In(Formal) Conversation with Minority Parents and Communities of a Canadian Junior School: Findings and Cautions from the Field

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Abstract

This paper reports on a university/school board collaborative outreach program hosted by a linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse junior school in Toronto, Canada. The program facilitates a forum where the school's families—in conversation with in-service and pre-service teachers, the school's administration, a local university's Faculty of Education, and community agencies—discuss issues the families deem important to their experience of public schooling. In addition to a detailed program overview, I present two tiers of participant feedback on the program, the first tier gleaned from parent surveys and the second tier derived from a series of interviews conducted by parent-researchers. Based on a consideration of the qualitative data emerging from this feedback, I offer three readings of the program: the first reading tells a story of how the program is empowering parents and caregivers and bringing them closer to their children's schooling; the second reading draws four implications that complicate the apparent successes of the program; and the third reading takes shape as a broader epistemic and ethical caution for action-oriented research of this sort.

Key Words: minorities, families, parents, languages, cultures, public education, diversity, communities, discussion, Canada, elementary, schools, action research, linguistically, culturally, raciallyminority, community, conversations

Introduction

In the fall of 2004, a large metropolitan school board (similar to a U.S. district) in the Greater Toronto Area in the province of Ontario, Canada, set out to identify the geographic areas of its jurisdiction confronted with significant socioeconomic challenges. The purpose for doing so was to select a number of inner city schools to serve as exemplars for their respective cluster of high needs schools, that is, schools with families facing pronounced social and economic challenges in their experience of public schooling. The selection panel was drawn from school board staff, parents, trustees, community agencies, two local universities, and the provincial Ministry of Education.

In the first phase of the initiative in 2006-2007, the committee selected three such schools based on their demonstrated potential for exploring innovative teaching and learning practices; for supporting the social, emotional, and physical well being of students; for offering their school as the heart of a community; and for committing to research, review, and evaluation of educational practices. The program which I will discuss in this paper is part of a response by one of these schools to its new role as exemplar. I have chosen to call this school Northfield Public School (pseudonym).

Northfield Public School is culturally, linguistically, and racially diverse. The school has a student population of 532 and offers Kindergarten to Grade 5. While some of the school's families have lived in the surrounding neighborhood for as long as 10-15 years, most of its families are recent immigrants to Canada, having lived in government-subsidized high rise apartments near the school for less than five years. In some cases, recent arrivals use the community as a transition point before moving on to another part of the city or province. In this sense, the school has to deal with a transient school population.

The school's diverse population shares a common set of experiences shaped by recent immigration, poverty, and the challenges of linguistic and cultural minority status. However, the population is also marked by stark differences. Linguistically, as many as 20 languages other than English are spoken by children at home. In the 1970's, Northfield consisted primarily of Italian and Spanish speaking families. Today, some of the predominant minority languages spoken by families at home include Vietnamese, Somali, Punjabi, Urdu, Tamil, and Spanish. Tracing these languages back to their geographic and national origins, one finds many of the school's families are originally from Vietnam, Somalia, Pakistan, Northern India, Sri Lanka, or Central or South America.

These linguistic differences mirror other profound distinctions, among them religion and ethnicity. In the case of religion, the main groups represented include Muslims, Christians, Hindus, and Buddhists. As for ethnicity, the school

paints a very complex picture. For example, even within the same country of origin, for example, Vietnam, one finds subgroups of ethnic Vietnamese, Chinese, and Khmer. These ethnic differences can also be further mirrored in levels of education. For instance, some parents and caregivers coming from rural, farming backgrounds have limited elementary level education (in some cases to the point of being functionally illiterate in their first language), while others, often from urban areas, have completed university degrees and have worked in professional fields such as law and corporate administration.

By way of preview, the program I will address in this paper facilitates a forum where participating parents and caregivers discuss issues they consider important to their families' experience of public schooling. In addition to the parents, the discussions also involve in-service and pre-service teachers, the school's administration, York University's Faculty of Education, local community agencies, and, as I will explain in a moment, the children. But before moving on to give a more detailed sense of how this extracurricular program works, I will situate it in a wider research-based context.

