that recommendations for improved relations can be made.

Differing purposes, the second barrier which caused the greatest problem for parents, resulted in territoriality. As the literature (Waller, 1961; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lightfoot, 1978) indicated relationships between the school and parents are naturally controversial because of different perspectives as well as the complementary relationship (Smith & Williamson, 1977) that is established.

One of the major frustrations for those interviewed was the school's lack of understanding of their children's needs. They had

a strong emotional connection to their children whereas the teacher had a more formal, less emotional relationship with many students. The parents tended to have a sense of urgency regarding the educational plans for their children. On the other hand, from the parents' perspective, the school indicated that the student just needed to develop and would come along fine if given time. When parents perceived the teacher to be complacent, the anxiety grew. Eventually communication broke down and very little could be done to resolve any issues. It was during the description of these situations that parents became very emotional, showing anger, frustration and occasionally discouragement. Interestingly, parents' perceptions of teachers who best met their expectations were those who showed a high degree of commitment and interest in their children's education.

In order to address the barrier of differing purposes, there needs to be examination of the present structures within schools. One might question whether as Waller (1961) and Lightfoot (1978) have determined that conflict is endemic to the very nature of the relationship. One of the basic factors which contributes to the conflict is control. In the past, the school has always maintained control through sources of power such as expert knowledge and the organizational structure. With power resting in the school's hands, parents have been excluded very easily from decisions that were made. However, these are changing times for society. Established institutions and their power are being questioned and



schools are not exempt. This raises certain questions: Who should have control of the power base? How much of the power base would schools be willing to relinquish? How much control of power should schools retain? How much power over decisions should parents have?.

Differences in power can lead to conflicts between parents and teachers. In the following chapter, recommendations will be made as to how to encourage more egalitarian relationships. This approach could promote the sentiment that the parental point of view is being considered in decisions that are made regarding their children's education. These recommendations will address what the implications are for the establishment of meaningful, collaborative parent partnerships in education today. There will also be recommendations made for further research on this topic in order to be able to better understand and make more specific recommendations regarding parent involvement.

## CHAPTER 5

### Conclusion

In the preceding chapter, the key barriers to parental involvement were determined as lack of involvement in decision-making as well as differing purposes and perspectives of parents and educators.

In regard to parental involvement in decision-making, a collaborative approach needs to be operationalized in initial contact with parents. As well, discussions regarding the child's education need to be valued at all times, not just when an issue arises. Time needs to be allocated for meaningful involvement; not only when a problem arises, but also to facilitate discussions regarding curricular planning and goal setting in the interest of better understanding the child and establishing good working relationships with parents. Schools need to reexamine approaches to parent involvement in order to begin to break down the defensive climates and start establishing supportive ones where collaborative decision-making can occur. A first step would be to ask parents for information about their child or their impression of a situation before telling them the school's perspective. This shift in approach could in itself promote joint decision-making and the beginning of parent partnerships with the school. School divisions need to operationally define the terms delegation model and

collaborative model. Once these definitions have been determined it would be necessary to develop a continuum with these terms at opposite ends. It would then be feasible to determine where parents, teachers and schools fall along this continuum. These solutions reflect my original working hypothesis that parents are frustrated with lack of opportunities for meaningful involvement in decisions made regarding their children's education.

Differing purposes of the two environments are a source of tension and frustration. I believe that once the relationship becomes stressed to the degree of those parents interviewed, there needs to be serious consideration given to alternatives outside of the school setting. An option could be the intervention of a third party who could assist in lessening defensive postures during meetings. Since the school possesses greater power and authority, this person could act as an advocate for the parents and the child. One way in which this could be achieved would be for the division to employ personnel who could work as a mediator in these situations. Parents would develop trust with this person and be willing to risk in a less threatening environment. Schools need to be willing to admit that they are not always successful and that it would be in the best interest of both parties to find a solution to the problem outside of that particular school setting. An answer might be another school environment. This should be done with no guilt for either party but rather with recognition that there are situations when relationships are irreparable. Schools need to

acknowledge that they can not always meet the needs of every student and thus invite the parent to explore other school settings which would be more conducive to their child's learning needs. This would provide a very good alternative because during the interviews parents usually cited one situation where a positive relationship had been established with a teacher and where they were very pleased with the school.

