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Diverse Perspectives of Parents,

Diverse Concepts of Parent Involvement and Participation:

Contrasts between Italy and the United States

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Abstract

Diversity of experiences and perspectives, it is widely agreed, should be a source of strength in home-school partnerships, as in other aspects of educational endeavor. Yet often, in the literature, diversity is presented as a complication to be overcome. A limiting mindset often prevails, both in theory and practice, where diversity is regarded as an issue or barrier, even amidst the best of intentions to be inclusive. In this chapter, we argue that this limiting mindset on diversity may in fact derive in part from the conceptual frameworks with which we in the United States contemplate and conduct research on diversity issues in home-school relationships. We make this point by taking the discussion outside the framework of the American literature. First, we offer our summary and interpretation of several general principles that describe the purpose, nature, and value attached to *parental involvement* in the United States. Next, we turn to the field of Italian education, in particular, to conceptualizations about *partecipazione*, or participation, a term for the idealized way in which parents, teachers, and community members should take an active part in the life, culture, and decisions concerning children and the educational services created for them. We draw mainly from the writings of a network of early educational leaders from cities of northern and central Italy (e.g., Bologna, Milan, Modena, Pistoia, Reggio Emilia, and others)—places which have carried out the strongest experiments in creating and sustaining systems of home-school-community.

Diverse Perspectives of Parents, Diverse Concepts of Parent Involvement and

Participation: What Can They Suggest to Researchers?

Diversity of experiences and perspectives, it is widely agreed, should be a source of strength in home-school partnerships, as in other aspects of educational endeavor. Yet often, in the literature, diversity is presented as a complication to be overcome. Certainly, many educators find that relationships improve or flourish when they get past the communication challenges or other kinds of complexity deriving from the variations of student and family background, history, culture, and economic situations. Stakeholders in successful partnerships seek out the strengths and potentials presented by those variations.

Yet, it is a bit of a puzzle that a limiting mindset often prevails, both in theory and practice, where diversity is regarded as an issue or barrier, even amidst the best of intentions to be inclusive. In this chapter, we argue that this limiting mindset on diversity may in fact derive in part from the conceptual frameworks with which we in the United States contemplate and conduct research on diversity issues in home-school relationships. We will make this point by taking the discussion outside the framework of the American literature. Instead, we will juxtapose central elements of the terminology and rationales underlying American writing about home-school relationships, with those of another country, Italy. In our view, the case of Italy is particularly interesting and germane to the discussion of the relationship of diversity issues to family-school partnerships because Italy has a democratic tradition and national-provincial structure much like that federal-state system in the United States; Italy also represents a society that has faced many of the same general kinds of demographic, cultural, and societal changes over the last half century as we have. Yet Italy's literature on home-school relations offers vocabulary and thematic emphases that are different enough from our own to provoke a

productive angle for critical reflection on American approaches. Of course, in the literature of international education, nations are often compared for their educational and family policies, and researchers publish comparative reports of student achievement and what predicts it. However, taking a different direction, we ask the question of what can be learned by taking one step further back and examining the discourse used to frame discussions about home-school relationships, particularly with respect to issues of diversity.

First, we will offer our summary and interpretation of several general principles that describe the purpose, nature, and value attached to parental involvement in the United States. These "big ideas" characterize the general mindset or stance that we believe prevails in this country, regarding the responsibilities families and schools have towards children. We do not claim that our summary interpretations are exhaustive or comprehensive of all the important ideas that Americans have about parent involvement in education. However, we submit that they capture certain key assumptions about parental involvement, as evident in the current body of theoretical writings and empirical studies.

Next, we will turn to the field of Italian education, in particular, to conceptualizations about *partecipazione*, or participation, a term for the idealized way in which parents, teachers, and community members should take an active part in the life, culture, and decisions concerning children and the educational services created for them (Bove, 2007; Mantovani, 2001, 2007). We will draw mainly from the field of early childhood (preschool to primary), which has been for decades at the forefront of Italian educational reform, and from the writings of a network of educational leaders from cities of northern and central Italy (e.g., Bologna, Milan, Modena, Pistoia, Reggio Emilia, and others)—places which have carried out the strongest experiments in creating and sustaining systems of home-school-community partnership (Bove, 2007; Ghedini,

2001). Finally, we will close by summarizing, raising questions growing out of our analysis of American and Italian conceptualizations of parent involvement, and suggesting that further cross-national comparisons may be equally fruitful.

