Implementing Parent Engagement Policy in an Increasingly Culturally Diverse Community of New Immigrants: How New is "New"?

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Abstract

The Ontario Ministry of Education announced the Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools in 2010. This policy aims to support parent engagement and provides a vision of its implementation at schools, boards, and the ministry. This mixed methods case study sheds light on its implementation and thus its implication by exploring the parent engagement experiences of parents and teachers. The study results reveal that the actual and desired levels of engagement are different between new immigrants and the established or non-immigrant families, and that teacher education in parent engagement is desirable in optimizing parent partnerships.

Keywords: immigrants, parent engagement, policy, parent involvement, teacher education, professional development

Résumé

Le Ministère de l'éducation de l'Ontario a annoncé le Parent politique d'engagement pour les écoles de l'Ontario en 2010. Cette politique vise à soutenir l'engagement parent et

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fournit une vision de sa mise en œuvre dans les écoles, les conseils scolaires et le ministère. Cette méthodes mixtes étude de cas met en lumière sa mise en oeuvre et donc son implication en explorant la participation des parents expériences vécues par les parents et les enseignants. Les résultats de l'étude révèlent la réelle et désirée niveaux d'engagement sont différentes entre les nouveaux immigrants et les établis ou de non-immigrant, familles et que la formation des maîtres en participation des parents est souhaitable dans l'optimisation des partenariats parent.

Mots-clés : immigrés, participation des parents, la participation des parents, la formation des enseignants, le développement professionnel, politique, défense des intérêts du public

Introduction

The demographic change projected by Statistics Canada (2010) for the next 20 years has significant implications for the education systems in Canada. While the Ontario Ministry of Education acknowledges the importance of partnerships with parents in support of student achievement (Epstein, 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2007) in its Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), little research has been done in Ontario to provide insights into optimizing parent engagement specifically regarding the growing population of visible minority immigrant families. There is also a void that needs to be filled in terms of the understanding of the unique perspectives of new immigrants in relation to parent engagement, especially when the Ontario Ministry of Education's definition of new immigrants (those who arrived in Canada within the last three years) is taken into account. Considering the above, this mixed methods study identifies the actual and desired levels of parent engagement, explores the differences between new immigrants and the established or non-immigrant families in their perceptions on the topic, and notes the implication for teacher education in parent engagement for comprehensive implementation of the Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools.

Background

Conceptual Framework for Parent Involvement and Parent Engagement

Numerous researchers have found that students do better when their parents are involved and/or engaged with their education. A comprehensive review of 51 quantitative and qualitative research studies have shown that parental involvement and engagement in the education of their child (from early childhood to Grade 12) are linked to outcomes such as increased academic achievement, higher graduation rates, improved attendance, more commitment to homework, improved emotional well-being, more positive attitudes about school, and improved behaviour (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Consistent with this finding, another meta-analysis of 52 quantitative studies focusing on the impact of parent

involvement on urban high school students specifically yields the same conclusions (Jeynes, 2007).

Over the years, many theoretical models/frameworks have been developed to describe the various types of parent involvement. This study uses Epstein's (1995) "over-lapping spheres of influence" theoretical model of parent involvement. Epstein recogniz-es that the more the three spheres of school, family, and community overlap, that is, the more they work together, the more the students benefit. Epstein (1996) acknowledges that parent involvement activities range from family-based activities to school-based activities (see also Jeynes, 2007). Based on the above recognition and numerous research studies about parent involvement at all grade levels, a theoretical framework of six major types of involvement, parenting, communicating, volunteering at school, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating in terms of accessing community resources, evolved. For example, parenting activities relate to parents setting home conditions conducive to the student's growth and development, discussing their expectations with the student, un-derstanding adolescent development and teen issues, and conversing with the student reg-ularly. Communicating activities involve exchanges between home and school regarding the student's education programs and progress through various means and medium. Vol-unteering activities can be parents acting as volunteers and/or as audiences at the school or in other locations to support student and school programs. Learning at home activities entail parents spending time with their children in academic learning activities at home that contribute to the student's success in school, such as monitoring homework, discuss-ing interactive homework, goal setting for academic subjects, and other curricular-linked activities and decisions about courses, academic programs, and postsecondary paths. Decision-making activities encompass parents engaging in various school committees and/or other outside organizations, which involve developing, reviewing, and improving school policies and mission statements that affect students and their families. Collaborat-ing activities consist of parents drawing upon their resources to strengthen student learn-ing and development, some examples being parents appearing as guest speakers, using their connections with organizations to strengthen the school programs, participating in community events with students, and encouraging students to contribute to the service of their communities (Epstein, Jansorn, Sheldon, Sanders, Salinas, & Simon, 2008, p. 197).

