

Looking Out, Looking In

*A partnership approach respects the strengths
and knowledge of students' families.*

Debbie Pushor

As an educator, something I find interesting—and worthy of exploration—is our starting place when we seek ways to reach out to families and communities. We typically look outward. We note that

some parents do not speak English, that some work long hours in demanding jobs, and that some have no job at all. We see some families struggling with the social and economic challenges of living in poverty. We observe families who are new to our country and who

may not yet understand the systems and structures of its schools. We witness varied levels of literacy and education and access to resources.

As we look outward, we often focus on the challenges that exist out there in families and communities. We attend to

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who they are (or are not); what they have (or don't have); and how much they can (or cannot) support the school's agenda. At times, we blame parents for what they are or are not doing: "If only these parents would . . .," or "These parents just don't care enough." At times, we shame parents for failing to meet our expectations through our notes and phone calls home about their children or through sessions designed to teach them how to be better parents. Such actions, which focus on things we believe others should do, only serve to widen the distance and feelings of alienation between the school and the home.

A more honoring and respectful approach is to start our work with families and communities by looking in a different direction—inward. The only thing we truly have any control over is ourselves. When we examine how our beliefs and assumptions shape our practices in reaching out to families and communities, what new possibilities do we see?

Meeting Melissa and Melody's Parents

In my first year of teaching, I had two sisters in my class whom I will call Melissa and Melody. They were both kind and friendly girls, considerate of others and always offering to help me out in the classroom. But because the girls' clothes were dirty and they often smelled, other children in the classroom regularly resisted working with them in small groups or pairs. Concerned that Melissa and Melody were being marginalized, I wrote a note home to their parents, whom I had not yet met, asking them to come in for a meeting. I did not indicate why I wanted to talk with them.

When the parents arrived, they were holding hands and visibly nervous. Like Melissa and Melody, the parents wore



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dirty clothes. They expressed concern for their daughters and were clearly anxious about why I had asked them to come and see me. In that moment, in their tightly interwoven hands, their worried expressions, and their questions about their daughters, I saw myself reflected—and I was both embarrassed and humbled. As a first-year teacher, with no children of my own, I had seen myself as the expert—the one who cared about their daughters, who was going to tell them how to do a better job of keeping their children clean.

Wanting to step away from the position I had assumed in relation to this mom and dad, I asked the parents to sit with me at the round table in our classroom and to look through samples of Melissa's and Melody's writing so that we could celebrate their growth. As we sat together, talking about the girls, I began to learn a little about the parents and their family and to gain some understanding of the richness of their family life and the complexities they

navigated daily. I began to sit *with* them, rather than to stand apart from them.

Thirty years later, this experience remains vivid in my memory. It keeps me awake to what I believe and assume about families and communities and about myself, helping me consciously strive to act in ways that leave everyone within an encounter feeling respected and strengthened.

Looking Inward as an Intentional Practice

My experience with Melissa and Melody's family disrupted the unexamined way in which I was living out my role as a teacher. But looking inward does not have to happen by chance or as the result of experiences like this one. It can be an integral part of our planned work as educators.

As a School Community

In our research at Princess Alexandra Community School in Saskatchewan, Canada, my colleagues and I found that this process of looking inward was an essential part of engaging parents and families (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). Princess Alexandra is a preK–8 school serving about 240 students, the majority of them from First Nations or Métis communities. For about a year and a half, staff members, family and community members, First Nations elders, and older students gathered in the evening for soup and bannock (fry-bread) every couple of months to collectively define their beliefs.

From that point onward, they used the four beliefs they had articulated—respect, connectedness, self-esteem, and safety—as their touchstones in all discussions and planning. Such questions as, "How does this activity help us enhance relationships with family and community members?" or "How will we ensure that parents have the same infor-



mation we have so they can participate equitably in making this decision?” became a routine part of school practice.

As a Professional Team

Another way to look inward is to dedicate professional development time to examining beliefs and assumptions about families and communities. I regularly facilitate sessions in which educators share stories of their individual experiences with families. We then work together to challenge or affirm the beliefs that were shaped by these experiences. Once educators consciously articulate their beliefs, we explore how they can reimagine their practice to better reflect their beliefs.

For example, it is common for educators to state that they believe parents hold knowledge both about children and about teaching and learning. Typically, though, their schools hold a Meet the Teacher night in September in which the teachers introduce themselves to the parents or family members of their students; outline curriculum expectations for their grade level; and describe their program, policies, and procedures for the year. Parents listen as the teachers describe the decisions they have already made.

In such a practice, there is no place for parents to share what they know about their children, their families, or the community. There is no invitation for them to express their hopes and dreams for their children. There is no collaborative decision making to determine what policies or practices may make sense for the children and families.

In light of this disconnect between the teachers’ stated belief and their practice, teachers and I often explore together how a Meet the Teacher night could become Meet the Parents/Families night instead. I pose questions like these: How might such an event unfold? How might a teacher, believing that parents have knowledge, determine with parents such things as a homework policy? How might a teacher facilitate a conversation

with parents in which they determine whether the parents want homework for their children? If so, how much, what kind, and what role do the parents want to play in the homework? In these newly imagined practices, teachers are able to live out their belief in parents as holders of knowledge through real opportunities for parents to speak and to participate in decision making.

