

The Inclusion of Parents and Families in Schooling: *Challenging the Beliefs and Assumptions that Lead to the Exclusion of Our Students' First Teachers*

Gwyn Fournier
University of Saskatchewan
Canada

ABSTRACT Through autobiographical narrative inquiry, I use my stories of experience to unpack the notion of inclusion and then, using that definition, I explore commonly held beliefs and assumptions about the positioning of parents and families in schools. I discuss how educators often unintentionally exclude parents and families from their children's schooling through common, taken-for-granted institutional practices, and how these practices then continue to perpetuate exclusion. I share my rethinking of practices, and I extend Pushor's notion of parent engagement, reframing her conceptualization through a lens of inclusion and ethical space. I explore how educators might work with parent voice and presence in an inclusive way, repositioning ourselves alongside parents and engaging in authentic relationships to deepen learning opportunities for our students, enriching the lives of our students and their families, as well as our own.

Introduction

When I think back over my education as a student in elementary and secondary school, and then in my early years as an educator, my experience was that students with special educational needs were completely segregated from the students in mainstream programs. Educators planned for and worked to meet the needs of these students by enrolling them in individualized programs within specialized classrooms and schools. Educational programming in these classrooms was entirely different from the *regular* stream and could be individualized to suit the diverse needs of each student. At the same time, students in the mainstream were able to complete their programming without the disruptions and inconveniences of the adjustments and accommodations that would have to be made by classroom teachers in order to include all students. At the time, segregation was considered best practice, and educators, academics, and decision-makers believed it to be the best option for everyone.

Thankfully, there is now an understanding of the mutual benefits of having all students work and learn together. Educators in schools are beginning to consider and include students of

all abilities as well as recognize their civil and social rights to an inclusive education. As educators, we are beginning even to think beyond integration, which can actually still be a deficit model in consideration of the requirement of the educator and other classmates to make the accommodations for the child with complex learning needs. The child with complex needs must *fit in* or *become ready* to share in the learning in which other students are already participating. In considering *inclusion*, we look instead at the unique gifts of all students and plan accordingly so that all students can take their rightful place to work and learn alongside each other in authentic, reciprocal relationships. Inclusion truly embraces the gifts and talents in each one of our students, and educational policies, programs and schools are being re-conceptualized and reorganized with inclusive ideologies at their core.

Defining Inclusion

In considering the meaning of the word *inclusion*, I note that *to include* is defined as “to contain [or hold within] as part of a whole” (“Include,” 2014). I visualize the image of an embrace. I think of holding someone within my arms and freely giving something of myself to that person. In response, I also receive something. In such an embrace, the other person has also given of her/himself, and it has been a mutually beneficial interchange.

It takes a certain amount of risk to embrace someone, particularly for the first time. There may be many questions and uncertainties as each person tries to determine the motivations and intentions of the other. It is not be the same if only one person commits to the embrace. It requires that both parties become somewhat vulnerable and exposed within the space of each other; but, in the giving and receiving of an embrace, both parties benefit greatly. In thinking of inclusion in the same way as an embrace, I note that two people can come together, interweaving ourselves and our beliefs with another person, being both the includer and the included at the same time.

Inclusion is often lived out between two people: life partners, employer and employee, student and teacher, friends, siblings, parent and child, or any other lived relationship. It is inside these relationships that people choose to share their own vulnerability for the sake of building a strong connection. Inclusion can also be practiced between groups of more than two people, as in the cases of a school, classroom, committee, or team. In order to create a safe space in which to become vulnerable, it may take a different type of effort to ensure that each person is regarded by the others equitably. It is only in finding that safe place that individuals can open their arms to embrace one another and the notions inherent to inclusion. Without each person first becoming vulnerable his/herself, inclusion cannot truly be practiced; neither can we be entirely whole.

Who is Being Excluded?