While some researchers identified limitations to Epstein's (1995) framework under certain geographic, socio-economic, and cultural contexts, and a recent research by

Robinson and Harris (2014) suggested that some types of parent engagement activities such as volunteering and decision making do not necessarily benefit students academically, it is still a theoretical model that consistently integrates all aspects of parent engagement with research findings based on the model supported by results obtained by other researchers in the field (Bower & Griffin, 2011; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Jeynes, 2007; Kohl, Lengua, & McMahon, 2000; López, 2001; Miksic, 2014). As researchers remain flexible and adaptive to local realities and experiences in its application, Epstein's framework continues to be the most reviewed, referenced, and utilized model in the area of parent involvement research (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002).

This study focuses on Epstein's (1995) "Overlapping Spheres of Influence – Framework of Six Types of Involvement" because (a) the framework was reviewed, referenced, and utilized in studies by most researchers (Jordan, Orozco, & Averett, 2002); (b) the Ministry of Education referenced Epstein et al. (2008) in its parent engagement policy document (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010); and (c) three Ontario Principals' Councils cited Epstein (2011) and provided a parent involvement survey that was based on Epstein's (1995) framework in their joint resource document designed to help school administrators implement the parent engagement policy.

Meanwhile, the connection between parents and schools was defined by some as a continuum from parents taking on a passively informed role, including receiving information from school via various media such as letters, newsletters, emails, and so on; to an *involved* role, including attending meetings, events, and supporting school programs; to an *engaged* role, including providing input and participating in discussions and decision-making processes at school (Alberta Education, 2011; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Pushor, 2012, 2011; Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). Since the terms *parent involvement* and *parent engagement* are used interchangeably in Ontario Ministry of Education publications, they are used as such in this study.

Canada's Demographic Change

According to Statistics Canada (2010), the proportion of the Canadian population consisting of foreign-born persons will continue to rise, reaching between 25% and 28% in 2031. The projected proportion of visible minority persons within the foreign-born population would increase from 54% in 2006 to about 71% in 2031. Thus, at least two

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out of three foreign-born persons in Canada could belong to a visible minority and, most new immigrants are projected to come from the visible minority groups of Chinese, South Asian, Black, Filipino, and Southeast Asian. In terms of detailed projected diversity for 2031, Statistics Canada identifies that 36% of the population under the age of 15 will belong to a visible minority group. South Asians and Chinese should still be the largest visible minority groups, and people whose mother tongue is neither English nor French could reach from at least 29% to 32% of the population. Meanwhile, it was projected that first- and second-generation persons between zero and 14 years of age would increase from 31% in 2006 to nearly 44% of the population in 2031. This increase takes into account the birth rate of foreign-born persons (Statistics Canada, 2010). Furthermore, most of the immigrants will probably settle in urban areas such as Toronto (Ontario), Montreal (Quebec), and Vancouver (British Columbia). While there is no new population projections published after 2010, Statistics Canada (2014) reported in recent annual demographic estimates that the percentages of immigrants settling in Ontario has decreased although it remains the province in which most immigrants settled, with 38% of 267,700 immigrants in 2013/2014 choosing to live in Ontario. Statistics Canada also noted an increasing percentage of immigrants settling in Saskatchewan (+1.1%) and Alberta (+1.0%), with 12,300 immigrants settling in Saskatchewan and 41,000 in Alberta. The increase could be attributed to the Provincial Nomination Program which is unique to each province and territory with the goal of fast-tracking the attainment of Canadian permanent residency (Citizenship and Immigration Canada Offices, 2015).

Preparing for Change

In a research paper regarding the impact demographic changes in Canada have on public education, Harvey and Houle (2006) noted that visible minority immigrants, especially certain subgroups, tend to be more economically disadvantaged compared to the non-visible minority immigrants. Harvey and Houle (2006) suggested that there is a need for policies that would help these immigrant parents and students quickly integrate "into the social and economic mainstream of Canadian society" and that the increasing number of school-aged visible minority immigrants "means our society has an obligation to ensure that our educational institutions are free from any form or forms of systemic bias" (pp.111–112). Harvey and Houle (2006) also stated that schools need to respond to the

reality of this changing population promptly and need to connect and collaborate with the families of the students and the community so as to prevent the public education system from becoming "socially disconnected from other key social and institutional groupings" (p. 114).

Considering the above report from 2006 and recent demographic change information from Statistics Canada (2010) mentioned in the previous section, there remains a need to establish/refine relevant policies. In an effort for schools to be responsive to the reality of increasing immigration population and fulfill the parent–school partnership vision of the Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools, it is important to understand the perspectives and experiences of visible minority immigrant parents with regards to parent involvement and engagement. Seeking to understand them and explore the differences between them and the established or non-immigrant families in their perceptions on the topic can be a first step in alleviating the obstacles to schools' responsiveness such as the existence of "silos" of stakeholders and a lack of empowering curriculum, resources, assessment strategies, and teacher education. Dealing with these obstacles may ultimately enhance a school's responsiveness.

