TRANSITIONING TO HIGH SCHOOL: PARENT INVOLVEMENT AND SCHOOL CHOICE

by

Mary Doreen Bullen

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Graduate Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education
University of Toronto

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Abstract

The disquiet around parent-school relationships is the focus of this study. During transitioning to high school, the boundaries around this relationship changes. Few studies have addressed these changes, particularly from parents’ perspectives. It is parents’ voices which are central to this study.

This dissertation uses the standpoint of parents, which is often absent or silent in educational literature and research. Within a critical and constructivist paradigm, and influenced by Institutional Ethnography, two elementary schools (divergent in race, social class, ethnicity and immigrant status) and one high school are the sites for interviews with 14 parents and 13 educators. 11 parents were re-interviewed after their children entered high school. Four questions were addresses: How has parent involvement come to be understood? How is the parent-school relationship experienced by parents and educators? How and why are decisions made around the transition and school choice process? Do parents’ perceptions align/vary from those of educators?

Based on historically constructed notions and assumptions, parent involvement is usually understood as a visible and public demonstration of appropriate and caring parenting ignoring interactions outside of the public’s gaze. Illustrated through Parent Council membership, parent
involvement is gendered, classed, culturally related and race, ethnic and immigrant status specific.

Some parents had more social, cultural, economic and emotional capital to bring to the transition process, while others were marginalized and had to rely on/trust the education system. School and Board policies and procedures were examined and their varied affects on parents’ experiences and choices analysed. Educators assisted in disseminating assumptions around parent-school relationships and contributed to inequitable parent knowledge, partially as a result of too little training. By examining social, economic and cultural positioning of parents within local school communities, positive parent-school relationships can be nurtured, which political pundits and educationalists have failed to accomplish.

During transitioning, organization and social discontinuities contributed to parent and school disconnects and constructed borderlands in the parent-child-school relationship. This study evidenced the fragility of the parent-school relationship, especially during this vulnerable time for parents and thus, reflective questions are presented in hope of initiating a crucial conversation in local school communities.
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This doctoral dissertation has been a 30 year journey. Throughout those years, I have changed my focus, altered my paradigm positioning and experienced many valuable years of teaching and parenting, which have brought insight into the landscape of this study. From the onset of my initial doctoral work, Margrit Eichler, my supervisor, has been a constant. Her unquestioning support, critical approach and never shifting belief in my work and myself, have given this dissertation life. Thank you for being you, Margrit!

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This can be a solo process if your family and friends are not very much part of its day-to-day goings-on. I thank my friends who never showed annoyance when I promised to update them in 25 words or less and then rambled. Yes, I have finally finished, but only for now! And to my family who have made me proud of my accomplishments, especially my parents who, in spirit, should be smiling and taking a bow. To my children, Darcel and Alex, as you go about pursuing your own life endeavours, I hope that no matter where you are in life’s journey you challenge your intellect and spirit in order to be your own best.

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CHAPTER ONE:
INTRODUCTION

Background to My Work

When people ask me how I came to my research topic, I hesitate. I hesitate because there was not one single *how* but rather a multitude of personal experiences which brought me to study parent-school relationships. The first half of my 29 year high school teaching career was spent learning the ropes, fighting to stay in the profession for yet another year and defining my interests. I began my teaching career in an urban school where the parents were predominately working/middle-class and first generation immigrants from one ethnic background, which was dissimilar from my own. When I reflect on my relationship with the parents during those first years, I am almost embarrassed at how reverent they were to me as their children’s teacher. They gave me permission to do whatever I needed to make sure their children behaved. They often came bearing gifts and hugs and profuse accolades for teaching their children. From watching and talking with colleagues, this was their experience in this school community as well.

After teaching 5 years at this particular school, I moved on to what was called an ‘at risk’ school. The school was located within a diverse ethnic, racial and socioeconomic community. Even though I only taught in that particular school for one year, it caused me to reflect on my own white working-class family upbringing and awakened a sense of the inequity in educational opportunities for students. I went on to work with teen parents who needed to balance the acquisition of educational skills with parenting and life skills. This certainly must have been one of my first endeavours into attempting to mesh the needs of parents with those of the educational system. Over my first 16 years in teaching, I changed schools four times, and acquired personal and professional experiences in working with students from diverse socioeconomic, cultural, racial, ethnic, and family life situations. I began to understand the multifaceted meaning behind the hidden curriculum, which was often driven by the complex day-to-day experiences of my students, their parents and educators.

The last half of my teaching career was shaped around questions reflecting on my role as an educator and a mother. I began to understand parents’ angst around phone calls from the school, the trepidation and silent preparation for parent-teacher meetings, the critical nature of
balancing the politically correct with honest conversations with parents or teachers and the importance of ‘making it ‘real’, even if I ran the risk, as a parent, of creating an uncomfortable situation, or as a teacher, of opening up a potential Pandora’s box.