Taking Time

Looking inward takes time. It requires a safe space in which individuals can risk telling their stories and being vulnerable as learners. It requires opportunities for honest, open conversation in which thoughts and ideas are treated

determined. There is an inherent hierarchy in this relationship. Educators have power because they decide when and how parents will play a part in their children’s schooling. As the school’s agenda unfolds and decisions are made, information or requests for involvement move out in one direction, from the school to parents and families.

Often, schools try to improve family involvement by becoming more invitational and welcoming. We translate newsletters into multiple languages or provide translators at open house nights and parent-teacher conferences. To facilitate parents’ attendance at school events, we serve coffee and sometimes a meal or a snack, provide babysitting

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with respect and dignity as educators explore new ways of making sense of their relationships with families and communities.

When we move on too quickly to developing new plans to reach out to families and communities, without this deeper exploration of who we are in relation to families and how and why we want to reach out to them, we end up doing the same old things we have always done; we just dress them up in new ways. The new ways may appear more appealing than the old, but they are likely to be no more effective.

Engaging Parents on a Deeper Level

Meet the Teacher nights, parent meetings, volunteer programs, fundraising campaigns, and field trips are some of the same old ways in which we invite parents and family members to be involved with their children’s schooling. When we involve parents and family members in these ways, we are asking them to serve the school’s agenda, which we as educators have

for preschoolers, or offer transportation between homes and the school.

In and of themselves, these are all good things. But if we still create the agenda and hold onto power, positioning ourselves and our knowledge as central, we are just dressing up old practices. We are not actually changing anything.

We begin to make real change only when we challenge myths and deficit thinking about parents and families. As we move from old ways of family involvement to new ways of family engagement, we enable parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, combining their knowledge of children and of teaching and learning with teachers’ knowledge. As the structure of schooling is flattened, educators and parents can develop a new agenda—one that is mutually determined and mutually beneficial (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005).

In my moment of awakening with Melissa and Melody’s parents, in a very small way, I began such a process of



relationship building. Sitting together at the round table in my classroom, we began to talk. As they read the stories their children had written in school, the parents, too, began to tell me stories. Listening to their stories was the most significant thing I did that day—just being present, spending some time, coming to know them. I learned that the father raced stock cars on a circuit in Montana in the summers and that the family traveled together for this period of time. I learned of the extended community in which they lived every summer, of places they had been, and of experiences they had had as a family. I glimpsed their passion for stock car racing, and I began to understand that they had structured their lives in a way that made these summers possible.

At the end of our time together, I saw the parents' love and concern for their children rather than what I had previously perceived as neglect. I realized how much my focus on cleanliness had clouded my appreciation for the girls' kindness and generosity and their joyful spirits. I had new insights into ways I could facilitate a deep and respectful sense of community in our classroom and take a different, more educative, approach with the girls around body awareness and hygiene. I believe that the parents and I both left our meeting with a shared sense of hopes and dreams for their children.

With a colleague, I began a Girls' Club at our school. We planned after-school sessions that addressed questions and interests the girls had in relation to their personal development. In one session, the public health nurse talked with the girls about feminine care and hygiene products and how to use them. At times, we had guests leading sessions on topics the girls had suggested, such as hair care. Other times, we sat together over a snack and talked. In addition to gaining knowledge about how to take ownership of their own personal care, the girls came to know one another differently and

developed stronger relationships with one another—relationships that transferred into the classroom.

New Assumptions and Beliefs

A number of beliefs underlie an expanded concept of family engagement. One of them is a belief in parent knowledge—the belief that parents or caregivers, living in the complex context of the family, hold deep and rich knowledge of their children. The deeper kind of family engagement that we seek—participating in the analysis of student achievement


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results, helping to establish school priorities, contributing to decisions about homework practices, and so on—requires that schools lay parent knowledge alongside teacher knowledge to make more fully informed decisions on behalf of students. This kind of engagement is about giving parents a voice and a place in the core work of schooling—teaching and learning.

Another core belief is that everyone should leave the encounters between educators and family members feeling strengthened. Our engagement with families depends on a sense of reciprocity and deep feelings of mutual care, respect, and commitment. I think of Janice, the mother of one of my students, who spent a lot of time volunteering in my classroom. She loved to write poetry and often worked alongside students during writing time. Janice talked with the children about their ideas, at times supporting them as they put their ideas on paper, at other times scribing for them. We sometimes printed her poems in our school newsletter or shared them at school assemblies.

Janice often said how much she

enjoyed having coffee in the staff room at recess and sharing the collegiality of lunchtime staff conversations. It was not until years later that she confided to me that during that period she had been living in an abusive relationship. Our school was a place of safety for her, where she felt worthy and valued. Her passion for poetry and her engagement in our writing processes were a real gift to my students, and her friendship and presence in our classroom were a gift to me. We were all enriched by our time together.

In the song "Affirmation," by Savage Garden (Jones & Hayes, 1999), the chorus begins with the line, "I believe in karma—what you give is what you get returned." I believe that when we look inward and challenge our assumptions and beliefs about families and communities, what we give is what we get returned. When we give our heartfelt care and commitment, time to listen and learn, and space for parent knowledge to be shared alongside our own knowledge, what we get is stronger schools, families, and communities. 

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