A review of literature showed that the level of parent involvement differs by culture, language, socio-economic status, and other factors. However, most research that examined parent involvement by culture and social class focused on Asian Americans, African Americans, Latin Americans, and whites (Auerbach, 2011; López, 2001; Olivos, 2006; Tinkler, 2002; Valdes, 1996). There was a lack of focus on new immigrants from countries like the Philipines and Sri Lanka, that is, Asian countries where Statistics Canada projected most of the new immigrants would be coming from in the next 20 years. Also, there was a lack of studies focusing on new immigrants by the definition of the Ontario Ministry of Education, that is, those who have been living in Canada for three years or less. This study aims to fill these gaps and provide insights into optimizing parent engagement through obtaining answers to these research questions from parents and teachers:

1. In what way is there a significant difference, if any, between actual and desired engagement activities that parents identified?
2. In what way is there a statistically significant difference, if any, among parents who have been in Canada for more than three years and the new immigrants who have not with regard to the actual level of parent engagement activities?

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3. In what way is there a statistically significant difference, if any, among parents who have been in Canada for more than three years and the new immigrants who have not with regard to the desired level of parent engagement activities?

4. If gaps exist between actual and desired engagement activities, what barriers have caused the gaps?

5. What are the perspectives of teachers on parent engagement?

Methods

The mixed methods case study was conducted in a high school (Grades 9–12) in Toronto, the top city where new immigrants tend to settle upon arriving in Canada. It was chosen because over half of its student population is composed of Asians (mostly from the Philippines and Sri Lanka), of which about 40% use a first language other than English; about 20% are new immigrants who arrived in Canada within the last three years; and it has a percentage of new immigrant student population comparable to that of the overall percentage at the other local school board.

In the quantitative phase, a paper survey was adapted from the survey instrument "High School and Family Partnerships: Surveys for Teachers, Parents, and Students in High School" created by Epstein, Connors-Tadros, and Salinas (1993) to contain 44 Likert items. Parents were asked to indicate their actual and desired level of involvement and engagement in 44 activities, identified by Epstein under the six types of parent engagement activities as relating to their children's education, from a scale of 1 (never) to 6 (almost always). For example, parents are asked to rank their own actual and desired frequency of checking their teen's homework based on a scale of 1 (never) to 6 (almost always). Note that parents may desire/want to check their teen's homework more frequently than the actual frequency they are able to commit to at present.

The 15-minute paper survey was made available to parents in both English and Tagalog because 85% of the families that have been living in the country for three years or less were originally from the Philippines. Parents were invited to respond to the survey, which was sent home via students, voluntarily.

Twelve parent-volunteers participated in individual follow-up semi-structured interviews and explained and enriched the quantitative results.

Teachers' perspectives on the topic of parent engagement and their reaction to the qualitative results obtained from the parent interviews were obtained through teacher interviews next. From those who volunteered, six teachers, with one to 24 years of teaching experiences in a variety of subject areas, were randomly selected to be interviewed.

Quantitative Findings

Twenty-four percent of parents returned the survey, a major improvement over the past when an average of 4% of the surveys sent home via students were returned according to the school principal. Of the 185 surveys used in this study, 46% of the respondents were Filipino, 30% were South Asian, 6% were white, 5% were Latin American, 5% were Black, and 8% were of other ethnicity. The ages of the children of these respondents were evenly distributed across the four grade levels of 9 to 12, ranging from 22% to 28%. Also, this sample reflected the population of the school under study, because of the above and also the fact that about 22% of the parents who responded to the survey self-identified as having been living in Canada for three years or less, while 21% of the whole school was reported as being new immigrants.

Actual and Desired Parent Engagement Activities

A paired-samples *t*-test was done on the survey data. Significant differences were found between the actual and desired levels of parent engagement activities in all categories for parents who responded to the survey. Parents desired to engage in more than their self-reported actual level in all categories of parent engagement activities. Parents' desired types of engagement activities in order of priority, from highest to lowest, were learning at home, parenting, collaborating, communicating, decision making, and volunteering.

Table 1. Paired-Samples *t*-Test Results re: Actual and Desired Parent Engagement Activities from the Perspectives of Parents

	Actual		Desired			
Type of engagement activities	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(184)	*p*
Parenting	4.30	0.97	4.98	0.75	13.421	<.001
Communicating	3.31	1.26	4.36	1.07	-14.935	<.001
Volunteering	2.30	1.28	3.44	1.31	-13.876	<.001
Learning at home	4.43	1.04	5.06	0.82	12.639	<.001
Decision making	2.71	1.37	3.72	1.29	-13.577	<.001
Collaborating	4.05	1.28	4.71	1.07	-11.761	<.001

Comparison of New Immigrants and the Established or Non-immigrant Families

In terms of the actual level of parent engagement activities, significant differences were found with small effect sizes for volunteering and decision-making activities among parents who have been in Canada for more than three years and the new immigrants who have not.

Contrary to the above, however, no significant difference was found among parents who have been in Canada for more than three years and the new immigrants who have not with regard to the desired level of parent engagement activities.