American Conceptualizations of Parent Involvement in Education

A useful place to begin is with the terminology used to discuss family-school relationships in the United States. In the American literature, parents' relationships with schools are usually labeled with one of three terms: "involvement," "engagement," or "partnership." These labels have arisen as researchers seek to analyze home-school relationships, categorize their manifestations, and operationalize the processes and outcomes of primary caregiver's interactions with schools. However, the field continues to suffer from inconsistent and sometimes confusing use of this terminology (Epstein, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

Involvement, Engagement, and Partnership: Evolving Terminology

"Involvement" is the oldest label and sometimes acts as an umbrella term that broadly categorizes the various types of activities parents use to connect with schools, though it carries a connotation of parents supporting their students or the school in the ways requested by educators and school personnel. Involvement can include many formats of family-school interactions, whether enacted in home, school, or community settings. Joyce Epstein has provided highly regarded syntheses of the literature and noted the lack of consistency in use of the terminology of involvement. To increase clarity, she has proposed a framework identifying six distinct types, or levels, of involvement: (1) parenting, (2) communicating, (3) volunteering, (4) home-based learning, (5) decision-making, and (6) collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995). Kohl, Lengua, and McMahon (2000) have pointed to limitations in Epstein's framework with respect to assumptions it makes about power hierarchies; they noted that her categorizations are primarily

school-centered and teacher-initiated, that is, they look at parental involvement from the point of view of the school. This criticism is reminiscent of an earlier formulation provided by Delgado-Gaitain (1991), which proposed the following three categories of parent involvement, based on who sets the agenda for the interaction: (1) school-initiated agendas, where parents conform to school policies or requests; (2) parent-initiated agendas, where school staff are invited to participate in activities determined by parents; and (3) shared agendas, that reflect collaboration and shared power between parents and school personnel. Thus, shared agenda-setting makes space for parents to initiate communication with schools, negotiate the terms of relationships and goals with schools, and act as advocates for their children.

"Engagement" and "partnership" are the newer terms in the literature of home-school relationships. These terms have arisen as scholars seek to be more inclusive and culturally sensitive about the diverse ways that families respond to educators and want to take part in their children's educational experience. The term engagement is being used more and more and applies to a broad range of activities, including those have been labeled involvement but also making space for a fuller range of ways parents can advocate and contribute. For this reason, "engagement" may be the best term to refer generically to any and all forms of family contribution, involvement, and partnership; we will follow that usage in the rest of this chapter.

The term engagement arose as an alternative to "involvement" to indicate a different, less school-centric perspective on home-school relationships. For example, Sheridan and colleagues (including the first author of this chapter) at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln have chosen to use the term engagement in our intervention approach (e.g., Sheridan et al., 2010, 2011). By our definition, "family engagement" involves genuine collaboration between families and schools/agencies whereby parents and educators share responsibility for the healthy development

and educational aspirations of children. In the *Getting Ready* intervention, family engagement is promoted across two complementary relational contexts: (1) the parent-child relationship, and (2) the parent-teacher relationship. We base our formulation on the fact that empirical literature suggests that relationships between parents and children in poverty experience heightened stain, due to external sources and increased levels of parenting stress, depression and/or other risks. Furthermore, relationships between parents and professionals are also often challenged due to discontinuities across systems and misunderstandings of one another's perspectives. Therefore, the *Getting Ready* intervention program seeks to strengthen relationships both *within* (parent-child) and *between* (parent-teacher) systems, in order to support positive child and family outcomes. In this way, Sheridan and colleagues focus on shared agenda-setting, as formulated by Delgado-Gaitain (1991).

Engagement is also used by McKenna and Millen (2013) to describe parent-school relationships where there is parent voice and parent presence. Focusing on parents who are economically, culturally, and geographically diverse, they have constructed a grounded theory of engagement based on data collected from focus groups and interviews with parents. Parent voice is honored when the teacher allows for an open, multidirectional flow of communication. Parent presence is honored when the parents' ideas and opinions about their children are given consideration and enacted. Other researchers have begun to introduce political considerations and speak to the rights of parents, families, and communities to participate in institutional governance. For example, Pappas (2012) used school closings in low-income neighborhoods in New York City as an opportunity to offer a discussion of parents as politically conscious actors who demand system-wide change and accountability. In Pappas's view (2012), engagement operates through two ideological frameworks. One framework views education as a free market

and recognizes parents as consumers; the other views education as a democratic process and recognizes parents as decision-makers and community builders. Thus, Pappas views engagement in its fullest sense as including opportunities for diverse parents to open negotiation with schools and advocate for reform.

