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Dual-Role Educator-Parents: How Public Educators Navigate Their Own Children Through Public Education

Katherine Becker¹, Libbi R. Miller², Sarah E. Cashmore¹, Daniel Becker¹

1) Lakehead University, Canada

2) California State University, Fresno, United States

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Katherine Becker
Lakehead University

Sarah E. Cashmore
Lakehead University

Libbi R. Miller
California State University

Daniel Becker
Lakehead University

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Abstract

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to reveal how parents who are educators navigate their children through public education (from Kindergarten to the completion of high school) and to share their insights with the widest possible audience to ultimately enhance the learning and wellbeing of all children. The premise of this study was that teachers and principals use social capital acquired through their professional practice in their role as parents, and that sharing their experiences with parents who have no insider knowledge may benefit all children. Findings indicated that participants used social capital (knowledge, relationships, and resources) about public schooling to enhance their children's academic success and wellbeing. Although participants offered advice for all parents and divulged their own personal practices as parents, several also acknowledged the fear some parents would feel to follow their advice entailing involvement with schools, teachers and administrators. As such, policy makers and educators are urged to improve communications that increase parents' comfort, in order to remove fear as a barrier to involvement and advocacy.

Keywords: educator-parents, social capital, parent involvement, public education

El Doble Rol de los Padres- Educadores: Cómo los Educadores Públicos Educan a sus Propios Hijos E la Enseñanza Pública

Katherine Becker
Lakehead University
Sarah E. Cashmore
Lakehead University

Libbi R. Miller
California State University
Daniel Becker
Lakehead University

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Resumen

El propósito de esta investigación narrativa era revelar cómo los padres que son educadores educan sus hijos a través de la educación pública (desde la guardería hasta el fin de la escuela secundaria) y para compartir sus conocimientos con la mayor audiencia posible para mejorar, en última instancia, el aprendizaje y el bienestar de todos los niños. La premisa de este estudio fue que los maestros y directores usan el capital social adquirido a través de su práctica profesional en su rol de padres, y que el intercambio de sus experiencias con los padres que no tienen conocimiento de información privilegiada puede beneficiar a todos los niños. Los resultados indicaron que los participantes utilizan el capital acerca de la educación pública para mejorar el éxito académico y el bienestar de sus hijos. Aunque los participantes ofrecieron consejos para todos los padres y divulgaron sus propias prácticas personales como padres, varios también reconocieron el temor que algunos padres sentirían a seguir sus consejos que implican la participación de las escuelas.

Palabras clave: padres-educadores, capital social, participación de los padres, educación pública

Teachers and principals who work in public education (from Kindergarten to the completion of high school) and who are also parents are uniquely situated when navigating their own children through schooling. Through their professional practice, educators’ knowledge of the inner workings of schools – including pedagogical practices, initiatives and policies, allocation of resources, school programming, expectations of students, and learning opportunities – accumulates daily. Educator-parents continually get the inside track on what is presently happening behind the scenes at schools, whereas parents who do not work in education may only know schools through the memories and impressions they have from their own experiences as students.

The purpose of this study was to investigate how parents who are educators navigate their own children through public education and to share this knowledge with the widest possible audience in the hopes of contributing to enhanced learning and wellbeing for all children. The questions of this study were:

- 1) Do parents who are public education professionals (teachers and principals) use their knowledge of the education system to improve their children’s learning and wellbeing? If so, how?
- 2) What insights can be shared with parents with little knowledge of public education to support their children’s learning and wellbeing?

Framework and Literature Review

The premise of this inquiry was that educators who are parents may be better positioned than others to navigate their children through public education due to social capital accumulated through their professional practice. We adopted Bourdieu’s definition of social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition” (Bourdieu, 1985, p. 248). Bourdieu’s concept of social capital encompasses any benefits accrued by an individual by virtue of participation in a group (Portes, 1998). By virtue of their daily participation in the education system, educators access knowledge, develop relationships and acquire resources, all of which they can use in their role as parents of school-aged children. Moreover, Dewey’s (1938) principle of

continuity of experience holds that all experiences are carried forward to shape future situations. We posited that teachers' firsthand experiences with schooling are carried from the professional context to shape personal parenting practices.

