

Running Head: STRONG TOGETHER IN ALL WE DO

School, Parents and Community: Strong Together In All We Do

by

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Abstract

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Parental involvement has been shown to play a crucial role in a child's education. Research indicates that parental engagement can influence student attendance, academic achievement and behavior. However, achieving high levels of parental involvement can be challenging. For First Nations communities, including the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw community, there are many barriers that inhibit involvement and must be overcome for parents to be actively involved with their child's education and to form meaningful partnerships with the school. It is important for schools to recognize these barriers and develop comprehensive strategies and procedures that foster parental engagement. School principals are essential in this process.

This project focuses on establishing and strengthening relationships between the parents, school and community working together for the students of the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School. Based on my personal and professional experiences (both as a teacher and principal), as well as current and relevant research, I make recommendations as to the steps involved in promoting and strengthening parental engagement at my school.

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Finally, a special thank you to the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw community. I feel truly blessed to be the principal of such an amazing school. I am looking forward to building new relationships within the community and strengthening existing partnerships. I believe by working together the sky is the limit for our children!

Part One - Introduction

First Nations recognize the vital role of parental involvement in education.

Parents must participate in establishing the direction and goals of the education program. Active involvement of parents in school programs creates better understanding and cooperation between the education staff and the parents, in fact, the community as a whole. (Assembly of First Nations, Tradition and Education 1988 as cited in Chabot, n.d.)

Gilakas'la. My name is Reed Allen and I am the principal of the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School. The above quote stresses the importance of partnerships between parents and the school. Research has proven that parental involvement is one of the most critical factors in student achievement and well-being.

The staff at the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School also recognize the significant impact parents and communities have on student success and realize this is an area we can help promote. As the school administrator I play a crucial role in this process. It is my responsibility to find ways to enhance successful current practices, as well as explore new ways of promoting community and parental engagement. I fully understand that this is a challenging task that takes commitment from our staff, creative thinking and time. Nonetheless, for the future of our students, I believe it is an essential one to undertake. As a result, my project focuses on establishing and strengthening relationships between the parents, school and community working together for the students of the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School.

Coming To My Question

Strong community and active parental engagement stands as an integral component of my educational philosophy. This core belief has been shaped by my personal and professional experiences. These include my upbringing, my teaching, and most recently being an elementary school principal.

My Upbringing

I was born in Terrace, in Northern British Columbia in 1978 and I am the oldest of three boys. My parents moved to the north in the mid 1970's when my father accepted his first teaching position at Copper Mountain Elementary. They made many friends and settled into the community nicely, but after five wonderful years they made the choice to move closer to family. So when I was two years old, they decided to relocate to the rural agricultural community of Oliver, in the South Okanagan. My parents' primary reason for moving was to raise their family closer to grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. They believed that surrounding their children with the support from their extended family would help them build a strong, healthy family.

Growing up I thought that my childhood and adolescent years seemed fairly normal. I lived with my parents and my two younger brothers. My parents took active roles in our lives. My mom sat on the PAC committee of our elementary school and she was no doubt a "hockey or soccer mom" cheering us on loudly from the sidelines. My father was the organizer. He was the president of youth soccer, he sat on the minor hockey executive and he coached many of our sports teams. Our house was heavily involved with athletics. My parents also provided us with so many other opportunities to learn, experiment and explore that were not sports related. They exposed us to experiences in academics, music, art, cooking, travel and community service, but

they did not force us down any particular path. Whenever we identified an interest, they often encouraged us to pursue that area regardless of any time and financial commitment.

My parents also understood the profound role they needed to play in their children's education. Being a teacher my father knew this all too well because he could see firsthand the importance of supportive parents amongst his own students. As a result, school was given top priority in our household. Homework and studying always took precedence over playing sports or hanging out with friends. If we were struggling with our grades they would do their best to give us extra help or seek support for us. For example, when I was having difficulty in my Math 11 course they hired a tutor to help me through. They were firm believers that having a solid education would give us the tools to create opportunities and ultimately give us a better future.

I have come to realize that compared to many I was very fortunate to have such strong parental engagement and involvement. Perhaps this is because I now see so many children who are struggling in part due to lack of parental support. I know that my parents put aside many of their own interests and chose to focus on their children instead. I took for granted the loving and supportive role they played in my development and I am now so appreciative of all their hard work because it undoubtedly had such a positive impact on my life.

Early Teaching

During the years that I attended high school, I volunteered my time as a hockey, basketball and soccer coach for younger children. Then, after my first year of college I worked as a youth leader at a local summer camp. It was these experiences that ignited my passion for working with children and they led me to study for my Bachelors of Education degree at the University of Victoria. After graduating from UVic it was difficult to find full-time employment, so I hoped to start out as a teacher-on-call (TOC) either in Victoria or in the South

Okanagan. Unfortunately, both lists were closed at the time. On the advice of a friend I relocated to Port McNeill on Northern Vancouver Island to begin my career in education as a teacher-on-call.

I was a substitute teacher for just over a year before I was given a five-month temporary contract in a Grade six class at Oliver Elementary School. This brought me back to my hometown in the Okanagan. I honestly thought that this opportunity would lead to a continuing position and I did not think that I would be returning to the island. Ironically, my father was teaching Grade four at the same school. So, for a brief period there were two Mr. Allen's (one senior and one junior) at the school. This position, although temporary was the first opportunity to have real ownership of a class. I had to plan each day, mark all of the students' work, and think of creative ways to engage my students. It was a lot of hard work but I enjoyed the responsibility of applying and adapting information and strategies within the context of a classroom. There were many moments to learn from and to reflect upon.

Unlike being a TOC, being in the same classroom everyday allowed me to develop relationships with the students. Building their trust and forming meaningful connections was a huge help in the class. It was also the first time I was required to interact with parents as the classroom teacher. Very quickly I began to understand the importance of the school and parental partnership. I needed volunteers for field trips, parents to help with homework, and parents to help with behavioural challenges. I even had one parent do a presentation about her experience living in Japan. Thankfully most of them were willing to assist me and help with their child's education. Without this support I am sure that my experience would have been much more challenging and may have gone very differently.

My contract expired and with little possibility of continuation for the following September I applied for a Grade six/seven position at the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School. I had to take my last day off of work from my Grade six classroom to make the job interview in Port Hardy. That interview went so well that I have now been at the same school for the past 11 years.

The Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School

Preparing to teach in a First Nations school was exciting but it also presented some degree of uncertainty. I was enthusiastic to have a chance to learn and experience a new place and culture. Despite growing up with many First Nations friends, I knew very little about the challenges that faced the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw community or the issues related to First Nations' schools and education.

