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Parental Involvement Policies in Ontario: A Critical Analysis

Max Antony-Newman

Abstract

In the current climate of ever-increasing pressure on parents to become more responsible for the achievement of their children, which forms an element of neo-liberal governance with its shift from public to private, it is necessary to understand the discourses generated by parental involvement policies. This analysis showed that existing policies in Ontario (Canada) are permeated with discourses of barriers and parental deficiency. They employ a narrow definition of parental involvement, privilege parenting strategies of White middle classes, and represent diverse and immigrant parents as lacking. Although the difference among parents is acknowledged, parents receive no recognition for funds of knowledge they have. Policy documents remain silent on issues of inequality and present parental involvement as a neutral tool rather than a socially constructed and historically specific practice with its set of winners and losers. Implications for policymakers include adding parental involvement content in preservice and in-service teacher education to make parent–school partnerships truly democratic and effective for all.

Key Words: parental involvement, parents, engagement, barriers to involvement, critical policy analysis, schools, policies, partnerships, Ontario, Canada

Introduction: The Rise of Parental Involvement Policies

It has been known for decades that parental background and family factors shape the educational experiences of students across countries. Researchers

who focused on social class and education paid significant attention to the ways in which the school reproduces social inequality (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Lareau, 2011) and provides differentiated curriculum to students based on their familial characteristics (Anyon, 1980; Luke, 2010). Social reproduction researchers showed that differences in parenting and other aspects of home environment shape the school experiences and achievement of children in profound ways (Lareau, 2011; Reay, 1998). At the same time, the idea of parental involvement as a response to educational problems, which required policy intervention, appeared only during the mid-1960s, but became especially powerful over the last several decades (Mapp, 2012).

When the U.S. president Lyndon Johnson began his "War on Poverty," education was selected as one of the main intervention strategies with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 setting aside additional funding for parental involvement in poverty-stricken schools (Mapp, 2012). Parental involvement was defined as "the capabilities of parents to work with the school in a way that supports their children's well-being, growth, and development" (Mizell, as cited in Mapp, 2012, p. 7). *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983 explicitly mentioned that parents were more important for educational reform than teachers and policymakers (Fernandez & Lopez, 2017). In the U.K., policymakers have been trying to increase social mobility since the late 1990s by "improving" the parenting of citizens, including increasing parental involvement in children's education (Vincent, 2017). Such "improvement" efforts have been centered on raising aspirations among working-class parents (Spohrer, Stahl, & Bowers-Brown, 2018) and helping them make "better" educational choices for their children (Exley, 2013). The 21st century brought parental involvement polices into the spotlight in the field of education, especially in the English-speaking nations. The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act, 2006 represents one of the few stand-alone legislative documents dedicated exclusively to parental involvement (National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017), while a Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools, 2010 offered the first comprehensive document of its kind in Canada (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

In the Ontario context, parental involvement was formalized in the late 1990s, when the provincial conservative government of Mike Harris passed Bill 160, Education Quality Improvement Act, 1997, which mandated school councils to be established in all schools (Ontario, 1997). In 2000, The Education Act, Ontario Regulation 612/00: School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees clarified that the purpose of school councils is to "improve pupil achievement and to enhance the accountability of the education system to parents" (Ontario, 2000, p. 1). This advisory body consists of several parents, the

principal, one teacher, one staff member, and a community representative. In 2005, the Parent Voice in Education Project, after consultations with parents across the province, resulted in a report calling for empowering the parental voice in education, creating a more inclusive environment for parents, and recognizing the differences among diverse parents in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The same year, the Ontario Parent Involvement Policy was introduced as the first policy document in the province dedicated to the involvement of parents in their children's education, followed by an enhanced *Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools* in 2010 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The Parents Reaching Out Grants program was launched in 2006 to provide funding to school councils and regional parental organizations with the goal to eliminate barriers to parental involvement (Hamlin & Flessa, 2016), whereas parent involvement committees for all Ontario school boards[1] became mandatory in 2009 through the amendment of the Regulation 612/00 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

If parents were always involved in their children's education, albeit in different ways, what lies behind the current proliferation of parental involvement policies? What problems are parental involvement policies supposed to solve? One of the possible explanations is the discourse focusing on the achievement gap (Carey, 2013; Goodall, 2017) and the need for school improvement in the "knowledge economies" of globalized capitalism (Rawolle, Wells, Paatsch, Tytler, & Campbell, 2016). Policy here is used as a solution to the "problem" generated by data—differences in test results from international comparisons (e.g., PISA) and local accountability measures (e.g., Education Quality and Accountability Office tests), public outcry and media coverage (e.g., discourse of failing schools), and government pressure (e.g., emphasis on education as the key element of human capital formation; Vargas, 2017). Subsequently, parents are blamed for educational underachievement, even though the problem of involvement here is a discursive one due to the narrow definition of normative parental involvement (Fernandez & Lopez, 2017). Not surprisingly, such increased emphasis on parental involvement lauded as one of the best tools for such improvement is disproportionally aimed at student populations identified as disadvantaged (Gewirtz, 2001; Rawolle et al., 2016). Parental involvement policies are getting popular internationally because, similar to other educational policies, they become global and "travel" through the network of international organizations (OECD, 2012; Redding, 2000) and via mobile educational researchers and private companies (Ball, Junemann, & Santori, 2017), which leads to the homogenization of policies across nation states.