Many of the approaches to teaching and learning do not allow for the different learning needs of students who do not fit the mold. In several of the interviews, parents said that their child had a special learning need, such as ADD, which had resulted in frustrating situations because either due to lack of knowledge regarding the learning needs or lack of willingness to adapt programming, the teacher had not made the accommodations necessary to result in successful learning situations for the student. Most students function very well in the present structures but there are a small number of students for various reasons, that need alternatives. Teachers and administrators need to be open and flexible to accommodate the individual learning needs of students. In order to best understand the student they also need the input from parents regarding what strategies work best with their child when in the home setting. This information is best shared early in the year when individualized education plans are begun.

### Implications and Recommendations

Educators and parents have one primary link in common, which is the young people of our society. It is with the best interests of these children that the Panel on Education Legislation Reform regarding the Public School's Act and the Education Administration Act (February, 1993) sets out one of the goals of education to be:

to work in partnership with parents and the community at large to develop the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, ethical, cultural and aesthetic potential of all students" (p.iii).

A Free Press article (April 28, 1993) summarizing this report stated that all involved in education were to "abandon jurisdictional turf in support of children" and that "parents should have access to records and files on their children, as well as full partnership in decision-making regarding educational programs being considered for their children".

The government is definitely advocating parent partnerships but it will be the responsibility of school divisions to determine how these partnerships will be operationalized. There are implications for the teacher, parent, school administrator, school parent councils, division-based administrators and resource personnel as well as the policy making body, the school board. The following recommendations are made to these stakeholders regarding their respective roles in improving parent involvement initiatives in schools:

Teachers:

1. that approaches to involvement include parents in discussions of curricular programming and goal setting throughout the school year;
2. that there be a recognition of and respect for the knowledge of the parents;
3. that there be a willingness to listen and be open to the parent's view, altering plans and personal perceptions accordingly;
4. that a reexamination of approaches to teaching and learning be made in order to better accommodate the needs of students who do not "fit the mold", and;
5. that teachers are considered an integral part of the school support team in making decisions for individualized education plans.

Parents:

1. that parents respect the knowledge of the teacher and assure that their involvement does not intrude on the independence of the child or inhibit the development of a relationship between the teacher and child;
2. that there be a respect for and willingness to hear the teacher's view in making decisions regarding the child's education, and;
3. that parents be an integral part of meetings with the school support team, providing their perspective to assist with planning for the child's individualized education plan.

School Administration:

1. that recognition be given by the school to the differing roles and perspectives, and that these varying perspectives be acknowledged as valuable input during the planning process;
2. that an atmosphere of openness be the basis for communication in order to break down territorial barriers;
3. that the school culture advocate parent participation in meaningful discussions with the school not just superficial events

(i.e. volunteer in child's classroom, meeting with child and teacher to set goals, meeting to discuss curriculum and how parents can be supportive of the program (resource role);

4. that adequate time for problem solving and discussion in situations where it is needed be recognized and supported from a budgetary perspective;

5. that schools examine their structures and practices and determine how the power base will be shared in order to alter all-powerful, all-knowing stances which set up and reinforce hierarchial relationships;

6. that flexibility and a creative approach be given to each situation (once labelling occurs, communication tends to break down); and,

7. that the school ethos be that individualized education planning meetings include participation and involvement of all interested parties.

#### Division-Based Administrators and Resource Personnel:

1. that in situations where communication breakdown occurs, a third party, someone outside of the relationship, becomes involved in order to open a blocked mode of communication allowing new role relationships to develop and redefinition of established role relationships (Smith & Williamson, 1977);

2. that consideration be given to the allocation of personnel to coordinate volunteer services available through parent and community involvement;

3. that an examination be made of the power which has in the past been controlled by the school system and to determine how it might better reflect current thinking in the area of public involvement in decision-making, and;

4. that school divisions examine current structures which have caused barriers to involvement and determine systemic changes that could occur in order to have a more collaborative approach to involvement.