"Partnership" is also an emerging label, frequently used in the current literature. The framework of "partnership" is particularly prominent in research by educational psychologists, early interventionists, and special educators, where the population of interest is children with special needs and their families. For example, Hornby (2011) describes the partnership model as one in which teachers are viewed as experts on education, while parents are viewed as experts on their children. Partnership is built on seven principles, including trust, respect, competence, communication, commitment, equality, and advocacy. Hornby also describes the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that may be necessary for professionals to work effectively with parents. Interpersonal skills are paramount, and although teachers may be practiced in presenting information and explanations, they may be less practiced in other skills such as listening and counseling. In the *Getting Ready* project, parents and teachers are said to be in a true partnership relationship when both parent and teacher make a responsible commitment to plan and work together on behalf of the child's learning; decision-making is shared; communication is frequent, positive, and bi-directional; cultural and language differences are respected, appreciated and reinforced; and unique child, family, and school characteristics influence how responsibilities are allocated. In general, a "one-size-fits all" approach to parent-teacher collaboration is avoided (Sheridan et al., Training Documents of *Getting Ready Project,* 2013), and professionals learn to recognize parental strengths in myriad forms, and to bridge cultural boundaries to form productive alliances (Edwards, Sheridan, & Knoche, 2010).

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Parent Engagement as a Responsibility

Regardless of label, the literature seems to suggest that home-school relationships are a *responsibility* or *duty*, representing the fulfillment of joint professional and parental/caregiving obligations. The responsibilities are seen as occurring in two contexts, school and home. For example, in Hill and Craft's (2003) formulation, school-based involvement includes being present at meetings (e.g., parent-teacher), attending school events (e.g., open house), or volunteering. Home-based involvement includes assisting children with school-related tasks, such as course selection and homework as well as talking with children about academic issues like test performance and the value of doing well in school. This conceptualization clarifies the roles, expectations, and resources that parents can and should provide through their involvement. Teachers and parents interact with one another, but the roles each side plays in promoting children's learning and development are complementary.

Joyce Epstein (1987, 2001) has offered a model of family and school relationships that accounts for the history, development, and possible patterns of responsibility between parents, teachers, and students. This model, referred to as the Overlapping Spheres of Influence of Family, School, and Community, delineates the separate, shared, and sequential arenas of influence and responsibility borne by each party. First, the notion of separate responsibilities assumes that families, educators, and community members have different goals and competencies and therefore bear different responsibilities towards children. Educators who hold this perspective may believe that the responsibilities of school and family do not overlap because formal learning is best achieved when teachers maintain universal, objective standards within their classrooms, or that it is risky to invite parents into their classrooms and expose themselves to criticism (Fleharty & Pope-Edwards, 2013). Parents may also hold this perspective; for

example, some parents, especially those from minority or low-income backgrounds, may find it uncomfortable to go into the school where they believe they are unwelcome and seen as incompetent. Second, the notion of shared responsibilities assumes that families and educators can coordinate their efforts to educate and socialize children. An individual who holds this perspective may believe that family and school responsibilities are complementary and that common goals can be constructed and achieved through communication and cooperation (as in the *Getting Ready* Project). Finally, the notion of sequential responsibilities emphasizes the timing of family and school contributions to development. An individual might hold this perspective in the belief that the early years are critical for laying the foundations for later learning, and therefore, parents and other socializing agents (e.g., physicians, child care providers, and preschool teachers) are responsible for preparing the child for primary school, at which point educators take on the task of promoting formal learning.

In all three kinds of allocation of responsibility (separate, shared, and sequential), parental involvement, or engagement, is conceived and enacted as an event or series of events that may or may not be intrinsically connected. Indeed, parental engagement is usually expected to be a short-term partnership with short-term goals. After all, in American schools, children are assigned to classrooms for the duration of a single academic year. Time and efficiency are of the essence and can dictate the terms of a relationship. Teachers have many children and families calling for their attention. Likewise, families may have busy schedules and time constraints that do not align with school-related events. Thus, pragmatic, short-term goals for parent engagement often seem the most reasonable way to proceed, and enhancing the potency of short-term relationships becomes important, in hopes that home-school relationships will have enduring and long-term effects (Dearing, Kreider, Simpkins, & Weiss, 2006; Dearing, McCartney, & Taylor,

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2009). Robert Crosnoe (2009; Crosnoe et al., 2010) is among the several researchers studying

how consistency in positive stimulation across caregiving systems (i.e., family and school) and

continuity across transitions from one level of schooling to the next, provide greater power for

establishing or deflecting trajectories of early achievement (see Chapter 2, Volume II in this

series). Pomerantz and Moorman (Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007; Pomerantz &

Moorman, 2010) offer insight into what specific kinds, or qualities, of parent involvement,

whether occurring in home or school settings, lead to better learning outcomes for children. Hill

(2001; Hill & Craft, 2003) speaks more directly to how African-American versus European-

American families become involved in school, and the impacts of that involvement on school

readiness and academic achievement.