Thematic Results

Value of Engagement Experience to Others and to One's Own Résumé

Two South Asian parents with children studying at Grade 9 and Grade 11 levels offered to translate for others. Understanding the language barriers experienced by others, one said: "Because uneducated parents can't read English...it is a good idea to translate. Write down my name, I can translate into Tamil and Sinhali," indicating that she would be willing to be contacted if the school needed help with translating in the future. Some parents saw volunteering as a service or a way to gain experiences or recognition which could

be helpful with job hunting. One South Asian parent of a Grade 9 student said: "I can translate English into Tamil or Sinhali. We treat it as a service. We don't expect money or anything, just a letter of appreciation." Another one said: "Some schools...have parent education programs, e.g., basic IT classes, Word, Excel…subsidized, maybe four-week programs. I also attended some of the programs, very useful, once a week... [The school can] give some certificates [to the parents upon their successful completion of any education program]."

Need for New/More Knowledge Regarding Canadian Education System

New immigrants expressed their need to learn more about an education system that is different from that of their home country for the benefit of their children. A Filipino parent of a Grade 11 student said: "I need more knowledge from school for my children." This sentiment was echoed by another South Asian parent who also has a child in Grade 11: "Parents are very eager to know what kind of methods they can adapt in Canada."

Perception of Teachers' Desire for Parent Engagement

Some new immigrant parents found friendly teachers a welcoming difference as compared to their previous experience. A South Asian parent of a Grade 11 student commented: "We cannot find a teacher without a cane in Ski Lanka. Teachers are friendly here." Parents desired to engage if they perceived teachers as being open to discussion and would not give negative consequences to their children because of parents' engagement. A South Asian parent of a Grade 11 student said that "some parents feel the discussion with teachers [are] helpful but some parents feel they go and tell something the teachers may not like. Some parents don't want to get children into trouble." Some parents also made decisions of whether to engage or not based on how they interpreted the messages they received from teachers. For example, a South Asian parent of a Grade 11 student commented: "If [a] parent shows interest in their child's education, the teacher will be motivated more." Two Filipino parents with children at the Grade 10 level also responded. One said: "Teachers want parents to be involved more, especially for those students who are lagging behind…[or who, for some reason, are] having difficulty." The other said, "The teachers were telling us, 'You know what? The students who are doing well, you can see their parents are really here. Those who are not doing well, you never

see the parents. That's a tell-tale sign. That's one of the reasons their parents are not that involved.'" Another Filipino parent of a Grade 10 student even noted how some parents were judged by teachers as being "over-engaged": "I know in the States, they call the parents who are over-engaged helicopter parents...but not everybody's like that." Basically, all messages parents received from teachers informed them of the level of parent engagement desired by the teachers.

Barriers to Parent Engagement according to Parents and Teachers

Parents and teachers identified seven common barriers/themes for having caused the gaps between actual and desired levels of parent engagement activities. These barriers, as listed below, confirmed the findings of various research studies (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1996; Epstein et al., 2008; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lawson, 2003; Lewis & Forman, 2002; Lightfoot, 2004; Olivos, 2006). However, the perception as to which barriers were more serious than others was different between parents and teachers. Teachers also held some unique thoughts on barriers that parents faced and yet were not mentioned by parents during the interviews. Common barriers/themes include time constraints, language/cultural barriers, beliefs (for example, that children or teachers do not want parents to be involved or the importance of being engaged), communication challenges between school/teachers and parents, communication challenges between parent and students, parents' perception of one's own lack of knowledge of the Canadian education system or subject matters, and prior negative experiences with schools/teachers. Table 2 shows (a) Count—the number of times the barrier/theme was mentioned by parents, (b) # Parents—the number of parents identifying the particular barrier/theme, and (c) % Parents—percentage of parents interviewed identifying the particular barrier/theme.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Parent-Identified Reasons for Significant Differences between Reported Actual and Desired Parent Engagement Activities

Barrier/Theme	Count	# Parents	% Parents
Time	49	12	100.00%
Knowledge/Connection	15	9	75.00%
Beliefs	14	9	75.00%
Communication (School–Parent)	10	6	50.00%
Prior negative experience	5	3	25.00%
Communication (Parent–Student)	4	3	25.00%
Teens prefer parent of same gender to be involved	4	3	25.00%
Language/Culture	3	3	25.00%
Lack of resources	2	1	8.33%

Table 3 shows (a) Count—the number of times the barrier/theme was mentioned by teachers, (b) # Teachers—the number of teachers identifying the particular barrier/theme, and (c) % Teachers—percentage of teachers interviewed identifying the particular barrier/theme.

