

THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING:  
"HARD-TO-REACH" PARENTS AND THE SIGNIFICANCE  
OF HOME-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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**THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING:  
*"Hard-to-Reach" Parents and the Significance of Home-School  
Partnerships***

by

©Sylvia E. Hopkins, B. Voc.Ed.

A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate  
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Faculty of Education  
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**THE ROLE OF FAMILIES IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING:  
*"Hard-to-Reach" Parents and the Significance of Home-School Partnerships***

**Master of Education, 1998 - Sylvia Elizabeth Hopkins - Faculty of Education**

**Memorial University of Newfoundland**

**ABSTRACT**

Current home-school partnership literature reveals that parents who are perceived by teachers as being "hard to reach" do care about their children's education, and want specific information about how they can help them with schoolwork at home. However, the school's adherence to conventional home-school relations, including traditional communication methods, remains a barrier to parents feeling welcome at the school.

The present study investigated the views of nine families with children in grade eight at an inner city junior high school in Newfoundland, and the views of four school personnel. The specific focus is the parents' emerging stories about their children's schooling experiences, and their opinions about helping their children with homework. The study also examined the reasons why parents were perceived as hard to reach, what issues affected their children's schooling; and how parents could contribute to a collaborative process. The majority of families were in low-income, working-class situations, with mothers as the primary caregivers and coordinators of the home-school relationship. These included single-parent, step-parent, and dual-income families.

The findings reveal caring but frustrated parents whose dismay about the school's lack of comprehension and response to their children's circumstances can be attributed to the following sources: 1. the school's communication patterns mainly involved contacting

them when problems arose; 2. the school's adherence to traditional parental involvement, such as the Parent-Teacher Association, contributed to parents' feelings of alienation and severely limited their participation; 3. insufficient and inadequate programs and support systems, along with lack of homework information created confusion and stress; 4. *structured on-going practices to keep parents informed* were nonexistent, although parents clearly preferred this type of involvement; 5. the traditional value-system of the school suggests that, in challenging the school, some parents were considered as problems themselves, without being given respect and legitimatization for their concerns. Such findings appear to have implications for The 1992 Royal Commission Report on Education in Newfoundland which promotes the closer linking of home and school, and developing strategies that encourage parents' involvement both in school and in learning activities at home.

Most significant, however, was that the majority of children had learning problems, including some with medical, behavioural, and learning disabilities. Their negative schooling experiences were intensified by the lack of early assessment, the trauma of moving from the elementary to the junior high level, and particularly their not being identified as "non-categorical special needs students" leading to some being stigmatized as troublemakers. Thus, more importantly for students' self-esteem and well being, the findings again point to the Royal Commission which advocates the rights of the child and equality of educational opportunity in order to cultivate "the intellectual, physical, emotional, social and spiritual development of students."

## **DEDICATION**

To the memory of my late mother and father, Lillian and Lewis Roach, who, despite not having the opportunity to complete their formal schooling, taught me with much love and spirited conversation the value of an education and hard work.



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## **Chapter One**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **(a) Background**

A long history of research on family environments and on school and family connections shows the importance of parent involvement for student success in school and for developing parents who are knowledgeable partners in their children's education (p. 1).

— Joyce L. Epstein & Susan L. Dauber (1989)

A Canadian report by Zeigler (1987) made it quite clear that parent involvement in specific, teacher-guided instructional practices at home or at school benefits children at all grade levels. The report points to evidence which suggests that “no other single focus has the potential to be as productive for students as the closer linking of home and school, of parents and teachers” (p. 4). Zeigler's comprehensive review of the research in 1987, drawing on both Canadian and United States (U.S.) studies, is affirmed by Epstein and Dauber's empirical findings in 1989 which indicate that families play a critical role in the personal and educational development of their children.

Investigations also demonstrate the need to engage parents in training activities to gain information and understanding of the curriculum, of what their children are expected to learn each year, and of the teaching practices employed by the teacher with particular emphasis on how parents can assist with schoolwork at home. Further to this, inservice for teachers, principals and school board administrators is recommended for training in collaborative partnership skills with parents. Epstein and Dauber's (1989) research shows that there is a need for a change in mindset on the part of teachers, but especially a change in principals' viewpoints concerning parents as formal partners in the education of their



children. Specifically, they suggest that successful collaborative efforts for parent partnership programs are usually contingent upon the beliefs of teachers, but are particularly dependent upon the perspective of principals.

These findings, supported by other Canadian studies, reports, and publications (Fullan, 1991; The Ontario Teachers' Federation, 1992; Pierce, 1994; Ross, 1994), also indicate that teachers and principals are more reluctant to involve the parents of older children, and may perceive hard-to-reach, lower-class, inner-city parents as not being interested. However, there are convincing data suggesting that *these parents want to be involved* and look to the school and teachers to take the initiative to include them in specific practices to help their children at home or at school. In their 1989 U.S. study of 2,300 parents in inner-city elementary and middle (junior high) schools, Epstein and Dauber found that "Parents in all of the schools in this sample are emphatic about wanting the schools and teachers to advise them about *how to help their own children at home* at each grade level" [their emphasis] (p. 14).

Ross (1994) in his special report, "Parents Make the Difference", echoes Fullan's (1991) findings that after socio-economic status, racial composition, education level, and students' ability and grade level are taken into account, "parents increased their understanding about school most when the teacher frequently used parent involvement practices" (p. 20). This finding also holds true for positive influences on student achievement. Ross's review of the literature gives an exceptional list of positive benefits afforded students through parent/family involvement: better long-term academic achievement; higher grades; higher test scores; higher motivation and more positive

attitudes; increased commitment to schooling; fewer retentions in grades; decreased placement in special education classes; fewer behavioural problems; improved average daily attendance; fewer school dropouts; lower suspension rates; more successful programs; and ultimately more effective schools (p. 19).

Relevant to this study are parents whose students may have behavioural, medical and academic difficulties. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that the literature points to the importance of professionals in recognizing and respecting the parents of these students as "expert partners" (Hegarty, 1993; Levin (1987); Mearig, 1992, Munn, 1993; Philpott, 1992). Highlighting parents' formal involvement in helping their special education children with schoolwork, Hegarty states, "When pupils have difficulty learning... the curriculum is therefore a principal arena for home-school contact and one where effective links between home and school can do much to enhance children's education" (pp. 122-123). Also pertinent to this study and further defining the personal difficulties with which some students have to contend, Canning (1996) stresses the vulnerable educational situations of those children described by the Department of Education as "non-categorical" special needs students. Without comprehensive assessment, the disabilities of these students are not easily discernible by the lay person, or medical professionals, and include, "Mild and moderate cognitive delay, learning disabilities, behaviour disorders and other learning problems" (p. 21).

The scope of Canning's 1996 report on special education in Newfoundland is extensive, and describes the problems pervading the classrooms of this province since the

integration of special education students into regular classes.<sup>1</sup> Without adequate teacher and administrative training in special education, along with the lack of appropriate academic and non-academic programs, students with special needs at the junior and senior high levels are particularly at risk. Therefore, parental involvement is essential to cope with schooling, and fundamental to their future success (Gersten, 1992; Hegarty, 1993, Mearig, 1992).

However, some researchers emphasize some parents' feelings of alienation and reluctance to attend traditional home-school occasions such as Parent-Teacher Association meetings (Bastiani, 1993; Levin, 1987; Macbeth, 1993; Pierce, 1994; Swap, 1993). Particularly with regard to parents who are perceived by the school as difficult to reach, not interested in their children's schooling, and who are primarily contacted about problem and crisis situations, Swap (1993) quotes Lightfoot (1978) who states: "Parent-Teacher Association meetings and open house rituals at the beginning of the school year are contrived occasions that symbolically affirm the idealized parent-school relationship but rarely provide the chance for authentic interaction (pp. 27-28)" (p. 19).

Furthermore, the literature points to teachers' negative perceptions of families of diverse composition, such as single-parent families, as well as those in low-income, working-class situations. Particularly, authors note the low expectations held by teachers for the children of these families (Brantlinger, 1985; Dornbusch & Gray, 1988; Epstein, 1995; Gersten, 1992; Levin, 1987). Levin (1987) writes that teachers' accusations about

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<sup>1</sup> As set out in 1987 Department of Education Policy - see also Canning, Kennedy, & Strong (1993).

working-class parents are affirmed in the "folklore of urban schooling and well-documented in the literature on school-community relations" (p. 274). Regarding teachers' low efficacy for children in single-parent families, Dombusch and Gray point to studies on home-school partnerships which state that, "Teachers who tried to involve parents in helping their children at home found that cooperation was just as great in single-parent households as in two-parent households" (p. 291). Also, many studies not only emphasize the importance of alternative ways to communicate with parents but outline the kinds of structured, collaborative home-school partnerships that are potentially inclusive of more parents becoming involved in their children's learning (Bastiani, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Gersten, 1992; Hegarty, 1993; Mearig, 1992; Oldford-Matchim, 1994; Ontario Teachers' Federation, 1992; Philpott, 1995; Pierce, 1994; Swap, 1993).

Fullan (1991) investigated parental involvement in instructionally related practices and compared the results with parental involvement in school governance advisory councils. In his review of the studies (Bowles, 1980; Fantini, 1980; Lucan, Lusthaus, & Gibbs, 1978-79; Mortimore & colleagues, 1988 and others) he found that, "There is little evidence to suggest that parent involvement in governance affects student learning in the school, although there may be other benefits and indirect effects" (p. 237). Fullan endorses the concept that students, teachers, and parents stand to gain more when parents are directly involved in the academic processes of their children's education. He emphasizes that these instructionally related activities have a far greater impact on students' schooling than when parents' participation only pertains to decision-making on school governance councils.

In Newfoundland, the authors of the government's (1992) report, Our Children Our Future: Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Delivery of Programs and Services in Primary, Elementary, Secondary Education, advocate the need for school councils and "effective parental involvement in the governance of the province's schools" (p. 11). Subsequently, The Royal Commission Implementation Team in their "Adjusting the Course Information Bulletin" (April 1994) recounted the value of parent involvement in "decision-making" through school councils. Furthermore, they denote "benefits of community collaboration" along with the idea that these benefits are being recognized by more and more school administrators and classroom teachers who "are welcoming parents, and others, into the school in a *variety of roles*" [italics added] (p. 5).

Perhaps the most encouraging attention afforded the critical issue of parents in the role of educational learning partners "both in school and in learning activities at home" is outlined briefly in a "Consultation Paper on School Council Operations."<sup>2</sup> Developed by the implementation steering committee, the paper mainly deals with the legal ramifications, structural composition, and decision-making activities of councils. Reference to parents' involvement in specific teacher-guided practices, however, is only afforded one brief paragraph entitled, "Strategies to Facilitate Parental Input." It states:

A key role of the Council will be to facilitate parental involvement in the education of their children with a particular focus on the closer linking of home and school, and parents and teachers. *Strategies should be developed that encourage involving parents both in school and in learning activities at home* [italics added]. Because parental involvement is a mechanism that links society, schools, and homes, it is crucial that

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<sup>2</sup> Working Together for Educational Excellence, 1994, p. 22.

Councils have well developed initiatives to encourage and focus this type of involvement. (p. 22)

Six pilot school council sites were set up to test the governance model, and information materials were developed to aid implementation at the remaining sites in 1995-96. The legislative framework for the school councils reads, "not less than 3 [members] shall be parents elected by parents from among parents of students in that school" (p. 10).

Parental involvement, then, seems to be currently at the forefront of educational matters in Newfoundland and Labrador. Nevertheless, what do we know of parents' thoughts and ideas on these issues? With some certainty we know that those parents who participate in parent-teacher associations may want to become involved in school councils, although only three representative parents can be selected as members in each site. Therefore, what of the remaining hundreds of parents, or guardians, or grandparents - the families of our students in each school district? Especially, what of those parents who are perceived by the school as hard-to-reach and who may have children with behavioural, medical, and/or learning difficulties? Also what of parents in low-income, working-class situations, and families of diverse composition such as single-parent and step-families who also need recognition and understanding? Is there a link between these families and the school's perception of hard-to-reach parents? Finally, how do these parents view their role in their children's schooling as well as the willingness of principals and teachers to respect and accept them as educational partners?

### **(b) Purpose of the Study**

This study was conducted from an ethnographic qualitative research perspective. The main purpose was to investigate the views, perceptions, and feelings of “hard-to-reach” parents (mothers, fathers, guardians, or grandparents) regarding their involvement in specific practices to assist their students with schoolwork at home, i.e., involvement that is specifically guided by the teachers and supported by the principal and vice-principal. Parents of grade eight students at an inner city junior high school were selected as participants for the study.

Through in-depth interviewing, the purpose was to have parents tell in their own words what they know and think about parent involvement issues categorized in terms of: (1) the out-reach communication methods used by the school; (2) the amount and type of their participation at the school and to what extent they were involved in their children’s schooling; (3) the effect that family characteristics, their gender and that of their student had on their involvement at school and at home; (4) the time they spent helping with homework, the quality of homework, and the school’s informing and monitoring practices for homework; (5) the current teacher-guided practices at the school; (6) their interest in teacher-guided practices, suggestions they may have for potential programs, their perceived ability to assist with homework and the effect on their perceptions of their children’s ability; (7) the educational opportunities for their children and their greatest wish for them; and (8) other issues they may identify which affect their participation in their children’s learning.

Triangulation or multiple methodological approaches in data collection were observed by the following procedures. Prior to interviewing parents, key informants were interviewed at the school. Teachers and administrative personnel were asked to identify existing communication methods and types of parental involvement. Especially pertinent were their views of presumed hard-to-reach parents' participation, as well as their interest in and perceptions of teacher-guided practices. Additionally, the analysis from one section of a teacher survey conducted at the school in 1993 addressing "Teacher Perception of Parental Involvement" was utilized to give comparative value to the study. Finally, some findings from a questionnaire distributed by the school to parents in May of 1995 is referenced in chapter six.<sup>3</sup> The survey was designed to gather information from all parents about their satisfaction with numerous schooling issues, however, it did not identify hard-to-reach parents. Fifty-one percent of parents responded to the survey, and of particular relevance for this study was the inclusion of several questions regarding parents' involvement and their specific interest in teacher-guided practices.

#### **(c) Significance of the Study**

The study obtained grade eight parents' perceptions about their role in their students' schooling and especially their interest in receiving information to help their children with homework. Participants were selected by teachers from a computer list of grade eight parents and were identified as being hard to reach and not interested in participating in their children's schooling. Most significant for the study was that some

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<sup>3</sup> The author of this study participated in the development of the questionnaire and wrote the final report.



parents described their students as having medical, behavioural, and learning difficulties.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the background information obtained during the interviews indicated that, for the most part, these parents had little education and were in low-income, working-class circumstances. Also, some were single-parent and step-families who, all too often, are considered by the school system as being dysfunctional families quite disparate and apart from the so-called normal family consisting of mother, father and two-point-five children.<sup>5</sup>

During the interviews, parents displayed enormous care and interest in their children's education. However, their dissatisfaction with the school's efforts to inform and involve them was exacerbated by the teachers' and principals' apparent adherence to traditional communication strategies as well as traditional types of parental involvement. These findings suggest an urgency for change and for the potential value in illustrating to the school how to develop and implement collaborative home-school partnerships, especially with those parents considered as hard to reach.

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<sup>4</sup> Described by the Department of Education in Canning (1996) as "non-categorical special needs students."

<sup>5</sup> See Power (1993) A School and its Families: A Feminist Ethnography of Divergent Realities.

## Chapter Two

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### (a) Introduction and Overview

Most important for *policy and practice*, parents' *level of involvement* is directly *linked to the specific practices* of the *school that encourage involvement at school and guide parents in how to help at home*. The data are clear that the *school's practices* [their emphasis] to *inform* and to *involve parents* are more important *than parent education, family size, marital status*, and even *grade level* in determining whether *inner-city parents stay involved with their children's education through the middle grades* [italic added]. (Dauber & Epstein, 1989, p. 14)

Extensive studies spanning from the 1970s to the 1990s by Epstein and associates at the Johns Hopkins University Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning provided the primary impetus and model used for this research. In part, the concepts advocated in the above quotation by Dauber and Epstein (1989) implicitly and explicitly declare the major theoretical themes which emerge from their work and seemed most appropriate for use in this study. The investigation of parental involvement in their children's school lives requires an the epistemology (ways of knowing), a methodology (ways of doing), and an ontology (the nature of reality for the participant and the researcher) where one embraces a philosophical disposition and manner that is sensitive, perceptive, knowledgeable, reflective, inquisitive, and respectful. Also seemingly necessary is a broad scope of theoretical categories encompassing the following interpretations and concepts:

#### **1a. Sociological, Political, Ideological, Cultural, and Historical**

**Interpretations:** These interpretations incorporate concepts pertaining to *family* and the diverse meanings implied and the realities that exist; *gender* and the implications for

mothers' and fathers' participation in children's education; *inner-city* and implications of *social class*, race, and educationally disadvantaged students and especially perceptions of *hard-to-reach parents'* lack of interest and not wanting to participate; middle grades or *junior high* where the probability of direct parent involvement is a somewhat novel idea to some; *non-categorical special needs students* and the implications of their needs not being legitimately recognized in the regular classroom environment; and finally, the subsequent implications for students' *educational outcomes* in this political/ideological milieu.

**2a. Structural/Institutional and Pedagogical Issues:** These issues incorporate concepts pertaining to *program models* or curriculum structure which is traditionally the domain of educational institutions; *school practices* which inform and subsequently involve parents; *teaching issues* and the implications surrounding the notion of parents as 'teachers' in collaborative home-school relations; and *teachers guiding parents* and the implications for parents' desire to participate in meaningful and long-term partnerships.

**3a. Educational Values, Judgements, and Attitudes:** These issues incorporate concepts pertinent to students', parents', and teachers' *increased confidence and respect* effecting positive change in their *perceptions, attitudes and respect* towards each other. For students, it is particularly a change in attitude towards their schooling and how they perceive themselves, and their parents, in it. For parents, it is especially a change in how they perceive themselves and the school, and their capabilities to assist their children. For teachers, it is notably a change in how they perceive parents and their ability to help their

children with home-schoolwork, and more especially their respect for them as "expert partners" in the formal education of their children.

**4a. Policy, Practice, and Educational Issues:** These issues incorporate concepts pertinent to implications for a *change in mindset* concerning *teachers' and principals' perceptions and attitudes* towards a participatory, collaborative model for students' formal education, as well as the influence of confidence in their own and parents' abilities. Implications for policy and practice also correlate with the educational ramifications for *specific practices* related to curriculum and parent participation in formal education, and for the *linking of parent involvement* to those *school practices* which encourage involvement at school and guide parents to help at home.

#### **(b) Substantive Findings**

As previously discussed, research in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, clearly and consistently indicates that involving parents in their student's formal education greatly enhances the student's self-confidence and interest in schoolwork, develops positive attitudes towards schooling, and increases their level of achievement (Bastiani, 1993; Dauber & Epstein, 1989; Epstein, 1995; Fullan, 1991; Henderson, 1988; Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez & Bloom, 1993; Philpott, 1992 & 1995; Pierce, 1994; Ross, 1994; Swap, 1993; Tangri & Moles, 1987; Ziegler, 1987). The research specifically points to two fundamental elements necessary to involve parents as knowledgeable partners in their children's education. These are the school's specific practices, programs or processes that inform and direct parents how to help their children, and critical to this are the communication initiatives undertaken to reach out to families.

These conclusions are particularly relevant for parents whose children have difficulties with learning and have special educational needs (Gersten,1992; Hegarty, 1993; Mearig, 1992; Philpott, 1992). According to Gersten this also includes families in poverty. Particularly writing about the vulnerability of junior and senior high students and outlining the numerous benefits of teachers' role in developing partnerships, she states that, "Their [teachers'] strengths lie in developing an educational relationship with specific families and in learning the strengths and weaknesses of those families" (p. 153).

The substantive findings corresponding to the interpretations, concepts and issues outlined above are delineated next. They are recounted under the same categories: (1) Sociological, Political, Ideological, Cultural, and Historical Interpretations; (2) Structural/Institutional and Pedagogical Issues; (3) Educational Values, Judgements, and Attitudes; and (4) Policy, Practice, and Educational Issues. The findings are not exhaustive.

#### **1b. Sociological, Political, Ideological, Cultural, and Historical Interpretations**

As noted above, Epstein and associates have studied parent involvement in schooling over the last three decades. Of particular relevance to this study is the fact that their investigations have included inner-city, middle or junior high schools where there are large populations of educationally disadvantaged students and "hard-to-reach" parents (Epstein, 1989). The steps taken to establish home-school relations are particularly important when attempting to include and reach out to those families who are considered by principals and teachers as being hard to reach and not interested in the school or their child's education.

However, Epstein and Dauber (1989) point to their own research and others (Chavkin & Williams Jr., 1987; Davies, 1987; Jones, 1987; Marockie & Lawrence Jones, 1987; McAfee, 1987; Moles, 1987; Purnell & Gotts, 1987; Truby, 1987) indicating substantial and persuasive evidence that, "parents of elementary, middle [junior high], and high school children *want to be involved* [*italics added*], but often are not helped by the schools to know how to become involved at school or how to help their children at home" (p. 1).

Related to this is also the idea of benefit, as Henderson (1988) asserts, "Children from *low-income and minority families* [*italics added*] benefit the most when parents are involved in the schools, and parents do *not* [her emphasis] have to be well-educated to make a difference"(p. 153). In Newfoundland, Canning (1996) emphasizes the connection between poverty and special education students, and in particular their need for help with reading. She also stresses that the, "Research has identified teaching strategies and other interventions necessary to ensure that poor children have the same opportunity to succeed in school as others from more advantaged backgrounds." Other authors are clear about some of these "interventions" and emphasize the importance of parental involvement when students have special needs (Gersten, 1992; Hegarty, 1993; Mearig, 1992; Munn, 1993; Philpott, 1992). Hegarty particularly emphasizes the need for meaningful, practical home-school relations in the areas of communication, curriculum, and assessment; he states that parents with such children need, "A meaningful involvement in their child's schooling so that the very different contributions of home and school work together in the child's interests" (p. 130). Gersten, upon extensive review of

the literature, goes beyond the notion of teacher-guided practices and advocates teacher home-visiting programs. In outlining strategies for teachers regarding families in poverty, she particularly notes the relevance for junior high students who may have special educational needs. Emphasizing the many negative effects when moving from elementary school to the junior high she states:

Early adolescence is a time of particular vulnerability for disturbances in development (Hamburg & Takanishi, 1989). That vulnerability is magnified for those preadolescents who must now cope with new developmental demands after they have experienced the cumulative effects of multiple risk characteristics of families in poverty. Many early adolescents find the transition from the neighborhood grammar [elementary] school to the more distant middle [junior high] school stressful<sup>6</sup> (Blyth, Simmons, & Carlton-Ford, 1983). (pp. 147-148)

Some of the literature also points to the subtle and sometimes obvious negative perceptions demonstrated towards low-income families by the school (Brantlinger, 1985; Gersten, 1992; Levin, 1987; Swap, 1993). Levin (1987) recounts the historical litany of teachers' complaints about the working class and the barriers these attitudes impose for some families. Regarding teachers, he states: "For their part, most teachers who are caught up in the rhetoric of 'inner city education' view the social and cultural backgrounds of the children's parents as making their task infinitely more difficult" (pp. 273-274). By the same token, parents are keenly aware of these perceptions and especially do not feel welcome at "traditional" school initiated events such as the PTA, parent-teacher conferences, and the annual open house (Bastiani, 1993; Levin, 1987; Munn, 1993; Pierce, 1994; Swap, 1993). Furthermore, parents are aware when teachers

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<sup>6</sup> The majority of parents in this study related experiences that concur with these findings.

have low expectations for their children. At the same time, however, they do not have high expectations for schools in meeting their children's educational needs (Brantlinger, 1985).<sup>7</sup>

In addition to teachers', principals' and school boards' insufficient cognizance of "contemporary families" from the perspective of "ethnic and cultural diversity, situational risk, individual vulnerability, and personal and social resources" (Procidano & Fisher, 1992, p. 3), there is also an important need for open-mindedness and knowledge of the diversity of family composition. Power (1993), in a compelling exposé about one school and its families in an urban setting in Newfoundland, outlines nine different family compositions by legal status. Complexities of home and work schedules for single-parents as well as custodial arrangements in extended step-family circumstances influence greatly the parents' involvement in their children's schooling (Crosbie-Burnett, Skyles, & Becker-Haven, 1988; Dornbusch & Strober, 1988; Dornbusch & Gray, 1988).

Further to family composition, Lareau (1992) poses important deliberations concerning gender and class issues. That is, when families comprise a mother and a father, or a female or male guardian, or both grandparents, questions arise regarding who supervises the student's day-to-day schooling experiences and learning activities at school and at home. Does social class influence the school's as well as parents' perceptions of

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<sup>7</sup> These findings were supported by the parents in this study.



gender role responsibilities regarding a child's education?<sup>8</sup> And is it of equal importance for both female and male students to acquire educational success? As Lareau asserts;

Many studies of gender have focused on the differential treatment of children in the classroom, as well as the way in which encouragement to pursue academic success in math and science is directed more to boys than girls. Researchers have also pursued the feminization of the profession and inequity by gender in the proportion of female administrators in higher education. ...I suggest that we need to see gender as operating in another important (*and neglected*) dimension of education [her emphasis]: *the role of parents in helping their children in school* [italics added]. (p. 221)

Strober & Dornbusch (1988) also recount the need for a change in the schools' traditional attitudes towards families, especially with regards to gender. Writing about communication between schools and parents, they underscore the "old assumptions" of schools concerning the availability of mothers, as well as the role of fathers in their children's education. They state: "School officials need to act as advocates for the child, educating both parents and legislators about the importance of good home-school communication with all adults who are involved in raising the children" (p. 331).

All of this implies that it is advantageous for school professionals to "adopt a family perspective" and in particular to understand the possible effects on a student's schooling experience. In accepting the challenge to promote and develop practical home-school relations with parents, school professionals also need to recognize the potential value of parents' contribution to the process (Epstein, 1995; Gersten, 1992; Grant, 1989;

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<sup>8</sup> Weiler (1988) advocates the countering of gender related stigmatizing attitudes and practices through critical understanding and organized, active, political opposition by female students, parents, and teachers.

Hegarty, 1993; Martin, 1992; Mearig, 1992; Munn, 1993; Philpott, 1992-95; Pierce, 1994; Power, 1993; Swap, 1993).

## **2b. Structural/Institutional and Pedagogical Issues**

According to Swap (1993), specific practices or "partnership models" may be developed by teachers and principals in collaboration with families to "assess their own school's starting place in practices of partnership" (p. x). Swap notes the importance of outlining clear, three to five-year goals for involvement practices with families, including two-way and three-way communications (i.e. school to home to school, and parent-teacher-student).

Schools in Baltimore City, Maryland, developed a program called Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) in 1986. The program, with a concentration in social studies and art courses, involved over 400 students in the junior high grades. Evaluative research following the first three years of implementation indicated overwhelming support for the program by teachers, parent volunteers, and students. The program continued into the fourth year and beyond under the leadership of the Parent Teacher Organization.

In their 1989 evaluation study of approximately 2,300 inner-city parents, Epstein and Dauber reported substantial findings concerning school programs and teachers' practices. They state:

The strongest and most consistent predictors of parent involvement at school and at home are the *specific school programs and teacher practices that encourage and guide parent involvement* [italics added]. Regardless of parent education, family size, student ability, or school level (elementary or middle school), parents are more likely to become partners

in their children's education if they perceive that the schools have strong practices to involve parents at school ( $b = .27$ ), at home on homework ( $b = .18$ , and at home on reading activities ( $b = .16$ ). The sum of all nine school practices has the strongest effect on parents' total involvement ( $b = .30$ ), after all other factors have been statistically controlled. (p. 8)

In a brief to their provincial government in 1992 on "creating genuine collaboration in schools," the Ontario Teachers' Federation drew on research in the United States and Canada as well as from the submissions of teachers, principals, and superintendents. In writing about reaching out to parents they list the factors required for successful, workable collaborative efforts. Four issues clearly correlate with the work of other researchers: first, collaborative initiatives with parents must have a focus; second, communication must be personalized; third, teachers and principals have to take a lead; and fourth, adequate resources have to be provided. Regarding a meaningful and specific aim or focus, they state:

Most parents want involvement around specifics, such as the particular challenges or problems facing their child. Meaningful collaboration has to build around this need if it is to generate involvement and recognize and use the skills and contributions of parents as well as teachers. Problems and issues have to be understood and owned to command involvement and action. (p. 18)

They also list twelve "tactics for generating successful parental involvement in the school." Several of these are specific to curriculum and some incorporate welcoming efforts. They write that the school should:

Create a place for parents to meet informally within the school, for coffee and interaction with other parents and staff, to examine curriculum, etc.; Use Family Nights to get parents and children working on joint projects; Use "Ziploc Science" Packs to be sent home with students for home experiments; Have "Borrow a Book" Programs supplemented by loaned videos instructing parents on how to help their child to read; Encourage

parents to share their skills, talents, hobbies and interests with their child's class; Engage parents and teachers jointly in door to door outreach to welcome new parents into the school, and to break barriers with those intimidated by institutions. (p. 20)

In Newfoundland, two home-school relations' projects have already met with success; one specific to reading skills and another to study skills. Developed by Oldford-Matchim (1994), one program advocates the importance of "Significant Others as Reading Teachers (SORT)." The developer/author outlines the details of the SORT project in a brochure and, in part, describes it as:

A family/community reading program designed to establish reading as an everyday practice in the lives of young children... It is supported by research findings which show that children experience success in reading when significant others engage with them in reading activities for an extended period of time.

Initiated in 1991, the program includes a videotape and a handbook for children's significant others. A variety of people contributed to the project, including educators, students and parents whose suggestions are reflected in the project. A thorough search of the fields of self-concept, self-esteem and emergent reading also contributed perspective for the program.

A second program, developed by Philpott, was specifically designed for *junior high parents*, as well as teachers, and was piloted in one school in 1995. One hundred and eighty parents grew to well over 200 as word of the six-week program spread among parents. A "Structured Homework Program" accessible on the SchoolNet computer site

was subsequently proposed.<sup>9</sup> In the proposal, Philpott pointed out that the program was designed for both parents and teachers, and that it was:

Aimed at introducing to teachers and parents a systematic and comprehensive package of materials to promote learning skills and study strategies for students. *It endeavours to empower these participants in the educational partnership with specific methods to enhance academic success for students during home study, class sessions, and independent work sessions* [italics added]. (1995, p. 1)

Particularly relevant for this study is that the impetus for this program came from Philpott's course developed for special needs junior high students in 1992 called "Empowering Students with Learning Disabilities." Parents were included as "an integral component" and it met with such success that a comparable course was developed for "regular stream students."

### 3b. Educational Values, Judgements, and Attitudes

Other research findings denote an added bonus from home-school partnerships in that parents become more confident in their abilities to help their children across the grades, and give a higher rating of teachers skills and teaching ability. Dauber and Epstein (1989) in citing their research in 1986 note that, "Earlier research showed that some of the strongest immediate effects of teachers' practices of parent involvement are on *parents' attitudes and behaviors*" [their emphasis] (p. 15). Also significant and perhaps indicative of an important change in mindset is the positive effects on, "teachers' opinions about parents' abilities to help their children on schoolwork at home" (Becker & Epstein, 1982; Epstein, 1986; Epstein & Dauber, 1988; as cited by Dauber & Epstein, 1989, p. 1).

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<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, funding was not made available for this final stage of the project.

These findings are also supported by the parents and teachers who participated in Philpott's "Structured Homework" project in Newfoundland. As one parent said of the pilot program, "If it had not been for Mr. Philpott's course and my participation in it, I would never have scrutinized my 16 year old son's notes and found his total inability to take good notes. I don't know whether to laugh or cry!" (see App. C). Regarding teachers' attitudes towards parents, after participating in the project, one teacher said, "I have students in my class whose parents are doing the program and I have had the opportunity to meet with them and discuss their child's progress. In my opinion this course has been a blessing. The program defines for parents, teachers and students what their responsibilities are" (see App. D).

Parents, teachers, and students, therefore, demonstrate more positive attitudes towards each other, and their efforts, when approaches towards collaborative partnerships are comprehensive, well-planned and long lasting (Bastiani, 1993; Henderson, 1988; Pierce, 1994; Swap, 1993). To reiterate Dauber and Epstein's (1989) findings - "The level of parent involvement was directly linked to the specific practices of a school to encourage involvement at school and to guide parents in how to help at home" (p. iii).

Other studies emphasize the importance for schools to respect and acknowledge parents as expert partners and to be cognizant of the differences in family circumstances (Hegarty, 1993; Mearig, 1992; Munn, 1993). Writing about "Families with Learning-Disabled Children" and underscoring the vital role and contribution that parents can make to their students' schooling, Hegarty is primarily concerned with the shallowness of partnership rhetoric if families' differences are not taken into account. While outlining

the "complementary" roles of parents and teachers, the author also stresses the need "for a functional description of home-school contact" which includes not only defining the activities, purposes, and relevance to schooling goals, but also involves determining, "How do they relate to parents' wishes and needs." (p. 119). The author goes on to describe:

functional home-school relations in special education [by examining] communication, curriculum, assessment, personal support, and liaison with other agencies. Such an approach is held to be more useful because it allows for the possibility of partnership but is not confined to partnership-type activities. (p. 117)

#### **4b. Policy, Practice, and Educational Issues**

In 1983 Becker and Epstein studied the implications of parent involvement on school policy including the types of parent involvement which benefit students, the types of involvement schools should encourage, and to what degree schools should expect parent participation. Reporting on the results, Epstein (1984) indicated the recognition and significance accorded parent involvement in their children's learning by "prestigious committees of scholars" in their contribution to reports on American schools. She notes, "The recommendations reflect the consistent findings in social research that children have an added advantage in school when their parents encourage and support schooling" (p. 70). Furthermore, U.S. Federal Government Policies, Programs, and Acts since the 1960s were indicative of this support, for example: Head Start, 1967; Follow- Through, 1967; Variations for both, 1971; Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act,

1974-75; and its successor Chapter I of the Education Consolidation and Improvement Act, 1981.

In studying the effectiveness of the various programs, Becker and Epstein's results strongly suggested a need for district-level policies "that would help classroom teachers develop workable programs of parent involvement in home learning activities" (p. 72). Other types of involvement, such as parents helping at school, did not indicate the same strong effects on parents' attitudes and evaluations of their ability to help their children and their evaluations of teachers' efforts and merits. In other words, the most rewards for the majority of parents came when teachers involved them in helping their children learn at home, through consistent and organized involvement in the teaching practices of the teacher.

In another U.S. study, Chavkin and Williams (1987) carried out research in six states which included parents, local school district superintendents, and presidents of local district school boards. The study brought to light important insights into the feelings of parents and administrators towards various aspects of parent involvement, and the kinds of district-level policies that existed to promote it. The researchers recommended guidelines that administrators could use to enhance parent involvement in schools. The guidelines are consistent with other findings elucidating the importance of parents' role in educational specific practices. In part, Chavkin and Williams outline that there is a need for school administrators to:

- (i) look beyond traditional ways of working with parents and respect their interest in shared decision-making;



- (ii) collaborate and state clear goals of involvement denoting that parents are as important to children's academic success as are educators.
- (iii) write formalized school district policies for parental involvement.
- (iv) provide instruction and inservice training for teachers and more importantly training activities for administrators themselves as a change in mindset may be necessary concerning the importance of parent involvement.
- (v) ask parents how they want to be involved - their ideas may be more sophisticated than educators perceive them to be.
- (vi) make certain that a variety of opportunities are available for parents dependent upon parents' skills, time available, work schedules, and individual preferences.
- (vii) make certain that parents are provided with more information, ample opportunities to share insights or concerns, and with sufficient training for partnership roles with school staff in the education of students.
- (viii) view the various types of parent involvement as a developmental sequence from all points of view, for the traditional parent role as audience obviously requires less effort than the roles of home tutors, decision makers, advocates, or co-learners.
- (ix) make available the appropriate kinds of resources for parent involvement efforts: staff, space, and finance.

Recent advocates of policy initiatives in Canada include Fullan (1991), the Ontario Teachers' Federation (1992), Pierce (1994), Ross (1994), Zeigler (1987), and as noted earlier, in Newfoundland, the Department of Education's 1994 "Consultation Paper on School Council Operations."

Although policy can be an important step towards changes in attitudes and implementation of any innovative programs, Canning (1996) and Canning, Kennedy, and Strong (1993) underscore the serious implications of policy implementation without appropriate and adequate support systems to maintain initiatives. Investigating the outcomes of the 1987 governmental special education policy for special needs students in Newfoundland, both studies reported that despite comprehensive policy, teachers, principals, and program coordinators did not receive training. Additionally, there were (and still are) no accountability strategies to ensure the appropriate utilization of resources, to assess service delivery and to hire suitably qualified teachers. As Canning (1996) states: "Informing schools of what they should be doing is not enough" (p. 26).

Advocates of home-school partnership programs evidently concur (Epstein, 1995; Swap, 1993). For example in describing policy and implementation strategies for parental involvement in San Diego City Schools, Swap outlined the extensive planning, implementation and evaluation involved. She described the work of a task force of almost 50 parents, teachers, administrators, and community representatives. Following policy development as well as a handbook for principals, "The task force also developed a 3-year implementation plan, characterized as a centrally supported, bottom-up approach to implementation" (p. 63). The three components included: 1. *Building Staff Capacity* that provided workshops for principals, parents, and staff; incentive grants; and widely distributed materials for parent involvement. 2. *Partnership Development* that included planning and implementation of comprehensive parent involvement programs; a planning process for principals; a major conference for 700 participants in the first year of the

program; and community-based organizational leadership and training on parent involvement in schools. 3. *Follow-up and Support* from the schools' district Parent Involvement Programs Department over a two year period clarified procedures, provided assistance to schools on needs assessment, staff training, implementation, volunteer programs, and evaluation, provided finance support for innovative programs, coordinated district and community resources, and implemented an evaluation plan.

### **(c) Methodological Issues Arising Out of the Literature**

Methodological issues involving collection methods, sampling, and data analysis encompass four categories: 1. empirical research; 2. comprehensive studies; 3. review of studies and literature; and 4. review of partnership programs.

#### **1. Empirical Research**

Studies carried out on home-school program partnerships indicate that data collection methods, for the most part, consisted of mailed or group distributed questionnaire surveys and include: Becker and Epstein (1982b), Chavkin and Williams Jr. (1987), Dauber and Epstein (1989) report no. 33, Epstein and Dauber (1989) report nos. 32 and 41, and Purnell and Gotts (1987). The samples in each of these studies were selected randomly from fairly large populations of parents, or teachers, or students, or superintendents. Various combinations of participants were selected depending on the type of study and information sought. Data analysis was quantitative utilizing computer software such as SPSS (Software Program for Social Statistics).

It is noteworthy that in Dauber and Epstein's 1989 study, Parent Attitudes and Practices of Parent Involvement in Inner-City Elementary and Middle Schools, "action research" was carried out by the teachers of these schools. A local Baltimore City foundation for education made small grants directly to teachers to attend workshops and participate in the development of the survey questionnaires.

Personal and telephone interviews have also been used. In one unique study, Marockie, Jones (1987) developed a home-school communications drop-out intervention program. The data provided simple but valuable techniques such as daily phone calls and home visits, emphasizing that personal contact is the most genuine and effective way of communicating with potential drop-outs and their parents.

Brantliner's 1984 study, a project combining interviews and a brief questionnaire, elaborates the important notion of seeking the "real feelings" or true perceptions of the participants. As she points out, the forced-choice element of questionnaires interferes with discovering the true realities of people, in this case parents. While her sample is considered by some (Weir, 1986) too small to be significant, others such as Olson (1986) consider that indeed "its great methodological strength [is that it] taps into the lifeworld of the parents of the children we teach" (p. 80).

Grant (1989), in her book Learning Relations, echoes the importance of personal communication in research and also emphasizes the importance of language as key to unlocking a student's capacity to learn. Personal interviewing and focus groups, therefore, were her primary source of data collection. Her participants were selected by knocking on doors of families in a low-income, inner-city neighborhood in Glasgow, Scotland. A

long-time teacher, educator, and Sister, her descriptive data analysis (produced as a book) demonstrated "improvements in children's active learning when parents participate and professionals co-ordinate their efforts" (back cover).

Participant-observation, and in-depth interviews were utilized by Lareau (1992), and Power (1993). These authors have contributed most impressive and important case studies concerning family and gender issues in schooling from a critical feminist perspective. Power (1993), a Newfoundland educator, researcher and consultant, observed students in an inner-city school classroom. While they were her primary participants, Power also interviewed parents, teachers, administrators, and government officials as key informants. Power's work is a long overdue, critical accounting of the "mismatch" between schools' and educators' "images and expectations" of families and the realities as lived by students. Lareau's 1992 study looked at the impact of social class and gender on students in a middle-class school compared with those in a lower-class school in a London township. Both authors use thick descriptive data analysis.

## **2. Comprehensive Studies**

Canning's 1996 review of special education in Newfoundland has implications for issues encompassing home-school relations. In particular it has ramifications for supposed hard-to-reach parents who have students with special needs, and for those within working-class, low-income circumstances. Comprehensive in scope, it included the review of the current policy on programming and service delivery, as well as other policies identified in current literature or practiced in other provinces. One hundred and five written submissions were received from those who were responsible for the organization and

delivery of educational programs and who provide support to students and families. The researchers also met with a number of community groups, educational agencies and organizations, parents, teachers, student assistants, and personnel from school district offices and government departments. They visited large and small schools in rural and urban areas throughout the province.

Additionally, a total of 12 questionnaires were developed and distributed to board personnel, support personnel, principals, classroom teachers, and special education teachers. Meetings in the field and visits to classrooms provided the basis for the questionnaires and indicated the most appropriate questions to ask. Meetings with a number of concerned parents were held, as well as consultations with relevant organizations and government departments. Finally, visits were made to other provinces to observe current practices, and to meet with teachers, other educators and government personnel.

### **3. Reviews of Previous Studies and Other Literature**

Reviews of previous studies include: Epstein (1987), Fullan (1991), Mearig (1992), Moles (1987), Tangri and Moles (1987), Henderson (1988), Munn (1993), Procidano and Fisher (1992), Ross (1994), and Ziegler (1987). Munn's work, published as a "well-researched book" in 1993, is a compilation of the writings of nine educational authors in the United Kingdom. Contributors ranged from professors involved in home-school partnership projects to the Deputy Director of the National Foundation for Educational Research. All topics pertained to the title of Munn's book - Parents and Schools: Customers, Managers or Partners?