Parent Engagement as a Remedy

Throughout the research literature, then, the notion that parent engagement is a *remedy*

prevails. Therefore, establishing the causal or underlying processes and measuring effects

validates the social utility of parental contribution. Indeed, determining the measurable outcomes

of family-school relationships is one of the strengths of the American research on parent

engagement. Educators and policymakers, along with researchers, share a strong concern over

whether, and how, parental engagement links to student achievement, and under what conditions

intervention programs to promote engagement are effective. Two major theories posit how home,

school, and community connections might be expected to benefit children's academic

achievement and functioning: the skills development model, and the motivation development

model (for a review, see Pomerantz & Moorman, 2010). The skills development model proposes

that parental involvement fosters skills-related resources that directly impact academic

achievement; for instance, phonological awareness, counting, and self-regulation, when fostered

by parents, become elements of preschool readiness. In contrast, the motivation development model proposes that parental involvement provides children with dispositions to engage in school, indirectly enhancing achievement. For example, parents may transmit the message that school and learning are important; children may internalize this value and be intrinsically (as opposed to extrinsically) motivated to engage in schoolwork. In recent years, many experts have provided comprehensive reviews linking parental engagement to students' academic outcomes and, in some cases, also their social-emotional outcomes (e.g., Boethel, 2003; Ferguson, Ramos, Rudo, & Wood, 2008; Pomerantz & Moorman, 2010). Henderson and Mapp (2002) list the ways that school, family, and community connections influence student academic outcomes: having better attendance; earning higher grades and test scores; enrolling in higher-level courses/programs; being promoted; passing courses and earning credits; showing improved behavior at home and school; and developing better social skills and adapting to school.

The attention to empirical links between family engagement and student outcomes is consistent with the American belief that parental involvement is part of the solution to narrowing the achievement gap between groups differing by race, culture, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. The need to improve the academic outcomes of certain segments of the student population remains a persistent challenge confronting American educators, policymakers, and members of the public. Researchers have identified parent/caregiver variables that predict levels of home-school connection, most notably, the "diversity" factors of race/ethnicity, culture/language, and education/socioeconomic status (see Boethel, 2003, for a review). These are the same factors found to put children at-risk for poorer achievement and developmental outcomes. Although many cultural theorists (e.g., Ada & Zubizarreta, 2001; Banks, 1995) assert that viewing family profiles through a deficit lens is not helpful for generating constructive

approaches to relationship-building, the emphasis by researchers on categorizing families and analyzing specific outcomes for each category has led to more focused strategies for specific families, while also highlighting the types of families we have yet to effectively reach. Furthermore, even though specific causal mechanisms and predictive strengths may vary, Henderson and Mapp (2002), in their review of 64 studies, found positive relationships to prevail between parental engagement and student achievement outcomes, across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds, for students at all ages. In this sense, promoting parental engagement can be considered a sound financial investment and linked to broader economic outcomes.

Showing the economic value of investing in parental engagement is important in today's political climate. In a global economy where jobs require more sophisticated skills than in the past, American educators and business leaders have expressed concern about students' achievement, especially in light of international comparisons. Policymakers and the general public focus on student achievement as one pathway to a stronger and more competitive workforce. For example, in 2000, the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction in the state of Washington published a literature review of 20 studies to determine the common characteristics of high-performing schools, one of which turned out to be a high level of parent and community involvement (cited in Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

The economic relevance of parental investment mirrors two concerns of the policymaking and business regarding cultural diversity and achievement outcomes. The first concern is that within the U.S., children from low socio-economic backgrounds, a group comprised of a disproportionate number of African-American and Latino families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006), show lower levels of academic achievement than their

middle- and upper-class peers (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003). The second concern is that across

the world (of our global competitors), children from East Asia outperform their American

counterparts, specifically in mathematics, as early as preschool and kindergarten (Starkey et al.,

1999; Yuzawa, Bart, Kinne, Sukemune, & Kataoka, 1999; Miller & Parades, 1996; Stevenson,

Lee, & Stigler, 1986). There are numerous explanations for the national and international

differences in achievement, ranging from school-level factors such as curriculum and teacher-

effectiveness to student and family-level factors such as racial identity and the curriculum of the

home (e.g., the number of books in the house). In this contemporary climate with its focus on

academic success as the road to economic well-being, parental engagement is conceptualized as

a source of social capital, and it becomes natural for stakeholders to call for cost and benefit

assessments of programs. Such evaluations identify where districts and schools should focus

their energies and resources, as well as illuminate, for the educators, strategies and practices that

leverage parent and community participation. Since efforts to promote home-school partnership

may cost money, they should pay off, that is they should be effective in reducing the social and

educational ills they are designed to remediate.

Summary of the American Perspective

To conclude this review of the American perspective, there are several characteristic

themes to be seen in discussions of parent engagement in education and that, we suggest, may be

provocative for research on family-school relationships in the United States:

- Parental "involvement," "engagement," and "partnership" are related, but distinct ways
  of describing and operationalizing how primary caregivers interact and build
  relationships with schools;

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- Parental engagement is a matter of duty; it represents the fulfillment of professional and parental/caregiving responsibilities or obligations;

- Parental engagement is conceived and enacted as an event or series of events that may or may not be connected. The home-school relationship is generally a short-term partnership, due to discontinuities and transitions, and time constraints and efficiency concerns are always present.