#### School Board:

1. that a policy regarding parental involvement be developed which would give definition to the division's model for parent

involvement as well as determine roles, responsibilities and processes.

School Parent Councils:

1. that an examination of the purpose and role of parent councils be made in regard to parent involvement at the school;
2. that the council act as a liaison body between home and school;
3. that opportunities to learn about and better understand the education system be facilitated by the council, and;
4. that they play an integral role in the development of a volunteer program within the school.

Teacher Education Institutions:

1. that courses on approaches to parent involvement as well as expectations for professional ethics be developed and taught to all students in the program;
2. that all students in the program receive at least one course on differentiating approaches to teaching in the interest of better accommodating the needs of all students. Incorporated in this course should be information on the different learning styles and needs of special needs students; and,
3. that courses offered develop a high degree of confidence in professional ability so that teachers are willing to take risks and be open to new ideas.

The recommendations above are proactive steps that need to be taken in order to enhance the development of parent partnerships with the school. However, from the research findings, it is obvious that situations will develop over time in which communication breakdown occurs. School systems need to recognize that crisis situations will develop and determine ways in which they can best deal with them. The following recommendations are



made regarding these stressed relationships:

1. that school personnel put aside personal bias and approach the conflict situation with a professional stance;
2. that parents be given opportunity to state their concerns during meetings before the school lays out parameters and plans for the student and that parental input be incorporated into future plans for the student;
3. that professional staff receive training in mediation skills;
4. that schools validate the concerns expressed by the parents by demonstrating through action a genuine interest in the student's educational future;
5. that schools encourage third party intervention in order to provide objectivity and equal opportunity for both parties to participate in discussions;
6. that acknowledgement be given to the fact that not all situations can be resolved and in the interest of all stakeholders it would be best if alternative arrangements be sought; and
7. that schools recognize crisis situations may result in irreparable differences of opinion and be able to move away from the situation without sentiments of guilt and failure.

In conclusion, parents interviewed were frustrated with approaches to parent involvement and felt excluded from their childrens' education. It has become very evident that open lines of communication and mutual respect are the building blocks for parent involvement and partnerships to develop. It is only then that collaborative decision-making can occur for the betterment of our future, the students of today.

### Recommendations for Further Study

This thesis has considered parent involvement from only one perspective; that of the parents. It is obvious from the data that the parents interviewed had major concerns regarding their involvement in decisions made for their children. I recommend that a case study of a similar situation be done but that it be approached from the perspectives of all stakeholders (teachers, parents, child, school, etc.). It would also be interesting to compare sentiments expressed in this study to those alluded to by parents when they had experienced a positive situation. There are definitely reasons for the differences and they could be explored in detail. The findings also lead to a need to examine why special needs students were often those who encountered difficulties with the present system and structures. This leads one to question whether specific changes need to be made to accommodate their learning needs. A study could be directed solely to the needs of these students and their parents.

Finally, a study of the present structures of power in schools would provide interesting data. The study could examine the balance of power and whether it could be shared among stakeholders. It would be interesting to know how much power schools would be willing to relinquish in the interest of

promoting meaningful decision-making. How much power needs to be maintained by the organization in order for it to be viable, and what decisions could be shared with other interested parties?

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## APPENDICES



## Appendix A

WINNIPEG, MB  
May 3, 1991

Addressed to Divisional Employees  
- Principal, Vice-principal and Superintendent

Dear Education Leaders,

I would like to thank you and your staff for your hard work in bringing the joys and meanings of learning to my three children. I am writing to offer some ideas and some constructive criticism regarding the way my children are being educated and the way our public schools are operated.

My starting point is a desire for excellence in education. My children, as do all children, have certain gifts and interests. School is one, but an important one, place where cognitive, affective and psychomotor intelligences can be developed.

I also start with the recognition that teaching is an increasingly challenging profession. I taught public and private school for eleven years in the field of music. I know the stress of facing up to 300 different students each cycle. I know the strain of motivating students in learning when basic needs for structure and love in their lives have not been met in the home.

