Beyond the Adjectives: Theorizing Educational Administration and Leadership

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Symposium Paper #3:

Towards Theorizing “Partnership,” “School Community” and Other Zombie Categories that Wander the Parent Involvement Landscape

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Introduction

Why is it that a forty-year corpus of diverse scholarship that discloses the complexities of involving parents in schools has not dislodged the persistent question: “how can we increase parent involvement in schools?” And how is it that parent school councils continue to be the archetypical arrangement for including parents in educational decision making despite the lack of evidence that school councils achieve this mandate? And why do we demonize some parents, and valorize others when they are supposedly all partners in education? Is there a distinction to be made between parent interference and parent involvement? When we say “it takes a whole village to raise a child,” and parents are children’s first teachers (Canadian School Boards Association, 1995; Gestwicki, 2004; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998) are we clear on how village is constituted, where it is situated, what it is that we expect parents to teach their children, and the end toward which we all claim to be raising the child?

The nature of assumptions underpinning such pronouncements and prescriptions, and the predilection toward parent involvement as a taken-for-granted good is the premise for my inquiry. To the point, there is a proliferation of policy and research mandating collaboration between parents and teachers, and yet, critical scholarship is continually demonstrating how some parents are displaced and disenfranchised from educational processes. School leaders seem no better prepared for this reality, despite their recognition of diversity and pluralism in their schools. As far as I can tell from a decade of studying this area, the leaders’ lament goes something like this: “It is the same parents doing all the work. We never see the parents we need to see.” So what is going
on? Like Gunter (2016), I believe it is incumbent upon researchers to ask, not only what has persisted by why it has persisted.

I propose that the parent involvement discourse suffers from too many of what Beck and Beck-Gersheim (2002) called zombie categories—phrases, terms, and truths that walk around on our educational landscape but have no life in contemporary contexts. Expressions such as “parents are their children’s first teachers” and “all parents want the best for their children” fuel the parent involvement enterprise. For the most part, these go unexamined, and so, too, the programs and prescriptions for parent involvement, or, in its variation, partnership and engagement. These zombie categories have diminishing effectiveness because they have undergone little or cursory debate or renewal. Changing social realities demand rethinking these zombie categories.

**Situating Zombie Categories of Parent Involvement in the Leadership Domain**

Citing the initial proposal for this symposium, this panel has been called to articulate analytical spaces beyond “adjectival leaderships” (Eacott, 2011, p. 137), a term used to describe the leaching of “leadership lexicon” (Gunter, 2016, p. 5) into all professional roles. In such a conceptualization leadership is an assumed capacity, character and consequence of one’s professional title; teacher leadership and student leadership, for example, have become areas of study in the field of educational administration in their own right. Everyone is a leader. Parents, too, are brought into the leadership campaign. Out of curiosity, I entered “parent leadership” as a search term on Google Scholar for the time period 1980, when parent involvement arguably was solidifying as an area of study—to the year 2000, and I got 324 results. The period 2000-2016 turned up 1420 results, suggesting “parent leadership” has increased almost fivefold
as a topic of scholarly interest and/or program development and evaluation (Bolivar & Chrispeels, 2011).

That parents occupy an important place in children’s education may be intuitively uncontested, but legislation, professional standards, and research findings have amplified the resounding imperative for school leaders to assess how they and their teachers involve parents. Working with parents is a metric of success for teachers in every jurisdiction across Canada. The *Calls to Action* (2015) specific to education emerging from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission focus on enabling Aboriginal parents to “fully participate in the education of their children” and to have the “responsibility, control, and accountability, similar to what parents enjoy in public school systems” (p. 2). Internationally, the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (U.S. Department of Education, 2015), which replaced *No Child Left Behind* in the United States, reestablished the importance of parents’ roles and responsibilities. The United Kingdom’s White Paper, *Educational Excellence Everywhere* (2016) emphasizes its aim is to not simply inform parents, but to empower them, put them first, ensure they are “able to influence decisions” (p. 66), and have a “clear route of escalation [for complaints]” (p. 67).