- Strong empirical links can be found between parental engagement and student academic achievement. These empirical links are consistent with the American belief that strengthening home, school, and community connections is part of the solution to narrowing the achievement gap.

- Because of these links, parental engagement can be considered an important remedy to social ills and a sound financial investment by society, linked to broader, long-term economic outcomes.

Italian Conceptualizations of Parent Engagement in Education

Italian conceptualizations grow out of a different history from that of grappling with school achievement concerns. Instead, parent engagement is more closely connected to wider political movements involving collective rights to conditions affecting quality of life.

Italy is a country with a strong tradition of publicly funded municipal systems of early childhood education and care, originating in the women's and labor rights movements that sprang forth at the end of World War II (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 2012; Edwards, Gandini & Nimmo, 2015; Gandini & Edwards, 2001). These family-centered child care systems have been created and sustained by city administrations, primarily in progressive, left-leaning, regions

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like Emilia Romagna and Tuscany, but supported also by more conservative and religious elements protective of family cohesion and women's maternal role. During the 1960s and 1970s, when most of the municipal systems of public infant-toddler centers and preschools were established across northern and central Italy, political coalitions came together on the basis of democratic ideals of solidarity and civic engagement, and these coalitions were able to secure legislation defining young children's rights to services prior to school age (Bove, 2007; Mantovani, 2001). Thus, from the mid-20th century forward, home-(pre)school relationships took on a cooperative, or socially-oriented, rather than individualistic character, centered on notions of civic engagement, sense of belonging, and the common good.

Participation

In Italian schools, the relationship between schools and families is generally referred to with the term "participation" (Cagliari & Giudici, 2001, p. 136). This is the case even though a cognate of the English word "involvement" (*coinvolgimento*) is available to them. In all of the writings on Italian early childhood education, even to this day, the term participation recurs over and over, incorporating the whole spectrum of meanings that in our opinion are covered by American terms: involvement, engagement, partnership. It is broader, implying that not only parents and teachers, but also other members of the community participate. It also covers all forms and levels of participation and contribution, without distinction, and frames issues connected to diversity in terms of multiple perspectives and invitations to dialogue. The following three quotations from parents in Reggio Emilia suggest the emotional value that parents derive from participating, as they serve on the advisory council of their children's preschool:

"For me it's a looking for growth through times of shared reflection, through opportunities for exchange, comparing points of view, taking our reflections further, so that I am closer to my child as a parent, so that we grow together as people."

"It's a personal development, sharing points of view, friendship, wanting to help do things, telling our stories; because if we parents talk about ourselves a bit then that helps the teachers in their work with our children which is of primary importance to all of us. It shows us that not everything is necessarily owed to us, and if we can learn that we can pass it on to our children for their growth and future.

"I understand participation in the City and Childhood Council to be an assumption of responsibility . . . which comes from the civic sense of belonging and contributing to a civilized community—collective—society." (Quotations from the *Charter of the City and Childhood Councils,* 2002, pp. 9, 25, and 34).

Educators also have recognizable ways of describing the participation. Here is how the concept is defined by Susanna Mantovani, eminent educator at the University of Milan, in summarizing for an international audience the dominant themes of contemporary Italian educational philosophy:

"*La pedagogia della participazione*" [pedagogy of participation]—this concept, which is difficult to capture within the framework of home-school relationships, describes the community character of schools for children and the consciousness that for parents and children the school of the early years is often the first experience of getting in touch as citizens or future citizens with the communities, its rules and its opportunities. It encompasses both the ideas of control and cooperation of citizens of the community in

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establishing and running the early childhood system and the daily practices connecting

school with family and with the outside community, such as transition practices, meetings

with group of parents, and common initiatives. (Mantovani, 2007, p. 1117).

Interestingly, this concept of participation is actually enshrined in the Italian Constitution

(Article 3,) which speaks of the duty of the state to remove economic and social obstacles that

constrain "the freedom and equality of citizens, thereby impeding the full development of the

human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic, and social

organization of the country" (Delrio, 2012, p. 82). Thus, the word participation has a deep

resonance in the Italian language related to the fundamental rights and dignity of persons before

the law, perhaps in the same way that the phrase, "pursuit of happiness," speaks to Americans.

Participation is not merely a means to an end, but an ultimate end, or *good*, in itself. While Italy

is not as collectivistic a society as, for example, China or Korea, neither is it as individualistic as

the United States; community and social belonging are strongly valued (Oyserman, Coon, &

Kemmelmeier, 2002; Putnam, 1993).