Research-Based Context

The program at Northfield, which I will refer to as *Learning in Schools and Homes*, is part of a broader response to the increasingly diverse demographic of North American society, in particular its urban centers. Within this response, educational critics have called for an elaboration of pedagogies, programs, and thinking in relation to linguistically, culturally, and racially diverse students. The key role played by families and communities in the education of such students is central to this proposed elaboration. For instance, in the area of classroom practices, it has been suggested that in matching students' background knowledge with lessons, teachers need to expand their *own* knowledge of their students' cultural and class-based experiences (McIntyre, Rosebery, & González, 2001); in the area of teacher education, there is a call for culturally responsive teachers who know about the lives of their students and design instruction that builds on what students already know (Villegas & Lucas, 2002); and in the area of language and literacy acquisition and situated learning, educational researchers have urged schools to pursue pedagogies where multilingual families can be community partners in their children's education (Abrams & Taylor Gibbs, 2000; Blackledge, 2001; Klingner et al., 2005; Lawson, 2003; McCaleb, 1994; Schecter & Cummins, 2003; Williams & Gregory, 2001). Among the benefits identified in such approaches are the overcoming of barriers to communication and increased parent confidence when offering input to educators and supplementary educational support to their children. Teachers,

too, it is argued, begin to change as they move closer to their students' lived experience of society and community (Melnick & Zeichner, 1998) and recognize the multiple benefits of parent participation, developing an image of parents as effective participants in their children's education (Sherri, 2006).

Learning in Schools and Homes is grounded conceptually in this *discourse of diversity*. Indeed, not only does this discourse ground the program conceptually, but it also informs its programmatic context. In this regard, the starting point and direction for the program is derived from two of the core concerns which define the literature on education in the context of diversity, that is, a focus on improved student achievement (Cooper, Chavira, & Mena, 2005; Nieto, 2000; Peck, Sears, & Donaldson, 2008) *and* a focus on more equitable relationships between families and schools (Axelrod, 2005; Kainz & Aikens, 2007; Poplin & Rivera, 2005).

Preparing for the Program

In setting the groundwork for the program, the research team—which included a lead teacher from Northfield, two graduate student research assistants from the Faculty of Education at York University, and myself (the university-based researcher)—generated ideas on logistics and arrangements, for example, how we would advertise the program to the parents, how many weeks it would run, and which grade levels we would target. We further speculated on what issues or ideas parents might be interested in discussing. On this last point, we were cognizant of our role as facilitators and, for that reason, did not presume to know what the parents would want to discuss. As a research team, we took our role to be that of providing a forum for parent-driven conversations, a forum where parents would feel comfortable in discussing issues regarding their children's school or the provincial school system or, if parents were newcomers to Canada, in discussing information that we could provide to help make their transition into Canadian society easier.

During the 2006-2007 academic year, *Learning in Schools and Homes* took place from 3:30 to 5:00 p.m. on one afternoon per week. For parents picking up their children after school, this time slot became an important issue since parents wanted their children to eat and rest at the end of the school day. In response to this, and also to provide a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere, each of the sessions began with a full, hot meal, respecting dietary needs such as Halal or vegetarian, during which all the research participants of all ages sat at the same table and ate and talked.

The research team's behind-the-scenes preparation meetings took place every week and involved finding printed or audio-visual materials which were

related to the weekly focus *and* available in parents' home languages—languages which were identified in the first session. For example, serving as a primary resource and as an outline for many of our discussions, we used documents from *The Newcomers Guide to Elementary School* (Settlement Workers in Schools, 2009), which are available online in 18 different languages. A key advantage of using documents from the *Newcomer's Guide* was that by distributing reading materials in the families' home languages, we sent the message that first languages are *resources*, following Ruiz's (1984) notion of *resource* as outlined in his taxonomy of perspectives on linguistic diversity. These materials typically triggered other discussions within our sessions and, in keeping with our role as facilitators, the research team let these discussions take their course. For example, one particular session began with a discussion of a document explaining the process by which students were to be registered in their local schools. However, in response to the parents' concerns, it evolved into a conversation on the potentially problematic nature of mandatory child immunization in contexts of religious diversity.

Another key aspect of the team's preparation meetings involved setting up activities for the children. Parents were encouraged to bring any or all of their children to the sessions. Childcare was provided for younger children, and the older children worked with one of Northfield's teachers on activities that complemented the adults' activities. Toward the end of each session the children joined their parents and shared the activity they had been working on. It is also worth noting that, as in the adult sessions, the teacher working with the children made efforts to incorporate students' first languages into the activities.