Inclusion, the act of including, or the notion of being included has been discussed, developed, debriefed, and referenced in education, often with respect to the inclusion of students (Lareau & McNamara Horvat, 1999; Loreman, 2007; Paley, 1993; Porter, 2008, Zepeda, 2012). All students have the right to an inclusive education, and all educators have an inherent duty to provide it. Educators and students becoming whole through inclusive practices is powerful and beneficial for all people involved. There may, however, be something additional to think about; there may be another part missing that has not yet been considered, keeping us from being truly complete.

Picture a young mother walking with her son on a warm September morning. He has a new green backpack; his new white socks are pulled up as high as possible, his shoes are neatly tied, his hair is combed into place, and the breakfast is freshly washed from his face. This is his first day of Kindergarten. He is excited and maybe a little bit nervous. His mom feels the same way. She cannot believe how fast the past few years have gone. How did her baby boy grow so fast to be ready for school so soon? She wonders if she has taught him everything he needs to know; is he ready for this? She has taught him his alphabet, how to count to ten, how to tie his shoes, and how to say please and thank you. Together they have stirred pancake batter, read books, spent hours exploring the cracks in the sidewalk and built hundreds of blanket forts in the living room. She has been readying her heart for this moment when she hands him over to someone else, entrusting that his teacher will love and understand him as she does.

They walk, hand-in-hand, greeting friends and neighbors as they head into the school. In the air lingers great excitement for the new school year. The mother and her son walk through the busy halls. The young boy pulls close to her as they pass groups of students buzzing about their new clothes and sharing stories of summer adventures. They get to the classroom door where they are greeted warmly by the Kindergarten teacher. She seems caring and loving as she bends down and welcomes the boy into her classroom. She offers to show him the building blocks by the window and invites him to look through the basket of books. She takes his hand, smiles at the mother, reassuring her and indicating, "He will be okay." Then she leads him into the classroom to join the other children. The young mother is left standing alone, wondering what to do as the teacher takes over, appearing to replace her position with her son. Eventually, the classroom door is closed, and the teacher begins her work with the children. The mother is left alone on the outside of the classroom looking in. She does not feel included on the school landscape; this space is not her place.

Parents, grandparents, step-parents, foster parents, aunts, uncles, and all other significant caregivers are our students' first teachers. They are the most important influences in students' lives, long before students reach the classroom. Further, their caregivers will be there long after our students leave us. Indeed, as educators, we are only present in our students' lives for a few passing moments (Pushor, 2013). Yet, educators sometimes miss or, sadly, ignore the importance and knowledge of parents and families as we stake our claim to the ownership of learning and of school settings. In some cases, the positioning of parents is clearly not one that is alongside educators, but is across from them. Parents may be asked to fill a role that serves only the needs of the school, and there may be several barriers in place that hinder authentic parent involvement, such as differences in perceived power, levels of trust and mistrust, and communication blocks between parents and educators (Lawson, 2003).

Henderson, Mapp, Johnson and Davies (2007) propose that there is a range of types of family-school partnerships reaching from "Open Door" schools on one end of the continuum to "Fortress" schools on the other. In Open Door schools, authentic partnerships between educators and caregivers are in place or are developing. These relationships enrich the lives and education of all students, families and educators. In Fortress schools, educators do not place significant value on the expertise of families and caregivers. It is on this latter side of the continuum where educators shut out the voice and presence of families, excluding them from their children's schools and schooling. Often, this exclusion is an unintentional consequence as we follow taken-for-granted institutional practices that we have always followed, not thinking about or challenging the beliefs and assumptions that helped put those practices into place.

Deep-Rooted Thinking and Practice

Looking back, particularly over my first years as an educator, I recognize the influence of my experiences with a segregated model of education resulting in the compartmentalized positioning of parents and families. Assumptions about families were alive and well in my beliefs and practice.

A Trebuchet and the Positioning of Parents

In my early days of teaching Grade 8 science, I remember sending home an assignment over the winter break. Students were asked to demonstrate their understanding of force, work, and simple machines by using a defined list of criteria from which to design and build a tabletop trebuchet, a medieval catapult. No materials were provided, and students were to complete the project independently over the school break. I informed students that we would be holding trials during our first week back to school, and points would be awarded for adhering to the given criteria, as well as for distance and accuracy in their shots.