The later years of my teaching career were spent challenging educational bureaucracies when the needs of my students, and sometimes their parents, were being overlooked or minimized. I had learned from my own experience as a mother and an educator that I had a limited amount of energy and had to selectively and effectively choose those for whom I wished to exert my protest. On a number of occasions, as a privileged white, middle-class mother, I was intimidated by the bureaucratic approach to my children’s education. I wondered how the parents with whom I worked must have felt when they had little social, economic and political capital. Thus, I felt compelled to be an advocate for not only my students but also their parents. On many occasions, I found myself confronting the very educational institution which employed me in order to ensure the provision of the best educational opportunities for my students and, for the parents, act as an interpreter in the world of education jargon, policies and regulations. I asked: Why was it so difficult for parents and schools to collaborate on meeting the educational needs of children/students?

My last school was informally known as a private-public high school. This term reflected what the staff and, for that matter, the Board thought was a school where parents felt entitled to question teachers about their children’s learning and teachers struggled with parental empowerment. Having taught in communities where I had to work hard to establish communication between myself and parents, I was surprised by the aura of parent power and entitlement in my new school. My experiences in diverse communities had led me to believe that talking with parents was the key to understanding children’s educational needs, where parents often brought into focus concerns around educational issues and revealed their children’s history and their own frustrations with the education system. Although I realized that higher socio-economic status parents generally had more agency, I also learned that they were more politically savvy and astute in terms of how the education system worked and were often adept in manipulating local school educators into providing the best educational opportunities for their children. Yet, I also came to realize that all parents in every school want their children to achieve to the best of their abilities and be successful in their educational career. I queried: Why was it
that some parents felt empowered to ensure their children had access to what they defined as an appropriate education, where other parents felt or were actually silenced in this same endeavour?

**Purpose of My Research**

My doctoral research seemed to naturally evolve out of my experiences in the ‘real’ world of education from both a mother and teacher perspective. As an educator, problems arose for me around long held assumptions and the need to balance an increasingly bureaucratic educational system with a more local and individual set of concerns. To me, the parent-school relationship was the key to disrupting a growing litany of rules and regulations which appeared to harness the learning opportunities of many students and clouding the parent-school relationship.

As an educator, I understand large institutions must dictate a well defined process in order to be, on paper at least, functional. From a personal perspective, I also understand that teachers often ask: What do parents know about the everyday doings of teachers? Are parents aware of the extensive and diverse demands placed on teachers, such as curriculum development, student and self assessments, and student behaviour management? Do parents understand the fine art of balancing the needs of all those involved in the day to day work of teaching?

I came to this research with a “sense of problem, of something going on, some disquiet” (Smith, 1999, p. 9). My personal position, as a parent and a teacher, is both contradictory and empowering. As a mother, I was aware of the intricacies of navigating the school system and trying to remain supportive, yet assertive, in order to get (what I considered) was necessary for the educational success of my children. The jargon and educational texts were familiar to me, unlike the experiences of most parents. As a parent, I asked: Do teachers understand how parents can feel isolated, different, unique, and/or anxious when entering, particularly, a high school setting? Do teachers understand how intimidating and/or confusing educational jargon can be? Do teachers realize that parents often have a wealth of information about their children’s social, emotional and intellectual being, beyond that of a student, which may be important in the teaching and learning process?

One specific disquiet which I had experienced as a parent and as a high school teacher was a change in the boundaries of the parent-school relationship during the transition to high
school. I concluded that somehow this relationship gets redefined. How does this happen and for what purpose? From the 1980s, research and academic literature suggested that parent involvement in their child’s education is critical to children’s academic success during the elementary school years. But this literature, specifically referring to the transition to high school research, suggested that parent involvement changes during these transition years; for example, upon their child’s entry to high school, parents become less involved in their children’s learning (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Eccles & Harold, 1993; Falbo & Lein, 2001; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Rumberger, 1990; Stone, 2000; Stone & Roderick, 1998). Although noted as another element in the parent-school relationship, few studies have addressed how these changes have actually come about, particularly from the parents’ perspective. The high school environment has been suggested as different from the elementary school environment in its parent-school relationship including the following differences: it draws from a larger geographic student community, there is a socially constructed belief that students entering high school must be more socially, emotionally and academically autonomous in their decision-making (Cushman, 2006; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999, Toronto Work Group Report 1991) and there exists a notion of a natural barrier between the specialist high school teacher and the unknowing/uninformed parent (Crozier, 1999; Isakson & Jarvis, 1999; Lawrence Lightfoot, 1978, 2003). Academic research does not address ‘how’ these notions have come about or ‘how’ parents have come to understand their relationship with schools during the transition years. My research focuses on these gaps.