Initiating the Program

The first block of six sessions was held in the Fall term of 2006 and was geared toward Junior and Senior Kindergarten and Grade 1, while the second block of five sessions was held in the Winter term of 2007 and aimed at Grades 2 and 3. A further block of four sessions for families of Grade 4 and 5 students was held in late Spring. Topics addressed in the sessions included the following: a discussion of the broad contours of *the education system in Ontario*, which, as explained above, evolved into a conversation on the potentially problematic nature of mandatory child immunization; *parent–teacher interview*s, which included the screening and discussion of a multilingual DVD modeling what a typical parent–teacher interview (or conference) can look like; *equity policies and practice*, which included a frank exchange of perspectives between school and families on what *equity* can mean; *getting involved with the school*, which included a sharing of views among parents who do and do not take

part in school activities; *community academic supports*, during which we invited representatives from the local library and homework clubs to share resources with parents; *why is Northfield not K-8?*, which took shape as a conversation around the institutional history connected to particular grade distributions in the school board and the parents' concerns around risks students face in transitioning from junior to middle school; *the importance of arts education*, which involved the art and music teachers visiting to share with parents some of their classroom practices and also to hear from the parents their thoughts on the arts in education; and, finally, a session focused on *authority and learning*.

Recognizing the potentially controversial nature of this last topic, and being in a position to draw on the culture of discussion we had begun to establish with the parents, we used this particular session to share information and views with parents and to learn about their concerns regarding discipline. On this last point, we learned that while these parents agreed that discipline and rules are important at an early time in children's development, they also felt that the kind of discipline they expected from teachers was different from discipline at home because the classroom is a public forum, and they felt every effort should be made not to embarrass children in front of their peers. The parents also pointed out that since parents know their children better than teachers, teachers need to know what is going on at home and vice versa.

Notwithstanding the research team's facilitative role, we did allow ourselves to take part in the discussions by contributing ideas and views and, in the discussion on *authority and learning*, a member of the research team talked about his own experience as a parent and teacher and his concerns when first moving to Canada at a young age. He discussed variations in how discipline can be viewed and posed the question, "How can we discipline respectfully?" Part of the parent response was the suggestion that new teachers should have teacher mentors who guide them through issues such as discipline.

At this particular session, the children's activities consisted of creating a role play in which the children simulated a situation where one child is left out of playing with their peers and hence "behaves badly." The children performed this role play for the adults and then talked about alternative responses to the situation, why the other kids were being mean, and what they would do if it happened to them.

These sessions with Northfield's families have been highly suggestive of the potential impact of this type of community engagement in education. For example, while the positive response of parents to our program is visible in their written end-of-year feedback (discussed below), there is also a multiplicity of areas where such an initiative can increase interaction in the school and community. For instance, for participating parents who are already active in the

community, *Learning in Schools and Homes* is a vehicle for dialogue with the greater parent community. Such parent leaders encouraged their fellow parents not only to take part in the *Learning in Schools and Homes* program, but also to take an active role in shaping the school culture.

As a former English as a second language (ESL) student, one of our research team members recalled some of the difficulties for both himself and his parents in adjusting to a new schooling and cultural environment, but he also noted the progress that has been made to accommodate the sociocultural, linguistic, and religious needs of families. In particular, the session on community academic supports (when we invited representatives from the local library and homework clubs to share resources with parents) offered a reminder of some of the barriers that may yet be in place for parents—such as not being able to participate meaningfully in report card conferences because of the absence of interpreters and the eventual communication gap between the school and home. Our research team member who had himself been an ESL student explained to parents that, by contrast, there are now useful resources available to the program parents and, indeed, to parents of the school more generally, resources such as a translated DVD on parent–teacher interviews or interpreters made available for report card conferences. Situated as it is within these more recent practices, the *Learning in Schools and Homes* program has the potential for furthering collaborative partnerships between the home and school.

First-Tier Feedback: The Year-End Survey

At the end of each block of sessions we invited parents to complete, anonymously, a written questionnaire which asked them to comment on various aspects of the program. Parents provided feedback in the language of their choice, and the research team translated these responses into English. The parent responses give us a sense of (1) the relevance of material provided to parents in their home languages; (2) the parents' view of the children's activities; and (3) the parents' overall impression of the program.