Educational research literature abounds with studies on parent/teacher topics, such as parent-teacher relationships, perceptions and attitudes of parents and teachers, parent empowerment, and the role of parent involvement and children's academic success. In the preponderance of such studies, parents and teachers comprise separate populations. Outside of home-schooling research, surprisingly little research has been published on the views and practices of the population of educator-parents – those educators who occupy the dual role of also raising their own children. Searches of educational, sociological, and psychological databases revealed few relevant studies. Two reports (Cato, 1992; King & Peart, 1992) examining work-family conflicts of teachers were located. More recently, Tuason (2005) examined the challenges and needs of parents who are also teachers and Koch (2011) interviewed teachers who have a child or children with disabilities.

Sociologists have long studied the intergenerational transmission of inequalities in educational contexts. In 1970, French sociologists Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron released *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (translated title) to propose a model of the social mediations and processes that “ensure the cultural capital across generations and stamp pre-existing differences in inherited cultural capital with a meritocratic seal of academic consecration” (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 5). Bourdieu contended that schools impose exclusions and inclusions that form the basis of the social order. More recently, American sociologist Annette Lareau conducted extensive fieldwork studying the daily lives of families from different socioeconomic classes, uncovering salient differences between classes that “appear to lead to the transmission of differential advantages to children” (Lareau, 2003, p. 5). Research focus areas have extended to differences in children's extracurricular (Galaskiewicz, Hobor, Duckles & Mayorova, 2012) and summertime activities (Chin & Phillips, 2004), use of time outside of school including church attendance and volunteering, and related impacts on behavior and educational achievement (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001).

Yet few studies could be located investigating teaching in the education system as a parental advantage. McFarlin (2007) found that having a parent for a teacher significantly lowered the incidence of behavioral problems in male children. White (2011) found that New Zealand fathers who are also teachers felt well equipped to guide their own children through schooling due to their knowledge of schools as organizations. And through an analysis of U.S. Census data from 1990, Doyle (1995) determined that teachers living in large urban areas were more likely than the general public to send their children to private schools; however, no recent research on school selection by educator-parents has been reported.

Methods

Narrative inquiry is a methodology for studying lived experiences. A narrative inquiry methodology was chosen for this study for two reasons. First, as the focus of inquiry was on the lived experiences of educator-parents, a methodology allowing participants to voice their own experiences in detail seemed most appropriate. Second, narrative inquiry is an exploration of past, present, and future, in other words, the temporality commonplace (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). This investigation involved past, present and future, in that participants' past professional experiences, as well as social capital accrued through past and present professional practice, may influence past, present and future parenting experiences. Also relevant was Connelly and Clandinin's (1988) notion of inquiry as an attempt to understand how humans make meaning of experience through the telling of their stories. An emphasis on participant narrative as an important data source stems from the view that we mold our lives and pasts through our stories. As Bruner (1994) argued, "a life as led is inseparable from a life as told—or more bluntly, a life is not 'how it was' but how it is interpreted and reinterpreted, told and retold" (p. 36). Clandinin (2006) maintained that our individual experiences are shaped by the larger social, cultural and institutional narratives in which we live and have lived. Narrative inquiry facilitated our investigation into participants' individual experiences which, as parents and educators working in public schools, are shaped by the larger social, cultural and institutional narratives present in their professional workplaces.

Data was gathered through individual interviews with each of the 20 participants. Participants included current and former teachers or principals who had experienced parenting a child or children during the public school years. All were located through word of mouth and snowball sampling. The participants lived and worked in the south and southwestern United States or in the provinces of Alberta or Ontario, Canada. Fifteen participants were female; five were male. Participants had an average number of two children and nine years of professional experience in education.

Semi-structured interviews (Esterberg, 2002) were conducted in person whenever possible, and otherwise through videoconferencing and by telephone. The goal of semi-structured interviews is to openly explore a given topic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to encourage these educators to share their personal stories on the topic of parenting a child or children through public education. Bruner (1990) cautioned that interviewers have a tendency to interrupt interviewees' narrative responses to questions because they do not fit into conventional categories. To avoid this pitfall and to privilege individual narratives, while the researchers composed a common interview protocol in advance (see Appendix A), interviewee's responses shaped each interview.

Once all interviews were transcribed in entirety, the four co-investigators independently categorized and coded the information through careful line-by-line analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). A fifth researcher with no vested interest in the results also independently coded interview data and identified emerging themes. To achieve researcher triangulation, only once each researcher had solitarily completed the initial coding process did the researchers share and consolidate initial findings into salient themes. The researchers were concerned not only with privileging participants' narratives, but also with presenting participants' views with the utmost accuracy, and as such, interviewees were invited to participate in member checking, a process to increase study credibility wherein participants review preliminary findings (Lapan & Armfield, 2009).