Table 3. Frequency and Percentage Distribution of Teacher-Identified Reasons for Significant Differences between Actual and Desired Parent Engagement Activities

Barrier/Theme	Count	# Teachers	% Teachers
Parent's time constraints	12	6	100.00%
Lack of communication (Student–Parent)	5	5	83.33%
Language/Culture	9	4	66.67%
Parent's belief	6	3	50.00%
Lack of communication (Teacher–Parent)	6	3	50.00%
Lack of communication (Parent–Student)	5	3	50.00%
Prior negative experience	3	2	33.33%
Communication (School)	2	2	33.33%
Parent's perceived knowledge/connection constraints	2	2	33.33%

Different views between parents and teachers as to seriousness of barriers.
There were two barriers that were perceived very differently by both groups. The biggest gap in perception was the lack of parents' knowledge/connection creating a barrier to

parent engagement. This barrier has the second highest percentage of parents suggesting as a barrier while it was the least mentioned barrier by teachers. Over half of the parents interviewed said they do not have the knowledge of either the subject matter because of their own education background or the Canadian approach to be involved with helping their teens. A parent of a Grade 10 student recalled how he chose to let his daughter deal with the question on her own rather than confuse her with the techniques he had learned:

> Sometimes I don't understand, or maybe I understand but the approach is different, especially math approach. I came up with the same answer or solution but... maybe it's like the technique is very much different, back home it is very detailed. Then, [if] there is something that is not right, [I say], "Oh, OK, you do it by yourself."

The lack of connections was also raised as the reason for the low level of participation in more collaborative parent engagement activities. Regrets such as "I am new, I didn't do it yet [i.e., work with businesses for donations, or other resources to improve programs for students], I don't know the person or bakery and stuff" and "No, I wanted to [talk as a guest speaker in class or at school] but I didn't have experience" were expressed by parents.

The second biggest gap in perception was language/culture differences being the barrier to parent engagement. While it has the second last lowest percentage of parents mentioning as a barrier, it has the third highest percentage of teachers considering it a barrier to parent engagement. Teachers commented: "According to the cultural environment they are coming from, the responsibility is the teachers do the work," and "They simply don't see it as something important or culturally they have other perceptions that it is not important to come." Interestingly, the only parent who mentioned environment/culture being a barrier pointed to the Canadian environment/culture instead of her own culture as the barrier:

> I was born and grew up like that. So maybe [that's] one reason I want to [be engaged like my parents]...but I don't go to that level because they are very different here, the environment the children are having, plus other factors in the community—I can feel that they don't want us to know every little thing.

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Barriers parents faced as perceived by teachers yet not mentioned by parents. Some teachers suggested that communication from the students to the parents could be a barrier since students could be the gatekeeper of information regarding parent engagement opportunities. The following comments are based on interviews with parents:

> If a letter is sent home through the student, the teachers are not quite sure 100% if all of them give the letters to their parents.

> If the school's automated call-out system call home when the parents are not there, students who received the message may not necessarily pass the message onto their parents.

> Teachers are not sure what the students are translating at parent–teacher interviews. It is often believed that the students are translating themselves in the best possible way and the teachers in the worst possible way, thus affecting parents' view toward teachers and hence influencing parents' desires for further engagement.

Teachers' Unique Perspectives on Parent Engagement

There were some perspectives regarding parent engagement that both groups did not share.

Perception of who is responsible for the education of the student. Some teachers associated the level of parent engagement to the parents' understanding of who is responsible for their child's education. For example, they thought some parents, sometimes depending on their cultural background, considered the education of their children to be solely the responsibility of the teachers. One teacher said:

> I think sometimes it is not clear [what] the role of the parents [is] and also the teachers... Sometimes the parents just want to be a watchdog for the teachers... Sometimes parents demand something that the teachers cannot do... We need to define the goal of the school, the goal of the parents.

Meanwhile, a beginning teacher with one year of teaching experience preferred parents getting involved at a level that is not overbearing: "It is their kids but we have to work as a team. One side should not be the sole decision maker. So, parents should be as involved as teachers but not that much."

Parents have different priorities as compared to teachers with regards to their children's education. While teachers acknowledged there were barriers which led to some parents being unable to engage as much as the teachers had hoped for, some teachers considered the differences in attitude toward parent engagement activities between parents and teachers as a contributing factor as well. Improving communication between teachers and parents was suggested to help mediate the differences by an experienced teacher (the years of teaching experience appears in the brackets).

> I think that maybe they are shy to come to the school because they don't speak the language, or they simply don't see it as something important or culturally they have other perceptions that it is not important to come or maybe they don't think things are already prepared for them. Here you prepare something for a long time and it is something very formal, very serious but they don't take it seriously... Some activities the teachers think are important but for parents it is not that important, so maybe we need to communicate better what do we need to get from the parents and from the students in order for them to clarify what they are supposed to do in order to be engaged more in school activities. (24 years)

Parents need to learn skills to enhance their ability to engage. Parents were seen as not having the skills needed to engage in their children's education. Examples mentioned by some teachers include time management skills and parenting skills. One teacher said:

> Maybe for whatever reasons, the parents are simply incapable of doings these things. They don't recognize the importance of school. They don't know how to plan time. If they knew how to plan time maybe their circumstances would be better, and then they would be home for their children. (10 years)

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Need for teacher training. Teachers, with a range of teaching experiences, mentioned that training needs to include people skills, communication skills, cultural knowledge, and knowledge of using the school database applications to find information about the student in preparation for engaging parents and discussing with them their children's education:

> Sometimes we have to change the attitude of the teachers... Sometimes they [parents] come into the office and they are not welcomed... We have to train the people. (22 years)