I thoroughly enjoyed teaching at this school. There were significant advantages to working in a small school. Having a low student/teacher ratio allowed for close relationships with students and the school environment seemed to be more team-based, collegial and energetic. The school has always had a strong sense of community because we were able to interact closely with our students and other staff. I also appreciated how the teachers at the school were involved in significant programming decisions. I was not mandated to teach a specific program and there were opportunities to give input into the types of materials and programs implemented.

However, unlike many of my previous experiences, I found it very challenging to engage many of the parents - to connect them with the classroom. I had difficulty in getting parents to volunteer, to help their child with schoolwork, and sometimes even to phone me back. There were times I definitely felt like the sole responsibility of educating these children rested with the

school. Reflecting back on this aspect of my teaching practice I can tell that it needed growth. I think I could have done more to foster the partnership between my class and the students' homes.

After being at our school for a number of years I began contemplating the possibility of becoming a school administrator. I believed I possessed some of the characteristics necessary to potentially manage such a demanding job. These included demonstrating instructional leadership, organizational skills and being adept with people. Ideally, I had envisioned becoming a vice-principal to gain experience. However, I was never given that chance. When our school principal struggled with stress and health concerns and retired early I applied and was given the position.

I was honoured and enthusiastic about becoming principal and I looked forward to a new set of professional challenges. It was a huge change from being a classroom teacher to being a full-time administrator. My responsibilities shifted from the comfort of my own classroom and my students to being the leader of the entire school. The first few months were a complete whirlwind as I had so much to learn about the management of a school. I was extremely motivated to make an immediate difference and I brought in some initiatives that have been successful. There were also a few times where my eagerness and lack of experience caused me to make some mistakes along the way. I now understand that significant change is a difficult process that takes discourse, collaboration and a significant time commitment.

My Rationale

I was a teacher at the school for eight years and I have been the principal for nearly three years. At this point in my career, I am familiar with the day-to-day operations of the school, the staff, the students and programs we are using. Now much of my practice is focused on exploring new approaches and building upon existing methods that will positively impact student

achievement and well-being. I believe an important way to accomplish this is by developing stronger relationships between the school community and local First Nations community. Our school motto is “Strong Together In All We Do”. However, in my opinion there is a divide between the parents of our students and our staff. As a school, I believe that we have made some significant strides in this area. But there are still times I feel like we are operating almost in isolation with little or no parental involvement. This is a very unsettling feeling. From my experiences, as described above, I believe that - as both valued partners and active participants - parents are paramount to students’ success. For my Masters project, I will investigate ways that I can broaden conceptions of the word “together” (as found in our school’s motto) to better include the local community so that they can have a meaningful and participatory voice in the education of their children. This will require a methodical approach in which I: (1) examine research that inquires into the impact of parental engagement; (2) define different types of community engagement; (3) understand the possible barriers for parents; and (4) evaluate our school’s current practices to promote engagement. I strongly believe that by broadening conceptions of “together” and increasing parental involvement from the community, our students will benefit tremendously.

Part Two - Literature Review

Introduction

As the principal of a First Nations school in British Columbia I have a strong desire to foster meaningful partnerships involving our parents, community and school. Unfortunately, many First Nations parents have not had positive experiences in the school system. The need to develop a comprehensive strategy that would enhance parental engagement and increase community involvement at our school is the focus of my Masters project. I believe that by conducting a review of current research and literature to learn the main trends and issues as they relate to parental and community engagement is a necessary beginning to this process.

Throughout my literature review I explore a number of meaningful areas. First, I begin by examining Epstein's (1995) theoretical perspective in relation to school, family and community partnerships. Second, I describe the framework of six types of school-family-community involvement created by Epstein. Third, I investigate some of the research that supports the engagement of parents, families and communities as it relates to student success. Fourth, I explore a number of barriers that may inhibit Aboriginal parents from being involved in schools. The objective of this literature review is to better contextualize the immense impact that parents have on education, while identifying key engagement and partnership strategies for parents in First Nations communities; to analyze their possible effectiveness and how they may inform recommendations for my school. Based on my research into the literature, in the next section of this document, I will make recommendations that aim to enhance parental involvement at my school.

Throughout this process, I concentrated my research on locating literature that would be as relevant to my practice as possible. Thankfully, I was able to find many pertinent resources

from a variety of sources including books, journal articles, discussion papers, government projects, and other documentation. Clearly there has been significant research into parental engagement in education across a wide variety of Aboriginal populations and similarly colonized Indigenous groups. Much of this research can be applied to my situation, but the reader must keep in mind that First Nations “vary from region to region” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6) within Canada and Indigenous populations “are often very different from other student populations that currently struggle in Canadian schools” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 6). It is important to recognize that while the issues concerning parental engagement and partnerships at my school share commonalities with other First Nations communities, they are unique to my students, parents, community and school.

Defining parental engagement and parental involvement

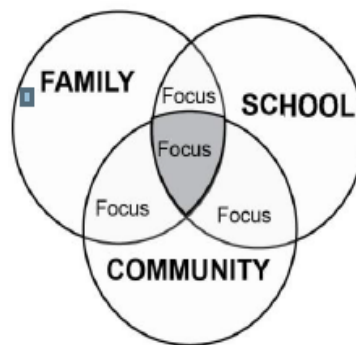
The terms *parental engagement* and *parental involvement* are the subject of much discussion in the Education field. Some sources make a clear distinction between the two, while others are not so consistent. For the purpose of this paper, both terms will be used interchangeably. *Engagement* and *involvement* will refer to activities (at school and at home) and the partnerships between families, schools and communities that have a beneficial impact on student outcomes. Also, throughout this paper the words *family or families* are used in place of *parent or parents*. I would like to recognize that family members often contribute in significant ways to children’s education. By *community* I mean the local residents who live in a particular geographical area. In the case of my school it refers to the Gwa’sala-‘Nakwaxda’xw community.

Theoretical Support

In the literature on parental involvement there are various theoretical models that reflect the impact of parent/community relationship with schools in education. These approaches range from models that stress limited involvement to others that actively promote it (Hornby, 2011). I found the most appropriate theoretical framework for my Masters project to be a model that promotes partnerships between families and schools. The *Theory of overlapping spheres of influence* as developed by Joyce Epstein is one of the most influential theories regarding improving student outcomes through school, family and community partnerships. A central principle of this theory is that student success can be best achieved through collaboration and cooperation between schools, family and community (Epstein, 1995).

Based on extensive quantitative and qualitative research of educational, sociological and psychological perspectives, Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres argues that when parents, educators and community work together students learn more. Within this theory, the student is placed in the centre with their achievement of their learning goals of mutual interest to the stakeholders in the spheres (school, family and community). The student is the key component to the partnership because they bridge the gap between teachers and the family. Each sphere has an area of specialty that overlaps influencing the child's development. Within the overlapping spheres of influence perspective, there is both mutual responsibility and mutual benefit for schools and families (Epstein, 1985, 1991, 1995, 2009, 2010).