Procidano and Fisher's (1992) text Contemporary Families: A Handbook for School Professionals included the writings of twenty-one authors comprising psychotherapists; psychologists; research associates; sociology and psychology professors; associate and assistant professors; and family clinicians. An American publication dealing with the many complexities of today's families and the relevance to education, the chapter topics ranged from family composition, families of diverse cultural backgrounds, to families in stressful situations, and families with vulnerable individuals. Of particular relevance to the present study was the chapter by Joanne C. Gersten (1992) entitled "Families in Poverty." Chief of research and statistical analysis at the Arizona Department of Health Services and an adjunct professor of psychology, Gersten has completed several studies and is widely published on the epidemiology of both health and mental health problems in children and adolescents. She advocates home visiting by teachers, underscores the high risk factors of poverty for junior and high school students, and endorses equal opportunity initiatives for students, regardless of family income.

Also in Procidano and Fisher (1992), Mearig's research about "Families with Learning-Disabled Children" is also pertinent. A professor and coordinator of school psychology graduate programs and member of a state board for psychology, Mearig has worked extensively with children with special needs and their families. She especially advocates the value of parents' knowledge and the school's need to respect them as expert partners in the schooling of their special needs children and underscores parents' on-going concern for their children's self-esteem.

The relevance of Tangri and Moles' (1987) writings is evident in their attention to various types of parent involvement, home-school communications, family composition, and especially the implications of parent-school relations for older students. Henderson's (1988) work provides valuable information gleaned from 53 studies during the 1970s and 1980s. The title of her article is revealing: "Parents Are A School's Best Friends."

Fullan (1991), a Canadian author, researcher and educator, highlighted an important perspective of parental involvement by comparing parent "instructional and noninstructional" involvement and the subsequent effects on students' personal development and school accomplishments. As well, he stressed the importance of school/teacher guided programs for parents. Ziegler's (1987) Canadian report has been well utilized by other authors, and is significant for its thoroughness, as well as for its review of parent/school participation at all school levels from pre-school through to junior and senior high.

#### **4. Review of Partnership Programs**

Partnership programs reviewed include: Bastiani (1993), Davies (1987), Epstein (1995), Hegarty (1993), Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez & Bloom (1993), McAfee (1987), Ontario Teachers' Federation (1992), Oldford-Matchim (1994), Philpott (1995), Swap (1993), and Truby (1987). In particular, Swap's book makes a significant contribution for researchers, developers and implementation groups of home-school partnerships. Author of the best-selling Enhancing Parent Involvement in Schools, as well as two other books, her current text, Developing Home-School Partnerships From Concepts to Practice, not



only gives a thorough review of school/home partnership models, but also delineates the advantages and disadvantages of some models. As well, she proposes an alternative model which she calls "A New Vision: The Partnership Model." Additionally, this author discusses the potential barriers to parental involvement, and follows with an accounting of various successful communication approaches.

The Ontario Teachers' Federation (1992) brief to their provincial government on creating genuine collaboration in schools listed the key factors to achieve success in reaching out to parents, and emphasize a meaningful, specific focus. In addition, tactics in generating successful parent involvement with the school are outlined, and include initiatives for assisting children with schoolwork.

Hegarty's (1993) work is pertinent because of his attention to special needs children. Deputy Director of the National Foundation for Educational Research in the United Kingdom, he has published widely on the education of these students but is particularly interested in the integration of special needs children into mainstream schooling. Stressing the importance of recognizing families' differences he describes the main components of "functional home-school relations" in special education, and notes the need for collaboration between parents and teachers whose roles complement each other.

Finally, Epstein (1995) not only summarizes the theory and framework for home-school relations, she sets out detailed guidelines which can assist schools in building partnerships. The co-director for the Schools, Family, and Community Partnerships Program in the Center for Research on the Education of Students Placed at Risk at The

Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Epstein has completed research on these issues spanning several decades. In highlighting the joint responsibilities of caring for children, she underscores the need for schools to take the initiative in partnership programming, outlines her framework for six types of involvement, and lists the expected results for students, parents, and teachers. In addition, there are descriptive steps for developing more positive school-family-community connections, a listing of the characteristics of successful programs and how to strengthen partnerships.

### **Chapter Three**

#### **METHODOLOGY**

##### **(a) The Participants and The Procedure**

This study involved one inner-city junior high school and was carried out in two phases. First, interviews were carried out with four key informants<sup>10</sup> at the school. Second, interviews were conducted with nine families. In seeking permission to conduct the research, separate meetings were held with the principal, vice-principal, and an assistant superintendent at the school board office. Approval from the school board also included obtaining a list of parents' names and telephone numbers from the school's computer database.

The **first phase** of the data collection involved the interviews at the school with two grade seven homeroom teachers and two principals.<sup>11</sup> The vice-principal provided the names of several teachers who might be interested in participating. Initially, three teachers were contacted by telephone, and with the final approval from the principal the interviews were set-up. One teacher was unable to participate; however, the other two interviews went ahead as scheduled, separately, in each of the teacher's homeroom classrooms. Ms. Moore<sup>12</sup> was interviewed first; she had been teaching for almost thirty years, sixteen at the junior high level. The other teacher was Mr. Hunter who had been teaching for only three years, all at the junior high level. The principals were Mr. Smith, the long-time principal, and Mr. Gates the new principal. Since the principalship changed during the study, it was

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<sup>10</sup> "Key informants are individuals who possess special knowledge, status... and are willing to share that knowledge with the researcher" (Lecompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 166).

<sup>11</sup> The principalship changed hands during the study.

<sup>12</sup> Fictional names are used throughout the thesis.

decided to avail of the opportunity to make a comparison of their commentary. Mr. Smith was interviewed a few weeks following the teacher interviews, while Mr. Gates participated after he had been in his new position for several months.

The procedure for each interview involved explaining the rationale for the study, and obtaining formal agreement for participation by having each sign an informed letter of consent. All four participants agreed to have the conversations audio taped. An interview guide provided consistent direction for open-ended questions. The main focus of the interviews with both the teachers and principals was to gain information about the types of parental involvement at the school as well as the communication methods employed. Also pertinent to the study were their thoughts and opinions about specific teacher-guided practices to involve parents directly in their children's learning. The ratio of mothers' compared to fathers' involvement was also queried; however, the over-riding issue was their perceptions about seemingly hard-to-reach parents. In addition, background information about the school was discussed with the principals. The length of the interviews ranged from 25 minutes with the first principal to approximately 60 minutes with each teacher and the new principal.

The second phase comprised the arranging and conducting of the interviews with the grade eight parents and, obviously, this process took much longer to complete than the first phase. Grade seven parents were the original choice for the study (and two grade seven teachers were interviewed); however, since the research was initiated at the school's year-end, the students were in grade eight when their parents were interviewed. Therefore, a list of grade eight parents' names and telephone numbers was requested.

Several months elapsed before the most current computer listing could be obtained from the school. Summer vacation and the school's up-dating process for the computer listings brought about the delay. Consequently parents were interviewed a number of months later than the teachers and the first principal Mr. Smith. Upon receipt of the list, a crucial first step in the procedure was to ascertain a "reputational-case selection" of presumed hard-to-reach parents (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). This method of choosing a particular segment of a "population" is based "on the recommendation of experts" (pp. 76-77). The experts in this instance were a grade seven teacher and a grade eight teacher. Permission was again obtained to meet with the teachers and they agreed to make the selection by checking names on the list. They were specifically asked to select names of parents whom they considered as hard to reach, or difficult to reach, and whom they considered as those who usually did not participate at the school or in their children's schooling. Out of a total of 145 names, the teachers selected 25.

Arrangement of the interviews involved calling the parents, explaining the nature of the study, asking permission to use a tape recorder and deciding on a mutually suitable time for each interview. Parents were given a telephone number should they later have decided to cancel. They were also contacted on the day of the interview to confirm their decision to participate. Taking into account some of the delays in reaching some parents due to work schedules, and rescheduling interviews due to illness or other commitments, the process took a period of four months to complete. Of the 25 families selected, seven could not be reached for reasons such as not having a telephone or not returning the call. Some numbers on the list were incorrect (sometimes reflective of recent changes in

marital status and changes in address). Of the 18 who were contacted, nine participated, seven declined, and two canceled.

Mothers were the major contacts in scheduling interviews; some fathers who answered the telephone referred the call to the mother. While an attempt was made for both parents to be interviewed, only three fathers fully participated. However, it should be taken into account that three of the families were single-parent, female-headed families. One student's family contact was the grandmother; unfortunately, she decided not to participate and canceled the interview.

Prior to the parents being contacted and following many inquiries, arrangements were finalized to offer them an alternate place where the interviews could be conducted. Privacy and comfort were uppermost and a community health-consulting centre located in a former residential home provided such a setting. Although parents were offered transportation and child-sitting services, only two mothers choose to be interviewed at the centre, with the remainder generously providing their homes as the interview site. Without exception, all participants demonstrated genuine interest in the research and were eager to tell their 'stories'. The privacy of the interview settings and the attention they afforded the discussion illustrated this. Most seemed to be appreciative that someone in education was interested in listening to them and putting their commentary in writing.

In addition to explaining the purpose of the research and ensuring their confidentiality when initially contacted, parents were given an informed letter of consent to read and sign before the interview began. As well, while they had given prior permission to audio tape the conversation, this was again confirmed before the discussion

began. Only one mother did not want to be recorded; notes were taken instead. While this limited the opportunity for substantive quotes, she was generous in her cooperation and was quite animated in sharing information not only about her children's schooling but about her own personal interests and achievements as well. One other parent, a father, objected to using the tape recorder just prior to the commencement of the interview. The mother had been the telephone contact and had agreed to being taped. Complying with his wishes, they agreed that the mother could be recorded when she spoke but the machine would be stopped when the father responded. However, only one question had been asked when he changed his decision and said it was okay to record his comments as well. At the end of the interview, the father was especially interested in hearing some of the recording. It was then discovered that a particular setting on the machine had disrupted a portion of conversation towards the end of the interview. These parents generously rescheduled another meeting to redo the segment.

Again an interview guide was utilized and provided consistent direction for the topics of discussion with the parents. However, the open-ended nature of the questions and an effort to facilitate an attentive and reflective atmosphere appeared to encourage a generous sharing of information especially pertinent to their children's schooling experiences.<sup>13</sup> The length of the interviews varied. Interest and comfort level appeared high so that the shortest interview was about 80 minutes long and the longest was about two and one-half hours. The average length was approximately 90 minutes.

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<sup>13</sup> As evidenced by the depth and breadth of the parents' "voices" in chapter five.

### **(b) Data Analysis**

The data were fully transcribed from the tape recordings. Data analysis procedures were employed utilizing what Miles and Huberman (1994) describe as theme patterns, clustering, metaphors, and connecting data to theory leading to a logical chain of evidence. This was carried out by using the computer software program for the analysis of text-based data, The Ethnograph v4.0. The interview texts were classified using single and multiple coding procedures which were guided by the interview topics and the participants' responses. The resultant coded or theme segments were also compiled and collated through a search process thus permitting efficient access to the dominant themes that emerged from the discussions. As well, preliminary writing conducted by using the software program's memoing feature was most beneficial for the analysis and in finalizing the emergent themes of the research.

In addition to the memo-writing during the analysis process, notes were also written following each telephone contact with parents and the school personnel. Most helpful, however, were the substantial observational notes that were written following each of the interviews. These were beneficial in the development of consistent emergent themes prior to and following the completion of the interviews.

Some comparative analysis was also carried out using the school's 1993 teacher survey. For instance, the parents' stated willingness to participate in their students' schooling in this study was compared with the frequencies of the teachers' perception of parents' desire to be involved, as a whole. Also, the parents' stated expectations of their students' abilities in this study were compared with the frequencies of teachers'



perceptions of parents' expectations for students, as a whole. Finally, quantitative data from specific selected components of the parent survey conducted by the school in May of 1995 were utilized. These were frequency distributions from the specific questions pertaining to parental involvement. As well, parents were distinguishable by grade since they were asked to indicate the grade of their student. However, as noted earlier, the survey was completed only by fifty-one percent of the parent population, and supposed hard-to-reach parents could not be identified. Quantitative analysis of the survey was carried out by using the Software Program for Social Statistics (SPSS).

#### **(c) Protection of Participants**

Fictitious names were used for all persons and for most place names in the findings. Some local organizations are named without relevance to any particular family. The listing of parents' names and telephone numbers were obtained from the school with the approval of the school board and the school's administrative personnel. Informed letters of consent were signed by a school board official, the key informants at the school, and the parents. These outlined the intent of the research, the agreement to use a tape recorder where permitted by the participant, the option to withdraw from the study at any time, and the assurance of confidentiality.

#### **(d) Limitations of the Study**

Since this study involved one group of parents in one inner-city junior high school, there is no attempt to generalize the findings to the wider population. As well, the endeavor to interview parents who were supposedly hard-to-reach limited access to only those parents chosen by the teachers. Therefore, while it is reasonable to assume that

types of parental involvement in Newfoundland schools tend towards traditional patterns, and parents' perceptions of their involvement depends on their individual experiences. obviously, the readers of this study will determine the significance of the findings.

**Table 1**  
**Schedule for Data Collection and Analysis**

Date	Task
May 1995	Request Permission to Conduct Study
June 1995	Interview Key Informants at the School Site
September 1995	Request List of Grade Eight Parents
December 1995	Receipt of List
January 1996	Ask Teachers to Select Hard-to-Reach Parents
January 1996	Interview New Principal
January-April 1996	Arrange and Conduct Interviews with Parents
May-July 1996	Data Analysis
December 1996	Writing
July-December 1997	Writing

**Table 2**  
**Sampling and Reputational-Case Selection of Hard-to-Reach Parents**

<b><u>Step 1</u></b>	<b><u>Step 2</u></b>
Interview Key Informants Two Grade Seven Teachers Long-time Principal <sup>14</sup> New Principal	Obtain List of All Grade Eight <sup>15</sup> Parents
<b><u>Step 3</u></b>	<b><u>Step 4</u></b>
Ask Teachers to Select Hard-to-Reach Parents	Sample Selected - 25 Contacted - 18 Final Sample - 9

<sup>14</sup> The principalship changed hands during the study.

<sup>15</sup> Due to the commencement date of the study, the grade seven students were in grade eight when the parents were interviewed.

## **Chapter Four**

### **SCHOOL VOICES: TRADITIONAL AND AUTONOMOUS MINDSETS**

Adult collaboration in any form is relatively rare in schools (p. 17).

-- Susan McAllister Swap (1993)

#### **(a) Introduction**

In this chapter, the findings from interviews with the two grade seven teachers and the two principals are presented. These participants were key informants for the study with the focal point being their perspective on parental involvement at their school. The pertinent questions revolved around four major themes: 1. how parents were involved in their students' schooling; 2. what kinds of communication methods were utilized to contact parents; 3. how the teachers and principals perceived the idea of teacher-guided practices to involve parents in helping their children at home; and 4. who played the more significant role in students' schooling - mothers or fathers.

Of particular importance was the issue of so-called hard-to-reach parents determined by the teachers as those who usually did not participate in activities at school or at home in their children's education. Of prime significance as well was an unexpected topic - special needs students. Arising during the conversation with the first teacher, issues pertinent to these students were to foreshadow the context of the remaining interviews. The setting in which the conversations with the teachers took place is described next, followed by the findings from the teachers and then the principals.

### **(b) The Setting**

Since the grade sevens were involved in sports day competitions, the interviews with the teachers took place in their homerooms. Each classroom was quite traditional with rows of students' desks facing the teacher's desk surrounded by ordinary classroom paraphernalia of chalkboards, charts and posters. The loud echoes of conversation reverberated in the empty rooms, and while this was somewhat distracting, even more bothersome were the announcements given over the public address system from the school's office. Without warning, these messages abruptly interrupted the privacy of the conversations, causing one to consider how teachers and students cope with these intrusions during the learning process.

There were several grade seven classes in the school and both teachers had one class of approximately 35 to 40 students each. Ms. Moore had been teaching for almost thirty years, including sixteen as a junior high teacher; Mr. Hunter had been teaching for only three years. Next the findings of the interview with Ms. Moore are presented.

### **(c) Ms. Moore - A Grade Seven Teacher**

There is simply not enough opportunity and not enough encouragement for teachers to work together, learn from each other, and improve their expertise as a community  
(cited by the Ontario Teachers' Federation, 1992, p. 49).

-- M. Fullan & A. Hargreaves (1991)

#### **1. Parental Involvement: Insular Classrooms and Delegated School Roles**

The interview with Ms. Moore points to what Swap (1993) describes as "school norms that do not support partnership" (p. 17). Individualism appears to be a pervasive acceptable approach to homeroom and subject teaching, whereby teachers rarely

collaborate with each other or with parents. For the most part, Ms. Moore appeared to view her role quite separate from that of parents and other teachers. Congruent with school management traditions,<sup>16</sup> Ms. Moore's homeroom probably could be considered as being quite insular. That is to say, she did not appear to share her successful teaching strategies with other teachers, and seemed to consider the idea quite unnecessary.

The discussion with Ms. Moore began with her views about parental involvement. In particular she was asked about the level of activity in parent-teacher interviews and the school's Parent-Teacher Association (the PTA). She noted that "traditionally over the years" she had good parental involvement. However, as Ms. Moore continued, it became evident that her perspective of parental involvement related to the communication methods she used to contact parents concerning homework, and more especially about student behaviour. To Ms. Moore, parental involvement essentially seemed to mean the assurance that parents were informed about what she referred to as classroom "infractions." She described parental involvement this way:

I feel I've had a fair bit of parental involvement but a lot of it has been instigated by myself because *I'm always phoning parents!* If a child is not getting homework done, I keep a record. I have something called a doomsday book which the kids laugh at kind-of-thing, but they take it sort of seriously. So if they have their name written in that book three times, for either work not done or some infraction in the classroom, then they realize that there's a phone call at home; and then at the end of that three, it starts again. So they realize - and I tell parents that should there be three infractions of any kind, I will call at home. Now in the meantime if a

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<sup>16</sup> Traditional approaches to school management have, and still continue to embody the insular classroom. Emphasizing hierarchy, individualism, and technology instead of dialogue, relationship, and reciprocity has contributed greatly to the fact that "teaching has been and continues to be an isolated and isolating experience" (Kidder, 1989 in Swap, 1993, p. 17; Noddings, 1988).

serious one comes up, I phone anyway and I always encourage parents of what I consider at-risk students, that is, not necessarily emotionally at risk but academically as well, I encourage them to call me probably once a month just so that we can have a chat. If I don't get to them, they should get to me.

Ms. Moore seemed to delineate the roles of teachers and parents from a fairly traditional perspective. When asked about parents assisting at school to do a workshop, if for example they had knowledge in a particular area such as social studies, her perception of the question appeared to be that of parents' infringement on her curriculum planning, particularly in terms of creating a great deal of coordinating work for her. Noting that parents and people from the community "are invited in the school to do various things," she appeared anxious to think that parents might possibly be included in daily teaching. She stated:

But to actually come in let's say, to be involved in the day-to-day running of the curriculum, I don't know if I would have the time to coordinate it, to be honest with you. It's sounds tremendous but my day is pretty long as it is and I don't know if I could fit in having to sit down and plan things out with somebody else because it would take a lot of coordination.

She went on to relate her experiences working with student teachers which she noted caused "*a load of work.*"<sup>17</sup> Pointing out the difficulties in orienting a new person into her class and particularly referring to the "eight special education" students<sup>17</sup> in her class, her exasperation was evident as she said, "So how are you going to get an outsider to come in and get them to tune into the individual needs when it takes awhile to get into that. It's very difficult."

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<sup>17</sup> See topic five about special needs students.

As noted earlier, Ms. Moore had been teaching for almost thirty years. Her responses, stated with confident intonation, seemed to indicate that she considered her homeroom class very much her domain. "I guess I have a fair bit of control in my classroom and I have my objectives set up and I have sort of my program now - after all this time, it is set up. It's working; it's very good." Surprisingly, despite her strong misgivings about involving what she described above as an "outsider" in her classroom, she did go on to say that "I like parents to come in to assist, to help with seat work and projects and we do this quite a bit." But again she repeated, "It's difficult - it's a fine line that you're following, as I say because I see the big picture in where I'm going and it's very hard when - if you're going to get someone to come in to do a topic." Obviously viewing this as a serious issue for her homeroom class, she elaborated still further.

It's very difficult; the more people you have involved in the curriculum, the more work it is on the classroom teacher.<sup>18</sup> That is, if you're going to have it structured and if you're going to follow your objectives and if you're going to make it interesting and tailor-made to your needs - and this is what makes a successful classroom.

Perhaps Ms. Moore was cognizant of her "delegated" teacher responsibilities to deliver the curriculum as set down by the Department of Education through her school board. But delegated roles are not only given to teachers but to parents as well. Swap (1993) points to these delegated roles arising from administrative decision making. She

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<sup>18</sup> This statement is consistent with Swap (1993). The overriding attitude is that educating children is best left to the "professionals," since parents can disrupt the expert learning environment. "They also argue that the extra time it takes to work with parents would place an intolerable burden on already over-worked teachers and principals" (Henderson, 1987, p. 2 in Swap, p. 21).



notes what Seeley (1989) describes as schools being set up in a “delegation model” (p. 18). In this traditional model, both parents and teachers view parental involvement from the following perspectives:

Parents signal that they do not have to be involved because the job of education has been delegated to the schools, and educators see parent involvement as an interference with the jobs that have been delegated to them (p. 18).<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, despite Ms. Moore’s apparent adherence to traditional designated roles for teachers and parents, her emphasis on the importance for teachers to actively seek parental support was profound. Negative experience had obviously led her to this decision as she noted with an all-knowing chuckle:

*But if you’ve got the home working against you, you can forget it! So what you have to do is seek their support. You have to go and seek their support and if they know that you’re interested in their child and that you’re doing the best you can for their child, very often - nine times out of ten - you’re going to get the support of these parents! Very seldom will you get one who’s against you. Now you will find somebody who totally disagrees with you - you’re not God.*

In summary, parental involvement for Ms. Moore appeared to be primarily a matter of seeking parents’ support and contacting them about their students’ behaviour in **not** completing schoolwork assignments and how well they behaved in class as recorded in her “doomsday book.” The idea of parental involvement in the classroom appeared to be a matter of some consternation for her, and she did not offer any comment about other

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<sup>19</sup> Will the implementation of School Councils change these attitudes?

types of involvement, even though the PTA was particularly mentioned in the question.<sup>20</sup>

Discussion of her communication methods is presented next.

## 2. Communication: "Secret" Strategies and Problem-Response Methods

As noted earlier, Ms. Moore's approach to teaching and especially to managing her students appears consistent with the literature in characterizing an insular classroom perspective. Not surprisingly, therefore, Ms. Moore described her communication strategies with parents as "a secret" and consistently spoke in terms of her individual approach throughout the interview. She stated:

When I have my meet-the-teacher night, I have a very full night for parents and I really touch on a lot of things... And usually by the time the evening is over, these parents realize that, okay, we are working together. Right? And it's open-door and it's phoning whenever. And I'll phone you whenever, or I'll send a note whenever. *And I tell you - it's a secret that a lot of teachers haven't found.* It's so simple.

Specifically responding to what she thought was the best way to contact parents she noted that the "telephone is a great tool but another great tool is student agendas." As with her "doomsday book," Ms. Moore used "student agenda books" more or less as a problem solving measure; in this case to ensure homework assignments were completed. Employed as a communication strategy, here is her description of her "student agendas:"

But another great tool is their student agendas, which I very often make a note in every day. If there's a student not getting his homework done, I make a note - "Please ensure that Johnny gets this done. He has this much homework." And I'll initial it and I'll expect the parent to send me back a little note in the agenda, initialed or signed... So I use that. That is an ongoing system. And it works tremendously well. Because sometimes I can't get parents; they're busy or at work or they're this or that and they

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<sup>20</sup> The principals appeared to value the PTA more so than the teachers.

can't get me. But that agenda going home - there's a note in it every night if needed.

Despite the "open-door" idea she explained to parents on the meet-the-teacher night, communicating with parents because of a problem appeared to be the rule rather than the exception. To reiterate, her doomsday book was also a reactive process regarding students' behaviour.

On the other hand, it must be emphasized that Ms. Moore did encourage parents of emotionally and academically at-risk students to call her at least once a month "Just so that we can have a chat. If I don't get to them, they should get to me." Ironically, however, Ms. Moore pointed out that parents did not take the initiative to call her because they expected to hear from the school for negative reasons only. Commenting on why she had to take the initiative to call them she noted, "Because if you don't, a lot of parents are reluctant, *because some parents still have the idea that the only time a teacher and parent talk is over trouble* - and sometimes it's good to talk over good things as well." Indicating a 'good-news' approach in communicating with parents, Ms. Moore went on to explain, "I have often called parents to say - 'She got her 'A' in English.' I have one student here this year who's been working all year since September to get an 'A' in English, and has not gotten an 'A' until recently, so it was very nice for me to call home and say that was happening." Obviously a positive process, it was not evident that Ms. Moore did this on a regular basis as a planned strategy for all students, but rather as an infrequent occurrence.

Unfortunately, Ms. Moore's observation concerning parents' expectations about hearing from teachers only when problems arise may belie a more pervasive and well entrenched attitude of parent-teacher relationships derived from and perpetuated by traditional approaches to managing schools. In addition to individualistic and hierarchical aspects of school management traditions contributing to insular classrooms and perpetuating negative attitudes towards home-school relationships, practices such as the ones Ms. Moore describes may help to establish what Swap (1993) refers to as acceptable negative reactive communicational routines between home and school. For example, while there may be no time set aside for building partnerships, there is usually time available to react to problem or crisis situations. Unfortunately, according to Swap "At that point, the stage is set for trouble, and the time spent together is often punishing and adversarial" (p. 23).

Interestingly, although Ms. Moore thought that teachers should be trained and encouraged to use such initiatives as her homework-agenda-book communication idea, she felt quite strongly that it should not be school policy. She stated:

A policy - I don't know - when you start to dictate - when something comes out as a policy, I think it takes a lot away from it. I think what needs to be done is when teachers are being trained initially and are being oriented into the school system and through in-service and from guidance from the administrators, I think this is something that has to be brought in this way. But soon as you start to dictate and soon as you start to say "This is a policy", well then, it really takes away something from that... You've got to encourage teachers... and you've got to get teachers to see the benefits of this. Even if it were an initiative from the office to say, "Students this is now agenda time... make sure you all get your homework written down." This is guidance from the office and encouraged by the teachers, but to make it a policy, I think it is doomed.

The idea that policy means failure for a project is *not* consistent with the literature. Considered a necessity, policy is required to aid with a change in mindset on the part of most teachers and school administrators towards innovative home-school partnerships, as well as actual practice implementation (Chavkin & Williams, 1987; Dauber & Epstein, 1989). Swap (1993) makes the important observation that policy is not a "sufficient condition for good home-school communication [however] a district policy that supports parent involvement is very useful" (p. 62). Additionally, Swap advocates a policy handbook for parents either on a variety of topics or on specific topics to be developed in cooperation with parents in language common to all.

Finally, an important and relevant issue for this study, Ms. Moore noted the relationship between her communication strategies and student success, "*The students, my students, who do the best in class and who get along better with their peers are people that I'm always in contact with their parents. They're always in contact with the school.*" This view is entirely consistent with the research which is unequivocal that parental involvement is an important factor for student success, but particularly their involvement in students' academic schoolwork through specific programs set up for that purpose (Epstein and Dauber, 1989; Epstein, 1995; Fullan, 1991; Henderson, 1988; Ross, 1994).

In summary, Ms. Moore's communication methods to contact parents were well planned, and in her view "an ongoing system [that] works tremendously well." Unfortunately, Ms. Moore seemingly did not collaborate with other teachers and her idea remained as she described it "a secret that a lot of teachers haven't found." Additionally,

although her communication methods seemed to work, her primary reasons for contacting parents appeared to be in response to problem situations rather than being initiated as a proactive strategy.

### 3. Teacher-Guided Practices and Hard-to-Reach Parents: A Good Idea, But...

While school initiated programs to show parents how they can help their children with schoolwork is the prime issue of this study, the emphasis concerns practices that would involve parents who are thought to be hard to reach. However, to reiterate Epstein and Dauber's (1989) research on this issue, it is very clear that:

The strongest and most consistent predictors of parent involvement at school and at home are the *specific school programs and teacher practices that encourage and guide parent involvement* [italics added]. Regardless of parent education, family size, student ability, or school level (elementary or middle school), parents are more likely to become partners in their children's education if they perceive that the schools have strong practices to involve parents at school, at home on homework and at home on reading activities. (p. 8)

Ms. Moore expressed that it was about time that somebody focused on this idea of involving parents in this manner. However, she was quick to distance teachers from any responsibility and felt that school board program coordinators should initiate such programs. She explained:

I think it's about time somebody focused on this. I think perhaps the initiative should come from the school board. I think that this is something that the program coordinators - and leave teachers in schools - could work on. And they should say, "Okay we're going to concentrate on Math for this particular workshop and any parents in our system, if you are interested in coming to find out how you can help your children at home." Then why don't they get the program coordinators - and leave teachers in schools - to put off these things in the evening or on the weekends because a lot of parents *cannot* take time off work to do that - or, if they choose I suppose, in the daytime. *But really, what an initiative to take!*

As well, she appeared to distance teacher responsibility for new partnership activity with parents by focusing on somewhat negative aspects of their parenting skills. She gave lengthy discourse on how parents should organize their children's leisure time in a more practical way noting that children's time today was "scattered," and that while they had more leisure time they were too "bombarded with media" such as television and video games. She felt that they needed, "more time to think, to read, or just to be, just to experience life themselves." Parents need to arrange a "best way" for their children's leisure time "and this would improve not only the academics, but it would improve the relationships between parents and their children and just generally make them calmer."

Additionally, Ms. Moore felt that parents blamed the teacher for the problems their students experienced with schoolwork especially parents whose children had learning disabilities. When asked if she felt that teacher-guided programs might improve students' attitudes towards school and improve parents' expectations of their children, she quite agreed. However, her major concern was about parents' high expectations rather than their low expectations for their children. Concerning the improvement of parents' expectations she exclaimed:

**Absolutely! Because a lot of parents have unrealistic expectations. And I've also heard, believe it or not - this is common of parents who have children who are having learning difficulties of various kinds. I've heard people just blame the teacher for those difficulties when this is something the child is born with - *a learning disability they're born with! And you cannot change it. They have to accept it. And how are they going to accept it if they don't get guidance or the students don't get any help at home!***

When asked specifically about involving parents whom she considered difficult to reach whereby they are shown how they could help their children with schoolwork, Ms. Moore's initial reply appeared to indicate her understanding of 'difficult to reach' to mean that of parents with learning difficulties themselves. She replied:

Over the years, I've had a lot of parents who are dysfunctional themselves. Who are themselves seeking help and their children are walking in the same path. For a fair number of them, I think an involvement like this would help, not only their children, but it would help them. It would improve, perhaps their home life somewhat, because a lot of parents have very few parenting skills.

She went on to give further examples of parents having extreme expectations for their students, "I do have some children here whose parents' expectations are way in the air. You do have to talk to parents - they have to have realistic expectations." She noted they had to be involved in the educational process with the school and their teachers, otherwise, she said, "They're not going to get it if they're not involved."

While Ms. Moore's responses demonstrated an apprehension concerning the involvement of teachers in on-going teacher-guided practices, she did seem to recognize another important aspect of home-school partnerships, that of school support programs provided for parents themselves. Swap (1993), for example, describes programs such as: Activities that Enhance Parenting Skills; Activities That Support Parents' Own Educational Needs and Interests; Seminars for Parents and Educators; and Outreach to Parents in Their Homes (pp. 122-126). Epstein and Dauber (1989) also point to the development of parents "who are knowledgeable partners in their children's education" (p. 1), thus emphasizing initiatives taken by the school, not the parents, as an important



component of home-school partnerships. Although, Ms. Moore felt that initiatives should begin with the school board, her responses are consistent with the literature to help parents improve their parenting skills, and to meet their educational needs.

However, as Epstein and Dauber (1989) and Swap (1993) clearly indicate, it is most important that the *school* develop policy and practice to encourage and guide parents in how they can help their students at home. In fact Swap notes parents' confusion in not knowing how they can help. She points to the research of Davies (1988) and Epstein (1990) which she says "is unequivocal in concluding that almost all parents from all backgrounds care about the education of their children at school [but] those authors also explain that parents often do not know what is expected of them or how they might contribute to their child's schooling" (p. 25). Most interesting for this study and presumed hard-to-reach parents is the research which also indicates that, "Some parents respond to this confusion by withdrawing; others become angry and frustrated when the school seems to be failing to meet the needs of their youngster"<sup>21</sup> (p. 25). Ms. Moore did not elaborate any further concerning the involvement of hard-to-reach parents, though the term was further explained to her.

When queried about whether she saw any connection between her homework agenda books and having workshops for parents to reinforce what she expected of her students she said, "Absolutely!" She went on to describe the information given parents on

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<sup>21</sup> This frustration and anger is well documented in Chapter Five.

meet-the-teacher night; this was a *one-night* information session done at the beginning of the school year:

I have a very full agenda and by the time they leave my classroom, they have these systems explained to them. What I do is I just make a list of things I want to talk about and it really makes a tremendous difference; what are my expectations of behaviour in class, of homework and assignments, and of contacting each other.

As outlined above, Ms. Moore did endeavour to keep close contact with parents on a continual basis. However, formal programs were not initiated by the school whereby parents were involved in a continuous schedule as advocated by Dauber & Epstein (1989), Epstein (1990), Epstein (1995), Fullan (1991), and Swap (1993). Again, the focus of Ms. Moore's objectives seemingly was homework completion and student discipline. Talking with parents occurred ad hoc should their student's name be placed in her doomsday book, or if an agenda-book note indicated a particular need to contact one another. For Ms. Moore, these were not only workable communication strategies, but also represented sufficient involvement initiatives with parents.

When asked whether she had observed an improvement in students' attitude and achievement when parents became involved, Ms. Moore responded:

Yes, as long as they're involved in a positive way. If they become involved in a kind of threatening or "you'd better do your homework" - that kind of tone - then it backfires on them. If you haven't got parents supporting the children in a positive way, it's better, I guess, they're not involved.

As for the potential of specific practice programs for parents being a positive or negative involvement, she said:

Well, I think it depends on who's heading it up and how it's done. I think it has to be a very structured thing. I think homework in itself has to be a

very structured thing. I write it on the board every evening. They write it in their agendas. That, number one, helps parents because when parents go home, they don't say, "What have you got for homework?" They should say, "Let me see your agenda."

Ms. Moore again gave a detailed overview of how her agenda book worked, concluding by saying, "And I find it's a tremendous aid for homework. It gives the parents the knowledge up front - what have you got tonight for homework?" As far as being a prerequisite for specific practices she continued:

It's just common sense. It's only common sense, you know, that the children have their homework written down. I think a lot of guidance for parents relating to homework and assignments comes down to common sense. They have to have the knowledge that their homework has to be done. They have to have the control of their children in a positive kind of way. They have to provide an environment for these children to do their work and they have to set an example themselves. You know, the homework has to be done. It's no good to get mad at them in the morning if it's not done.

In summary, Ms. Moore saw teacher-guided practices as a good idea. Evidently however, she felt that someone else should take the initiative to implement and conduct such programs, in particular, program coordinators at the school board office. As well, she seemed to emphasize that it was the parents' responsibility to improve their parenting skills in order to help their children and better organize their leisure time. Primarily she noted that hard-to-reach parents often needed help themselves, however, it was not clear if she fully understood the use of the term and further explanation did not elicit an additional response. Initiatives taken by the school did not appear to be an alternative concept for her.

However, consistent with Ms. Moore's thinking, Swap (1993) notes Epstein's research which indicates the serious lack of school administrative leadership support for teachers, "Administrators often leave the selection and use of parent involvement activities to their teaching and support staff" (p. 24). Further to this, she particularly emphasizes the serious lack of information for teacher pre-service and in-service. She quotes Epstein (1987) "This lack of active administrative leadership and attention is due, in part, to the dearth of useful, organized information on parent involvement in schools" (p. 120 in Swap, p. 25). Finally, Swap also states that inadequate information and training for teachers and school administrators themselves is clearly a barrier, "to successful parent involvement programs" (p. 25).

#### **4. Gender: A Non-Issue**

Ms. Moore, for the most part, considered questions concerning any differences in mothers' and fathers' involvement in their children's schooling to be relatively a non-issue. With the exception of her comments about some fathers' professional work situations permitting time for them to visit the school during the day, her responses were somewhat curt. However, she did recognize that throughout her years of teaching that mothers had played the more significant role. She observed that today with both parents working outside the home, fathers usually have more autonomous work situations enabling them to leave more readily during the daytime hours.

Over the years, *there was always more involvement with the mothers*. I see that changing quite a bit. A lot of mothers have jobs perhaps that are more difficult in the sense for them to get away. Sometimes, the men have the jobs where they have a bit more flexibility - jobs where they're in more leadership capacities so they have a bit more flex-time, so sometimes it is

the fathers that I have to contact. *And very often, the ones that come here most are fathers, with some of my more difficult students.*

Ms. Moore was quite definitive in her response for any differences she may have found in parents' attitudes towards the importance of sons versus daughters receiving an education. She simply replied, "No, I don't see that at all. I probably saw it twenty years ago but I really don't see it at all today." This observation from a teacher who had been in the profession for as long as Ms. Moore had been, perhaps, is encouraging information.

Lareau (1992) emphasizes an important and, what she considers, much neglected dimension of education, that of the role gender plays in parents helping their children with schooling. Power's (1993) research confirms that mostly mothers are involved and that it is also mothers who are blamed for their student's academic, and personal failures. Swap (1993) describes the dilemma this way:

Parents (especially mothers) and teachers (especially women) are supposed to be infinitely responsive, nurturant, freely giving, available, and focused on children. Parents and teachers convey to each other impossible high expectations about their performance, and each group embodies for the other its disappointed expectations about perfection (p. 23).

In summary, while Ms. Moore had very little to say on this topic, the second teacher who was interviewed, as well as both principals, noted that it was mothers who were more involved. They indicated that mothers are involved more directly, not only in their children's schooling, but also in fundraising and other activities for the Parent Teacher Association.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, Ms. Moore choose not to elaborate on this topic; as noted, it was seemingly a non-issue for her.

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<sup>22</sup> See the interview findings with Mr. Hunter and the principals.

### 5. Special Needs Students - Junior High Students: Unexpected Issues<sup>23</sup>

While Ms. Moore initially appeared rigid in her attitude towards parental involvement, particularly in her classroom, what emerged was the fact that Ms. Moore was dealing with a very challenging teaching situation. These circumstances may have contributed to her detailed attention to closely managed teaching and classroom strategies. Despite this, she described her homeroom as "a typical classroom:"

I have eight very good students; I have three extremely emotionally disturbed students. If I have somebody come in from the outside, I have to take an hour and say, *"Now, you don't say this to this person. You don't touch this person. You don't ask a question of this person."* And I mean it took me - at the beginning of the year, it took the month of September to weigh out this situation that I have! As a matter of fact, even when I have a substitute teacher in, I have a list of things that a substitute teacher has to read because this class has the ability to be very explosive. So I'm juggling all of these things.

Evidently, for such teaching situations as described by Ms. Moore, there are no classroom or outside support services in place (Canning, 1996). Though Ms. Moore did not speak about an inadequate system, her exasperation with what she called her "typical" class was quite evident, as was her dedication. While she believed her class to be typical, it seems a sad commentary on the education system in Newfoundland and Labrador that while integration of special needs students is supported by many in the education community, the structures have not been put in place to sustain it. Written guidelines have not been put into practice, as Canning states it is not a workable integration:

What was evident from our data gathering is that there is not in fact a continuum of services, rather the intensity of service given to any student

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<sup>23</sup> These issues, introduced by Ms. Moore, were to foreshadow an unexpected floodgate of information from the parents who participated in this study.

is based on the school or district position on integration of students with special needs and the availability of special education teacher time. There are a number of notable gaps in the service continuum which cannot seem to be bridged under existing staffing formulas and school organization... One of the most serious gaps is that between the high level of service for students with severe mental handicaps and the service available through teachers for "non-categorical" special needs students, most of whom have mild to moderate cognitive delay. (p. 20)

Apparently, Ms. Moore is not alone in her frustrations. Canning's report on special education is a testament to the woefully inadequate teaching, curriculum, and structural supports for special needs students, their parents and teachers. One insidious example is the total lack of recognition of students the Department of Education terms as "non-categorical" special needs students. Referring to the Department's policy set down in 1987, Canning notes this situation has led not only to unavailability of services, but also emphasizes, *"The section of the policy document which states that labels should not be applied to any student, regardless of his/her exceptionality, has led to a denial of the need to identify specific problems and to a belief that the cause of a learning problem does not matter"* [italics added] (p. 21). She notes the crucial importance of personnel knowledge about the characteristics of each student's disability in order that appropriate program planning processes can be designed and implemented for effective intervention measures.<sup>24</sup> Pertinent to Ms. Moore's situation regarding instructional support for her students, the report states:

Comments from classroom teachers, special education teachers and special education coordinators clearly indicated that the very students for whom special education was designed are not now being adequately served because of the dispersion of these students to regular classrooms. (p. 23)

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<sup>24</sup> Some parents unequivocally supported this notion.

Ms. Moore's agitated frustrations at the suggestion of parents, or student teachers, or even substitute teachers coming to her classroom is undoubtedly justified since the planning is totally her responsibility. It was during the discussion about the feasibility of parents giving a presentation to her class that Ms. Moore introduced the problems she encountered with her special needs students. She explained:

For instance, I have eight special education [students] here. *Whatever work you do for the main group, you have to redo everything for these, and within the eight you have to do it again so how are you going to get an outsider to come in and get them to tune into the individual needs when it takes awhile to get into that. It's very difficult.*

Also complicating the teaching challenge is the problem of junior high schools. While discussions about the junior high structural concept were not pursued in particular, Ms. Moore expressed a keen awareness of the special needs of junior high students in general. Availing of every opportunity, she talked about the plight of the junior high student indicating very insightful concern and observation. Her initial mention was about the needs of junior high parents:

And I think, not only do parents of preschool children need some parenting skills, but there should be times throughout the school year when the focus is on being the parent of a junior high school student. And that would, of course, take in how do I help guide my child's time so that they're getting the best - and so they can enjoy themselves and still be children.