> I think we can get a lot of input in terms of how to deal with people, how to engage people and how to make sure that they are more welcomed. Personally, I feel we can get a lot of ideas from the hospitality and service industries. (1 year)

A beginning teacher recalled her negative phone conversation experience with a parent and suggested the school board provide some training:

> I think definitely that [communicating effectively] is a talent...by the years of experience, you can get better; but I think you can certainly get educated in that matter... I think the board has to provide some training. (1 year)

Another teacher also considered having knowledge of different cultures as being important and that parents could be learning partners:

> Maybe they [parents] have a wealth of knowledge that they don't realize. I think maybe being honest and [having] a committee with different social economic groups represented, multicultural, [would] provide a better overall learning environment [and help us to] make better decisions for the students because we cannot deny their culture and their backgrounds, their ethnic backgrounds that have shaped them. The parents are probably really aware of their needs. (8 years)

Discussion and Implications

A meta-analysis of research on parent involvement indicates that most research has been in the United States with only 5% located in Canada (Nye, Turner, Schwartz, & Nye,

2006). Further review of the literature shows that most of the research on parent involvement in Ontario focuses on the topics of numeracy, literacy, or student achievement at the elementary school level, and very little research at the high school level, and includes parents from countries other than the Philipines and Sri Lanka—the countries Statistics Canada (2010) has projected that most of the new immigrants will immigrate from in the next 20 years—and on immigrants in general without recognizing its definition by the Ontario Ministry of Education, that is, those who have been living in Canada for three years or less (Hands, 2013; Ji & Koblinsky, 2009; Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Sénéchal, 2006).

This study fills in these gaps and provides new insights into optimizing parent engagement at the high school level by discovering three pieces of information. Their discussion and implications are described below.

Engagement Preferences of Parents and the Ministry

The first discovery in this study was that the desired levels of parent engagement activities for all parents were significantly higher than the actual levels in the order of priority, from highest to lowest, learning at home, parenting, collaborating, communicating, decision making, and volunteering. Although it is possible that parents might have "inflated" their responses because of social desirability (Krumpal, 2013), it was still beneficial to hear their voices because participating in an activity may not reflect their desire, but it could be that they were pressured, instead, by their children (Valdes, 1996). Besides, the bias introduced by the potentially inflated responses for the actual levels of activities could have cancelled out the effect of inflated responses for the desired levels of activities. Hence, this research finding could be used to better inform the teachers who believed that parents do not care about their children's education when they are not involved in ways the teachers envisage them being involved (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Pushor, 2011). Those teachers could be further informed by recognizing the seven barriers to engagement as identified in this study. The barriers are time constraints, belief, communication challenges among student and parent and school, parents' lack of knowledge/connections, language barriers, cultural differences, and prior negative experiences with schools/teachers. Teachers might also appreciate learning about parents perceiving seriousness of barriers, such as language/cultural differences and lack of knowledge/connections, differently

than teachers. This realization may prompt teachers to communicate with parents to get the actual information instead of making assumptions. Since these barriers are consistent with barriers identified in other research (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1996; Epstein et al., 2008; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lawson, 2003; Lewis & Forman, 2002; Lightfoot, 2004; Olivos, 2006), it indicates that barriers to engagement parents face are similar no matter where they come from, how old their children are, or whether they are new to Canada.

Meanwhile, the order of priority in terms of parent involvement and engagement activities found in this study has important implications. As its name implies, the vision of the Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools is to form a parent–school partnership whereby parents progress along a continuum from taking a passively *informed* role to an *involved* role, including attending meetings, events, and supporting school programs; and from an *involved* role to an *engaged* role, including providing input and participating in discussions and decision-making processes at school (Alberta Education, 2011; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Pushor, 2011, 2012; Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). Learning from this study that the parents ranked decision-making and volunteering activities lowest in priority in terms of parent involvement/engagement activities meant that there could be a disconnect between the priority of desires of the parents and the ministry. It is unclear whether the parents' current actual and desired levels of engaging in these two types of activities—being from rarely to sometimes—is considered to be fulfilling the vision of the ministry. However, parents commented that the barrier regarding engaging in decision-making activities is because of the lack of information regarding these activities, while the barrier regarding volunteering activities is because the activities are often held at inconvenient times, such as during work hours. Schools that are determined to reach out to parents can use multiple communication channels simultaneously and consult parents regarding the most convenient time for them to be engaged in activities. However, it is prudent to assess the practicality of timing options in the consultation process and engage all parties involved. This is an especially important issue to resolve as, when interviewed during this study, some teachers were not supportive of having engagement activities on Saturdays—a suggestion presented by some parents who felt that Saturdays would be the most convenient time for them. Meanwhile, with limited funding and resources, schools or teachers may want to assess the percentage of parents who show interest in engaging in various activities, and allocate resources in the most

cost-effective way. The survey used in this study may be modified to meet the needs in each unique environment. It is helpful to then collect parents' feedback and suggestions so as to inform the school's future planning, ensuring these engagement opportunities are meaningful and authentic.

