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Questioning Equity and Excellence in Ontario and Scotland: Critical Policy Analysis of Parent Inclusion for Reducing Educational Inequality
Remise en question de l'équité et de l'excellence en Ontario et en Écosse :
analyse critique des politiques d'inclusion des parents
pour réduire les inégalités en éducation

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Abstract
Over the last three decades many countries made efforts to improve their education systems by increasing students' academic achievement. A new appreciation of inequality in education among policymakers provided impetus to focus on equity. Parental involvement and engagement in education are vital for students' academic achievement. If in the context of educational policy, excellence and equity go together, what is the role assigned to parents? A critical policy analysis of seven policy documents from Ontario and Scotland showed that policies acknowledge the crucial role of parents in achieving educational excellence and mention barriers marginalized parents face in engaging with their children's education. The role of White middle-class nonimmigrant parents in pursuing excellence for their children at the expense of equity for all is neglected. Marginalized parents are seen through the deficit lens. Implications for policy include making parents from dominant groups visible and adopting an asset-based approach to marginalized parents.

Résumé
Depuis les trois dernières décennies, de nombreux pays sont à pied d'œuvre pour améliorer leurs systèmes éducatifs en amplifiant les résultats scolaires des étudiants. Une nouvelle appréciation de l'inégalité dans l'éducation par les décideurs politiques les a incité à se concentrer sur l'équité. L'implication et l'engagement des parents dans l'éducation sont essentiels à la réussite scolaire des élèves. Si, dans le contexte de la politique éducative, l'excellence et l'équité vont de pair, quel est le rôle assigné aux parents? Une analyse critique de sept documents de politique en provenance de l'Ontario et de l'Écosse a démontré que les politiques reconnaissent le rôle crucial des parents dans la réalisation de l'excellence éducative et mentionnent les obstacles auxquels les parents marginalisés sont confrontés lorsqu'ils s'impliquent dans l'éducation de leurs enfants. Le rôle que jouent les parents de race blanche non-immigrés de classe moyenne dans la poursuite de l'excellence de leurs enfants au détriment de l'équité pour tous est négligé. Les parents marginalisés sont perçus sous l'angle du déficit. Les implications pour l'élaboration de politique sont de rendre visibles les parents des groupes dominants et d'adopter une approche basée sur les atouts pour les parents marginalisés.

Keywords: parental engagement, excellence, equity, critical policy analysis
Mots clés : engagement parental, excellence, équité, analyse critique des politiques

Introduction
Over the last three decades, many countries and subnational jurisdictions made efforts to improve their education systems by increasing students' achievement and enhancing their skills (OECD, 2019; Zhao, 2015). In the context of neoliberal accountability and increased competition between nations in the so-called "knowledge economy"[1] (Marginson, 2010; Peters & Humes, 2003) fuelled by large-scale international assessments, e.g., Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Engel & Frizzell, 2015), many systems began focusing on "excellence" in education to sustain their economic development (Rasmussen & Lingard, 2018; Sahlberg, 2006). Excellence in this context is predominantly understood as the most efficient distribution of resources to achieve preset educational outcomes by the most, but not necessarily all students (Bowen at al., 2006). It is routinely measured via standardized tests (Hursh, 2007).

At the same time, a more profound understanding of educational inequality caused by structural barriers shaped by class, race, and gender led to initiatives aimed at fostering equity in education to ensure that all students can achieve excellence regardless of their background or family circumstances (Campbell, 2021; Noguera, 2001; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009; OECD, 2012). In the last decade, many educational administrators made the next step and began focusing on both excellence and equity to ensure the academic achievement, well-being and inclusion of students as the main goals of education reform (OECD, 2016; van den Branden et al., 2011). The focus of this paper is on two such jurisdictions, Ontario in Canada and Scotland in the United Kingdom, which declare that both excellence and equity are the key pillars of their education reforms (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014; Scottish Government, 2016).