On the first day of school following the break, I was excited to see several students walk in with trebuchets in tow. They were built out of various types of wood, which was one of the defined criteria. Some were hot glued together, some tied together with string, and others were falling apart, because they had not been built strongly enough for transportation to school. I was thrilled to see how hard my students had worked, and I was excited to begin the trials during science class. Then, Sarah walked in with her trebuchet. Sarah's trebuchet was made of measured-twice-and-cut-once wood, and it was expertly assembled using nuts and carriage bolts. It was adjustable so that it could excel using multiple types of loads and be accurate over various distances. It was painted pink and purple. It was obvious to me at the time that Sarah had received lots of help with her project.

I was livid. The expectation was that students do the work. How could she possibly have learned anything if she had so much help? Did she do any of the assignment herself? Who was supposed to be doing the learning for this Grade 8 science credit? How was I supposed to assign a grade for this? I remember ranting to a colleague who wisely responded that, instead of complaining about it, I could be spending this time celebrating that Sarah's parents were supporting her school learning. The comment stopped me in my tracks; I had not even talked to Sarah or her parents about how the project had been completed, nor had I considered that their support of her learning was something to celebrate. It was the first time I remember finding myself face-to-face with my own assumptions about the positioning of parents and families in schooling.

My expectations of parents at the time had been that they simply needed to become informed of what was going on at school. Their responsibilities to support their child were to read the notes that I wrote and sent home, and forward requested fees if I wanted to do something special in the classroom or take a field trip. To me, parent duties also included sending treats (if they so desired) so that we could celebrate their child's birthday or another special event, reading and signing progress reports, and attending meetings as invited so that, as a staff, we could inform them of what our plans and goals were for the school and for our students' programming. There was one agenda that mattered in my classroom, and it was mine. That was my blueprint. That is what I remember experiencing as a child throughout the years of my schooling, and what I had anticipated in my experience as a new teacher. I held myself in the position of the educator, the "holder of the knowledge" (Pushor, 2010, p. 6), viewing my students' parents, families, and communities as less knowing.

The Inclusion of Parents and Families in Schooling

I lived the belief that school was the only place of learning, or at least the most important place of learning. I paid little honor or consideration to any of the learning opportunities or relationships existing beyond the walls of my classroom. Even the consideration that it was *my* classroom speaks to the positioning I assumed. Parents and parent knowledge (Pushor, 2010, 2013) were not included in my practice. No classes or even discussions throughout the pursuit of my own teacher education had addressed the role and positioning of parents, families, and community in education, and I had never even considered it.

Parents as the “Other”

It can be attributed to human nature that people look for opportunities to associate with others with whom they share something in common. These connections may include ethnic or cultural origins, languages, family structures, income levels, sexual orientations, and levels of education, among a myriad of other factors and influences. It is the absence of the consideration and representation of different perspectives and worldviews that can become concerning. These connections can bring about the formation of beliefs and assumptions about ourselves—and others—and about how we interact and build relationships with other people. “Humans have the tendency to assume that their own experiences are the norm” (Allen, 2007, p. 13). There are so many ways to connect with one another, and, if someone is not like us in one or more of these ways, we may have a hard time recognizing that they are *one of us*. If they are not *one of us* then perhaps they are *one of them*, or perhaps they are even *against us*. This line of thinking can have us positioning individuals in the place of *other*.