Two overall questions I asked at the outset of my research were: How do parents come to understand parent involvement during their children’s transition to high school? How do parents come to understand their relationship with the school during the high school transition process? Two additional questions became apparent once I began to interview parent participants: How do parents make decisions around the school choice process? How do parents’ perceptions of parent involvement and transitioning align/vary from those of educators?

**Conceptual Framework**

Upon returning to educational research, after a long absence, I was given an opportunity to reflect on my own understanding of sociological methodology, which had become more reflective, inclusive and qualitative in nature. For this study, I chose to take the standpoint of parents, believing that they have often been absent or silenced in educational literature; therefore,
it is the parents’ voices (spoken of not as one but as multi-voices) which I have highlighted in this dissertation. I chose a critical and constructivist method of inquiry in approaching my literature review, as well as in the analysis of my findings. I have questioned: why some parents’ voices are heard while others are silenced, how institutions of education have, throughout history, located parents on the lower end of the education hierarchy where they must respond to the needs of the education system, not to their and their children’s needs, and why ‘borderlands’ between parents and schools continue to exist, as suggested by Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (2003).

To better understand the parent-school relationship and to understand how parents in different school communities are positioned and position themselves in the transition and school choice process, I needed more than one elementary school site for analysis. I therefore studied the experiences of parents in two divergent urban school communities. One community was homogenous in race, social class, ethnicity and immigrant status and the other diverse in all these social aspects. I examined how school and Board policies and procedures affected the parental transitioning experience and school choice process. I used the parent participants’ voices, concerns and questions to interview educators at my two elementary school sites, as well as at one of the designated high schools for these two communities. I followed the parent participants in their and their children’s experiences at the high school level; thus, being able to hear whether their expectations of high school had been met, their emotional angst diminished and whether they felt they had been heard or, as research suggests, the high school forum provided/assumed little parent-school communication and interaction.

**Dissertation Research**

I investigated influences on parent-school relationships by focusing on parents’ everyday experiences in the transitioning of their children to high school and the school choice process as they strive to understand the policies, procedures and nuances of these educational processes. I reflected on how institutional information contributed to the knowledge of some parents while marginalizing others. As I reviewed the literature on transitioning and school choice, one of the most prominent concepts was the importance of parent involvement in their children’s education. This brought into question the concept of ‘parent involvement’ from my own understandings as a teacher and as a parent and became an area of focus during my interviews.
From the research literature, my parent participants’ and my own understanding, I became aware of how the concept of parent involvement was based on socially constructed notions and assumptions of being a performance based activity and an indicator of ‘good parenting’. Parent involvement is viewed as gendered, school work is mothers’ work (David & Stambech, 2005; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Lynch, 2008; O’Brien, 2007; Reay, 2005), socio-economic and culturally related (Ball, 2003, Brantling, 2003, Byrne, 2006, Lareau, 1999, Levine-Rasky, 2008, Lopez, 2001, Reay, 2001, Vincent & Martin, 2002), as well as racially and ethnically specific (Carreon, Drake & Barton, 2005; Corwyn & Bradley, 2008; Dei, 2008; Douglas B., et al., 2008; Gentle-Genitty, 2009; Kao & Rutherford, 2007). All of these notions influenced parents’ and educators’ understandings of whom, how and why some parents make certain school choices and others do not or, in fact, why others do not have a choice at all. During the transition and school choice process, bureaucratic education policies and procedures are influenced by each of these notions which have a long history in the annals of education, as is reflected in my Historical Trajectory Chapter 2. School Board policies and procedures do not always reflect the needs of a diverse and local parent community, but rather mirror social constructs and long established assumptions around parent-school relationships, especially in urban centres such as Toronto.

My study brings into focus my parent participants’ everyday experiences in the transition to high school while examining various organizational and social discontinuities which contributed to emotional angst and a disconnection between parents, students and schools. Both transitioning and school choice policies and procedures were experienced differently by parents in my two elementary school sites, even though most parents chose to register their children in the same Board-designated high school. I found that policies and procedures, meant to establish an overall sense of Board governance and control, were not presented to parents equitably, nor were they understood by all parents equally, nor implemented by all educators in the same fashion. With increased educational bureaucratic structures, mandated policies for parent involvement and an imposed common curriculum, it is generally accepted that students across the Province of Ontario are given equal opportunities for learning. My study contradicts this belief and presents parental experiences which, for some, are dissimilar and, in fact, so divergent that I have to ask, why and for whom are these Board and Ministry policies and procedures developed?
Significance of This Study

My research identifies a number of questions and problems associated with parent-school relationships which, in some cases, are not new in the educational forum, but have been ignored or lain dormant over the years. The first is situated in the ever-growing bureaucratization of education, where parent involvement has been mandated and parent-school relationships dictated. In an urban centre such as Toronto, education is not a straightforward business. Each local school community has unique needs, understanding and expectations of its educational system. Each local community provides different parent voices, parental experiences and parent-child-school relationships. Thus, these unique relationships are distinctive and must be listened to, heard and collaboratively approached in ways determined by each individual school community.