I also start with the assumption that the school classroom is a place where parents and other adult volunteers can make a significant impact on the quality of education. The teacher cannot be expected to handle alone the complex web of needs that a classroom of the 1990's represents. I assume that teachers are ready and eager to welcome volunteers into their classroom. I assume that teachers realize the tremendous potential for enhanced learning represented by extra adult attention given to the students.

If these presuppositions are correct, I am led to several questions. These questions are not intended to focus on individual teachers, for we have been satisfied that the teachers of our children are fine persons and good workers. We have had several of them to our home as guests and have appreciated them. Please do not make any effort to associate my comments with my childrens' teacher. Please take these comments in general, and if you should communicate them to anyone, stress that these are not directed at individuals.

My first and basic question is: "How seriously does the school value volunteers?". I am aware that letters have come home requesting volunteers. Nor have we ever felt any barrier to offering our services other than the hectic schedule of a full-time graduate student and a full-time homemaker/breadwinner. Yet consider the following:

1. We have never been called in fall by the classroom teacher to encourage our participation in the classroom for the coming ten months.

2. There has never been a meeting of all the parents of any one of the nine classrooms our children have belonged to over the past three years.
3. I am not aware of any investment of time and personnel by the administration of the division in general or of the school in particular in pursuing and coordinating community volunteers.

Let me make a few suggestions. In my years as teacher I did a considerable amount of phoning parents, both by way of introduction or to request help. Parents were usually surprised that the teacher would phone. Their response was quite uniformly positive to whatever I had to say. I suggest to you that if each teacher would contact the parents at the beginning of the year and dialogue with them about the opportunities for volunteering, the volunteer support would go up considerably. (It would go up dramatically if the teacher took the trouble to visit each home.)

I have never heard of a school encouraging its teachers to meet with the parents of their students as a group. But why not? (I have been able to think of no reasons other than lack of interest or courage or innovation. But surely not! I believe that you and your staff are dedicated professionals. Perhaps you have just never thought of it, or quite possibly I am naive). The parents represent the values, the home situations, the resources, the attitudes towards education which significantly impact the child who comes to fill a seat in the classroom. I believe there would be a special kind of learning which could take place at a meeting involving these very parents. The teacher would gain immediate insight into the motivation of individual students to learn. The parents would sense which other homes represented at the meeting share their values and would know which friendships to especially encourage for their children. An overall commitment to the educational process could be developed and plans made to fulfill this commitment. Are teachers free to take such an initiative?

Such a meeting could frankly and openly address problems. The teacher could say: "I am finding it tough going in my class. There are twenty-one individuals in the room, and I identify six of them as having behaviour or learning problems. I work fifty hours a week, but still I fear the classroom is not getting the quality kind of education to which I have dedicated my career. I have to spend much of my time babysitting? What can we do?" Parents could say: "When I visited the class for lunchroom supervision I sensed a considerable lack of respect for me as an adult. Do we as parents allow this? How must the teacher feel? Let's talk about how we teach our children to be fair and courteous and respectful to adults".

Such meetings would also be opportunities for administrators to show leadership in helping the parents educate their children. The principal or superintendent could say: "Have you ever considered the amazing potential of the newspaper for education? That's right, the simple newspaper!". He or she could go on to give colourful and engaging examples of how history, science, literature and life values can be found and discussed by ordinary in the lowly newspaper. This is just an example of educational leadership. Is the leadership of school and school system responsible for spreading the good news of the enrichment that education brings to life?

I have suggested that the teacher phone the parents, that the teacher call a meeting with the parents as a whole. I am presupposing that teacher and adults are able to work together in a cooperative manner for the common good. I would also like to suggest that a higher priority needs to be placed on volunteer recruitment

and development. I have some faith that, even in our busy world, there are untapped volunteers "out there". What would be the exciting results if one person at the Division level were given the task to contact churches, service clubs, senior citizens, businesses, etc. to offer persons therein the opportunity to make an impact on an impressionable life. I think there would be persons willing to help students with reading and writing, to help teachers with routine correction, to tell their personal stories, to give tours of their business establishments, to share the joy of learning as they have known it.

Perhaps there would even be room at the school level for volunteer development. In the schools in which I taught the vice-principal was always the "bad guy". He or she dealt with the majority of discipline problems. Many of these problems would disappear in one-on-one contexts. If the vice-principal was to make time in the early part of the term to obtain several volunteers, he or she might not have as steady a stream of discipline problems in his or her office.