Being the *other* means feeling different; is awareness of being distinct; is conscious of being dissimilar. It means being outside the game, outside the circle, outside the set. It means being on the edges, on the margins, on the periphery. Otherness means feeling excluded, closed out, precluded, even disdained and scorned. It produces a sense of isolation, of apartness, of disconnectedness, of alienation. (Madrid, 1988, as cited in Turner-Vorbeck & Miller Marsh, 2008, p. 2)

In looking at the common positioning of parents in schools, educators, administrators, support personnel, and sometimes even policy, can effectively work to build a hidden curriculum that *others* parents and families. As Turner-Vorbeck (2008) discusses, hidden curriculum refers to what students learn at school and what messages are received by students and families that are not part of the explicit curriculum. These messages can either be intentional or unintentional as they are communicated by school personnel to students and families through personal interactions as well as through the structure and organization of the school itself. Consider the messages we send with some of the common signage used in schools: *Visitors must report to the office*, or *Please remove your shoes before entering*. These directions, instructions, or commands create a hierarchy between school staff and families right at the front door of the school, before families have even entered the building. We continue with this particular hidden curriculum of exclusion as we work in our classrooms with the doors closed, leaving parents waiting on the outside for us to finish our work and segregating our students’ lives into the compartments of school and home. We build significant relationships with students, but keep families and parents at an arm’s length, particularly in communities that are not similar to our own.

Because it is easy for educators to recognize the differences in others first, before seeing or noting the similarities, a space is often created for judgment and *othering* within relationships. Consider some of the many situations encountered in schools: the single parent who is unable to

attend parent-teacher interviews because she is working late once again; the family that arrives at school a half-hour past the bell each day; the students who come to school and ask for breakfast almost every day because they are hungry; the band students who are unable to pay for their band fees; the student, new to Canada, who has special dietary requirements; and so many more examples that can have school personnel reacting in judgment. Such *othering* can be significantly detrimental to the work both educators and families are trying to do. As soon as we create an *other* in our school communities and classrooms, we choose to practice exclusion. This exclusion damages trust and limits relationships considerably; it renders everyone involved as incomplete.

Instead: Parent Engagement

Instead of excluding parents and families, how might we include them—embrace them as we do our students—and create a circle in our schools in which we are all made whole? When we embrace the notion of *parent engagement*, we authentically include parents and families in relationships and decision-making that is “mutually determined by educators and parents to be important for children and . . . lived out in a respectful and reciprocal relationship” (Pushor, 2007, p. 1). Parent engagement encompasses the real work of schools, including accessing both educator and parent knowledge to make shared decisions such as those about curriculum, homework policies, and the school’s continuous improvement plan. It requires that educators and parents work together to find ways to share expertise in order to have the greatest impact and benefit for students. Such sharing of expertise may mean that roles are varied and shifting, with parent or educator leading, supporting, or following at various times (Pushor & Ruitenburg, 2005).

Trebuchets Rethought – Repositioning Parents in Schools

Related to the previous story, I have thought of Sarah often over the past few years and about how I might do things differently now if I had the opportunity. Imagine that I had taken the time to build real relationships with all of my students’ families. Imagine that I had shared family stories and values and lingered at events such as family potlucks. Imagine we had really gotten to know one another on a personal level. Imagine that because we had shared so much of ourselves, I knew that Sarah’s mom was a skilled craftsperson and worked for a cabinet production company. I designed the project to capitalize on her skills by inviting her to share her expertise with our class. We met to plan the project together, sharing and discussing how we would reach science outcomes as well as instruct and practice the required skills and safety considerations.

The day we presented the project to the students, Sarah’s mom joined us. The project was no longer a take-home assignment, as we first thought it would be. Instead, we worked together in class with the students, with Sarah’s mom taking the lead in some of the teaching and learning. She had the expertise we needed, after all. Other parents who were available during the day were also present to help and support the students as needed.

When the trebuchets were ready, we held a celebration in the evening. Families were invited to join us. We set out tables and chairs with snacks and beverages for everyone to enjoy as students shared their learning with each other’s families. We took time to linger in conversation. There was cheering and laughter as the trebuchets were put to the test in the challenge rounds. I took photos of families joining to celebrate their child’s learning. We put together a slideshow the next week and sent it home as a memento for families.