Against this historical and cultural background, I carried out my analysis of parental involvement policy documents in Ontario guided by the following

research questions: (1) How is parental involvement conceptualized in policy documents compared to the latest parental involvement research? (2) How are diverse and immigrant parents represented in policy documents? Does the discourse empower one group of parents and marginalize others?

Parental Involvement: Three Scholarly Approaches

Parental involvement,[2] one of the key topics of academic literature on student success for several decades (Epstein, 2010; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Taylor, 2004; McNeal, 1999; Wilder, 2014), has been shown to affect cognitive and behavioral outcomes of school-aged children across socioeconomic segments and ethnic groups. It could be roughly classified into school-based activities (volunteering, attending parent–teacher conferences, serving on parent councils) and family-based activities (setting expectations, monitoring child's progress, helping with homework, discussing schools). Despite the almost unanimous acknowledgement of numerous benefits of parental involvement for children, this phenomenon has been approached by scholars from three different perspectives based on variation in methodology, theoretical lens, and positionality of researchers. I define these approaches here as *involvement for achievement, involvement as capital,* and *involvement for equity*.

Involvement for achievement perspective is the dominant approach both in research (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Jeynes, 2007) and policymaking (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). The appeal of this orientation lies in the possibilities parental involvement has to improve academic achievement (Nawrotzki, 2012). Prolific scholarship in this area is attested to by several meta-analytic studies, which aggregate numerous primary sources dedicated to the establishment of relations between parental involvement in its multiple definitions and academic achievement (Jeynes, 2005; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Sénéchal & Young, 2008). On the policy level, parental involvement offers promise to decrease the achievement gap (LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011) and improve schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Parental involvement programs are one of the explicit requirements from the federal government for U.S. public schools which have high concentrations of students living in poverty and which receive additional funding under Title I, Part A of ESEA (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Education Act: Ontario Regulation 612/00 contains provisions for the mandatory establishment of parental involvement councils in school boards across Ontario, whereas authorities in England and Wales experimented with the range of initiatives including home–school agreements (Gibson, 2013).

One of the main contributions of this perspective lies in the classification of types of parental involvement and psychosocial explanations of why parents get involved in their children's education. Epstein (2010) offered the most influential classification of types of parental involvement, which are represented by parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Despite the justified criticism that this framework centers schools and downplays parental agency (Stitt & Brooks, 2014), it is still useful due to the emphasis on psychological, educational, and sociological aspects of cooperation among families, schools, and communities. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) came up with a model of parental involvement that explains reasons for parents to become involved in their children's learning. According to this model there are three sources of parental motivation for involvement: role construction and sense of self-efficacy, perception of invitation to involvement from school, and life-context variables.

Despite the above-mentioned contributions of the *involvement for achievement* perspective that establish the benefits of parental involvement for children's learning, provide an initial definition of the term, and look at psychosocial reasons why parents get involved, this stance has several limitations. First, the purpose of parental involvement is narrowly defined here as a tool to improve achievement to meet the needs of governmental authorities in terms of teachers' accountability and competition between schools. Academic performance is the only measure taken into account. Such needs of parents and teachers as emotional support, identity formation, and reproduction of family culture are ignored, because it is school-based involvement and outcomes that are emphasized here (Stitt & Brooks, 2014). Secondly, such salient social categories as class, race, and immigration status are not paid enough attention when the *involvement for achievement* perspective is adopted. Subsequently, more holistic approaches to parental involvement are required to capture the complexity of the phenomenon, take into account the experiences of diverse parents, and to provide insights for policy and practice that would be meaningful to both parents and teachers.

One of such alternative approaches is *involvement as capital.* Scholars who follow this line of inquiry (Lareau, 2011; McNeal, 1999; Reay, 2004) pay special attention to the way social class affects parental involvement and use the concept of capital as developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1986). He extended the notion of capital by adding its cultural and social types to economic capital (money and assets; Bourdieu, 1986). Cultural capital denotes a set of values, skills, and dispositions that help its owners achieve social mobility or successfully navigate educational systems. Social capital is expressed through valuable resources acquired through membership in a particular social group

(Wacquant, 2008). Going back to the central notion of education as the main site of social reproduction (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), researchers working through the perspective of *involvement as capital* show how the education system is organized to provide all children with education commensurate with their social class (Anyon, 1980; Luke, 2010). As far as the middle and upper-middle classes dominate capitalist societies, their cultural norms (language, comportment, preferences, dispositions, etc.) are viewed as desirable by the school system (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). On the contrary, the cultural and social capitals of working-class parents and their children are devalued due to their lower social position and lack of correspondence to school expectations.

Differences based on social class permeate the culture of parenting in profound ways, affecting the behavior of parents at home, in school, and in the community. Lareau (2011) defines two main types of parenting as "concerted cultivation" practiced by middle-class,[3] university-educated parents with professional jobs, and "the accomplishment of natural growth" typical of working-class and low-income parents. Concerted cultivation lies in organizing children's time in a structured way, especially through organized activities (Rivera, 2011; Snellman, Silva, Frederick, & Putnam, 2015; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016), developing critical thinking and presentation skills by talking to children as equals, and instilling the feeling of entitlement. On the other hand, the enactment of a natural growth approach allows children to play freely on their own, with siblings, or neighbors. These differences are not necessarily predetermined by choice, because middle-class parents have the capacity to "cultivate" their children due to their own higher level of education and financial resources needed to provide organized activities, whereas working-class and low-income parents suffer from a lack of time and money (Lareau, 2011). Crucially, their own early socialization and schooling prepared them for manual jobs where they have to follow the instructions of superiors and have little freedom to define how work should be done, which contrasts with professional occupations that require critical thinking and presentation skills.