When queried about the importance of the school having close family contact at the junior high level she replied:

*It's crucial - it's more important because the children that we get in junior high school are going through the most difficult period of their lives! And it's a period where you - it's make or break, and even with the best of situation, with the most understanding teacher - understanding is one thing, structure is quite another - because they certainly need both.*



Even with everything going as best you can for them, it's still a rough ride. Adolescence is a rough ride.

Drawing on her sixteen years experience with junior high students, Ms. Moore also noted the constancy of their needs as individuals regardless of the changes in curriculum or technology. Her experience had shown her what to anticipate, and what worked in dealing with their day to day schooling needs as well as their personal situations. She stated:

*The fact that they are looking for independence, that they want respect, that they're very tuned in to what is fair.* This age group, I don't care what methods you bring in, what technology you bring in or anything you bring in, these things are the connecting links throughout the years. And once you have a system for this, all other systems following take their place.

Finally, with the awareness of the burdens of her special needs students seemingly ever present, she continued her monologue about junior high students:

Once they realize that you are their teacher, that this is a safe, pleasant, relaxed environment - but very structured at the same time - they respond. I have very few difficulties with these children even though there are some people here who say it's a difficult class. But it's very easy to handle them once you keep the same things in mind.

## 6. Summary and Conclusion

Ms. Moore is perhaps the epitome of a dedicated teacher. Her communication methods with parents concerning students' homework could be of benefit to other teachers, their students and parents. Unfortunately, school management traditions of teachers working alone within individual classrooms have apparently contributed to her somewhat secretive perspective. Perhaps more importantly, it has evidently created far too much responsibility for one teacher. This observation is even more poignant when one considers that the integration of special needs students into the 'regular' classrooms of

this province has occurred over the past decade. While 1987 provincial government policy led to its implementation, adequate numbers of trained teachers, appropriate academic programs and support systems were not put in place, and still do not exist (Canning, 1996; Canning, Kennedy, & Strong, 1993).

Obviously, Ms. Moore, her students and their parents could benefit from appropriate development and implementation strategies and support systems. Furthermore, information on programs which include parents in their children's schooling is also a critical requirement. As Swap (1993) eloquently states:

The problems in achieving partnerships between home and school have a long history. They are not primarily due to lack of concern or skill among either parents or teachers. Rather, they seem to arise from traditions within the school culture of running schools according to a hierarchical, non-collaborative, delegation model; avoiding conflict; utilizing ritualized formats that inhibit authentic communication; and failing to allocate sufficient resources of time and money to home-school relationships. (p. 26)

The interview with Ms. Moore seems to support the notion that structured home-school partnerships would be of particular benefit for junior high students, and perhaps even more so for special needs students and their parents.

#### **(d) Mr. Hunter - A Grade Seven Teacher**

##### **1. Parental Involvement: A Teacher's Differing Perspectives**

Mr. Hunter's three-year teaching experience had been primarily in French Immersion junior high school classes, but he had also taught a large number of students enrolled in compulsory Core French courses. Interestingly, he framed many of his responses in ways that compared his experiences with these two groups of students. Mr.

Hunter's opening comments about parental participation appeared to set the tone for this differentiation:

French Immersion, yeah. And speaking generally but not as a rule, Immersion parents tend to be very interested in their student's progress and involvement in school activities, etc. And I found that this year, and two years ago when I was at another school in the same position, every parents' night I was blocked solid. Every single one of my parents showed up and every single one of them wanted to have more than just ten minutes to talk about their child's progress. So, from my perspective as a French Immersion teacher, there's been a great deal of parental involvement in the child's schooling, education, activities in school, etc. As far as the other courses in regular French, I get probably - and this is a stab in the dark - about ten percent show up on parents' night or show any interest. Out of the forty-five or so students in the [Core] French classes, I probably have five or six parents show up, whereas in my class of twenty-three, I believe every single one showed up. That's the French Immersion.

In addition to the French Immersion parents' excellent attendance at parent-teacher interviews, Mr. Hunter's experience was that the students also demonstrated a positive attitude towards their parents helping at the school. For example, when asked if parents assisted him by carrying out workshops, he told about parents who had helped him out with various drama presentations and how he could not have put on the performances without them. He noted that the students had responded very positively to particular parents' involvement. He explained:

They were super-excited, you know, when they knew that there was going to be somebody else besides me. Not that they didn't like me or anything but I mean it's nice to have a different person involved, and especially when the person that's coming in has specific expertise in an area that the kids want to see. We had a lady come in, for example, who procured a lot of costumes for our recent production. The kids were hanging off her because she was the saviour who dressed them all up. She came at the last minute, sort of thing, rescued us from a costume difficulty and they responded really well to her. And another parent from my class (the

immersion class) came in and helped with make-up and the kids responded really well to those presences [sic].

In contrast to these success stories were his experiences with his Core French classes. Moreover, Mr. Hunter appeared persistent in associating the negative behaviour of these students with any contact he had with their parents. Thus, when asked for his thoughts about the desirable effects of contacting these parents for reasons other than problem situations and about the potential for teacher-guided practices to increase interest in their students' schooling, Mr. Hunter responded this way:

No, I haven't seen any real cases of that. Most of the time, most of the experiences I've had with kids and parents are that kids don't want their parents involved with school. They don't want sir talking with mom or sir talking with dad. It makes them extremely uncomfortable and that's why *if you got someone in class who's not cooperating with you and you say, "If you're not careful, this is going to warrant a call home" or something - they clam up right away. The last thing they want is sir calling mom or dad; and when you do talk to mom or dad, there's a change in the relationship that you have with that student.*<sup>25</sup>

As the interview progressed, it appeared that Mr. Hunter was unable to perceive of contact with these parents for reasons other than the reporting of negative behaviour. The literature suggests that differences in student behaviour is related to the segregation of students by academic ability, and furthermore that this can translate into self-fulfilling prophecy with regard to academic achievement. Fullan (1991) quotes Weinstein (1983):

In classrooms where students were aware of the teachers' differential treatment of high and low expectations, the students' own expectations for themselves more closely matched the teachers' expectations, and the teachers' expectations for their students were powerful predictors of student performance (p. 302). (p.177)

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<sup>25</sup> Later, his comments seemed contradictory on this topic.

Mr. Hunter also indicated that some students enrolled in Core French courses are there against their desired choice,<sup>26</sup> as he noted later in the discussion about communication:

Last year I had to call a lot of [Core French] parents because I was experiencing difficulties, mostly because of large class size and difficulty in controlling many students who were repeating grades and *just weren't interested in the subject area I was teaching - French.*

To summarize, on the one hand Mr. Hunter's experiences with parental involvement were quite positive with his homeroom French Immersion students, whom he described as "special." On the other hand, the circumstances with the Core French students, whom he evidently associated with misbehaviour and low parental involvement, were mostly negative. It is perhaps relevant that his contrasting perceptions of these students may have been influenced by the notion of inconsistent teacher expectations of students enrolled in classrooms of a differing academic milieu.<sup>27</sup> These contrasted impressions were prevalent in the discussion about communication as well. Finally, like Ms. Moore, Mr. Hunter did not comment about parental involvement in the Parent-Teacher Association.

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<sup>26</sup> One parent who was interviewed in this study was especially upset that her daughter, who had difficulties with reading, was in Core French rather than extra reading classes.

<sup>27</sup> Unexpectedly, the parents of a learning challenged student voiced strong opinion about the funding and programs available in French Immersion for higher achieving students, and the paucity of programs at the junior high level for special needs students such as their son. See Chapter Five.

## 2. Communication: Problem Response Methods - An Accepted Routine

Again, as was the case with Ms. Moore, Mr. Hunter's communication with parents seemed to be mainly for disciplinary reasons, particularly due to the negative behaviour of his Core French students. He described his contact with the parents:

Where I was having problems, behavioral or discipline problems in the classroom with certain students and I decided to make home contact; and in the majority of cases, I was greeted or received positively and with a lot of concern and let's work together to alleviate this problem. But in many other cases, it was - I got the distinct impression, just through the telephone, the parent was either intimidated, not interested or didn't think it was a serious problem and sort of brushed it off and said something like, "Yeah okay. I'll speak to him" or "I'll check into it" and that was all was said about it.

The literature is consistent in pointing to the need for proactive plans to involve parents in on-going collaborative partnerships rather than in routine communication procedures invariably carried out as a reactive procedure.<sup>28</sup> In some Ontario schools where efforts have been generated towards "Creating Genuine Collaboration in our Schools," one teacher described a proactive plan in her school:

We had a parents' night on curriculum, and went to parents and asked them what they would like to do... So, we set up the evening around different stations based on the topics they wanted discussed, with teams of teachers at each, and the parents going around... It's good to get the parents' input. It solves so many problems. You get good ideas, and automatically, you have good PR [public relations]. They are behind you 100%. They know what's going on, they know why, they know you, and they have more confidence in what you're doing. Any way you look at it, it solves so many problems. (Ontario Teacher' Federation, 1992, p. 17)

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<sup>28</sup> Parents who participated in the study confirmed this observation.

Obviously, one such plan will not clear the way for comfortable communication between all parents and teachers. In particular, school administrators' and teachers' perceptions of working-class parents whose children have special needs bring about attitudinal and communication barriers. Particularly vulnerable are those children whose learning problems have not been identified. These unrecognized and, therefore, undiagnosed learning, emotional, and health disabilities create severe academic challenges for these students, contribute to their misbehavior in class, and lead to their subsequent stigmatization. In these cases, communication with parents seems to involve one crisis after the other.

When initially asked what kind of communication methods he used for his classes, Mr. Hunter said:

Well, the methods would be basically the same. It's either a letter sent home by the office informing them that interviews are taking place and, you know, that's the only communication I make - or that's made with the parents on behalf of the school. It would be the same across the board for reporting time, that sort of thing.

On the other hand, he indicated having more personal contact with his homeroom French Immersion parents. He referred to them as "my parents" in describing the use of the "telephone tree":

But otherwise, if I wanted to get a message to all of my parents or to all my kids in my homeroom we have a telephone tree system set up and I've used that a few times this year and that's one way to communicate to everybody. Basically, everybody is - well, every parent is on the tree and I have two parents who volunteer to start up the tree and I call both of those parents whenever I want to transmit a message and I tell those two parents and they in turn have three that they call and those three have two or three that they call until everybody has been reached.

Mr. Hunter seemed to take pride in telling about the telephone tree as he noted that "everybody - every classroom in the school is supposed to be on that telephone tree in case we need to transmit information for storms and stuff."

While he used the telephone tree to relay particular messages for his homeroom, Mr. Hunter appeared surprised when asked if he used it to contact the Core French parents. Even though he had previously noted the poor turn out of these parents at parent-teacher conferences. He explained:

Well, I - I wouldn't - I wouldn't have any experience with the [Core French] parents in that respect. The only contact that I would have would be if I need to contact them about their child's progress behaviour or something like that - if I have a concern. And this year at this school, I've never had to call any of those parents. Last year, I did; I had to call a lot of these parents because I was experiencing difficulties. But I found that they were responsive but some were more so than others - so it depended.

In summary, at no time did Mr. Hunter indicate having negative contact with his homeroom, French Immersion parents. Unlike the concerns with Core French students' parents, communication and involvement consistently appeared to be very positive. Mr. Hunter also gave a list of what he noted were the usual type of communication methods between home and school:

A letter to take home is the most common and kids will take it home. You can tell students the message verbally, and then there's radio announcements. You've heard them yourself, I'm sure. And the other way is to make the direct phone contact whether that be through the family, the phone tree or through your own personal direct contact and that's the most reliable, of course, when you're talking to them yourself. Other than that, I'm not sure that there are any other ways to communicate.

Finally, Mr. Hunter did point out that he had seen improved student achievement after he had made contact with a parent despite the impetus being a negative reason.



However, he felt this was due to his efforts in showing students he cared about how they did in his course. He again acknowledged that contact with parents had contributed to positive outcomes. He explained:

*I see changes in attitude and achievement after I had made a contact about a student. For example, if there was a student who was not cooperating in class or not performing to his or her full potential and I call the parent; I did see a change in attitude and, in some cases, a change in achievement on the student's part. I would not attribute it, however, entirely to just making a parent contact and getting the kid afraid or getting him grounded because he didn't do his French or whatever. I think most of the changes in attitude and achievement have been a result of my own effort (italics added). Not blowing my own horn or anything but I have seen changes in attitude that have affected, because I've shown these kids on a one-on-one basis that I've really cared about how they did in my course. This was after a parent contact, mind you; and that may have helped me get some inroad with the kid but it certainly played a role.*

While Mr. Hunter did not clarify to which group of students he was referring, his comments about "not cooperating in class" appear to have been directed towards Core French students. Perhaps it is noteworthy, therefore, that earlier in the discussion, when asked about the benefits of contacting parents for positive reasons, Mr. Hunter gave a seemingly contradictory opinion about students not wanting him to talk with their parents and that a negative relationship with the student was the result.

### 3. Teacher-Guided Practices and Hard-to-Reach Parents: A Good Idea But...

For the most part, Mr. Hunter seemed to indicate it was a good idea to involve parents in specific teacher-guided practices, though he thought it was a more plausible concept for parents with higher education.<sup>29</sup> Initially, when asked for his thoughts on

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<sup>29</sup> The literature suggests that this is not the case (Epstein, 1989; Henderson, 1988; Fullan, 1991; Ontario Teachers' Federation, 1992; Pierce, 1994 and others).

setting up workshops or programs whereby parents are invited in and shown not only what is expected of their students but exactly how they could help with homework, he replied:

Okay. That happens in French Immersion for sure. At the beginning of the year, when we have our orientation night, welcome night, speeches and that sort of thing, we invite all the parents in. They get a tour of the school and go the gym and listen to the principal and vice-principal and everybody talks to them about what school is all about. But there's a period during that evening where all of the French Immersion parents come and sit with me for anywhere from twenty minutes to an half an hour and that's the time when I tell them, "Okay, here's what I expect and here's what's going to happen this year and here's what you should expect."

When asked if this were an ongoing program throughout the year, he noted: "No. No. It's only done once a year; and then after that, the only contact I have with them that would be scheduled would be the interview times - reporting periods."

Mr. Hunter reiterated that teachers have more contact with parents of their homeroom students rather than those in particular subject classes. As noted, he did contact some parents of his Core French subject class, but generally for discipline reasons. When queried as to the possibility of having scheduled programs for all parents to become involved in a positive capacity, Mr. Hunter referred only to his French Immersion class.

Yes, well as a matter of fact, it was just last night that I was in here; we were expecting Immersion parents for next year to show up and talk to them about an accelerated math program we're intending on offering that class next year. But, yeah, if there's something different or special that's going on that concerns the group as a whole, we certainly try to meet with the parents and invite them to come in and tell them exactly what our intentions are and where we're going with this. It's an information session and time for feedback.

He went on to say that since French Immersion was somewhat special, frequent parent meetings are to be expected. Though he also noted that if any class were involved in projects or beginning a new program there would be more parental involvement. On mentioning the feasibility of specific programs for regular homework Mr. Hunter replied:

Yeah, well, yeah. Even regular homework, sure. I think it would be a great idea to invite parents to chat with the teacher and probably once or twice or three times a year, whatever was deemed to be appropriate, any homeroom teacher could invite all their parents to come in and chat, just to have a face-to-face and catch up on things because I mean when kids go home and parents ask them what they did in school today, the kids always say, "Nothing" - for the most part or "You wouldn't be interested". Kids think that parents are totally removed and apart from the system that they're involved in every day it seems and it's a rare case to find a student and a parent who know exactly - that both know exactly what's going on in school.<sup>39</sup>

Despite Mr. Hunter's positive views regarding specific guided practices for parents, his perspective seemed to change when asked about the potential of such programs for parents whom he might consider difficult to reach, i.e., parents who presumably did not participate in their child's schooling and for whom socioeconomic issues may impede their participation. He replied:

And not only socioeconomic, but that's certainly important. The education level of the parents - even, and that's where the intimidation comes in I believe, because I haven't run into it here, but last year I did run into a few cases in those big eight and nine French classes that I had where I was having problems, behavioral or discipline problems in the classroom with certain students and I decided to make home contact... The parent was either intimidated, not interested, or didn't think it was a serious problem.

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<sup>39</sup> Epstein (1995, p. 703) points to the important role of the school to effect students' attitudinal change on this issue particularly instilling the value of home-school partnerships.

Additionally, Mr. Hunter's perception appeared to indicate a negative bias towards such parents, particularly in contrast with his views of French Immersion parents. He made a fairly long statement:

The majority of parents, it seems to me - and you have to remember I'm only speaking from only three years of experience in this system - the majority of parents want the school to look after their children's problems. They have enough to do during the day, especially if you have two parents working. They want the teachers and the students to look after everything; and most of the time when you get around junior high and high school level, the majority of parents believe that the work their children are involved in is beyond them anyway and let the school take care of it and - well, you, show me how I can help; I know I'm not going to be able to teach them anything. *But there are ones who really genuinely want to know how to help - and I get that a lot in French Immersion.* Otherwise, I don't know if it would work very well. Parents want to send their children to school and get the report in November or whatever and I'm not sure that there would be a good response to one of these, you know, workshops and stuff like that. You'd certainly get the few.

What seems clear is that some parents only hear from the school when there are problems, and this may be the only way they know the school. As well, it seems that teachers may be unaware of the many and varied programs to involve parents regardless of education and interest level, such as the Ontario project cited above.

During the conversation about teacher-guided practices for parents, Mr. Hunter did recall a program at his previous school in which parents were invited in for a one-month period to hear presentations given by teachers regarding study skills and how to help their children with school-work; there were different topics every night. He felt that the response was good: "Out of a school that has about six hundred students, something like that, we had under one hundred that showed up and asked a lot of questions and were very interested and this wasn't just for French, all parents were invited."

Regarding administrative support for such programs, Mr. Hunter seemed to think that school administrators should not be responsible for initiatives, and indicated that such a program might be initiated by any group or person in the community supported by the school. He explained:

Oh certainly a guidance and leadership role. I wouldn't necessarily expect the administration to begin anything or start up anything. The impetus for such a program could come from anywhere but it would be, I think, the administration's responsibility would be to say, "Okay, this is a great idea and this is where - how we're going to do it." Yeah, support basically or "What do you want to do and we'll help you", and yeah, for sure, to be there.

When queried about the issue of school board policy, Mr. Hunter did not address the term 'policy' directly but said that, "The school board would, to my mind, support anything that would foster greater parental involvement... Maybe a letter or something at the beginning from the school board saying, 'that we approve highly of this and encourage you strongly.'" Then again, he thought that perhaps the school board would indicate they were too busy to become involved, and while, "they would extend full support - I think that their level of involvement would be very low." As far as financial support, he said:

I'm not sure that the school board would give money over and above what's budgeted to the schools for extra programs unless it was already part of the original budget plan. I think that if schools are going to start up some sort of program where they're going to educate their parents on a part-time basis, as well as the kids, they would probably have to do it with the money that they have. The school boards - I mean education is strapped in a lot of areas as it is. I mean we can't get a bus to go on a field trip unless every kid brings in two bucks to pay for it. You know, it's a sad fact that we have to accept, I suppose. Everybody is being cut.

Unfortunately, considering the school reform emerging from the province's 1992 Education Royal Commission, which has included the downsizing of school board districts and significant teacher layoffs, Mr. Hunter's comments seem quite appropriate.

At the end of the discussion about teacher-guided programs for hard-to-reach parents, Mr. Hunter made an interesting observation concerning students' opposing views with regard to their parents coming to the school being contingent on the reason for the visit:

I think it might depend on the level of involvement. If students know that their parents are coming into school doing workshops in the evening about how to help them study, about how to help them do their French or something, you know, I think they might be pretty receptive to that, depending on the parent, of course, and the student and the relationship they already have. *But I believe that if the students knew that their parents were going to be in school when they were in school, like helping in the library or assisting out in the office or with drama or something like that, there may be a problem there. I don't think kids want to share the same school space with their parents.*

Interestingly, he had previously described how the French Immersion students were "super-excited" to have parents "share their space" during the day-time hours in helping with a drama presentation. Again he seemed to hold contradictory perceptions of each group of students.

In conclusion, although Mr. Hunter's views appeared to be influenced by contrasting experiences, evidently he held some optimism for the potential of teacher-guided, home-school partnerships for some parents.

#### 4. Gender and Socio-Economic Status

As in the interview with Ms. Moore, the question about the imbalance of mothers' and fathers' involvement in student's schooling did not evoke much discussion with Mr. Hunter. Evidently, it was not an important issue for him either. However, Mr. Hunter again indicated a contrast between French Immersion and Core French parents. He felt that this was an interesting question, and elaborated his views:

Mmmmm. That's an interesting question. For the most part the mothers usually take the leading role, ask all the questions, come to the meetings. Although in Immersion, there's a very high percentage of both who show. In my experience with the Immersion classes that I've had is that you'll get a very high percentage of both parents coming. With other classes, like the regular grade eight and nine Frenches [sic] that I've taught, it's usually the mother who comes in. In scattered cases, it's only the father. You know, there are single fathers out there too, I've learned; but mostly it's the mothers who will take the responsibility.

Mr. Hunter acknowledged that mothers comprise the majority of single-parent families and talked about the time constraints they encounter. He replied:

Yes. For sure. For sure. There's a small percentage of parents who call me at interview time and tell me that they're very busy and can't come into the interviews or couldn't schedule a time, and we'll have a little chat on the phone or we'll set up another time that's convenient for both of us and meet. But, yeah, usually if there's a single parent that's extremely busy, we'll make other arrangements.

Schools need to go beyond the making of "other arrangements." According to Power (1993), appropriate programs should be considered as necessities for the present realities of not only the single-parent family but for two-parent families as well. She emphasizes the traditional patriarchal attitudes dominating and controlling educational systems. Attitudes that still pervade daily happenings such as who "should" be at home when

teachers or the principal want to call the home; or when media announcements specifically inform "mothers" to pick up their children due to an impending storm causing school closure. Power states:

Educators... would do well to abandon their myths about proper families and the proper (subordinate) role of women in society and work with parents and students to develop school policies, programs and practices which reflect the diverse realities of family in their lives. The human cost of maintaining the status quo seems to make anything less unthinkable. (p. 120)

Quite often economic constraints dictate whether some working-class families have transportation to go to the school, or in the case of a single-parent home, having the means to pay for baby-sitting for younger children. Gersten (1992), for example, outlines the many barriers for education facing families in stressful situations, and especially families in poverty. She explains the need for and describes types of home-school partnerships to involve poor parents who do not come to the school. The following is one such program emphasizing the need for schools to take the initiative:

Because poor parents will not come to the school, school professionals need to contact poor parents in the home, the church, the local welfare office, the well-baby clinic. Invitations by the administrator to help him or her develop community goals for the school need to include requests for parents to give names of other parents to contact, particularly those individuals who are seen as sources of influence, persuasion, and support in the community. This pyramiding procedure will bring into the process of consensus parents who have long been alienated from the school and will also help identify those parents whose opinions and positions others value, respect, and may emulate. (pp. 152-153)

To conclude the discussion, Mr. Hunter was asked if he had ever observed differing attitudes towards the relevance of education for sons versus daughters. Encouragingly, and further to what Ms. Moore had indicated, he replied: "No, I can't say



any parent that has shown concern or not shown concern, I've never been able to pinpoint gender as an issue. No." It would appear from this study, at least, that gender equity from the teacher's perspective has improved from previous generations. Do female students now receive more cohesive support from family, peers, and teachers in their educational pursuits?

### 5. Summary and Conclusion

As noted previously, Mr. Hunter had been teaching for only three years. The conversation with him can be described largely as a need for a change in mindset. While enthusiastic about the involvement of the French Immersion parents, the discussion about the Core French students and their parents repeatedly included comments about students' misbehaviour, academic problems, or lack of cooperation. Communication was invariably carried out as a result of negative situations, and Mr. Hunter did not envision contact with these parents from a positive context. His views appear to illustrate a dichotomy in attitudes towards academic expectations of French Immersion and Core French students. However, negative attitudes towards low-achieving students is not a new, nor local phenomenon. Brantlinger (1985) points to the relationship between social class and academic expectations from both the school's and society's perspective:

It may be that the middle class is the only class to benefit from education and thus to continue to believe that schools provide equal opportunity and have an impact on social mobility. The majority of low-income parents in this study felt the purpose of school was to teach basic skills so their children would become literate. Schools may have minimal expectations for low-income pupils, but low-income people also appear to have minimal expectations for schools. (p. 26)

Furthermore, as Canning (1996) suggests:

The economic needs of children and families are no less today than they were in the late 1960s... Having acknowledged that it [education] does have a role to play, it must then act to develop meaningful programmes, curriculum, and support programmes for students who are at risk of school failure. (p. 284)

Mr. Hunter's experiences told of actual happenings from his perspective. Though he appeared to be a caring and enthusiastic teacher, perhaps he is another teacher stranded in the time warp of traditional school approaches to home-school relations and in the isolationism of the homeroom classroom. As one superintendent stated in a submission to the Ontario Teachers' Federation's research project on collaboration in schools:

It's amazing how isolated certain teachers are, and how isolationist our schools have become, with people closing the classroom door and doing their own thing. The most effective schools are those that break the isolationism and find ways and means of getting teachers to talk about teaching... Collaborative schools tend to be those that get formal and informal opportunities for dialogue in place.

### **(e) The Principals - Mr. Smith and Mr. Gates**<sup>31</sup>

#### **1. Introduction**

Although the interviews with the principals took place on separate occasions, the results are presented in a comparative format. The conversation with the long-time principal, Mr. Smith, was carried out at the end of the school year in June, and the new principal, Mr. Gates, was interviewed the following February. As evidenced by the

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<sup>31</sup> As noted, the principalship changed hands during the study. Availing of an opportunity to compare both discussions, the new principal was interviewed.

lengthier quotations, the interview with the new principal was longer; the previous principal indicated his time was limited.

Like the teachers, the principals were key informants for the study and again the primary focus was their views of parents' involvement at the school, particularly hard-to-reach parents. In addition to the topic of parental involvement, they, too, were asked about communication methods, teacher-guided practices, and gender issues. An additional topic, school background information, was included. Used to commence both interviews, this topic seemed to give rise to viewpoints that set the tone and direction of the remainder of the discussions with the principals.

## **2. School Background Information: Viewpoints About the Parents' Role**

Highly educated parents are bewildered; what of the less educated ones who have always felt uncomfortable in dealing with the school? (p. 227).

— Michael G. Fullan (1991)

A School Improvement Project had brought about recent physical enhancements to the junior high. The improvement program also included student, teacher, and parent surveys<sup>32</sup> with the latter mainly concerned about parents' satisfaction with school life and their views on the physical changes. Two issues arising from the background information appear relevant for this study: the first concerns the teachers' survey and the interview with the long-time principal, Mr. Smith, and the second pertains to the new computer laboratory and the interview with Mr. Gates.

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<sup>32</sup> The teacher and parent surveys are referenced in the present study.

Of particular interest was a section in the teachers' survey entitled "Teacher Perception of Parental Involvement" which included the statement: *Our faculty must provide more opportunity for parents and community members to involve themselves in the education of our students.* The response rate indicated that 91.7 percent of teachers generally agreed with that statement. While Mr. Smith and Mr. Gates knew about the survey, they seemed not to be aware of some of the results. Both expressed little surprise when given this finding and indicated that teachers were committed to home-school partnerships. However, as the discussions proceeded, both revealed assumptions of parental involvement and home-school partnerships that could best be described as traditional rather than collaborative.<sup>33</sup> This was particularly evident in the discussion with Mr. Smith who specifically emphasized the accomplishments of the Parent-Teacher Association. He seemed to believe that parental participation at the school could be realized best through this association. Obviously very proud of its accomplishments, he stated:

The parents involved in our PTA are the 'cream of the crop' - they run it and if I call them they know I want something done. They plan socials for themselves and the teachers, but really the only way to attract parents is dependent on the school administration and teachers' attitudes - this is the best attraction. Parents like dramas and musicals and they come in droves to see their children - not a building - but their children.

On the other hand, in discussing the school's background information, and particularly the school improvement project, the new principal, Mr. Gates, elaborated

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<sup>33</sup> See Fullan (1991); Levin (1987); Munn (1993); Ontario Teachers' Federation (1992); Swap (1993).

about the computer laboratory and the technological advances of the school. He pointed out that, "in the technology area, you know, the school might be very, very advanced - probably - well - I guess without a doubt, the most advanced in this system - I mean in our school board." Discussion about technology and the computer laboratory seemed to heavily influence the conversation with Mr. Gates. He described his efforts to establish a program to involve parents in what he called "a challenge from a technology perspective" where a survey had been sent to parents to initiate their interest in learning to use computers.

Although the principals elaborated on two different types of parental involvement, there seemed to be similarities in their underlying assumptions i.e., elitist perceptions of parental involvement which tend to be inclusive of those parents Fullan (1991) refers to as "educated parents," and generally exclusive of less educated parents, "who have always felt uncomfortable dealing with the school" (p. 227).

This observation is of particular importance when considering the potential involvement of so-called hard-to-reach parents. Bastiani (1993), Gersten (1992), Oldford-Matchim (1994), Ontario Teachers' Federation (1992), are in agreement with Swap (1993) regarding the importance of the *kinds* of involvement for parents as well as *how* initiatives are undertaken. For Swap, this is the crux of successful, inclusive partnerships with hard-to-reach parents, as she explains:

My research (Swap, 1990c) suggests that even "hard to reach" parents are not so hard to reach when they are offered programs that are respectful of their strengths and backgrounds, responsive to their needs, and scheduled at times and places that they can manage. (pp. 97-98)

Related to this, Fullan (1991) compares what he calls "Instructionally Related Involvement" whereby parents are given instructions as to how they can help their children with school-work, and "Noninstructional Forms of Parent Involvement" such as school councils and parent-teacher associations having to do with governance and fundraising. He states:

In determining under what conditions parent and community involvement is most beneficial, we have to understand the different forms of parent participation and their consequences for the student and other school personnel. Stated another way, why do certain forms of involvement produce positive results while others seem wasteful or counterproductive?... *The role of parents and the local classroom and school is where the most powerful instrument for improvement resides* [italics added]. (p. 227)

In summary, while both principals appeared to be quite proud of their strategies to involve parents, they seemed oblivious to the barriers these may impose for many parents. They seemed unaware that different approaches to home-school partnerships may be necessary in order to be more inclusive of those parents who do not feel comfortable in the PTA milieu and who are intimidated by computers. Following is a more detailed account of what the principals had to say about parental participation at the school.

### **3. Parental Involvement: The Traditional PTA and The Computer Lab - Barriers and Limitations**

Both principals supported the notion of parental involvement. Mr. Smith seemed quite proud of the orientation night held at the beginning of each school year in September which he called "Parent Visit Night." As noted, it was quite evident that he especially took great pride in the parents who "ran" the PTA. He talked about their great leadership ability and their tremendous loyalty to him, as he called them "the cream of the

crop" and noted that if he wanted something done all he had to do was call one of the executive members. He was very complimentary about the social nights they planned and the help given teachers during student concerts and plays. He noted that through the association, the school's administration were able to "find out what parents want," for example, they invited speakers to attend their meetings concerning such topics as "Learning Disability Students." Additionally, he said that parents also helped in the resource centre and that "they are trained to work there."

Undoubtedly, these initiatives were quite helpful and supported the efforts of the administrators and the teachers. However, as Swap (1993) and other researchers (Epstein, 1990; Hafner, 1990) in the United States point out, participation in organizations such PTAs is generally very low. Further, research in the United Kingdom highlights (as Mr. Smith did) the congenial ambiance between school administrators and parent associations, but Macbeth (1993) notes agreement with Tomlinson's (1984:87) claim:

'Because the aims of PTAs are to encourage consensus and agreement between homes and schools, they rarely incorporate mechanisms for dealing with conflict. Thus, when the interests of parents and schools do not coincide, PTAs may be of little value.' [Moreover] in her study of British parental organizations, Nias (1981) draws the same conclusion and adds that many of the activities of such bodies do not appeal to parents. (p. 33)

Alternatively, Lightfoot (1978) points out that schools tend to avoid potential conflict with parents by bringing them together with teachers for "brief ritualistic encounters." As cited by Swap (1993), Lightfoot states:

Schools organize public, ritualistic occasions that do not allow for real contact, negotiation, or criticism between parents and teachers. Rather, they are institutionalized ways of establishing boundaries between insiders

(teachers) and interlopers (parents) under the guise of polite conversation and mature cooperation. Parent-Teacher Association meetings and open house rituals at the beginning of the school year are contrived occasions that symbolically affirm the idealized parent-school relationship but rarely provide the chance for authentic interaction (pp. 27-28). (p. 19)

Furthermore, as will be demonstrated below, for those parents who do not participate in the PTA, it is seen as being controlled by a particular group of parents who are obviously well-liked by school personnel and who might view them as not belonging. They feel alienated and stigmatized, particularly if their students are considered to be disruptive. Additionally, for parents who would like to have specific information about how to help their children with schoolwork, the PTA is deemed to be a waste of time.<sup>34</sup>

In Canada, Fullan (1991) supports this notion and is unequivocal in his assertion that instructional involvement of parents is potentially more beneficial to students than noninstructional involvement. He states:

It is intuitively if not theoretically obvious that direct involvement in instruction in relation to one's own child's education is one of the surest routes for parents to develop a sense of specific *meaning* vis-à-vis new programs designed to improve learning [his emphasis]. [In contrast] there is little evidence to suggest that parent involvement in governance affects student learning in the school. (p. 237)

Mr. Gates, the new principal, seemed to realize the weaknesses of previous parent-teacher associations. When asked if he thought the PTA served or helped parents and students, especially parents whose children had such health problems as Attention Deficit Disorder, he replied:

Here in this school? I haven't seen it yet but, you know, if I could speak from what I know historically about how the home and school worked in

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<sup>34</sup> As stated by the parents in this study.



this school, I think it's fair to say that their primary function was fundraising. Apparently, they haven't for years had full-fledged home and school meetings per se and nor did they have regularly held elections. I think it was just by appointment. They called a number of people in September and said, "I want you on the executive this year."

Mr. Gates went on to describe what he seemed to think was a more democratic "approach" to the PTA: "I took the approach - look, if parents want to be involved in the school, then they have to become involved and do it themselves. You know, I'll call the meeting. It's up to them to show up. And we filled the gym the first night that we had a general meeting." Interestingly, he added "you generally do the first meeting anyway, you know. As long as people know you're not having an election of officers." So when asked if this had been a PTA meeting or a meet-the-teacher night, or if these were considered the same, Mr. Gates revealed that it had *not* been an actual PTA meeting. He said,

Well, we didn't call a meet-the-teacher night. It was - you know, it was a - I guess it was called *curriculum night*. It was a combination of things, you know, but it was, you know, for the home and school. And then when we actually called the first annual meeting per se and wanted to have election of officers, you know, we had a fair number.

This particular discussion with the new principal seems to indicate an interesting development: the parents at this school appear to support the research that indicates they are more interested in their children's school-work than being involved in the Parent-Teacher Association. To reiterate, the gym was *not* filled by parents to attend a PTA meeting, but to attend a *curriculum night*. It was not clear if Mr. Gates had considered the implications of the meaning of this event, or recognized this distinction. When asked if specific programs were in place to show parents how to help their students, Mr. Gates

described his endeavours to introduce parents to the new computer lab. Evidently proud of this initiative, he said:

We have set up a challenge from a technology perspective and we sent out a survey asking parents if they'd be interested in coming in with either themselves or with their kids to learn how to use the technology - in the evenings. And if they'd be interested in specific courses, you know, like word processing or spreadsheets and this sort of thing, you know, or if they just want to come in and learn about the internet, you know... And we had a good response I must say.

In summary, while this initiative was certainly a step that is supportive of direct parental participation in students' education, unfortunately, it may not be beneficial for those parents whom Fullan (1991) describes as the "less educated ones who have always felt uncomfortable in dealing with the school" (p. 227). To reiterate, while both principals seemed to advocate parental involvement, according to the literature, their efforts seem narrowly focused and exclusive of parents who have been uncomfortable in going to the school for traditional, ritualistic parent-school occasions.

#### **4. Communication and Hard-To-Reach Parents**

Swap (1993) describes the "keys" that are necessary in order for schools to establish two-way communication with parents who are considered difficult to reach. She notes that school administrators need to: believe in the importance of developing innovative strategies to include such parents; find out why some parents do not participate in order to isolate the problems; devote resources for systematic planning to address the problems, but more especially she emphasizes that not all planning is appropriate for each "subgroup." She states: "Therefore, the initial goal may not be to bring everybody together to do the same activities, but to establish initial contacts with each subgroup and

to begin to develop a strategy for building trust in each that will bear fruit over time" (p. 98). Once again, this establishes an important connection between the types of activities offered to parents and whether or not they respond to contacts from the school. It also emphasizes the complexity of the problem and the need to recognize that not all parents want to participate in the PTA, and not all are comfortable in teacher conference meetings.

While both Mr. Smith and Mr. Gates were aware of the difficulties in reaching some parents, again they seemed traditional in their approaches not only in establishing communication with hard-to-reach parents but also in the activities that parents were being contacted about. When asked about hard-to-reach parents coming to the school, Mr. Smith said, "There are some parents who do not come to *PTA or orientation night* even though we send *memos home by the students*. And when something major is happening we use the telephone tree where the teacher phones all the parents and parents call parents." Queried about teachers contacting parents personally, Mr. Smith said, "We are breaking down barriers - more and more parents are coming into the school on a daily basis because we've made contact." However, it was not clear whether Mr. Smith was referring to hard-to-reach parents or the PTA parents, and he did not expand on the reasons for their coming to the school.

Mr. Gates talked about the importance of communication at the junior high level, but seemed to place the responsibility for poor communication with students and parents: "It's difficult at junior high to get students themselves to communicate to parents that we need them to come in for this or that and the other thing. And parents, for whatever

reason, don't check the book-bags the same as when they were little, you know." He noted that he sometimes "tricked" them by putting announcements on the radio thus averting some students' presumed forgetfulness. Like Mr. Smith, Mr. Gates described parent-school relationships from a traditional perspective. When asked specifically about communicating with hard-to-reach parents he responded by talking about parent-teacher conferences, or as he called them "interviews." He said, "We have parents like that and it's very frustrating. Even at interview time, you know, we do have some parents who will not come in for interviews. We can't even be sure if they even saw the report card, you know." He went on to explain attempts to contact them directly by telephone and to send letters home by registered mail, since he felt students were unreliable in these matters.

Once again it is important to consider why parents are being contacted. For example, the question arises regarding the connection between difficult to reach parents and students having academic problems. When asked if he had noted this relationship Mr. Gates replied: "Generally, the ones that we really have difficulty reaching - *the hard-core ones* - the students have difficulty." Although Mr. Gates did not elaborate further about his meaning of "the hard-core ones," it seemed clear that he was linking hard-to-reach parents with students who experience academic problems. He thus underscored the idea that the main contact or in some cases the only contact such parents might have with the school is usually of an adversarial nature.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> As will be shown, this correlation, plus antagonistic contact, was borne out during the interviews with parents who had been defined by the school as being "hard-to-reach."

Since the only information they may hear about their children is unfavorable and sometimes upsetting it should come as no surprise to the school that they are not interested in going to parent-teacher interviews. As Swap (1993) points out, parent-teacher conferences are stressful even for confident parents and teachers when there are no problems let alone when they are dealing with antagonistic situations. Also, not only is the discussion about the student's performance onerous, but both may anticipate an evaluation of each others skills. Swap explains:

Perhaps the most fundamental problem with conferences is that even strong, confident, experienced parents and teachers continue to approach conferences with a mixture of hope and dread. [As well] teachers and parents invest conferences with enormous symbolic importance. In the best of circumstances, parents and teachers feel that their own skills may be judged by the other... *If in the past parents or teachers have experienced conferences as punishing, communication can be defensive or angry at the outset. Even without a problem, the brief conference format makes it difficult to develop a working relationship. When there is a problem, the conference format makes it difficult to thoroughly define it, let alone arrive at thoughtful solutions* [italics added]. (pp. 79-80)

When queried about contacting hard-to-reach parents with positive information, Mr. Gates' reaction seemed empathetic. However, his comments appeared to be more applicable to those students who would probably be high achievers thus excluding students who do not fit such a prototype. He replied:

Yeah, that's important. As a matter of fact, I was looking at a package the other day with our school pictures from one particular company and it had little incentives for students: student of the week, student of the day, student of the month kind of things, and you could make announcements about the students and accentuate the positive. But, of course it's important that parents know at home too. And little things like when the students' reports go out, you know, giving students an extra pat on the

back, for some accomplishments whether it's in athletics or you know, or even curricular.

In conclusion, both principals seemed to view communication with parents from a traditional perspective. For example, in commenting about his attempt to get parents to use the computer lab, Mr. Gates said, "Oh gosh! We sent out letters to every family. I used the radio stations. I faxed the announcements to them [radio stations] for the whole week, and short of sending personalized letters by registered mail, I thought we did everything we could." While these efforts were obviously sincere, it is evident that they were not adequate, particularly for parents whose children have academic or behavioural difficulties.

In speaking to what he calls "successful schools" Bastiani (1993) points to the "large-scale, cross-phase studies" in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States concerning schools whose pupils achieve well. Noting the work of Brighouse and Tomlinson (1991), Bastiani explains that these schools "are *all* characterized by 'good' home-school relations" [his emphasis] (p. 103). With particular reference to two-way communication and the relevancy this has toward establishing meaningful home-school partnerships, he emphasizes that:

These successful schools go well beyond the basic legal requirements to develop effective, two-way communication, are accessible in a variety of ways and at all reasonable times, work hard to find ways in which parents can encourage and support their children and provide them with practical help and, above all, build a sense of shared identity and common purpose - the beginnings, at least, of a genuine partnership. (p. 103)

To summarize, it is important to establish innovative ways to contact parents who usually do not participate, and it is also crucial to consider what parents are being contacted about.