The theory of overlapping spheres of influence theory is a model whose components can be visualized as spheres arranged in a Venn diagram representing family, school, and community. The theory is represented by an internal and external structure. The external model represents the school, family and community. These spheres can be pushed together to overlap and create partnership activities or pulled apart to operate separately in the family and school environment. The internal structure represents two levels of interaction that foster personal relationships between the home, school and community; institutional and individual. Institutional interactions refer to general or common practices that involve all families such as school events. Individual interactions refer to practices that involve a particular child involved with parents and teachers such as parent-teacher conferences. All of these interactions focus on the child and are important to the external and internal structure (Epstein, 1985, 1991, 1995, 2009, 2010).



Source: J. L. Epstein (2009). *School, family and community partnerships: Your handbook for action*. (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

Figure 1: Overlapping Spheres of Influence of School, Family and Community on Children's Learning

Types of School/Family/Community Partnerships

Parental involvement can take many forms. Traditionally, these included activities that support students both in the school and at home. At my school these activities typically include volunteering at school, helping with homework, communicating with the school and attending school events or meetings. However, the research is starting to recognize other perspectives in the definition of parent involvement in education that go beyond this traditional model. Based on the theory of overlapping spheres of influence and substantial research, Joyce Epstein and her colleagues created a useful framework of six types of involvement. This framework includes; parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community as methods of involvement. Each type of involvement includes different partnership practices between schools, families and communities to help student success (Epstein, 2009).

In Epstein's (2009) book *School, Family and Community Partnerships: Your Handbook For Action*, six types of involvement are described as follows:

- 1.) Parenting: Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each age and grade level. Assist schools in understanding families.
- 2.) Communicating: Communicate with families about school programs and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.

- 3.) Volunteering: Improve recruitment, training, work and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at the school or in other locations to support students and school programs.
- 4.) Learning at home: Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum- linked activities and decisions.
- 5.) Decision-making: Include families as participants in school decision, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, and other parent organizations.
- 6.) Collaborating with the community: Coordinate resources and services for families, students, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community. (p. 16)

The Effects of Parental Involvement and School Partnerships

Throughout the literature, the effects of parental engagement and relationships between families and schools are both praised and lamented. Studies herald positive engagement and partnerships as an effective strategy to support student success academically, behaviourally and socially, while a lack of involvement and partnerships is also blamed for negatively affecting a wide range of important student outcomes. Henderson and Mapp (2002) conclude, “the evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: Families have a major influence on their children’s achievement in school and through life” (p. 7). There is also sufficient research supporting the belief that when families and schools form effective partnerships there are immense benefits to students (Epstein, 1985). However, it must be noted that effective school and family

partnerships is not the only influence. High performance expectations, quality instruction, effective leadership and many other key characteristics are contributing factors to student success as well (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Taken as a whole, helping families strengthen their involvement in their child's education positively affects student achievement and development (Feinstein & Symons, 1999, Fan & Chen, 2001 & Epstein, 2009).

Parental influence on literacy. One of the most researched areas regarding student achievement and family involvement has been conducted around literacy development. The evidence about the benefits of parents being involved in their children's literacy activities is overwhelming. Family influences on literacy development begin at a young age, before children enter school and continue throughout their elementary school grades. Parental engagement that provides their children with literacy experiences has the greatest impact in emergent literacy as children prepare for formal instruction and better prepare children for instruction at school (Bus, van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995 & Wade & Moore, 2000). This is evident in many studies. For example, Sénéchal and Young (2008) conducted a meta-analytic review that focused on 16 intervention studies and determined that parent involvement has a positive effect on children's reading acquisition in early primary grades. Although parental involvement has the greatest effect in early years its importance to children's literacy success continues into high school and beyond (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003 & Epstein, 2009). It is clear throughout the research that families who are involved in providing a variety of literacy experiences for their children are more likely to have students with greater reading knowledge and skills. Therefore it is beneficial

for students when schools develop strategies to help educate and promote this engagement with families.

Parental influence on their children's school attendance. Arguably the most critical role families have on achievement is related to student attendance. Multiple studies confirm that increased and consistent student attendance correlates with better academic performance (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Jorgenson, 2012; Sheldon, 2007). Sheldon's research study compared a matched sample of 69 schools in Ohio that have adopted partnership programs based on Epstein's theory of overlapping spheres to those who do not. The research found that schools that reached out to involve parents in their children's education had significantly improved student attendance compared to schools that were not conducting these activities. This in turn correlated to higher student scores on math and reading achievement tests (Sheldon, 2007). Parents play a critical role in ensuring their children attend school on time, every day so they can benefit fully from the programs offered. Schools have a huge responsibility to work with parents in helping students maintain or improve regular attendance. Schools that have positive relationships with parents are more likely to have students attend and achieve higher standards.

Development of social capital. Student achievement is also promoted when parents develop *social capital*. Social capital as a concept first appeared in economics in the late 19th century and the use of the term in education has been traced as far back as John Dewey. More recently it has been investigated extensively most notably by theorists Broudieu and Coleman (Plagens, 2011). Defining social capital is complex, although in a general sense, "social capital

is a social or group property that can exist when individuals come in contact with others” (Plagens, 2011, p. 52). Historical and modern references to social capital all stress the importance of cooperation, networking and relationships to the advancement of individuals and achievement of desired outcomes (Plagens, 2011). In education, as parents and communities develop relationships with the school and become more involved they develop increased social capital (i.e. skills and information) to better support their children with school. Parents who communicate and interact with teachers as well as with other parents better understand the vision and expectations of a school. In turn, this allows them to reinforce these expectations at home (Laureau, 1996 as cited in Hill & Taylor, 2004). Parents who are involved are more likely to develop ways to work with their children and the school to promote increased academic achievement.

Parental involvement and children’s behaviour. Lastly, parental involvement and support has also been linked to children’s behaviour at school. Some literature puts the actions of parents at the forefront of the social and behavioural attributes of children. According to the First Nations Parents Club: A Handbook For Parents (2012), parents are “primarily responsible for helping their children to develop strong values and self-confidence” (p. 1). In a partnership model, the responsibility of developing respectful students with positive attitudes is shared with both the parents and the school. There is significant data to indicate when schools are leaders in parental involvement and effective partnerships that students develop positive attitudes towards school (Epstein, 2009). A meta-analysis of quantitative literature about the relationship between

parental involvement and student achievement also found that when parents are actively involved with their child's education it fosters better student classroom behaviour (Fan & Chan, 2001).

Undoubtedly, the research suggests there is a strong connection between parent involvement and lower instances of behavioural issues at school.