In school settings, middle-class parents can successfully negotiate on their children's behalf to ensure that they receive appropriate services (e.g., access to academic tracks or gifted programs) and that disciplinary and academic problems are resolved (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003). Successful educational experience, rich social networks, and financial resources for remedial and complementary activities make middle-class parents confident that their voice will be heard. Their actions are not necessarily valuable per se but are better aligned with the expectations of school as an institution (Lareau, 2015). On the contrary, working-class parents have very few resources that allow them to advocate for their children. Quite often they not only lack the general understanding

of the "rules of the game" but also feel shy seeking institutional help (Reay, 2004). Their social networks consist mainly of relatives and neighbors similarly located in the working class, who cannot provide support when school accommodation is required (Lareau, 2015). Due to such differences based on class, middle-class parental involvement is considered normative by schools (Reay, 1998), whereas the ways working-class or low-income parents get involved in their children's education are disregarded or undervalued. The strongest point of looking at *parental involvement as capital* is that instead of focusing only on school-centered involvement, this approach allows us to understand the underlying social conditions that affect how different groups of parents get involved in their children's education. Attention to social inequality explains why the parental involvement of working-class and low-income parents does not provide their children with as many benefits in the school system as their middle-class peers receive.

If the *involvement as capital* perspective highlights the salience of class, *involvement for equity* also adds race, ethnicity, and immigration status to the analysis of parental involvement. Researchers working in this vein critique the *involvement for achievement* approach for largely ignoring the ways parents from nondominant backgrounds[4] participate in their children's education (Baquedano-Lopez, Alexander, & Hernandez, 2013). Traditional typology of parental involvement in the Western context is based on practices of White, middle-class, native-born parents. Subsequently, different parental involvement strategies adopted by racial/ethnic minority, working-class, and immigrant parents are perceived through a deficit approach which negatively affects their involvement.

The deficit approach ties into the general perception of parents as inadequate in their role of childrearers who need expert advice on parenting and state intervention to ensure that children are taken care of and their educational success is ensured (Berry, 2013; Gillies, 2005; Lee, 2014). Unsurprisingly, parenting education programs are disproportionally aimed at nondominant parents (Fernandez & Lopez, 2017; Gillies, 2007; Rawolle et al., 2016). In the neoliberal times, parents are constructed as entrepreneurial subjects who approach their children as "projects" and can choose schools and other educational products and services for their children (Geinger, Vandenbroeck, & Roets, 2014; Reay, 1996). Such discourses further marginalize diverse parents because their parenting practices are less often aligned with the vision of parents as consumers (Reay, 2004).

To counteract the deficit view of diverse parents and their childrearing practices, academics who espouse the *involvement for equity* approach see parents as agents who can intervene on behalf of their children and resist existing barriers

to involvement (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). A promising way of studying *involvement for equity* is followed by researchers interested in the concept of "funds of knowledge" which was originally developed through the anthropological study of Latino/a households in the U.S. (Rios-Aguilar, Kiyama, Gravitt, & Moll, 2011). This concept defines parental practices, ideas, and values about education predominantly typical of Latino/a working-class immigrants that resist marginalization in the U.S. school system (Olivos & Mendoza, 2009). Funds of knowledge include proficiency in students' home language(s), home literacy practices, and prior educational experiences both in the host country and abroad (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Another possible emancipatory practice at the intersection of research and activism is parent community organizing (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013), when grassroots organizations supported by educational researchers are used to work against the power of bureaucratic organizations (school boards, ministries of education). Although these empowerment approaches are a significant step forward compared to traditional school-centric parental involvement, there are several downsides here as well. First, the necessity to have a researcher to initiate change could be too paternalistic and a deficit approach in essence, despite noble aims. Secondly, if "funds of knowledge [are] for the poor and forms of capital for the rich" (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011, p. 163), we are still left with the question: How in the field of education can funds of knowledge be transformed into capital (e.g., better grades, higher college enrollment, etc.)? The notion of capital brings back class and power, which are evident in contemporary schooling more than ever (Ball, 2010; Siraj & Mayo, 2014).

To sum up, the complex phenomenon of parental involvement has been the center of attention of researchers, educators, and policymakers for several decades. Whether analyzed for its connection to achievement, its value as capital, or potential for equity, parental involvement in education cannot be ignored.

Methodology

As a scholar working from a critical standpoint, I adopt a critical policy analysis approach (Young & Diem, 2017) focusing on: (1) difference between policy rhetoric and practice (what policy documents "say" and how parental involvement is practiced) based on prior research and available Canadian data (People for Education, 2012); (2) roots of policy and its development (how parental involvement policies emerged and what problems they were intended to solve); (3) distribution of power, resources, and knowledge (does the discourse empower one group of parents and marginalize others; what is the balance of power between parents and teachers); (4) stratification, inequality,

and privilege (how diverse and immigrant parents are represented in the policy); and (5) nature of resistance (are nondominant actors involved in policy to make their voices heard).