Consider the positioning of parents and families in this school setting. It plays out in a manner that honors parent knowledge instead of ignoring or scorning it. It brings together two worlds of our students, worlds that were not meant to be compartmentalized, and it creates something stronger, more meaningful and more worthy. Further, such parent engagement celebrates and strengthens our many and varied relationships. It positions parents and educators alongside one another, and it is inclusive of the voice and presence of families in their children's schooling.

Rethinking Education in Out of School Places

Rethinking the trebuchet project provides us with insight into the potential for parent engagement at school where educators are tasked to decide on and determine a planned sequence of learning. Schooling, by itself, does not encompass the entire story of education. Education is something in which we are engaged from the moment we are born (or even before) until the day we die (Pushor, 2013). Education is in every moment of every day. Parents and families are engaged in many ways in their children's education, ways in which we may not even be aware. It is important that, as educators, we recognize and honor all of the educating that families and parents are facilitating at home, whether we see those efforts or not.

The way in which parent engagement can easily be overlooked was illustrated quite clearly at a Sweat lodge ceremony I attended last summer. During the Sweat lodge, two young boys, about 10 years old, played a leadership role. The boys drummed and sang in the lodge during a round. I assumed they were a little anxious to begin with. We sat for several minutes in the darkened silence, hearing only their nervous giggles, while we waited for them to start. The elders met them with patience. Eventually, on their own time, they were able to begin. I was struck by how responsible and knowledgeable both boys were as they led the round and then served at the feast following the ceremony. Their confidence demonstrated that they had obviously experienced this ceremony many times before. They easily and so naturally followed the protocols, all of which were new to me. These procedures involved serving to the left, offering something to everyone, dividing up the food if there was not enough to go around, making sure the berries were served first, and probably so much more I did not see and do not yet understand. So much learning and education went into their preparation for the Sweat lodge ceremony that day. Their family members and members of their First Nations community were consciously facilitating the young boys' learning. It was so apparent to me that the boys' schooling was just one small part of the broad education that they were receiving.

Our students' lives, not unlike our own, are multifaceted with relationships, skills, talents, and interests that extend far beyond what we see and know at school. It is only when we know about their lives outside of school that we can truly begin to know our students. It is in this place of understanding that we will recognize gifts, talents, and capacity where once we may have recognized deficit stories. By linking together the education that children receive in out-of-school places with the education they receive in schools, we begin to honor and to demonstrate the value we place on the work that is being done by parents and families. We re-position parents and educators alongside each other in the schooling and education of children.

Building Relationships with Families

Taking the time to build genuine relationships with parents and families is a vital first step in developing authentic parent engagement. It is through these relationships that we will

learn about our families and our students, and it is how we will open ourselves up to them as both the includer and the included. “Building relationships with families means respecting them—their language, values, struggles, insights, culture, and family structure” (Allen, 2007, p. 94). We are invited to put aside our stories of families (Huber, Graham, Murray Orr & Reid, 2010) gleaned from secondary sources such as previous educators, schools and society-imparting labels such as *single parent*, *divorced*, *out of work*, *homosexual*, or *uneducated*. Instead, we are invited to open our hearts and minds to the possibilities that we share more in common with our families than we may realize. In building relationships with parents and families, we step forward with our entire selves, opening our arms and enveloping each other, receiving each other into our lives. Within the embrace of inclusion, there is no *other*, no-one within the margins, no-one on the periphery. Instead, we exist together, with each other and our beliefs, made whole through inclusion.

Some parent and teacher relationships may come easily; one or two simple invitations may be enough to spark a relationship that brings richness to our classrooms and lives. Other relationships may be more challenging to develop. Not all parents may respond to all invitations. Even given many opportunities, there are many reasons that a parent may not fully engage in a deepened relationship with an educator. “Every time parents and teachers encounter one another in the classroom, their conversations are shaped by their own stories and by broader cultural and historical narratives that inform their identities, their values and their sense of place in the world” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, as cited in Allen, 2007, p. 84). I have to remember that just because a parent or family has not responded to my invitation, it does not mean that they do not care about their child’s schooling. There could be many reasons why they have not responded. It just means that I need to try again to invite them.