Secondly, the transitioning and school choice process is illustrative of school community distinctions and is an example of how policies and procedures advantage some parents (and their children) while disadvantaging others. In most urban centres in Canada, education must not be merely viewed from a bureaucratic business perspective but rather include perspectives of those for whom the education is intended (parents and their children), as well as non-parental taxpayers.

Thirdly, parents are not all equal. Not a new concept but sometimes a forgotten one. Not all parents have the social, economic, cultural or political capital to assist their children in the educational forum, particularly in critical decision-making times such as the transitioning years. This does not suggest that some parents are unable to understand their children’s options or unwilling to wade through the many procedures and processes. But this cannot be done over a short period of time without the help of educators who are well trained. This, I found, is not the case. There are too few educators able to help and they have too little training. While the marketing model of education has tightened the belts of educators, it has also further marginalized those parents and their children who require knowledge, experience and assistance in understanding educational decision-making which may ultimately affect their children’s future career options.

Lastly, educators and the educational bureaucracy must recognize parents as equal partners in their children’s educational decision-making, especially at the high school level.
Educational jargon must be explained, parents must be given the opportunity to express their lack of understanding, their personal fears around their children’s transitioning and their educational expectations for their children. Information sharing between parents and teachers/schools must be guided by parental needs and open to questions and clarification. This must be done in a safe, collaborative and hearing environment outside the hierarchical positioning presently existing in Ministry and Board-mandated forums.

**Concluding Remarks**

Much of the research completed on parent-school relationships has focused on analyzing results from parent questionnaires or surveys. This type of ‘data collection’ gives an overview of socially constructed parental responses, but misses the nuances of the why’s and how’s, and does not allow further questioning about the everyday experiences of parents in the educational forum. I have grounded my work in social class, gender, race and ethnicity theories which have, throughout the history of education in Ontario, varied in their explanation of the hierarchical positioning of parents (some higher on the hierarchy than others) in the parent-school relationship. I have given evidence that some parents have social, cultural and economic capital upon which to draw during the transition years and the school choice decision-making process while other parents are marginalized and must rely on/trust the education system itself to provide the best opportunities for their children. I argue that educational bureaucracies and educators themselves assist in disseminating assumptions around parent-school relationships, as well as contribute to the construction of inequitable parent knowledge of the schooling process.

As Lois Andre-Bechely (1999) noted, “Educational policies are not applied neutrally; they make different groups work in different ways” (p. 14). It is the inequity of how policies and procedures are developed and implemented and how they work differently for different groups of parents which I have learned from my parent participants in this research. Although many parents did not mention their own inequitable position, a few discussed nurturing what they perceived was their position of privilege.

In the conclusion of this dissertation, I have presented both a number of ‘learnings’ which I have acquired from my parent participants, as well as reflective questions surrounding the transitioning and school choice process. I have shared my findings with my research participants.
and hope to continue the discussion on ways of bringing to light the unique understandings of local parents with their school communities. It is hoped that through these discussions, school practices and procedures will be questioned by both educators and parents, and equitable educational opportunities will be established for all children/students for whom the educational system is meant to serve.

Definitions of Selective Terms

The following definitions of terms are given to clarify their use in this study:

*collegiate institute / high school / secondary school*: Although having historical financial differentiations, they do not have differential meanings in this study.

*elementary / middle school*: When used in this form, the understanding is that they are being discussed as the educational level prior to high school, in spite of differences between elementary and middle school students ages and grade variances

*immigrant parent*: Usually referring to parents who have immigrated to Canada in their adult lifetime and, in this study, are also a visible minority

*knowers / unknowers*: Those who are believed/understood to have knowledge and/or experiential understandings as opposed to those who do not.