### **5. Teacher-Guided Practices: Traditional Views and Perceived Barriers to Home-School Partnerships**

Writing about school-based initiatives in the United Kingdom which embrace “parents as partners” to help their students with reading and mathematics in particular, Bastinal (1993) notes the influence these initiatives have had on improving professional attitudes and convincing both families and schools of the value of collaboration. He states:

For it shows, without any doubt, that when teachers, parents and pupils work together, in a spirit of *practical partnership* [italics added], then not only do pupils gain in obvious ways, but there are also benefits of achievement and relationship that are both lasting and transferable to other aspects of children’s learning and development. (p. 104)

Early in Mr. Smith’s interview he noted that the PTA looked after the “specific needs” of students. However, when questioned about the specific needs of students whose parents are hard-to-reach and who may not feel comfortable in coming to the school for orientation night, PTA meetings, or parent-teacher conferences, he returned the discussion to communication and the school’s efforts in sending memos home and using the “telephone tree.” Initially, Mr. Smith seemed to discern the questioning on specific teacher-guided practices as being concerned with helping parents instead of students, as he said, “It would depend on what the parents perceive as their needs not what we perceive as their needs.” With further explanation and inquiry about the potential for

programs to help students with schoolwork, he gave an example of one student who had benefited from his personal contact with the parents:

Well, I can tell you about one student who was having problems and because I kept phoning the parents they became more cognizant of their child's education and more cognizant of their education. They tell me he has improved. And he is having on-going counseling sessions. We will always have those needing on-going counseling sessions, but the only way is to have an internal social worker instead of an outside counselor.

Mr. Smith did not respond to the idea of teacher-guided practices on a broader scale to include teachers, parents and students, even though he seemed to believe in the importance of his own personal involvement to help some students. He then added, "We had planned to bring in parents to learn computers over the past year but we've had a lot of things coming at us so it hasn't gotten off the ground;" perhaps indicating that Mr. Gates' idea of involving parents in the "new technology" was not an original one.

Returning to the topic of specific practices and whether he felt administrative support was important for such a program and if policy would be required, Mr. Smith seemed to view the idea more clearly as he replied:

I don't think it should be put in policy, but our role would be to develop understanding here to assist and facilitate for teachers and parents. Parents have a lot to offer and right now some parents are coming to classes to help out. If parents want teacher-guided practices, no problem, we can set it up. It would be my next plan of action probably.

Thus it appeared that Mr. Smith was open to such a plan. However, it is noteworthy that an Evening Study Program, described in a school brochure, had not been implemented despite teachers' indication that it was crucial for parents to work closely with them. As shown in the teacher survey, an overwhelming 97.2 percent agreed with



the following statement: *It is important to me as a teacher to have the parents of my students working closely with me in the education process.* The description of the program in a brochure about the school's improvement project was outlined as follows:

Our Evening Study Program, designed to give students, especially those who are disadvantaged, a place to study, must be expanded to include all of our stakeholders in the learning process. A team of faculty members, students, business partners, *and most critically, parents*, [italics added] will lead these initiatives.

Months later when the new principal was interviewed, this program was still not in place. Asked if there were any structured programs to involve parents in helping their children with schoolwork, Mr. Gates replied:

They do [exist] but not in a structured way because I do know of parents who come in to talk to teachers *looking for strategies to help their children. Unfortunately, it happens most of the time around reporting, you know, and sometimes it's a bit too late but we have parents who come in and want to meet with teachers.*

Once again, Mr. Gates seemed to place the onus on parents to initiate collaboration with teachers and to ask for assistance. As well, the concept of a planned program whereby teachers and administrators would ensure that parents did get information that was not "a bit too late" seemed not to occur to him.<sup>36</sup> Surprisingly, however, Mr. Gates went on to say that, "We try to create a homework haven kind of setting here where parents could come in with the children or the children could come in and do their homework in a safe environment." This comment seemed to indicate that perhaps indeed an Evening Study Program had been implemented after all. Asked if this were being done at the present

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<sup>36</sup> Parents with "Homework Mystery Stories" especially stressed that reporting time was too late.

time, Mr. Gates replied, "No not here - not here in this school. I don't think it worked." Though, he clearly thought it had been a good idea at his former school, Mr. Gates did not indicate support for setting up such a program at the junior high. It was at this point that he initiated discussion about his technology challenge for parents.

Refocusing on teacher-guided practices, Mr. Gates was asked for his opinion about teachers setting up structured programs particularly for parents with low education levels, who may be less assertive and uncomfortable in coming to the school. He replied:

I think we'd have - you know a small minority really. I don't think we'd have a strong representation - no. And I think it's because people are busy. I don't know if it's a reflection on society but people seem too busy these days - people are involved in so many things. I know I'd have a problem with teachers, you know, getting them out but there would be some but I think they'd be the minority.

Mr. Gates had this to say about involving hard-to-reach parents:

I think the biggest problem we might have is communicating to them what this is all about so that they, you know, understand it and to make - to get them out - to get them here, you know. A lot of them don't, you know, especially the - the less educated parents I find probably feel somewhat intimidated.

Talking about his attempt to involve grandparents "as resource people in social studies or science or whatever....," Mr. Gates mentioned that a meeting had been held, but that only three grandparents responded. Mr. Gates seemed to feel that students' negative attitudes towards the involvement of their parents (or grandparents) at the junior high level contributed to the low turnout. Noting the successful program in his previous school which was an elementary school, he said:

It's just hard to generate interest, you know. I find that at the junior high level it's harder - much, much harder than elementary. I mean we had a

very successful program going at my previous school in elementary, you know, with parents and grandparents. [But at] the junior high students don't want parents, well for a lot of them, they say they don't, but I think that a number of them do without saying or admitting it. I think deep down inside they like the fact that they're involved and that they're here. But it's not cool at this age, you know.

Mr. Gates' responses seem consistent with Swap's (1993) point that too much emphasis is placed on parents themselves rather than what methods are used to contact them: "The problem with the label "hard to reach" is that the difficulty in establishing communication is placed on the parents rather than on the methods educators have developed to reach out" (p. 97).

Parents also have concerns about how to encourage their junior high children to share more information with them about their schooling. Epstein (1995) in reporting on surveys and field studies involving teachers, parents, and students at all school levels again points to the crucial role of the school in giving students, "much better information and guidance... about how their schools view partnerships and about how they can conduct important exchanges with their families about school activities, homework, and school decisions" (p. 703).

However, Mr. Gates foresaw other barriers for teacher-guided practices. When asked about the importance of support from the school's administration and the school board if teachers initiated such a project he replied:

Oh yes. Yes indeed. You know, I think it would be great to see teachers to take this and go with it. I'm not so sure that we'll ever see it because it seems to me that teachers - and just from discussions that I see on certain news groups on the internet, teachers are feeling overwhelmed more and more. Teacher workload certainly hasn't decreased. If anything it's getting worse especially here in the urban schools - that's what I find.

He also seemed to perceive such practices as being outside the context of regular curriculum responsibilities as he commented about the increasing difficulties to motivate teachers "to become involved in extra-curricular things." Noting that the teacher population was aging and showing more signs of burnout, he added his surprise regarding the number of teachers on extended sick leave in the province.

Finally, Mr. Gates was asked whether the school board had initiated parent partnership programs and if they should play a larger role in being supportive especially in a monetary way. He was also asked if it were not more important at the junior high level since many teachers, parents, and administrators seem to think it is a particularly difficult time for students. He replied:

Well, I think - yeah, it certainly wouldn't hurt - we've tried everything else. I think we need help from wherever we can get it, you know - be it the Department of Education or the school board or both, you know. I mean the school board is very interested in what parents have to say and they've very interested in feedback. I mean everything they do there's a parents' survey attached to it looking for information. But I don't know. I don't know. You know, I'd like to see some programs, you know, but usually programs mean money and money is scarce. The school boards are facing cutbacks too.

However, Mr. Gates did feel that school boards were far too busy with administrative bureaucracy and that it was the day-to-day activities in the classroom and support for teachers that was of prime importance. As he noted, "And that's why it's important for us, you know, here at the school level as administrators to acknowledge that, you know - to lend support when and wherever we can."

Unfortunately, Swap (1993) points out that although school administrators may support such initiatives they usually leave it to teachers to select and use parent involvement activities. Noting Epstein's research about the scarcity of useful, organized information she explains:

Thus, although the information about the benefits of home-school partnership is easily accessible and often mentioned in professional journals, useful, organized information or comprehensive training that would help educators to incorporate the information into their own practice have not been widely available. Clearly, a barrier to successful parent involvement programs is inadequate information and training. (p. 25)

In summary, the literature suggests that school administrators would do well to support initiatives for innovative home-school partnerships; and in fact both Mr. Smith and Mr. Gates were, in the end, seemingly supportive of teacher-guided practices though they perceived many barriers. These included communication barriers, time constraints, low parent education, teacher burnout, lack of funding, and junior high students themselves.

#### **6. Gender Issues: Fathers Have An Authoritative Attitude But Mothers Take Prime Responsibility for Children's Education**

Time did not permit a full discussion concerning gender issues with Mr. Smith. However, in referencing the Parent-Teacher Association volunteers, and particularly its executive committee, Mr. Smith consistently referred to the female gender. Evidently, it was the mothers who carried out the things he wanted done, including the work and social activities of the PTA. In one instance, he did reference both the mother and father of the student whom he had sought to help with academic problems. After contacting them he

noted, "the *parents* became more cognizant of their child's education and their own education."

Mr. Gates made several observations about the ratio of mothers' and fathers' involvement and their differing roles. He made a definite statement that mothers were the major participants in education whether as volunteers, or primary helpers in their children's schooling. Specifically asked if he found there was involvement of one more than the other, Mr. Gates replied:

More - more mothers. Usually, when we see the fathers involved, it seems to me now just on the surface - if there needs to be some pressure exerted to make sure that the student gets the services that he really wants, you know, the father will come in and whether as a - whether he feels he has more of an authoritative air about him or what, you know. And I'm only talking about a very small number - one or two examples, you know. For the most part though, the mothers seem to be the one.

His observation appears to relate to Levin's (1987) historical descriptions of schools as organizations "administered by men and dominated by a male-oriented ideology of rationalized impersonal authority and business-like efficiency" (p. 273). In writing about "Parent-Teacher Collaboration," Levin discusses the problems encountered by women teachers in such bureaucracies and the resulting difficulties and tensions in their relationships with families and more especially with mothers who are the main contact with schools. However, he also clearly points to the patriarchal dominance in education and the seeming powerlessness of women teachers and mothers. He states:

Historically, relations between families and schools have been structured by patriarchal ideology and parent-teacher encounters have largely occurred between women working in institutions dominated by men. Parenting and teaching have been two major occupations of women since the advent of universal public schooling in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Most

mothers do both, though they are paid for neither and their efforts are recognized more through criticism than applause. (p. 275)

Levin wonders why mothers and teachers have not formed alliances against the male dominated bureaucracies that structure their lives. He notes that the answer is not a simple one and points to the work of other sociologists who suggest that these are complicated cultural issues encompassing "normative conflict between the personalistic culture of the family and the universalistic culture of the school" (p. 275).

In speaking to this, Mr. Gates also noted teachers' perceptions concerning the availability of mothers during the day-time hours even though they may work outside the home. For example, it would appear that school personnel saw mothers as having more knowledge about their children than fathers. He replied:

Yes, that's fair to say. Seems to be the perception. Generally, if teachers are going to contact the parent, they'll go for the mother. I don't know if that's stereotyping or if she is the one most available or if she's the one who cares the most. You know, we deal with a lot of fathers too but I'm sure we deal with a majority of mothers and the mother seems to be the primary contact, you know. If a child is sick, we endeavour to call the mother - we look up the mother's number first - work number if both parents are working. We'll endeavour to call the mother first. I suppose - I don't know - it's probably stereotyping, you know. Who knows best whether a child is sick. But generally, I mean we would call home and whoever answers the phone that's - When we check the data form, I mean if a child comes in for whatever reason and we need to contact somebody we'll check and see if both parents are working. I'd say it's pretty general. I mean I'm sure it's not just here at this school. I'm sure it's a general thing. And I'm sure at the primary/elementary level you'll find that there's even a greater majority of the primary contacts who are mothers.

It summary, it would appear that old stereotypes still may exist in this school. However, Mr. Gates is probably correct in his assumption that this attitude persists in other schools where administrators and teachers tend to contact the mother first even at

her workplace. This would appear to be understandable if indeed it is mothers who take the lead role in children's educational matters. However, Dornbusch and Strober (1988) in discussing Public Policy Alternatives and School-Parent Communication point to the need for schools to introduce flexibility to accommodate what they describe as the "new families." No longer can school staff continue to take for granted that mothers are available at the times they decide to call upon them whether for parent-teacher conferences, PTA meetings, or if a crisis should arise concerning students' behaviour or illness. They explain:

In a world populated largely by families of the male/breadwinner-female/homemaker variety, schools could count on most mothers being available to meet with teachers during the day, and on many mothers being willing to chaperone field trips and assist as classroom aides... In addition, schools could schedule short days and long holidays and refuse to make any provision for the care of even mildly sick children, because most mothers were available to care for their children before and after school, during school holidays and vacations, and during periods of illness. Today, however, the presence of new families in large numbers has made it impossible for schools to continue making their old assumptions about the availability of mothers. Moreover, many fathers, including noncustodial fathers and stepfathers, wish to play a greater role in communicating with the school about their children. (p. 331)

In conclusion, it would appear from the comments of the new principal, Mr. Gates, as well as the two teachers and the former principal, that many mothers are not only maintaining their historical role in being involved with the school, but have taken on the responsibilities of breadwinner as well. An issue beyond the scope of this study but related to the discussion would be whether or not they also maintain the role of primary caregiver in the home as well. Pertinent to this study, however, is the fact that many of parents who agreed to be interviewed were either single mothers or had brought their



children into a second marriage with evidence of continuing to be the sustaining force in the children's education and home life.<sup>37</sup>

### **7. Summary and Conclusion: Hard-to-Reach Parents - Two Emergent Issues**

In summary, both the former principal, Mr. Smith and the new principal, Mr. Gates seemed supportive of parental involvement, however, Mr. Smith's main interest appeared to be the PTA, while Mr. Gates emphasized his efforts to get parents involved in using the computer laboratory. Teacher-guided practices was a new concept to them but one they may support if teachers wished to pursue such a project.

In concluding the analysis of the principals' interviews, two emergent issues pertinent to hard-to-reach parents are further considered.<sup>38</sup> The first relates to the discussion with Mr. Smith and concerns the school's expectation for parents to be in agreement with school values. At the end of the interview, Mr. Smith appeared to seize the idea of teacher-guided practices to advocate the notion of parents being the "real" teachers. Notable, however, were his comments about the need for parents to have the same philosophy as the school.<sup>39</sup> This was not surprising since the Parent-Teacher Association, as an exceptional form of parental involvement, was uppermost for Mr. Smith. Responding to what hopes he held for parents' future participation at the school, he said:

A teacher, a trained teacher is the facilitator of learning, but a parent is the real teacher, the parent is the ultimate teacher. Now that means that the parents must have something that other teachers do not. What I

<sup>37</sup> See the Family Demographics - Table 4.

<sup>38</sup> These issues are particularly relevant for the parents in this study.

<sup>39</sup> See Macbeth (1993) and "Preconceptions About Parents in Education" (p. 33).

would like is for most of *my parents* to be on the same wave-length as the school - the same or similar philosophy, and parents whose students have problems - that they too would tune into the teaching process or become part of the teaching process.

Relative to Mr. Smith's apparent preoccupation with the PTA (and the teachers' comments about student behaviour) Munn (1993) states:

Collective action, such as through parents' or parent-teacher associations has been largely concerned with fund-raising, or transmitting information, and has not usually challenged the school's way of doing things. The important point is that parents are generally expected to uphold school values whether this is in ensuring their children do homework, behave in an acceptable way or come to school dressed appropriately... The parent's role is to reinforce school values and to support the school if there are problems with their children. (p. 2)

She also notes that teachers are largely comfortable with parents being compliant with the school's values and rules. These traditional attitudes obviously were supported by Mr. Smith, particularly his reliance on the PTA to carry out his ideals and plans for the school. More importantly, however, Munn stresses the negative perceptions of parents who challenge the system. She notes, "*Parents who challenge school values are, like their children, typified as 'problems'*" [italics added] (p. 2).<sup>40</sup>

The second issue about hard-to-reach parents emerged from the conversation with Mr. Gates. He seemed to suggest a relationship between hard-to-reach parents and those students who have personal, medical and academic problems. When asked if he thought this relationship existed, he responded by referring to the kinds of difficulties students experience and then noted how some parents are contacted, as he said:

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<sup>40</sup> Again, this is especially relevant for some parents in the study.

Yes, a combination, but usually - yeah, usually a combination. Sometimes, just academic, you know. Ultimately, if it results in suspending the student, we are able to contact the parents that way. Sometimes it has come down to having to involve some branch of Social Services, you know, be it Child Protection or whatever, but that has happened.

Finally, Mr. Gates was asked if he knew of parents whose children had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) and whether they participated in such school activities as the PTA. He felt they participated in a community association for parents whose children have the Disorder, but that they were not involved in the PTA. Interestingly, he thought that parents attended more meetings than in the past because they themselves were finally overlooking the stigmatization of learning disabilities. He stated: "You know, I think they're getting over this idea - that stigma attached to learning disabilities. Seems to me like they are anyway. It's improved." However, the overwhelming problems appear not to rest with parents, but with the education system as a whole. As will be seen in Chapter Five, it is a far more complex issue than parents "getting over" the idea of stigmatization.

## Chapter Five

### PARENTS' VOICES: FRUSTRATIONS, BARRIERS AND THE JUNIOR HIGH MURKY HOLDING TANK

Parents and educators both have vital information to share (p. 57).

-- Susan McAllister Swap (1993)

#### (a) Introduction

In this chapter, the findings from interviews with nine families are presented. It is worth repeating that these were parents who were considered by the school as hard to reach. Presumably, therefore, they were not interested in activities at the school, such as parent-teacher conferences and the PTA, and were uncaring about their children's education.

Fundamental to the study, the main purpose of these interviews was to obtain parents' perspectives on whether they thought teacher-guided practices could assist them in helping their children with schooling. Again, the pertinent questions revolved around six themes: 1. family background; 2. school communication and parental involvement; 3. views about teacher-guided practices; 4. homework issues; 5. gender issues; and 6. perspectives on their students' educational opportunities and their greatest wish for them.

Beginning with the first interview, the question *How is Your Student Doing?* seemed to encourage an overwhelming release of information whereby parents offered lengthy details about their children's experiences with the school system. As noted above,

an apparent connection between alleged hard-to-reach parents and special needs students<sup>41</sup> also emerged and added a new dimension and dynamic to the six interview themes.

The findings are presented in two parts. The first includes the stories of four families whose circumstances portray especially poignant messages about schooling for their special needs children. The remaining five families have no less compelling stories. They reveal seemingly unanswerable questions about their students' schooling - some of whom had particular learning needs as well. First, the interviews with the parents who had 'big stories' are presented.<sup>42</sup>

### **(b) Frustrated Parents With Big Stories**

#### **1. Background Information: Four Families<sup>43</sup>**

As described in chapter three, parents were given a choice as to where the interview could take place. While one family accepted the offer to meet at a community health consulting centre located in a former residential property, the remaining parents chose to be interviewed in their homes. The interview settings were private and comfortable; parents were generous in sharing information.

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<sup>41</sup> "Special needs" refers to "non-categorical" students in Canning (1996). Learning difficulties emanate from diagnosed, *but particularly undiagnosed*, medical and psychological problems such as Tourette's Syndrome, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), developmentally delayed, and learning disabilities.

<sup>42</sup> The term 'big stories' refers to the detailed, lengthy, and sometimes alarming information that parents related about their children's schooling experiences.

<sup>43</sup> See Family Demographics - Table 4.

Two families were headed by single mothers, one of whom had been widowed for approximately five years, and was a grandparent as well. The other two families had two parents; however, the mothers had been single parents for a period of time and were now in second marriages. While one of these families implied that the father was a step-father to the children, the other family was clear that this was the case in their marriage. Only one father participated fully in the interview; the other left quite early in the discussion. Mothers, therefore, were the main participants.

The parents were fairly well educated with each having attained some level of post-secondary education. Four of the six parents had a community college trade; one had university education and another had completed some university courses. However, only two of the six parents had full-time employment and still another worked part-time. Regarding the two single mothers, one worked full-time and the other was unemployed.

For the most part, parents did not share a great deal of information concerning their job situations except to relate the type of work they did and whether or not they were employed. However, one mother and father did talk about their vocations and the father commented about not being able to find employment. The mother had completed a course in garment construction and design and evidently was a good seamstress making and selling items of clothing from her home. She proudly displayed a well-made jacket she had sewn for her husband and a beautiful floor-length velvet gown for their daughter. However, the mother did not appear to consider this real, paid work as she said with a shy laugh, "But I don't work proper right now." Her previous positions had been in a hospital

and working with severely mentally challenged individuals in an assessment training centre.

One of the two-parent families seemed to be living comfortably, but within moderate means, and presumably could be classified as working middle class. However, the other three families, despite their educational achievements, were clearly struggling financially. One family, for example, did not have a vehicle. The mother pointed out the problems this imposed since their junior high student required transportation to commute to and from school. While the two single parents did not talk specifically about their economic situation, in relating their children's problems, they did reveal some of their personal struggles which of itself caused them great concern.

The findings in this first "Parents' Voices" section includes Families One, Two, Six, and Eight.<sup>44</sup> Family One had four children - a son in grade eight, another son and a daughter in high school, and a third son who had not completed high school. Family Two had two children - a son in grade eight and another son who had left school early. Family Six had two children - a daughter in grade eight and a son in grade nine. Family Eight had four children - a son in grade eight, a daughter who was removed from grade eight the previous year by her mother; a son in elementary school; and another older daughter who also had not completed high school.

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<sup>44</sup> See the Family Demographics - Table 4.

## 2. How is Your Student Doing? Opening the Floodgates!

The longer a learning disabled child has been without effective assistance in school, the more likely he or she is to have a poor self-image and increasing performance anxiety, to which parents, in turn, naturally react (p. 213).

— Judith S. Mearig (1992)

The question *How is your student doing?* opened the floodgates. The dominant emergent issue was that the stories related by parents were not about routine schooling experiences, but concerned the plight of their special needs students. As noted previously, special needs students whose disabilities are not visually observable or clearly discernible have been described by the Department of Education as “non-categorical” special needs students (Canning, 1996). The junior high children discussed by their parents in this study appear to meet the special education criteria, as outlined by Canning:

Students who have special educational needs but who do not meet the criteria for any of the four designated categories of special need - visual impairment, hearing impairment, severe mental disability or severe physical disability - are served under provisions for “non-categorical” needs. Included in this group are mild and moderate cognitive delay, learning disabilities, behaviour disorders and other learning problems. (p. 21)

All four families had at least one child falling within this description or category. In total, five children's stories were related by their parents: Robbie, diagnosed with Tourette's syndrome; Paul with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD); Mark who had reading problems and social difficulties in the school; Angela who had an unspecified learning disability; and Eric who was mildly developmentally delayed.

Three issues appeared consistent in the families' narratives: first, their many frustrations in coping with their children's personal and educational needs; second their



struggles in seeking recognition of those needs by the education system; and third the trauma their children seemed to experience in entering the junior high level of schooling. Their stories also highlight the value of the insightful, practical knowledge that parents could contribute to a collaborative home-school partnership process.

Robbie's<sup>45</sup> story begins this segment; as noted, he had been diagnosed with Tourette's Syndrome. His mother initiated the discussion by describing in great detail a serious altercation between Robbie and another student whereby the law was involved, and Robbie's parents were asked to keep him home from school for ten weeks. Of this his mother said, "This time last year, he was home and everybody was frustrated with it and he didn't know what to be doing himself, crying, 'How come I can't go to school?' And I would say, 'This is why you can't go to school' - and it was so hard."

Misunderstandings of Robbie's behaviour as he entered the junior high in grade seven led to his suspension. Essentially, however, his behaviour was symptomatic of the Tourette's. For his parents, this ignorance of his condition at the school, meant many discouraging months of turmoil in dealing with the school, the school board, the medical profession and the Department of Social Services.

In elementary school, without the school's involvement, Robbie's parents were told by a physician that he had Attention Deficit Disorder and Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder. Subsequently, his mother strongly opposed his being taken from the elementary school and being sent to the junior high level to be integrated into regular classes. At the

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<sup>45</sup> Pseudonyms and fictitious place names for most institutions are used throughout.

elementary level, his special needs had been accommodated by teachers who were familiar with his difficulties. Knowing that structured support systems were not in place at the junior high, and considering the problems her child was experiencing, Robbie's mother had fought to have him remain in grade six for a second year. She states:

So I told the principal in grade six that my child should not have been passed. You know, passed to grade seven and I said why he wasn't doing well at the time. He wasn't up to par from my point of view to go to grade seven. He just didn't have the mentality is a good way of putting it and I don't agree with shoving children from grade to grade, especially a child who's got major problems. When he originally left grade six he was on Ritalin<sup>46</sup> and by the time the Ritalin got into his system, it changed his body to the point that we actually thought he was having a heart attack. The school did too. So I had to take him out of school to get all kinds of tests done and I figured the answer out by telling the doctor that it was the medication making him that way, and sure enough their heart specialist agreed with what I said. So he had to be taken off that medication and that meant another major change again. He had to leave the two-stream school and go to a larger school with all regular classes. You just can't push him into that system. As far as I'm concerned you gradually get him in, you know.

Since there had been no official transfer of documents,<sup>47</sup> she had attempted to inform the new teachers about her son's problems and particularly his need for extra help. Subsequent to his suspension in grade seven, the school finally supported her in having a psychiatric assessment carried out which indicated his medical problem was Tourette's

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<sup>46</sup> A prescription drug used to treat ADD.

<sup>47</sup> As per 1987 Department of Education policy pertaining to the mainstreaming of students, see Canning (1996).

Syndrome<sup>48</sup> rather than Obsessive-Compulsive Behaviour and Attention Deficit Disorder. After the major incident and new diagnosis, the school finally agreed in having a teacher assistant accompany Robbie in changing classes, during recess and lunch hour. Clearly, Robbie's mother knew this was long overdue and underscored the fact the school and the school board had not listened to her from the beginning. She stated:

Well, I mean if they had to listen to me in grade six - I told them that the young fella needed extra help. They didn't listen. They put the child in grade seven in a regular school classroom. So after I went in and saw the home-room teacher and I sat down one day and told her and she said, "You know," she said, "You're right about that." She said, "I find that if you had somebody else to give him a hand that he would be a lot better because he don't fully understand." And I try to tell people that Robbie is not the person to shove in a classroom of thirty people. He is the one that you would put in a classroom of ten or fifteen.

She was also observant concerning the importance of classroom management methods.

Noting teachers' differing attitudes, she said:

I find that some of the teachers are nice people and there are the ones that you can turn around and explain things to - that would take it all in and say, "Oh my I didn't know that. What can I do?" Robbie will tell you he doesn't like his student assistant, he just don't like her and if you don't click with him, you're kind of in trouble because there's times that he won't listen to you anyhow. *And he's not too happy with his homeroom teacher because he shouts at him.* Like one morning he was interested in doing whatever he was at and the teacher turned around and told him to straighten up because it was prayer time. Robbie turned around and told him, "Don't you sing out at me, sir." And the teacher got really mad with him. So... you know...

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<sup>48</sup> The parent indicated that previous to this the student had not been given a psychiatric assessment by the school. However, a medical doctor, whom she clearly indicated had been arrogant towards her, gave the misdiagnosis. (Also see "The ADD Dilemma" Maclean's, March 11, 1996.)

Robbie's story continues to unfold as each topic is developed. Next, however, Paul's mother described similar problems with the school system.

Paul, who was in grade eight for a second year, also had experienced many problems in the early grades and again an appropriate assessment had not been carried out to determine the cause of his apparent short attention span and his disruptive behaviour. The school's response to Paul's difficulties was to send him home - over and over again. Finally in grade six the school supported an assessment to be carried out by physicians and specialists at the children's hospital. Paul was diagnosed as having ADD and was put on Ritalin. Here, in part, is the beginning of his long story:

He started acting up in grade five a little bit, it just got worse in grade six. Actually I should go back to kindergarten and tell you that when he went to kindergarten, and I went to the parent-teacher interviews and the first thing they said to me was Paul's attention span is very limited, always got to be standing behind him saying now Paul do this and do that with things. So every year that was the same report right? So when he left primary and went to the elementary class about three months into grade four, it started to show up again. Now in the meantime he was supposed to have been tested to see where he stood and see if there were any problems, I signed the paper and whatnot, but he was never ever tested in grade four. Then he went to grade five and to grade six, where things just escalated with everything else, and he was constantly getting into trouble talking back, disrupting the class, and finally he couldn't do the work, and he spent, I'd say Paul spent three-quarters of grade six at home. Now this is where it was done I guess, he was tested in grade six, and he was diagnosed as having Attention Deficit. He got to see the psychologist at the Janeway and she put him on Ritalin. So it seemed to help him a little bit, his concentration was a little bit better but his behaviour didn't improve whatsoever. So then he went to grade seven and like I said *he had spent about three-quarters of grade six at home. Every time something happened they'd send him home, send him home, send him home, send him home. He was out one time for a five-week span from school!*

In addition to being sent home when problems occurred, Paul's mother's story also indicated the inconsistencies in academic programming since beginning junior high. Evidently, the type of program for special needs students depended upon the initiatives of the homeroom teacher. In contrast to Robbie's mother's description of his distressing situation in a regular grade seven classroom, Paul's mother indicated he had experienced a positive year. Unfortunately, however, when he moved on to grade eight the programming and teaching approach changed. A trouble-filled year resulted in her insistence that he repeat grade eight, but now in his second year in grade eight things had not improved for Paul. Interestingly, like Robbie's mother, Paul's mother also talked about the importance of a teacher's demeanor especially in being calm and not shouting. The mother explained:

Paul had an excellent teacher in grade seven<sup>49</sup>. *She was a very positive teacher, she was not a teacher to bawl and rant and rave at him, she was fairly calm but she was very stern like, you know, you do what I say, but she didn't get huffy puffy... and she didn't send him home!* For the first few months, from September to December he fought her every inch of the way, believe me. *But I guess when he realized that she meant what she said and the fact that, you know, she didn't get mad at him, shouting at him or anything like that. She was very calm with him and firm, and he settled after Christmas in grade seven and from Christmas until June he did excellent!* He was in regular classroom but in sort of a special program and going out for special help from Mrs. Clarke. She was another great help, as well, in the grade seven program.

Paul's mother described opposite experiences in grade eight including being suspended:

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<sup>49</sup> This teacher was Ms. Moore, though neither the parent nor the teacher knew that each was a participant in the study. The student's success in her class supports the notion for collaboration between teachers and parents, and between teachers themselves; not to mention adequate and appropriate academic programs including teacher support systems.

And now in grade eight [his second year] he's not doing good at all, because it's very hard to get him to go to school. He done really, really well the last part of the grade seven year, and he was even surpassing the teacher's expectations. Then he went to grade eight and low and behold there was no such thing set up for grade eights [sic]. There was no program in place like the one he had with the teacher in grade seven... Then I found out was that they keep putting you on whether you passed or you don't, if you accomplished the work or you didn't. Like I said, *he spent a lot of time out again last year, he was suspended and - I don't know!* So I had to contact the school board in June and say, look he's not leaving grade eight, don't even make any plans or think about putting him on to grade nine. He's done absolutely nothing with grade eight, grade eight is his foundation to go to grade nine and he knew nothing about it. So they did agree to let him stay back and repeat grade eight. And I didn't know that they keep putting you ahead. I assumed that there was a certain amount of work that you must complete to go to the next grade... But this year is not good at all, this year he is in a regular classroom, he is trying to do the regular work but he's having a struggle.

Queried about the benefits of the grade seven teacher's methods and whether this would have made the difference for Paul in grade eight, his mother interrupted the question by stating:

*If that program or the way they worked it in grade seven had of taken place in grade eight, I don't think Paul would have half as many problems as what he has now. But the fact was, it wasn't there; he was put into the wrong type of classroom!*

Paul's mother also pointed to the lack of general awareness about ADD but more especially the lack of teachers' knowledge as she said:

*Even the teachers are not well up on it and they don't know how to handle them. One teacher in particular told me last year when I went to a parent-teacher interview that he was never taught how to handle them but they expect him to go in and handle twelve or thirteen by himself.*

Both Robbie's and Paul's mothers appeared to have had similar frustrating circumstances with the school system. Several issues were apparent: ad hoc programming, teachers' lack of knowledge, lack of respect for parental knowledge, student trauma upon

entering the junior high level, and the stereotyping of their students despite educational policy that was supposed to diminish such attitudes.

Exacerbated by personal hardships, similar issues created anxiety for Mark and Angela's mother, a single parent who had been widowed a few years previously. Incredibly, her oldest daughter had been widowed recently while expecting her third child. She related the impact on the children when they lost their father, particularly Mark who was now in grade eight. Evidently, while his grades had improved he was still having problems with reading subjects. She felt that perhaps her children were over-protected by the special education teacher at the elementary level. However, she thought this may have occurred due the loss of their father and was appreciative of the teacher's efforts. Beginning with a discussion about Mark's reading problems, she explained the circumstances when three of her children were still in elementary school:

Mark has improved. Actually he brought home his report card Friday and he has improved greatly since the first term. But he's having a lot of problems with reading type subjects, right? He's having problems with his French but he says it's his French teacher doesn't like him. In the elementary school his reading kept him back quite a bit and he was with Mrs. Tucker.<sup>58</sup> All my children became very dependent on her. Now in the meantime too, my children lost their father with leukemia five years ago - so this was a disastrous time. My youngest son just started kindergarten and Mark was in grade two, plus he was sick. It was really rough. So the three of them Angela, Mark and Stephen were at the elementary school. And Mrs. Tucker sort of wrapped him in this cocoon type thing and so I think she overprotected him a little bit too much but I'm not knocking her don't get me wrong. But they were so dependent on her; Angela had her full time from grade one right on. Mark had her for reading and mathematics, but they become quite attached to these special ed. teachers.

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<sup>58</sup> The special education teacher.

However, entrance into junior high was quite another matter. Again corroborating the other parents' experiences with inconsistent programming and the trauma their students experienced going from elementary into junior high she added,

And apparently now when you hit the junior high the support is not there - the one-on-one type program. Now I know all about funding and all this sort of thing. I can understand and I can cope with all that stuff but it just sort of leaves my child hanging and they don't know what to do. *The regular programming is too heavy for them and going from the elementary to junior high has been drastic! I think there should be some sort of weaning from elementary to junior high because there's so much pressure once they hit junior high!*

Mark's mother went on to talk about the pressures of being with unfamiliar people and the resulting stereotyping of her son. She considered that students would do better if they were in surroundings where they felt more comfortable. She noted:

To me if a person is comfortable, you're going to do better in surroundings where you're comfortable... Some students drink, some smoke and some sell cigarettes, some of them push drugs. But Mark is basically an older type, and a loving person. He adores his grandmother. He likes going to church with her. This is the sort of thing he is into, right? Like if there's fights or whatever, Mark is terrified right? He'll come home and cry! You know, "Such and such is after me" or "this person said that I said this but, mom, honest, I didn't say it." And I know he didn't say it but the other person, of course, has been told something else and he can get fooled up for a whole week because of this situation because of his peers, because he doesn't smoke. He's not into drugs and he hasn't got the least bit of interest in the beer. And these people don't know him so they're saying - they've got him labeled now. He's a wimp and he's what's this new word - wuss, is it?

Additionally, this mother had a learning challenged daughter, Angela. While the focus of the study concerned students currently in grade eight, she returned again and again to Angela's story. Just one year earlier, when Angela was in grade eight, her mother considered there was no alternative but to remove her from the school. Although she



made many laborious efforts to secure an appropriate program for Angela in the junior high, the school and the school board had not helped. Also, despite Angela's serious academic difficulties since she started school, once again, no assessment had been done; until, finally in grade seven, a psychology graduate student from Memorial University doing educational research determined she had a learning disability. Like her brother, she had coped in the elementary grades with the assistance of the special education teacher.

As noted, Angela's mother met with the school board and school's administration but to no avail. In the meanwhile, she discovered there was a suitable program in two other schools, but to her dismay Angela was denied entrance to both. In one instance the family was not the 'right' religion; in the other they did not live in the required school zone. The mother related the dilemma with no future hope for Angela's education:

She's got a learning disability and I don't know what to say but I've had it with school boards. The program and the help that she needed wasn't available at the junior high [names the school] but it was available at a Catholic school so because she was non-Catholic I couldn't get her into the program. Another school had it but we weren't in that zoning area. So I'm stuck with a seventeen year old that the last passing grade is grade seven and nobody will accept her anywhere in secondary-type education, upgrading type things for GED [General Education Diploma] preparation or in ABE [Adult Basic Education]. She can't be accepted into those programs since she's not over eighteen. The type of program in junior high was between a Therapeutic Mental Health sort of program for developmentally delayed and a special ed. program that helped the people with say dyslexia. She's got a learning disability. That's all it's been labeled. *But I went through, actually, I went to hell and back with the school [names the junior high]. Couldn't get any satisfaction!...* She was also getting a lot of pressure from her peers because she was older. Of course, being in grade seven - she's really a tall girl - Angela's about 5' 10", right? And of course, that was a misfit right off the bat, then plus what was a sixteen year old doing in grade seven? *They pushed her ahead to grade eight. She didn't have a clue what she was doing there. I*

*mean she had no idea!* Her reading ability is - the last time it was evaluated, she was on a grade three level.

Again this mother's story is consistent with the other parents' in that programming, stereotyping, and being "pushed ahead" were common factors to the junior high milieu. Referring to Mark's problems as well as Angela's situation, she noted yet another barrier, that of dealing with the principal, as she said:

I've been down in that school [the junior high] so much and the battle was always the same and I found Mr. [names the principal] very cold. I know it was my daughter I was fighting for but it was just like, you know, he presented his side of the issue and you either took it or that was it. That was the end of it. Basically this was the end of the conversation.

She went on to describe the final circumstances leading to her removing Angela from the school. Essentially, she felt that in the two years her daughter had been at the junior high nothing was done to assist her even though the school had been given a thirty-two page summation of the psychological assessment done by the graduate student. Over a period of several months, the mother met with the principal and guidance counselor. Promises were made but still Angela was in a regular class and continued to come home from school in a distressed state. Her situation appeared overwhelming and according to her mother contributed to her low self-esteem. The mother's anguish was evident:

Angela has no self-confidence whatsoever. She would come home from school screeching and bawling "I'm not going back. I don't ever want to see the inside of the school again!" Angela has very little general knowledge. They didn't do anything to improve this - nothing. She was with a regular teacher - nothing. No help. No nothing! At this point we had tried St. Jude's;<sup>31</sup> we had tried St. Christopher's; we had tried Harrison; we had tried whatever list of schools I had been given. I had fought with one school board, then the other. I had my fill of it. I just

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<sup>31</sup> Fictitious school names.

couldn't handle it any more... I nicely told him [the principal] that I thought he was totally responsible for the fact that I was taking a fifteen year old out of school because I didn't have anywhere to place her and she was getting absolutely nothing out of the school.

Towards the end of the interview, Mark and Angela's appeared to have some renewed hope. In realizing that the new principal at the junior high had been the principal at her children's former elementary school, she noted that he was knowledgeable of the family's circumstances including the children's schooling problems. Encouraging her to open new discussions with the school, she replied with a chuckle, "Yes, this is new to me, see. This, this got the home fires burning here again now."

The final introductory story was told by a two-parent family whose son had a serious learning disability; Eric was in grade nine. They also had a daughter, Judy, in grade eight who was doing well in school. It was clear that the parents wanted to talk about Eric, as they repeatedly brought the discussion around to his schooling difficulties.

In contrast to the other interviews, both parents were present with the step-father taking the dominant role in the conversation. This family apparently did not have to cope with the financial difficulties and personal tragedies described by others. However, they were quite frustrated with the junior high system, particularly with the lack of adequate programming for their son. They spoke with obvious experience about the negative impact of what they called an ad hoc approach. For them it meant that Eric had moved from one program to another to the point where they were now confused as to what method was being used. Although asked specifically how Judy was doing in grade eight, they responded with elaboration about Eric:

Judy is doing well. Eric - what I can say? Judy is pretty consistent, has been pretty consistent throughout her schooling and Eric needs extra help in certain subjects. Perhaps I should say in most subjects and goes out of the regular class for his English and his science. No, I'm not sure. It's changed since last year... It varies grade to grade. I don't know. I just don't know. I know it's English and one or two other subjects. The first year they did mainstream him. He went out for a couple of classes, didn't he? [father asks mother] Yes, and last year, he was more in the special needs class because we found that there were behaviour problems and so on. But now this year, it's a combination, a mixture. Yes. It's a combination of both. But the reason for that is because: (a) They don't have any money and, of course, if they don't have any money they can't get any teacher assistants, and that's been really cut back.

The mother noted that the special education teacher was just half-time and that there were some teacher assistants, but the father interjected:

Some, but not enough for the number of hours that are needed for the children, the children like Eric. *That's one area that the government cut three or four years ago rather than coming up with more money for children like them because they need more help rather than less help!* So that's one area they cut and I guess that isn't going to change.

While both parents had a higher level of education than the other participants, they also found it difficult to contend with what seemed to be the illogical circumstances at the junior high. Their daughter had adjusted well, however, Eric had not. Like the others, they talked about the prevalence of stereotyping on the part of students and teachers. For example, as the father noted, "Eric could do something that was minor but it was quite often blown up to be something big because he did it." Asked about attitudinal problems amongst students the mother simply responded, "And teachers." As with the other parents, they spoke of the teachers' lack of understanding, and told of constant communication with the school to inform them of their son's needs. They also referred to the importance of a teacher's demeanor. However, the father was empathetic

with the teachers and often placed blame on funding cuts for the dearth of the much needed help for students such as Eric. As he explained:

Well, I don't want to take anything away from the teachers. He's come a long way and we've worked pretty hard with the teachers - constant dialogue with them, I guess. But he just couldn't adjust mainly because *coming from the elementary school - it was so quiet and his teacher was really good. She was strict but she was really fair.* This was in grade six, there was only ten in the class so that was a great class. So then when he went up there [to the junior high] he was put directly into the mainstream - wasn't it - first, and although his teacher was really good he'd get into trouble going from class to class - in the halls or out on the playground... In junior high, it's all new... *We've had lots of teachers say that junior high shouldn't exist - as it is right now... I feel some of the teachers feel that the children are almost ready for high school and therefore leave a lot up to them* - just assuming that they will fall into taking notes, etc. things like that and I don't feel that they're quite up to that... Also, one of the real problems is the lack of money and the fact that the teachers are run ragged and for us to expect that a one-on-one say in teacher-student ratio is almost impossible and *that's where junior high really breaks down and children like Eric are thrown into that environment needing extra help and it isn't there. That's one area they've really cut!*

However, both parents were optimistic about a program they assumed would be available for their son when he reached high school; a program offering both vocational and academic options. The father seemed to think that it could build on Eric's strengths instead of emphasizing his weaknesses. In fact, he thought that the junior high level was more or less a waste of time. He stated:

The high school has a work-study program okay. *But the junior high system does not have that. You wallow in the junior high system until you get to that level. Then once you - if you can make it through that, it's like you can swim the channel. Once you get to the other side, it's probably not too bad for opportunities. But there's nothing. And they've told me that unfortunately the junior high level or the junior high has nothing to offer except the basic courses - the academics and so on.*

In summary, parents were disconcerted due to the lack of programming and the shortage of knowledgeable teachers. Asking the question - *How is your student doing?* gave rise to detailed discussion surrounding these factors. Of prime concern was the non-transferal of information between the elementary and junior high levels resulting in a deficiency of background information about their special needs students.<sup>52</sup>

As well, some parents were upset in not being kept informed when their child was "pushed ahead" against their better judgement. They felt their students were not ready for a more advanced grade particularly at a new school away from trusted teachers and friends. Additionally, since the students were "mainstreamed" into regular classes with homeroom teachers, who, for the most part, seemed to be untrained in special education, there were sudden and disruptive inconsistencies in teaching methods and classroom management. These findings supported by Canning (1996) clearly indicates the lack of programming, professional support, and teacher training.