We begin with the importance parents place on the materials provided in their home languages, since this was something they seemed keen to highlight. One of the parents in the Fall block wrote, "yes, it's important to provide the information translated in home languages because with this parents who have problems with English in reading can involve themselves in school activities." Another parent from the Fall block writes, in Spanish, "the translated documents helped us to grasp the true meaning of the topic being delivered. I was happy to know you have translated copies of the material for discussion." A third parent, from the Winter block, adds, "it's important to translate informa-

tion in some home languages because with this most of the parents who have problems with English can understand easily and give their views."

The second area in which we solicited parent views—that is, on the activities their children took part in while they, the parents, took part in the adult discussions—provided us with the following feedback: "I was very impressed with the activities that the children engaged in while we were in session. I was impressed when children from different backgrounds sang in Spanish." A second parent, this one from the Winter block, remarked, "I like the activities very much, especially the ones for the children because they develop their creativity and imagination. I like to hear the children sing or recite, because when they do, one can enjoy the quality of the work they do."

Finally, when asked about their overall impression of the program, a parent from the Winter block writes, in Spanish, "all the topics seemed interesting; they helped in informing us of all the kinds of support provided for kids and their parents." A parent from the Fall block writes, "it was helpful to have the interaction with other parents. The facilitators did quite well at making the sessions feel like the parents were leading the discussions. It truly was a discussion, not a presentation or workshop."

A last point of consideration in both planning for and trying to understand the dynamics of our program deals with parents' different ways of learning or expressing their views. This is the case of silences in some of our sessions, where some parents simply did not speak out or express an opinion. I am reminded here of Pon, Goldstein, and Schecter's (2003) point that "modes of silences can be enabling or debilitating depending on individuals' situations and circumstances" (p. 117). In this article, Pon and his colleagues point to the lack of research on the role and significance of silence and silences (2003, p. 116). Although their study focuses on students, we may be able to extrapolate the significance and legitimacy for parents, too, of all modes of communication as well as ways of knowing and learning when designing and implementing programs such as *Learning in Schools and Homes*.

At the outset of the program, our planning team was unanimous in its desire *not* to facilitate a program premised on a deficit view of minority languages, minority cultures, and minority families. Our starting premise was that the minority families in the school were *already* inscribed in complex social ways and that these inscriptions—ways of being, ways of thinking, ways of interacting, ways of worshipping—are of enormous potential value to their children's experience of public schooling, provided these differences are understood *as* resources by the school, by the school board, and, indeed, by the very community agencies set up to assist them. In order for us to use the afterschool sessions as an incubator for the view that the families' differences are

in fact resources, we deliberately avoided a unidirectional, top down presentation format and encouraged a conversational, dialogic format. Logistically, it has proven workable; interpersonally, it has proven to be an effective means of fostering meaningful conversation with parents; and conceptually, it holds the promise of furthering notions of community involvement in education.

Second-Tier Feedback: Peer-Research

In addition to the parent surveys at the end of the first year of *Learning in Schools and Homes*, I was keen to augment this feedback with a second, retrospective look at the program. As for how to access participants' perspectives on the first year of the program, I thought it appropriate that the method reiterate the community-referenced ethos of the program itself. With this in mind, in 2007-2008 I drew upon parents and caregivers from the school community as peer-researchers. My assumption was that linguistic and cultural minority parents and caregivers would be more at ease and more forthcoming if they were interviewed by other linguistic and cultural minority parents and caregivers, people with whom they shared some of the same challenges—linguistically, culturally, socially, and socioeconomically.

Toward this end, I invited three parents and caregivers (two of whom were new to the school) to interview seven parents and caregivers who had taken part in the program the previous year. One of the parent researchers, who speaks Spanish and English, conducted her three interviews entirely in Spanish with three Spanish-speaking parents who had been given the option of Spanish or English or both. A second parent researcher, who speaks Somali and English, conducted two interviews entirely in English, one with an interviewee who speaks English as a primary language and another who speaks Somali as a primary language. (Note: I have only recently discovered that this parent-researcher chose to avoid the use of Somali, her home language, because she did not feel confident in her first language literacy skills for the purposes of translation.) The third researcher speaks Vietnamese and Chinese and English and interviewed a pair of women who chose to be interviewed as a pair and in Vietnamese. As it turned out, this third cluster of interviews became very difficult, and I will address this in some detail.