Reggio Emilia is one of the progressive cities of northern Italy which have always been

in the forefront of educational innovation. Reggio educators speak frequently of participation

when talking about parent and citizen involvement (Corradini, 2012; Gandini, 2012; Hall et al.,

2010). They regard respect for children as recognizing them from the first years of life as

members of a permanent social group of citizens (Ghedini, 2001). Carlina Rinaldi (2006), in a

chapter called "Participation as Communication," discusses participation as something that

should permeate the infant-toddler center and influence not only its architecture and staff

routines but also its very concepts of ethical professional practice. Indeed, she states:

There are no aspects, topics and sectors of participation, as opposed to aspects, topics and

sectors of non-participation. In our view, the term 'participation' goes deep into and helps

work out and reinterpret issues such as the professionalism of staff members, educational

freedom, vocation in teaching, the role of the educator and the allocation of various rights

and skills between the families and the professionals. (Rinaldi, 2006, pp. 49-50).

The Reggio educators' latest declaration of the meaning of participation is published

formally in the *Principles of the Educational Project* (2010). The principles include a dense

layering of intermingled concepts, typical of Italian educational writings, rather than a logically

ordered sequence of carefully distinguished ideas, as one expects to find in the more analytic

style of writing in American educational literature:

Participation is the value and the strategy that defines the way in which the

children, the educators, and the parents are stakeholders in the educational project; it is

the educational strategy that is constructed and lived day by day in the encounter with

others and in the interpersonal relationships. Participation gives value to and makes use

of the hundred languages [i.e. multiple symbol systems] of children and of human beings,

viewed as a plurality of points of view and of cultures; it requires and fosters forms of

cultural mediation and develops in a multiplicity of occasions and initiatives for

constructing dialogue and the sense of belonging to a community. Participation generates

and nurtures the feelings and culture of solidarity, responsibility and inclusion; it

produces change and new cultures that contend with the dimension of the contemporary

world and globalization (Istituzione Scuole e Nidi d'Infanzia of the Municipality of

Reggio Emilia, 2010, pp. 10-11).

While the concept of participation per se would not necessarily seem to have close

connection to the concept of diversity (the focus of this chapter), in fact, it does. This is hinted at

by the quotation above, which speaks of participation as fostering "forms of cultural mediation"

and producing "new cultures that contend with the dimension of the contemporary world and

globalization." However, the term*, cultura*, or "culture," has somewhat different connotations in

Italian than it does in English, and this is important to our explication. In Italian it refers to

values and customs, but also to intellectual creations and aesthetic awareness (reminiscent of the

way English speakers refer to "someone of culture and cultivation"). The history of Italian

educational reform in the public welfare and early childhood sector indicates that "cultural

differences" (positively valenced as sources of diverse creativity and sensibility) have always

been at the heart of thinking about the need for, and benefits of, parent and citizen participation

in the schools. Parent and citizen participation in the running of preschools and infant-toddler

centers was a victory won by left-center coalitions in the post-World War II era. The movement

led to the legal formalization of what was called *gestione sociale* (awkwardly translated into

English as "community-based management"). It is a legally-mandated system of advisory

committees (composed of elected parents, citizens, and educators) who have a formal role in the

running of the municipal preschools, infant-toddler centers, and other educational programs

designated by their city administration. Thus, the diversity issues that originally inspired labor

unions and women's organizations to demand formalized, protected participation were related to

gender and social class diversity. These groups (women and the working classes) desperately

wanted not to be sidelined, excluded, or left out of participation in the democracy. They were a

mass of individuals who wanted to have participate, in the sense of *being protagonists*, or

"having a voice" in the everyday workings of the programs--they wanted to be invited in, respected, listened to, and appreciated to contribute.

Thus, the concept of family participation incorporates all forms of "protagonism" or active contribution, from attending parent meetings to serving on advisory committees, from helping with specific needed tasks such as preparing food for a celebration to advocating for funding for the schools. All forms and formats of parent contribution are equally valued and are not graded, for example, as to level or visibility of involvement. Perhaps because Italians have a deep theatrical sense, they desire to become alive and visible to others through words and actions, and to have their contribution responded to respectfully. Being able to participate has more of the quality of a right than a duty.

The city represents a natural and human stage where the actors are all the citizens: women and men, young and old, who participate day by day in the changing of the urban landscape. A stage of events, markets, religious and civic celebrations, conferences and meetings, commerce and music. (Sandra Piccinini, former president of the governing body of the early childhood system in Reggio Emilia, 2012, p. 89).

To be sure, the institutions to support educational participation are strongest at the early childhood level, in Italy as in the United States. In Italian schools, particularly at the middle and secondary levels, there is less evidence of parent participation (Corradini, 2012); mainly in the preschools and primary schools is participation most visible and institutionalized.