New Immigrants Engaged More Than Established or Non-Immigrant Families

The second finding was that, although volunteering and decision-making activities ranked lowest in parents' list of priorities, new immigrant parents reported a significantly higher actual level of engagement in these two types of activities than those who have been living in Canada for much longer. Qualitative results showed possible reasons for the difference included the new immigrants' desire to network with other adults, to learn about the new education system, and to help students settle down when they first arrived. This could mean that new immigrant parents might be a worthwhile target group on which to focus the limited resources to help encourage and enable their engagement, while removing barriers to their engagement. For example, without such information, most school grant funds were spent on presentations and workshops on literacy, numeracy, and student success in the past (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2012). With this information on schools' immigrant family populations, the limited funds could be prioritized and directed toward networking events, presentations on the Canadian education system, presentations by the parent council to explain and encourage new immigrant parents to engage, and follow-up communications and activities, and so on.

Motivating Factors for New Immigrants to be Engaged

The third revelation in this study was that new immigrant parents were more engaged because of their perceived value of adding engagement experience or recognition of services to their résumé, need for new/more knowledge regarding the Canadian education system, and refreshing experience or perception of teachers' desire for parent engagement as compared to that of their home country. While the first point was not found through a literature review, past research findings relating to the last two points were documented mostly at the elementary level (Eccles & Harold, 1996; Epstein, 1996; Hornby & Lafaele,

2011; Valdes, 1996). The perception of teachers being friendly and open to parental engagement was a motivator for parents to be involved. However, not all teachers project such an attitude. According to information collected from the teacher interviews conducted in this study, teachers did desire parent engagement in general. Nonetheless, teachers' perceptions of parent involvement might be biased based on their personal experiences. For example, some teachers perceived parents as being less involved in their children's education than teachers would like. In conversations with teachers, Noguera (2001) even found "parents are described as uncaring, dysfunctional, unsupportive, and part of the problem...obstacles in the way of progress, and as problems to be overcome" (p. 205). Deficit thinking has led others to attribute low parent involvement to "empty-vessel" type parents who are incapable of getting involved due to their linguistically, ethnically, or culturally diverse backgrounds (Lewis & Forman, 2002; Lightfoot, 2004; Olivos, 2006). Noguera (2011) also noted that some teachers "hold beliefs that parent competence is reduced by socioeconomic challenges" (para. 5). While some teachers desired more parent involvement, others experienced the opposite. They considered certain parents untrusting of their professionalism or expertise, and contended that such parents were too demanding or intrusive at times (Lewis & Forman, 2002; Lightfoot, 2004; Olivos, 2006). The above could be related to the suggestion, as expressed by some teachers, that the roles and responsibilities of parents and teachers were unclear, and that the two groups might also have differed in their focus. Furthermore, there is no agreement as to who is responsible for ensuring parent involvement in schools (Blankstein & Noguera, 2010). These differences in personal beliefs and cultural practices, as well as misunderstandings between educators and parents, can result in tension which does not contribute to an environment conducive to parent engagement (Lawson, 2003; López & Stoelting, 2010).

Understanding the motivating factors for new immigrants, schools and teachers can plan to encourage engagement by promoting the value of engagement to new immigrant parents, offering official recognition of engagement, and inviting new immigrant parents to Meet-the-Parents/Families night (besides Meet-the-Teachers night). Another option is diversity-celebrating events to assist new immigrant families in building or strengthening the knowledge of their culture, language, and religion among their fellow parents and teachers (Guo, 2012; Pushor, 2011).

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Implications for Teacher Education

All of the new insights above regarding new immigrant parents' engagement with their children's education need to be shared with teachers in order to optimize parent engagement when trying to fulfill the parent–school partnership vision of the Ministry of Education's Parent Engagement Policy. This can be done via teacher education, as proactively suggested by teachers with various amounts of teaching experience at the interviews. In addition to training topics and models suggested by past research in the Canadian context—such as having teacher training on topics relating to students' culture, language, and strategies to encourage parent engagement offered as part of a teacher education program or as topics for discussion at staff meetings or on professional development days at school (Hands, 2013; Ladky & Peterson, 2008; Pushor, 2011)—teachers interviewed suggested some ideas not found in the review of literature based on Canadian contexts as mentioned above. For example, in this study, teachers specifically mentioned several skills they felt they would gain if they were to be trained in how to encourage effective parent engagement. These skills include people skills, communication skills, and knowledge of using the school database application in order to access detailed student information efficiently. One teacher, who used to work in the private sector, suggested hiring trainers who conduct professional communication and corporate training for companies such as Starbucks and McDonald's to offer workshops or training sessions on how to deal with a variety of people under different circumstances effectively while exemplifying the organization's beliefs and values. This suggestion of having professionals outside of the field provide a fresh perspective on the existing realities in the education sector may spark creative ideas that ultimately enhance parent engagement. Meanwhile, another teacher's idea was to have experienced teachers mentor new and inexperienced teachers, especially on how to interact with parents. Although mentoring is part of the Ontario New Teacher Induction Program (NTIP) for teachers in their first year of teaching, some teachers want to have mentoring in place after they have completed NTIP, as suggested by teachers interviewed in this study. This could be because the initial focus of mentoring for early career teachers tends to be on classroom management instead of parent management (Burke, Aubusson, Schuck, Buchanan, & Prescott, 2015).