I looked at parental involvement policy documents to better understand the narratives on parental involvement in Canadian schools. These documents are important for the analysis of parental involvement because they shape the narratives around involvement. After all, policy is often understood as the "authoritative allocation of values" (Easton, as cited in Prunty, 1985, p. 136). When policy is understood as text (Ball, 1993) it allows one to see the agendas and compromises of multiple actors responsible for the creation of documents. In the case of parental involvement policies in Ontario, we can distinguish the position of the Ministry of Education, several school boards, associations of school principals, and one nongovernmental organization. Texts produced by these policy actors define the range of problems and solutions related to parental involvement in the province. The policy as discourse approach (Bacchi, 2000; Ball, 1993) goes further to look at not only what can be said, but also who has the power to speak, and what ideas are excluded from policies (Fimyar, 2014). Notably, policies are almost always implemented in nonstraightforward and nonlinear ways (Braun, Maguire, & Ball, 2010). Nevertheless, some policy documents have significant power, especially when supported by regulatory requirements (e.g., mandatory school councils and parental involvement committees in Ontario). In other words, parental involvement policy documents play an important role in defining what types of involvement are expected from parents by the school system. Table 1 provides the full list of analyzed policy documents and names of the organizations responsible for the creation of these policies.

After a close reading of policy documents, they were coded thematically. The first level of coding used a combination of pre-set and emergent codes. Among the pre-set codes informed by prior research on parental involvement (Epstein, 2010; Lareau, 2011; Mapp, 2012; Saltmarsh, Barr, & Chapman, 2015), the following descriptive codes were included: parental involvement, engagement, parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, collaborating with community, barriers to involvement, and immigrant parents. At this stage, a range of additional descriptive codes emerged: benefits of parental involvement, high expectations, and acknowledgement of parental involvement. During the second level coding, I took multiple first level codes and reorganized them into a more select group of codes which were developed into broader categories: home-based activities, school-based activities, role of parents, role of teachers, diversity, and supporting parents. At the stage of third level coding, categories were refined to develop major themes: normative

parental involvement, good parenting, deficit lens, and absent teachers. Themes were analyzed to answer the research questions.

Table 1. Analyzed Policy Documents

Policy Document	Organization
Parents in Partnership: Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools	Ontario Ministry of Education (2010)
School Councils: A Guide for Members	Ontario Ministry of Education (2001)
Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy	Ontario Ministry of Education (2009)
Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario	Ontario Ministry of Education (2014)
Ontario Regulation 612/00: School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees	Ontario [Government] (2000)
Parent Tool Kit: What Parents Can Do to Help Their Child Succeed in School	Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) (2012)
Planning Parent Engagement: A Guidebook for Parents and Schools	Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) (2014)
School Administrator's Guide to Parent Engagement	Ontario Principals' Council (2011)
Policy P.023 SCS Parent and Community Involvement	Toronto District School Board (2005)
Operational Procedure PR558 Parent and Community Involvement	Toronto District School Board (2015)
Policy #238.0, Parent, Family and Community Engagement	York Region District School Board (2015)
Policy 606: Catholic School Councils	York Region Catholic District School Board (2013)
Beyond School Councils: Engaging Parents to Help Their Children Succeed at School	People for Education (2012)
Parent Involvement Committees: Building Parent Engagement in Ontario's School Boards	People for Education (2015)

Findings

First, I will briefly describe the policy documents before providing the analysis of narratives present in policies in order to answer the research questions. At the top of the policymaking hierarchy there are five documents developed by the Ontario Ministry of Education. They include the framework *Parents in*

Partnership: Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), which outlines the roles and expectations around parental involvement, provides examples of existing initiatives, and sets targets for schools, boards, and the Ministry itself regarding parental involvement in Ontario schools. *School Councils: A Guide for Members* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001) describes the work of school councils in detail from their establishment to day-to-day operations. *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) refers to parents on several occasions regarding them as partners in need of welcome, respect, and engagement. *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario* also underlines the importance to "ensure parents and guardians are welcomed, respected, and valued by the school community as partners in their children's education" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 7). Closely associated with these documents is Ontario Regulation 612/00: School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees, passed by the provincial government. In its revised form, the regulation makes both school councils in separate schools and parental involvement councils on the board level mandatory for all public schools in the province (Ontario, 2000).

The second group of parental involvement policy documents is represented by policies created by associations of school administrators. Ontario Principals' Council created *School Administrator's Guide to Parent Engagement* (2011), which provides school leaders with one resource to answer all questions regarding parental involvement in schools. Council of Ontario Directors of Education (CODE) developed two documents: *Parent Tool Kit: What Parents Can Do to Help Their Child Succeed in School* (2012), and *Planning Parent Engagement: A Guidebook for Parents and Schools* (2014).

On the school level, the following documents were analyzed: Toronto District School Board (TDSB) Policy P.023 SCS Parent and Community Involvement and its related Operational Procedure PR558 Parent and Community Involvement. I also looked at York Region District School Board Policy #238.0, Parent, Family and Community Engagement and at York Catholic District School Board Policy 606: Catholic School Councils. I selected these school boards in particular because they represent the Greater Toronto Area, the most populous metropolitan area in Canada, and they have dedicated parental involvement policies which are publicly available on their websites. These documents outline responsibilities of all board stakeholders regarding parental involvement, focusing heavily on school councils, fundraising, and volunteering, alongside practical measures aimed at implementing the *Parents in Partnership* policy from the Ontario Ministry of Education (TDSB, 2015).

