

**PARENT PARTICIPATION IN DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS:  
MOVING BEYOND ATTRIBUTIONS OF BLAME**

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## **ABSTRACT**

While facilitating community participation in disadvantaged schools can be difficult, this article argues that given the structuring of schooling in contemporary western democracies, it is even more difficult than we might imagine. Drawing on Bourdieu, we attempt to elucidate the complex relations between schooling and socio-cultural contexts which can lead to inequalities of opportunity for parent participation in schooling and work to maintain disadvantage for marginalised students. Recognitive justice, with its positive regard for social difference and centrality of social democratic processes, offers us another way of advancing this discussion beyond simplistic attributions of blame. In particular, a politics of recognition is concerned with opening up the processes of schooling to groups who often have been excluded and for their views to be seriously engaged within decision-making processes. This article gives voice to such views, utilising interview data from a small Australian secondary school located in a regional community with high welfare dependency and a large indigenous population. We conclude that to increase parent participation in disadvantaged schools, what is needed is a transformation of the field 'to establish alternative goals and ... completely ... redefine the game and the moves which permit one to win it' (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 172).

## **PARENT PARTICIPATION IN DISADVANTAGED SCHOOLS: MOVING BEYOND ATTRIBUTIONS OF BLAME**

### **Introduction**

The involvement of parents or other important caregivers in their children's schooling is an ideal that informs much contemporary practice in schools. For some parents, such expectations are taken for granted and energetically pursued. Other parents, however – often those from working class and ethnic minorities – do not necessarily share these understandings, at least not in ways legitimated by schools. Given these different understandings of the role of parents in schools, involving disadvantaged communities in schools can be extremely difficult (Connell, 1993).

While traditional explanations for parents' non-participation in schooling – such as 'they just don't care', 'they're too busy', and/or 'they think that schooling is not their concern' – are affirmed in our research, we also report on accounts that address parental involvement in schooling from the standpoint of parents, particularly those positioned as not involved. The data are comprised of 23 semi-structured individual interviews with teachers, parents and students from a small secondary school (of 200 students) located in an Australian regional community, characterised by high welfare dependency (particularly among those who live in the township) and a large indigenous population. It is a purposive rather than a random sample; a mixture of teachers, parents and students differentiated by such attributes as gender, age, ethnicity, socio-economic status (SES), involvement in schooling, and levels of academic achievement. Differentiation between participants' comments is indicated by their position in the field (teacher, parent, student) and by number (for example, Teacher # 17).

This article takes the epistemological standpoint (Harding, 1998) of parents, seeking to give voice to those largely silenced in this discussion of who determines the practices of schooling. Interrogating the research data for reasons why parents do not participate in schooling, two identifiable explanations became clear. In particular, the reasons parents gave for their non-participation tended to be very different to the reasons imagined by those for whom participation was part of their experience of schooling.

We begin our analysis with this second set of responses: largely traditional explanations for the non-participation of parents. We then explore the explanations of these parents themselves; the reasons they give for not getting involved in the life of the school. Finally, we consider their responses to what can be done to increase the involvement of parents in schools. In doing so, we identify agendas that serve socially just purposes for schools and their communities.

Throughout this analysis, we draw upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly his notion of field, because of its explanatory power in elucidating the inequalities of opportunity in schooling, in this case, the relative positioning of parents. The article attempts to make visible the structural constraints which affect parental participation in one disadvantaged school with a view to transforming the understandings and practices of those involved, to move beyond attributions of blame and think through ways in which agents in the field can engage with the current arrangements.

### **They just don't care**

In our research, teachers tended to be the strongest critics of parents, although not all of them and not of all parents. Still, many observed that 'there's generally a small band [of parents] that will continually have their say and others who ... don't care ... don't really

want to ... have an input' (Teacher #15). To some extent, teachers tended to be fatalistic about these arrangements. As one teacher commented in relation to the problem of 'parents of 20 or 30 children out of 200, 250' (Teacher #20) turning up for parent-teacher interviews: 'That's about what we expect. And it's usually the same ones and often it's those coming from ... the country areas [not the town] to see the teachers and I guess that could be because some of them just couldn't care' (Teacher #20).