Clearly, parents are part of the “discipline” for improving schools (Dimmock, 2012; Murphy & Torre, 2014; Senge, et al., 2012). Documents such as these noted here invoke concepts like “partnership” and “community” that have dominated the discourse, and are pedaled as promising partnership practices (Thomas, Greenfield, Sender & Epstein, 2015). In this paper I examine this promise, by interrogating categories in policy discourses and educational research around parent involvement, considering foundational assumptions and their effects, and some of the implications for educational administration
as a field of study. I am interested in how the presence and absence of theory may lead to or detract from conceptual specificity, what Hanna Arendt would call true understanding (Gunter, 2014) or Lorraine Code (1987) would call epistemic responsibility. Ulrich Beck’s legacy concepts such as risk society, zombie categories and subpolitics are useful for understanding why there is such an insistence around parents’ involvement in schools even though little seems to change with respect to the profile of which parents are, and are not ‘involved’, and what that involvement looks like.

**In Search of Zombies**

Zombie categories are lurking in terms like family, school community, and partnerships. They are fuelled by self-evident truths, such as the following:

- Parents are the children’s first teachers
- All parents want the best for their children
- It takes a village to raise a child
- No one knows a child better than her parent
- Teachers are experts of curriculum; parents are experts of children
- It’s all about relationships, or relationships, relationships, relationships
- It’s all about trust
- It’s all about students
- Education is a shared responsibility
- Parent involvement is the key to improved student achievement (Hara & Burke, 1998)

These zombie categories and articulations remain undead, even though it seems like they are saying so much, they are ontologically and subsequently epistemologically empty
shells. This idea is the subject of the analysis in the following sections.

**Conceptualizations of Parent Involvement**

Nomenclature in the parent involvement lexicon is perhaps a good place to start in an examination of zombie categorization. “Parent involvement” has been, and continues to be the term most commonly invoked in analyses of school-family relations, emerging largely from the American context, and most notably based on Joyce Epstein’s (2011) typology for parent involvement. “Partnership,” “engagement,” and “participation” have emerged as alternatives, and Epstein herself in the mid-90s argued that the term “school, family and community partnerships” more accurately captures how parents, teachers and community members are all spheres of influence that must work in tandem to deliver a unified message to students about the imperative of school (1995). Throughout the 1990s, then, the prevailing discourse has been one of partnership between parents and teachers (Christenson & Reschly, 2010). Increasing opportunities for home-school interactions is promoted as a key strategy to achieve this.

But a partnership orientation ultimately reflects an individualist approach to parent involvement and assumes parents are in service to teachers (Lareau & Shumar, 1996). In response to this, critical scholars argue that “engagement” addresses the power hierarchies to which involvement and partnership are apparently blind, and also cleaves inherent binaries of the “involvement” regime such as involved/uninvolved, which inevitably cast some parents as good, and others as bad. Such scholars argue engagement reflects the mutuality of care for and interest in children, and parents’ and teachers’ commitment to each other (Pushor, 2012). Whereas involvement, partnership, and participation render parent involvement a technological process, a means to an end
focused on student achievement outcomes, the moral overtones of engagement portray parent involvement in a way that feels inclusive, and simply right.

These semantic confrontations make a strong appeal to social justice sensibilities and have resulted in more attention to the spectrum of diversities that impact upon the nature and level of parent-teacher interactions. More scholarship pays attention to the perspectives and experiences of marginalized parents. What cashes out is reminiscent of Gunter’s “adjectival leadership”: parent engagement becomes “meaningful parent engagement” (Pushor, 2012, p. 472), and partnerships become “authentic partnerships” (Auerbach, 2012, p. 5). New terminology supposedly serves to elevate the parent involvement agenda and make it more inclusive. Does it?