Parents and families have been increasingly seen as key actors whose contribution to their children's learning can be leveraged to increase the educational excellence at the national, subnational, and local levels (Jeynes, 2012; Mapp, 2012; Rawolle et al., 2016). Subsequently, policymakers and educational administrators in various jurisdictions are seeking parental input into the school improvement process (Leithwood & McElheron-Hopkins, 2004) and overall fostering of excellence in education (New South Wales Government, 2017). A new appreciation of the role of parents in achieving equity in education has also emerged (Baquedano-López et al., 2013).

As far as children spend 80% of their time at home and 20% at school (Wherry, 2004), it is crucial to understand how parents and their involvement and engagement in children's education and learning (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014) are positioned in education policy in jurisdictions which aspire to achieve both educational excellence and equity. Due to the salience of family factors in students' achievement and well-being, parents can play a crucial role in achieving both excellence and equity in education. Against this backdrop, this study will focus on Ontario and Scotland to answer the following research questions: (1) How is the role of parents in achieving excellence and equity constructed in policies? How do policies address educational inequality? (2) Do current discourses around parental engagement empower one group of parents and marginalize others?

Parental Role in Education: Drive for Excellence and Equity in Education
Sociologists of education have known for decades that the family factors, especially parental socioeconomic status (SES), represent some of the strongest predictors of children's academic success (Caro et al., 2009; Sirin, 2005). One of the earliest theoretical explanations for this phenomenon was offered by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) in the book *Reproduction in Education, Culture, and Society.* They suggested that schools reproduce social inequality by

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[1] For the debate about the "knowledge economy" and education see Lauder et al. (2012).

"recognizing" and "rewarding" the cultural capital and habitus[2] of middle-class students who are excelling academically in comparison with their more struggling peers from working-class and rural backgrounds (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Despite the significant progress in expanding secondary and especially higher education opportunities in the second half of the 20th century (Weininger & Lareau, 2018), children from middle-class and upper-middle-class families are still enjoying better outcomes in schools and access more prestigious postsecondary institutions (Calarco, 2018; McNeal, 1999; Rivera, 2016). Parents shape the educational achievement and well-being of their children by being engaged and involved in their education both at home and in schools and while all parents want the best education for their children (Vincent, 2017), parents with higher levels of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Lareau, 2011) have more resources at their disposal and get higher return on their engagement (Antony-Newman, 2019a). Apart from having more time, money, and knowledge of the education system, such parents are viewed more favourably by teachers and can more successfully advocate on their children's behalf (Lareau, 2015). In the current neoliberal context, many middle-class parents are aware of the risks of downward social mobility for their children, so they invest increasingly more time and money to drive "excellence" for their children (Warikoo, 2022; Weis et al., 2014), as they understand that academic achievement in school allows children to attend desirable programs in high-ranked universities. Economic capital is used by privileged parents to pay for tutoring so that their children can boost their academic grades (Weis et al., 2014). Parents also arrange numerous extracurricular activities for their children in the spirit of "concerted cultivation" (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016), which adds to children's well-being and confers a certain level of distinction to university applicants (Stevens, 2009).

Are such labour- and capital-intensive types of engagement available to all parents? Unfortunately, parental engagement in children's education is not a neutral practice, but a culturally specific type of activity that brings the most benefits to parents from dominant groups (in the Western context these are White, middle-class, nonimmigrant parents) (Stitt & Brooks, 2014). In schools, working-class and ethno-racially minoritized parents are often excluded from decision-making (Hanafin & Lynch, 2002), are seen through the deficit lens (Medina et al., 2015), and stigmatized (Wilson & McGuire, 2021). Parental engagement and involvement are powerful tools for academic achievement, but their deployment mostly results in the "excellence" for the privileged families rather than for all students (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009).

Parents are located in the home domain (Wherry, 2004), where their goal is to support the achievement and well-being of their children, whereas teachers' role in the classroom is to support the majority if not all students (Cucchiara & Horvat, 2009). This leads to the potential challenge tension between the individual interests of parents (academic excellence of their children) and collective goals of schools (closing achievement gaps between groups of students) (Calarco, 2020). Parental engagement in education has the potential to be a shared responsibility between families and teachers (Rosenberg et al., 2009), but such model would require reimagining the role parents and teachers play in balancing the individual excellence and collective equity in schools.