Possible Barriers to Parent Engagement

There is ample evidence that points to the benefits of effective school and family partnerships for children's success academically, behaviourally and socially including in literacy, attendance, and behaviour. However, many schools struggle to implement activities or strategies that increase parental involvement. For First Nations parents, the literature suggests there are diverse and complex barriers that contribute to limited parental engagement in schools (Bower, 2011; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; R.A. Malatest & Associates, 2002). In order to overcome these barriers and facilitate the development of effective partnerships it is essential to study and gain an understanding of them.

The many challenges faced by Aboriginal parents. Before elaborating on these barriers, in a R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd (2002) discussion paper on Aboriginal issues in education, a few important notes were raised for the reader to consider when thinking about Aboriginal culture and schools. Their extensive research indicated, "The schooling experiences of Aboriginal parents are very different from the Canadian population. As well, the school's expectation of parent engagement and an Aboriginal parent's view of engagement can be both traditionally and culturally very different" (p. 9). Although the research indicated many potential

barriers that exist on both the parent and school level, I have only chosen to discuss the barriers I believe to be most relevant to parents in my school. These include the negative educational experiences of parents, poverty, negative parental contact, cultural differences and lack of school strategies.

Negative parental educational experiences. Many Aboriginal parents have had negative experiences with schools resulting in a lack of confidence and trust in the Education system. For many First Nations communities, a significant contributor to this mistrust originated from their residential schooling experience. These government-funded, church-run residential schools were set up to eliminate parental involvement and cultural context for Aboriginal children. A profound long-term effect of taking generations of children away from their families, as R.A. Malatest & Associates Ltd (2002) note, is “a general lack of trust with the system and those who administer and deliver education” (p. 11). The challenge of overcoming the effects of residential schooling is difficult and gaining trust in the education system will definitely take time. Even for those individuals who did not attend residential schools, other negative school experiences still exist. As Hornby and Lafaele (2011) explain, “negative experiences with their children’s previous schools, or throughout them experiencing either learning or behavioural difficulties during their own schooling” are also barriers to parental involvement (p. 40). Additionally, many First Nations parents have experienced racism throughout their education. According to Richards (2012), “a history of discrimination permeates many Aboriginal families’ view of formal education” which has led to parents being

“skeptical of schools” (p. 5). Unmistakably when parents have negative experiences at school it can potentially result in them being reluctant to form meaningful partnerships with schools.

Poverty. The research literature points to poverty as another major barrier to parental engagement with their children’s schools. The research shows some very troubling statistics that indicates many First Nations families are living in poverty. A Macdonald and Wilson (2013) study found that “Indigenous children in Canada suffer a poverty rate of 40% compared to 15% for all other children in the country” (p. 12). These numbers are difficult to comprehend because historically First Nations communities have complex and rich cultures. Sadly, “First Nations have gone from being the richest peoples in the world to the most impoverished, as their lands, resources, and ways of being were stolen from them” (Palmer, 2011, p. 112). Colonization and assimilation combined with a severe underfunding of services by the federal government has had devastating health, employment and educational effects for First Nations people (Palmer, 2011).

The Gwa’sala-‘Nakwaxda’xw people are dealing with all of these effects as well. The community, like “most First Nations communities are still in the process of healing” and “personal wellness and social dislocation continue to be a concern” (Teaching in a First Nations School: An Information Handbook for Teachers New to First Nations Schools, 2006, p. 7). The evidence is undeniable that when families struggle with the effects of poverty - lower incomes, employment challenges, poor housing and health - it presents greater challenges towards their ability to be involved with their child’s education (Richards, 2012; Bower, 2011; Malatest &

Associates, 2002; Hornby, 2011). These parents face more barriers than parents from higher economic backgrounds including lack of resources, childcare and transportation concerns, and other stresses from living in disadvantaged communities. These parents often do not have an advanced education themselves and as a result many feel intimidated by schools in that they do not have the ability to question teachers (Hill and Taylor, 2004; Malatest & Associates, 2002). It is unfortunate that parents with children who would most benefit from parental involvement often find it most difficult to become and remain involved.

Negative parental contact. Parents who are primarily contacted by the school for adverse reasons often demonstrate decreased parental involvement. Hornby (2011) notes, “when children develop a reputation for exhibiting challenging behaviour their parents can be reluctant to go into schools for fear of getting more bad news” (p. 44). The same exists for Aboriginal parents who have contact from teachers that is usually only negative in nature (Malatest & Associates, 2002). The research also shows a huge difference in the nature of parental contact between affluent and economically depressed communities. According to Epstein (1995), “schools in more economically depressed communities make more contacts with families about the problems and difficulties students are having” (p. 703). Fostering parental engagement and developing partnerships with families must involve communication that takes a more balanced approach to include the positive accomplishments of students and not solely the negative.

Cultural differences. A further barrier for parents can be the difference in cultural backgrounds between themselves and their children’s educators. My school is located in a First

Nations community and all our students have First Nations backgrounds. That being said, our school administration and most of our teaching staff are non-First Nations. When teachers are culturally different to their students they are less likely to know them and their parents (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). I do believe that our staff members work diligently to form meaningful relationships with students and parents, to understand the local culture and to incorporate it into the curriculum. However this process takes time and the cultural difference is a factor to consider.

A lack of school strategies. Lastly, but very importantly, a lack of engagement strategies by schools to encourage and enhance parental involvement is a significant barrier to children's success academically, behaviourally and socially. Many schools and educators implicitly understand the importance of parental involvement, yet it is not always explicitly reflected in their practice. This may be a result of teachers being unprepared and lacking the knowledge about strategies for involving parents and developing collaborative relationships. Alberta Education in 2002 recognized "many teachers are unprepared when it comes to developing collaborative partnerships with parents" (p. 12). When the research is clear that family and school partnerships make a huge difference in the success of students it is so unfortunate that many teachers are not adequately trained or supported in this area. Although, as school principal, I cannot right the wrongs of European colonization and Aboriginal parents' previous negative schooling experiences, poverty, and cultural differences as highlighted in the literature above, I can work to evaluate our school's current practices to promote engagement in

relation to the literature in this review. I strongly believe that by broadening conceptions of “together” and increasing parental involvement from the community, our students will benefit tremendously. What follows in the next section of this M. Ed. project document is a case study of my personal experiences and reflections that relate to parental engagement at my school.