In a keynote to the European Research Network About Parents in Education conference in Tromsø, Norway in August 2015 Crozier implied understanding the nature of the inequities and power discrepancies between parents with and without social and cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) is insufficient, for structural obstacles of racism and classism make collective parent action difficult. Rather than promoting the control or quelling of the advantage of the middle class as she has in earlier writing (e.g. Crozier, 2000), she proposed middle class privilege can be used to promote educational change as a compromise. This is a good example of the instability of the foundation upon which the parent involvement argument is made. One day the democratic imperative calls for equal partnerships; the next day the advantage of the middle and upper class is viewed as a potential tool to pull in from the periphery those parents who are disadvantaged because of race, ethnicity, class, gender orientation, family composition, refugee or immigrant status, political ideology, and so on.
Ladwig and Gore (1994) are insightful here for pointing out what is zombie-like about these critical conceptualizations. They posit that the common link among critical research is the assumption that by amplifying the voices of the marginalized, we avoid perpetuating the Grand Narrative of the Master’s Voice (p. 227). Further assumed is that the knowledge of those on the margins has “stronger objectivity” (p. 230) than the knowledge that emerges from the dominant perspective. Ladwig and Gore further point out: “there seems to be an assumption that as soon as research…is moved into the context of some specific nondominant social group, then issues of power and method have been addressed.

Family as a Zombie Category

Cook (2014) argues, there is no consensus on the definition of family. Whereas school administrative processes may have been updated to reflect changes in family composition (Heilman, 2008), gender presentation (Blount, 2006), and increasing ethnic diversity, a reliance on objective characteristics such as biology, marital status and living arrangements does not capture other ontological realities of family, such as the social role of family, or how personal meaning and values impact upon family definitions and dynamics (Gavriel-Fried & Shilo, 2016). This has implications for research in this area, as well, for “how researchers integrate or separate the ontological realms of objective, subjective and normative truth claims” (Cook, 2014, p. 4) impacts upon methodological choices, and ultimately interpretations and findings.

The biblical configuration of family—heterosexual couple with children—is indexed in educational policy and practice (Cook, 2014); this is the form of family around which all practices and policies adapt. When family is imagined as nuclear,
certain expectations around the meaning and parent and what should be their role in educational matters become limiting features that may not reflect contemporary families.

Community as a Zombie Category

Because parent-teacher collaboration is assumed to be a communal affair, the term “community” is a household term in this area of study. Perkins (2015) recently wrote, “within education, the word community is used and overused to the point that it holds little concrete meaning” (p. 319).

Murphy and Torre (2015) have invoked this construct to proposes a new configuration for parent-teacher relations called “communities of engagement for parents” (p. 49), arguing that “community privileges a set of foundational ideas (e.g. membership and personalization) different from those that typically anchor institutions” (p. 204). Yet in their explanation of the components of this model—care/respect, trust, shared vision, authentic membership, and collective work—very little is achieved in terms of conceptual specificity. This is endemic in educational research, where school community is viewed in functionalist terms, as a lever for school improvement (Torre & Murphy, 2014), ignoring the idea that schools are both place-based and social constructivist (Koziol et al., 2015).

Several types of school improvement have tried engaging school community as a strategy (LaChasseur, 2014), while ignoring the multiple ways in which community is interpreted, and the practical implications of these social constructions. Communities, as Blackshaw (2010) argues, are weak ontologies, lacking in foundation and theoretically ambiguous. School communities are not benign objects in the context of parent-teacher relations, but “tender geographies” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. ix) where histories of
school for both parents and teachers tacitly play. But with few exceptions (e.g., Furman, 2002; Shircliffe, Dorn, & Cobb-Roberts, 2006), community itself is unexamined in the educational literature on parents.

**Zombie Mantras**

As mentioned at the outset of this paper, both academic and professional literature is speckled with feel-good and taken-for-granted mantras that drive the parent involvement agenda, and yet are empirically contestable and theoretically vacant. Two such sayings are “no one knows their child better than a parent” and “all parents want the best for their children.” These zombie-like mantras are discussed in this section.