Parental Engagement: What Do Policymakers Say?
Parents have always been involved in their children's schooling and engaged in their education and learning (Goodall, 2018), but it was only in the late 1960s when policymakers turned to parents as important actors in education and decided to harness their energy for the purpose of

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[2] Cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) refers to a set of values, skills, and possessions (e.g., competence in the dominant language, educational credentials, books and other material objects) which are considered desirable in a given society. Habitus represents subconscious and internalized dispositions which define our perception of and actions in the world based on our exposure to social structures (Wacquant, 2008).

school improvement. In the United States, involving parents became mandatory for schools in impoverished areas, which required additional funding from the government (Mapp, 2012). *A Nation at Risk* report in 1983 went much further and proclaimed that parents were more important for students' success than teachers (Fernandez & Lopez, 2017). British policymakers tried to increase academic achievement by making parents make important educational choices for their children (Exley, 2013). In Ontario, late 1990s heralded the introduction of school councils with the goal to involve parents and increase accountability in education (Antony-Newman, 2019a). In the 21st century parental engagement became formalized and institutionalized across the English-speaking world (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; Government of Australia, 2008; Smith, 2021). For example, the Canadian province Ontario published a comprehensive *Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools* in 2010 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), and the Scottish Government introduced *The Scottish Schools (Parental Involvement) Act 2006* to regulate parental involvement in the nation (National Parent Forum of Scotland, 2017).

Parental involvement and engagement policy documents in Ontario and Scotland are mainly centred around two objectives. The first one is establishing school councils and advisory committees at board levels that encourage parents to get involved in school governance and representation (Government of Ontario, 2000; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2001; Scottish Government, 2006). Another focus of such policy documents is encouraging parental involvement in schooling and improving family-school communication (Council of Ontario Directors of Education, 2014; Education Scotland, 2021). In both cases, parents are encouraged to get involved in their children's schooling to serve the external goals of either educational administrators (keeping teachers accountable by serving on councils and taking part in governance) or schools (getting involved to help schools teach students better via volunteering, fundraising, and homework help) (Antony-Newman, 2019a). The key question here is whether such a school-centric approach to parental involvement and engagement is conducive to achieving both excellence and equity in education and this study will answer this question.

Methodology
This study employs qualitative research approach to policy analysis. Critical policy analysis was selected in this case as the most suitable methodological approach to better understand the construction of parental role in achieving excellence and equity and education. Critical policy analysis focuses on the difference between policy rhetoric and practice, roots of policy development, distribution of power between policy actors and recipients of such policies, inequality that stems from policies under analysis, and resistance to policies (Young & Diem, 2017). In this study, I focus mainly on the difference between policy rhetoric and practice, distribution of power between policy actors and recipients of policies, and inequality that stems from policies under analysis. Policy documents produced by the Ministry of Education in Ontario and Education Scotland that mention parents as instrumental in achieving excellence and equity in education set the tone for educational actors (administrators, teachers, parents) to enact/respond to such policy initiatives. Unlike broader parental involvement policy documents that are prepared by ministries, school boards, nongovernmental organizations, and teacher associations (Antony-Newman, 2019a), policies that view parents as crucial for excellence and equity in education in Ontario and Scotland are the results of policy work at the top of the educational hierarchy represented by the Ministry of Education (Ontario), Scottish Government and Education Scotland. Ministries define the nature of social problems (lack of excellence and equity), generate a policy discourse with its range of possible solutions (engaging parents) at the exclusion of competing ideas (Bacchi, 2000). Their policies are also supported by legal requirements to establish school councils and parental involvement committees. As a result,

documents selected for this analysis have significant power over the dominant discourse around excellence and equity in education and the role parents play in this debate. The list of policy documents is given in Table 1, and their general description is also provided at the start of the Findings section.