Since the post-War era, Italian society has undergone many changes, some of them parallel to changes and transformations in other Western societies, and thus the conditions originally generating a culture of parent participation in education have been altered. Patrizia

Ghedini (2001), policymaker from the Emilia Romagna Province, has described the macro

changes that have made the necessity of redefining educational interventions urgent. For

example, the decline of the rate of reproduction has led to Italy having one of the lowest

birthrates in the world, leading to a change in expectations on the part of parents for their

precious, only child. At the same time, the slowly rising divorce rate means that the nuclear

family is more fragmented and more isolated from extended kin. Longer life expectancy has

often led to a different role for grandparents in taking care of children. Further, there is an

explosion in the number and range of backgrounds of immigrant families with small children,

presenting new and different problems in education, communication, and social integration.

Finally, the economic recession of the early 21st century has deeply threatened the economic

prosperity that supported Italy's generous welfare and family-support system.

However, the idea or ideal of parent participation in early childhood systems has not

collapsed in the face of these societal and economic changes, but rather has shown its capacity to

endure in the face of occasional declines (Rinaldi, 2006) and to adapt to new cultural and social

situations (Gandini, 2012; Moss, 2012). The systems of advisory committees, set up originally

to provide a voice in the running of schools for outsiders (women and working classes) have

readily lent themselves into vehicles for giving new kinds of outsiders a way to participate and

have a voice. Indeed, in our experience, Italians seem to enjoy the very process of gathering

together, with everyone eventually contributing some idea to the discussion and listening politely

to others, long into the night. Young children in preschool master the art of *discussione*

("debate," or "discussion," involving humor, stock references, and other stylized verbal

flourishes, not escalating into serious conflict) to joyfully match wits with their peers (Corsaro,

1994; Corsaro & Molinari, 1990; Corsaro & Rizzo, 1988). Today, in Reggio Emilia, new groups

of immigrant families, and new generations of young parents, want their aspirations to be heard and recognized in different ways than in years past, but it is still possible for educators, parents, and citizens to create forums to listen closely to one another and be responsive to the felt needs of parents of today (Dahlberg, 2012; Moss, 2012; Study Group on "Identities and Functions of the City and Childhood Councils," 2002).

In the opinion of the authors of this chapter, the idea of participation remains a living and vibrant, motivating concept in Italian society, and takes somewhat different forms in different locales. As an example from outside of Reggio Emilia, we would suggest that it takes on a different cast in another context. In Pistoia, in the Tuscany Region of central Italy, the term participation is not heard as often as the term, *reciprocità*, or "reciprocity."

Reciprocity

The concept of reciprocity refers to the chain of positive and meaningful exchanges that is set up in a school with high levels of family participation and close partnership with educators. The sense of the long time horizon of mutual benefit is even better captured by this term than by the earlier term, participation. Reciprocity depends on each party finding a way to contribute as well as to look for and recognize others' responses, thus inspiring further contributions, as seen in the following quotation from leading Pistoia early educators:

> Educators look for a practical contribution on the part of each parent to the life of the community, for example, through joint work in building furniture, playground equipment, games, or toys. Even more importantly, they also expect that parents interact with them in everyday ways. These social exchanges are often very positive and useful occasions that build ever more meaningful relationships and that bring life and color to

the center. Parents often bring to the center little gifts of toys or food, just as children often carry small presents home. Such giving is a symbolic expression of the value each side gives to the exchange. The little gifts involve both the giver and the receiver, and the exchange guarantees the reciprocity that binds the community together. (Galardini & Giovannini, 2001, p. 102).

In order to set up this cycle of reciprocity, educators must approach their work with particular emotions, or caring dispositions--"empathy" and "generosity of attitude," as they say,--motivating the work of offering quality to children and truly hear and welcome parents' messages, perspectives, and unique knowledge of their children (Cline et al., 2012; Edwards et al., 2014). A pedagogy oriented to *well-being* prevails, connecting the quality of education with a deep sensitivity to the children's, families', and even the teachers' sense of ease and comfort in the school (Becchi, 2010; Mantovani, 2007). Educators and families encounter one another with expectations of working together over a long term: at least three years in the preschool, and five years in the elementary school, since continuity created by "teacher looping" is the usual and culturally expected organization. In such a context, the Pistoia educators speak of interpersonal and cultural differences as a source of value, where reciprocity becomes realized: "Each family, with its particular culture, has many things to communicate if only educators listen, and many resources to invest if only educators can create a space for true dialogue" (Galardini & Giovanini, 2001, p. 102). Families contribute not only the means to better understand their child, but also memories, stories, skills, and experiences gained from their own cultural traditions and experience of being parents. Thus, reciprocity depends on quality of process in school-family relationships, more than on specifically named products of the interaction.