*parent council / school council / school and community council*: These terms are used interchangeably throughout this dissertation, reflecting local usages and the literature.
CHAPTER 2:
HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY

Introduction

Parents and schools are often deemed to have a similar educational goal for their children/students: the provision of the best educational opportunities to meet the needs of each individual child. How has this common goal become meshed with the political, social, economic, cultural and personal perceptions of both parents and schools? The interconnectedness of these social factors have often obscured the parent-school relationship, particularly at the high school level, resulting in barriers to parent and school collaboration. In this chapter, I will present an overview of some of the ideologies which have been infused into the development of the “borderlands between parents and schools” (Lawrence Lightfoot, 2003, p. xi). The discourse around parent-school relationships has fluctuated according to societal, political, social and economic needs, often resulting in uncertain expectations by parents, students and educators. In the first part of this chapter, my intent is not to present a chronological/linear history of Ontario’s educational annals, but rather present a brief and loosely fitting sequential history of Ontario high schools to draw out a discussion around changing parent-school relationships.

Looking through a questioning lens, I hope to also reflect and bring into focus my own assumptions about this relationship. What I intend to listen for in the historical texts is an understanding of an interconnectedness of the parent-school relationship within the context of a socially constructed education system. It is also essential for me to acknowledge the absence of multi-voices in the history of education in Ontario, particularly prior to the 1960s. The written records in the 19th century do not reflect the population diversity in Upper Canada/Ontario\(^1\) at the time. Thus, I do not claim to give voice to those groups silenced by omission in historical records (working-class, ethnic and racial minorities, aboriginals and sometimes females), nor reflect their first hand concerns. Historical records and educational researchers often reflected a Eurocentric, white, upper/middle-class and male view of economic, social and political events in Ontario’s education history, which was also mirrored in the voices of parents and teachers. I will

\(^{1}\) Upper Canada (until 1840), Canada West (until 1867), Ontario (after 1867) (Curtis, 1988, p. 12)
reflect on this absence of voices throughout my historical trajectory and understand that secondary records are more often questioning and telling of the nature and attitudes of a more diverse Canada.

I also intend to present questions and assumptions around a fluctuating ideology of ‘parent involvement’ throughout Ontario’s educational history and present various explanations for this flux, my interest lying less in the historical events and more in the rationale given for changing parent-school relationships. But, as in any other relationship, complexities are many and its explanations personal and diverse.

At this time, I would like to discuss a few of the problematics of ‘doing’ historical sociological research. I may have more questions than answers, but ‘truths’ in historical research are often dependent upon the researchers’ connection with the ‘facts’ and perceptions of relationships. I realize the ‘truths and facts’ presented here are based upon my own readings of historical documents as well as those of others but, where possible, I will point out discrepancies in interpretations or possible multiple readings, in addition to my own personal relationship with the subject. This may add to the complexity of this historical trajectory, yet it is necessary for establishing possible links between events and relationships and my own positioning in the analysis.

My research is focused on the parent-school relationship during the transitioning years to high school. Thus, I will narrow my historical trajectory to the history of Ontario public schools, particularly in urban centers. My gaze will first focus on the time period from just prior to the inception of the Ontario Public High School Act of 1871 up until World War II. Secondly, I will discuss the post World War II period to the present. I have framed my focus on these two time periods according to economic, social, cultural and political changes in Canadian society and what was/is reflected in educational philosophy and thus parent-school relationships.
Ontario Public Education and Parent-School Relationships (mid-nineteenth century to World War II)

Local Educational Control

By the end of the 19th century, the political history of public education in Ontario could be described as bureaucratic, imperialistic and dualistic. It is important to lay the groundwork in explaining how, for the most part, a rural, locally controlled school system evolved into a complex, highly centralized government bureaucracy. Rather than giving a thorough account of this evolution, which is beyond the scope of this chapter, I will touch upon the factors which influenced the growth of this bureaucratic structure.

From the early to the mid-19th century, Canada was geographically rural in nature and schools were the responsibility of local officials (including trustees) and community members. Schools could be built if community parents determined there was a need and local authorities agreed. Although government grants were small, local communities and trustees could finance the building and furnishings of a school, hire a teacher and provide the required resources (Curtis, 1981; Gidney, 1972). Between 1816 and 1841, there was no general school taxation, no geographical school district and, depending upon the interests, needs and financial situation of the local community, resources varied. Sometimes schools were built directly next to each other providing education for competing groups, based on social, ethnic, racial or economic segregation (Lawr & Gidney, 1980a). Central educational policies were carried out or not, at the whim of local authorities and community members (not always parents). Thus, “the policies implemented and the values incorporated in them belonged to those who defined the problem and made the rules” (Lawry & Gidney, 1980b, p. 131).

By the 1840s, both urban and rural Ontario were feeling the effects of a number of changes. The Act of Union (1840), passed by the British parliament, proclaimed the merger of the two colonies: Upper Canada (primarily anglophone) and Lower Canada (francophone), to become the Province of Canada in 1841. This left a milieu of political discontent in the newly formed British colony. In the School Act of 1843, there was little doubt that British Imperialism was evident: “It was not only ‘British’ but efficient to secure to government the supervision of
education. To leave it in the hands of the local people, was to leave it to chance or incompetence” (Gidney, 1972, p. 39).