Table 1
List of Analyzed Policy Documents

Ontario	Scotland
Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy (2009)	Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education: A Delivery Plan for Scotland (2016)
Ministry of Education (Ontario)	Scottish Government
Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools (2010)	Achieving Excellence and Equity: 2020 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan (2020)
Ministry of Education (Ontario)	Scottish Government
Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario (2014)	Engaging Parents and Families: A Toolkit for Practitioners (2021)
Ministry of Education (Ontario)	Education Scotland
Ontario Education Equity Action Plan (2017) Ministry of Education (Ontario)	

Policy documents were analyzed with the help of the thematic analysis focusing on "identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes" (Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2) from the selected policy documents. Since the critical policy analysis focuses on the difference between rhetoric and practice (Young & Diem, 2017), I first had to describe the themes in policy texts related to parental role in achieving excellence and equity and education, to be able to compare the rhetoric in policies with the empirical evidence from the literature on the practice of parental engagement. I read all seven policy documents and applied thematic coding with a combination of preset and emergent codes (Saldaña, 2021). Codes that came from the parental engagement (Fernandez & Lopez, 2017; Mapp, 2012; Saltmarsh et al., 2015) and excellence and equity literature (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Campbell, 2021; Warikoo, 2022) included such items as *parental involvement, parental engagement, equity and excellence, school improvement, barriers to involvement,* and *immigrant parents*. During the initial coding I distinguished additional codes that emerged from the data: *high expectations, parents as partners, raising attainment, family learning,* and *learning at home* among others. Subsequently, I refined the codes to generate themes, which were used to answer the research questions of the study. To further understand the inequality that could be exacerbated by the analyzed policies and highlight the power differential between policy actors and policy recipients, at the final data analysis stage I looked at what was missing from policy documents based on the critical literature on parental engagement and parental role in education (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Lareau, 2011).

Findings

Before presenting the findings of the critical policy analysis which aimed at understanding the role parents are assigned in the achievement of excellence and equity in Ontario and Scottish education, I will briefly describe the analyzed documents and their overarching aims.

The framework parental engagement policy, *Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010), was inaugurated in Ontario in 2010. It provided the definition of parental involvement, gave examples of successful initiatives, and set parental involvement targets for schools, school boards, and the ministry. In response, many school boards and individual schools developed their own parental involvement policies, while teacher and school-leader organizations issued their guidance as well (Antony-Newman, 2019a). *Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) was introduced by the Ontario Ministry of Education in 2009 as a reference document for all of its 72 school boards, which were mandated to develop their own equity policies at the local level (Rezai-Rashti et al., 2021). It was followed by the *Ontario Education Equity Action Plan* in 2017 (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017), which outlined concrete actions to be taken by schools over a 3-year period to ensure equity in education. *Achieving Excellence: A Renewed Vision for Education in Ontario* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014) was launched in 2014 with a particular vision for public education in the province where "Learners in the province's education system will develop the knowledge, skills and characteristics that will lead them to become personally successful, economically productive and actively engaged citizens" (p. 1).

Scottish Government unveiled its *Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education: A Delivery Plan for Scotland* in 2016 with the twin goals of achieving highest standards in literacy and numeracy, acquiring necessary skills and qualifications while ensuring "every child has the same opportunity to succeed" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 4). This was followed by a more detailed document, *Achieving Excellence and Equity: 2020 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan*, with priorities, existing issues, and proposed solutions across a vast educational terrain ranging from assessment and school improvement to teacher professionalism and parental engagement (Scottish Government, 2020). To help educators work more successfully with parents, which has potential for both excellence and equity, in 2021 Education Scotland developed a document, *Engaging Parents and Families: A Toolkit for Practitioners*. It includes such sections as definitions of both parental involvement and engagement, focusing on learning at home, involving all parents, and establishing community connections (Education Scotland, 2021).

How is the role of parents in achieving excellence and equity constructed in policies? How do policies address educational inequality?