Finally, I selected for analysis two parental involvement policy documents prepared by People for Education; they are *Beyond School Councils: Engaging Parents to Help Their Children Succeed at School* (2012) and *Parent Involvement Committees: Building Parent Engagement in Ontario's School Boards* (2015). Unlike actors responsible for documents in the first three groups (Ministry, associations of school leaders, school boards), People for Education is a nongovernmental organization established in the 1990s to support public education in the period of cuts to public services initiated by the Harris government (Winton & Brewer, 2014). Due to its history and mandate as "an independent, nonpartisan, charitable organization working to support and advance public education through research, policy, and public engagement" (People for Education, n.d., para. 1), People for Education is free to generate alternative policy solutions, which is telling in the structure and content of the two analyzed policies.

Conceptualizations of Parental Involvement in Ontario Policy Documents

How is parental involvement conceptualized in policy documents compared to the latest parental involvement research?

Over the last several decades, multiple discussions among critical scholars of parental involvement have highlighted the importance of the fact that the way parental involvement is conceptualized in policy and research affects parental involvement practice in schools and families (Auerbach, 2007; Stitt & Brooks, 2014). Discourses around parental involvement generated in policy documents circulate in the media and find their way into teacher education, which adds to their internalization by educators (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013). Traditional understanding of involvement is seen mostly as parental participation in school-based and school-sanctioned activities (volunteering, fundraising, homework help, advocating for their children). This discourse is problematic on two levels. First, as prior meta-studies have shown, it is parental involvement at home (setting expectations, providing academic socialization, etc.) that brings the most improvement in academic achievement (Harris & Goodall, 2007; Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007). It is understandable that schools as institutions are interested in parents' help which could directly benefit schools by providing voluntary labor and additional funds raised in the community (Winton, 2018), but ignoring home-based involvement means that we lose the opportunity to harness its benefits for better student achievement and well-being. Secondly, if the emphasis is placed only on school-based parental involvement, it privileges the practices typical of parents from dominant groups (i.e., in the case of Ontario: White, middle-class, and native born) who are more comfortable participating in the school domain (Stitt & Brooks, 2014). As a result, if home-based

involvement, which is preferred by parents from nondominant groups (e.g., visible minorities, working class, immigrants; Tang, 2015; Thomas-Duckwitz, Hess, & Atcherly, 2013; Zhong & Zhou, 2011), is overlooked on the policy level, these parents lose their voice with teachers and could be seen as "hard to reach" (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013; Crozier & Davies, 2007). We know that parents from dominant backgrounds possess social and cultural capital valued by the school and feel more confident participating in school-based involvement (Dyson, 2001; Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2016). Subsequently, even in situations when parents from nondominant backgrounds practice the same activities at home as do parents from dominant backgrounds, it is the latter group of parents who benefits more from this involvement.

In the Ontario context, policymakers have significantly improved their understanding of parental involvement compared to the earlier period. In 2005, parental involvement was defined by the Ministry of Education as "good parenting, helping with homework, serving on school councils and board or provincial committees, communicating and meeting with teachers, and volunteering in the classroom or on school trips" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, p. 3). Problematic moral undertones of the notion of "good parenting" (Thomas, Keogh, & Hay, 2015) and school-centered emphasis on homework, councils, and volunteering were heavily mismatched with home-based involvement preferred by parents (e.g., supporting students well-being, organizing learning at home; Hamlin & Flessa, 2016).

As a result, it is important that the current framework policy *Parents in Partnership: Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools* offers significant improvement by acknowledging both home- and school-based involvement in its expanded definition of involvement as:

> The policy acknowledges all aspects of the important parental role in education. These include providing home conditions that support children as learners at all grade levels, supporting parent peers, and taking parents' leadership roles. Some parents play a leadership role and serve on school councils, Parent Involvement Committees (PICs), or Special Education Advisory Committees (SEACs). Some volunteer for field trips or help with various school activities. Parents meet with teachers to discuss their children's needs, progress, and goals, and they attend assemblies, performances, and sports events. Many parents read to their children every night or talk to them about their school day. These activities all reflect engaged parents who are contributing to their children's education. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 11)

The document *Parents in Partnership* acknowledges barriers based on language, immigration status, poverty, or unfamiliarity with the education system.

Still, a more in-depth textual analysis shows that the deficit view of involvement is evident here, when support is offered mostly to parents who "do not understand the language of the school" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 28) or have to be "reached out" (Crozier & Davies, 2007, p. 307). The document contains 13 sidebars with brief descriptions of particular initiatives that "illustrate some of the ways in which these organizations are breaking down the barriers to parent engagement and supporting parents as welcomed and valued partners in education" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 8). The intentions of policymakers are clearly positive here, but heavy emphasis on support, however necessary, outweighs the acknowledgement that parents already possess considerable home resources at their disposal (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). Parents are merely acknowledged in several brief sentences, for example: "Parents in Ontario care about their children and want to be involved. They want their children to succeed in school and are willing to help in as many ways as possible" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 25). In contrast, possible types of support are comprehensive and can be classified into the following groups: (1) suggestions about how parents can help their children's learning at home and in school; (2) information for parents to participate in school life and engage in literacy activities; (3) resources available at schools. The word "support" is used a staggering 108 times in the *Parents in Partnership* policy (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010).