Bureaucratization: Reasons for and Effects on Parent-School Relationships

Historical analysts have debated reasons for the bureaucratization of the educational system in the mid to later part of the 19th century in Canada (Curtis, 1981; Gidney, 1972; Katz, 1976; Parr, 1979; Prentice, 2004). In order to understand the basis behind the present educational bureaucracy in Ontario, it is essential to present the arguments often given to explain why education moved from a locally controlled matter to government officialdom. I will discuss four of these arguments, keeping in mind that the purpose of this chapter is to examine the parent-school relationship.

Religious Mores

First, Christian religious mores were heavily embedded in Ontario’s white settler population during the first half of the 19th century and religious leaders felt a responsibility for correcting what they perceived as the ills of a growing urbanized and industrialized society (Katz, 1976; Parr, 1979; Prentice, 2004). During the 1840s and 1850s, there were a number of prominent figures in Ontario who were instrumental in bringing to the forefront concerns over ‘the ills’ of Canadian society, particularly in relation to youth and education. The commonalities in the voices of these school advocates was a ‘new educational’ focus based upon a belief in the dualism of human nature. This dualism, being the human ‘physical/emotional self’ in opposition to the ‘intellectual self” (Prentice, 2004, pp. 25-26), critically informed the notions of education, both public and religious, as well as the role expectations of parents (primarily middle-class mothers) in schools.

Egerton Ryerson, a Methodist preacher and Minister of Education of Ontario, and Dr. John Strachan, an Anglican minister and later Bishop, accepted this concept of human dualism which led to an understanding that children were born pure and needed to be guided away from all the evils in society in order to remain pure into adulthood. The emotional/physical self, meaning materialistic, sensual and immoral feelings, would surface if a person were not taught how to suppress these desires. This varied from the previous belief in the ‘original sin’ (children born of sin) and it was now up to the influential adults around children to maintain this purity.
Education became the forum to guide students in the ‘correct’ direction and provide the intellectual growth necessary to help children reason through the immoral and treacherous paths in life. Perhaps, youth were too valuable to leave to the discretion of parents, so teachers were entrusted to maintain childhood ‘purity’. As I will show, this theme of parental inefficiency and ignorance can be seen throughout Ontario’s educational history, even in the rhetoric of education today.

Also, a new social doctrine was introduced based on changing the ills of society which were suppose to have resulted from a growing urban and industrial society. A realignment of society’s beliefs in compassion and cooperation seemed more suited for the social and economic changes taking place during the later part of the 19th century. This new ‘social gospel’ was embraced by educational reformers in Ontario by directing social and educational reforms towards children of poor and immigrant parents who otherwise, did not fit into the desired Eurocentric, white and middle-class British colony. Parr (1979) noted, “Christian social policies emerged from divergent theological disciplines which had markedly different effects upon the working-class children, women and men” (p. 170). And, Katz (1976) reminds us that “the invention of institutionalization as a solution to social problems” very much “reshaped North American society” during the 19th century (p. 384). Religious institutions as well as expanding government institutions were encouraging a more caring and cooperative approach towards finding solutions to the perceived growing ills of society. The effects of this social gospel approach can still be noted in the present educational system.

**Decreasing Local Conflicts**

A second argument used to explain educational bureaucratic growth was based on community needs. Lawr and Gidney (1980a) argued that local communities, including parents and local officials, wanted a centralized educational decision-making body in order to alleviate the increasing local conflicts and disagreements over school financing, teacher qualifications and school locale. Between 1850 and 1871, local community schools were being financed through government grants, property assessments and a school section rate (levied on parents using the school or property tax on all ratepayers) (Lawr & Gidney, 1980a). The conflicts among parents, trustees, ratepayers with no children, government officials and the court system have been well documented. From the thousands of letters and school documents Lawr and Gidney (1980b)
perused from this time period, their conclusion was that a centralized, regulated body of decision makers did alleviate much of the local community strife, as well as conflict between trustees and parents. Although communities may have gained some level of harmony in their loss of autonomy over local schooling, I question whether parents and trustees were as satisfied, in the long run, once the effects of centralization and bureaucratic structuring were realized. This dissatisfaction can be evidenced later in parent responses to legislated compulsory school attendance.

**Responsible Government**

Thirdly, the political unrest in the mid-19th century led to a newly formed Canada resulting in a conservative agenda focusing on ‘responsible government’, and eventually led to a centralized and highly regulated educational system (Curtis, 1981; Griffith and Smith, 2004; Katz, 1976). Much of the criticism from educational officials (Assistant Superintendents) in this regulated system focused on “the social character and condition of teachers” (Curtis, 1981, p. 12). As Curtis (1981) further noted, these arguments were “moral in form but political in substance” (p. 12).