An argument that has been gaining traction in curriculum theory circles is that parents and teachers have expertise equally valuable for the educational enterprise; in an ethnographic study by Cremin et al. (2015), teachers learned to recognize “home knowledge” (Cremin & Collins, 2015, p. 3) as a legitimate curricular foundation for children’s literacy. Similarly, arguing from a Schwabian (1973) stance of curriculum, Pushor (2011) honours parent knowledge and argues for “curriculum of parents,” (p. 217) suggesting it is in the “intertwining…of the parents’ and families’ lives and the subject matter that curriculum is made” (Pushor, 2013, pp. 13-14). These scholars in particular, champion teacher outreach through home visits (Pushor & Murphy, 2004) or “Learner Visits” (Cremin & Collins, 2015, p. 4) where teachers shed their role as subject matter sage and become students of family processes, dynamics, and desires. There is no theoretical basis for such activities that would suggest this forwards the parent involvement agenda. More concerning is the assumption that professional and non-professional boundaries must not simply be transcended, but eradicated. Presumably,
when teachers leave their professional territory, they create the conditions for positive
parent-teacher relations. But we have little empirical evidence to suggest this is the case.
Further, what are the legal and ethical implications of parents entering into students’ and
families’ homes? If parents are a new curriculum, then what are the theoretical
foundations for pedagogy in this regard? And is the curriculum of parents homogeneous
or static? Are teachers to accept and adapt to home conditions, regardless of what they
are? At what point does a visit become surveillance? Finally, how might this be shaped
for the elementary and secondary school families, given the profound difference in
expectation for student independence and autonomy?

Underpinning the notion of a curriculum of parents is that parents have more
knowledge about and better understanding of their children than teachers. While there
may be some merit to this assumption at the elementary school level, my own
experiences researching high school parents would suggest this is highly debatable
(Stelmach, 2006; 2013). In fact, parent involvement at the secondary school level is less
a matter of parent-teacher relationships, and more about the negotiation between parents
and their adolescent children regarding when, where and how parents will participate in
their schooling. Further, is what parents know about their children necessarily more
valuable than teachers’ knowledge of child and adolescent development and psychology?
How does parent knowledge (Pushor, 2012) translate pedagogically? If diversity is the
rule for family dynamics, what is the theoretical framework for something like parent
knowledge that can be mobilized in teacher education programs?

“All parents want the best for their children.” This claim is found in research and
policy documents alike, and is a pseudo-truth that would seem to justify a range of
parenting practices, including questionable ones, from hyper-parenting to laissez faire approaches (Pedersen, 2014). Principals are expected to be open to all parents, regardless of their expectations or behaviours, or whether they undermine improvements for other children.

Further, this zombie mantra promotes the assumption that all parents have the skills to raise children toward positive outcomes, but empirically we know this not to be the case. In Canada, the 2011 National Household Survey recorded approximately 30,000 foster kids, and in 2007 the Canadian Child Welfare Research Portal counted over 65,000 Canadian children in care on a single day. In 2013 the number of children in out of home care in Canadian provinces was over 63,000 (Jones, Sinha, & Trocmé, 2015). In my province of Alberta in 2013-2014 there were over 11,000 children receiving child intervention services at home, or in temporary and permanent care. Of those three categories, the largest number of children were in the category of permanent care (Alberta Government, 2016). Thus, not only is this mantra theoretically vacuous, but it is empirically false.