One of the key omissions in policy documents, especially in *Parents in Partnership*, is the absence of mentions of teachers. Multiple case studies of successful parental involvement in schools are presented, but every time the emphasis is on parents, who have to be helped, surveyed, or things have to be explained to them so they are more aware of why parental involvement matters. There is almost no word on teachers and teacher readiness to work with parents, even though prior studies have shown that parental involvement suffers when teachers are not prepared to work with parents collaboratively (Patte, 2011; Uludag, 2008). Unfortunately, the material on school–family partnerships is rarely included in initial teacher education programs internationally (Thompson et al., 2018) or in Ontario, specifically (Petrarca & Kitchen, 2017).

Policy documents produced by actors other than the Ontario Ministry of Education have a slightly less school-centric view of parental involvement. For example, CODE, in their 2014 *Planning Parent Engagement: A Guidebook for Parents and Schools* that accompanies their 2012 *Parent Tool Kit: What Parents Can Do to Help Their Child Succeed in School*, mentions specifically that the "key messages in the Parent Tool Kit identify the importance of families supporting their children in more ways than attending meetings or volunteering at school" (CODE, 2014, p. 17). Parents are told that "learning at home is one

of the most beneficial ways to help your child succeed" (CODE, 2012, p. 11), but the former "don't need to know how to do homework to help" (CODE, 2012, p. 17). Nevertheless, the purpose of these documents is quite instrumental. The *Planning Parent Engagement* guidebook has as its stated aim "for parent groups and school staff to use [the document] in planning school-based activities to complement and support parents' efforts at home" (CODE, 2014, p. 3). The *Parent Tool Kit* helps parents to reinforce classroom learning at home, prepare for a science fair, or stay informed about school events (CODE, 2012).

Policies written by the three Ontario school boards (TDSB, YRDSB, YRC-DSB) in the greater Toronto area acknowledge the "invaluable role [of parents and families] in supporting students' learning both in the home and by making valuable contributions to classrooms and schools" (YRDSB, 2015, p. 2). Moreover, "TDSB believes that education is a shared responsibility among parents, the community, students, staff, and the Board" (TDSB, 2015, p. 1). At the same time, these policies are concerned mostly with such issues as school councils, parental advisory committees, volunteering, and fundraising, while the definition of involvement is referenced from the *Parents in Partnership* policy provided by the Ministry of Education. It is important to mention that under the Education Act, Ontario Regulation 612/00: School Councils and Parent Involvement Committees, school boards are required to ensure the day-to-day operation of the above-mentioned councils and committees; subsequently, this topic is paid significant attention.

Finally, only People for Education, a nongovernmental organization supporting public education in Ontario (Winton & Brewer, 2014), puts parents at the center of its discourse in its *Beyond School Councils: Engaging Parents to Help Their Children Succeed at School* toolkit. Parents are comforted that according to the latest research:

> The evidence is clear. Parents make a difference. And the way they contribute most to their children's education is through what they do at home. Being a parent can be challenging, but the good news is that you don't have to be "volunteer of the year" or an expert on the war of 1812 to help your child succeed at school. (People for Education, 2012, p. 2)

The centrality of parents is achieved by providing tips for parents first and then switching to supporting roles for teachers and principals to play. Having reviewed the available literature on benefits of parental involvement (People for Education, 2012), authors of *Beyond School Councils* distinguish four successful strategies for parents: (1) Have high expectations for your children; (2) Talk about school; (3) Help your children develop a positive attitude toward learning and good work habits; and (4) Read together (in any language).

Crucially, teachers and principals are then given ideas how to "support parents in having high expectations for their children, how to help parents talk with their children about school by giving them something to talk about, how to encourage parents to read with their children" and support parents in developing their children's work habits and learning skills (People for Education, 2012, p. 4). How effective is this welcome shift of focus from schools to parents in the policy discourse on parental involvement is a difficult question to answer. Alternative policymaking by the People for Education was not always enough in the past to change the terms of the debate, but their work is an important step in this direction (Winton, 2018).

To sum up, the current narrative in Ontario parental involvement policies shows a slow change of conceptualization of parental involvement from a very school-centric model to one which includes activities that parents practice at home as well. Despite this important expansion of "parental involvement" as a concept, many of the improvements are either superficial or not significant enough. Overall, the involvement that supports school activities (e.g., homework, science fairs, serving on councils) is privileged by the amount of space and the level of detail provided to discussion of such types of involvement in the 14 analyzed documents. Subsequently, parental involvement which is aligned with the policy expectations is likely to be more valued by the schools. Such types of involvement will function as capital for parents who can and are willing to participate in such activities.

How Parents and Parents' Involvement Are Represented in Policy Documents

How are diverse and immigrant parents represented in policy documents? Does the discourse empower one group of parents and marginalize others?