I want to support you in your work. I know something of how it feels to be an educator. I have my own children. We have volunteered only a few hours a month to date and perhaps other parents are equally strapped for time. But I think there are resources we are not using. We seem to think education is solely up to the teacher. Do you feel that way? I want an even better education for my children than the one they are getting. The teacher alone cannot provide that education.

I close with the question: "How seriously does the school and the division take volunteers? Are you really tapping the resources for education in this community? Are you really excited about the rich possibilities for education when home and school work together? Are you really releasing your teachers and your administrators to be educational leaders?"

I await your reply. Thank you.

Sincerely,

A concerned parent

(not original copy - re-typed to maintain anonymity April 24, 1992)

## Appendix B

Faculty of Education,  
Department of Educational  
Administration and Foundations  
University of Manitoba  
Winnipeg, Manitoba  
April 24, 1992

(Name of Parent)  
(Address of Parent)

Dear (Name of Parent)

In completion of my Master in Education degree, I am conducting a study in the area of parent involvement in education. The title of my thesis is Parent Perceptions of Obstacles to Parent-Teacher Partnerships in Education.

Your name has been given to me as a parent who has expressed a desire to become involved in the education of your child(ren) but feel that the school has been slow to accept your offer. The purpose of this study is to examine from your point of view what obstacles exist and what changes would promote partnerships between you and your child's school.

I would appreciate if you would be willing to participate in the study by sharing your personal opinions on this subject. The information will be collected through interviews which will take place at a convenient location, during the months of May and June of this year. I would like to interview you twice with the first interview lasting approximately one hour and the second about a half hour. You can be assured that all information that is shared will be kept in confidence. It would be helpful if you would allow me to tape our sessions so that all details can be recorded. These tapes will be destroyed once the research project is completed. By signing the consent form which is enclosed, you will indicate your willingness to be interviewed. The second consent form refers to agreement to be quoted in the discussion part of the thesis. You can be assured that quotations will remain anonymous. Quotations could prove to be very valuable in supporting an argument, thus your permission would be greatly appreciated.

Your participation is entirely voluntary and if at any time you wish to withdraw from the study, you have that right. If you decide to withdraw, I would appreciate notice through a letter sent to me at the address at the top of this letter. It is my aspiration that results of this study will affect change in the area of parent involvement in education. When the study is completed, I will send you a summary of the results.

In closing, I request that you return the consent forms that are attached in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope by May 8, 1992 indicating your willingness to participate. Please keep the duplicate copy of the consent form for your records. Shortly after I receive your consent form, I will call you in order to set up a date for the first interview. Your consideration to this request is most appreciated since your participation is instrumental to my completion of my degree.

Yours sincerely,

Joycelyn Fournier-Gawryluk

Parent Involvement in Education

Part A:

Consent Form

I have read the letter requesting for my participation in the research project entitled Parent Perceptions of Obstacles to Parent-Teacher Partnerships in Education and agree to participate in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Name- please print)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

Telephone number (in order to arrange an interview) \_\_\_\_\_  
(home)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(work)

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Part B:

Consent Form

I have read the letter requesting to quote anonymously what I say during the interview conducted on the study Parent Perceptions of Obstacles to Parent-Teacher Partnerships in Education and agree to the request.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature)

\*\*Please return in the self-addressed stamped envelope by May 8, 1992

## Appendix C



## Appendix C

### Parent Interview Schedule

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: \_\_\_\_\_

As indicated in the letter sent to you earlier, the purpose of this study is to gain insight on your point of view regarding parent involvement programs initiated by the school. It has been indicated that you have opinions regarding your involvement in your child's education but have not necessarily been heard. It is important that I receive your point of view on this subject and you can be assured that it will be kept confidential. Before I begin taping the interview, I would just like to confirm that it will be acceptable to you. As stated in the letter, these tapes will be destroyed after the research has been completed. (wait for answer to inquiry) I would like to open with some factual questions about the number of children you have, their ages, etc.