Even among parents, parent participation in schooling was seen as a matter for parents themselves. As one noted, 'it's up to the parents I suppose. If they want to be involved they will' (Parent #22). Some were particularly scathing of their fellow parents and their lack of interest in their families and communities:

Well I think a lot of people in [this town], parents in particular, really don't care what's happening at the school ... Half of them are just prepared to just drift along ... and at the end of it they think, 'Why didn't my child achieve something better?' But I really don't think that they're all that involved in the process as much as [parents from] the farming community. (Parent #19)

What is interesting about these comments is the strong sense of resignation. The sentiment is that some parents 'just don't care' and that 'there is nothing that can be done about it. We've tried'. Here the non-participation of parents is attributed to their own lack of interest and is viewed as a reflection of the lower value that these working-class families supposedly attribute to education compared with middle-class families. In contrast, Soliman (1995) suggests that:

Social class differences may explain how separate from or how connected with the school families feel and what action they take on behalf of their children, but not how much they value education. Teachers often mistakenly assume that parents who have not progressed far in their own formal education do not value it for their own children (Lareau, 1989) or that those parents who do not attend the school on specific occasions when they are invited are uninterested in their children's education (Bridges, 1987). (p. 162)

Yet Bourdieu (1990) argues that interest is the precondition of the functioning of every field. By sending their children to the school, parents are agreeing to participate in the game, and in so doing, tacitly recognise the value of its stakes. Believing in the game they are playing, it is difficult to suggest that these parents are not interested in the schooling of their children.

There seems little recognition, then, that there could be parents who would like to become more involved in schooling and little understanding of the more complex reasons why they are not, including the role of the school in fostering non-participation. Moreover, the assumption that having a voice is really just a matter of choice ignores the complex matrix of power relations that define living in Australian society and that enable some and inhibit others from having their say in what counts as 'good' schooling. To do so is to laminate over the extent to which some individuals or groups are effectively disempowered or marginalised as a consequence of their classed, gendered and racialised identities (McInerney, 2002). It is interesting that the parent in the above excerpt alludes to a link between parent participation in schooling and student achievement. Non-participation by parents, it is implied, can be attributed to these parents' poor attitudes and, eventually, to their children's poor academic achievement. Like much deficit discourse, the problems are

located in parents and their children, with little that can be done by teachers, schools and systems to alleviate them.

### **It's the cargo cult mentality**

On several occasions, this non-participation by parents was also seen as indicative of a more widespread disposition within the community: a 'cargo cult mentality' that anticipates the 'shipping in' of goods and services but is also critical when circumstances do not match their expectations. The following student points to the criticisms expressed by some parents as evidence of the latter. As she puts it:

A lot of the parents don't support the school and the students ... At the functions when there's good things happening, not many parents turn up, but when there's bad things happening, all of them turn up and whinge but they never do anything about it.

(Student #22)

It is interesting in these remarks that criticism is not seen as a legitimate form of parent participation, particularly when juxtaposed with parents' apparent lack of support for 'good things'. While the problem of parent non-participation is framed above as a lack of interest, here it is also understood as laziness: 'they never do anything about it'. Moreover, from this student's perspective, parents' non-participation discounts the legitimacy of their criticism. As the following comments illustrate, what is viewed as parents' critique is often turned against them, again in ways that question their commitments to the community and the school:

I call it the 'cargo cult mentality' ... They want to see the ship come over the horizon bringing the goods as long as they don't have to do anything ... [A]ll the Government

agencies are finding [that the community] want us to do the job for them ... [The attitude seems to be] 'What are you going to do?' It's not, 'What can we do to help us increase our capacity to do the job ourselves?' ... Sport is a good example. They want lots of sport and I'm limited by the number of staff I've got and last night I was very much taken to task by a parent because we didn't support football but we didn't have the staff to do it ... and I asked for [parents to] volunteer and got none so I couldn't run that sport. Soccer was another one that we started ... but I just didn't have the staff and I couldn't get a community volunteer or parents to even drive the kids down in the car, it was all my staff doing it. (Principal)