Katz (1976) pointed out a number of developments which were attributed to changes in North American society. Two of these were: the government’s growing responsibility for an increasing immigrant and transient population and the ills of society (poverty and immoral behaviours); and the increase of institutionalization to solve social problems (p. 384). These changes were reflected in the beliefs of Ryerson and other educational reformers that it was their duty to create, through educational change, an uplifted, homogeneous and respectable Nation Colony, or what Curtis (1981) called a ‘construction of a public’ (p. 33) and what Griffith and Smith (2004) stated was a ‘new middle-class’ (p. vi). Some historians generally accepted that the ‘state’ took on the responsibility of creating a new middle-class which was felt to be required in an increasingly industrial and specialized economy. As Dehli noted (1988), “The middle-classes, and the training and knowledge they acquired through expanding and differentiated state schools and universities, were central to the accomplishment of these transformations” (p. 378). And Dehli (1988) extended this by explaining the need for increasing “governance and public administration” which came to rely on “knowledge produced through positive science, professionally trained staff and increasingly specialized, hierarchical and bureaucratic forms of
management” (p.377). This was and is reflected in ever increasing educational policies, which often left (and still leaves) parents as bystanders in the state-run education of their own children.

**Redefining Family**

The last argument frequently presented for the bureaucratization of Ontario’s school system is the “separation of home and workplace” which led to the redefining of the role of family and government, particularly in relation to the education of children (Katz, 1976; Katz and Matterly, 1975). Katz (1976) pointed out that changes which occurred during industrialization and urbanization, dramatically affected the “day-to-day pattern of family existence…. The boundaries between family and community became more sharply drawn” (p. 387). Family lost its function as a production unit and was no longer seen as the protector of the deviant (misbehaving and intellectually challenged children). With legislation limiting young children’s participation in the labour force and then eventually compulsory education, children remained in the home for a longer period of time and parents (upper/middle-class) made a conscious decision to have fewer children and thus became more emotionally invested in their offspring. Katz (1976) discussed this ‘heightened role’ of family in the socialization of its children resulting in a tighter, more emotionally intensified family grouping (p. 387).

Katz (1976) also noted that youth had little to do but ‘hang out’ on the streets, which was perceived as delinquent idleness resulting in immoral behaviour. Legislated compulsory high school attendance created a place to ‘house youths’. But, in their study, Katz and Matterly (1975) observed that a more centralized and regulated education system did not necessarily increase regular attendance of youth from working-class families, although it did for middle-class families (upper class families often sent their children to private schools). The dramatic growth in registration of pupils was seen as evidence of the success of the High School Act of 1871 (Harcourt, 1902; Prentice, 2004; Ryerson, 1872), but the reality was that registration did not reflect those pupils who actually attended on a regular basis. The problem was not student nonattendance, but rather irregular attendance, especially for working-class children who often had to help forge a living with their families (Cook, 1976; Davey, 1975).

Concerns were also presented by Katz (1976) with respect to middle-class families who were threatened by the changing social order which came with an industrial society. Upper and
middle-class parents thought that increased education would better guarantee their children at least the maintenance of their current social and professional status (a theme which is reflected especially by middle-class and immigrant parents today and noted in my own study). Thus, the ‘new school’ system by the end of the 19th century came to reflect existing inequalities and did not foster social cohesion as had been hoped by some school supporters (Katz, 1976; Katz & Matterly, 1975).

The large number of historical studies in the late 1970s and 1980s on the bureaucratization of the Ontario educational system makes it apparent that no single reason can be given for this change. It is quite feasible that the unique combination of a religious and moral milieu, the mushrooming scientific theories of the time, the ever present problems associated with a complex industrial and urbanized society, as well as the growing political, social and economic concerns of a changing colony were realized by those who understood they were responsible for Canada’s future. In all of these changes, what did the parent-school relationship look like?