Part Three - Case Study

Learning and growth happens in many ways. Throughout my personal life and professional career I have had many learning opportunities that have allowed me to become a better educator and leader. As illustrated in Part One of this document, I learned from my parents that students benefit when families play an integral role in their children's education. This was confirmed in my literature review as the research clearly indicates that increasing parent and community involvement in education can lead to increases in student achievement. However, learning from my professional experiences through reflective practice and inquiry has arguably been the most powerful. It has allowed me to make sense of my daily interactions with colleagues, students and parents; to improve upon my own practice and thus the quality of education of my students. In this section of my M.Ed. project document I analyze and reflect upon a number of my notable experiences engaging parents at our school, recognizing the type of engagement we were hoping to achieve, potential barriers and methods to overcome them. I begin with incidents where engaging parents was successful, and escalating towards cases where involving parents was very difficult. Despite the degree of engagement achieved in each situation, all of these incidents have motivated me to establish, strengthen and grow relationships between the parents, school and community.

Our Special Education Department

During my time at the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School it is evident that our Special Education Department is at the forefront of creating and maintaining ongoing, collaborative relations between home and school. Through considerable self-reflection and analysis of past

experiences they have created procedures in our Individual Education Plan (IEP) process that have effectively built partnerships with our parents based upon mutual respect, shared responsibility and expertise. This has not been an easy task. Considering on average over one-third of our student population require an IEP it takes a huge commitment to have that many parents and/or families participate in the development of all of these individualized programs. Also, for many of our parents, simply coming into the school, let alone to an IEP meeting, can be overwhelming and even intimidating. Despite facing many challenges, our Special Education staff has been committed to creating and maintaining partnerships with families because they have seen it positively impact many students. As a result they work diligently to give parents a meaningful voice in their child's education by engaging them as equal partners and to share in responsibility in the development of their child's education program.

There are a couple critical incidents that clearly demonstrate the effectiveness of our Special Education staff at engaging parents and that have solidified my belief in the importance of parent involvement. Most notably, our determination to engage with one family in the IEP planning and implementation process clearly stands out in my mind. This family has six children who attend our school, five boys working at or near grade level and one daughter with severe special needs. Before their daughter entered our Special Education program, these parents demonstrated little interest in the school, had little knowledge about their child's programming and did not even know the teacher's name. That all changed once they became involved in the IEP process.

During the development of IEP's our staff take a team approach that promotes the active participation of both parties. This is accomplished in a few ways. First, we do not want to overwhelm the family so we only have a few staff members attend, the child's teacher, the special education worker and often myself. We typically ensure one of those staff members is from the local community and already has a positive relationship with the family. Second, we do our best to create a welcoming environment. When families arrive we always give them positive reinforcement for attending. We offer them a beverage, give them a comfortable seat to sit in and use a meeting room with little distraction. We also prefer to use a circular seating formation as a subtle way to promote cooperation and inclusiveness. Fourth, although we facilitate the meetings we try not to dominate the discussion. We continuously check in with the family and ask their input throughout the meeting. Fifth, we use familiar language and try not to use terminology that may be difficult to understand. Lastly and one of my favourites, we use humour to break the ice.

In the case noted above, these measures allowed the parents to feel comfortable enough to share salient information regarding their daughter's interests, their short and long-term aspirations for her and the learning goals they wanted the school to focus on. In turn the school shared our views on the significant learning needs we believed should be given priority and the specialized services we could provide to support them. All members actively participated in the discussion and collectively we were able to develop a plan that took into account the perspectives of both the family and the school. Including the thoughts and opinions of the

parents into the IEP decision-making process gave them a meaningful voice in their daughter's education. The impact on both the student and the family was immense. The student's attendance improved substantially, as a result her academic achievement increased. For the parents, being able to make a significant contribution to their daughter's program gave them more confidence because they felt more efficacious in their capacity to influence the success of their child. I believe these parents, like many of our parents have a desire to be involved in their child's school life. They may just lack the skills or confidence to be involved with their child's learning, particularly in a school setting. By making their voice valuable, our Special Education team has instilled confidence in many of our parents and helped them overcome this barrier. Most often, it is these parents, who have participated in the IEP team conferences that I regularly see at the school and who exhibit greater involvement in other school-related activities with all their children.

There was another critical incident that involved our Special Education department that was pivotal in shaping my belief that school and family partnerships can positively influence student success. When I first met this particular family, the parents had sent their children to our school in the primary grades, but transferred them to the public system in their intermediate years. They told me in later conversations that they believed it more beneficial to move their children because the public system was able to better prepare them for high school. While their children attended our school in their primary years these parents were committed to the success of their children and were actively involved in their education. They communicated well with

our staff, volunteered for school events and supported learning at home. However, when one of their children was struggling with his learning and was not meeting grade level expectations, it forced them to be involved in a different manner. During consultation with our Special Education department, both the parents and school staff agreed that for this student to keep up academically he would need a great deal of support from school and home. At school this involved working with his classroom teacher to adapt and modify his schoolwork to accommodate his learning style, as well as receiving additional daily one-on-one support from our Special Education staff. At home, the parents were motivated to play their part, but a significant barrier inhibited them from providing the additional assistance and reinforcement the student needed. Because their child had a severe learning disability, the parents voiced their concerns about not being able to properly support him. The student had the ability to learn, but compared to his other siblings his learning style was unique and his parents felt they did not have the skills to accommodate this difference. As a result, these parents were seeking to be engaged with the school in a learning and mentorship capacity. They wanted guidance and training to learn instructional strategies that they could employ at home. So we had these parents attend training sessions that were typically only offered to the staff. They also observed our Special Education teacher working with their child to model the approaches we found successful. Providing them with these learning opportunities allowed them to learn the strategies to facilitate their son's learning at home. With the student receiving individualized support from the school and home the student made significant academic improvements.

Reflecting back on our interactions with this family, it makes me proud because we developed a partnership that was undeniably successful. We were able to provide these parents with methods and strategies they could use to support learning at home. I believe we should be providing similar training or workshops for parents (e.g. family literacy) to develop strategies to engage in learning at home with their children. For this family, it transformed their struggling primary student into an effective learner who was working at grade level by grade seven. He is now on pace to graduate from high school on time with the rest of his peers. The huge strides these parents witnessed in their son validated their involvement and their ability to work together with the school. It also strengthened our relationship with this family, and their perception that the public system was a better option for their children changed. They realized, our school, in particular our Special Education staff are committed to engaging parents in their children's education. With this newfound confidence in our school they decided to keep their youngest two sons in our school until they left for high school and they even transferred another back in grade six from the public system. I am still close to these parents and they have become huge advocates for the importance of involving families at our school.

Learning From Challenging Situations

The high level of parental engagement found within our Special Education program unfortunately is not a general pattern at our school. Like many schools, we have parents who display a broad spectrum of involvement: committed parents who are supportive and participate, parents who demonstrate some support and parents who neither support nor participate in their

child's education. Attempting to engage some of these parents has been a challenge. I have experienced a number of incidents that have not produced the desired result where failure to properly engage these parents has resulted in a continuum of negative responses. I believe they are a result of the diverse and complex barriers that exist on a school and parent level. Although these situations have not always gone smoothly, they have given me an opportunity to reflect and learn from the experience, forced me to think differently and change my approach to involving these parents.