Sport is also representative of the kinds of 'good things' in which the above student noted the absence of parents' support. But notice, too, how parent participation is narrowed in the Principal's comments to volunteerism. Illustrated here is that legitimate forms of participation are those that involve parents resourcing their own and their children's needs and desires, irrespective of their abilities to do so. Driving students to soccer games may seem a simple contribution, for example. Yet, this needs to be understood in the context of the town having one of the lowest rates of car ownership in the country. In short, the kinds of parent participation desired by the Principal may not be what parents are able to deliver. This provides a different way of understanding the Principal's frustration at not being able to satisfy the school's demands.

What appear as opportunities to participate are those most often constructed from within the school, not by parents themselves, and, therefore, are constrained. For those parents who share the school's agenda this may be acceptable, but others are left without a voice (Crozier, 1998). Even in situations where parents may want to contribute to school



activities, the lack of appreciation for their particular abilities provide further constraints on their participation.

Such easy recourse by teachers and others to a 'deficit' view of the local area and the capacity of its inhabitants (Nixon, Allan & Mannion, 2001) as the dominant explanation of parents' non-participation, is an important issue in understanding the 'problem'. Conceived in this way, parent participation in the school seems destined to remain a problem. However, moving beyond explanations that understand parents' non-participation as a function of their character flaws and towards the inclusion of different ways of conceiving of participation and different participants in the conception of parent participation, seem more fruitful avenues to explore.

### **Getting involved is not really an option for me**

One such explanation apparent in the research data was parents' lack of time to participate, something that was acknowledged by parents and teachers alike. As one teacher commented, 'parents are busy people' (Teacher #22). Family commitments were common examples of these time constraints that prevented the participation of some parents: 'a lot of [parents] have little kids' (Parent #22). There were also others, like the following mother of thirteen (five of whom live at home and attend the secondary school), who commented, 'if my kids are sick or they're in trouble then I'm here. But if I'm not needed for that, I try to keep as far a distance as possible because while they're at school that's my special time' (Parent #24).

Clearly, this is a different accounting of the problem of parent participation. Rather than attributing blame to these parents, there is recognition that family and other commitments (including the limited time and disposable income of lower and working-class parents)

make it difficult to supplement and intervene in their children's schooling. This can prevent the participation of some who otherwise may be quite willing to play some kind of formal role in their children's education. Middle-class parents, on the other hand, often have the necessary social and economic capital – for managing child care and transportation, hiring tutors and meeting with teachers – to become actively involved in their children's schooling (Lareau, 1987).

### **My experiences of school are not that good**

Another reason discernible in the data for the non-participation of parents concerned their negative experiences of schooling, either as a parent of a student or as a student themselves. As is the case in this school, Cairney and Munsie's (1995) research confirms that it is the working-class and lower-class families that are more likely to have had negative experiences as students themselves, and who may experience feelings of insecurity and intimidation in school settings. As one parent reflected:

I don't know why [they don't get involved]. I don't know whether it's their own experience at [secondary] school was pretty horrible when they were kids, but they do seem to be a lot less willing to be involved in the [secondary] school than they are with the primary school. (Parent #19)

The following teacher's comments also demonstrate an awareness that prior experiences in educational institutions can impact on parents' willingness to be involved: 'I think some parents don't want to come because schooling for them [wasn't] particularly successful and school is like, "I don't want to go back in there" ... I don't think they feel comfortable being there' (Teacher #22).

Recent experiences in the school as a parent can also impact on parent participation. One student told us of a confrontation between her mother and the former Principal and how this had led to what is now a very minimal level of involvement: '[My Mum] doesn't go to P&C meetings. She only signs forms when she has to ... She doesn't help fundraise ... She said one day to the [former] Principal ... she can put the school somewhere the sun don't shine' (Student #21).