Findings

As the researchers consolidated our coded themes, three prevailing categories emerged. The first of these includes the explicit advice that

educator-parents offered to all parents that they also follow themselves with their own children. The second category includes actions that the participants take to help navigate their children through public education that they did not explicitly advise to other parents. The third theme relates to the challenges identified by participants related to parenting while also working in the education field. These categories and related sub-themes, detailed here, both echo and extend the existing body of related literature. All participants' names are pseudonyms.

Explicit Advice

Each participating educator offered words of advice to other parents. Participants also related that they followed much of this advice with their own children. In some instances, advice to other parents emerged through the telling of a personal parenting experience. Participants were also asked to offer recommendations for parents with little or no professional knowledge of public education, and oftentimes, this advice overlapped with their own self-described beliefs and practices. This explicit advice was categorized into three interrelated sub-themes: relationships; communication; and involvement.

Relationships

Participants voiced the belief that parents are partners with teachers in a child's education, and that "it's all about relationships." Several offered pointers on how to build a relationship with a child's teacher. Anne Marie advised arranging a face-to-face meeting with the child's teacher. Claire proposed beginning early in the school year with a gift:

I would ask a front desk person what little thing the teachers like. Are they a coffee drinker? Do they like chocolate? Do they like bottled water? Are they kombucha [tea] drinkers? And if you do have to drop in because you have a question or something, bring them a coffee or bring them chocolate or bring them kombucha so that you're not just the parent that always has questions, you know, without also being somebody who's supportive of that teacher.

Connectedly, multiple participants had been confronted by an angry parent and cautioned against lashing out at a child's teacher. Veronica explained, "The teacher only wants to be a partner with the parents, not against them. But if the parent keeps coming and putting them in that position, it's not good for that relationship, and it's not good for the student either." Jason related, "Everybody has had a teacher they hated. Some parents project that on every teacher." Anne Marie summed it up, "Just be present. You're not there to judge them. You're not there to make their life harder." Rather than "ambushing" a child's teacher, participants urged parents to conceptualize the relationship as a partnership. "Parents need to be told that, really, the teacher and the school is on your kid's side," said Sheila. "They want the best for your kid and you raise the kid together." Anne Marie reminded, "You're both there for your kid." While Mary reassured, "You need to know that I'm right here behind you."

Communication

"It's all about communication," declared Jason. Communication was a salient theme in the interview data and was a common thread in the explicit advice participants offered to all parents that they themselves follow. Communication referred to frequent exchanges with a child's teacher and with a child. Claire recommended that all parents find out their child's teacher's preferred method of communication (email, phone call, or face-to-face). Whatever the preferred method, several participants stressed the importance of staying in regular contact.

And what should parents communicate about? The prevailing advice from the majority of participants was to, as Robin phrased it, "Ask lots and lots of questions." While Austin recommended asking lots of questions "about why things are happening in [your] child's education," Claire advised asking a specific question to get the ball rolling: "Can you please give me advice on how to transfer what you're doing in the classroom to the homework that we're doing at home?" In summary, Marsha's guidance neatly captured that of the other participants:

Overall, I believe that it all connects to relationships and

communication. Education is a journey. If we have a relationship with our child's educator and establish good communication, then you will be able to approach him or her at any point along the way.

Participants both gave and followed the advice to frequently communicate with a child's teacher. Henry admitted:

There's not a day that goes by – and I know this drives my daughter nuts – that I don't ask, "What did you do first hour? What did you do second hour?" And I go through her classes as they are laid out. And we talk about things.

Michael described using an innovative approach to communicating with his son during school hours:

My mom bought my son a little Galaxy tablet to bring to school... he and I have a Google Hangout chat going. When he's able to get on we've been using that a bit. And I'm glad his teacher's okay with that, where we've been able to chat back and forth.

For several participants, communicating with children also meant helping them learn to advocate for themselves. Carrie explained, "I try to coach my daughters about things and how they can, on their own, rectify a situation." Sheila said it's especially important for children with special needs:

You can advocate for your kid to a point, but then the kids need to advocate for themselves. I think it's a wonderful parent that can help their kid learn what their rights are, as far as the IEP [Individualized Education Plan] goes, but then have the kid start stepping up and saying, "I need this accommodation."