As for the selection of participants, I deferred in large part to the recommendations of my on-site research project coordinator who is also the school's Adult Education teacher. She was instrumental in recommending three potential peer researchers and in recruiting potential interviewees. As for the interviewers, the coordinator and I opted for three women who we thought met the following four criteria: one, they were interested in talking about the

after-school program; two, they had the language skills to conduct interviews in a minority home language and English; three, we thought they would stand to benefit from taking part, that is, they would potentially strengthen their own interpersonal and language skills; and four, they were willing to consider a longer-term role as researchers in future peer research at the school. (As it turned out, two of the three parent-researchers joined the parent-research team for 2008-2009.)

As for the interviewees, we opted for seven parents and caregivers who, first and foremost, we were able to contact—this is always a challenge in schools with high mobility. We also looked for parents who had taken part in most of the previous year's after-school discussions.

The interviews were conducted in a small office adjacent to other administrative offices in the school. They were guided by a set of open-ended questions focused around the previous year's program (see the Appendix for the Spanish version of the interview protocol). The interviews varied from 15 to 45 minutes in length, and they were audiotaped. The recordings were translated (when required) and transcribed in their entirety. All of the participants, both interviewers and interviewees, were paid through a Faculty of Education minor research grant.

As I read and reflected on the transcripts, I knew it would not be difficult to use the findings to tell a story of how the program is empowering parents and caregivers and bringing them closer to their children's schooling. For example, as a general response to the program, one of the parents offered the following: "I can more effectively express myself, and also I can participate in the education of the children…like any parent I want that the situations are good, that there is security, and that the children are put in first priority." Another Spanish speaker remarked, "the sessions were good because all the topics that they proposed were excellent…I have liked what I've heard, and they have all been good." A third minority language parent explained, "I liked the fact that I could practice and listen to others speaking English, which motivated me to put in an effort to understand what they were saying. So to a certain extent, I was able to practice my English as well as at the same time learn about how the system works in this country."

And in response to a question which asked them to describe what *they* thought the program was about, a mother who is herself a student in the school's Adult Education class claimed that "the purpose was to make the education better, to make the programs better, and so the parents can develop a better relationship with the children and their teachers." One of her classmates in the Adult Education class added, "I wanted to learn more about the school. I wanted to meet more people, and I also wanted to know more about the programs." Another

mother, a native speaker of English and Bengali who went on to complete a teacher education program, reflected, "partly to get parents more involved in the school, to understand how the school system works so that they would feel more comfortable coming to the school and being involved with the school. Um, yeah, I think that was sort of the purpose."

On the issue of relationships with other parents and caregivers, a young Spanish-speaking woman said, "I did not know anyone who attended those meetings, and so it was good that we compared our ways of life and exchanged ideas and stories of our experiences as well as suggestions for improvements." She added, "well, yes, I did see that the relationships were closer between attendees. For example, there was a Vietnamese girl that came over to my house whose name I can't remember right now, but since we were both attendees of the program we were able to converse and talk more." These sentiments were echoed by another young woman who pointed out, "it was helpful. There were a lot of things that I learned and that the parents I think learned, and it was nice to be with each other and, you know, have a stronger sense of the parental community at the school."

The program's successes can also be evidenced by instances in the interviews where the participants showed signs of taking ownership of it. For example, in response to a request for suggestions for future sessions, two of the participants made specific suggestions. The first participant, highlighting her own ongoing challenges, explained, "I am currently going through a difficult situation due to immigration. Things have happened to me that because of not knowing…I would like that we would touch upon this topic so that people don't go through the same problems that I am currently going through." The second participant made specific recommendations for the program's method:

> so the main thing is that there maintains this continuity so that no topic is forgotten, every two weeks or, rather, every week is too close, maybe the meetings could happen once every twenty days or once a month or something like that so that the continuity is maintained and so that one does not miss the "line" of what is being discussed.

In contrast to this first set of remarks, it is also important to identify two further strands in the interviews that complicate the apparent successes of the program. The first of these two countercurrents may suggest parent and caregiver dependency rather than agency—that is, parents and caregivers as passive, or at least not fully empowered, recipients of information or direction. A Tamil-speaking participant confided, "the true purpose [of the program] I think was bringing information to let us know where we can go, how we should educate our children and (long pause) how we can integrate ourselves to the Canadian

community." A further sampling of views representing a cross-section of linguistic and cultural backgrounds on this issue reiterates what may be a passive ingesting of information and instruction: "[the purpose of the program] is to see where they [the program facilitators] could help us and know more about how we can educate our children;" "I know that with this type of class, one feels more oriented and knowledgeable on how to raise their kids on the right path;" "[the program is about] the help it offers us and the information it provides us."