Avoidance. Avoidance is a behaviour that I have experienced from parents. Some parents have avoided being involved even in situations that require immediate attention for serious academic and disciplinary concerns or even medical emergencies. For example, there was an incident where an intermediate student directly mocked his homeroom teacher and a support worker in the classroom. When I asked the student what had happened he proceeded to mock me and told me to "Get my ears checked." Similar behaviour had been addressed previously with the student so I thought it was best to have a meeting to discuss the matter with his father, the primary caregiver. The intention of this meeting was to inform the parent of the behaviour, determine possible causes and collaborate on potential solutions. After talking to the father on the phone, he immediately came to the school. I told him about the severity of the incident and the pattern of inappropriate behaviour we had been experiencing. I also stressed the importance of dealing with the situation in comprehensive manner. The father responded by saying, "I'm busy and have to be back at work" and he took the child home with little discussion.

Over the next three days, I was forced to call home for similar behaviour and each time the father removed the child from school for the remainder of the day. On every occasion, I proposed a longer meeting to collaborate on the development of a behaviour management plan, but the father declined saying he was too busy. I failed in my attempts to connect with this parent and have him effectively engage with the school. As a result, we were not able to gain any valuable insight from him into the underlying causes of the student behaviour. This left us in a difficult situation because the behaviour continued in the subsequent days, frustrating the teacher and disrupting the learning of his classmates.

Reflecting back, it was obvious that the approach I used to communicate with this parent was unsuccessful and that I needed to find alternate ways of connecting with him. Identifying any potential barriers that may have faced this parent would have been a good place to begin. I believe I could have done this by simply asking the parent the reasons why he was unable to meet for long periods of time. I suspect it was due to his commitment to work. The father was a single parent and had recently gained new employment. Not wanting to miss work he was most likely unable to manage the multiple demands on his time. This may have put him off from being involved, especially since he was being called while he was at work. If this was the case, I could have attempted to organize a better time to meet with the father. My perception was that the father was uninterested in dealing with the situation so he was avoiding it all together. This may have been the case, but I should not have made that assumption. Investigating any barriers

and determining how to overcome them most likely would have been a more effective method of getting this parent be involved.

Refusal. Refusal is another behaviour that I have witnessed first-hand. Some parents believe that education is the sole responsibility of the school and that all school activities should be coordinated and managed by school staff. For example, I contacted a parent to set up a meeting regarding bullying concerns only to have them tell me, “It happened at school, so you deal with it!” Another parent, when asked to volunteer for a school fundraising event, refused because they told me it was my job and that’s what I get paid for. Refusal to engage with the school on any level has definitely stunted the learning and growth of students at our school. For example, we have had to cancel field trips because we haven’t had enough parent volunteers. Parents also refuse to help their children with homework even though it is an integral component of our reading and math programs.

I believe many of these parents simply don’t understand that when the school and families work together to support learning, students tend to have better academic achievement. As a school we need to find creative ways of sharing this information. Building a relationship is an important first step to engaging these parents in this process. One method that has helped connect them with the school has been to invite them to events that don’t require them to bear any responsibility, such as our Fun Fair, Play Potlatch or Pancake Breakfast. Once they are in the building it gives our staff a chance to informally talk with them. As the relationship builds we can then discuss the correlation between family involvement in education and student

success. When parents feel comfortable with you, as well as witness all the wonderful experiences the school is providing their children they are more likely to be involved, even if it's on a small level such as volunteering for school activities.

Confrontation. Confrontation is another behaviour of parents I have experienced. I have had parents become argumentative and confrontational as a result of a disagreement over an incident that has happened with their child. I clearly recall one situation where we hoped to establish communication with a family regarding their child's aggressive behaviour towards students and staff. This was an attempt to work together to find ways to prevent this behaviour and agree on appropriate discipline if the inappropriate behaviour persisted. Unfortunately, one of these meetings ended when one parent yelled obscenities at my staff and stormed out of the room. It was obvious the conflict was attributed to different perceptions on the situation. The parent believed his child was being bullied but we believed by analyzing all the information that he was being a bully.

I was very troubled by this incident and it took me a few days to determine a suitable way to re-approach this parent. I realized, after reflecting on the event and discussing it with other staff, that a barrier to meaningful engagement for this parent might have been related to negative parental contact. Specifically, most previous contacts with the parents had been due to adverse behaviours from the child. As a result, it was important to re-establish positive communication with this family. I achieved this by having a respectable community member, in this case a band counselor, be the mediator for each side. With the counselor's unbiased support we were able to

reconvene and have a meaningful discussion about how both sides could support the student. I also made sure the student's teacher was in daily communication with these parents. This way they were more aware of the challenges the student faced, but also to inform them of the many positive aspects of the student's behaviour and learning. Confrontation can be very damaging as it has the potential to destroy relationships that take years to develop. However, as in this situation, it can also be a catalyst for change and result in a positive outcome. The conflict with this father ultimately forced me to be more creative in my approach and engage with them in a different manner.

Threats and violence. Threats and violence have only happened in a minority of cases but they have been the most difficult behaviours to work with. I have had parents intimidate me physically and verbally including through the use of racial slurs and even threaten my employment within the community. Initially these experiences were upsetting and even made me angry. However, in more recent interactions of this nature I haven't been as discouraged. I have come to the realization that for many parents this type of behaviour is a manner in which they know how to support and protect their children. So in more recent incidents, I have remained calm and actually thanked many of these parents for showing interest in their child's education. This has managed to neutralize the situation and facilitate appropriate communication with one another. Although I don't agree with their approach, at least they cared enough to fight for what they believed was best for their child. I believe these parents have the potential to work

in partnership with the school; we just have to come up with ways to properly engage these parents and to redirect this energy into something more positive.

Parents and families who we find difficult to engage are a realistic challenge facing our school. Although parental involvement is not the only factor to student success, in my experience when negative or ineffective parental engagement occurs it adversely affects the student. It has the potential to decrease student attendance, lower academic achievement and increase inappropriate student behaviour. Unfortunately, these incidents often involve the highest risk students who require the greatest amount of support at school and from home to be successful. This makes any fractures in the parent-school relationship potentially devastating for children. As a result, I believe this gives critical importance to improving our interactions and communication with these parents. It motivates me to better understand our parents and the factors that inhibit engagement, to be reflective about our school practices, and to discover more effective ways of engaging parents and families. Education must be an activity of collaboration and not an activity of isolation.