Involvement

Most participants stressed the importance of being involved in a child's education, and almost all participants described themselves as involved or very involved. One participant (Kate) was "highly involved"; Karen

described herself as “really, really, really involved”; and Henry admitted, “my daughter would say I’m over-involved.” Some mentioned that they were as involved as their work schedules would allow, and further lamented the concurrence of work-related commitments and volunteer opportunities. But what does it mean to be involved? With their own children, participants described being involved both at home and at school.

Involvement at home

Participants told of staying involved at home in several ways, particularly reading to a child every day. For instance, two participants started reading to children the day they came home from the hospital. Jason and his wife read to their children and had their children reading to them before they started attending school. Emma asked her two older children to read a chapter a night before bed while she read to her youngest child. She also employed her professional knowledge of assessing reading ability with her youngest, periodically performing a running record assessment, “to see how she’s doing.”

Being involved at home also meant supporting a variety of school-related activities at home

- helping with homework, school projects, studying for tests, and fundraising;
- ensuring homework gets completed;
- keeping track of at-home reading;
- checking the teacher communication folder daily;
- and examining the contents of the backpack every day.

Participants viewed their abilities to help with homework at home as advantageous. Anne Marie shared:

My son] brings this worksheet home and it’s already double-digit addition. I say, “Show me. Do you know how to do that?” He goes, “Kind of.” And I’ll sit down with him, and we’ll work on it together.

Veronica shared that her husband has remarked on her abilities to help with homework:

We're doing it at the kitchen table and my husband is watching us from the couch just going, "Oh my, there's no way I would have been able to help her." Often he'll say from the other room, "Girls, you are so lucky you have a teacher for a mom."

Furthermore, one participant contacted a colleague to borrow manipulatives to support her daughter at home in understanding mathematical concepts. Another hired a colleague to tutor her son in math. Another helped her daughters develop goals for improvement. And multiple participants related that they helped a child or children develop good work and study habits from a young age. Belle described a home environment rich in school-related activities. She expressed a lack of confidence in schools to provide all of the meaningful learning experiences she wants her children to have, and said, "I teach them everything they need to know at home. They go to school primarily for socialization."

Oppositely, participants shared the various ways that they intentionally provided learning experiences at home that are different from school. These learning experiences took the form of both organized extracurricular activities (music lessons, Girl Guides, athletics, and so on) and informal experiences. One of Kate's practices of involvement at home included hosting parties to network with other parents. She said:

Involvement with other parents is equally important because you need that network... I do tend to have big birthday parties for my son in our house. I think it's a form of social capital for him and gives me a chance to get to know the parents and be able to use those networks

Belinda said of her daughter, "When she comes home from school, the only thing she wants to do is play... I think she's so starved for undirected and self-guided play." Claire echoed this sentiment, saying, "This is why we do fun things at home... I have come to learn that I can't always count on her school to do that." Emma facilitated her children's self-directed play at home by building on their ideas and asking open-ended questions to expand

on their learning. Kate explained her feelings about her son's free time this way:

Math is the issue... That's a tough one. If I do math drills with him at home, is he really going to like it any more? As a parent I have to be kind of hands-off to some degree and say, let them do this and let's wait and see... I strongly believe that the elementary years should be a time where children have a lot more freedom, and so I don't want to pile additional work or demands on him.

Five participants also stressed the importance of taking cues from the child and nurturing the child's interests. As Michael explained:

I think trying to remote teach or try to tutor too much on my own would not be as productive. When things have not been good for [my son], I think that support and emotional security is much more important for him. I just try to do things that are fun and engaging... It's very good to really pay attention to the sorts of activities that children are in – whether it's something engaging, like model building or game playing, and letting them being really involved and happy rather than trying to drill and kill them at home.

Involvement at school

Participants reported involvement at their child's school in a variety of ways, including: volunteering in a child's classroom; assisting on field trips and at community events; attending assemblies; and visiting a child's class to give a workshop. For Anne Marie, involvement entailed being at school and being visible. "Just be there... Even if it's two minutes before school starts or one minute after school's over. Say, 'How was the day? Good. Thank you.' Just be present."

Several of these educators pointed out that since their daytime work schedules conflicted with daytime opportunities, they found ways to be involved at a child's school after work hours, by: attending information nights, family nights, and school concerts; organizing a French book club; and through parent-teacher associations and school council. Jason shared

that by attending school council meetings at his daughter's high school, he had learned about postsecondary scholarships that few people apply for or even know about.