At this juncture, it is very much worth considering the question of whether every parent seeks *agency* vis-à-vis their child's school in the ways Western educators might envision. In other words, it is important to think carefully about the motivations and rationales and ways of life within which the parents in this study may not have assumed the opportunity to increase their own agency. Some of the parents' responses may reflect culturally influenced attitudes toward teachers and schools, that is, that one learns from them rather than negotiates mutual relationships with them. Clearly, institutional relationships are construed differently, depending on one's own history, culture, personal experiences, socioeconomics, and so forth.

In this regard, the point of weighing the findings on this issue is not only to explore potential parent and caregiver dependency—rather than agency—but to draw into question the very research perspective which deems this parent preference as *dependency* in the first place. This double-edged caution is directed, then, both at the parents' responses and the researcher's interpretation of those responses. It is also in the spirit of a co-evolving of how *all* the participants think about family–school relations. I will return to this sentiment in the concluding section.

The second of these two currents that complicate the apparent successes of the program are expressed as a dissatisfaction or concern. I will touch on three of these instances. In the first case, one of the participants, after she had praised the program for pulling the parents closer to the school, shared a suggestion for the kind of topic that the program might address in the future—a topic emerging from a difficult incident. She relates,

> Some [topics] are very difficult to discuss.…Like the other day, my nephew from Mexico came to visit and went to go play at the park, and a few other children of color spit on him, to which the mother asked, "what exactly can I do about this even though I don't speak the language?" Also, the child is already starting to feel a sense of resentment towards children of color due to their attitudes. As a result, this may spark the development of something bad. So, one topic of discussion could be how to integrate children of different cultures.

The same participant, in commenting about an incident at one of the sessions, explained,

> There was one instance in which something happened that I did not like. It was related to the food that was brought…I think they said that there was chicken for the Muslims since they weren't allowed to eat any meat. So, practically, it was like this food was unable to be touched since it was only allowed for these types of people. These little types of differences *are not right*…for some people it will not matter if they eat Halal meat so they should just buy Halal for everyone or simply just buy everyone the same thing.

This aspect of how the participants related to the program and to each other received a more pronounced expression in the case of the Vietnamese-speaking peer-researcher and the pair of Vietnamese-speaking parents—two mothers of children attending the school. According to my on-site coordinator, who was helping to facilitate the interviews, the interview never really took place since the conversation between interviewer and interviewees began and ended with a heated exchange around preliminaries.

In an attempt to understand what actually happened, I spoke with my on-site coordinator privately and then with the Vietnamese-speaking peer-researcher. In private, my on-site coordinator suggested that the interviewees felt the woman who had been chosen had no right to be asking them questions. This was even after the interviewees had been given the relevant background details in preparation for the interview. My coordinator further claimed that interviewer and interviewees spoke different varieties of Vietnamese, had very differing levels of education, and that the interviewer came from an urban background while the interviewees were from a rural area. When I spoke to the interviewer, she was reticent and chose only to tell me that the interviewees did not speak Vietnamese very well, nor did they speak Chinese very well. (I later established that all three Vietnamese-speaking participants were ethnic Chinese.)

This second-tier feedback, accessed via parent-researchers, provides further insights into the program. I extract, suggestively rather than definitively, the four following implications for programs of this kind:

- One cannot underestimate the extent to which minority parents are concerned with their children's experience of public schooling, with their own learning and sense of agency as adults, and with their relationships with other adults in the school community.
- One cannot assume that programs or initiatives which are meant to foster agency among minority parents and caregivers will actually do so. In fact, some parents and caregivers may respond to such initiatives in passive and receptive ways.

- Difficult issues around intra- and inter-racial, ethnic, linguistic, and socio-economic relations should not be ignored in school-based programs with benign titles such as our own *Learning in Schools and Homes*.
- The assumption that adults feel more comfortable interacting with other adults with whom they share linguistic and/or cultural experiences is not necessarily the case. While in some cases a rapport can be enabled by this matching, in other cases it can be a source of friction.