Part Four - Reflection

The primary motivation for my M.Ed. project is to improve student achievement at my school. There is strong empirical and scholarly evidence that effective parental engagement arguably can make the biggest impact on increasing student achievement (Feinstein & Symons, 1999, Fan & Chen, 2001 & Epstein, 2009). When parents are engaged and involved, students, parents, families, teachers, schools and communities all benefit; schools become increasingly rich and positive places to teach, learn and grow. Having supportive parents of my own, and by working at schools early in my career with excellent parental engagement, I took these powerful and unequivocal claims for granted. The reality is that many schools, including the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw School struggle to achieve a high level of parental engagement. Nevertheless, I believe that by understanding the barriers to involvement that our parents face and through purposeful reflection of past practices we have a wonderful opportunity to cultivate meaningful family-school linkages. In this final section of this project I make my recommendations as to the steps involved in promoting and strengthening parental engagement at my school.

Responsive initiatives and recommendations

Adapting existing and implementing new school-wide practices that promote parental engagement are responses to the existence of barriers to involvement found within our school and community. I believe my literature review highlights barriers that are unique to First Nations students and that they are an accurate reflection of barriers that face our parents. These include negative educational experiences, poverty, negative parental contact, cultural differences, and a lack of school strategies. It is evident these barriers exist because they have been identified

in research where data has been compiled from within First Nations communities. More importantly, I know these barriers are prevalent at my school because parents have told me they exist and I have first-hand experience with them. Next, I outline my experiences with each barrier, connect them to the findings of my literature review, then suggest strategies to help overcome the barrier and hopefully increase parental involvement.

Barrier: Negative educational experiences. Research conducted by R.A. Malatest & Associates (2002) refers to the trauma incurred from residential school as a considerable factor that makes parental involvement difficult in First Nations communities. Many of our parents and community members have had similar experiences within the education system. For example, elders in our community have told me that they still have mistrust for the education system as a result of the negative effects of residential schooling. As previously cited in my literature review, Richards (2012) noted, “a history of discrimination permeates many Aboriginal families’ view of formal education” (p. 5). I have also heard many stories from parents in our community that they experienced racism when they were students at school. The following recommendations will help promote parent involvement, ultimately by making this group of parents feel comfortable at the school. It must be noted that for some, these experiences were so profoundly negative, that it will take considerable time to overcome this barrier and gain trust in the education system.

1. *First Nations control over education.* According to Joyce Epstein’s *Framework of*

Six Types of Involvement, as referenced in the literature review, developing activities that allow parents to be involved in the decision making process will get them more involved (Epstein, 2009, p.16). We are a community school run by the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw First Nation. The Band Council, who are elected representatives of the village, many of them parents of students at our school, are essentially in charge of operating the school. Through the band council, the community has the potential to have meaningful input into shared policies and vision of the school. This would give the community a feeling of ownership over the school. Epstein (2009) also mentions the creation of parent organizations as a method of including families in the decision making of shared views and actions (p.16). Currently, we do not have a parent organization at our school. However, I do believe it could be a potentially excellent way to create meaningful partnerships with our parents.

2. *Create a welcoming, family-friendly environment.* Although I did not review the research related to school climate and parent involvement in my literature review, I do believe it deserves consideration. Especially for parents who have experienced trauma or racism at school we want to have them associate our school with a positive experience and atmosphere. A critical step to having these parents be involved is to have them feel comfortable at the school. I believe our school is doing well in this area. I know this because many parents and community members have told us how welcoming our school feels. This has been achieved through a number of ways. First of all, our hallways have large cedar pillars similar to a First Nations Big House, the walls are decorated with First Nations art created by our students, large photos of traditional

territories and pictures of elders. Our goal is to have community members instantly feel a connection to their family, their past and their culture. Third, our school staff does well to make a good first impression with visitors. They are warm and friendly, ask if help is needed and address concerns quickly. In this First Nations community, it is customary to hug our elders when they enter our building. We also exchange greetings in the local language. As the principal, I have an open door policy where parents and community members are always welcome. This has worked well and I have been able to engage with many more parents in this manner than I had by scheduling meetings with them. Fourth, we invite parents and community members into classrooms and to school-wide activities. This gives parents an opportunity to become familiar with the school staff and the building. The more parents are in the building, the more likely they are to get involved.

3. *Having support.* Although not discussed in literature review, it is from my experience that allowing parents or community members to be supported by a familiar person has increased involvement at our school. For example, we have had much more success having elders come to our school when they are able to have other elders accompany them. We have also changed our approach with parents during meetings. Typically we would just expect parents to show up for meetings, give their input and leave. However, for many of our parents, like the elder who attended residential school, they may not feel comfortable or safe at school. So in recent years we give parents the option of having support people such as a family member, a family support worker or other advocates attend. We also implemented a new strategy that had one of our

employees who is well respected and from the local community attend meetings with reluctant families. His presence and ability to empirically identify the needs of both sides has made a huge difference in our ability to work with families who were previously challenging to connect with. It's my experience that parents who are more supported feel more comfortable and are more likely to attend, as well as openly share information, than those who come alone.

Barrier: Poverty. The negative effects of poverty have been widely demonstrated and accepted in research (Richards, 2012; Bower, 2011; Malatest & Associates, 2002; Hornby, 2011). As noted in the literature review, parents living in poverty have so many factors to overcome for them to be involved, including lack of resources, childcare and transportation concerns and other stresses from living in disadvantaged communities (Hill and Taylor, 2004; Malatest & Associates, 2002). Many of these effects are clearly evident in our community and at my school. Like many First Nations communities, many of our families have substandard living conditions or they live off reserve because there is a lack of suitable housing in their community. In addition, a large percentage of our parents have employment, health and social concerns. Overcoming poverty is very challenging, but I believe our school plays a crucial role in supporting these families. The following strategies have allowed many of our families to be more involved in their child's education.

1. Help parents overcome barriers. It is from my experience that lower-income families are confronted with many barriers to involvement. As a result, we have adopted some simple but effective practices that will help them overcome barriers to communication, childcare and

transportation. For instance, many of parents do not have a landline telephone or even mobile phones that can accept incoming calls. As a result, we communicate with many of families through text and Facebook messages. Additionally, many of these parents can not afford childcare so there are times when we even provide babysitting options. This past year our secretary and school custodian child minded the two younger siblings of a student whose parent was at an IEP meeting. Many of our parents do not have transportation options other than walking. So it is common practice to pick up parents if they need to come to the school to volunteer, for meetings or any other activities. We do this so often that I carry a child booster seat in my car at all times because many of parents are forced to bring younger siblings with them to school. Although employing these strategies can be a tall order, we have seen an increase in parents at our school as a result of implementing these practices.