In both Ontario and Scotland, parental role in achieving excellence and equity in education is covered in two different sets of policy documents. On the one hand, there are several documents explicitly focusing on excellence and/or equity where parents make an appearance (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2014, 2017; Scottish Government, 2016, 2020). On the other, we have parental engagement policies where questions of excellence and equity are mentioned but not central (Education Scotland, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). In the Scottish context, notions of excellence focus mostly on increasing academic achievement, while equity refers to closing academic achievement gaps, especially related to communities affected by poverty (Scottish Government, 2016). Ontario policymakers also conceptualize excellence as meeting provincial targets in literacy, numeracy, and graduation rates, but their understanding of equity includes not only closing achievement gaps, but also fostering inclusion, engagement, and well-being (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009). There is more consensus about the nature of excellence (academic achievement) in Ontario and Scotland, whereas equity is

understood in broader terms in Ontario (closing achievement gaps, fostering well-being, increasing engagement, and ensuring inclusion) compared to Scotland, where the main focus is on closing the achievement gap between diverse groups of learners.

Documents which focus on excellence and equity acknowledge existing barriers in society and education and make clear connections between the two concepts:

A child's circumstances—where they live, their family's circumstances—still have a disproportionate impact on their chances of success. (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 3)

The fundamental principle driving this work is that every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of ancestry, culture, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, language, physical and intellectual ability, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status or other factors. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 8)

It is clear that students who feel welcome and accepted in their schools are more likely to succeed academically. By ensuring equity in our education system, we can help all students achieve excellence. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014, p. 9)

Policy solutions to the problem of excellence and equity include enhancing the quality of teaching, dismantling barriers, and raising standards. What role do parents play in this policy landscape? *Ontario Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy* emphasizes that it is important to

promote the involvement and engagement of parents with their boards and schools to encourage them to share their ideas and provide advice on enhancing equity and inclusive education (e.g., through parent involvement committees, special education advisory committees, school councils). (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 20)

This is a laudable goal, but the document focuses almost exclusively on school-centred facets of parental involvement and does not mention home-based involvement and wider parental engagement with children's learning (Goodall, 2018). It is problematic because we know that many parents from marginalized communities, including immigrants and refugees, feel more confident and safe engaging at home rather than on school premises (Antony-Newman, 2019b; Hanafin & Lynch, 2002). The more recently published *Ontario Education Equity Action Plan* sets out to increase equity in multiple domains: school and classroom practices, leadership, governance and human resource practices, data collection, integration, and reporting, but parents are mentioned only in one section. Practical solutions are still vague and steeped in deficit thinking (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017):

increasing parent engagement in equity and inclusive education, particularly by identifying strategies to reach out to parents who may be disengaged from the education system. (p. 16)

Sustained and intentional engagement of parents from diverse populations, and of diverse communities in the board is supported through Parents Reaching Out grants. (p. 25)

Similarly, the *Achieving Excellence and Equity: 2020 National Improvement Framework and Improvement Plan* mentions the "liberating" power of parental engagement, but the one-directional flow of ideas from school to home is also coloured by shades of deficit thinking, where parental "funds of knowledge" (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011) are barely mentioned and parents are constructed as actors in need of help: "family learning helps close the attainment gap through breaking the generational cycles of deprivation and low attainment. Its effects can provide lasting impacts and improved outcomes" (Scottish Government, 2020, p. 32). *Delivering Excellence and Equity in Scottish Education: A Delivery Plan for Scotland* accurately states that "Parents and families are the most important and influential people in children and young people's lives, and are central to achieving our aims of raising attainment for all and closing the attainment gap" (Scottish Government, 2016, p. 16).

The document offers a range of solutions from school-centric, e.g., providing transparent

information to parents on school performance (results of school inspection, attendance rates, children's progress), to initiatives that have the potential to meaningfully benefit parents, e.g., developing family learning programs, funding literacy campaigns in areas with high deprivation, and improving early learning.

Finally, we have parental engagement policy documents, *Parents in Partnership: A Parent Engagement Policy for Ontario Schools* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010) and *Engaging Parents and Families: A Toolkit for Practitioners* (Education Scotland, 2021). The former acknowledges the role parents play in achieving excellence:

> Parents matter in education. They matter as vital partners who contribute much to the work of our educators, schools, and communities. They matter as parent leaders, parent mentors, and models of commitment to excellence in education, and they matter every day as they influence and support their children's academic achievement. (p. 2)

It also mentions barriers to equity in schools, which can be dismantled by "identifying and removing discriminatory biases and systemic barriers in order to allow participation of all parents in their children's schools, with the goal of supporting student learning and helping to close the achievement gap" (p. 6).