While programming and teaching were perceived by parents to be superior in the elementary grades, still there had not been appropriate psychiatric assessments despite the fact students had presented with many learning and behavioural problems. It is clear that the junior high system was a very negative experience for these parents and their children. As one parent put it, children are "wallowing in junior high" while waiting in hope for appropriate programming at the senior high level.

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<sup>52</sup> If any information were transferred, either it was lacking, not read by teachers, ignored by the school's administration, or all of the above.

In conclusion, these families' stories suggest a strong association between teachers' notions of hard-to-reach parents and special needs students. The remainder of the findings reflect their experiences from that perspective. Next their reactions to the school's communication methods and how they perceived their involvement in school activities are presented.

### **3. School Communication and Parental Involvement: Negative Reports, Stressful Interactions, and Contrasting Experiences**

Learning how to communicate effectively is essential for developing a partnership between home and school (p. 61).

— Susan McAllister Swap (1993)

Questions about the school's communication methods and the parents' involvement at the school were interwoven. As noted, these parents were quite involved in their children's schooling and were in constant contact with the school. However, they did not comment a great deal about parent-teacher conferences and none attended the PTA. Consistent with the literature,<sup>53</sup> they felt the PTA was not relevant in helping their children and did not feel comfortable in attending. A factor in alienating parents was that communications and interactions were primarily because of negative circumstances. Further, individual parents perceived being treated differently by the principal, and indicated varying levels of confidence and assertiveness in their dealings with school personnel.

At first, they related that the school's communication methods were acceptable

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<sup>53</sup> Fullan, 1991; Munn, 1993; Swap, 1993.

and told of two-way contact with either the school telephoning them or initiating many calls themselves. Some also mentioned keeping abreast of concerts, plays and other announcements. Their responses included:

Okay, it's good, it's good. Normally you get a letter coming home every now and again telling about the different things happening at the school, plays and things like that. And I hear from the teachers, principal, and guidance counselor... Yeah, they'll call directly if there's anything going on in school related to Paul. (Paul's mother)

Mm mm. Yeah [communications pretty good]. (Eric's mother)

We're usually on a first-name basis with the teachers... We've worked pretty hard with the teachers and have had constant dialogue with them, and in fact, we e-mail back and forth all the time. I e-mailed the principal a little message about certain things I'd like to see in place so we've got a pretty good working relationship there. (Eric's father)

About feeling comfortable in going to the school, some said:

No, not really but the thing of it is it's your son and his education, you have to - it's a part of parenting that goes with having children. I guess it goes hand in hand, and it's something that you have to do and you have to do it to the best of your ability. (Robbie's father)

Oh yes. I must say I have no problem with the teachers or the principal, it's a new principal we have there this year. I must say they're very nice people. (Paul's mother)

However, their primary reasons for going were concerning problems:

It's mainly because of our son but maybe if things were different, maybe if it were just our daughter, well, I know we wouldn't have as much contact with the teachers. We'd feel that it wasn't necessary. (Eric's father)

I go to the school a lot! [Voice raised in anticipation of having more to say. Then a little later]... My son is not doing very good. This is the second year he'll be in grade eight... His behaviour is a major factor, so therefore, like I said *I'm in constant contact with the school.* (Paul's mother)



We make a number of trips there in the run of a year. Like, okay, number one our son has Attention Deficit Disorder, Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder and to add insult to injury, he has Tourette's Syndrome. Coupled with some of the mistakes he's after getting into, we've had a fair amount of dealings with the teachers at the school. (Robbie's father)

When asked if they received good-news calls from the school, they replied:

No! No. When, when I get the phone call and I hear the voice on the other end, I just say, "Well, what happened today!" (Paul's mother)

No. Most of it's negative but I'm usually the one who calls up. Well I have more dealings with Mrs. Langley and I phones her up and I says, "Now, there's something on the go this week - is everything all right?" You know, "Did you hear anything lately?" type of thing. (Robbie's mother)

No - no it's usually negative. (Eric's mother)

It's usually negative, I guess - we're all like that but there are times when that does bother us a bit because *that's the only time that we have contact with them is if there's something going on that shouldn't be going on.* (Eric's father)

Eric's mother related this incident:

When Eric was younger, I had one teacher, this is just a little story, but he was disruptive in the classroom and after school I would get all the negative things. I took this for awhile - Eric did this, he did that, he was up running around and wouldn't sit in his seat, and on, and on and on. So finally one day I was just so upset by all this negativity - "Now," I said, "Does Eric ever do anything right or nice in your classroom?" "Oh yes, he does! He was nice to so and so." But until I said that, it's like everything reported had to be negative. So then, one of the teachers took it a step further in that she had a little booklet done up and on it was "Things that I did today." And Eric would write in his little printing, "I helped so and so with a homework book" or whatever. *And it was like a positive reinforcement, but before that it got to a point where I had been just at my wits end!*

Given examples of students' successes, Paul's mother noted the benefits of positive communication:

Yeah. Mm mm. Which is good because then the parent will go back to the child and say, "Well, I spoke with your teacher and she said that, you know, you done this today which is very good. You know. It's really good. Keep it up sort of thing." You know.

Mark and Angela's mother was obviously frustrated and distressed about interrelations with the school. When asked what the communication was like, and whether or not she attended the PTA, she talked mostly about the latter. Noting her encounters when she took Angela from the school, she feared being ridiculed by other parents if she were to go to meetings:

No. I don't. I don't. I lost interest totally. But I do read whatever might come from the home and school association, or the basic letters that come home with - say outlining of the programming and what's happening when and this sort of thing. *But to attend, I don't think they would think very highly of me if I ever had to go down there and an issue such as mine would come up...* The thing is they didn't go through what I went through and they would just say, "Well I didn't have any problem." *I mean I'd lose it! They'd ask me to leave - I know they would!* Which, of course, again makes it hard on the children.

With regards to attending meet-the-teacher night, she said:

I didn't. No, I didn't. I sound like the cold person there now, but I do have regular contact with Mark's teacher by telephone... But, as for going there - like I said, I know it would only make it harder on Mark and Stephen. Stephen still has to face being placed at that junior high if this zoning stays the same, but anyway it would make it harder... I don't want to listen to people trying to tell me what they're going to do, because I've been listening to it - we're going back six years when my oldest daughter started there - probably close to eight years from the first grade seven class.<sup>54</sup> But what would be the sense, I guess, for me to attend one of these functions or whatever if the issue did come up [about no program for Angela] and if I was to say - speak my mind....

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<sup>54</sup> Another difficult experience was her oldest daughter's pregnancy while at the junior high. She had tried to continue her schooling but was taunted to the point where she had left.

Noting that satisfactory closure had not occurred regarding Angela's situation, she simply responded, "No! It's just like - left open." Also to the suggestion that she had not been supported and respected for her viewpoint, she simply said, "No, I haven't. No, I haven't."

In contrast, Eric's father was confident in his interrelations with the school and gave commentary about appropriate ways of dealing with teachers:

I had a teacher tell me a few years ago that in terms of dealing with teachers that a little bit of honey goes a lot further than vinegar. So, if you approach them, and be very critical of them right off the bat, I don't think you're going to get anywhere. Now maybe there are people out there with just cause for doing that. You know, we realize it's a problem and in our particular case it's important that we work with them and we've had meetings with them twice this year now. But e-mail now, well, that's even better than the telephone because it's like it's a letter sent.

Suggesting that some parents do not have computers in their homes, he replied:

I think a lot of the parents, and I don't mean this in a mean way, but a lot of parents probably don't have the education level that might be required to - maybe they're a little bit intimidated by the overall school system and the teacher. We send our kids and we expect that the teachers are going to teach your children and that's it... But we've never been confrontational. There's been a couple of times when we've been disgruntled about things but we've worked it out. But I think going to them and being really angry and calling them things - it's just not going to work.

Eric's mother added:

It's been said to us, I guess, that we seem to be very interested in the children and the teachers seem to be really supportive of us being there for both our children.

Also noting that some parents have to contend with much adversity in their lives and have to fight to be heard and respected, Eric's mother who had been a single parent herself, replied:

And I think teachers feel that a lot of times if you come in to see about a student, then they are almost ready for an argument or for a confrontation, rather than us going in, sort of sitting down and working through it with them. *Sometimes they're on the defensive too in justifying what they're doing and the reason behind what they did.*

On the other hand, the father interjected compliments about the principal as he said:

The former principal was pretty good. We got along really well. He'd phone me in Eric's presence and pretend to be mad at him... So we used to work things out where he'd put the fear of the devil in him - a little bit... There were a lot things that they overlooked because they knew we were working toward the same goal. Whereas if I said, you know, "To hell with you guys it happened at school it's your problem."

Although Robbie's father participated very briefly in the interview, he also complimented school personnel, particularly teachers. He said: "We've had some run-ins with the teachers there... but all-in-all I must say, they're to be commended - some of them for the work that they do - just in helping us alone!" However, Robbie's mother played the primary role in the four children's education and related why she was not involved in the PTA or other events:

No. I don't bother with it because the way I looked at it going back to about a year ago I had three schools. I mean I can't get myself to three schools... I used to go depending on what each of them was doing. If it was in a concert for instance, I'd go to that. But since Robbie isn't in anything, I don't bother, you know.

She also elaborated about not attending the meet-the-teacher night. Expressing feelings of estrangement and anticipating confrontations with parents who considered Robbie a bad influence, her comments were remarkably similar to Mark and Angela's mother's:

I don't bother to go because the way I looked at it - I've got two different school systems right now and the trouble I'm having with Robbie is totally different from the people who are coming in who's got Johnny and they're perfect people to them. *And, you know, I don't belong. That's my point*

*of view so I try to do the best I can. I've got my own contact with him [the teacher]... I get the outline of things from the school. And I don't bother with it because like I said, I mean I don't want to go and listen to - because I would end up having it out with a couple of parents that I do know who turn around and tell their children that my son is a bad influence on them, to stay away from him. And I wouldn't be able to handle that and, you know, you avoid contact and I avoid contact with some people and I don't bother with it! They [school personnel] know where I'm to - I can pick up the phone and they can phone me anytime of the day or after school even.*

Being a single working parent, Paul's mother did not have time to participate in the PTA. Prior to telling Paul's story she said, "No, I'm not involved in any of that. Time is a big factor. Paul is another big factor, he is a little bit of a problem child in school so therefore you've got to sort of try to keep some tight reins. So I like to be at home when he's there, right?" However, she did go to meet-the-teacher night and said, "Yes, yes I attend that. You get to go through the school and see the different areas and meet the teachers, your children's teachers, and then they have a social afterwards down in the cafeteria - so yes, it's good."

Both of Eric's parents attended meet-the-teacher night and said, "We've gone to meet-the-teacher night but we usually know them [teachers] by then. Usually we go in and meet them straight away." Eric's father also initiated a lunch-time activity program to help him when he first entered the junior high. He explained:

For about a month, I started going up at lunch time every day and I even brought games of checkers and backgammon and cards that the school didn't have. I used to play with Eric, or with the other children, and then the other children would play with him. So after that things were pretty good. But, it took a lot out of me because that was about a month leading up to Christmas... It's just that they didn't have a lot of places to go during recess or lunch time. They have free time and for a child like Eric that's not good.

However, while the teachers were particularly pleased, the school did not continue the program. He expressed disappointment:

They were really happy, (chuckling) especially when I spent \$20 or \$25 of my own money to buy games. I left them at the school and I thought they would follow through at lunch time if a child wanted to play backgammon or cards, we sort of had the understanding that they would ask for these games from the counselor... and they'd play in the lunchroom. But that only lasted for about two or three weeks after I left. They didn't really follow through so it ended up with the children having a lot of spare time on their hands.

Like the others, Eric's parents were not involved in the PTA and indicated not knowing its purpose. The father said:

They have bake sales... but I really don't know what they do... I've never even had any idea in my mind. Now, for me to sit down for an hour like this in the night - this is sort of nice really. You know, I'm usually busy doing something and I don't know if I want to get involved in it.

With the suggestion that some parents think that the PTA means that parents and teachers work together for the good of the children, the mother stated:

But it's not - it's not like that at all I don't think. *We went to one, the counselor gave a talk one night which was pretty good but they had him as a guest speaker and he was talking about homework and probably similar types of things that you would like to find out about - such as homework and skills that the children learn, or don't learn, and how we can help them with their homework and such.* That was our son's counselor, I guess, when Eric was in grade seven .

In summary, while communication was initially portrayed as being open, parents acknowledged without exception that contact with the school invariably concerned negative information about their children. In describing the inhibiting factors for two-way communication with parents of children with special needs, Swap (1993) confirms that even in scheduled meetings, "parents often are the recipients of negative information

about their child; they frequently feel intimidated by the array of teachers, specialists, and administrators... and they are rarely equal partners in decision making" (pp. 95-96). Although some parents were more comfortable in their dealings with the school, their frustration concerning negative contact was still evident. Further contributing to some mothers' feelings of alienation and mistrust were the actual or perceived negative attitudes of the school and other parents.

Finally, in light of these parents constant contact with the school, the question arises as to *why they were alleged to be hard to reach*. While they may not have been involved in traditional activities such as the PTA, they did go to the school when specific information was given about their children. Some attended meet-the-teacher night, and all initiated efforts to obtain academic placement information and to provide background information about their children. One family did attend a PTA meeting in the three-year period their son had been in junior high - one meeting where they were given *specific information as to how they could help their student with schoolwork!*

#### **4. Teacher-Guided Practices and The Importance of Parental Knowledge**

Parents and teachers inhabit very different worlds and view the child from different perspectives. Unless there is a deliberate, sustained effort to bridge the two worlds, the likelihood is that the child's education will suffer (p. 119).

— Seamus Hegarty (1993)

In this section, the parents' views about teacher-guided practices are presented. Also included is the topic of "parental knowledge" not only concerning their own children, but also regarding their insight into the negative consequences of educational inadequacies on a larger scale. Most often parents were not listened to formally or

informally. Thus, in responding to the idea of teacher-guided practices they elaborated about their negative experiences.

For the most part, parents seemed to think there were possible benefits to be derived from teacher-guided practices. Robbie's mother replied:

Well, if they could come up with some idea of how to help Robbie, all you got to do is call me and suggest something and I could try it and I'd say, "Okay" and then I could go back and say, "Well, you know, it didn't work for me this way or why don't you try another way." You're trying to be flexible because there's so much you got sometimes - you got to live with kid gloves, you know. But yes! Sure! I mean, anything if it's benefitting him.

Paul's mother thought that parents and teachers preparing plans for helping might be a good idea, however, she was quick to emphasize the crucial need to begin such a process when students are young. Discouraged that it may be too late for her son, she again referred to the grade seven class when Paul had done well and how in grade eight the same help was not there. Her lengthy response follows:

That's great, that would help, but my feeling about anything is, *it has to happen early!* Paul now is 14 and he started to have problems back in grade four, if he could have been caught in grade four and tested and diagnosed as having this problem and things put in place to help him at the earlier stage he might not have experienced what he's went through. The older you are the harder it is. I don't know if anything was put in place like that now if it would even help him, because he's had two more years of doing nothing... You know, he had just turned 12 when he went to grade seven. So he was a lot younger, a lot more impressionable. If that program what was put in place then - it worked, and he realized that he was not going to get his own way, he was not going to be sent home. He was asked to leave class and sit out by the door until he was ready to come back in, but he was not sent home, that was that. And he realized they're not sending me home, I'm not getting a holiday, so I'm going to have to do something and that's what he did. *But that wasn't carried through to grade eight, that's what I'm saying, and now he's had two more years where he's missed out!* So I don't know if something like that were put in



place again, right? Now he's older, he's bigger, you know he's way taller than what I am, the situation, everything's changed.

Although disillusioned, she did point to some positive aspects if she were kept informed by the school. Particularly, she noted that Paul did not remember his homework and came home empty handed. If a program were in place, she felt at least she might know what his homework involved. She further noted that a group meeting would be preferable to many parents calling the school every day. She commented:

*My biggest problem with him is not knowing what he has to do and hasn't got to do... Yes, my gosh if you know where the problems lie well then you can help work on it, but if you don't know what they're having a problem with, how can you help?... But I'd like to emphasize that it needs to be done at an early age, right?! These things have to be instilled in the kids at a younger age. Even now, it would help some, yes, not everybody, but I'm sure it would help some of the children.*

Mark's mother seemed to think that such a program would be helpful for him:

I'd like to see that. I would like to see that happen. I know it would aid somebody like Mark. Mark has really got a lot of weak points. Again, we're dealing with reading skills. And, of course, with reading skills and mathematics - like, they really can't get anywhere without the reading skills... Like I say, Mark does need extra help but I know right now they've made it quite clear to me that they just do not have the time. They do not have the teaching staff.

When asked if the PTA had programs directly related to assisting children with schooling, she replied:

No. No, no. The only thing I've ever heard about the PTA is just that they have their regular meetings whenever they're called - I think it's once every three months. They have their card parties. They have their fundraising. What surprises me too is that you get all these newsletters sent home about all these fundraising events that they're having for - well, computers... But okay, I can see them needing funding for computers but why over and over and over again is it computers? *Why don't they just say, "Well, we're having a fundraiser especially for the effort to bring in*

*tutors from senior high schools" to put some time with students that just need that little push that my son needs... But the programs aren't there. They are not made available! They're sort of just left hanging in the air!*

Although she noted that her children seemed to listen best to others, she also felt that parents wanted more involvement with their older children, and said:

*At the elementary school things are much closer. It is almost like a family sort of thing at that school. It's family oriented... But I find with other parents... they'd rather attend with the older child. Now maybe it's because it's another school. Maybe they carry on different programs or something, I don't know, but I have noticed this repeatedly and said, "You know, it almost seems that the parents are wanting to go to something the older child is involved in."*

Mark's mother told about never missing parent-teacher interviews and other events at the elementary school. She stressed the loss of family atmosphere and communication once her children entered junior high. She felt this negatively influenced her older son's future, as she replied:

*Well, I don't hear from the junior high the way I do from the elementary school. But I find it's awful. It's like - I think that once the door is closed behind the student from the elementary school, once they leave - I don't think it's open there again at the junior high for that sort of bonding - this feeling that once you walk inside. Of course, right from kindergarten to grade six. I mean you got your concerts and everything else... But like to me Mark is just as important because he's on the other end, sort of facing the world kind of thing and, like I said, it hurts because I know that he needs just that little bit of extra help and it's just not there and it's going to hinder him! He's got his dreams cut out. He wants to join the Newfoundland Constabulary. Ever since he was a little, little child, his step-grandfather was one of the police inspectors and Mark idolized him and ever since he passed away, he has always said, "Well, I'm going to be what poppy Al was." And it's still his goal... But it'll take him so much longer, you know what I mean?*

Eric's parents responded to the idea of teacher-guided practices by emphasizing the importance of study skills, particularly the father, as he said:

I'd like to see something like that set up... even just to ask them [students] how they study. A lot of them don't know how to study. And if somebody went in and gave some pointers on how to study or even 20 minutes after school... A lot of times, I think children would take you up on that if they were interested in really learning how to get the most out of their studying habits... *It's definitely worthy of a presentation some evening. I think a lot of people would benefit from it. Yeah, that's a good idea because... you can't study all your subjects the same way.* I think it's important to teach the children study skills because I think even in their reviews... I think it enables you to recall.

Like the others, Eric's mother underscored early intervention:

I honestly feel that the children have never ever been taught how to study [and] it should start before the junior high level. If you can instill these practices into children early on, then it makes an impression on them. I feel that younger children tend to be like a sponge - that they will pick up the habits that they're used to doing and carry them through. But in junior high level, well, we did pick up so many bad things about studying that Eric was doing.

These four families appeared to be receptive to being given information to help their children with schoolwork. However, home-school partnerships require a sharing of ideas, and parents' input is particularly important in the case of special needs students.

For school professionals, Mearig (1992) emphasizes:

It is important to explore with parents the conditions that seem to make a difference in the child's behavior and learning. *Realize that parents may be correct in their observations or impressions... Try to utilize their insights and ideas. And certainly parents need to be involved in a meaningful way in all decisions about school placement and programs.* [italics added]. (p. 224)

Hegarty (1993) and Swap (1993) also make it clear that parents are a valuable and essential source of information. Unfortunately, the parents in this study felt isolated and not respected for their contribution. Following are examples of their knowledge about

coping with the school system, and their insight concerning the potential adversity for the wider community resultant of educational deficiencies.

Robbie's mother, in describing her son's problems, also related difficulties she encountered with a physician. Although an older son had been diagnosed with a specific behavioural disorder, the physician evidently did not value the information the mother could provide, and took a critical stance. She indicated her consternation with the doctor: "And I told this to this particular doctor who told me I was running off at the mouth and I said, well, it's like this I said, I am having something done and I'm having it done this week! And so I had an appointment that week with the same doctor that was my older son's doctor." The parent's persistence resulted in her son having a psychiatric assessment; recommended four years previously, it had never been carried out!

Additionally, this family fought to keep their son from being sent to the Whitbourne Boys' Home. Both parents went to the Department of Social Services to obtain paid transportation for their student to and from school. Meeting with the Social Services Minister, they related the serious circumstances that had befallen their son. The mother described what transpired:

We told her what was going on, but she was more interested in telling me how good Whitbourne Boys' Home was. *I said, "Excuse me, Mrs. Smith, but I'm telling you that Robbie is not going to no Whitbourne." And I said, "That's it!" But, she said, "If he have to, we have good psychologists and good psychiatrists." I said, "No thank you! I don't need them because I'm telling you he's not going there and he's going to have a lot better than that!"* All we went in for was to have okay for the Social Services to give transportation for the young fella to and from school.

Initially, the school also had ignored her appeals. But her determination to contest their decisions had succeeded; they later acknowledged her advice:

And she [the teacher] did come back and tell me at the end of last year that what I was saying was right all along - that it worked with him having the student assistant and it worked with him in the smaller classroom setting. *And I was telling it all along and nobody heard any word I said!* But like I told them, you might have degrees in front of your name and you might have degrees behind your name but you don't know it all! That's my opinion. Because when you got troubled youngsters, I don't intend to sit back and shut up.

Robbie's mother demonstrated insight into the need for effective two-way communication between home and school. She stressed the importance for teachers to call the home should they detect a problem, and their need to know a student's background. Describing how it must be for parents who aren't contacted by the school, she said:

Well, I'm the one who calls them and gets calls. What about the people who have troubled children in school that they think are normal but the teachers are seeing something going wrong with that child and calls should be made and say, "Hey, Johnnie is not doing well. *Is there something wrong at home? Is there something wrong that he's not studying? Is there some medical problem? Is there something that the school system should know?...*" I went to the junior high with my child, knowing the principal... I could go in and say to him, "You know, Robbie's got this and this," and later on, there was a meeting called and I explained to him, "This is what's wrong with him and this is what you should do with Robbie." And then after a couple of months what I said was looked at and finally agreed upon and straightened out to the point that it was working well, the teachers were working well, Robbie was working well.

Unfortunately, problems surfaced again when many of the school's personnel changed without her knowledge. There were no mechanisms to inform the parent of the changes and evidently no collaboration between old and new staff, consequently, her hard work evaporated. She explained:

But now when this school year started, there was a new principal, there was a new guidance counselor. And Robbie went into a classroom of a teacher he never even knew. There was a lot of new adjustments to these people, so at the beginning of September, my life was on the downfall I would say because there was a major, major upheaval with another child and I had to deal with that and I just couldn't go in and say, "This is what's going on and this is who I am." And the calls weren't sent at home and things started to fall by the wayside early in September with him.

This mother also gave voice to the potential hazards that befall young people when disabilities go unrecognized. Denoting ignorance and stereotyping, she stated:

*So I know from experience that children do go into a school system without people even knowing that they have Attention Deficit [and Tourette's syndrome]. I've had it happen here so I know, I can speak. And if you as a troubled child go into the school system - in such a big system - you get lost in the cracks. Your life goes haywire and everybody is saying, "Oh look, isn't he a devil. I wish he wasn't here. What's wrong with that kid." And if me as a parent can't go in and say to you, "Listen, Johnnie have Tourette's syndrome or Attention Deficit. This is what you expect. This what can happen. Now if you got any problems with him, call me" - and if I don't do that and let it go by the wayside, you're going to be there frustrated with the kid and get really mad at him and he's going to get sick of you and then he's going to say, "Well, I'm fed up with this! I've have enough of this school" and drop out. And that's where half of the people on the street are drop-outs and in trouble.*

She also emphasized the need for teacher education:

They never even knew what Tourette's was. And I tried to explain to them "Now this is what he's doing..." You know, give them the whole scenario... And I said, "*I know it because I live with him!*" I mightn't have what education that you got - not putting anybody down with education. I did my grade 11, but I might have more mentality than the people who's got three or four degrees behind their name. So that's how I see it. Like I told the new principal in a group meeting what should be done with Robbie and them - pamphlets should be given out to his teachers on Attention Deficit, Obsessive/Compulsive Disorder and Tourette's - it should - information sheets or something. The school board... what they need to do is have a workshop on disabilities; this is what this child could have. You know, you might have somebody in your classroom reacting this way or this way. Here's the information sheets on

this. This is what we possibly could do with this child. Now if this child has got that problem, they could go back to the parent and say, "What can I do to help you?" I had to go in there, and tell them to tell Mr. Thomas to stop screaming out... if he raises his voice louder than his normal voice, he's screaming at him and he [Robbie] can't handle screaming. So he has to be told that he can't scream at him. You can't point at him. You can't touch him... *The teachers need to be educated!*

Eric's step-father, who enjoyed a comfortable alliance with the school, particularly with the principal, interestingly, had this to say when asked about the potential of teacher-guided practices to break down barriers with parents:

That's a very difficult one - because I've also heard comments like, "*So-and-so is probably a little bit of a problem in school but after talking with the parents they've probably been able to understand why.*" And I think, you know, I may as well say it, we all know that's going on. That may go back to lack of education. I don't know how you get around that because maybe the parent just doesn't trust the teacher or they just couldn't give a good damn.

Noting that perhaps some parents feel stereotyped, Eric's mother seemed more empathetic as she said, "I'm just thinking, would the parents feel intimidated by the teachers somewhat?"<sup>55</sup> It was also pointed out that some parents may not have the opportunity to reverse negativity and stereotyping and find it impossible to change their children's situation at the school. However, the father talked about Newfoundlanders not being assertive, and again described their non-confrontational approach with school personnel. Suggesting they could share their coping strategies with other parents, they seemed to perceive some benefits, and said:

I think one nice way for parents who are somewhat intimidated probably by the fact that they may not have a lot of education... and they're being a

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<sup>55</sup> She had been a single mother. The father was a new parent; he had several university degrees!

little bit intimidated about coming to meetings and standing up expressing themselves, but I think if we have little work groups, that's one way... I don't like standing up talking... But in little working groups... maybe with about 10 people. It's worth a try. (Eric's father)

I feel that that would be a good approach to take... because I wouldn't stand up and speak out in a large group. But I would with a group of half a dozen parents or something I'd certainly sit down and discuss my kids, but not in a roomful of people... And if there were these small groups and they appointed one person that could report... to the board or fiscal level. (Eric's mother)

Eric's father also noted the benefits of forming an advocacy group:

I don't know whether the purpose would be to get together and try to develop a pressure group - not necessarily to the schools, but the school boards and the Department of Education... And they could ask about funding and say, "This is a project we'd like to fund."

The mother added, "Seems like we've always sort of gone it alone, you know, even going to the school board level and going to the school principal."

Paul's mother was asked if she had talked with other parents who had similar problems, and she replied:

No! No. No. I haven't talked with anyone at the school... Parents should have the chance to have input into what's happening in school. And, like I said if my child is having problems in certain areas and the child is probably better in other areas, why can't we sort of zero in on both, right? You know, we'll help them with the bad one. Like, we can all give him a little bit of praise and encouragement because they're doing so good with the other areas.

Mark and Angela's mother also felt there were others in comparable situations:

Sure. There's got to be! Because Mark had to go to summer school because of his problems. He devoted half his summer again this year. He had to do the same thing last year. If the opportunity was there or if the teaching staff was there - I know it's not available. I know funding or whatever stops it but we can go right back to the board of education. Two years in a row he has devoted most of his summer to summer school.



Parents were also asked about moral and financial support for teacher-guided practices. Evidently skeptical about obtaining assistance from the school board, Eric's father noted fiscal and union problems they had encountered:

I think it would be nice... But I don't know, we've never had any real good support from a school board... They will always say, "Well, yes", you know, "we'll try and do this, but that money will have to come from the Department of Education." *Well, our little sore spot is the student assistants. That doesn't come from the board but directly from the Department of Education. So there's a double layer there. We have to go through them and they have to get it through the boards and, of course, they're also unionized - the teacher assistants. So it's not like you can pick one. We've looked into getting a teacher assistant who would most benefit Eric, but that's not necessarily the case. We had to get one that's the most senior regardless of how bad he or she may be. Or one the most junior.*<sup>36</sup> (Eric's father)

Or - maybe sometimes there's personality clashes. Our son, for instance, if I were his teacher assistant, I may not be suitable for him, but yet in terms of union I am fully entitled to be with this particular child. I don't know how you could ever resolve a union/administration problem... [Regarding support from the board and the school's administration] I think to be supportive, yes. Because then I think they would be supportive of the teachers and students in carrying it through. (Eric's mother)

Yes, you got to have their support, yes definitely, definitely need support, cooperation like the principal and the assistant principal and the teachers you know. (Paul's mother)

Initially, Mark and Angela's mother thought the question referred to parents requesting help for their students. Indicating considerable disillusionment she replied:

I wish you wouldn't ask me stuff like that about support. I don't know about support from the school... I don't know how much you'd beg, borrow or steal to get attention to get whatever it is you're looking for. But I don't know how you do it. *I'm lost! Because to be nice doesn't work and to be nasty doesn't work so what are you supposed to do!*

<sup>36</sup> This parent's analysis of the teacher assistant situation is clearly consistent with other parents' experiences across the province. As per media commentary by parents - September, October, November, 1997.

With clarification of the question, she returned to Angela's story. Expressing disappointment and insight, she said:

Oh yes. Teachers, if the teachers initiated the programs; if the teachers presented the ideas; this is what we think would be a better idea - give examples of students that would be helped tremendously by this. *It'd make the difference of day and night to some of these students' lives, I think. For example, Angela is one that was left out in the cold. If somebody other than the guidance counselor and the MUN student had made the reach-out and grabbed in the opportunity from the assessment report - something would've been done. I know she'd probably still been in senior high... And the pain is so great you wouldn't believe!*

In summary, these parents seemed to support the notion of teacher-guided practices. One final quote from Eric's father concerning the one PTA meeting they had attended gives significant indication for the need and desire for such a program. Adding to the mother's earlier comments, he said:

But you know, *the only PTA meeting that I ever went to in the school was where Ben Dalton gave that talk and I didn't realize it was a PTA meeting. I probably wouldn't have gone because that's never appealed to me but it was an interesting talk. That's why we wanted to go. Because it dealt with behaviour and yeah - homework skills. It was a good meeting I think and it reinforced a lot of ideas that we already had. And even if you can have meetings like that, that reinforce things.*

Also crucial is the school's recognition that parents may have innovative ideas and important information to contribute. Hegarty (1993) succinctly underscores the value of parents' knowledge and the importance of two-way information. He states:

*Over and above basic information on any relevant medical matters, the school has to become informed on the child's learning difficulties and the wide range of factors which have a bearing on them... Teachers can also learn a great deal from parents about the child's pattern of difficulties and what the parents can do - and maybe are already doing - to help... The flow of information from school is no less important [italics added]. (pp. 119-121)*

Finally, facilitating opportunities for parents to help each other is also important, as Hegarty notes, "Support of a different kind is provided by contact with other parents of children with special needs. Their common experiences enable them to understand and support each other in mutually helpful ways" (p. 127).<sup>57</sup> Clearly, however, these parents did not have contact with one another.

### 5. Homework Issues: Parents' Diligence and School Inadequacies

The curriculum is a principal arena for home-school contact and one where effective links between home and school can do much to enhance children's education (p. 122).

— Seamus Hegarty (1993)

The discussion with parents about homework underscored their children's learning difficulties and heightened awareness of their negative schooling circumstances. Inadequate information from the school, inconsistent approaches by teachers, and lack of homework initiated their contacting the school. All parents spent a great deal of time attempting to help, and efforts to assist their children and to get them to do homework seemed to highlight the need for new helping strategies.

Robbie's mother related in great detail some of the difficulties she encountered. Since Robbie ignored an agenda book, used by some teachers to list homework assignments, she asked the school for direction. There were times when he didn't want her to help, but she spent up to two hours per night with him. She explained:

I said, "Okay, Robbie, you know you have certain times that you got to do your work and times you can go out or you can play... If you had to let me help you, maybe you could've got a little bit more because you're getting good marks now, you are capable of doing that..." He don't bring home no agenda... A couple of weeks ago *I told them I wanted the homework*

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<sup>57</sup> Swap (1993, pp. 116-118) also supports this notion.

*wrote down so I'd know what it is and I want to know assignments and test times...* Robbie tore up the agenda book and won't bring it home. He'll just say, "Now, mother, I've got math tonight..." If he's there two hours, I have to stay here. I go back and correct him and I say, "Now, Robbie, look, go over this sum here" and he'll go back if he don't understand, he'll tell you or whatever.

She also expressed concern that homework and tests were not always set and noted trying to find out why. Relating her conversation with the teacher, she pointed out the difficulty in getting Robbie to read:

I says, "Listen, there's no homework, no tests, no sound." And she said, "Well, really, we don't have a lot of homework." Probably out of five days, he might have three. He's supposed to be reading at home and pushing reading and doing book reports and that, it don't work. You can't push somebody, but if he sit down now, he's liable to take it in his head to read three chapters of a book. That's a book to him.

Noting that perhaps she had to spend extra time helping her son she responded, "Robbie is a constant baby-sitting job and that's the way it is."

Paul's mother also related the difficulties he experienced with homework. Her frustration was evident in thinking that perhaps he used tiredness as an excuse not to do homework during his first year in grade eight. She explained it this way:

Okay with Paul I think it was a big excuse. He just found it too overpowering to try to do it, so he'd do so much and then he'd say his hand was tired from writing. And then start to say things like he'd want to have a drink, every kind of little excuse he could come up with to stay away from it, from doing his homework.

Asked if homework was set for him now in his second year in grade eight, she replied: "No. No." However, she acknowledged that the learning strategies used by his former grade seven teacher had been the most positive experience for Paul:

Oh yes, yeah, yeah. He didn't do a lot now mind you, but he'd know what was required. He'd bring it home for me to sign and have it brought back to the teacher. Plus he was on a monitoring program. They had a sheet every class they went to - if their behaviour was good and they were prepared for class, and these sorts of things, the teacher would check it in. Okay, if he went to math and he was good, his behaviour was good or very good, she'd tick whatever block it was and she'd phone.<sup>58</sup> Yeah, they had that in grade seven, monitoring yeah.

She also pointed to the benefits of being kept informed by the school during that time:

Yeah, when he brought it home and he and I knew he had homework - yes, I could help him with the study subjects - the math I couldn't... But the other subjects he had in the junior grades doing spelling and that, like, I use to make sure to help him learn and ask him his spelling and get him to write them down. And I'd help with paragraphs and his capital letters and punctuation and these things. When he brought it home and it was something I could help him with, I helped him with it.

Mark's mother was also concerned that he did not have enough homework; she too called the school to inquire as to the reasons why. It seemed to her, however, that her younger son had too much homework. She explained:

My concern is about Mark's homework... I called and I questioned why I had this 11-year-old [the younger son] that's doing grade five that actually falls asleep at the kitchen table with me sometimes and I have to wake him and say, "Okay, Stephen, go to bed." And he's upset because he hasn't finished all his homework and he is at that since supper dishes have been done... *So it upset me to say, "Okay, why do I have an 11-year-old in grade five that's doing all this homework and I've got a 14-year-old in grade eight and he's got it done in 10 or 15 minutes!"*

She related her conversation with the teacher, whose remarks seemed contradictory to her concerns about Mark's problems with reading and needing extra help. Confirming it was Mark who had the lesser amount of homework, she said:

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<sup>58</sup> This homework and monitoring process described the system Ms. Moore used for her special education students.

No. Not assigned homework. No. But I called the school and I questioned his teacher and he just said, "Now whether" he said, "he does his assigned work during school hours after assigned work in the classroom is done?" Which is possible, which is fine with him, if his work is completed in school - he wasn't having any problems with Mark. [The teacher also said,] "If this is the way he wishes to do it, that's totally up to himself. There's nothing that we can do about that."

Although the teacher appeared to believe that everything was fine, later, she again referred to Mark's reading problems. Keenly aware that it affected all aspects of his learning, she was bewildered about what she could do to help him. She stated:

He's just on the borderline. He needs a little push inside, but this barrier is stopping him. of course, I'm getting right back again to his reading skills, he doesn't have anybody to help him... I'll try to get him to read - pick up a book and read to do something with this bit of extra time. You don't read just a bit and rush to go outside!

Coping with troublesome homework situations was not unique to these three mothers, two of whom were single parents; both of Eric's parents related difficulties as well. Once again reading problems came to the fore:

Usually what we do is let him sit down and try it, get him to struggle through but he still hasn't learned to work at something and then call on us if there's a problem... What should be 15 minutes can probably take him an hour and a half. If we sat there and did it with him, then it's done and there are times when we just don't have the time, so we're trying to encourage him to make better use of his time but it's really difficult... *But most of Eric's case is that he's got very poor reading skills and that's another thing in school - you could write books on that - there is no provision for reading in school and no courses to teach them how to read!* He's an atrocious reader and as a result he doesn't want to read. And when it comes to doing homework, he won't read it.

They also described the planning they undertook for Eric's homework. Talking about the use of agenda books, they said:

Well, they did in their elementary levels. On the agendas we had to sign

their homework then, but now they just do it themselves and just write it in. (mother)

Eric wasn't bringing home his homework last term and so it took us all term to put something in place. What we finally came up with is that he would take his agenda to each class and get the teacher to initial it even just to make sure he got them to write in homework. (father)

Or no homework. (mother)

The teacher would just go "no homework" and initial it. Now, we asked the teachers if they would do that, so that guaranteed that Eric got used to the routine of taking his agenda to class and the responsibility of having to bring it home to us. Of course, he tried every trick in the book to get around it. "Oh I lost my agenda; somebody stole my agenda; somebody ran over my agenda with a tractor." (laughter) It goes on and on. (father)

Noting the challenge in getting their son to work on his own, the father again expressed optimism for the program they hoped he would have next year, in high school. He stressed the need for such a program at the junior high level, as he said:

The point is that's a real challenge for us, trying to get him to do the work on his own. *We would hope that this program at the high school when he goes there will probably, help Eric or help children like Eric. But it's badly needed, you know, it's terrible!* (father)

In summary, all parents pointed to the difficulties they experienced in attempting to help their special needs students with homework. Clearly, they were not well informed by the school about homework assignments and expectations. Relating the initiatives they undertook to confer with the school, parents expressed concern that not enough homework was set. Particularly, they emphasized their students' poor reading skills, and although they had talked about this problem earlier, the conversation about homework seemed to highlight this shared dilemma.

Hegarty (1993) writes about home-school relations from a special education perspective and goes beyond homework issues in underscoring the central role of the curriculum when students have learning problems. He states, "The central task of schools is to facilitate pupils' learning. When pupils have difficulty in learning, this task becomes if anything more important... There are many home-based ways of involving parents in the curriculum" (pp. 122-123). Clearly, these families could benefit from such collaboration.

#### **6. Gender, Family and Class Issues: Primary Caregivers and Diverse Families**

Teachers who tried to involve parents in helping their children at home found that cooperation was just as great in single-parent households as in two-parent households.

-- Sanford M. Dornbusch and Kathryn D. Gray (p. 291, 1988)

The role of mothers *and* fathers is an important aspect of children's education. Relevant to this, however, is the importance of schools to accommodate to the "new families."<sup>59</sup> Assumptions about mothers' constant availability, times that working parents can go to the school, and fathers' interest in children's schooling must be addressed. Another dimension, of course, is the diversity of family composition such as single-parent families and step-families. Traditionally, mothers have taken prime responsibility for children's schooling, and tradition seems to dictate that this perception remains a reality.<sup>60</sup>

Of the two fathers who were interviewed, only Eric's father participated to its completion. Robbie's father participated briefly, and alluded to helping with their

<sup>59</sup> See Dornbusch and Strober (1988)

<sup>60</sup> See Dornbusch & Strober (1988); Lareau (1992); Levin (1988); Power (1993); and Swap (1993).



children's schooling, but inadvertently referred to the mother as actually carrying out the these responsibilities. Commenting about Robbie's problems, he said, "We make a number of trips there [to the school] in the run of a year - now Margaret more so than myself but I do attend the meetings." However, after he left the interview, Robbie's mother responding to a specific question about whether they both went to the school replied, "I'm usually the one who does that." When asked if she preferred that the father go more often, she said:

I don't mind. I'm use to it because - you don't know the situation between me and Danny, we're married right now anyhow, *but I was the one who did the schoolwork - the school bit - and went to the meetings and went to whatever.*

Robbie's mother also did the contacting with the school, the school board, and the medical professionals, and helped with the homework.