Having briefly analyzed the conceptualization of parental involvement in Ontario policy documents, I will now focus on parents whose involvement is sought to make good schools even better (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). The most dominant narrative associated with parents in all analyzed documents is that of "parents as partners," because "essential understanding must be the recognition that meaningful partnerships among parents, educators, and communities are the core of parent engagement" (Ontario Principals' Council, 2011, p. 8). The word partner(ship) is used no fewer than 40 times in the *Parents in Partnership* policy with other policy documents not far behind. Despite the democratic rhetoric, the discourse of parents as partners (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013)—used extensively in the document produced by the Ministry—supports agendas, curricula, and the mission of schools rather

than the interest of parents: "The positive results of a genuine partnership between parents and schools include improved student achievement, reduced absenteeism, positive student behavior, and increased confidence among parents in their children's schooling" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 8). CODE puts it in a straightforward manner: "It will be worthwhile to formulate an annual implementation plan to engage parents in their child's learning at school and at home. The goal of the plan is to align the goals and objectives in the school improvement plans with activities that engage parents" (CODE, 2014, p. 17). Supporting learning is understood as improving achievement and well-being with academic achievement clearly taking precedence over well-being, even though the latter was found to be especially important to parents in Ontario (Hamlin & Flessa, 2016). Once again, the policy reinforces the notion of school improvement, so that "good schools become even better when parents are involved" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 5). Interestingly, *Beyond School Councils* and *PICs: Supporting Links Between Ontario's School Boards and Ontario Parents* by People for Education barely mention the idea of partnership. This fact contributes to the idea that the "parents as partners" discourse is generated by the educational community for its own purposes (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013) and is not necessarily shared by parents and their organizations.

The supporting role of parents is confirmed in the policy documents by defined boundaries between parents and teachers. There is a clear discouragement of teaching by parents: "The concept of help at home refers to families encouraging, listening to, praising, guiding, monitoring, and discussing schoolwork with their children and not whether or how they teach school subjects" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 10). "[Parents] believe that they should be reading the textbook and trying to teach their child how to solve a problem or complete the homework. Although understandable and well-intentioned, using this approach can create confusion and frustration for both parents and children" (CODE, 2012, p. 16). Even People for Education recommends that "rather than trying to directly 'teach' your children, focus on helping them handle distractions and crises of confidence, praise them for effort and persistence, and demonstrate a positive attitude about school as a whole" (People for Education, 2012, p. 3). Such a discouragement of teaching by parents at home is somewhat understandable, because it not only supports the professional autonomy of teachers, but also avoids excessive pressure on parents, especially those with limited education. The downside of this approach lies in the fact that many immigrant parents like to follow the curriculum of their home countries to complement learning in school (Guo, 2011) and ignoring it takes away the agency from this large group of parents. As a result, some immigrant

parents send their children to complementary schools (Asanova, 2005) or pay for tutoring (Byun & Park, 2012). Both strategies may increase educational inequality between those who have access to such shadow schooling and those who cannot afford it (Bray, 2010).

The second most evident narrative in analyzed policy documents is that of barriers to parental involvement. While the nature of parental involvement and its benefits to children's achievement and well-being are described in several policy documents quite well, the concept of barriers and the related notion of "diversity" are taken for granted and rarely analyzed in detail. Only the description of the Parents Reaching Out Grants initiative, inaugurated in 2006 and created specifically to tackle perceived barriers to involvement (Hamlin & Flessa, 2016), contains a workable definition of such barriers. "[It] supports school-based initiatives focused on engaging parents who may experience barriers as a result of language, recent immigration, poverty, newness to Ontario's school system, or other factors" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 19). The Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy also "directs school boards to implement strategies that identify and remove discriminatory barriers that limit engagement by students, parents, and the community, so that diverse groups and the broader community have better board-level representation and greater access to board initiatives" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 19). An expanded definition of diverse learners in the Ontario education system, according to the Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy, includes students who are targets of racism, homophobia, religious intolerance, and/or could be at risk of lower academic achievement (recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Aboriginal students, boys, students with special education needs; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009).

The idea that diverse parents have barriers to their involvement requires the normative understanding of effective involvement all parents should aspire to. It also creates a dichotomy between those who do not face barriers and those who do. Acknowledging real barriers is the first step towards dismantling them, but recognition alone is not enough if not followed by systemic action to challenge the social arrangements that lead to the emergence of barriers. The role of policy documents is important in generating discourses that look at parental strengths and see parents as central players in their children's learning. At the same time, inequality among parents in terms of cultural and social capital needs to be recognized to move away from deficit assumptions towards meaningful improvement. Prior research showed that middle-class parents of dominant backgrounds (White, native-born) have advantages when it comes to effective involvement (CODE, 2012, 2014). They can advocate on their children's behalf more successfully because their cultural capital is recognized

and valued by the school, while their social networks provide significant information regarding the school system (Lareau, 2011). Sufficient economic resources and nonhostile institutions give such parents better return on their involvement. Despite the acknowledgement of different types of involvement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), more space is dedicated to specifics of serving on school councils (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001), participating in parental involvement committees (People for Education, 2015), and volunteering in the school (CODE, 2014; TDSB, 2015), which are precisely the types of involvement that immigrant parents are less involved in compared to parents from dominant backgrounds (Antony-Newman, 2018). Policies mention the salience of learning at home and setting high expectations, but no elaboration or examples are provided. This is an important omission, because immigrant parents are more often involved specifically in home settings (Hamlin & Flessa, 2016; Poza, Brooks, & Valdés, 2014; Sohn & Wang, 2006).