The decision to participate in schooling is certainly easier for those who have had positive experiences in school, either as students themselves or more recently as parents. And it is no surprise that more often those with positive school experiences are from dominant groups; schools are largely staffed by teachers from similar backgrounds who reflect and authorise similar views (Boykin, 1986). Lareau (1989) explains this phenomenon as 'interconnectedness': 'middle-class parents speak about education in the same language as the teachers; they have similar expectations of the education system; they have the same views on what one needs to do in order to achieve within the educational system' (Crozier, 1998, p. 130). In contrast, for some parents, the school may be 'an instrumentality of a dominant government and a symbol of an alien culture' (Gilbert & Dewar, 1995, p. 13).

This illustrates well the ways in which the rules of the game are accepted, making it appear as if everyone is free to play and everything is negotiable. More often, it is a game in which the rules are determined by the dominant. Everyone plays, but not everyone is equal. Moreover, the rules or regularities of the field are 'only ever partially articulated, and much of the orthodox way of thinking and acting passes in an implicit, tacit manner' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 20). The legitimate is never made fully explicit. If the

marginalised do not know the rules of the game, how then can they fully know the moves that permit them to win?

### **I don't have the necessary skills**

Yet, even those from dominant groups experience barriers to participation in schooling. Feelings of inadequacy were expressed and identified by both teachers and parents in our research as possible contributing factors to low levels of parent participation. As one parent commented:

I've always been involved with P&C in one way or another throughout my children's school years ... In the second year that I was [at the secondary school] ... I said ... I'd been a treasurer and a secretary, so if they were happy to have me [as president] I'd give it a try. Four years later I'm still in the position and I hope that I do the right thing by it. Sometimes I think I'm a little bit inadequate in places ... but I think I do a good job. (Parent #19)

If this particular parent experiences feelings of self-doubt and inadequacy, one must wonder whether there are some who have never attended a meeting out of fear that they will be out of their league.

Some suggest a link between low academic achievement and feelings of inadequacy that deter parents from becoming more involved in their children's education. For example, when asked about whether the school encourages parents to be involved in its operations, one parent responded, 'I really can't answer that one because I tend to take a back seat ... I don't feel that I have the education myself' (Parent #23).

Parents who are prevented by their own level of education from helping their children are much more reliant on teachers' judgements and often speak about them 'knowing best' with regard to academic work (Crozier, 1998). Teachers, too, saw a correlation between low levels of education and feelings of inadequacy, particularly in relation to parent participation in schooling alongside 'well-educated' teachers: 'Others [don't participate] because they wouldn't feel that they'd be able to communicate with teachers, they would see the teachers as well educated [people]' (Teacher #20).

The fear that some parents harbour, that 'they wouldn't ... be able to communicate with teachers', is a very real one for those members of the community who are illiterate or have a poor record of academic achievement themselves. What these parents recognise is that they lack the culturally valued educational skills necessary to participate effectively in the educational process (Lareau, 1989). In their struggle to improve their child's position in the field, and in much the same way that parents depend on doctors to heal their children, many working-class communities turn over responsibility for their child's education to 'professionals' (Borg, 1994); their expert status assured by virtue of their access to the capital at stake in the field. Middle-class parents, on the other hand, often have educational skills and occupational prestige matching or surpassing that of teachers and see education as a partnership between equals. For them, the education of their children is a shared enterprise. These parents are clearly more comfortable engaging with professionals and becoming involved in the education of their children. While the teacher in the following excerpt tells us more about her perceptions of the feelings of inadequacy experienced by some, she also offers suggestions on how to do things differently to change the situation:

I think we need to teach parents how to be active participants in education. I don't think we do that. We invite them and they don't come and then sometimes we bag them 'cause they don't come but maybe they don't know how. Some of them might not want to go to a P&C meeting in case they look stupid or don't know what to say or are asked to read something and they can't read ... How daunting would it be to walk into a room [with] four teachers, the Principal, the Deputy Principal, the head of the P&C, three ... parents [from the farming communities] who are extremely intelligent articulate people, why would you want to come? It would be very intimidating. So I think we need to ... do things differently to (a) teach them how to be more actively involved and then (b) make it so that they feel comfortable to do that and practice what we've taught them to do ... I think that ... sometimes as teachers we ... only hear certain voices ... [A]nd I think that that's because we don't teach people how to ... use their voice. So a lot of the indigenous parents and a lot of the extremely poor parents they just aren't heard. (Teacher #22)

Here is recognition that there is a tendency for educators to assume that 'non-participation implies an apathetic or passive citizenry lacking in both expertise and motivation' (Blackmore, 1995, p. 59). Like Carole Pateman (1989), however, the teacher sees 'non-participation as a manifestation of feelings of disempowerment experienced by most citizens, particularly women, resulting from the exclusionary nature of the political process and institutions and from their lack of experience in formal decision-making, rather than apathy' (Blackmore, 1995, p. 59).

Although these parents may be willing to help with their children's education, their unfamiliarity with the tasks being asked of them means that they may have few ideas about how to provide this help. In the teacher's comments above, there is also a hint of

changing the habitus of the school, 'mak[ing] it so that they feel comfortable'. In this way, what this teacher proposes is positive in two aspects. Not only is there an attempt to educate others in the dominant cultural capital – that which is legitimated in schools and required for success in the wider society – but there is also an appreciation that the habitus of the school needs to be changed if we are to entice more parents and community members to enter its doors. By letting dominated parents in on 'the rules of the game', this teacher is involved in a struggle to transform the field rather than seeking to preserve the status quo. Her location in the field and access to the valued forms of capital within it also means that she has a better chance of succeeding in her attempt of transformation than a parent endowed with little of the capital at stake in the field. While the dominant in a given field are in a position to make it function to their advantage, this teacher is evidence that they do not automatically have a propensity to orient themselves actively toward conservation.

### **They seem to know what's best for the kids**

Related to these feelings of inadequacy are doubts about whether parents would be listened to anyway, particularly when there appear to be an abundance of highly educated staff who seem to know what is best for students and the town. As the Principal, concerned at the lack of parent participation, pondered:

So I don't know ... whether they feel that ... no-one's going to listen, so why bother ... [P]eople might say, '[The Principal] lets us know all the time that we can come up and have a say but we don't feel they're going to listen anyway.' (Principal)

In fact, earlier research undertaken in the school suggested that the school's rhetoric did not support its practice when it comes to negotiation and consultation with parents, students and community members:

The study said that practice doesn't appear to match what's on paper ... On paper it says we negotiate, that students have a say in the curriculum, that we access community members and I believe that in practice ... there's very little of that going on. (Principal)

Both parents and teachers tended to agree that parents were often left out of the consultation process. As one parent commented:

I don't feel that [the teachers and administration are] always ready to listen to ideas that we might have ... I think [it's] because they're trained, they've done their degrees and they know what they're doing about that kind of thing. Sometimes some of them feel that we're not qualified to offer that kind of advice. (Parent #20)

In support of this parent's perceptions, the following teacher was very clear in setting the ground rules for community participation in schooling:

As long as they don't try to interfere with the curriculum I don't have a problem, because I work on the theory that everybody's an expert in their own field. I don't mind the community having an involvement in suggesting that we should be trying something new ... But when it comes to actually designing the curriculum ... I would rather look to something like ... the uni[versity] than the community because if they were the experts, they'd be doing the job, wouldn't they? (Teacher #18)



This is a good example of what Waller (1932) typifies as the relationship between teachers and parents, as 'natural enemies' facing enduring problems of negotiating 'boundaries' between their 'territories' (Lightfoot, 1978). In this sense, parents may represent a threat to teachers' professionalism and are viewed as not capable of:

... contributing anything of value about curriculum and teaching for their children. It is observable that many parents accept this still, particularly those of humble occupational status ... They accept that they will be invited (summoned) to the school as a body from time to time but that there are quite definite limits to what will be discussed. As Goodacre remarks: '(P)arental suggestions about curriculum, teaching methods, staff appointments, etc ... are unthinkable' (p. 51). Sociological research into social role relationships in education have shown this attitude to be encouraged by many teachers, generally tacitly but sometimes quite specifically (see Musgrave & Taylor). (Claydon, 1973, p. 122)

The Principal sums up this 'I know what's best for them' attitude well: 'We have a number of staff who want to do good for the community ... [But they] believe that [the community have] got to accept what's best for them ... [A] number of staff think, "No, we know better. We are the teachers"' (Principal).