Authors of the policy document accurately cite research evidence that high parental expectations towards their children's education are beneficial for their achievement (Jeynes, 2012) and genuine partnerships between parents and school can be rewarding (Stitt & Brooks, 2014), but the school-centric agenda (Goodall, 2018) is quite prominent in the document: "Parent engagement is nurtured when parents know how to make meaningful contributions to the school's efforts and when they believe that school staff, as well as their own children, value their participation in the school" (p. 12).

Excellence is seen by Ontario policymakers as an overarching aim with the term "achievement" used 31 times, and parents are canvassed to provide help by having high expectations at home and being involved in school councils and parental advisory committees so that "good schools become even better when parents are involved" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 5). Excellence is understood mainly in terms of academic achievement, while breaking down barriers to equitable parental engagement serves an auxiliary function to narrowing the achievement gaps. Social justice, inclusion and sense of belonging are not mentioned as central components of parental engagement for equity (Baquedano-López et al., 2013).

Engaging Parents and Families: A Toolkit for Practitioners (Education Scotland, 2021) is aimed at educators; it correctly mentions that practitioners are not always ready for parental engagement as they need support in acquiring knowledge, developing skills, and becoming confident to work successfully with parents and families. The document suggests some progressive ideas including open days, home visits, child-led workshops, and home-school sharing of achievements (Education Scotland, 2021). There is a strong emphasis on engaging with all parents, which is definitely an equity issue, but the document also adopts a deficit thinking where only problems are seen but strengths go unnoticed:

> However, once children start school it is not always easy for parents to know how best to help their child … If a parent has English as an additional language or is not confident in literacy or communication they may not be able to access a school or practitioner's attempts to engage them via letters, reports, newsletters or phone calls. In addition, the language of education may be a barrier itself for parents and especially where families have different educational or cultural backgrounds. (p. 4)

When parents are appreciated for "creative ideas about school education" (Education Scotland, 2021, p. 7), the goal is invariably to improve the standards and quality of schools. Parental engagement in learning, education, and schooling is a multifaceted practice (Goodall, 2018)

and the central role of parents has to be acknowledged at the policy level. Highlighting significant constraints experienced by many parents is a crucial first step to address such challenges, but it should be accompanied by acknowledging and including parental "funds of knowledge" (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011).

Do current discourses around parental engagement empower one group of parents and marginalize others?

Having discussed the role Ontario and Scottish policy documents assign to parents in achieving excellence and equity in education, I will now turn to the question of which groups of parents are represented in the policies and which are left out.

Ontario's Equity and Inclusive Education Strategy describes groups that face the highest barriers in educational achievement and well-being:

> Recent immigrants, children from low-income families, Aboriginal students, boys, and students with special education needs are just some of the groups that may be at risk of lower achievement. To improve outcomes for students at risk, all partners must work to identify and remove barriers and must actively seek to create the conditions needed for student success. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 5)

To achieve equitable access to and experiences of education it is natural to focus on the abovementioned group of parents, but it will be successful only if deficit thinking is replaced by asset-based approach where schools value what parents have to offer (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the analyzed documents often describe parents through deficit lens, as those "who do not understand the language of the board" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 22) and whose busy lives make it difficult to play an active role in their children's education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). As a result, compensatory strategies are offered. For example, *Parents in Partnership* policy provides at least 13 case studies of parental engagement strategies developed by schools and school boards to "help" parents (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010). *Engaging Parents and Families: A Toolkit for Practitioners* devotes significant space to family learning, helping parents who speak "English as an additional language" or have "different educational or cultural backgrounds" (Education Scotland, 2021, p. 4).