On the other hand, the word "diversity" in the texts is used together with "increase," "better," "outreach," and "barrier." There is a lot of emphasis on how diverse parents have to be engaged (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Ontario Principals' Council, 2011): "it is especially important to find ways of encouraging participation from the various and diverse ethnocultural groups that make up the school community. For a number of reasons, some parents from these groups may be hesitant to involve themselves in local education matters regarding their children" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 39). The text provides no explanation of reasons behind this hesitancy. Parents who face barriers are viewed from a deficit perspective, which especially trickles down to "culturally and linguistically diverse parents" whose funds of knowledge are hardly recognized. This is both discriminatory and wasteful but is hardly surprising in the context of issues with the lack of recognition of foreign educational credentials and subsequent downward social mobility among many immigrant parents, in particular (Guo, 2009). The current approach to parental involvement among parents from nondominant backgrounds resembles liberal multiculturalism in its attitude to "diversity." Although "diversity" is acknowledged, it has to be managed to keep the status quo to the benefit of the education system already in place (McCarthy, 1993). Parents from diverse backgrounds are offered support in the spirit of generosity, but policy documents remain silent about the issues of class inequality which is the most strongly evident in children's parenting leading to social reproduction in education (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Finally, I would like to mention that the *Parents in Partnership* policy does offer a sensible definition of challenges many parents might face regarding their children's education, which could improve the way parents are seen by policymakers and educators if it is applied to all parents without exception:

With their busy lives, it can be challenging for parents to play as active a role as they would like in their children's education. Research has shown that parent involvement can be influenced by many factors such as language, parent educational level, the challenges of single parenthood, attitudes of school staff, cultural influences, socioeconomic status, and geography (for example, the local challenges facing urban, rural, and northern communities). As well, parent engagement tends to lessen at the secondary school level, resulting in, for example, reduced parent volunteerism. In addition, parents sometimes come from countries where the school culture and opportunities to participate in school activities are different from those in Ontario. Access to knowledge about Ontario's educational system and how they may become more involved in their child's education are essential for such parents. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, pp. 8–9)

Conclusion

My analysis has shown that over the last decade policymakers in Ontario attempted to shift the conceptualization of parental involvement from the exclusively school-centered agenda towards a more inclusive approach, recognizing that classroom volunteering and participation in bake sales and fun fairs are not the only legitimate ways of parental involvement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Renewed focus on home-based involvement is welcome for several reasons. Home-based involvement is more effective for academic achievement (Jeynes, 2003, 2005, 2007), its recognition allows for parental agency to be taken into account (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013), and it validates activities of nondominant groups of parents (working class, ethnic/racial/linguistic minorities, immigrants) who historically tend to feel more comfortable being involved at home (Stitt & Brooks, 2014). At the same time, although many policies pay significant attention to involvement at home, the goal of such involvement is presented as mostly to reinforce lessons learned at school (CODE, 2012, 2014).

As to the representation of parents in policy documents, I found that parents are seen as partners, but their role is valued as much as it supports school agendas (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), improvement plans, and increased academic achievement as measured by standardized tests (CODE, 2014). Discourse of barriers (Hornby & Blackwell, 2018) adds a deficit perspective, because these parents are depicted as those that have to be helped, while their own agency and funds of knowledge are much less accepted (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). The omission of focus on teachers, their beliefs, and preparedness

to cooperate with parents is telling. Family–school partnerships and parental involvement cannot fulfill their true potential if parents continue to play the supplementary role. Only the nongovernmental organization People for Education (2012) provides an important voice in the Ontario policy context by centering parents and affirming the types of involvement already practiced by them before moving to teachers and principals with suggestions on helping parents to be better involved in their children's education. In other words, in most policy documents produced by the official bodies (Ministry of Education, school boards, associations of principals), diverse and immigrant parents are mentioned, but the focus still remains on normative (school-based) involvement, while nondominant parents are viewed mostly through a deficit lens.

In terms of implication for further research and practice, it is necessary to mention that in this study I analyzed parental involvement policy documents in Ontario (Canada) to understand how parental involvement is conceptualized on the policy level and the way parents are represented in the policy documents. The next step will be to see how such policies are enacted in the field of education. As to the policy practice on the level of government, school boards, and other educational stakeholders, it is important to go beyond the acceptance of barriers to involvement and diversity among parents. We need to acknowledge that it is the social inequality and narrow definition of parental involvement that produce discourses of "hard to reach" parents (Crozier & Davies, 2007) and deficit views of barriers to involvement (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). Furthermore, if the change in conceptualization and discourse around parental involvement is followed up with emphasis on teachers and their preparedness to work with parents, we will have a much better chance to have effective and democratic parent–school partnerships for all.

Endnotes

[1]School boards in Ontario are similar to school districts in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.).
[2]Being aware that some scholars differentiate between the broader term parental/family engagement (with students' learning at home, in school, and in the community) and more narrow parental involvement (in schools; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Pushor, 2007), I follow the more established tradition, which uses parental involvement as the broader definition.
[3]Middle-class defines people with university education involved in nonmanual labor with a significant degree of workplace flexibility. On the contrary, working-class members are understood as persons without postsecondary education who perform manual labor (Lareau, 2011).
[4]Nondominant background is understood here as not belonging to the White, middle-class, native-born group, which has been traditionally seen in the literature as parents who received most benefits to their children from the education system compared to racial and ethnic minorities, working-class, or immigrant parents (Brantlinger, 2003; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002; Lareau, 2011; Reay, 1998).

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