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Patrizia Ghedini, the north Italian policymaker whom we have quoted previously, ties together the concept of reciprocity with the idea of respect for children and their rights. Providing children with high quality schooling affirms children's right to excellent schools and depends on reciprocity:

> Respect for the rights of children is measured by the attention that we give to children's quality of life. It is measured by the attention we give to their psychological and physical well-being, their potential and their developmental rhythms, from a perspective of listening and reciprocity between children and adults (Ghedini, 2001, p. 42).

Summary of the Italian Perspective

To conclude this review of the Italian perspective, there are several characteristic themes to be seen in discussions of family and citizen involvement in education. These, we submit, may be provocative for research on family-school partnerships in the United States:

- Parent involvement is a matter of "participation," something not divorced from the political arena but instead seen as a right—gained through the same progressive trends that have led women, workers, and today, new immigrants, to take their just place in society;

- Participation includes all forms of contribution valued equally, not categorized by level or grade;

- Participation is seen as a long-term, committed relationship between generations, with emotional connotations, captured in the term, "reciprocity;"

- Participation depends on the stakeholders cultivating attitudes of empathy and respectful listening, to foster a sense of belonging or inclusion by everyone; thus it concerns the process of the interactions;

- Progress of the educational endeavor depends on widespread participation and exchange of diverse perspectives flourishing together as a source of vitality and innovation.

Conclusions and Research Directions

In this paper, we have presented two contrasting portraits, American and Italian, as ways to look at parent –school relationships. We have attempted to construct fair summaries, that is, not exaggerated or oversimplified contrasts that turn one mindset or the other into a caricature rather than a framework for reflection. We would submit that the American discourse on home-school relationships involves an analytic approach seeking to break down categories of involvement/engagement/partnership, and then to determine their measurable outcomes for parents and children of different diverse groups. The outlook assumes a distribution of responsibilities between home, school, and community with a short-term time horizon and less focus on the quality of communications and relationships, *per se,* as an end value, than on parental engagement as a useful means to promote school readiness, learning, and success. In contrast, we would submit that the Italian discourse involves a holistic approach that subsumes all categories of contribution into a general concept of "participation," defined not as an obligation but rather a right. There is little or no interest in the measurable outcome of participation for parents and children of diverse groups, but instead a progressive outlook holding that participation *per se* contributes to democracy, on the one hand, and to the creation of a social good--diversity of outlooks and perspectives, the well-spring of innovation--on the other.

This appreciation of participant diversity as a source of multiple perspectives, generative of possibilities, may be analogous to the way biologists and medical researchers view biodiversity as a rich source of potentially useful and important genetic variations. This juxtaposition of frameworks provokes a set of questions that could stimulate future research directions.

First, what other countries have interesting perspectives on home-school relationships that may be useful to study? How can we begin to identify those national ideologies and diversity-oriented practices and strategies that might spark innovation in the United States? For example, the Scandinavian countries have intensely democratic traditions, individualistic orientations, and diverse populations; how are they promoting home-school partnerships? (see, for example, Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 2007).

Second, is it necessary for us to focus on learning skills and school achievement as the sole or predominant rationale for school-family partnerships? Are there other ways to think about the benefits, short- and long-term, that focus on the well-being and quality of life experienced by all of our children, families, educators, and ultimately, communities?

If so, third, what might be the benefit of regularly including narrative and case analysis, or other qualitative approaches, into mixed methods packages with strong quantitative design, to help illuminate the meaning-making that takes place for all the diverse stakeholders within successful partnerships, as well as to more fully describe the complex implementation processes of interventions?

Finally, what kind of attitudes, dispositions, or worldviews must stakeholders have in order to participate in open-minded and constructive family-school partnerships? What is the role of empathy and a "generosity of attitude" in the partnership and in our research, and how do we

cultivate them? How about the role of time? When relationship formation is rushed and then truncated in the typical American manner, what constraints are imposed, especially with respect to families from cultural backgrounds with non-mainstream attitudes toward time and efficiency?

This chapter opened with the puzzle as to why, in spite of the widespread recognition that diversity should be seen as a source of strength in home-school partnerships, most research addresses the communication challenges or other kinds of complexity deriving from the variations of student and family background, history, culture, and economic situations. Based on a comparison with a certain body of Italian literature of parental participation in education, we have suggested that the answer may lie in constraints imposed by our very concepts around family-school relationships. Of course, these are rooted deeply in our language and national frames of mind, that is, in cultural belief systems that exist at multiple levels and spheres of discussion, involving assumptions implicit and explicit, and therefore not something to gloss over or disrespect. However, cross-national comparisons offer a way to widen our lens and ask new kinds of research questions, and to listen more carefully to the full range of perspectives offered by stakeholders in our society. The language of "participation" may add a valuable nuance to our usual discussions of "involvement," "engagement," and "partnership," providing a less evaluative and more synthetic way of framing family contributions, presence, and voice in our schools and communities.

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