Barrier: Negative Parental Contact. It was clear throughout the literature that negative parental contact is a significant barrier for many parents. Epstein's (1995) research concluded that negative contact with parents was more prevalent in "economically depressed communities" (p. 703). Although the community where I work could be considered "economically depressed" I don't believe there is a general pattern of more negative contact with parents at our school. It could almost be the opposite. We make contact with the parents to inform them of positive student achievement or behavior more often than negative contact. That being said, like the father mentioned in Part Three, there have been times that some parents have primarily been contacted when their child is in trouble. It is from my experience that solely having negative

communication with a parent can seriously impede their involvement. As mentioned in my literature review, Hornby (2011) notes, “when children develop a reputation for exhibiting challenging behaviour their parents can be reluctant to go into schools for fear of getting more bad news” (p. 44). This is not a pattern we want to have happen and the following strategies will help alleviate this concern.

1. *Frequent and balanced communication.* Epstein (2009), identifies communication as an important partnership practice (p. 16). I would agree, but would go further to say for this communication to be effective it must be frequent and balanced. It has to be more than a monthly newsletter or a parent-teacher interview at the end of a term. Weekly, if not daily communication will provide parents with a more accurate reflection of student progress, increase their understanding of school programs and policies, and help develop familiarity in interacting with teachers. These parents will also develop a greater capacity for monitoring their children's progress and be more responsive to their problems.

2. *Mediation.* Unfortunately, negative contact with parents is a reality. I did not review any literature that pertains to mediation between schools and parents, but I do have valuable experience in this area. From my experience, I have found it very useful not to get discouraged, to take time after any negative incident to debrief with school administration before looking at ways to reconnect with the parent. Every situation and parent is different so there may not be one method that will work in all situations. Other colleagues may already have a connection with the family and be able to suggest an effective method to engage these parents. As

mentioned in the Part Three, I have had a band counselor be a mediator between an upset parent and myself.

Barrier: Cultural differences. As noted in my literature review, when teachers are culturally different to their students they are less likely to know them and their parents (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). At our school this is a legitimate concern as most of our staff are not from the local First Nations community or do not have Aboriginal ancestry. At our school, we have developed the following strategies to be effective at helping our staff connect with our parents and be responsive to cultural differences. These suggestions have been locally developed and are based on over 30 years of experience having a school in a First Nations community, consultation with our elders, parents and culture staff at our school. I believe these strategies are an effective way to connect with families for any staff member working in a First Nations school.

1. *Respect.* Respect is the most important value for First Nations schools. This is a consistent value for all First Nations schools and communities. I have learned that respect can be demonstrated by listening to others. I will always remember an incident with an elder who was talking to one of his granddaughters. He said, “You need to use your (pointing at his ears) more than your (pointing at his mouth).” For myself, this was a huge challenge because I always thought I had something valuable to share so I wanted to speak first and dominate the conversation. I now always listen more than I speak. As discussed in Part Three, the facilitator of our IEP meetings followings this same principle where parents and students are invited to

speak first, before our teachers or special education staff. Understanding and valuing these traditions are important for all staff members to know. It is important to seek direction from experienced staff members or people from the local community as to how to be culturally appropriate. As the principal of the school I help this process by collaborating with our two First Nations culture teachers to organize cultural training sessions for the staff.

2. *Be involved in community and cultural events.* Our First Nations community appreciates teachers who show a commitment to the lives of their students by participating in community events, especially ones that involve their culture and traditions. Recently, a well-respected community member mentioned how important it was to have staff attend community events. He also remarked how the community looks forward to seeing us there in support and how they notice staff at these functions. In my situation, there are many excellent opportunities to attend community run activities including potlatches and feasts, community dinners and sports tournaments. By taking part in local community events, teachers will educate themselves regarding the various cultural backgrounds found within their communities, which can lay the groundwork for establishing positive relationships with the institutions and people that play a major role in the lives of students (Epstein, 1996). As a school leader, I need to advise staff members about the importance of establishing these relationships. I also need to work closely with various groups within the community (ie. Band Council, Health & Child Services, Youth Sports and Recreation and Elders) to determine when events are taking place so I can recommend to my staff which ones would be meaningful and advantageous to attend.

3. *Understand the community.* From my experience, it is important to learn the history and current reality of the community and school. Many of the teachers at our school have worked in the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw community for many years and are familiar with these issues. However, we do not have any standard procedures for new staff orientation. Recently, the community released a documentary video entitled "How A People Live" that traced the history of the Gwa'sala-'Nakwaxda'xw people. This gave our staff, especially the new employees, an opportunity to learn about the many hardships the community has dealt with. Providing new employees with similar learning opportunities will enable them to better understand the profound issues that may inhibit engagement and will help them relate to their students and their families, and will increase community confidence in new teachers. This could be worked into a structured orientation at the beginning of the year for new teachers. Relevant information could also be shared at every staff meeting for new and continuing staff.

Barrier: A lack of school strategies. When parental engagement is lacking, I believe schools should look inwardly at themselves and determine if they are providing sufficient opportunities for their parents to be involved and engaged in their student's learning. If we compare our practices to the six types of involvement suggested by Epstein, I believe we are providing our parents with opportunities in most areas, but I do believe there is room for substantial improvement in all of them. The following strategies will hopefully help schools foster new ideas and remain focused on the importance of parental engagement.

1. *Commitment to a vision.* In my research for my literature review I did not find any research on the importance of staff commitment to a school vision of increasing parent involvement. Being a principal for some time now, I have learned that an administrator's vision can quickly be renounced if teachers do not believe in the vision or are reluctant to change. So of the most important responsibilities of the school leader when establishing any vision is to share in its development. For staff to take ownership they must be involved in every step of the process. They must understand the data that reflects the importance of parental engagement in student achievement and collaborate on the design and implementation. Parental engagement has a greater effect if it is embedded into school development plans because it is more likely to result in a whole-school commitment to working with parents and families (Bull, Brooking & Campbell, 2008).

2. *Teacher training.* As outlined in my literature review, research indicates that many teachers are unprepared in developing partnerships with parents (Alberta Education, 2002). If this is the case, then school administrators need to provide on-going professional development for teachers to learn how to work with, and engage parents. Training and development of staff contributes to the capacity of schools to develop and implement strategies that support the engagement of parent's in their children's learning.

Conclusion

Parental engagement matters. The evidence is undeniable that student achievement improves when parents play an active role in their child's education. Knowing this, I believe our

school has little choice but to be committed to looking at strategies to increase involvement and create more meaningful partnerships with our parents. We are already engaging many of our parents on a number of levels. However, by continually analyzing the effectiveness of our existing practices, as well as learning from relevant and current research, we have the ability to adapt, modify or create ways of having our parents be engaged in their child's education. In doing so, we will actualize our school motto, "STRONG TOGETHER IN ALL WE DO."

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