For several participants, being involved at school meant advocating for a child. Belle related that "parents really are the best advocates for their children," and Lola shared, "As parents, we have to be advocates because students have no voice." Mary urged that advocating for children with exceptionalities is of particular importance:

Go on the website of the board, go on the website of the organization that represents what your child's exceptionality may be. Get the information you need to equip yourself so that you can ask reasonable and legally appropriate requests for your child... Never regret that you didn't pursue something for your child as an advocate for your child because no one else is going to advocate for your child at the level that you will.

Don't be afraid

In the course of their interview, more than half of the participants communicated a powerful barrier to involvement: fear. Several stated, "Don't be afraid." Robin elaborated, "A lot of parents enter a school building with knots in their stomach and are afraid to ask questions for fear that they might sound stupid or that they should already know the answer to that." Kate recommended parents read the book *The Essential Conversation* by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, which describes the source of that fear as the tensions and baggage parents bring from their personal experience into their children's school experience, affecting how they interact with teachers and navigate schooling.

What Educators Do But Did Not Advise

The second category to emerge from the interview data involved what participants do (including beliefs and activities) to navigate their own children through public education that they did not explicitly advise other parents to do. *What educators do but didn't advise* emerged as a number of

commonalities in participants' telling of personal stories about their experiences parenting and navigating their own children through schooling.

Initiating contact to make a special request.

Even though participants stressed the crucial nature of building relationships and communicating with teachers in their explicit advice, they did not advise other parents to contact a teacher to make special requests for their child. Nonetheless, almost all participants shared an experience of initiating contact with a teacher to make a special request for their child. These included requests to

- challenge a child;
- assign a child to a particular teacher's class for the coming year;
- bring a child in to meet the teacher/tour the school before the start of a school year;
- have a child re-tested or re-screened;
- move a child's desk to a different location within the classroom;
- assign meaningful activities, not busy work, when a child finishes work early;
- allow snacks outside of regularly scheduled times;
- provide more opportunities for independence;
- offer an accelerated reader program;
- begin emailing regularly.

Almost half of participants related that they continually ask teachers to increase the challenge for a child. Kate told every teacher, "Don't be afraid to challenge him." Three participants communicated routinely having a say in who a child's teacher would be. Belle shared that she would decide each year with the principal:

We need to make sure that the teacher is someone who is consistent and very structured and has good classroom management and those kinds of things. So that's usually when I'm meeting with the principal to discuss placement for the kids.

Sheila also described a preference for particular qualities in her child's teachers:

I did interfere in the selection of who her teachers were... I knew who was making up the class lists, and I was really good friends

with her, so I did use my contacts. I wanted her to have the teachers that I knew did interesting, engaging things; the ones who touched all aspects of the curriculum, not just science and math, or not just the arts, but there was a good mix. If she was scheduled to have teachers that she was particularly distraught about, then we'd see what we could do to change the schedule.

Participants also told stories of initiating contact with schools to express concerns, hopes, and high expectations. For instance, Belinda was concerned about the lack of recess time at her daughter's school. She said, "I have spoken [about it] with the principal and the curriculum specialist and all my daughter's teachers." Claire has also expressed a concern more than once. "I have made it very clear, I have multiple times asked about getting the accelerated reader program into [the school]. I feel like at this point in time I am beating a dead horse." Veronica shared her plan for expressing concerns in the future. "I'm going to be in contact with her teacher right away. I'm going to speak about my concerns, about what last year's concerns were, about my hopes for her."

Additional language immersion and Montessori

Four participants began a child or children's formal education at a Montessori school. Half of the participants interviewed had a child or children in a language immersion program; for the participants in the United States, it was Spanish immersion, and for the participants in Canada, it was French. Kate 'shopped' for the right school, enrolling her son in one of three different schools in her area that offered French immersion. Claire recognized that her daughter was advanced and enrolled her in an English/Spanish program in the hopes that it might "slow her down a little bit."

Understanding curriculum and speaking the language

No participants advised other parents to familiarize themselves with the curriculum, yet half described knowing the curriculum as advantageous. Kate elaborated, "Having worked in the system, I understand the curriculum.