#### Opening Questions

1. How many children do you have? What are their ages and gender?
2. What school do your children attend in the division?
3. In which grades are your children?
4. Have your children ever attended another school?

#### Questions on Parent Involvement

1. Could you begin with a description of one or two situations which made you feel excluded from you child's education?
2. Why did you feel excluded? (Probe for: differing purposes, territoriality, lack of mutual understanding, differing norms and values, previous negative experiences, limited time for communication, and planned events being superficial)
3. What could have been done differently in your opinion by the school in order to change how you felt?
4. What obstacles do you believe exist which impede change to occur in this area at the school?

5. Do you think there is anything you could have done differently in this situation? If so, what would that have been?

6. Could you describe an initiative by the school that made you feel valued?

7. What do you feel is the difference between this example and the other(s) when you felt excluded?

8. Is there any information that I have not requested that is pertinent to the study from your point of view?

I would like to thank you for your opinions and your time. Could we set up a date and time for the follow-up interview which will take about 30 minutes.

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Time: \_\_\_\_\_

**Areas to probe if situation relates to it:**

Literature sources (as found in the thesis):

- Page 6 \* differing purposes and motives of the two environments  
- "natural enemies" vs. "natural allies"
- Page 7 \* territoriality  
- defensive, resentful stance  
- can be accentuated by ambiguity of roles and relationships
- Page 7&8 \* lack of mutual understanding about roles and relationships
- Page 8 \* differing norms and values between two environments
- Page 9 \* previous experiences  
- negative experiences by the parent as a child can influence how they relate to the school as an adult
- Page 10 \* limited time for communication on the part of both parties
- Page 11 \* events planned by the school are regarded as superficial
- Page 17 \* parents are participants in decision-making regarding their children  
- goal setting, etc.

## Appendix D

Winnipeg, Manitoba  
April 24, 1992

Superintendent  
Winnipeg, Manitoba

Dear Sir,

As you are aware, I have been working on my Master in Education program for the past three years. I have just completed my last course in the Educational Administration and Foundations Department and have begun working on my thesis. You will find enclosed a copy of my thesis proposal entitled Parent Perceptions of Obstacles to Parent-Teacher Partnerships in Education. Since I will be interviewing parents in the school division, I am writing to ask permission to conduct the study. I would like to note that I will be doing the research as a Master's student and not as an employee of the division and that the division will not be identified or identifiable in the thesis.

It is my intention to share information from the research project with you and it is my aspiration that the division will gain insight into this area from the study. I would appreciate a letter of permission at your earliest convenience so that I can proceed with the research.

In appreciation of your attention to this matter.

Yours sincerely,

J. Fournier-Gawryluk

## Appendix E

## Categories of Behaviour Characteristic of Supportive and Defensive Climates

### Defensive Climates

1. Evaluation
  - speech or gestures render judgment.
2. Control
  - implication that there is a correct answer or pre-determined solution (leads to feelings of inadequacy).
3. Strategy
  - behavior that can be perceived as ambiguous and having multiple motivations.
4. Neutrality
  - one person indicates a lack of concern for the other's welfare.
5. Superiority
  - one person implies he/she is superior in position, power, wealth, intellectual ability, physical characteristics, etc.
6. Certainty
  - dogmatism - one person unwilling to consider the other person's perceptions of a situation or unwilling to consider changes in his/her own perceptions (will produce defensiveness in the other person).

### Supportive Climates

1. Description
  - presents information that does not imply that the receiver change behaviour or attitude.
2. Problem orientation
  - approach assures participants there are no hidden motives, no pre-determined solutions, attitudes or methods.
3. Spontaneity
  - behaviour that is free, open, honest and appropriate for the situation.
4. Empathy
  - express care for the other's feelings and respect for the other's worth which are supportive and defense reducing.
5. Equality
  - one person tries to keep the roles within the transaction on an even level.
  - no role is better than the other
6. Provisionalism
  - willingness to be open to the other person's views and to be open to change of the person's own perceptions of a situation.

Jack Gibb (1961) cited in Smith, D. & Williamson, L. K.  
Interpersonal Communication, Roles, Rules, Strategies and Games.  
(1977).