**Implications for Leadership and Theory in Leadership**

There are lofty expectations for teachers and school leaders to accomplish the parent involvement agenda. Not only is parent involvement legally entrenched through school councils in all jurisdictions in Canada, but teacher supervision and evaluation of principals considers how well they communicate with and are sensitive to the needs and perspectives of families. Yet, as Gunter (2016) argues, “models of best practice” (p. 7) of leadership are increasingly developed in isolation from the intellectual traditions of leadership. There are several models for teacher-parent partnerships (e.g. Cook et al.,
Smrekar, Cohen-Vogel, & Lee et al., 2010) which are problematic because of conceptual ambiguity and conflation of terms. Partnership is equated with community in these models; community is equated with alliance. Community, partnerships, engagement and idealized and unquestioned, alluded to but insufficiently addressed and underdeveloped, leaving an empty shell of prescriptions. More than ever, Gunter argues, leadership requires intellectual work rather than policy prescriptions.

Along a similar vein, Eacott (2011) argues that leadership scholarship is narrowly constructed around what leaders do. It is deemed leaders’ micropolitical mission to “guide parents through a process of socialization,” “nourish authentic parental engagement,” and “foster interdependency between the home and the school and the co-management of student success” (Torre & Murphy, 2016, p. 214), all in the name of community? Professional literature translates this into strategies such as those listed by Hargreaves and Shirley (2009): “home visits, home meetings, breakfast clubs, drama and athletic events, homework assignments shared with a family member, after-school activities, and parent-friendly meetings to discuss children’s progress” (p. 78). Parent involvement, it seems, is about sugar and spice and making nice. This explains why Epstein’s (2011) six types of parent involvement or Hargreaves and Shirley’s “six pillars of purpose and partnership” (p. 73) smack of kitsch, to use Samier’s (2008) frame of reference. It is evident in the parent involvement arena that ontological distinctions have not been a strong enough focus in research, and lightly engaged at the level of practice, if at all. This does not have to be the case.

For example, a range of disciplines has explored the construct of community,
including sociology (Anderson, 1983; Bruhn, 2011; Delanty), rural sociology (Corbett, 2007, 2009, 2014; Howley & Howley, 2010; Theobald, 1997), human geography (De Blij & Murphy, 2003; Lee, 2014) community psychology (Jason, Stevens, & Ram, 2015; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; McMillan, 1996; Wise, 2015) and community studies (Blackshaw, 2010; Bradshaw, 2008). To take another example, consultation is a common practice justified by educators and educational policy makers to supposedly engage parents in a partnership, but the literature on citizen engagement and public administration gives us theoretical insight into the limitations of consultation (e.g. Arnstein, 1969). Surprisingly little of this theorizing has made its way into educational research. Leadership for parent involvement requires a stronger analytical frame, developed out of synthesis of theory on concepts such as family and community, and empirical data. Further, parent involvement, like leadership, is used as an intervention strategy and problem-solving tool, displacing it from its historical, political, cultural, social and economic context (Eacott, 2011). Why school councils or other forms of parent involvement came about and the purpose they serve today may be dramatically different, and therefore require rethinking of the structures and practices that have become entrenched.

Rather than “how can we increase parent involvement in schools?” “what makes parents feel in community in their children’s schools?” may yield deeper understanding and more sophisticated leadership. Zombie categories, such as the ones discussed in this paper, form a tight weave in the parent involvement topic, and the neoliberal expectations for results, continual improvement, and individual merit make it tempting for leaders to anchor themselves with this rope and ignore important questions, like are partnerships
“reform strategies, collaborative programmes or new types of institutions” (Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2016, p. 2)? Unlike the natural research domain where theory is the starting point, the educational arena is institutionally defined, and research questions are shaped by practical needs (Labaree, 2003). Strong claims about what is required to improve schools are often made in the absence of theoretical or conceptual clarity because educational research is a “marshy epistemological terrain” (p. 14), but rather than accept that as a deficit in the field of educational administration, researcher should take advantage of the opportunity to be multi-and trans-disciplinary. Theorizing the zombie categories on the parent involvement landscape may inspire educators to ask different questions, and be less tied to the best practice enterprise, to give up the search for essential attributes of leadership for parent involvement, and become more comfortable with the “loose threads” that characterize family-school relations and the leadership of schools.
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