Eric's step-father appeared to be quite involved in helping with homework and contacting the school. Although he dominated the interview discussion and emphasized his successes in dealing with the school, it became apparent that Eric's mother spent the most time on schooling matters. Indicating she worked part-time and noting the difficulties in helping with homework, she said: "Even, you know, with part-time work - fortunately, I guess I'm home after school with the children and things like that but there are times when I do work extra hours." She also completed a question about teachers' and others' perceptions about mothers' role in schooling by interjecting that its... "The mothers. It's the mother's role." As well, when asked about the importance of both

parents' involvement, their comments seemed to indicate differing experiences and perspectives. As the father talked about the mother's daily involvement, he appeared to contradict his previous comments about his participation. With regard to the school's and society's assumptions about mothers being the stay-at-home parent, he began his response seemingly in a joking manner, and the following exchange ensued:

Oh no. I'd rather my wife stayed home and cooked. (laughter) Actually, there's a lot of truth to that. No. I think it's important that we both get involved. I probably communicate the most mainly because I'm at the computer and we'll probably zap back and forth but, you know, *Marilyn drops them off, picks them up and will probably go in and talk to the teachers every now and then.* But then there are times when I may go in so we sort of share it and I think it's been important. But I don't -- (Eric's father)

*But I think teachers speak to moms more so than dads.* (Eric's mother interrupting)

Yes. I was going to say I don't see a lot of dads up there. (Eric's father added)

Pointing out that media announcements about school closures usually call for mothers to pick up the children, Eric's father replied, "Oh yes. Yeah. I think it's so (chuckling). Yeah, that's true. It is usually the moms, yeah." A short discussion ensued concerning the time constraints when parents work full time. In particular, they noted the extra burdens on single parents in helping their children with homework:

And a lot of times, I think that the children are left to their own devices with homework. Maybe the parents just don't have the time. Moms are probably trying to get ready for the next day. They're busy in many things or the student may be with a grandparent during the evening if mom and dad are working. You know, a lot of times maybe they can't help them with homework. (Eric's mother)

It would be pretty crazy if I worked full time and Marilyn worked full

time. I work full time but if she worked full time as well, it would be really crazy. Actually, I don't see how, say, single working moms do it or single fathers. It must be very difficult. (Eric's father)

Relevant to the challenges facing single parents, Paul's mother underscored the importance of both parents' responsibility to their children. Prior to relating her son's story she had this to say regarding her being the main person helping her children with school:

Yes, yeah. The father has not been present. [Taking a deep breath she continued] No, Nooo. He doesn't take any part. And that's, I think, that's a major issue with Paul, as well, that he struggles to deal with that now at this point in time. He was only three when his father left.

Parents were also queried about the importance of daughters' as well as sons' education. Without exception, all expressed its significance for both. However, Robbie's mother, and Mark and Angela's mother were especially concerned about the importance of education for their daughters. Robbie's only sister, Shelly, was in high school and her mother was determined to see her succeed. Her strong comments<sup>61</sup> reflect this point of view:

I don't agree with a sixteen-year-old girl coming home with a boyfriend... When you get your education, and you get your university, a boyfriend fits in the middle of it somewhere. But while you're under my roof, there is education and nothing else.

Concerned about her daughter's activities during the summer, she also related how she persuaded Shelly to join the military reserve, and was proud of her promotion to a sergeant ranking. With her mother's encouragement, Shelly was also a successful model

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<sup>61</sup>Some of the wording is tempered.

and was going to another province to do a photo shoot. Her mother proudly displayed her modeling photos.

Once again the importance of a daughter's education was especially poignant for Mark and Angela's mother. Her oldest daughter, Megan, had left junior high when she became pregnant. She had wanted her daughter to remain in school, but antagonistic and belittling attitudes persisted and she had left. Also an upgrading centre would not accept her while she was pregnant. Emphasizing the importance of a daughter's education, she related some of the story:

Definitely, it's just as important. Well, my older daughter is an example there. I mean to be a junior high drop-out and have to go back to an institution like the Ready Centre... And you got to have a youngster to get in there. That was the acceptance - a little by-law - the fine print. The priority was given to single parents... She was sort of just kicked aside... When she was pregnant, they wouldn't accept her. When she did have the baby and was a single parent, they said, "Okay, fine."

Although Paul's mother did not have a daughter, being a single, working parent seemed to influence her point of view. She replied:

Oh, I think an education is important to both. Especially this day and age, cause of the fact is, it is no longer a one person family income sort of thing right. The way things are now, you need two incomes, and its important for both being male and a female to have an education.

Eric and Judy's parents did not have a great deal to say about the importance of a daughter's education. Thus in contrast to their usual lengthy comments about other interview topics, they simply replied, "Yes, it is" (mother). "You know. I don't have any problem with that. I think that's pretty important, yeah" (father).

In summary, the mothers were the primary caregivers for their children's

schooling. One father indicated he had a high level of contact with the school, however, he subsequently suggested that it was the mother who contributed the majority of daily hours to their children's educational needs. All parents agreed that it was just as important for daughters as well as sons to acquire a high school education. However, mothers who had experienced personal adversity were clearly more passionate about the importance of education for daughters.

Although parents were not asked about gender or social class as factors in how they were perceived and treated by school personnel, the issue did emerge throughout the interviews. The notion that these parents were perceived by teachers as being hard to reach suggests a bias against single mothers, step-families and low-income families. To reiterate, two of the four mothers were single parents, and two were in step-families and previously had been single parents themselves. Also, with the exception of one family, all were low-income, working-class parents. They did care about their children's education and wanted to help them, but were frustrated with the school's shortcomings. The single mothers were especially disillusioned and obviously felt abandoned by the school system. The research, pertinent to this finding, points to the influence of teacher efficacy and program initiatives for single-parent families.<sup>62</sup> Teachers tend to believe that children from single-parent families will do less well in school, and that parents will not work with them at home. In their research, Dornbusch and Gray (1988) note:

Those teachers who sought increased parental assistance, compared to teachers who did not try to develop a partnership with parents, gave grades

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<sup>62</sup> Dornbusch, 1986; Dornbusch *et al.*, 1987; and Epstein, 1984 as cited by Dornbusch and Gray (1988).

that reduced markedly the usual discrepancy... [Also if single parents] are perceived to be less interested or active, that can have an effect on both the child and the teacher. (p. 291)

With regard to low-income parents, Brantlinger (1985) points to the need for the so-called "intelligentsia" to change their patronizing attitude of such parents. Particularly referencing educational equity, her criticism illuminates generalizations about low-income families and the realities of power:

Perhaps to justify their right to a more equitable educational system, it is necessary to credit the working class with more intelligence and awareness. It is one thing to be ignorant of inequitable class relationships and another to "be aware of" but lack power to change the situation. (p. 25)

## **7. Parents' Wishes for Their Students: Equality of Educational Opportunity**

Working-class children and their parents bear the brunt of reduced government expenditures for schooling and the pressure of a no-frills back-to-basics curriculum with high failure rates to demonstrate standards and excellence (p. 271)

-- Malcolm A. Levin (1987)

Parents were asked about their children's schooling opportunities and their greatest wish for them. Without exception, they gave poignant and insightful commentary alluding to inequality of educational opportunity. Inquiry was also made about their children's non-academic interests and whether they were able to pursue these at school. It became obvious, however, that opportunities to express their stronger aptitudes were not available. Instead, low academic achievement and perceived bad behaviour exacerbated negative attitudes and perpetuated stereotyping towards them.

Robbie's mother's determination and assertive efforts to create awareness for her son's needs had been, in part, successful. As noted at the outset, a teacher assistant finally

had been assigned to accompany Robbie from class to class, thus averting potential conflict with those students who had misconceptions of his Tourette's behaviour. Conceivably, the previous year's crisis situation could have been avoided if Robbie's needs had been legitimately recognized when he entered the junior high. Following a year of complex difficulties, and the ten-week suspension, currently he was doing well in school. His mother was cautiously hopeful about his future:

Knock on wood - he started off having it rough. He's after having a couple of bouts of school problems the year... But Robbie has come from a youngster that is failing... the child is improving in school and his medication has been evened out. He hasn't been in any major trouble since October and this is January, thank God! And the longer period of time that rolls by it seems like the better for him... it's in his favour.

While optimistic about his schooling, she told of problems with neighbours who also misunderstood his behaviour. Disheartened he had no friends, she related how she gave him support and encouragement:

He don't like living here anymore because he's got no friends... So what are you going to do, go around to the 28 houses and explain your situation - so it's useless... It's making a harder life for him. But I'm trying to tell him, "Robbie, look at the good work you're doing in school. You're doing really well. You're doing good at home." You know, "Try to ignore these people" and I'm going to try to get something done for him this summer through the probation officer. I'm going to see if I can get her to work on getting him involved in different things.

Queried about his non-academic skills, she was pleased about his interest in needlepoint and sewing:

He started picking up needlepoint and he was doing good with it and... He started taking up sewing and he used to do sewing all the time. I had two machines so I said, "Okay, you're only allowed to use this one." And he kept up on it and it didn't bother me.

Considering her seamstress skills, she thought that being a tailor could be part of his future. Responding to the idea enthusiastically, she said, "Why yes! Sure he could! He can go down and use the machine anytime." However, opportunities to express his talent at school seemed tentative, "He's only doing that until the end of this month and he was supposed to make a kite, for instance, but for whatever reason... he never bothered with it after." Asked if Robbie participated in extra-curricular activities, she told about his being denied a part in a grade six concert. With insightful observations about social-class stereotyping she replied:

I think some of it is he's not interested, but he's not pushed enough to be interested. For instance, when he was in grade six there was a concert and Robbie wanted to be the jack-in-the-box. But, of course, they picked somebody else and so he didn't want to go to the concert. But, I thought the teacher should give him a chance. I said, "Okay, so what, give the child a part so he would feel a part of the group," right? But she never did. *They take the nice, high society children and put them out front for everybody to see those dandy little kids and those poor little kids, and those poor little troublesome children, irritating people, are just shoved by the wayside!* Instead of saying, "Okay, you can say this part now, Robbie, you could do this." or "Come on, you're really good doing that."

At the conclusion of each interview, parents were asked about their greatest wish for their children if there were no barriers. Stressing the importance of teachers listening to parents, Robbie's mother again demonstrated her insight and commonsense. She stated:

In relationship to a school, and not only junior high or even, yes, seeing that we're talking about junior high - *I think that the teachers should listen to what the parents have to say and sit back and size up the situation and say, "Are these people right? Can Johnnie go ahead to grade eight realistically?" Instead of being told that because of the age or because of the height of a child and because of the troublesome children that's upcoming in the school system, that it would be better for a child to go ahead - how better is it going to be? Is it going to be better for the child or better because I'm getting rid of a child out of my classroom?" You know, it's not looked at - the real story is not heard!*



While Robbie's future appeared brighter, on the other hand, Paul was still experiencing great difficulties in school. Regarding his opportunity for success, his mother replied:

It's very bleak. His attitude now has a lot to do with what is wrong. You know, he hasn't been in school a lot and over the past couple of years [sighs] he's gotten in with the wrong crowd at school. Naturally, they sort of draw on one another and he's gotten into a little bit of trouble and things like that... Right now he's very weak in school.

Paul's non-academic interest was playing guitar, but the school's music program did not include that instrument. Similar to Robbie's experience with the concert, Paul and his friend were denied performing at the school even though they had spent many hours preparing. Evidently, this was punishment for misbehaviour. Noting his estranged father's musical ability, Paul's mother thought that perhaps he could have success with music. In a contemplative tone, she said:

The only thing he's into is music. He has a guitar and he taught himself how to play. *You know that is probably the only highlight that he has. There's music in the school but not what he wants. They don't have guitar.* They have the horns and these sorts of things... Actually, he was gonna play last year, but whatever happened they weren't allowed to - him and this other guy were practicing... I guess they were having a rough time in school and they wouldn't let them play... Yes, it's quite possible he could some day be successful. He inherits that trait from his father. His father plays in a band and so he's getting the musical ability right there.

Agreeing with the notion that education should provide an opportunity for students with special needs to enhance their musical abilities, she also thought that parents could help with such a project:

Yeah, have that little initiative - something that they could work towards right? You know, if you have a half decent week in school, you could have it as a reward for kids who are having problems. Like I say, if you put in a

good week and if things are running pretty good... you could have a music thing where students can come and bring their guitar or whatever... I guess it would be better in the evenings because a lot of parents work and I'm sure there's a lot of parents out there who are musically capable themselves who could probably help.

Thoughts of Paul's future appeared to magnify his difficulties and she felt that being labeled a trouble maker had led to unwarranted blame. Painfully aware of his situation, Paul continually pleaded with her to take him away from the school. Disillusioned, she said:

*If money and time were no obstacle to me, I'd haul Paul out of the junior high, I'd haul him out of St. John's and I would probably put him in a rural school outside of St. John's. Because he has told me over and over again he doesn't want to be in that school! Like... the least little thing that goes wrong, whether he's there or not - And, of course, obviously they're continuously on his back for those sorts of things and whatever else... There's a teacher, he's one of the staff there, he's very negative. Now, I guess Paul is giving him many opportunities to feel that way, but it doesn't help him if this one particular person is forever negative. But Paul has told me, he just does not want to be in that school! [Somewhat hopeful she added] Of course, if the opportunity is there... and probably if he stayed around Manuals. You know, somewhere to get him out of the city... and hopefully make some new friends who are not quite as negative. He talks about moving and oh, he'd go tonight - he would go tonight, you know! ... He's not a bad kid... If he would only learn to settle and go to school every day and get what's taught in the class, that alone would help him. But he hasn't for several months now.*

Conversation ensued about equality of opportunity and she commented about programming that would emphasize a student's strengths:

Oh yes. That would be something positive in schools, right? Everybody is not academic... We all have got to be able to read... but not everybody is going to be a professional person - not everybody has the ability to do it nor would want to... But we've all got something that we're good at and why not zero in on that in the school system. *There are certain basic things... skills that we need to carry with us through life, so we could have that plus we could also build on our strengths!*

Paul's mother poignantly noted the futility when one is stereotyped and encumbered by negative attitudes. Agreeing that academic success might prevail if a student's strengths were emphasized, she stated:

*Yesh, academics would follow it. Yes. If you're more content in your situation, in your school and in your classroom, then naturally you might be more content to pick up on other things. But if everything is negative from the time you enter to the time you leave you're going in negative; you're coming out negative and you're getting nothing. And that's the way it would be!*

When asked about the school's efforts to enhance Angela's non-academic capabilities, Mark and Angela's mother again expressed her incredulity that there had been nothing for her daughter. Efforts to find a program outside the education system were also futile; ironically, Angela needed a letter from the junior high to be accepted in certain programs. She explained:

They found every level that she was tested on was low... They pinpointed that she has a way with younger children and with older people and she's good with crafts. So, I said, "What you're telling me is that I've got a 15-year-old girl I'm taking out of school and let her make baskets?"... ***But no - there was no program - nothing! Absolutely nothing! There was nothing to bring out anything!*** When I was told about how she was good with elderly people and younger children, I took her to the hospitals and to the Agnes Pratt Home. I understood they had candystriper programs available. She was denied because she needed a letter of recommendation from the school... She baby sits now. That's all she can do. They wouldn't give me a letter at the junior high to take to the volunteer division of the hospitals... to find out what kind of student she is, if she was asked to write a letter for an elderly patient or something - which, of course, Angela wouldn't be able to do. But they didn't care about the fact that she could put her arms around somebody... And little children to really open herself up and care for them... But they overlooked all that.

Astonished that the education system had not helped her daughter, she gave further detail leading up to taking Angela from the school. Encountering obstinate attitudes, bureaucracy, and religious discrimination, she related the sequence of events:

Yes! I thought all I had to do was just pick up the phone or go down to the school... They would put me on to somebody else and somebody else... then I went down to the school, spoke with them directly... I found them very rude... [Then] the principal up at the Catholic school was this close to accepting her [in their program]. She said, "Okay, which parish do you attend?" I said, "St. Thomas..." She said, "Oh goodness, Angela is not Roman Catholic..." Her vice-principal called me back, "I'm sorry" she said "Sister Helen did a re-evaluation of the student, the number of students have been accepted for that particular program." She was very sorry to inform me... So here they have a program and because she was non-Catholic! What! I didn't ask for a religion program... The professor at Memorial... did quite a bit of study on Angela and he was quite intrigued by the whole situation. Even after this 32-page summation of Angela - what her weak points were, what her good points were, what she was good at and what she wasn't - Nothing! Thank you. Wasn't that something? I even got to the top brass in the school board and we dropped all the formalities... We had lovely little chats, about summer vacation cabins... - you name it. But still nothing! Absolutely nothing!

With some note of optimism she said:

She's baby-sitting now full time. She likes that work, yes, but she's got her mind made up that she's going to somehow finish her education. I don't know how. I have no idea how. She's got her applications in everywhere - even with the Ready Centre - with the schools for success and the T. I. Murphy Centre.

Returning the discussion to Mark, she felt that antagonistic attitudes towards her family may be associated with the school's lack of support for her son. However, she still believed that he could succeed if given the opportunity. Noting some students were protected inside a high achievement circle, she felt that students like Mark were kept on the outside:

I know Mark is quite capable of doing much better - if he was given just this little bit of opportunity, this little bit of extra help... They're telling me it is not available now... I'm not going to get down to the nitty-gritty and say, "Well, I know you do, but you're just not doing anything because you don't want to because you know he's Angela's brother and you know who his mother is." I'm not giving in to that... But I know that he could be so much better... *Mark is one of those people who need just this little push inside that circle, he would be something. He would graduate. He would be more self-assured if nothing else. He'd have this confidence within himself. Right now, he's just outside that circle!*

However, her constant agony concerned Angela. Having recently moved the daughter's attempt to spell the name of their new street was a vivid reminder of her reading difficulties. Thinking about her future without an education, she said:

It's just like cold water in my face again... People have told us she's a pretty girl and she's sweet, *but where is she going to go without an education? She's not going to go anywhere!*... And this is the part that hurts so much because she's made up of this real soft way... She loves children and old people.

When asked her greatest wish for her children if there were no barriers, she responded by outlining her ideas for early assessment and intervention:

For example, in elementary school, Angela was never evaluated, until finally at the junior high. That's one thing I've had to thank that school for, but that was a MUN student training... So he's the one that tripped up on this. *Why not take each individual student sometime... supposing it was during the summer months and give them a thorough investigation when it comes to their abilities and their weaknesses. It can't be that hard to do... I'd do it and I'm sure you'd find more volunteers!* Just to find out what they need in comparison to another student - their learning abilities and put it all down.

She also expressed consternation about her children going into the junior high without any thought given to their learning problems. She stated:

They threw them into the ocean! That's exactly what they did and you got to cope with... the behavioral differences, or whatever goes on. *Why not just take a couple of minutes to sit down and say, "Okay, here's your chart*

*from your elementary school. This is where your weaknesses are. This is what you need help in. This is what you're good at!... So why don't we use you, you're good at math. Why don't we use you to help somebody that's not so good at math to help them along - like a buddy type program." You know, like buddy reading and all this sort of thing. I mean, what could hurt?*

Again asked her greatest wish, like the others, she was insightful and profound:

The only thing I ever wanted is the same as any parent when you just look at the face of your child right after you've given birth - is to wonder where the child is going to end up. What's going to happen. How much you're going to be a part of that child's life and then you take a lot of blame yourself when you see your child starting to fail. But then when you know you've done your best... Basically, all you want to do is to see them up there on the stage to accept their high school diploma. If they don't have the ability to attend university, if they don't have the best marks of the [graduation] night, to hell with it. Let them go into something else. But they've accomplished those twelve, thirteen years of their most important education. From there on, they can face anything. But if they don't have that they can't put gas in a car anymore unless you've got grade twelve. *To see them walk across the stage to get their high school diploma - that's the first step in making it on their own, isn't it?*

In response to their greatest wish for their children, Eric's parents indicated great concern for the lack of suitable programs for him in junior high. Anticipating their daughter having few difficulties they said:

Well, we'd like to see them at least get through high school... Judy has expressed the desire to be a veterinarian... It would be nice to see her go on and to see Eric definitely get through high school. *We don't know how far he's going to go because if he stays in the kind of a system he's in now, he's just not going to make it!* But if we can get him into the high school/work study program where you can still get your number of courses to qualify for your grade twelve... Our greatest wish would be to see him really like this and really excel in it. There'd be some areas whereby that system can identify Eric's problem points; because as it stands right now it's not going to be identified... *junior high isn't good and I guess that's another wish that junior high could be revamped or re-streamlined or whatever - reorganized - because I don't think it really prepares the students!*

Regarding Eric's non-academic interests, they noted his ability to play chess and backgammon, and again expressed their disappointment that the school had not continued the lunch hour sessions initiated by the father. One result, possibly revealing teachers' and students' stereotypical attitudes, was their amazement that a "slow learner" could actually play these games. Indicating the school's lack of foresight in not continuing the program, the father said:

*I don't think they're encouraged to think at lunch time. But when I was there with those games, they couldn't believe that he knew how to play chess or backgammon or things like this. They were amazed! Honestly! And he's good at those things.*

Eric's mother was quite perturbed that school personnel would have assumed such a biased attitude towards their son, when they, as parents, took his ability for granted. She said: *"But another thing that's bothered me, I guess, in one way is that they didn't think he could do it but yet, here at home, it's sort of something that he does anyway!"* Discussion continued about the need for programs enabling students to develop their extra-curricular interests and to help diminish attitudes that students are somehow of less value if they are not academically inclined. For Eric's parents, the senior high work-study program was their only hope. To reiterate his disillusionment with the junior high system, the father stated:

*You wallow in the junior high system until you get to that level [senior high]... Once you get to the other side, it's probably not too bad for opportunities. But there's nothing, and they've told me that unfortunately the junior high level has nothing to offer except the basic courses -the academics and so on.*

They also thought that students such as Eric should be given the opportunity to do oral exams. They noted:

And another thing, he's not real good at expressing himself, and his reading abilities are poor. So, of course, on an exam he has to read the exam, try to interpret what the question is and then try to answer it by writing it down. So his results vary quite a bit on the exams. (father)

I honestly think that if Eric were given an oral exam he would do better. I feel that when we went over his subjects for the exams the past few weeks, he knew certain questions...because we were helping him. He did okay, he was in the 60s which is not bad, but I honestly feel that Eric knew more than what was on the paper. I feel an oral exam would have drawn out more of what he knew about the subject. (mother)

Eric's mother also related how one teacher encouraged students' creative abilities:

Judy likes to draw and she's pretty good in art... One teacher in grade six... was the only one who wrote that on her report card and brought out her artistic talents in a positive way. He just felt that it was good for Judy to keep on drawing and encouraged her all the time; it's nice to see that. Why, say at lunch times, couldn't there be somebody, a teacher, taking some time out - maybe the children would like to go in and draw or... maybe they could make something.

The father added that perhaps grandparents or retired teachers could plan and supervise such activities. But noting on-going funding problems, the mother said, "And a lot times these things go unnoticed because there aren't sufficient funds and there isn't any time."

They proceeded to express strong views concerning the disbursement of financial resources and the educational inequity for special needs students. Eric's mother particularly noted that French Immersion programs may be important for some students, but that in some instances these students leave the province. Society would benefit in the long term, she thought, by providing the educationally challenged with programs to ensure they receive adequate if not optimal schooling services. The father assumed that special needs children have the same rights to an education as other students in the province. Pointing to their efforts to attain adequate programming, he said:



We've been up to the Confederation Building and I've written letters and so on. That doesn't bother me at all if I really have to. I should really right now write letters into a campaign now. It is really hard, you know, to try and get money these days to do anything and it's -

Interrupting, Eric's mother stated:

When you have a child who has extra needs, I always come back to the point that with the French immersion, not that I want to take anything away from them, but I always feel that these children are above average children. And the money that is poured into French Immersion could be also directed our way because these children will be working in the community more than likely. We don't expect these children to move away and make careers for themselves. *I just feel that they would be contributing to the community and if there was a program for them that it would do some good for them - for everybody - for the community, because they would have good self-esteem, would be employed, putting things back into the community and giving back into what was given them.*

Adding his support, the father said:

I agree with Marilyn that there's a lot of money pumped into French Immersion and although I don't have any problems with that... But I figure if we pumped a little more money into our children and their education... possibly we'd get a much bigger return, especially children who have special needs. I mean you just can't ignore them. *I would assume that they have every right to an education, the same education that any other child in Newfoundland has and I don't know if that's in the Education Act, if there is one, but I would imagine it's there somewhere. But I just feel that they're not getting that!*

In summary, these families demonstrated grave concern for their children's future and a strong perception of inequality of educational opportunity. They pointed to inept academic programs, the lack of non-academic programs, and the lack of academic assistance for their children. Their experiences included stereotyping; teachers' poor demeanor and lack of knowledge; discrimination based on religion and zoning; and lack of early intervention processes. Additionally, parents were not listened to, and without

recognition of their learning difficulties, the children's special needs were not legitimated as they moved from one school level to another. These issues caused parents tremendous frustration with the education system, and the painful realization that their children were not being afforded the right to an education.

Canning's (1996) report is clearly reflective of these parents' views that equity is not a reality for special needs students. Particularly, she points to the risks for students at the junior and senior high levels where the expertise of special education teachers is spread too thinly forcing learning challenged students to be placed in regular classes without adequate support. Emphasizing the need for appropriate academic as well as *non-academic* programming, she states:

*It is at these [grade] levels that mild to moderate cognitively delayed students are most disadvantaged as they cannot meet the demands of most regular academic courses but there are very few non-academic options, such as home economics or industrial arts, available in most schools. Further, indications are that very few courses are modified for these students. High school teachers told us they did not know how to modify courses, and did not have the time to modify each course for each of the special needs students in their classes in any case [italics added]. (p. 24)*

Mearig (1992) also notes the importance of non-academic options as she says, "Parents and school professionals both should feel a responsibility to identify activities in which the learning-disabled child can succeed" (p. 224). Furthermore, she underscores the importance of having both academic and vocational programs designed specifically for them. This concept deals with the potential of arts and music programs in building students' self-confidence and self-esteem by emphasizing their strengths, and

encouraging them to remain in school.<sup>63</sup> Additionally, Mearig (1992) endorses the parents' impassioned view that their children complete their secondary education even though they may not proceed to university or college.

In light of these parents' stories, statements in the 1992 Royal Commission report on education regarding the rights of all children to receive an equitable education appear rather shallow and rhetorical. The chapter specific to educational finance espouses equitable funding for quality schooling; contrary to these children's schooling reality it states:

Funds to provide for the education of children are provided in a manner which ensures taxpayer equity. *The education system must provide all students, whatever their economic and social backgrounds or locations, with equal access to these resources... Every student should have access to quality educational programs and services that reasonably respond to individual needs, regardless of interests and abilities, regardless of where that student lives, regardless of that student's cultural and socio-economic environment* [italics added]. (pp. 117 & 123)

#### (e) Parents with School-Homework Mystery Stories

Teachers can help parents a great deal by clarifying their expectations about homework in workshops, in writing, and/or in grade-level meetings (p. 110)

-- Susan McAllister Swap (1993)

#### 1. Introduction and Background Information: Five Families

In this segment, the findings of the remaining five families are presented.

Pertinent questions revolved around the same six themes: family background; school

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<sup>63</sup> This notion was supported by guidance counselors at their annual conference in St. John's, November, 1997. Reported on CBC radio on November 7, 1997 by Alec Hickey, Department of Education.

communication and parental involvement; gender; homework; teacher-guided practices; and educational opportunities. Most of these parents also chose to be interviewed in their homes with only one deciding to meet at the community health centre. Like the other families, they were welcoming and generous in sharing information. One family was headed by a single mother; the others were two-parent families. While three fathers agreed to participate in the interviews, again, the main participants were mothers.

The education levels of these parents were lower than the previous group. Out of the nine parents only two had finished high school. One of these had completed college courses as well, while the other related that she was seven months pregnant when she graduated. Emphasizing the importance of education, she stressed that it was the support from her parents and teacher which influenced her remaining in school. The other parents' education levels ranged from grade seven up to the completion of a few high school credits. Although not high school graduates, two mothers had completed post-secondary programs; through social services one had done courses in receptionist-typing and job readiness training, and the other mother had completed courses in sewing and marine cooking. One father and mother were studying to attain their General Education Diploma<sup>64</sup> (GED); they often stressed the importance of education during the interview. Another parent, with only grade eight, attempted up-grading but had found it too difficult. She had left school to care for her sick mother; and the father, the youngest of sixteen children, also left school early when his father was ill.

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<sup>64</sup> High school equivalency diploma.

Only four of the nine parents were employed. Three of these were concerned about losing their jobs through company and government downsizing; one mother had been on disability leave and another mother worked part-time. She was given only three to four hours recall notice, and since the father's work took him out of town for several week intervals, it had been impossible to retain a regular caregiver for their children. Mostly, they depended on the availability of friends. Previous and current occupations of the parents included carpentry, housekeeping, worker for the school lunch program, cook and housekeeper in a hospital, clerk with the provincial government, driver for a moving company, and cook in a senior citizens' home. Two mothers had been teacher aids, and indicated enjoying the work. They had assisted teachers with various duties including correcting tests, helping with special assignments, and cooking.

This "Parents' Voices" section includes Families Three, Four, Five, Seven, and Nine.<sup>45</sup> Family Three had two daughters; Sherry, from the mother's first marriage, was in grade eight and another daughter, from the present marriage, was a preschooler. This mother and father talked about their marital status (the other two-parent families did not relate this information one way or the other). Although Sherry's step-father was present during the interview, he seemed to prefer an observer role and often left the room; the mother was the main participant. Family Four had three children - Allan in grade eight, a son in grade nine and a daughter in high school. Both these parents contributed somewhat equally to the interview. Family Five, a single mother, had one son, Greg, in grade eight.

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<sup>45</sup> See the Family Demographics - Table 4.

Family Seven had two children - a daughter, Karen, in grade eight and a son, Tyler, in high school; only the mother participated in the interview.<sup>66</sup> Family Nine had two children; a daughter, Tara, in grade eight and a younger daughter who was still a preschooler. The father appeared to dominate the interview, even when questions were specifically directed to the mother.

Although the children in these families seemingly were not special needs students, and their parents responded positively to the question *How is your student doing?* it became apparent that their children were having learning difficulties. These included problems with reading, failure of core subjects, and confusion about homework assignments. Therefore, while parents were fairly confident about their children's abilities and future success, they were perplexed about these immediate issues and the school's apparent inattention to them. Significant again is that these families were in low-income, working-class circumstances with low educational levels, and were selected by the school as being hard to reach.

## **2. School Communication and Parental Involvement: Unwanted Parental Help and the Meaningless PTA**

Partnerships tend to decline across grades, *unless* schools and teachers work to develop and implement appropriate practices of partnership at each grade level [author's emphasis] (p. 703).

--Joyce L. Epstein (1995)

Questions about communication and parental involvement were again combined.

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<sup>66</sup> Noted in chapter three, this parent did not want to be audio taped; direct quoting is limited.

Like the others, these parents were also in touch with the school on a fairly regular basis and initiated calls themselves to set-up meetings concerning their children. While some attended meet-the-teacher night, science fairs, concerts, and parent-teacher conferences, all were emphatic that the PTA as a fundraising body did not warrant their attention. Queries about their involvement also elicited comparison of the school culture at the elementary and junior high levels. The ambiance at the elementary school, they felt, was more welcoming for parents than at the junior high. All indicated being more involved at the elementary level, and if programs were set up, some indicated a willingness to assist in the classroom at the junior high. However, one mother's offers of help were actually declined.

When asked why the school contacted parents, it was found once more that communication was primarily for negative reasons. Sherry's mother expressed amazement that the school was sometimes presumptuous in thinking she was unaware her daughter was not in class. She stated:

Usually, the only time they contact me is if Sherry is sick and she needs to come home, or sometimes they don't realize she could be sick and they used to phone home and say, "Do you know your daughter's not in school today? We were wondering if she was pipping off." I said, "No, my dear." I said, "You got no worries about my daughter pipping off school." And ever since I said that to them, they don't even bother to phone to see.  
*So that's about the only time I hear from them!*

Clearly, Sherry's mother was surprised by this assumption, especially since the teachers had told her on several occasions that Sherry was a well behaved student, and how they enjoyed having her in their class. Inquiring if the school ever contacted them concerning something successful Sherry may have done, she replied, "No. They don't phone then."

Her step-father, whose participation in the interview was limited more to observance than discussion, stated, "No, they don't phone here like that. The only time you'll hear from them down there is if they thought they were pipping off, if they're in trouble, fighting or something. That's the only time we'll hear." The mother added:

I goes down when they sends home the pre-reports... Even if they don't ask me to go down, I'll go down anyway. I make my own appointments to see them. That's what you usually have to do, unless they sends home a letter saying that they wants to see you. I was down to one and it was just introducing the teachers they had there. That was the first one I went to the year. After you met everybody you got to walk around the school and go to their classes and that. There's a new principal down there this year. Last year there was a different fellow down there, right?

Allan's mother also noted the usual reason for parents being called. In response to how and why the school contacted them, she said:

Oh, like if the child gets in trouble or something like that, they'll call then. Other than that, we haven't had no dealings with them. [Asked about positive calls, she said.] No. They don't. No. No. Well, Allan's teacher called at the beginning of the year to introduce himself to us and told us if we had any problems to call him, but other than that, we don't hear from him.

Although Tara's father related being contacted for negative reasons, he felt her present teacher was genuinely concerned:

Well, usually it's like a note and then once or twice she just called, and *that's only usually when there's something up. Like she's called to say, "Tara has been late twice this week.."* You know, *its a problem with Tara being late - just little things like that.* I must say the teacher that she has now seems to be pretty concerned. Like she'll call probably on a Saturday afternoon to just say, "Oh hi! How are you doing, Tara has been a little bit late this week and I was wondering if you were aware of it. Is she leaving home on time or is she taking her time and doing something in between?" - genuinely concerned about it. I must say.



Inquiring if the teacher called specifically when Tara was doing well he replied:

Oh, I must say the time she did call she did bring up the fact that she was pleased with Tara's great manners in school, she's very polite sort of thing... *but nothing really she hasn't called just to say, "Oh, I just called to let you know that Tara is doing fantastic in school" or something of that nature.*

Karen's mother seemed to think that communication had deteriorated at the junior high. She said, "It use to be perfect at the school, but they don't call anymore, you have to call." The previous year, she had attended the PTA, parent-teacher conferences and the science fair; but now she was "taking a break and helping her mother" who was ill. Later in the interview, Karen's mother revealed that she had wanted to help out at the school but her offers were declined.

Most parents knew about and described the telephone tree. For various reasons, some participated and some did not. Without elaborating why, Karen's mother said that she neither "wanted it" nor "agreed with it." Other parents said:

Yeah, they have that [telephone tree] down there but we didn't used to put our number on it because where we had an unlisted number. But that [telephone tree] was only in case of emergencies or storm closures and stuff like that. (Sherry's mother)

Well, we had the telephone tree from all the children in one class with the parents' name on it and the child's name... You know, if they wanted something, then well I'll phone the next parent and they'll phone the rest... Once it was for the PTA to let everybody know when it was on. (Allan's mother)

I wasn't into it last year I didn't understand quite how it works. But this year the teacher explained it a bit more, so I said, "Yes, girl, put my name down" *but I never got a phone call or anything from it...* It's very rare I gets a note. I gets to see all Greg's tests because I got to sign them - his report and stuff like that. (Greg's mother)

Evidently, the school did not send newsletters. Karen's mother noted her daughter had written for the newsletter, but was not aware if it still existed. Allan's mother indicated only getting a newsletter from the elementary school, as she said, "They used to always send a little newsletter from the elementary school, right? Every three months or so." As for the main method of communication from the junior high, she replied, "They said they'd call but... that's about it."

Regarding going to the school, almost all parents related feeling fairly comfortable in meeting with teachers; though some expressed reservation:

Well, I guess with the teacher I felt comfortable and that, right; but while I'm there waiting, I gets a little nervous. But I know one teacher is really nice to talk to; that's her homeroom teacher. (Sherry's mother)

Oh yeah. Teachers are nice, you know. They speak to you. If there's any trouble, they'll call you. (Allan's mother)

Yes, the teachers are friendly I feel okay going to the school. (Karen's mother)

The teachers' been nice and take time out to talk to you about' em... same as usual... Like I said, I try to help him when I can. When I can't, I will probably go to teachers and say, "Well, Greg is having trouble with this or that." I'll phone or I'll go up or, if I happen to see her or whatever, I'll mention it to her. (Greg's mother)

On the other hand, going to the PTA and other events at the junior high was quite another matter. All parents talked about feelings of alienation at the junior high, especially in comparison with the elementary level. Although Sherry's mother had related being comfortable in meeting with the homeroom teacher, she later gave a lengthy narrative about the difficulties in changing schools. Interestingly, her comments reflect those of

Mark and Angela's mother (who was interviewed weeks later). When asked if she felt comfortable in going to the PTA, Sherry's mother stated:

No, and then like there's another thing too. When your child leaves one school - you're used to them teachers in that school and that. I haven't been down there [the junior high] that much. When I goes down there, I'm as nervous, my dear, as you could be. It's strange to you and you're really uncomfortable. But that makes it harder on the children too, because they're going to a totally new school. And you don't know all the people there... Like, now these PTA meetings I know it's dealing with other parents to go and talk about things to do with the school; it's not there to meet themselves. Even if I could carry a friend with me, I would feel a lot more comfortable - usually it's only the parents that goes to these things.

Like the previous four families, these parents also pointed out being more involved in schooling activities at the elementary level. They lamented there was nothing at the junior high to make them feel welcome or even wanted, and that "things were not the same." Allan's mother remarked, "When they were in their lower grades, I was involved in the bake sales and when our oldest daughter was in Brownies down there. And we used to go down and see the teachers on the interviews and that... and I was working myself right. I used to work all eight to fours then." However, she also observed a difference in atmosphere between the two school levels. Asked why she was more involved at the elementary level, she said:

I think that where they were younger and we went and picked them up if they didn't get the bus. We would go in and the teachers would be talking to you and telling you, "We've going to do this and this today." ***But up there [at the junior high] they don't want you in the schools. They only want the youngsters to get going, right?!***

Concerning whether expectations were higher for parental involvement at the elementary level, Allan's father seemed to think there were not as many activities for

students at the junior high. He said, "I don't know, because when the youngsters were down to the elementary school, it seemed like they were always into something. They always had different stuff on the go, didn't they?" The mother agreed, "Oh yeah, always. But they're just not interested in the junior high school, I suppose. And like Allan with his sports. He played soccer first of the year and then basketball and floor hockey and he's in hockey outside of school." Regarding participation in concerts, she replied, "No. They don't be in it. Allan is interested in sports and things. I know they had a band out there but neither one of mine are interested in the band or anything like that." Regarding their own involvement at the school, she said:

They have that [meet-the-teacher night] every year but we didn't go. *I haven't seen none of the concerts from grade seven to grade nine - only when they were in the elementary school - we used to go to it all then.*

As for going to the PTA, both parents simply replied, "No."

Sherry's mother related several stories about her involvement in the early grades and appeared to have enjoyed it, as she said, "I used to be involved in the Christmas bazaars and everything at the elementary school." Inquiring as to why she was not as involved at the junior high, expressing disappointment she said:

It's not the same to me somehow. They don't have a Christmas bazaar - if they had that down there, I'd be going down there and helping out with that if they needed help. *The elementary school seemed like they longed to get the parents more involved; because even when they used have their Halloween parade, all the parents and everybody was invited, you never had to pay to see it and you could bring the youngsters, if you had any home.*

This mother also indicated her willingness to assist at the junior high. She explained:

Well, now, in the elementary school they were talking about teachers and they never had enough help. I was one of the people that stood up and said

to them, "Why don't you ask the parents to come out and help the teacher for a day. Like, give them rotations..." I said, "I'd be one of the people who would be first to come and do it." *If there was a class down there [at the junior high] that I knew I would feel comfortable in, I would be glad to do it because children are having a hard enough time now.*

Asked what she would like to help with, if parents were invited to assist in the classroom, she said:

Well, I could help with home economics or sewing or anything like that. I could do art because her art teacher asked me to draw a picture for her one time... *They don't have nothing down there like that - just PTA meetings; and like I said, I don't feel up to going to them because usually all they talks about is what are they going to do with this or that. Different things like fundraising. And the way I looks at it - well, I don't be asked my advice when I goes there so why should I go?*

As noted, Karen's mother especially wanted to assist in the classroom or in the gymnasium. However, despite the fact she already volunteered in the library at her son's high school, and also had typing and clerical skills, the school refused her help. Clearly disappointed she said, "I even offered to clean up or anything but they told me, "No." Proudly displaying beautiful craft items she had made, she noted, "I'd like very much to go in and show the kids." Nevertheless, she still held hope that there would be a gym program requiring volunteers in a few months. PTA meetings, she thought, were boring, and though she enjoyed talking with other parents, she also had observed that its main purpose was fundraising. One of her main interests was attending the school's science fair.

Greg's mother attended meet-the-teacher night and parent-teacher conferences. She described the meet-the-teacher night, "Well, they introduced all the teachers and a new principal. He more-or-less put an outline what his goal was and what he wanted to

do with the school. It was pretty interesting." However, when asked if she attended PTA meetings, she replied, "No. No. It's just not for me! When Greg first started school, I got to be honest, *I went to every meeting and done everything like you were suppose to and I never ever got nothing out of them - It just wasn't for me!*" Having attended a recent meeting concerning lack of funding, it was evident that Greg's mother was more interested in using her time to help her son with school. She expressed her annoyance over the political discussions:

It's the big debate, right? So we got up and walked out because I mean there was no funding. Like I said I don't really have a lot to do with the PTA... *Because the only thing that bothered me was how Greg was doing and make sure he was comfortable in the school and he was getting looked after or he was getting enough attention for his work, and that was my main aspect of it, right? And to go and listen to them fighting... it's just a waste of time!*

Like the others, Tara's mother and father were not involved in the PTA. Also comparing the elementary and junior high levels, the father said:

We've gone to some of the meetings [parent-teacher conferences] but I thinks of Tara in school so we've gone to plays and things like that but we're not heavily involved in the PTA or anything of that nature... *I'd say communication is still there but it's not really like they need people as much. Like, at the elementary school, it was, you know, for library duties, for lunch duties, but like at the junior high they don't seem to involve the parents as much.*

In summary, these parents expressed problems with the school's communication and involvement, and also indicated being contacted largely for negative reasons. Although considered by the school as difficult to reach, they were knowledgeable about the school's telephone tree, responded to requests to set-up parent-teacher conferences, and sometimes initiated meetings with teachers themselves. Some parents attended meet-

the-teacher nights and the science fair, and indicated wanting to assist in the classroom or gymnasium.