I know what he's learning each year, where he's expected to start and where he's expected to end up each year." Jason said simply, "We know what our kids are supposed to know." And because participants understand what's important, they also know what is not important and can make informed decisions as they navigate their children. As Carrie explained:

I know how much merit goes into certain things or how much doesn't. Whereas parents not in the system don't know that – they think everything is the be-all and end-all for marks, but it's not. Some things are just for practice.

Veronica shared why to her, straight A's are not important on children's report cards:

A 'B' means that they're working at grade level, that they understand what they're doing. This is good news. This means we have wiggle room to get better, but it doesn't mean that just because they know what they're doing that they deserve the A. So I think for parents to really, yes, put stock in the report card because it is important, and it is informative. But don't make it the be-all and the end-all. Is your child also happy? Do they have a great social life? Do they enjoy their skating club that they go to? Do they have a balanced, well-rounded life? Great. Then does it matter that they don't have eight A's on their report card and they only have three?

As these educator-parents know what is and is not important, four shared their lack of concern about scores on standardized state or provincial tests. Michael elucidated:

That's another thing that I think helps, being a teacher, is understanding the assessment game and hopefully knowing when to be concerned and when not to be concerned. For example, EQAO [the standardized test in Ontario] – I've marketed EQAO, and I know it doesn't affect promotion. I know it's more about a big survey to tell teachers and educators at large at different levels

what’s going on. It’s more of a data collection project than it is an individual assessment of achievement for students. So I’m like, “Whatever, go in and do your best. I don’t really care.”

Belinda and Kate both expressed stronger aversive beliefs about standardized testing. Belinda, who lives in the U.S., planned to keep her daughter home on all test days as a form of passive resistance. Kate, who lives in Canada, described her feelings about the culture of test preparation in schools: “I’m also very much against standardized testing... I believe that learning should be joyful. There’s a playfulness to learning. It shouldn’t be tedious.”

Several of these educator-parents also described how advantageous it is to speak the language of schooling. Austin shared, “As a profession we use a lot of education-specific jargon that parents often don’t understand.” Morgan stated that other parents give her their child’s report cards to “translate into normal language.” Belinda explained administrative and academic changes at her daughter’s school to other parents who do not work in education. And Carrie, who works in special education, explained legal rights to friends with children on IEPs.

Choosing schools and communities

No participants offered advice about school selection; however, three participants purchased a home within the boundaries of a desired school. For Claire, school choice was about existing relationships. She explained, “We knew [the school]. We knew the people who worked there. We felt safe with them, so I agreed that that would be okay.” Although Kate did not know the staff at her son’s future school, she also emphasized relationships:

The administrative assistant at the school said, “Drop in any time and one of us will give you a tour.” So I actually did drop in unannounced to see what they would do and the principal did drop everything and he took me around. Ultimately for me it was about the relationship and the general feel of the school. It felt like a warm and supportive and nice environment to be in.

Whereas for Veronica, Emma and Jason, it was more about community choice than about school choice. Veronica said she and her husband bought their home because they liked the neighborhood. Emma said:

We moved to the area because we knew it was a nice, small community with lots of kids and we wanted to raise our kids there... There is only one Catholic school in our town, but we were excited to send them there. We had heard wonderful things about the school and felt comfortable that it was just K-3 to begin with. We were also excited because we heard it was a very personal school.

And Jason explained, “We moved here because we thought it would be good for [our kids] to attend country schools. [Their schools are] close knit. Every kid knows everybody. Teachers know everybody.”

Career/Parenting Conflicts

The third prevailing theme from this investigation is challenges related to parenting while working in the education field. The first of these challenges is the work schedule of teachers and principals. As discussed previously, multiple participants reported that their work schedules conflicted with classroom volunteer opportunities, field trips, and other school activities. Participants also shared that an inflexible work schedule is challenging when family issues arise, such as when a child becomes ill.

Balancing the dual-role of parent and educator is a second challenge. Two participants expressed regret that after working with children all day, they did not have the patience for their own children that they wished to have. Several participants also related that while occupying a dual-role afforded them insider information to use to advocate for their child, at the same time, they were careful not to “overstep boundaries” as a parent, especially if they were more experienced or knowledgeable than their child’s teacher. As a result, these educator-parents reported using caution and careful phrasing during interactions and calling fewer meetings to express concerns than they otherwise would have. Carrie related that her professional relationships with colleagues rendered her unable to advocate as she wished for her child:

When there are difficulties with my child or how I think programming is happening or discipline is happening and I don't agree with it, it's a very difficult situation because they are my friends, they are my colleagues, and then to say, "I don't like how you're doing something. I don't agree with it" – it's a very hard situation.