The implication of the above is that training in parent engagement is not an event but a continuous process. This is taking into account the changing demographics

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of Canada and that new immigrant families from diverse backgrounds have invaluable parent knowledge to contribute to enrich their children's educational environment. Resources and support from all levels of institution, such as government, higher education organizations, school boards, and schools, are desired and should be coordinated to offer a range of learning experiences that meet the needs of teachers with different levels of comfort in engaging parents. This could mean learning strategies from one institution, role-playing with various scenarios in another, practising and reviewing experiences at the local school level, or a combination of various training methods and modes of learning. In addition to the above, as parents are recognized as knowledgeable partners instead of empty vessels, inviting them to engage in the design and offering of teacher education in parent engagement could lead to breakthroughs and inspiring results (Flessa, 2008).

Implications for Policy Implementation

The goal of the School Administrator's Guide to Parent Engagement, as produced by three Ontario Principals' Councils, was to support school administrators in implementing the Ontario Parent Engagement Policy. It offers a parent involvement survey that was based on Epstein's (1995) framework to better understand parents' engagement experience so as to inform school planning. However, the survey did not take into account that actual experience and desired experience are not the same and that new immigrant parents and established or non-immigrant parents have different priorities/desires in the type and frequencies of engagement activities as revealed in this study. Therefore, there is still room for improvement in optimizing their experience as school administrators continue to implement the policy. With results from this study, here are some policy implementation recommendations for school administrators:

a. Survey the school community regularly in order to determine its unique and potentially changing desires regarding the type of activities in which the community can engage, potential barriers to engagement, and the effectiveness of the school's efforts in supporting parent engagement.

b. When resources are limited, focus policy implementation on a particular group of community members. For example, it was revealed in this case study that new immigrants (those who have been living in Canada for three years or less) desired more decision-making activities. Therefore, in a school with

    many new immigrant families and limited resources, the highest return on investment may be prioritizing the engagement of this group for their desired activity using what limited resources are available.

c.   Recognize that students are key stakeholders and potential gate-keepers of information in the parent engagement process and promote the benefits of parental engagement to both students and parents.

d.   Enable a shared understanding of parents' and teachers' desired level of parent engagement in various activities, and identify barriers parents may face to help break down the "silos" stakeholders phenomenon and enhance collaboration.

e.   Let parents know they are valued and their help is welcomed and needed, as this can be beneficial to both school and parents. For example, schools can reduce translation and organization costs for events, while parents can network and add experience to their résumé.

f.   Ask Student Success teachers, who have dedicated time to student success related initiatives, for advice with contacting parents individually, coordinating parent engagement workshops, releasing classroom teachers for meeting with parents, collecting and analyzing parent engagement data, and informing school parent engagement policies.

g.   Provide teachers with practical professional development opportunities to update skills/knowledge so they are better equipped to adapt to parents' changing beliefs and desires in parent engagement, as well as their preferred communication methods.

Future Studies

Regardless of the limitations of this study (such as it being a case study with results that may not be generalized to a larger population), based on the study findings, one can appreciate the values in hearing the voices of new immigrant parents. This is important especially when their actual and desired levels of participation and support for parent engagement are different from established or non-immigrant families. One of the contributions of this study is that it sheds light on the necessity of including the voices of immigrants in policy implementation. Research has shown that parent engagement can

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have a positive impact on student achievement. When the voices of immigrant parents are unheard, they may not be able to utilize their potential to the fullest under programs that have not considered their voices. Effective implementation of the Parent Engagement Policy would require teachers to be actively involved in its implementation, as well as involved in teacher education aimed at better understanding the community teachers serve, cultural proficiency, and ways to engage new immigrant families.

Although the 24% survey response rate in this study was a major improvement over the past rate of 4%, 76% of the parents still missed the opportunity to have their voices heard. How might the perspectives of the 76% of parents have differed from those who have responded? What barriers/considerations might have affected their participation in this study? How might the response rate be further improved?

Some students suggested that it is crucial that parent engagement opportunities, including survey studies, be supported by teachers enthusiastically, with clear explanation of their importance, and that the benefits to parents and students be advertised through effective communications in various media. School administration's leadership and empowerment of teachers to achieve the above can make a positive difference to enhance parent engagement experience of all stakeholders (Auerbach, 2011).

Moving forward, further studies could include a replication of this study in other schools within Ontario to possibly generalize the results to a larger population, examine the impact of school administration and teacher self-efficacy in implementing parent engagement policy and supporting related initiatives, as well as carry out a new study on the feasibility and effectiveness of co-constructing teacher education with input from new immigrant parents.

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