However, all told about being involved far more at the elementary level, and perceived that they were not wanted at the junior high. One mother was clearly disappointed that her offers of help were met with refusal. Furthermore, each parent felt there were not enough programs or events at the junior high which included or even wanted parents' help. The main parental involvement at this school seemed to be the PTA, which these parents astutely observed to be a closed political, fundraising group. Without exception all said they were uncomfortable in going there, questioned its value, and expressed their disinterest. As noted elsewhere,<sup>67</sup> their perceptions of this PTA were evidently well founded and supports the research which says that PTAs are not well attended, perceived to be of little value, and rarely provide the chance for authentic interaction.<sup>68</sup>

Considering these families were from low-income, working-class situations, and considered by the school<sup>69</sup> as being hard to reach Epstein (1995) states:

Schools in more economically depressed communities make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties their children are having, *unless*[her emphasis] they work at developing balanced partnership programs that include contacts *about positive accomplishments of students* (p.703). [At the junior and senior high levels] When parents perceive that the school is doing many things to involve them, they are more involved in their children's education at school and at home. *The school's practices – not just family characteristics – make a difference*

<sup>67</sup> See the Principals' Findings.

<sup>68</sup> See Fullan (1991); Macbeth (1993); Swap (1993).

<sup>69</sup> See also Brantlinger (1985); Fullan (1991); Levin (1987); Swap (1993).

*in whether parents become involved and feel informed in their children's education* [italics added]. (1989, p. 8)

### 3. Gender, Family and Class Issues: Fathers Help with Homework But Do Not Go to the School

Social class, language, ethnicity and religion divide teachers from parents (p. 273).  
 -- Malcolm A. Levin (1987)

Gender bias has implications for the success or failure of collaboration with families. Schools need to be cognizant of attitudes not only towards two-parent families and the inclusion of both parents in children's schooling, but biases towards single-parent and step-families as well. Schools and parents also need to be aware of perceptions concerning education for females. As history informs us, there are differing values particularly concerning its importance and necessity.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, these parents also were queried about the role of mothers and fathers, and the importance of education for their daughters and sons.

Even without asking specific questions about gender, attitudes regarding which parent should go to the school emerged in the discussion. For example, while Sherry's step-father seemed concerned about the how the school contacted the home, he had never gone to the school. When discussing the school's communication methods, he said:

Teachers down to the school should get a hold of parents more often though. About letting them know what's going on down to the school with your daughters and sons or whatever. Telephone - send a letter out - whatever. If they got a meeting down there, go down. Just because I don't go down, she [the mother] can go down.

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<sup>78</sup> See Gaskell, McLaren, & Novogrodsky (1989); Weiler (1988).



When asked whether or not he would go to the school if he were contacted himself, the father said, "Oh, probably I would, right." However, in response to who actually went to the school, their joking manner seemed to belie stronger feelings on the matter:

She can answer that. I don't go down around the school. I don't mix up with none of the teachers. (father)

He only saw the teacher on a picture... He don't even go down to the meetings... He's going to be comfortable [in going down to the school] in another two years though. (mother)

They both laughed, but it was obvious they already had discussed the father's responsibility to help with their younger daughter's education, as the father said, "I got one out there to go." The mother added, "You see, I told him he got to take Kelly. I took Sherry; he got to take her." Asked if he thought it was more of a woman's job to do that, he replied, "Yes it is. Yeah. Yep! [more laughter] I haven't been inside the school yet. I'm not going in there either. But when the little one goes, I'll take her." The mother added, "Kelly - definitely! From kindergarten right on up, he's going [more laughter]." Inquiring if she thought that a father should be involved, she replied,

Like, I'm after asking him, "Are you going to the meeting tonight with me to see what's going on" and all this, right? "No, I'm not going!" You know, I'd like for him to go down and see what they says, because he might have a better way of helping than I would.

Regarding the importance of education for both daughters and sons, the mother replied, "I says two of them needs it just as much. Two of them needs the same kind of education. One don't need it more than the other one. It's just as important to both." And the father added, "Yep. Every bit of it." Sherry's mother indicated that her daughter

went to her for help with homework, but that she asked her to go to the father for help with math on occasion, she added, "And that's what she'll do, then go to him, right?"

Allan's parents appeared to be equally involved in their children's schooling. Worried about losing their jobs through government cutbacks, both wanted to earn their high school equivalency diploma. Not surprisingly, they themselves initiated discussion about the importance of education for both genders:

They all need their education, you know, too - boys and girls, right? When I goes back [from sick leave] if I'm not allowed to go back at housekeeping, first thing I got to do is have my grade twelve. (mother)

No matter who it is, they all need education. If you got no education, you don't get nowhere today. You got to have education for anything. Everybody should be encouraged to get their education no matter if they're fifty year old. (father)

Regarding his involvement if teachers were to show parents how they could help with schoolwork, he said, "*Sure! Sure. I wouldn't mind. I don't see why not. When it comes to my children, I mean I'll do anything for them. It don't matter really if it's going to help them, you know.*" As to who they thought was more involved at the school, mothers or fathers, the mother replied, "I'd say it's more mothers. Then again, some fathers too. I've seen fathers out there too." The father seemed practical about the issue as he said, "I guess the way it is - whoever can make it, I suppose. Sometimes the two of them can't be there." The mother added, "And there's single mothers and single fathers too, that have a job right?"

Greg's mother, who was a single parent, had some definite views concerning the involvement of fathers, as well as the stigmatizing roles of women and men. While

indicating she had never considered any differences in the importance of daughters and sons obtaining an education, she obviously felt strongly about both parents participating in schooling, as she stated:

Well, my father never went to none of them [school meetings] but I think he should've, right?... To me, I got to do it all because I'm the only one Greg got. But if I had his father I would want his father to be there to participate and to help him. Now, I got to say this - my boyfriend - he's got a little fella and his mother is dead so he has full charge. He has to do it all, right?

Interestingly, she related going to meetings with him because 'as a man' he felt quite uncomfortable going to the school, as she said:

Now, I'll go to meetings and that with him. Like, he feels awful because he's a man, right? But he'll do it. Okay, he'll do anything for his son. He feels uncomfortable so I went over to the school - I'll tag along with him.

She noted seeing other fathers at the school, but added, "But most of them never will go." Regarding her comfort level in going, she said, "I can go anywhere by myself. It doesn't bother me that his father is not there. I got over that eight years ago." Inquiring if she saw fathers at the meet-the-teacher night, she replied:

It was good. There was a lot of fathers. I find now that more fathers are involved than when I was going because my dad never went to nothing and so did nobody else's dad. If you went to a concert, like mom came to see us - it was mostly women and mostly grandparents and women. This is what you would see when you look down. You'd hardly see your fathers or any men in the audience. It was mostly women.

Asking why she thought it had changed, she said, "I think it's because the women are working. The women who work are just as tired as the man and now the men knows when they come home, they just can't kick up their feet because the women are working too." She also indicated strong opinion that there was on-going debate about paid and

unpaid work and who works the hardest, and stressed that physical work in the home required major daily input. Returning to the father's role in schooling, she continued, "But it's still there. Men still feel a bit awkward going but they're more voluntarily going now than they were." Cognizant of attitudes about traditional roles, she talked proudly about her skill in maintaining small appliances, but noted the difficulties in getting her son to do household chores. Pointing to her efforts to teach an open attitude, she said:

And I'm trying to teach Greg that - like, my mother's role was in the kitchen, looking after the kids; dad was out working. But it's not that way anymore, right? But the role is now you do what you can and get it done and try to help out and be a good man.

Karen's mother indicated that the father sometimes helped their daughter with homework. She, however, spent a great deal of time helping their son, Tyler, who was in senior high and had Attention Deficit Disorder. Like some of the previous students, he was being treated with the drug, Ritalin. While the mother was very keen to be involved at the school the father did not participate, although he had attended a recent meeting concerning an "up-grade computer program for Tyler." Karen's mother felt quite strongly about the importance of education for both their daughter and son, and said, "Yes its just as important." Clearly, she felt that education was fundamental. Despite not having a high school diploma, she was constantly finding ways to improve her own educational level, and had successfully completed a clerical-typing course, and a job search program with assistance from social services.

Tara's father had spoken with her the teacher over the telephone, and appeared to indicate that he was the main helper with homework. However, his work took him out of

town regularly for two to three week periods, and in the previous two years, he had never gone to the school. Referring to the mother he said, "Cathy's been up there. I haven't." Up to this point, Tara's mother had had very little to say, but now quickly added, "That was during the first term... report cards came out. I guess most terms I go there for the parent-teacher conferences. Yeah, when their report card comes out. Just to let you know how she was doing." She also went to meet-the-teacher events but noted her shift-work schedule interfered with going this year.

Regarding both parents helping with schoolwork, and being given information from the school, Tara's father responded, "It would be nice for two of us to go to give us an idea about what's going on. I don't know. I mean our situation is like when it comes to homework, go to dad. When it comes to this, go to mom." He said that he encouraged his daughter to study harder and responded to the importance of a daughter's education by saying, "Oh definitely. Definitely. Probably more so I think." The mother said, "Yeah, I agree with that."

In summary, all parents espoused the importance of education for both genders, and felt strongly that it played a crucial role in their children's future. While mothers were the predominant helpers, especially in attending such school events as meet-the-teacher night, parent-teacher conferences, and concerts, nevertheless, some fathers played an important role in helping their students with homework.<sup>71</sup> However, with one exception, they did not go to the school.

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<sup>71</sup> This also emerged in the section on homework.

Realities of work situations affect parental participation, and although some professional work situations permit autonomy in going to the school during the day-time hours,<sup>72</sup> neither working-class mothers nor fathers may not have such a privilege. Epstein (1995) particularly emphasizes the need for schools to organize opportunities that are more inclusive of single parents and fathers. The literature also suggests that policies and procedures based on traditional perceptions of familial composition leads to the school's insensitivity to step-parents. Particularly, they are often excluded from school lists inhibiting communication and attendance at parent-teacher conferences (Crosbie-Burnett, Skyles, and Becker-Haven, 1988). With regards to economic issues, schools may need to provide child care should working-class families not have the means to pay for it themselves when both parents want to attend meetings together, or when one parent's work takes them out of town, or when the parent is a single parent. Transportation could also be a problem.

According to some of the discussion with parents, stereotypes of traditional male-female roles remain entrenched. However, issues of gender sometimes reflect systemic *societal* issues emerging from tradition, class and economic matters.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the fathers' uneasiness in going to the school, yet their apparent willingness to help their children in the home, appears to speak to their private compared to their public<sup>74</sup> perceptions of what they consider to be acceptable, traditional gender roles. These cultural

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<sup>72</sup> As was the case with Eric's father in the previous section.

<sup>73</sup> See Gaskell, McLaren, & Novogrodsky (1989); Giroux (1993); Popkewitz (1991); Weiler (1988).

<sup>74</sup> See Popkewitz (1991); Weiler (1988).

views, along with school traditions, seem to be influencing factors as to whether the working class are involved at schools. For example, in discussing the tensions between teachers and working-class parents, Levin (1987) notes the linkage to the cultural structures within schools. Pointing to the school as an organization "dominated by a male-oriented ideology of rationalized impersonal authority and business-like efficiency." He states:

However one explains the emotional accompaniment to encounters between parents and teachers as they have been historically structured within the culture of the school, the encounters themselves are typically marked by formality, distance and tension. *The distance is greatest and tensions are most visible in relations between teachers and working-class parents* [italics added]. (p. 273)

#### **4. The Home-Schoolwork Enigma: My Student is Doing Okay But...**

Parents at all grade levels frequently feel confused about how they can best assist the school and their child with homework (p. 110).

-- Susan McAllister Swap (1993)

The discussion of homework revolved around whether parents were helping their children, and how they were doing with schooling. While the query *How is your student doing?* evoked lengthy stories from the other families regarding many personal and schooling issues, these parents were mainly concerned with academic issues. In the beginning, parents indicated their children were doing okay, but gradually it was revealed that they were experiencing various learning problems. Difficulties, which on the one hand seemed to be straight forward to resolve, but on the other appeared to confound parents.

Of the schoolwork difficulties conveyed, perhaps Sherry's story was the most disquieting. At times her mother appeared as frustrated and discouraged with the school system as the previous parents. When first asked how Sherry was doing, she told about a recent exam Sherry had passed, but quickly related her academic problems and the lack of cooperation at the school. Intelligence testing at the elementary level determined her placement in a special education class, and she had repeated grade two. Not surprisingly, there was no transfer of information, and, therefore, no recognition or accommodation of her needs when she went from the elementary level into the junior high. Discovering that things were going wrong, her mother related efforts to inform the school about Sherry:

The first part of the year she failed some subjects. *It's hard to get help down there! Because I started last year with it and it's only this year now they actually started trying to do something with it!* They waited for her tests to be over to get special help with reading and math.

Although she had improved by doing extra reading and math at the elementary level, still, Sherry's mother had to fight to get extra classes at the junior high. She was successful in having her excused from religion and gym, but was still attempting to have her removed from the core French class. Unable to cope in this class, her mother was perturbed to think that her time could be better spent doing extra reading and math. Also, while a physical condition excused her from gym, the mother related two instances where the gym teacher had demonstrated belligerent attitudes towards her daughter. In addition to these unfortunate incidents, it is worth repeating that while Sherry had been tested for special education placement at the elementary level, the findings were ignored upon her entrance to the junior high. Her mother explained the situation:



When Sherry had one of those tests to see what grade level they were supposed to be at or see how smart they are, I was told that she was one of the children in the top ten that needed help and if she worked on a computer, she would do a lot better. *That was done when she was in the elementary school... Well, it went in her files but they [at the junior high] mustn't have read it. I told them about it and she was after being put in her regular class then right?!* They said, "Well, we can take her out and put her in special ed. class. And I said, "Well, I don't really want to do that because of her friends and that, right?" So he said, "We suggest that we leave her there..." And now last year, she did fairly good. She passed. This year now I mentioned to them again. I said I wants to get something done now before it's too late!

To make matters more difficult, Sherry insisted on doing schoolwork on her own. Her step-father said, "She's not the person to ask, "Do you want any help, right? She tries to do it on her own." Evidently, however, he and a brother-in-law had helped her with homework in the past. He elaborated:

She does it herself now. But since she's been in kindergarten up to grade five and that, me and her used to go in the spare room, the school desk is there and I used to help her. She don't like no help no more. If she gets in trouble, you know - if she gets stuck or something like words and that, she come down and ask how you spell it and everything, right? When she come home she'll go on right upstairs in the bedroom and then she'll go studying... I had her down to my brother-in-law's and where he got a full education and everything - 21 years going to school - and he started tutoring her and he tried to teach her doing math and everything. But her marks went right down.

Sherry's mother emphasized several times that she was very quiet and that her teachers mentioned this as well. However, it was obvious that Sherry's mother was worried about the fact that she required extra help, "*before it's too late!*"

Well, every time I goes down to the school, they tells me that she - especially her homeroom teacher and almost every other teacher that I talked to that she's after having - they tells me, "We got no problem with Sherry - we wish we could have her all the time". I said, "What do you mean by that?" He said, "She's the quietest one in school. "There's

students here," they said, "we purposely puts her in front of them because we knows that she got that much patience that they can do what they wants and she's not going to do nothing with 'em." But here lately she's starting to lose patience with that too. They really enjoy her in school. But when I go down for a meeting to see how she's doing in school, if there's any concerns they tells me then. Because like I ask them, "If she needs a tutor, let me know now before it's too late, right?"

Later in the discussion about homework, the mother repeated her earlier comments about Sherry being quiet and also described how she sometimes helped her, as she said:

She's too quiet, right? She's too quiet. The teachers told me that... But I said, "If you're not sure on how the spelling is, you got your dictionaries." I said, "Sound out the word and look for something that sounds and looks like it. And then read what it says about it and if it says what you mean, put that word down then, right?"

Paradoxically, Sherry's mother felt she could help her daughter more if only Sherry would ask her for help. Evidently, she herself had been treated harshly by her father about homework and she did not want to force the issue. When asked how long she spent helping Sherry, she said:

Well, if I was there to give her the help, she'd take it. But she won't ask for it. I dare say she would take it if I offered it to her. There's no time I does it because when I was growing up, my father used to really rooaaar into you, and I said, "I'm not being like that to my child, right? Because it made me worse than better. Sherry came home the weekend with an awful lot of homework and I didn't know until last night and she was up there for about three hours... I asked the teacher to let me know how much homework she has and what she's got to do...

Regarding a homework agenda book, she said, "Yeah, they got agenda books." But when queried about signing it, she replied, "Oh! Well, they don't do that with Sherry."

Finally, Sherry's mother seemed especially dismayed that except for regularly scheduled parent-teacher conferences, the school apparently did not telephone or invite her in to discuss Sherry's difficulties. She stated:

The way I looked at it, if the teacher don't want to talk to me over the phone, just let me know and I'd go down and talk to them about it to see what I could do to help... She wasn't getting involved and I had to go down and explain to the teachers. I said, "If Sherry don't ask for help or don't want to get involved, you got to ask her. You got to more or less invite her into it. Because she was always like that the whole way through school. She's too shy." They said, "Yeah, she is really quiet."

Allan's mother was also concerned about his schoolwork, particularly his reading ability. She related that of their three children he was the one she helped the most. She said: "Allan, that's the only one I do have to help. Sometimes I got to read to him and then let him answer the questions. Now he's really good in math." The father also helped and said, "I've often sat down for maybe two hours or longer... Usually we sit down and he'll start reading on and I'll read a couple of pages and then he'll go on again. We could be there an hour and a half. But I've seen him there longer than that - reading." Confirming Sherry's mother's observation that homework did not require signing this year, Allan's mother said: "In grade seven, you used to have to sign that [agenda book] every night. Now, they don't. But I looks through Allan's every night anyway."

Greg's mother was proud that he was doing well in school, especially since he had had problems adjusting in grade seven and had problems in all subjects. Of this she said, "I think it was just the junior high where they thinks they're old and wants to fit in with the teen years." Regarding his improvement, she said:

We can't believe it's the same child. The teacher said to me, "I can't believe how much Greg has changed. He really deserves the credit; he's after coming a long way." I told the teacher I never had trouble with Greg from kindergarten on; he always did his books himself. If he ran into trouble, he asked me...

She also knew there was an agenda book, but no signing procedure. She said:

Oh yeah. Grade seven and this year they got agenda books and they have to write in their homework and what they have the next day... Oh no. No. No. He's never ever had that [signing]. Like, he brought home the agenda book. I would go through it and find out what he got for homework but I didn't have to sign it.

Although Greg's mother emphasized that he wanted to work on his own, she was frustrated that he did not give her enough information about schoolwork. She explained:

Well, I don't know what he's doing because he don't tell me. He only tells me when he wants to do a problem. I'll give an example. He had to bring home an egg... and I had to baby-sit and he had to pay me and stuff like that. It was a big responsibility but it was excellent. I think he learned a lot from it... I was able to participate but most of the time I'm really in the dark and I ask him and he says things are fine and that he's doing okay. And that's all I knows about it.

One source of uncertainty was not having enough information for science projects. Again, while she felt that he should take responsibility for them, she clearly wanted more information when he had come to her about a recent assignment. She talked at length about this issue and, in part, stated:

I can't help much with the projects because, I mean to me it's something he has to do and get insight into it... He just thinks it's foolish for him to be telling me... It's like he took out these papers and said, "Look mom that's all I needs now. I'm going to make an electric motor." I read down it and I looked at him. "Okay honey. *But I'm lost. " I don't know if he's got to make that or is he supposed to do something else. It's a lot of work!* He's got to hook up a nine-volt battery - one of those square ones - and he needs a cork and nails..."

In asking Karen's mother how she was doing in school, she said, "Oh, she's doing excellent, yes doing good and the teachers says that too." She noted that Karen sometimes went to her father for help with homework, but added "That's not too often though, you know. When she does get stuck, she reads it out." Like the others, she also indicated that teachers had required the signing of homework in the elementary grades, but such a practice had not been carried out at the junior high.<sup>75</sup>

While Karen's mother assisted her occasionally, she spent a great deal of time helping their son in grade ten. As noted, Tyler had Attention Deficit Disorder. With regard to how he was doing in school, she said, "He's doing okay on the basics and he's in a regular class." Worthy of note is that she was helping her son at home with a tutoring program she sought of her own accord from a local "Skills for Success Program." She felt strongly that a similar program at the junior high would have been very helpful, not only for him but for herself as well.

Tara was having problems with some subjects. Asking both parents how she was doing in school, the father responded, "Well, she's doing pretty good... she can just coast along with math and religion, you know, but when they get into the science and the social studies, the heavy study subjects she has to put that extra bit of work into it. She's doing reasonably well." As for assisting her with homework, again the father replied, "Well, I usually go over it with her, but mostly if she's having problems. We keep pretty good tabs on her homework... She'll let me know if she got a test or something so I'll go through the book, write a few things here and there for her." As for needing more information

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<sup>75</sup> Except for those students in Ms. Moore's homeroom class.

from the school, he replied, "Once this year I was a little concerned about math problems - converting fractions..." He felt that she was doing them incorrectly. Although Tara was convinced she had followed the teacher's instructions, on checking with the teacher, her father was correct. Of this he said, "Once she realized it, there was no problem."

Tara's mother and father had never heard of a homework agenda book. Noting that she sometimes stayed after school to study, they agreed that such practices were dependent on individual teachers. The father said, "Definitely, I think some teachers more so than others... there's certain teachers she hasn't really mentioned... [but] - her homeroom teacher - her and Tara has a real good relationship."

Finally, Tara's father was quite perturbed that students felt pressured into raising funds for school equipment, and thought it had reached the point where it appeared to be taking precedent over getting homework done. He talked extensively about this issue and, in part, stated:

Sometimes, I think there's more pressure on her trying to sell the product than it was to do homework. She felt worse going to school without selling anything than without her homework done... I don't think the children should be held responsible, or the parents either.

He also thought that such funds would be best utilized for sports activities, and concluded by saying, "Granted the school will benefit eventually; the fundraising is for the new computers... but on a smaller scale like if it was a swim team to go to Gander for a weekend - seems to be more warranted for that."

In summary, once again supposed hard-to-reach parents were obviously concerned about and assisted their children with homework. Since these students did not have the

learning and medical difficulties presented in the previous section, the query *How is your child doing?* elicited responses mainly pertaining to academic issues. Nonetheless, most were having some trouble with schoolwork, and the parents seemed to be at a loss as to what could be done to assist them; though they were evidently trying their best without help from the school. Swap (1993) points to the confusion parents often experience about homework and outlines ways in which the school could alleviate the situation. She states:

Confusion often crops up around the nature of assignments (what needs to be done, how, and by what date); the role parents should take in helping (organizer, supporter, doer, proofreader, monitor); and what to do if nobody in the home understands the assignment... Teachers can help parents a great deal by clarifying their expectations about homework in workshops, in writing, and/or in grade-level meetings... *Some schools offer workshops or seminars for parents that increase their knowledge and experience with particular subjects* [italics added]. (p. 110)

Along with parents being confused about homework, some expressed frustration in not knowing how to communicate with their children regarding schoolwork, and how to convey their interest and willingness to assist without seeming intrusive. Epstein (1995) writes about the important role of the school in recognizing and supporting parental concerns on this issue. She states:

Just about all students at all levels - elementary, middle, and high school want their families to be more knowledgeable partners about schooling and are willing to take active roles in assisting communications between home and school. *However, students need much better information and guidance than most now receive about how their schools view partnerships and about how they can conduct important exchanges with their families about school activities, homework, and school decisions* [italics added]. (p. 703)

### 5. Teacher-Guided Practices, The Importance of Parental Knowledge, And The Meaningless PTA Revisited

Teachers have not been sensitive to the parents' historical feelings of exclusion from their children's formal education and their need for recognition as "experts" about their own offspring (p. 280).

-- Malcolm A. Levin (1987)

Once again parental knowledge emerged as a critical element for collaborative partnerships. In particular, Karen's, Greg's, Allan's, and Tara's parents offered ideas that could potentially enhance teacher-guided practices. However, all parents again voiced criticism of the PTA and viewed it as irrelevant in their children's schooling. They also pointed out that parent-teacher conferences, following report card distribution, is far too late in the school year to find out how students are doing.<sup>76</sup> They thought that information should be on-going, particularly if a problem had been detected. Allan's father was especially concerned about this, and stressed the importance of knowing what was happening with schoolwork long *before* report card time. He stated:

Most of the time we know for a fact that if Allan is weak in some area it could be three or four months of school gone by before we know. You don't expect the teacher to pay attention to just one student, but I mean if they're correcting his tests and he's weak - if they'd notify us right away... you'd be able to help him out. But if you gets months gone by and he gets a lot of homework on --

Interrupting him, the mother pointed to what she considered as lack of attention to Allan's reading difficulties at the junior high. Corroborating the other families stories throughout the study, she stated:

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<sup>76</sup> See the principals' findings. Note that Mr. Gates felt it was the parents who were too late in coming to the school!



*Well, I find that they don't pay as much attention to them in junior high as they did in elementary. Because in elementary, sure we had to see four or five people like regarding Allan's reading - that time they put him in a special class and remedial reading.*

However, the father felt that financial cutbacks in the education system were creating an adverse affect and contributing to under-staffing as well as increasing the numbers of students per classroom. He observed:

The cutbacks - that's what I thinks about. The way things are going, I mean the teachers and the government together, they're all understaffed right? Well, you know, instead of having probably 30 students in a class before all that started - they probably got 40 now. So they can't get time I suppose - fewer teachers with a lot more to do.

When asked if they were aware of any programs to show parents what kinds of things they could do to help with schoolwork, Allan's mother replied, "They've never mentioned anything. Because like they haven't said much about it really, just Allan needs to study more at home. It was written on his report card - one of the term reports, right?" As to whether the school had ever given ideas on what he should be doing at home or how they could help him, she said, "No. No. They don't say. Allan just should study more of his books at home." The father added, "And he should do more reading and that." Inquiring if they thought it would be a good idea to get more information from the school, Allan's mother said:

Yeah, they could. It'd be nice to know what he's doing or what he's given to do. Like I know when he was in grades two or three *they had him in a special reading class and that really helped him.* They used to tell him then to read the newspaper. He reads the Telegram every night that it's here... We would probably get more books for him to read, you know, that he'd like to read from the library. Before Easter, he had to do a project on the fishery, so I'll wait and see what he's going to get on that - he wrote up four or five pages. His uncle helped him with it.

As to whether information might increase her confidence in helping Allen, she responded, "Yeah, I think so. Yeah. Yeah." She also felt she would not be intimidated going to the school, and the father added, "If it was going to help Allan, I'd go along with it."

Concerning parents' involvement if both were working full-time as they were, they said:

Yes. I think a lot would. Even for the teachers' interviews, two of us went unless they made it early in the day and we couldn't get time off but we get family leave for school, you know, for the children. (mother)

I dare say. Like I knows if it got anything to do with our youngsters, we wouldn't mind doing it. Yeah, I wouldn't mind going down. If it was once a week, it wouldn't matter to me. Because if it's anything for the youngsters we're always there to do something for them - whatever it was they needed done, right? No matter what it was, we're always there for them. (father and the mother agreed)

When queried about the importance of teacher-guided practices being supported by the principal and vice-principal, Allan's father again brought up the issue of early intervention. "Yes, but it's no good for them to realize half way through the term that he's not going to improve by the time the year is up... The first month or so you should know what a student is able to do and what he can't do, right?" As for financial support for a new project, both thought it might impose more fundraising burdens on families, but still they would help their children. The father said, "If it was something to help Allan I wouldn't mind."

Greg's mother thought there was a need for homework information for parents, and again stressed her need to know more about project assignments. She replied, "There could be. Because I've been stunned over something and say, 'Well, Greg, you're going to have to ask the teacher because I just can't do it.' There could be. Like, if it was a

project and it was worth so much of his marks, I probably would need it, you know.”

However, she expressed concern about wasting teachers’ and students’ time and noted the importance of being able to drop in to the school should a specific problem arise. Like Allan’s father, she thought that timing was crucial to ensure a student’s needs were being met; even regularly planned sessions might not be satisfactory. She noted, “The youngsters do so much in the run of a month... He spends a lot of time at it. He does so much that by the time the meeting come up - it could be just a waste of time.” However, when asked if regular sessions with the teachers would have helped in the previous year when Greg was having trouble in grade seven, she replied:

*I think it would've helped me but I don't know if it would've helped him but it would have helped me because I was lost and he wasn't telling me much... It would've helped me for the fact that he was having trouble and I didn't know what they were doing, right? And probably I could've went and listened to other parents who had children in his class... I didn't even know his friends' names!*

With regard to getting information on specific subjects, she said, “It would be helpful because the parents could stay on top of what their kids are doing.” But again she pointed to contacting as the need came up:

*Because parents could be having trouble with something else and then they won't get their answer until the next meeting and it would be over then... He's doing his electric motor tomorrow so he's really on his own unless I gets together with a friend that knows something about it or one of my brothers. Now if they had something up to the school where you could go up and read up on projects or whatever, right?*

She gave an example of going to a friend’s office to help Greg work on a computer project. While he had done well on the assignment, she thought it would have been far better if the school had been available, as she said, “But if I could’ve went to the school,

me and her went up and sat down and done it with him. Or even if the science teacher was there for a day or a night. We could go in with him, and the teacher could just give us a little help, right?"

Greg's mother was adamant that if parents thought that a schoolwork information program was a PTA meeting they would not go. She stated:

Because most PTA meetings were fighting over money... Every parent from my prospect are going to think, "Oh God, this is garbage again..." unless they get up and go and see what it is. Right? If you got to get baby-sitters it costs money, right? That's ten dollars out of your pocket to listen to them arguing over money...

Probing her idea that parents would have to be shown that the "meeting" might be beneficial *to them*, she corrected the questioning by simply saying, ***"To the child, benefits to the child!"***

When queried about teachers' and principals' views concerning parents' capability to help with schoolwork she thought that parents would appreciate any help or information they could get. She replied:

*I find parents who don't have schooling are really frustrated with their kids. So if we had an extra hand or volunteer to give them a hand at school, they probably would go to take the frustration away from the kid because the kid is frustrated. He's got this work to do and even dad or mom can't help him, right? And the kids sometimes don't realize that probably mom or dad never got their high school... So if they did have something like this at the school. Or just put it this way - if they had someone at the school, say up to nine o'clock every night, you could drop in and say, "Listen, this is my kid and we're having trouble with this. Can you help us?" But it would have to be a regular basis because you can run into trouble any time!*

She also noted the need for assistance when a child is ill, since there had been no process in place when Greg had missed two weeks of classes due to chicken pox. She

stated, "If there had to be something over there I'd go in the night time. I would've drove over and got the information." Greg's mother had provided insightful ideas about teacher-guided practices, however, her continuing commentary about the PTA was a defining aspect of the interview. Asked about administrative support for teacher-guided practices, she again talked about the association, but this time she recounted her original understanding of its purpose. She stated:

Well, when I heard PTA, Parents-Teachers Association, that's what it stands for, right? To me, when the child starts kindergarten *the PTA means parents are going to help teachers; teachers are going to help parents and we're going to form this big group, we're going to be okay and we're going to help each other. That's my first impression of it, right? Think about it! Right? This is an association here when you have any trouble, you contact the association and that - but I never ever got anything from it... Well, what it means to me is that I would go in there and sit down and listen to these people debate over this and that. So I'm a parent. I'm there, but this association is going ahead without me whether I'm there or not. You understand? Like, they didn't really need me!*

She continued by noting certain parents who talked a lot and seemed to know all about the issues. Again posing the question of principals and vice-principals support of teacher-guided efforts, she replied, "I suppose that's what they're there for (laughing)." But regarding funding, she said, "They're not going to get the support from the school board, not with funds. That's a more or less down hill aspect of it. if it's going to cost anything." Her concluding remarks seemed to indicate her support, but again she stressed the need to know what exactly a "meeting" entailed, she said:

I'd be more likely to be a 100 percent to go to help him if he was having trouble... Like if this was to start up, a lot of parents would want to know what exactly it was for and it's not just the parent-teacher thing - *it's for the parent and their student. I think you'd get more people going!*

Karen's mother, who was keen to help at the school, was quick to support teacher-guided practices and also saw it as an avenue to continue her education as well. She said:

Yes, that's a good idea, yeah would be nice. Like Karen is doing well but say now she has a social studies exam coming up so something like that could probably help her - since she has trouble with that. *Yes, it could be good for me too - would help with words and reading - I'm no good at math - maybe it could upgrade her - but me too. Right?"*

As well, she pointed to the need for more information on homework projects, since Karen asked her to make inquiries of the teacher. While having no difficulty in contacting the teacher, she felt that such a program could increase her confidence to help with schoolwork and strongly advocated, "training the parents." She noted that the former educational psychologist at the school, came to their home to explain how she could help Tyler with schoolwork. Although, the administration had refused her help at the school, of the psychologist she said, "He was all for it! - parents helping students keep out of trouble and help with their work." As for teacher-guided programs, she was certain of the potential benefit to her as a parent and asserted, "Yes. it would give me more confidence to help." She also felt that administrative support and funding were important, and again mentioned the need for home-tutoring packages. Currently, the family was waiting for a reply about funding to purchase a computer for Tyler.

Tara's parents also seemed to favour participating in teacher-guided programs. Her father said, "I probably would. We don't have a lot of involvement... *But if it had something to do directly with Tara, fine and dandy.*" Her mother added, "*Yeah. That sounds pretty good. I think they should have something like that anyway. You know, to*

*help the kids and that."* Asked about administrative and financial support for materials such as brochures, he said: "Definitely should!"

While Tara's parents were receptive to obtaining information at the school, her father was clearly enthusiastic at the prospect of receiving information directly at home. Summing up the discussion, he noted the benefits of receiving information about study skills such as timing, taking breaks and how to approach reading a text, and added:

I think something should be sent home each term, you know - this term your child will be doing chapter four, five and six in geography. They'll be learning this and that. *I mean I would love to have something like that so I could go over it myself and sit down and whip through those chapters and if Tara got a question, say, "Now what about Jacques Cartier, like we all know he went around this way or if he only made it so far... I think that would be fantastic, right?!"*

Sherry's parents seemed reticent about the idea of obtaining information to help her. When asked if the school involved them in assisting, the mother replied, "No. No." As to whether she would like to be, she said, "Well, if I could do it I wouldn't mind being involved - a lot of it I can't do myself." However, she went on to describe how she helped Sherry with wording when she was doing assignments on her typewriter. She also talked about upgrading her own education, but the birth of their youngest daughter delayed her plans. Asked if specific instructions might increase her confidence in helping, the mother said, "Increase mine an awful lot." And the father, "Oh yes, it would help Sherry, and it would us too." At the suggestion that working with the teacher could perhaps determine why Sherry was insistent about studying on her own, the mother interjected, *"I don't think it helps her very much to keep letting her do it on her own."*

Again noting her daughter's need for help, Sherry's mother related positive feedback given by a grade six math and gym teacher:

When I'd go see him, he'd look at me and he said, "Sherry is a girl that wants to learn. She just needs to get the extra help to show her how to do it. She got a problem. There's something there blocking it, that she can't learn it and maybe one of these days she's going to do okay. But until that happens, she's going to need the help to learn it, and she wants to learn."

When asked what the teachers at the junior high said about her progress, Sherry's mother demonstrated exasperation, as she stated, *"All you hear is Sherry is a really good child. We don't want her out of our class. She's the quietest one... that's all you hear! But that's not helping her work!"* Evidently, however, she had discussed her worries about Sherry with the homeroom teacher, who had told her, "Yeah, there's something there going on again, she's falling behind." Where upon, the mother had said, *"Well, I know that she needs help, and she's not getting the help that she needs!"*

Earlier indicating her discomfort in going to meet-the-teacher nights and the PTA, Sherry's mother was asked if there were other occasions offered at the school when she might meet other parents. She said, "They don't have nothing like that. It's always the parents go meet your child's teacher. There's no such thing, you know, as you go down and meet a parent." Noting a possible benefit of having programs for parents to help their children might be to meet other parents, Sherry's mother also initiated unexpected discussion about the PTA and fundraising for equipment. She stated:

Like these PTA meetings I know it's dealing with other parents and that but that's just to talk about things to do with the school. It's not there to meet themselves. I mean there's good intentions - like raise money to get more computers... *But it's not telling you how you can help your children or help teachers to help the children. There's no link there*



*between the things that they're getting for the school and to help the children. You just give them stuff to try to help themselves and that's it. Like if they showed parents - if they knew how to do it - it would give me more opportunity to help my own child when it comes to computers and stuff like that.*

As for her opinion of the principal's and vice-principal's support for teacher-guided practices, she was skeptical about their interest since her efforts to reach them had been futile. She replied:

I think the whole school should do it because every time I phone down the only one I can ever get is the vice-principal and that's a really a hard job to get a hold of him! And then I was talking to the principal down there about Sherry - the trouble she was having - "Oh, I can't talk to you now, I've got to do something else. Give me a call back or drop down" or something like that, right? [About the school board] They should support it but I doubt very much if they ever would. They might say, "Well, you can go ahead and do it but you get the money wherever you can." Like that, right?

In summary, these families were supportive of receiving information to help their children, and thought that such a project should be endorsed by the school's administration. Once again, the importance of parental knowledge came to the fore, and parents exhibited creative insight as to how such a project could meet their particular needs. They offered ideas which ranged from using the computer lab for homework assignments, to receiving specific information at home, to the school providing tutoring packages for parents. A crucial issue for one mother was the necessity for an on-going daily or nightly trouble-shooting communication base for students and parents.

Parents were especially critical of the traditional contact used by the school for reporting a student's progress. They stressed that the current practice of meeting with

parents after students had completed several months of work was far too late for them to be informed of their children's learning problems.

Like the previous families, these parents also considered that the PTA did not warrant their participation. Without exception, all at some point said it was for fundraising, expressed their discomfort in going there, noted feelings of not being wanted, and particularly mentioned its irrelevance in directly assisting students. One mother was bemused when she described her initial understanding of parent-teacher associations to mean that of parents and teachers planning strategies to help students. Parents appeared to have given the whole idea of the PTA insightful consideration, and expressed more interest in how their children were doing in school rather than fundraising and listening to political arguments. Therefore, these parents appear to agree with Fullan's (1993) notion of instructional versus non-instructional parental involvement, in that most parents are more interested in the former than the latter, as cited earlier.<sup>77</sup>

As well, Levin (1987) and others<sup>78</sup> also emphasize the deficiency in school methods, and teachers' knowledge, about alternative strategies to communicate with, or more importantly, to collaborate with parents. Writing about parent-teacher relations and alternative schools in Ontario in the 1970s, Levin points to entrenched traditions and attitudes. He states:

Coming from a tradition where relations with parents are largely confined to the annual open-house and post-report card conferences, teachers are by-and-large ill-prepared for the give-and-take of alternative school

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<sup>77</sup> See Michael Fullan's *The New Meaning of Educational Change* (pp. 227-246).

<sup>78</sup> Epstein (1995); Fullan (1991); Munn (1993); Ontario Teachers' Federation (1992); Swap (1993).

committee meetings with parents... Teachers have not been sensitive to the parents' historical feelings of exclusion from their children's formal education and their need for recognition as "experts" about their own offspring. (pp. 280-281)

#### **6. Parents' Wishes: Advocacy for Education**

Just about all families care about their children, want them to succeed, and are eager to obtain better information from schools (p. 703).

— Joyce L. Epstein (1995)

Exploring parents' thoughts about their children's future opportunities revealed their ideals for attaining an education. Most parents also drew analogies from efforts to up-grade their own educational level along with their missed opportunities. Despite being hopeful for their children's future, some expressed concern about their present learning difficulties and the school's poor response to their needs.

When queried about Allan's opportunity to succeed in school, his mother's comments centered around efforts to improve his reading, as she replied:

Well, he's doing good in school. He got the chance to do it if he put his mind to it too and help himself. We does what we can for him, like if he needs to go to the library... In elementary school every night he used to bring home a book - that was one of the programs he was in down there to help his reading. Now the school library have a lot of projects to do, so he spends a lot of time there... If he got a project he stays after school until four and then walks down to his grandmother's.

However, his father stressed the shortcomings of the school in not keeping them updated on Allan's progress. He said,

He's not doing that bad in school, you know, he got good marks... But if you got a teacher who's teaching over the years they should know what a child can and what he can't do. And they should notify parents if they can help him out, or even if they can't... When they're trained people they should be able to pick up on it a lot sooner than two or three months of the

school year gone. *They're putting it in the report card! So I mean why can't they phone you and tell you?*

Allan's ambition was to be in the National Hockey League (NHL). Of this his mother said, "He got to work at that too, he goes to hockey summer school." The father added, "That's all he has in his mind." From the outset, Allan's parents had emphasized the importance of education, and when asked their greatest wish for him they said:

I'd love for him to get his education and go to university even. Like I said, it's him who got to want it too, right. We can't force him to do something that he don't want to do. Money couldn't be no problem. I'd go in the hole to put him through school. (mother)

Yes - the same thing with me. You got to have your grade twelve now or I mean you can't get nothing, right. To go out to pump gas, you got to have grade twelve. (father)

As for Allan's interest to do well in school, his mother said, "So far he has, but if he turns out like his mother he'll probably go a couple more years and that's it... But we told him he got to have his education in order to stay in the hockey, you know to go to the NHL." The father's closing comments seemed to be as much about his own will to succeed as about Allan's, as he stated:

Well, he likes hockey, and the first year he fails, that's the first year of hockey he's going to miss. So I don't say he's going to want to miss hockey. *No matter what it is you wants to do, you have to have grade twelve. You got to have it!* I only got grade eight and look where I'm to - stuck in the hospital and can't get out of it. I'm after writing my GED [General Education Diploma]. I failed that - so there it is. But no good worrying about lost time and I'm going back to write it again. Yep. I'm going to write it as many times as it takes now to pass it. You can write it every three months, so they'll see my face every three months.