This conflict was especially pronounced in the interviews with educators in the province of Ontario, where participants belong to the same union as their children's teachers. Robin described her dilemma this way:

There's a fine line between me asking direct questions and having that be seen as a complaint because the teacher's federation makes it very clear how you would go about it if you weren't happy with what a colleague was doing, right? So you have to be careful about how that's dealt with. So that's probably what has kept me from asking more pointed questions at times.

To get around this issue, a handful of participants reported asking the child's other parent to advocate or express concerns, either through phone calls, emails, or speaking out at parent/teacher conferences or parent council meetings. Correspondingly, multiple participants reported that being in PUBLIC education influenced the ways their children's teachers interacted with them. Sheila commented that her daughter "had that halo effect in high school. She'd get ridiculously high marks... She didn't know what working hard meant, and it backfired in university. " Mary arrived for a parent-teacher meeting about her son and was surprised to discover that an administrator would be silently sitting in on the meeting. She attributed this and similar experiences over the years to her dual-role as both a parent and a principal. Robin shared that teachers tended to gloss over her daughter's issues, and Robin expressed that she was grateful when she encountered a substitute teacher who spoke honestly about her daughter:

His first comment was, "Oh, I know her, she can be a handful at times." So there was that frankness and honesty... And he said,

“You know, she’s really bright, and so she’s finishing things quickly and then ends up being disruptive sometimes.”... It was just really frank information that was very helpful that we’ve never, ever received before.

Overall, participants fell along a spectrum of opinion regarding the (dis)advantageous nature of their dual-role. Some participants acknowledged certain challenges but highlighted the perks of working in public education while navigating their own children through the system; others accented the disadvantages and conflicts they experienced.

Discussion

It was clear from this inquiry that participants used their insider experiences in public education to ascertain the usefulness of the parent-teacher relationship. They articulated how to go about building a relationship with a child’s teacher, how and why to communicate often and in a friendly manner, and how they used relationships and communication to advocate for their child(ren). Using relationships to navigate and advocate required continual communication with a child’s teacher. Participants knew possible methods of communication and not only what questions to ask but also what requests were possible. They asked for special favors, some of which may not be conceivable to the general public, such as accelerated reader programs, school tours, for a child to be assigned to a particular teacher’s class, and to have a child re-tested.

Participants expressed evidence-based beliefs and practices. Indeed, decades of research have demonstrated the long-term benefits of reading with children from early childhood (Bus, van Ijzendoorn & Pellegrini, 1995), parent involvement in children’s education (Wiseman, 2009), and the advantages of play for children’s social, emotional and cognitive development (Miller et al., 2009). Although participants did not explicitly reference educational research literature, their knowledge likely came through professional experience, through teacher training and professional development and practice, and through daily interactions with colleagues. Most notably, these educator-parents understood the criticality of parent involvement, and they knew numerous ways for parents to become involved

in a child's education. Participants even understood how to overcome barriers to involvement, such as attending evening meetings to overcome work-related scheduling conflicts or having a spouse advocate for a child to overcome the constraints of professional collegiality.

What participants did not explicitly advise others to do reflected their social capital acquired through professional practice: they knew what they could ask for; they knew the curriculum and how to help with school work at home; and they spoke the language of schooling. These findings compliment White's (2011) findings that father-teachers' knowledge of schools as organizations made them feel well equipped to navigate their own children through the system. In addition to social capital from professional experience, participants' actions as parents also reflected their middle-class capital and privilege. Class-based capital was most apparent with reference to school choice. For example, some of the participants purchased homes within the boundaries of a desired school, while others paid tuition for Montessori education. These actions reflect middle-class privileges. Similarly, this was apparent in the choosing of language immersion programs. Such programs attract not just educator-parents but many middle- and upper-class parents who see additional language acquisition as an enrichment opportunity and a chance for children to develop a more international profile (Block, 2014).

The findings of this study also add to research on work-family conflicts of teachers by Cato (1992), King and Peart (1992) and Tuason (2005). Inflexible schedules and balancing the dual-role, especially the constraints of professional collegiality, were identified as conflicts. Participants' reports of preferential treatment or an unwillingness of teachers to report behaviors were of particular interest in light of McFarlin's (2007) finding, which suggested that having a parent for a teacher significantly lowered the incidence of behavioral problems in male children. Further research is recommended to understand the complex relationship between teachers and educator-parents. Specifically, does having an educator for a parent influence the reporting of behavioral problems in children? And what impact does having an educator-parent have on children's long-term academic success and wellbeing?