Both parents and teachers pointed to a lack of qualifications, and hence expertise, as the reasons behind teachers' unwillingness to take on board ideas from parents, with teachers possibly feeling that their claim to be a professional is undermined should they give credence to parental knowledge (Hughes & Mac Naughton, 2000). Teachers in the school

who hold to this position have little incentive to collaborate with parents and believe that parent knowledge can be ignored without their professional standards being compromised.

Bourdieu would explain these teachers' actions as struggles to preserve the field and strategies to defend their dominant positions within it, with teachers struggling against parents to maintain monopoly over the legitimacy of what counts as school knowledge. In the end it is the teachers who hold the trump cards in the form of educational qualifications which derive their social value and therefore yield profits of distinction for their owners through their scarcity (Bourdieu, 1997). Among some parents, this results in feelings of impotence in their interactions with professionals and again to less than ideal parent participation in the school. However, there are indications among teachers more broadly of an 'emergent' professionalism (Nixon, Martin, McKeown & Ranson, 1997) in which their 'sense of professional identity is derived from their capacity to listen to, learn from, and move forward with the communities they serve' (Nixon, Allan & Mannion, 2001, p. 334). Such community-led change is driven by 'the concerns and the agency of community members and groups rather than by the interests of the professional groups involved' (Nixon et al., 2001, p. 335). In the same way, professional teachers need to work *with* communities and facilitate their meaningful involvement in the future direction of schooling.

### **The Principal's ideas are the ones that really matter**

According to some of the parents and students we spoke with, the Principal could also be accused of 'knowing what's best' for the community. One parent viewed the P&C as 'just there for fundraising' and while 'the P&C is supposed to be somewhat of a partner in making decisions ... I don't feel often that they are' (Parent #20). One student, when speaking about his mother's previous involvement in the P&C, even went as far as to say, 'I think [the Principal] ... [made] important decisions ... because they were hers and did not

really listen to anyone on the P&C. Like, if there were five people [who] wanted one thing on the P&C and [the Principal] didn't, well it wouldn't happen' (Student #20). He went on to say, the Principal would 'say that so many people decided on this but it was really her idea ... So Mum just doesn't go anymore ... [My parents] don't want anything to do with [the school]' (Student #20).

And as another parent summed up, 'I still think [the Principal] tries to get everybody's opinion but ... when it really comes to the crunch, she's still doing what she wants to do' (Parent #19). This is a good example of the culture of schools that reinforces the trend of parents being conditioned to accept tokenistic roles. Such comments also reveal the power of the Principal's position, and parents' conventional understandings of a highly hierarchical way of making decisions. The consequence is that parents feel unable to question this authority even when they want to (Gilbert & Dewar, 1995). It is little wonder that there is a legacy of mistrust by locals of professionals (Nixon et al., 2001) and that as a result, many are sceptical about the motives and sincerity of administrators when it comes to empowerment. While many principals tend to embrace and endorse the idea of participation, Wood (1984) contends that their behaviour – their controlling values and tendencies – suggests otherwise.

The 'entrenched power of the educational bureaucracy means that, within their own school communities, principals remain the most influential and powerful individuals' (Gilbert & Dewar, 1995, p. 6). It is the scarcity of the capital held by the Principal that authorises the dominant position they occupy in the field. Indeed, the Principal is able to exert an effect of domination only because of the acknowledged value status of the capital s/he possesses. Bourdieu calls this power to dominate disadvantaged groups 'symbolic power'. The acknowledged value status of these capitals (the Principal's accent, qualifications, social

position and so on) as legitimate, 'is a recognition which maintains and reproduces a strict hierarchy to the advantage, and disadvantage, of factions within it' (Grenfell & James, 1998, p. 23).