Ethical Space in Parent-Teacher Relationships

It is inside the sharing with one another of our family stories, and therefore our own identities and worldviews, that we can seek to find ethical space and create shared understandings. Ermine (2007) describes ethical space as a “creation of two solitudes with each claiming their distinct and autonomous view of the world, (and with) a theoretical space between them...opened” (p. 194). A compromise is not the same thing as ethical space. When two parties compromise, they come to an agreement that involves each party conceding a portion of their beliefs and values to find common ground. What is critical to consider when determining ethical space is that both parties remain whole, neither compromising for the sake of the other. Rather, a commonality is found between the beliefs, experiences, and relationships of both parties. Instead of one party dominating the other, it is the space between the two that becomes important. It is what is left of us as humans when we strip away the labels that society has placed upon us (Ermine, 2011). Ethical space and the search for ethical space can take place between cultures, belief systems, genders and in any other group of bodies forming a relationship. It is through the search for ethical space in these relationships that educators can begin to become more inclusive of parents and families in their practice.

You Belong Here

In order to begin the conversations that will build positive relationships, it is necessary for parents and families to feel that they are invited and welcome in the school. Early this fall,

my principal and I asked our staff to physically walk out to the front of the school and to re-enter the school, walk the halls, read the bulletin boards and get a general sense of how welcoming our school felt. We had made many enhancements through our efforts to create a space that was welcoming to our families. New, comfortable seating had been purchased and arranged, along with plants, in the front foyer. A sign above the entry stated *Welcome* in several different languages spoken in the homes of our students. Tables were arranged for families to sit and linger with a cup of coffee, and bulletin boards full of pictures of smiling students and staff at school events adorned the walls. Staff members were pleased with how great it felt to enter our school.

The second task we asked them to complete was to re-enter the school, re-walk the halls and re-read the bulletin boards. This time, they were in small groups and we gave them a role to play and discuss in their groups. They were not completing this exercise as themselves; rather, they were representing one of the following: a single mother or father, a new-Canadian family, a First Nations or Métis family, or a family living in poverty. During the second round of the exercise, several affirmations were made in terms of inclusion and the work we had already completed. More importantly, we collectively found several gaps in our intentions that may potentially serve as roadblocks to building those ever-important relationships with parents and families. Taking on the perspectives of members of our diverse parent body, the staff raised questions such as: Where do I go when I enter the building? Where is the office? How do I fill in the registration papers if I do not understand English? Is there a lunch program? I do not see a lot about First Nations cultures here. These photos are all about kids at school; what about all of the learning kids do at home? Where am I represented in this building?

Through this exercise, reflection, and ensuing discussion, we were able to recognize and challenge many of our own assumptions about parents, families, and school. In addition, our discussion gave us the beginnings of a to-do list to create a more inclusive environment in our school. The changes needed are not all easy ones to accomplish; some of them will take a lot of time and effort from all staff members as well as from families and students in order for them to be effective and authentic. These conversations continue among staff members. In addition, as we work to build genuine relationships with parents, we have begun to extend the conversation to include their own individual thoughts and perspectives in how we might work together to strengthen *our* school.

In building authentic, reciprocal relationships with parents and families, we enrich not only our own lives, but also the understanding we have of our students. Once this work has begun, we can truly consider the *whole child* in our classrooms and include authentic learning experiences for all students that connect to and honor their learning outside of the classroom. Parents and family members can be asked to bring their skills and interests into the classroom to share with all students. A Filipino father might be invited to come and teach students how to cook a Filipino meal; a Métis auntie may teach the entire class some jigging, a mother who is a banker might teach a lesson to middle years students about budgeting. The possibilities and resources that will open up to parents, educators and students are abundant. It will bring together and strengthen the multiple worlds and identities of students and it will include parents in their children's schooling, acknowledging their integral and rightful place in their children's lifelong education.

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