We undertook this study to discover what educator-parents' insights could be shared with non-educator parents to support all children's learning

and wellbeing. Findings include the necessity of communication, relationships and parent involvement. More importantly, however, findings indicate that we did not ask enough questions. Even though educator-parents identified challenges to navigating schooling as both parents and professionals, they identified a profound barrier for some non-educator parents: fear. Several participants noted the fear and discomfort of non-educator parents they knew. Thus in addition to asking what insights could be shared with non-educator parents, we also should have asked, “What insights can be shared with all educators?” The onus is on administrators and teachers to communicate, build relationships with, and involve parents and families of their school communities, especially when they know some of them are afraid. All children stand to benefit from the views and practices shared here: reading and intentional learning experiences at home; parents who know the curriculum and understand the specialized language of schooling; and parents who are involved both at home and at school. But how can parents learn about and implement these practices when they are uncomfortable walking into a school or talking to teachers? It must be the responsibility of educators and policymakers, already in position of the requisite social capital (knowledge, relationships and resources), to actively pursue inclusive policies and practices to quell that fear.

As many parents are unfamiliar with the curriculum, Drummond and Stipek (2004) encouraged teachers to be committed to communicating with parents about what their children are learning. We extend recommendation to encourage educators to be committed to making parents feel comfortable communicating, building relationships, being involved, and advocating. Moreover, educators and administrators are urged to communicate all the ways they know for parents to become involved, communicate, and advocate.

Summary and Conclusion

The researchers set out to understand whether and how parents who are public educators use their knowledge of the education system to improve their children’s learning and wellbeing and to mobilize the insights gained to ultimately support all children’s learning and wellbeing. We posited that through their daily participation in the education system, participants

develop social capital (Bourdieu, 1985) in the form of knowledge, relationships and resources, to use in their role as parents of school-aged children.

During their interviews, participants shared experiences involving the use of all three – professional knowledge, relationships, and resources – to enhance a child’s academic success or wellbeing. As Emma, a new teacher, reported, “Since working at the school, I have so much more knowledge about resources and opportunities than I did with my oldest before working at the school.” Conversely, adding to previous research on work-family conflicts of teachers, participants also shared ways in which their careers clashed with their role as parents. The experiences shared by these participants shed light on how all children’s learning and wellbeing can be better supported. While study findings are significant to all parents wishing to enhance a child or children’s learning and wellbeing, and who may not possess the requisite social capital to access, guide, choose, and advocate in schools, results are of particular pertinence to policy makers, educators, and administrators, who are well positioned to break through the barriers of fear preventing some parents from full participation.

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Katherine Becker is Assistant Professor at Lakehead University (Canada).

Libbi R. Miller is Associate Professor at California State University (United States)

Sarah E. Cashmore is Lecturer at Lakehead University (Canada).

Daniel Becker is Lecturer at Lakehead University (Canada).

Contact Address: Direct correspondence to Katherine Becker at Lakehead University, Orillia Campus, Heritage Place, Room 16, Ontario, Canada. E-mail: klbecker@lakeheadu.ca

Appendix

Interview Protocol

1. How long have you been a teacher?
2. Could you describe your teaching experience?
3. Describe your philosophy of education.
4. How old is your child/are your children?
5. Is he/she or Are they enrolled in public or private school? Describe your child's school.
6. Has your child/ren ever switched schools? If yes, what happened?
7. Could you talk about making the decision about where your child/ren would attend school?
8. Did school choice relate to your choice about where you live? If yes, how?
9. How would you describe your degree of involvement as a parent in your child's education (i.e. not so involved, somewhat involved, very involved)? In what ways do you stay involved?
10. Can you think of a time when you met or spoke with your child's teacher, beyond the usual parent/teacher conferences? If yes, could you tell me more about it? And who initiated contact?
11. Can you think of a time when you met or spoke with your child's principal? If yes, could you tell me more about it? And who initiated contact?
12. Can you recall ever getting involved at school because you felt that your child's learning or wellbeing was at stake?
13. Does being a teacher ever help you as a parent with a child experiencing school? How? Can you think of any specific times it has helped?
14. Can you think of any insights you could share with parents who are not teachers about how to navigate their children through public education?