As noted, Greg's mother was especially proud of his progress in grade eight in comparison to grade seven. She strongly believed that her son needed the will to succeed, but she was also persistent in her support for him, as she stated:

He's at the age now where he knows he's got to do his homework and he knows his books got to be done, and if he chooses not to do one, he chooses to pass or fail... I tell him, "You're not doing it for me." And even in grade seven, I told him, "Greg, study now - you know your marks are low... Come on you can pass. You can do it. You're doing it for yourself. Your mad at your teachers but it's not them repeating the grade. It's you." And by the end of June he made it! He studied and I think it just kicked in and he said, "Well, I'm not going to fail. I'm not going to stay behind."

Earlier relating being pregnant before completing high school, Greg's mother noted the support she had received from her parents and a teacher:

And that's what my parents did with me. They said, "You're not doing it for us. You're doing it for yourself..." They said, "You can quit and give up, or you can want to pass. It's your choice." That's why I have to tell Greg, "I could've quit," right? I could've very well give up and not done homework after school. But, I figured, at least I'll get my grade eleven out of this, if I don't get anything else. I won't have to look back and say I wish I finished school. I did quit for two weeks. Then I had a teacher who hauled me back too (laughs).

Regarding barriers to Greg's future, she replied:

No. No. I don't think so. I think he'll be all right. I'm hoping he'll go right to grade twelve and go to university - something I never had... [My wish for him is] To get what he wants - to join the navy. First he said lawyer, policeman... [But] He wants to do his university degree first... he knows he wants to go to university.

Karen's mother had recently talked with her about completing her education, and the daughter had replied, "Yes, mom I'm gonna get my education." Her mother noted that she found grade eight more difficult than grade seven. Concerning their son with

ADD, she said, "If Tyler can stick it out this year he'll only have two more left." As noted, Tyler had been put on the drug Ritalin which caused him to be tired, and a physician took him off the prescription. Apparently, however, because of a recent upset in class, a teacher insisted he be given the drug again. Though now on a lower dosage, the mother felt that he did not need it. She was angry about this, but seemed powerless to influence the situation.

Like the other parents, Karen's mother's greatest wish was for both her children to successfully complete high school and "to go further if we have the money," she added. Karen had talked about being a nurse, and Tyler wanted to be a truck driver. Clearly proud of her own up-grading achievements, Karen's mother talked about gaining self-confidence, and proudly displayed her certificates from a local college.

Tara's father talked about the benefits of home-schooling. Therefore, when asked if the opportunities existed in the school system for his daughter to succeed, he replied, "Yeah, I think so. I think she'll come through pretty good. Probably not as good as she should, but a little above average - somewhere around a 75 to 80 average I would hope." Discussing her future, he noted some potential barriers:

Nothing definite what she wants to do once she finishes, but I've mentioned to her, "To get in university it's going to be harder and harder, so you got to keep your marks up." And she says, "Well, dad, how're you going to afford that?" University costs a fortune and I've read in the paper how they go to university for seven years and then they go for another six or eight weeks to know how to find a job. That sort of thing must deter a child... But technical training, especially this day and age, that's got to be a lot towards anything - that hands-on sort of thing.

Regarding their greatest wish for Tara, her mother gave a brief response, "I'd like for her to get a good education. Get herself a good job." Agreeing, her father hoped she would do better than he had, and stressed the importance of education:

Well, I do too... It's really hard to say. Although it wouldn't really matter to me as long as it was something - I guess like every parent - as long as she can do better than I did. That wouldn't take very much. But as long as she was happy in a job - something worthwhile that she could make a decent living at... Something that she enjoyed... *But education - that's the basics. You got to have that!*

Although Sherry was having difficulties with some academic subjects, her mother was proud of her abilities in the arts. She talked about her reading and writing skills and the fact that she had pen-pals. Noting the problem areas, she also related her successes:

Two of her main subjects that she got to pass is math and science... She failed science first part of the year, but English she did okay because she started reading books - Harold Stein books and she used to write up book reports on them. She did three reports and did good on it... She really likes singing and was in a choir down in elementary, but in *junior high she wasn't - I don't think they offer the choir down there.*

Discussing the importance of students being given an opportunity to pursue subjects in which they might excel, Sherry's mother said:

Yeah, because she really loves art. I was talking to the art teacher and they got a club down there to do Christmas drawings and that... I think it was after school or whenever they could get the chance - that's all that was. She had her regular art class and she got into cross-stitch and stuff.

However, she was cautiously optimistic regarding Sherry's future, and particularly stressed the importance of her current needs, and stated:

If she got the help she needs she'll do good. I'm hoping that she'll go through high school, then go on to college up here and then go to university to make sure she got all the education she's going to need to get a good job... If she wants to do something for herself and get really

situated good in life, I would hope for her to be able to do it. *And she ain't going to be able to do it without the help and the chance now. She needs help now and this is when she should get the help!*

As for her greatest wish for Sherry, she said, "To succeed in life - whatever she wants to do to get her wishes - whichever they may be." She also had some final comments about the school. In an appealing tone, she said:

They should keep in contact with you more in case anything went wrong when your worried about certain subjects. So parents at least would be able to go down to talk with whichever teacher it needed to be, and talk about this situation. *You know, see what they thinks is wrong and try to find out what's wrong with Sherry - why she's having a problem and how would she like to be helped with it - I need help!*

In summary, once again presumed hard-to-reach parents cared about their children's schooling and future aspirations. Without exception, all stressed the importance of education and strongly supported their children in pursuing post-secondary studies. Although optimistic about their children's future, they were also cognizant of the implications of their present learning difficulties, and were particularly wary about the lack of assistance and foresight of the school. Parents also lamented about their own educational weaknesses, but expressed determination to continue their formal learning.

Consistent with these parents reliance on the school to respond to their children's learning problems, Fullan (1991) notes the link between social class and low educational level. Therefore, emphasizing the important role of the school, he cites Epstein's and Dauber's 1988 and 1989 research in eight inner-city elementary and middle schools, which states:

Without the schools' assistance, parents' knowledge and action to help their children are heavily dependent on the parents' social class or education. But schools - even inner city schools - can develop strong



programs of parent involvement to help more families become knowledgeable partners in their children's education (pp. 11-12). (p. 235)

**Table 3**  
**Participation Ratio of Mothers and Fathers**

<b>Family</b>	<b>Mothers</b>	<b>Fathers</b>
1	1	Briefly
2	Single Mother	--
3	1	Briefly
4	1	1
5	Single Mother	--
6	1	1
7	1	--
8	Single Mother	--
9	1	1
<b>Totals</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>3</b>

**Table 4**  
**Family Demographics and Children with Schooling Difficulties<sup>79</sup>\***

Family	Family Type	Students in Junior High	Other Children	Marital Status	Employment Status	Education Level
1	Two-Parent	1 Son (LD)	3	Second Marriage	Both Unemployed	Both Some Post-Secondary
2	Single-Parent	1 Son (LD)	1	Single Mother	Employed	Post-Secondary
3	Two-Parent	1 Daughter (SN)	1	Second Marriage	Both Unemployed	Both Less than High School
4	Two-Parent	1 Son (SN) 1 Daughter	1	Married	Both Employed	Both Less than High School
5	Single-Parent	1 Son	None	Single Mother	Unemployed	High School
6	Two-Parent	1 Daughter 1 Son (LD)	None	Second Marriage	Both Employed	Both Post-Secondary
7	Two-Parent	1 Daughter	1 (LD)	Married	Both Unemployed	Both Less than High School, Some Courses
8	Single-Parent	1 Son (SN)	3 (LD)	Single Mother	Unemployed	Some Post-Secondary
9	Two-Parent	1 Daughter	1	Married	Both Employed	Both Some Post-Secondary

**\*Key for Children with Schooling Difficulties**

**(LD)** >Children with a Learning Disabilities

**(SN)** >Children with Special Needs in Reading and other Core Subjects

<sup>79</sup> Of the nine families, seven had children with learning problems. Families five and nine were the exception, although they did have problems with some subjects and confusion about homework.

## Chapter Six

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Family-like schools welcome all families, not just those that are  
*easy to reach* [author's emphasis] (p. 702).

-- Joyce L. Epstein (1995)

#### 1. Summary of Main Findings

This study explored the views of parents, teachers and principals concerning an organized program to inform parents about how they might assist their children with schoolwork. Selected by teachers, the parents had children who attended grade eight at an inner city junior high school in Newfoundland. A summary of the study's findings along with a discussion of theoretical and practical implications for potential partnerships between hard-to-reach parents and the school are presented in this chapter.

As outlined above, with the exception of one family, the participants in this study were low-income, working-class parents with low educational levels. They included single-parent and step-parent families, with mothers being the primary care-givers and coordinators of the home-school relationship. Their children were experiencing various schooling difficulties; however, most notable was that the majority of the children had learning problems including medical, behavioural, and learning disabilities. Although parents were selected by the school as hard-to-reach, the interviews revealed caring, knowledgeable, and concerned parents who were perplexed and disappointed with the school's obvious lack of understanding about their children's circumstances. They also stressed the importance of education for their children, but were cautiously optimistic about their future.

The school's lack of response to the children's needs clearly contributed to the parents' confusion and frustration, and can be traced to the following sources: 1. the school's traditional communication patterns mainly involved contacting them about students' misbehaviour; 2. the school's adherence to traditional types of parental involvement, such as the Parent-Teacher Association, contributed to parents' feelings of alienation and severely limited their participation; 3. insufficient and inadequate academic, and non-academic programs and support systems for students, along with lack of homework information created confusion and stress; 4. the lack of early assessment, the trauma of moving from the elementary to the junior high level, and the absence of being identified as "non-categorical special needs students" led to some being stigmatized as troublemakers; 5. *structured*, consistent, and on-going practices to keep parents informed were nonexistent, although parents clearly preferred this type of involvement; and 6. the traditional value-system of the school suggests that, in challenging the school, some parents were considered as problems themselves, without being given respect and legitimatization for their concerns.

These findings have implications for the fulfillment of the recommendations from The 1992 Royal Commission Report on Education in Newfoundland particularly promoting the closer linking of home and school, and developing strategies that encourage parents' involvement both in school and in learning activities at home. More importantly for students' self-esteem and well being, the findings point to the Commission's advocacy for the rights of the child and equality of educational opportunity.

## 2. Theoretical Implications

The way schools care about children is reflected in the way schools care about the children's families (p. 701).

-- Joyce L. Epstein (1995)

Unique to qualitative research design, ethnographic studies bring into focus the capricious nature of everyday life and the perspectives of those involved, thus confirming the reality experienced by participants and demonstrating "concretely the connections among research activity, educational theory, and pragmatic concerns" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 28).

The parents in this study, in sharing their lived experiences, highlighted many elements of the schooling process that have long required educators' attention. Despite their circumstances, or because of them, parents in less than privileged socio-economic situations are adamant about the importance of education for their children and want to participate in their learning. However, the persistent traditional views towards authentic collaboration with parents about curriculum, and other historical jurisdictions of the school, remain as barriers to such sharing of information.

Additionally, the school's attitudes with regards to social class, family composition, gender, and parental involvement continue to sustain middle-class notions of educational norms (Brantlinger, 1985; Levin, 1987). The entrenchment of traditional roles in the school, and in the home, give further confirmation for much needed change in biases along with the establishment of new strategies to accommodate the daily realities for dual-income working-class families, single-parent families, and step-families. Added to this is the respect and recognition owed to mothers as the primary care-givers in the

home and as the coordinators of home-school relations (Crosbie-Burnett, Skyles, & Becker-Haven, 1988; Power, 1993).

Complicating these factors, and further marginalizing many families, is the integration of children who have schooling problems, without early assessment and, therefore, without accurate identification as non-categorical special needs students. As Canning states, "It must be recognized that if special identities are lost so are the capacities for providing special education services" (pp. 21-22). Additionally, while Department of Education policy in this province reflects the belief that previous information about individual students only serves to perpetuate stereotypes, it still stands to reason that students' learning difficulties have to be identified in order to receive the help they need (Canning, Kennedy & Strong, 1993; Canning, 1996). As clearly brought out in this study, stigmatizing of these students occurs in any event, largely through ignorance, and leading to devastating consequences. Some of the children in this study were completely estranged in the mainstreaming milieu upon entering the junior high system.

In order to ameliorate these issues, and the accompanying on-going confusion about schooling problems, there is required a "paradigm shift" in attitudes towards the sharing of information with parents as equal and expert partners. As well, parents need to recognize, and to be assured, of the legitimacy of their contribution to their children's schooling and of the validity of their point of view (Munn, 1993). In addition to change in mindset, teachers and school administrators require information for alternative communication and partnership programs (Bastiani, 1993). Their insufficient knowledge

was evident, as were parents' clear observations of a non-welcoming atmosphere at the junior high.

The conservative, autonomous, and established methods of parental involvement used by teachers, and the inattention of families by school administrators, except as fund-raisers and troublemakers, need, therefore, to be seen as major handicaps to correcting the lack of genuine, tangible, and practical home-school partnerships.

### **3. Practical Implications**

We need to include those parents who, for a variety of reasons, have traditionally not felt welcomed at schools (p. 27).

-- Marie Pierce (1994)

As consistently revealed in ethnographic stories, the complexity of educational matters and their magnification within our culture "allow policy makers and educational consumers to formulate more accurate and judicious expectations about what schools, families, and other agencies can do to direct and enhance education and socialization" (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 28). Although such stories about individual realities are often "filtered through preconceptions" of what is supposed to be, similar pitfalls also characterize other methods of information gathering. Granting parents "the courtesy of asking them what they think" about their children's schooling "gives a very strategic framework" for analyzing their children's experiences and needs (Olson, 1986, pp. 79-80).

Parents' immersion in the above dialogue foretells the potential benefit of their involvement in a partnership process. More or less standing or stigmatized on the

periphery of the school's culture and external to the already "established" parental involvement, these "hard-to-reach" parents provided a profound critical view of educational matters. Parents demonstrated knowledge about learning disabilities far beyond the comprehension of many, and were also observant of the detrimental affects created by the system's inadequacies. These parents had vital information to share with teachers and principals, and with each other. Yet, for the most part, they were not heard, not appreciated, and not respected. Their knowledge was not legitimized by the education system and they were forced to fight for equality of opportunity for their children.

Ultimately, at the centre of "enhanced education and socialization" are the children. While they are the main actors in their schooling, partnership programs may be designed to "engage, guide, energize, and motivate students" in support of their own efforts to achieve success (Epstein, 1995, p. 702). The benefits of interactive partnerships are well documented in the research, and the literature is also explicit concerning the critical role of the school in establishing "family-like schools" - a school that is not only interested in academic excellence but also cares about the personal welfare of a child. Specifically, junior high schools need to recognize that just when preadolescent children are beginning to seek independence is the time in their development when they most need the careful guidance and support of parents and teachers. For special needs children who are caught in the "cycle of early failure, poor motivation, learned helplessness, low self-esteem, and more failure and loss of self-esteem," (Mearig, 1992, p. 230) family-like schools are an imperative. Therefore, schools may consider two choices towards involving parents in their children's education:



- (1) They can follow an all too common approach which sees the school as a battleground for conflict, power struggles and disharmony, or
- (2) They can emphasize partnership creating conditions that foster the sharing of power and mutual respect, where talents and energy focus on students' learning and growth (Epstein, 1995, p. 711).

The impetus to develop innovative family programs in the schools in this province may come from school councils. Although still in the implementation stages, councils should be lobbied to carry through one of their original strategies to link "society, schools, and homes" as a "crucial mechanism" to facilitate parental input, and develop strong initiatives to involve them in learning activities at home. The strength of school councils may lie in their dedication to and advocacy for the needs of the families in their specific schools. In the 1995 survey of the total parent population at the junior high in this study (while only 51 percent responded to the questionnaire) it is notable that 86.8 percent *agreed* with the statement: *I would like to be given specific instructions about how I could help my student with her/his schoolwork*. Parents were also invited to give written comments in each section of the questionnaire. Regarding that particular question, one parent wrote, "This question is the most important item on this questionnaire!"

As noted earlier, school councils are only permitted three appointed parent representatives. Their contribution as decision makers still remains dependent on whether the traditional power brokers accept parents' new role. Principals, teachers and school boards may need intense briefing in an attempt to distill traditional thinking and power-based protectionism. Most important for the participants in this study is the inclusion of

their articulate, and knowledgeable voices to ensure that comprehensive and suitable measures are vigorously undertaken to include them in a collaborative process. School councils would also do well to consider the common features of already established, successful partnerships: 1. recognition of school, family, and community as the "overlapping spheres of influence" on student development; 2. paying attention to various types of parental participation to accommodate diverse needs; and 3. enlisting the assistance of an "Action Team" of other teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members (Epstein, 1995, p. 704).

The implications of designating some parents as hard-to-reach, and non-participants in their children's education is undoubtedly a barrier to initiating any form of partnership. It is a barrier not only due to the traditional functioning of the school, and particularly the attitudes towards these parents, but it is also a barrier because of parents' actual experiences with education which obviously influence what they have come to expect from the school. Sometimes subtle, sometimes overt stigmatization can paralyze attempts to bring groups together in mutual respect. As Levin (1987) states, "The distance is greatest and tensions are most visible in relations between teachers and working-class parents... Parents know that they are helpless in the face of the schools' power to evaluate them, their children and their culture" (p. 273). In the 1993 survey of teachers at the school in this study, it was revealed that 83.3 percent of teachers *generally disagreed* with the statement: *Parents' of students of this school have high expectations for their children*. The prevalence of what appears to be condescending attitudes towards low-income families, as well as their own awareness of, and anger about, such biases, is well

recorded. Unfortunately, teachers' low efficacy and negative evaluations of their children's intelligence and abilities can lead to internalization for the recipients (Brantlinger, 1985, p. 26).

Furthermore, provincial government reform strategies to reduce expenditures for schooling have historical implications for working-class children and their parents in "bearing the brunt of policies to demonstrate standards and excellence." Research in 1967 and 1987 noted this correlation (Levin, 1987, p. 271). Unfortunately, this present study supports this observation in 1997.<sup>80</sup> The cutting of particular academic and non-academic programs have consequences for the working class relevant to children leaving school early, "not because they cannot succeed but because they feel the school has nothing to offer them or because they are disgusted with school practices" (Brantlinger, 1985, p. 26).

In order to bring about successful collaboration, it is clear that educators and society need to undergo substantial changes. In the face of seemingly overwhelming odds, parents in Newfoundland and Labrador can only hope that some of the more positive writings in the Royal Commission's Report, "Our Children. Our Future" (1992) will be taken from the theoretical page and acted upon enthusiastically. In selling the idea of the consolidation of educational resources, the report utilized the concept of the rights of the child. The findings in this study indicate it is just that - a concept. Concerning education

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<sup>80</sup> See the provincial government's "Adjusting the Course: Parts I and II" (1993 & 1994). Advocacy for reduced government funding for education is hidden under the guise of rhetorical commentary about "educational reform, economics and development, and the public good."

issues and consequences, a chapter on educational finance (glaringly omitting parents from the equation) states:

Respectful relationships among students, teachers, administrators are developed and maintained in order to deliver a healthy balance of activities fostering the intellectual, physical, emotional, social and spiritual development of students... Ensuring that every student, regardless of location, age, sex, religion, race and other considerations is provided with equal funding, staff and services is the goal of horizontal equity theorists on the assumption that equality of educational inputs will lead to an equal opportunity for education. (pp. 124 & 128)

From a practical perspective, therefore, the findings here confirm the previously established need for the Department of Education to:

- (a) listen to and respect parents' knowledge about their specially challenged children.
- (b) implement the recent recommendations put forth by the Association for Community Living<sup>81</sup> regarding assistance for students in the classroom.
- (c) advocate and fiscally support professional development for teachers, principals, vice-principals, teacher assistants, school board members, and school council members concerning all aspects of alternative communication methods and collaborative partnerships; including the imperative to recognize biases and, therefore, much needed development of transformation strategies to diminish stigmatization and marginalization through gender, social class, and family composition.

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<sup>81</sup> In recent months, parents have reported, through various news media, the plight of their children in the classrooms across the province. Some have joined forces with this Association to impress upon government the urgency to implement the recommendations of the Canning report.

- (d) carry through the legislative powers of school councils to develop strategies to involve all parents in appropriate curriculum matters including "learning activities at home."
- (e) collaborate with social workers and mental health personnel and other community agencies to encompass and respond to the needs of "the whole child" in forming a caring community around students.
- (f) collaborate with the Faculty of Education at Memorial University to ensure that all pre-service teachers participate in course units regarding school-family-community collaborative partnerships.
- (g) implement the recommendations of Special Matters: The Report of the Review of Special Education (1996). Unless appropriate programs, teacher training, *early* interdisciplinary assessment, and other support systems are in place for special needs children, particularly those who have indiscernible characteristics (non-categorical students), all students, teachers, and parents are negatively affected.
- (h) investigate the junior high schooling structure of arbitrarily, and abruptly segregating preadolescent children from established norms at the elementary level at a time in their lives when they are most vulnerable to damage of self-esteem, in their attempt "to develop a concept of a new, adult, and independent self" (Gersten, 1992, p. 148).
- (i) examine the early-leaver ramifications of the "centralization and standardization" of curriculum which systematically cuts academic and non-academic programs thus ignoring the culture of school settings and children's diversity.

In part, based on Chavkin and Williams' 1987 research, as well as Epstein's, 1995 guidelines, the findings here also corroborate the need for school boards, school councils and school personnel to:

- (a) collaborate and state clear objectives concerning parents as essential partners to children's academic success.
- (b) create an Action Team as an "action arm" of the school council with a specific committee dedicated to developing strategies to reach out and work with families of specially challenged children.
- (c) ask parents for their ideas, providing ample and various opportunities to share insights and concerns.
- (d) assess current partnership practices,<sup>82</sup> organize options for new partnerships, implement selected activities, evaluate subsequent phases, and continue to improve and coordinate the selected practices.
- (e) involve and provide training for other teachers, parents, students, administrators, and community members to assist the action team.
- (f) obtain funds and support from school-business partnerships for the specific purpose of family-school improvement processes.
- (g) develop a three-year plan along with detailed one-year plans to permit sufficient time to do the work.

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<sup>82</sup> Including the partnerships programs developed in Newfoundland: Philpott's (1995) program for *junior high parents*; also Oldford-Marchim's (1994) program, "Significant Others as Reading Teachers" (SORT).

For the parents who participated in this study, the findings here highlight the validity and necessity for you, and other parents, to continue fighting for equality of educational opportunity for your children. In a forceful, collective voice others are joining with you to work in furthering and winning the cause.

#### **4. Suggestions for Further Research**

A constant issue arising in this study was comparison of the various school levels. Therefore, an emergent research question is whether the trauma and distress experienced by the children in moving from the elementary to the junior high level, as outlined, is dependent on the particular school and teachers or whether such problems are symptomatic of the junior high level across the province. Ethnographic studies conducted with other parents in other junior high schools of similar age group and grade level composition would provide useful comparative data concerning the viability of maintaining such infrastructure.

Another researchable inquiry relates to whether the amount of involvement at the junior high level of presumed hard-to-reach parents, and other parents, is dependent on the school's ideology and initiatives. What influence do teachers' perceptions and interactions with parents of different social class have upon family-school relations, as well as on student achievement? Such information not only would be valuable in planning strategies for home-school interrelations but also for professional development regarding covert biases and the ramifications of such attitudes, including teachers' efficacy for student achievement.

A crucial question from in this study is intervention processes for students with special needs, particularly those correlating with socio-economic circumstances. Do some schools and teachers already have innovative strategies that are working for their students? What role does educator collaboration have in the wider implementation of such programs and what are the implications for financial, moral, and policy support from school boards and the Department of Education?

Finally, a pertinent question is whether the newly formed school councils in Newfoundland are in fact representative of all parents including those thought to be hard to reach. Are they planning to encourage the voices of all parents in their decision making, and to enlist their help for the important work of improving school-family-community partnerships? Are there successful family-school partnerships already in existence in this province?



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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Guides

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## **Interview Guide (Principals)**

### **1. School Background Information**

Probes:

- School improvement projects.
- Future objectives.
- Parents' role.

### **2. Teachers' 1993 Survey**

Probes:

- Awareness of the results concerning teachers' perceptions of parental involvement, for example teachers indicated that:
  - a) *It is important to me as a teacher to have parents of my students working closely with me in the education process (97%).*
  - b) *Our faculty must provide more opportunity for parents to involve themselves in the education of our students (91.7%).*

### **3. Teacher-Guided Specific Practices**

Probes:

- Knowledge of practices/programs currently employed by teachers to involve parents.
- Programs that specifically guide parents in how they could help their children with schoolwork at home.
- How carried out (i.e. parents individually, groups).
- Views on the present and potential role of such programs on children's schooling regarding such information as:

- a) What the children will be studying.
- b) Teachers' expectations of students' responsibility concerning homework and in-class schoolwork.
- c) The importance of all subjects in school (i.e. a well-rounded education for future decisions regarding higher education and careers).
- d) The methods teachers used to teach particular subjects.
- e) How parents could assist with particular subjects at home.
- f) Study skills (i.e. timing, breaks, reading a text, how to study for different types of exams, and how to take notes in class).
- Views about parents' ability to help their students.
- Views about parents' education level and/or social class affect on their capabilities to help their children with homework.

#### **4. Hard-to-Reach Parents and Communication**

Probes:

- Perception that there are such parents.
- Communication methods (present, future).
- Views regarding parents' potential interest in wanting to know how to help their children (i.e. guided by the teacher).

#### **5. Parental Involvement: Student Attitude and Achievement**

Probes:

- Perceptions of relationship between students' attitudes and their parents' level of involvement at school or at home.



- Perceptions of relationship between students' achievement level and their parents' level of involvement at school or at home. Differences in relationships when considering different types of parental involvement.

#### **6. Administrative Support/Policy for Teacher-Guided Programs**

Probes:

- Views about the importance of support.
- Views about administrative support in setting up such a program for parents in specific practices.
- Importance of having a program supported through written school policy.
- Views about resources (funding, time, space, assistance) to carry out such a project.

## **Interview Guide (Teachers)**

### **1. Current Parent Participation and Gender Issues.**

Probes:

- Parent Teacher Association.
- Parent/teacher interviews.
- Other activities.
- Ratio of mothers to fathers, or female to male guardian, etc. who participate.
- Perceptions of parents' involvement level when the student is male or female.

### **2. Current Specific Practices/Programs/Workshops**

Probes:

- Current practices where parents are given specific guidance as to how they could help their children with schoolwork at home.
- Other types of information sessions with parents.
- Individually or in groups.
- Kind of information given.
- Level of parental participation.

### **3. Hard-to-Reach Parents**

Probes:

- Perceptions and views about whether some parents are hard to reach.
- Perceptions and views concerning their response/non-response to requests to come to parent/teacher meetings, workshops, other activities.

- Views regarding their potential interest in wanting to know how to help their student (i.e. guided by the teacher).
- Views about their ability to help.

#### **4. Parental Involvement: Student Attitude and Achievement**

Probes:

- Perceptions of relationship between students' attitudes and their parents' level of involvement at school or at home.
- Perceptions of relationship between students' achievement level and their parents' level of involvement at school or at home.
- Differences in relationships when you consider different types of parental involvement.

#### **5. Present and Potential Role of Specific Information Sessions for Parents**

Probes:

- Interest and views about setting up programs/sessions regarding:
  - a) What their children will be studying.
  - b) Your expectations of students' responsibility concerning homework and in-class schoolwork.
  - c) Importance of all subjects in school (i.e. a well-rounded education for future decisions regarding higher education and careers).
  - d) Methods you use to teach particular subjects.
  - e) Specific information as to how parents could assist with particular subjects at home.
  - f) Study skills (i.e. timing, breaks, reading a text, how to study for different types of exams, and how to take notes in class).

- Views concerning the importance to have the principal's and vice-principal's support for such a programs.
- Importance in having written school policy to implement and support such programs.
- Views about resources (funding, assistance) to carry out such a project.
- Perception and views of parents' education level, and/or social class affect on their capabilities to help their students with homework.

#### **6. Communication Methods to Contact Parents**

Probes:

- Importance.
- Methods used.
- Further ideas.

#### **7. Parents Assisting at School**

Probes:

- Interest in having parents present topics in class on such subjects as art, politics, science, computers, language, culture, home economics, careers, and social studies.
- Views about parents' ability to help at school.
- Perception and views of parents' education level, and/or social class affect on their capabilities to help at school.

**Interview Guide  
(Parent Participants)**

**1. Background Information**

Probes:

- Family composition (i.e. number of children, boys/girls, those attending school).
- Working - at home, outside the home.
- Other family members full-time or part-time work.
- Family composition (mother/father, single mother/father, guardians, grandparents, etc.).
- Grade eight student - a son or daughter, or more than one student in junior high.
- (Parents' education level discussed later in the interview.)

**2. School Participation/Involvement and Communication**

Probes:

- How often, and why go to the school.
- Feelings when there.
- How and why the school or teacher makes contact.
- How and why you contact the teacher or anyone at the school.
- How receive information about the school, activities, and about your student.
- Suggestions as to how you would like to be contacted.
- Types of volunteer work or activities participated in at the school (i.e. paid/unpaid school staff/helper, program supporter, home tutor, audience, advocate, learner of specific practices, decision maker).

- Interest, and thoughts about helping (i.e. now doing all that is possible considering personal circumstances, would like to do more or less - what and how).
- Interest in giving workshops or presentations at the school on such topics as: art, computers, careers, home economics, and social studies (i.e. any family member).

### **3. Homework Assistant Programs**

Probes:

- Types of programs or workshops now offered at school to show you how to help with your child's home-schoolwork (i.e. parent groups).
- If participating, how does this help you and your children.
- Types of personal help you receive now (specific instructions from the teacher) as to how you can help your children with homework.
- Benefits to you and your children.
- Thoughts about present and future teacher guidance regarding:
  - a) Ways the teacher could show you how to help, such as:
    - What your child will be studying.
    - The teacher's expectations of your student's responsibilities concerning homework and in-class schoolwork.
    - Importance of all subjects in school (i.e. well-rounded education for future decisions about higher education and careers).
    - Ways subjects are taught.
    - Study skills (timing, breaks, reading a text, studying for different types of exams, how to take notes).

- . Exactly what you could do to help your child with specific subjects at home.
- b) Views about receiving guidance.
- c) Affects on perceived capability to help.
- d) Affects on perception of student's ability in school.
- e) Potential for such programs (would it make a difference to you and your child).
- f) Affects of personal circumstances on helping.

#### **4. Time Spent Helping Children At Home, and Gender Issues**

Probes:

- Who helps the children at home (i.e. mother, father, partner, guardian, older sibling, grandparent).
- Amount of time spent helping children with homework and other schoolwork (i.e. by you or partner/spouse, or someone else).
- Thoughts about the affect teacher guidance might have in the time spent helping your child.
- Views about the importance of helping both a son and a daughter with school-homework.
- Amount of time spent helping daughter and/or son.
- Feelings about helping your children with school-homework (i.e. confidence doing it).
- Receipt of help from the teacher/school how to check homework, how this done.
- Thoughts and views about the quality of homework (i.e. benefits to student and amount of homework).

- Importance for mother and father (male or female partner) to help their children with school-homework at home.
- Importance for a mother and a father (male or female partner) to help and do volunteer work at the school.
- Types of volunteer work each would do at the school.
- Affects of personal situations on time spent helping at home or at school.

#### **5. School/Administration Support**

Probes:

- Views as to the importance of principal and vice-principal support regarding teacher-guided programs for parents.
- Views about resources (funding, assistance) to carry out such a project.

#### **6. Educational Opportunity**

Probes:

- Thoughts about your child's opportunity to succeed and do well in school.
- Hopes for your children when high school completed.
- Thoughts about how they will do in school.
- Views about how your child is doing in grade eight.
- How rate your ability to help.
- Education level of family members.

#### **7. Wishful Thoughts for Your Children's Future**

If money were not a problem and time were not a problem, if there were no barriers, what would be your greatest wish for your children?



**Informed Letter of Consent - School Board  
(Assistant Superintendent)**

I am a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Programme, Faculty of Education, at Memorial University. As part of my M. Ed. thesis work, I hereby request formal approval from the Avalon Consolidated School Board to conduct a research project with grade eight parents at one of your junior high schools.

Through pre-arranged 60 to 90 minute interviews, the purpose of the research is to explore the thoughts and views of a sampling of grade seven parents regarding parental involvement at the school. I am especially interested in their views concerning teacher-guided practices or programs which could assist them in helping their children with schoolwork at home. With the parents' permission, an audio tape recorder will be utilized during the interviews. At the end of the study, the information gathered will be erased. Parents may review the transcribed version of the taped interview prior to actual use of the data within the study.

Data collected in this study may prove beneficial in helping teachers and parents come to understand each others points of view about parent involvement. As well, it may provide a basis for the development or expansion of teacher-guided practices to formally involve parents in their children's schooling either at home, or at school. I am particularly interested in those parents who do not participate and may be considered as difficult to reach.

With the board's and principal's permission, I wish to obtain a listing of grade eight parents from the school in order for teachers to make a sample selection. As well, I would like to include the principal, and two teachers as key informant participants consisting of approximately 30 minute interviews. I am also requesting their permission to use an audio tape recorder, and again tapes will be erased at the end of the study.

All information gathered in this study is strictly confidential and at no time will individuals be identified. Participation is voluntary, the participants may withdraw at any time without prejudice of any kind, and they may omit answering questions they do not wish to answer. The results of my research will be made available to the school board, all participants involved at the school, and the parents upon request. As well, all participants may review the transcribed version of the taped interview prior to actual use of the data within the study.

This study has received the approval of the Faculty of Education's Ethics Review Committee. Should any participant in the study wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study, they may contact Dr. Stephen Norris, Acting Associate Dean of Research and Development at the Faculty, 737-8693. My thesis supervisor is Dr. Rosonna Tite; she may be reached at 737-8617. For your further information, as a graduate student,

**Informed Letter of Consent - School Board *continued*:**

I worked with the school's committee to develop a parental questionnaire which was distributed to the total parent population in May 1995 by the school.

I am enclosing a copy of my research proposal for your perusal, and I will be available to discuss the proposed study with you at your convenience. My home telephone number with an answering machine access is 368-1340.

Thank you in anticipation of your cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

Sylvia E. Hopkins

I \_\_\_\_\_ (Assistant Superintendent) hereby give permission for M.Ed. thesis research, undertaken by the graduate student Sylvia Hopkins, to proceed as requested. Upon participants' agreement, permission is given to carry out interviewing with school administration, teachers and parents about parental involvement in their children's schooling. I also give permission to access a listing of the 1995/96 grade eight parents' names and telephone numbers for the sole purpose of selecting a sample for this study. I understand that participation is entirely voluntary, participants can withdraw at any time without prejudice of any kind, and they are free to omit answering questions they do not wish to answer. If audio tapes are agreed upon, they will be erased at the completion of the study.

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Date

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Assistant Superintendent's  
Signature

### **Informed Letter of Consent (Principals)**

I am a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Programme, Faculty of Education, at Memorial University. As part of my M.Ed. thesis work, I am requesting your permission to conduct a research project with some grade eight parents at your school.

Through pre-arranged 60 to 90 minute interviews, the purpose of the research is to explore the thoughts and views of a sampling of parents regarding their involvement at school. I am especially interested in their views concerning teacher-guided practices or programs which would assist them in helping their students with homework. With the parents' permission, an audio tape recorder will be utilized during the interviews. At the end of the study, the information gathered will be erased. Parents may review the transcribed version of the taped interview prior to actual use of the data within the study.

Data collected may prove beneficial in helping teachers and parents come to understand each others points of view about parent involvement. As well, it may provide a basis for the development or expansion of teacher-guided practices to formally involve parents in their students' schooling either at home, or at school.

Having received permission from the Avalon Consolidated School Board, and now with your permission, I would like to obtain a listing of 1995-96 grade eight parents and telephone numbers in order for teachers to make a sample selection. As well, I am requesting to talk with you, and two teachers consisting of approximately 30 minute interviews. The purpose is to explain the project, identify existing practices of parental involvement, and perhaps gain insight into the shared outlook towards the potential of parental involvement programs in the formal education of their children. I am particularly interested in those parents who do not participate and may be considered as difficult to reach.

All information gathered in this study is strictly confidential and at no time will individuals be identified. Participation is voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time without prejudice of any kind. The results of my research will be made available to you upon request. As well, you may review the transcribed version of your taped interview prior to actual use of the data within the study.

This thesis work has received the approval of the Faculty of Education's Ethics Review Committee. Should you, or any participant, wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study, you may contact Dr. Stephen Norris, Acting Associate Dean of Research and Development at the Faculty, 737-8693. My thesis supervisor is Dr. Rosonna Tite; she may be reached at 737-8617.

**Informed Letter of Consent - Principal continued:**

As arranged in our telephone conversation, I look forward to meeting with you on \_\_\_\_\_ at \_\_\_\_\_. With your permission I would like to take notes, or use a tape recorder, and please feel free to omit answering any question you do not wish to answer. Again, audio tapes will be erased at the completion of the study. My home telephone number with an answering machine is 368-1340. Thank you in anticipation of your cooperation.

Yours sincerely,

Sylvia E. Hopkins

I \_\_\_\_\_ (Principal) hereby give permission for M.Ed. thesis research, undertaken by the graduate student Sylvia Hopkins, to proceed as requested. Upon individual agreement, permission is given to carry out interviews with myself, teachers and parents about parental involvement in their children's schooling. As approved by the school board, I also give permission to access a listing of the 1995/96 grade eight parents' names and telephone numbers for the sole purpose of selecting a sample for this study. I understand that participation is entirely voluntary, participants (including myself) can withdraw at any time without prejudice of any kind, and we are free to omit answering questions we do not wish to answer. If audio tapes are agreed upon, they will be erased at the completion of the study. Upon request, I may review the transcribed version of my interview prior to the actual use of the data in the study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Principal's  
Signature

**Informed Letter of Consent  
(Teachers)**

I am a graduate student in the Educational Leadership Programme, Faculty of Education, at Memorial University. As indicated in our recent telephone conversation, I will be conducting a study with some grade eight parents at your school as part of my M.Ed. thesis work. The purpose of the research is to explore the thoughts and views of a sampling of parents regarding parental involvement. I am especially interested in their views concerning teacher-guided practices or programs which would assist them in helping their children with schoolwork at home.

I am also interviewing two teachers and would greatly appreciate your assistance for approximately 30 minutes of your busy schedule. The purpose will be to identify existing programs or practices involving parents, the communication methods used to inform parents of the programs, and perhaps gain insight into your outlook towards the potential of programs to involve parents in the formal education of their children. I am particularly interested in those parents who do not participate and may be considered as difficult to reach.

All information gathered in this study is strictly confidential and at no time will individuals be identified. Participation is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time without prejudice of any kind. With your permission, I would like to take notes, or use a tape recorder, and you should feel free to omit answering any question you do not wish to answer. At the end of the study, the tapes will be erased. Also, you may review the transcribed version of the taped interview prior to actual use of the data within the study, and the results of my research will be made available to you upon request.

This study has received the approval of the Faculty of Education's Ethics Review Committee. Should you wish to speak with a resource person not associated with the study, you may contact Dr. Stephen Norris, Acting Associate Dean of Research and Development at the Faculty, 737-8693. My thesis supervisor is Dr. Rosonna Tite; she may be reached at 737-8617.

If you are in agreement to participate in this study, please sign below. A copy of the letter is for your record. If you have any questions or concerns please do not hesitate to contact me at my home number 368-1340 (answer machine access). Thank you for your consideration of my request.

Yours sincerely,

Sylvia E. Hopkins

**Informed Letter of Consent - Teachers *continued*:**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (teacher) hereby agree to participate in an interview about parental involvement in their children's schooling being undertaken by the graduate student Sylvia Hopkins as part of her M.Ed. thesis work. I understand that participation is entirely voluntary, I may withdraw at any time without prejudice of any kind, and I am free to omit answering questions I do not wish to answer. I do agree to an audio taped recording of the interview, but I understand that the information will be erased at the completion of the study, and I may review the transcribed version of the taped interview prior to the actual use of the data in the study. All information is strictly confidential and I will not be identified.

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Date

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Teacher's Signature

**Informed Letter of Consent  
(Junior High Parents)**

Dear Parent or Guardian:

As I indicated to you in our telephone conversation, I am a graduate student in the Faculty of Education at Memorial University. As part of my Master of Education thesis work, I am conducting a study with junior high school parents, and as I indicated to you, the purpose of the study is to obtain your thoughts and views about parental involvement at your student's school. In particular, I am interested in what you think about teacher-guided practices or programs which would assist you in helping your children with school-homework.

I understand from our telephone conversation that you would like to participate in this study, and have agreed to share your thoughts and answer questions with the use of an audio tape recorder. As we discussed, the length of the interview is really up to you and could be about 60 to 90 minutes at the most. You may read the typed version of our interview before I use it in my study, and at the end of the study the information on the tape will be erased.

All of the information you give is strictly confidential and at no time will you be identified. Your participation is, of course, voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without prejudice of any kind. As well, you should feel free to omit answering any questions you do not wish to answer.

This study has received the approval of the Faculty of Education's Ethics Review Committee. Should you wish to speak with someone at the University who is not associated with my study, you may contact Dr. Stephen Norris, Acting Associate Dean of Research and Development at the Faculty of Education, telephone number 737-8693. My thesis supervisor is Dr. Rosonna Tite; she may be contacted at 737-8617.

I greatly appreciate your assistance in this research. Your thoughts and views on parental involvement in their children's schooling is a valuable source of information. Again, all such information will be confidential and you will remain anonymous. The results of my research will be made available to you if you request it.

To confirm your agreement to participate in this study, please sign below. A copy of this letter is for your record. If you have any questions or concerns following the interview, please do not hesitate to contact me at 368-1340 (please leave a message on the answering machine, should I not be available to take your call). Thank you for participating in my study.

Yours sincerely,

Sylvia E. Hopkins

**Informed Letter of Consent - Junior High Parents *continued*:**

I \_\_\_\_\_ (parent/guardian) hereby agree to participate in an interview about parental involvement in their children's schooling being undertaken by the graduate student Sylvia Hopkins as part of her Master of Education thesis work at Memorial University. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without prejudice of any kind, and I am free to omit answering questions I do not wish to answer. I do agree to an audio taped recording of the interview, but I understand that the information will be erased at the completion of the study, and if I request it I may review the type-written version of the taped interview before the information is used in the study. I understand that all the information I give is strictly confidential and I will not be identified.

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Date

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Parent's/Guardian's Signature