Conclusion and Conceptual Caution

All told, the discussion forum at Northfield proved to be a worthwhile space for parents to connect with their children's school. The parents found it useful in a number of areas: it allowed them to hear and to heard by teachers and administrators; it provided them with opportunities for linking with other parents; and it introduced them to broader educational practices which shape their children's experience of public education. Analysis of feedback on the program, from both the year-end surveys and the follow-up parent-driven interviews, also revealed that the interactions facilitated by the program are not insulated from the broader social and interpersonal dynamics at play between and among parents. In this sense, the program must be prepared to take up, discuss, and learn from these dynamics—dynamics that are not immune from the tensions that also characterize the community within which the program is situated.

In this vein, I will conclude with a conceptual caution that lends some sense of the broader epistemic and ethical concerns that can be read into this program. In commenting on the place of reform efforts in curriculum studies, Smits (2008) cautions against a preoccupation with *improving methods*. This caution is equally valid in applied research programs such as *Learning in Schools and Homes*. This work, focused as it is on *improving* school–family relations—particularly in the case of minority families—does run the risk, as Smits (2008) points out in reference to the French philosopher Alain Badiou, of improving the methods of existence without considering the conditions of existence. Glossed in the context of *Learning in Schools and Homes*, the risk can be read as one where the *improving* of school-family relations carries on without considering the conditions of possibility for those relations in the first place. In this scenario, applied work can indeed turn instrumentalist and normative: an instrument for pulling school practices toward a normative point, that may, admittedly, be more democratic and responsive.

But the concern I am raising here doesn't devalue the importance of either democracy or responsibility. It does signal that the conditions of possibility for

democracy and responsibility (not to mention authoritarianism and irresponsibility) have to be integral to the discussion forums and to the research around it. This is not to say the only alternative to democracy and responsibility is authoritarianism and irresponsibility. Taking responsibility, for instance, may look very different in different cultural contexts. Following this caution, both the discussion forums and attendant research need to be open to nuanced, complex, and perhaps counterintuitive (to a Western perspective) understandings of self and society, particularly as they manifest themselves in educational contexts.

It is for this reason in particular that I insist, both in my reports to funding agencies and in my strategizing with the school-based research teams and their wider school communities, that *Learning in Schools and Homes* and the research tied to it is meant not only to effect changes in how families and schools interact, but also to effect changes in how all the participants think about family engagement with schools. In a nutshell, I insist on allowing the research to surprise us about family–school relations, certainly, but also to surprise us about ourselves: how we experience the world and how we think about it.

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John Ippolito's research interests center on teacher education in contexts of linguistic and cultural diversity. This focus takes shape along three strands of inquiry. The first strand examines publicly funded educational practices for linguistically and culturally diverse students, families, and communities. The second strand explicates programmatic and conceptual possibilities for collaborative partnerships between school board-based and university-based educators. The third strand explores the interface of minority languages and mainstream, dominant language schools. Underpinning these three lines of inquiry is a motivating concern around the ethics of teacher education and teacher practices. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dr. John Ippolito, York University, Faculty of Education, Winters College 251, 4700 Keele St., Toronto, Ontario, M3J 1P3, Canada, or e-mail jippolito@edu.yorku.ca

Appendix. Questionario de Preguntas (Interview Questions)

1. Si usted asistió al "Programa de Aprendizaje en Casa y Escuela," podría decirnos cuantas veces tuvo la oportunidad de participar en el? (How many times did you attend the *Learning in Schools and Homes* program last year?)
2. Son sus hijos alumnos es esta escuela? Si es así, participaron ellos junto a usted en el programa? (Did your children attend this school last year? If so, did they attend the program with you?)
3. Que le animo a usted a participar en este programa? (Why did you attend the program?)
4. Podría decirnos cual fue el propósito de este programa? (What did you think the purpose of this program was?)
5. Tuvo la oportunidad de aprender algo nuevo en este programa? (Did you learn anything from the program?)
6. Piensa usted que este programa le ayudo a ver como se desarrolla la educación de sus hijos, y como se desenvuelve la escuela a que ellos asisten? (Did the program change anything about how you think about your children's education or the school they attend?)
7. Piensa usted que la participación de los padres en el programa, pueda haber producido un efecto positivo entre ellos? (Did the program have any effect on your relationship with other parents in the school?)
8. Que piensa usted que se debería hacer o cambiar para mejorar el programa? (What could be done to improve the program?)
9. Desearía asistir a otras reuniones como estas posteriormente? Si o No? (Will you be attending the program this year? Why or why not?)
10. Hay algo mas que usted desearía agregar o preguntar? (Is there anything else we haven't talked about that you would like to add?)