Crucially, to have a genuine understanding of the role all parents play in achieving excellence and equity, we need to pay attention to a larger group of parents who are not mentioned in any of the analyzed policy documents, namely members of the dominant group, which in both Ontario and Scotland are represented by the White, middle-class, nonimmigrant parents (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau, 2011, 2015). All parents want the best for their children's education (Vincent, 2017), but we know from prior research that parents from the dominant group are in a privileged position because their social and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986) is valued more by the school compared to their racialized, working-class, and immigrant peers (Hajisoteriou & Angelides, 2016). Their parental involvement in education (volunteering in the classroom, taking part in school governance) and engagement in learning (arranging multiple extracurriculars, hiring tutors, ensuring access to books and computers) fuelled by significant economic capital is traditionally seen as normative (Reay, 1998). The invisibility of the White, middle-class, nonimmigrant parents in policies that focus on excellence and equity makes their actions that aimed at achieving academic excellence for their children and the possible negative consequences for the overall equity in education invisible.

Conclusion

Findings from this study show that Ontario and Scottish policy documents acknowledge the role of parents in achieving excellence and equity in education (Education Scotland, 2021;

Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2010, 2014, 2017, Scottish Government, 2016, 2020). There is a heavy emphasis on parents "partnering" with schools to improve academic achievement of children and contribute to excellence in education under the slogan of "good schools become even better when parents are involved" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010, p. 5). Both Ontario and Scottish policymakers acknowledge existing equity issues (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009; Scottish Government, 2016) and develop plans to close the achievement gap and make parents and families more included in children's education (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017; Scottish Government, 2020). Parents from marginalized groups are directly or indirectly referred to in policies, and all suggested interventions are aimed at parents, who live in poverty (Scottish Government, 2016, 2020), feel excluded from the education system, and face communication barriers when interacting with educators due to discrimination and lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate support (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2010). At the same time, privileged parents from the majority White, middle-class, nonimmigrant communities are invisible in excellence and equity policies, which on the one hand normalizes their specific parental involvement and engagement practices, but on the other, obscures their role in achieving excellence for their children (Crozier et al., 2011; Posey-Maddox et al., 2016).

Acknowledging barriers that marginalized parents and students face is only the first step in dealing with educational inequality, which is likely to be insufficient and inadequate when the roots of such inequality are not examined, and the beneficiaries of the status quo are not named. Prior research shows that middle-class parents are successful at ensuring the academic excellence for their children by sending them to more selective programs (Gaztambide-Fernández & Maudlin, 2015) and better-resourced schools (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008), advocating on their children's behalf in schools (Lareau, 2015), training their children to get support from teachers (Calarco, 2018), and helping their children to feel confident when dealing with people in the positions of authority (Lareau, 2011). Family learning programs that aimed at improving parental education of the already marginalized communities (Education Scotland, 2016) may somewhat contribute to the disruption of multigenerational disadvantage (UNESCO, 2017), but they will barely make a dent in the inequitable landscape where parental involvement and engagement from dominant groups is already valued much more than from their less privileged peers. Similarly, school-based parental involvement (de Carvalho, 2001) benefits parents who are already comfortable coming to school to volunteer, to confidently talk to teachers about their children, and to take part in school governance (Lareau, 2011). If parents from nondominant groups have less chance to send their children to specialized programs (Gaztambide-Fernández & Maudlin, 2015), if they find it hard to be heard in school (Lareau, 2015), and if their children are paid less attention in class (Calarco, 2018), then current initiatives in the Ontario and Scottish policy documents (Education Scotland, 2021; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009, 2010, 2014, 2017, Scottish Government, 2016, 2020) are insufficient to ensure excellence and equity for all students. Policymakers need to take the next steps, namely, to acknowledge the role of privileged parents in the reproduction of educational inequality, to adopt asset-based rather than deficit-based approach to parents from marginalized groups (Rios-Aguilar et al., 2011), and to develop initiatives that would recognize the roots of inequitable access to academic excellence and offer effective and transformative solutions.

To conclude, asset-based, family-centred parental engagement initiatives can start addressing the situation, when parental needs and interests of all families are at the centre rather than on the periphery of relations between families and schools (Goodall, 2018; Pushor, 2015). Only then, the promise of excellence and equity for all will have a chance to be realized.

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