As Gilbert and Dewar (1995) suggest, the role of the Principal, and the power which accompanies it, are key issues in the process of community involvement in decision-making:

Constructed by bureaucratic regulation, professional expertise, and everyday assumptions about authority and decision-making, the position of principal is a focus of many of the problems of participation. More generally, studies of the principal's role illustrate the typical political processes by which schools run, and which need to be countered if decision-making is to become more participatory. (Gilbert & Dewar, 1995, p. 7)

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on Bourdieu, we have argued that inequalities of opportunity for parent participation in schooling work to maintain disadvantage for marginalised students. One approach to increasing parent participation is to educate parents in the skills of participation. It is presumptuous to assume that parents have these skills as a matter of course, particularly when the cultural context of this specific community and of schooling in general are so disparate and foreign in many ways and when the experiences that parents have of school serve to extenuate these differences. Skilling parents in how to participate in school, however, is itself presumptuous. It presumes that schools know best and it doesn't move beyond the notion that it is parents who need to change, not schools.

Thinking differently about these cultural and political aspects of knowing may produce different ways of doing school. Indeed, this is to be expected if the particularities of a school's community are taken into account. Increasing parent participation, then, may require us to 'do things less traditionally. So why have a parent/teacher night if no-one turns up. We have to find another way of talking to parents' (Teacher #22).

While traditional notions of parental involvement in schooling suggest that the conversations between schools and their communities should begin from the school, as Cairney and Munsie (1995) found in their research and as is suggested by interviewees in our own, such attempts to bring the school and its communities closer together have been ineffective and frustrating to both parents and teachers and little has been achieved. In this school-centred model of school-community relations, parents and educators do not necessarily work well together and they do not equally share decision-making. Those who are unwilling or unable to become involved in schooling face marginalisation. Moreover, the lack of participation on the part of subordinate groups leaves the door wide open for the dominant – who are equipped with the cultural capital legitimated by educational institutions – to mobilise class advantage and lobby for their own agenda (Grimes, 1995; Henry, 1996). Enabled to reproduce a situation that benefits them, is hardly optimal for anyone else whose interests do not coincide with dominant groups (Hatton, 1995).

Clearly, schools need to think about what they expect from families and communities and respond in ways that serve socially just purposes. Recognitive justice (Gale & Densmore, 2000), informed by the work of Young (1990) and Fraser (1995), with its positive regard for social difference and the centrality of social democratic processes, offers one way of advancing this discussion beyond simplistic attributions of blame. In particular, a politics of recognition is concerned with improving access to and participation in education by

opening up the processes of schooling to groups, including marginalised or disenfranchised parents, who often have been excluded and for their views to be seriously engaged within decision-making processes. Such politics aims at 'overcoming subordination by establishing the misrecognized party as a full member of society, capable of participating on a par with other members' (Fraser, 2001, p. 24). For this to happen, parents must be viewed as partners, and the vital role that they play in education recognised.

Teachers need to implement initiatives that recognise the complementary roles of parents and teachers, and bring schools and communities closer together (Cairney & Munsie, 1995). One way to do this is to involve the community in the development of the curriculum, which ideally should be responsive to local as well as global cultural and economic contexts, and encourage and assist students to draw on their cultural experiences to succeed academically (Gale & Densmore, 2000). The development of curriculum should encourage critical and collaborative reflection among all those involved in education, and be 'an ongoing and continuous activity that belongs to the whole community and has its roots in the attitudes, aspirations, dreams and biases of its people' (Middleton, 1995, p. 195).

Bourdieu would argue that these suggestions are examples of transforming the field. To increase parent participation in disadvantaged schools, then, what we need is a revolutionary struggle 'to establish alternative goals and more or less completely ... redefine the game and the moves which permit one to win it' (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 172).

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