**Parent-School Relationship in the Changing Landscape**

There are few documents which reflect views other than those of upper/middle-class parents towards this new legislated educational system. Whether middle and working-class parents agreed with the new bureaucracy, they had little choice in whether it happened, but not necessarily whether to comply. Lawr and Gidney (1980b) have noted that, although the Education Office may have dictated a number of policies, often townspeople chose to adjust them to fit their own needs or even discovered that some policies made their lives easier. For example, uniform textbooks guaranteed that parents would not have to buy different texts each year, thus reducing the families’ financial burden. Prescribed curriculum was felt to give unity and coherence to courses of study for children both in urban and rural Ontario, perhaps in much the same way as the uniform curriculum in Ontario does today. Many policies were often altered (with the knowledge of the Education Office) in order to fit the needs of particular communities and reduce the degree of angst felt by trustees and parents towards the Assistant Superintendent of the region. Educational policy making did/does not necessarily guarantee parents’ and educators’ compliance.
According to Lawr and Gidney (1980b), parents and local community members provided the impetus behind early Ontario Public School construction, operation and hiring of teachers. While, by the turn of the century, primarily middle-class community members took on the role of financing public education (through taxes), parents had little say in what and how their children were taught (the state knew better). As they entered the 20th century, middle-class mothers were expected to act as role models and contribute to the education of immigrant mothers and children, as well as assist in uplifting the plight of working-class families (Dehli, 1990). As I will show, this relationship between schools and parents continues well into the 21st century, with schools as the knowers of appropriate moral and ethical values and the deliverers of educational curriculum and middle-class mothers acting as role models and saviors to the downtrodden. In middle-class neighbourhoods today, local Parent Councils (primarily composed of middle-class, white mothers) are often expected to fundraise for local or world charities and organize, run and participate in various school directed activities. This distinction between educators as knowers of all educational matters and parents as unknowers in these matters, yet expected to be involved in the social and financial betterment of their children’s schools, persists today.

**Imperialism, Dualism and Education**

As mentioned at the onset of this chapter, the political history in Ontario could be described, in addition to being bureaucratic, as imperialistic and dualistic. The High School Act (1871) brought with it changes in: compulsory tax-supported public education (for ages 7 to 12), grants legislated to Grammar Schools (High Schools and Collegiate Institutes) based on ‘payment for results’ (attendance, proficiency of study, school hours) and supervision of courses of study, teacher qualifications, examinations and continual inspections of teachers and schools (Ross, 1883). All of these now compose much of the basic bureaucratic structures of education in Ontario today. At this time, social, political and educational reformers perceived that order and regulation would bring stability and nationhood to an unstable Canada. Concerns arose from the upper and middle-class population related to the number of immigrants in Canada and the need to maintain a ‘British stock’ (Parr, 1979; Roberts, 1979). In urban centers, a white, upper and middle-class population became concerned over what they perceived as a ‘permanent class of poor’, an increasing crime rate and juvenile delinquency, an ever growing immigrant population and an overall sense of immorality.
Britain’s economic, social and political upheavals paralleled those in Canada resulting in a 50 year emigration period, starting in 1869, of some 80,000 British pauper children to act as apprentices in Canada’s struggling agricultural communities (Parr, 1979, p. 169). In addition, by 1930, Canada’s “motherland” had facilitated the emigration of 250,000 female domestic servants to fill a void for “servant girls” in Ontario’s growing middle-class families and, of course, this also helped solve Britain’s problem of an overabundance of females, particularly of the working-class (Parr, 1979; W. Roberts, 1979). Together with a sagging economy, a shortage of workers and an increasing immigrant population, middle-class families, in particular, became concerned about the stability of their social position in Canadian society.

In the mid-to later 19th century, school promoters generally accepted that individuals and families could improve their status in the world through education. Several dualities became apparent during this time of developing a ‘respectable’ nation. First, a distinction between the educated (respectful, mannerly, refined, honest, religious and property owning middle-class) and the uneducated (untrustworthy, immoral, socially inappropriate and ‘propertyless’ working-class) grew. Thus, educators saw society divided into “two great, mutually-hostile classes” and perpetuated this dualism (Prentice, 2004). This notion is not so different from educational arguments today centered on class, immigration status, race and ethnicity to which I give evidence in my own research findings.

A second dualism can be seen in gender role differentiation. By the last half of the 19th century, the human nature dualism of “physical/emotional self” in opposition to the “intellectual self” (Prentice, 2004, pp. 25-26), was critical in formulating the notions of family and education, as well as the role expectations of parents (primarily middle-class mothers). Women were seen as wives, mothers and guardians over the home and family, representing ‘purity’, selflessness and the caring aspects of human nature (private sphere). Men were the slayers of evil in the battlefield of the workplace (public sphere). This gender dualism was also reflected in schooling with a differentiated curriculum, segregated classes, where possible, and limited admission of females into higher education. School success for a male meant an opportunity for higher education and entry into a particular occupation which provided a means for his independence from his parents. For a female, schooling was an interlude in her family-oriented life and it ensured that she would marry well and enhance her husband’s social status (Prentice, 2004).
Thus, public schools became the expected institution to bridge the gap between middle-class and poor, cultured and non-cultured, promoting higher status with educational achievement, yet differentiated social and intellectual expectations between males and females.

This gender role differentiation (dualism) extended into a growing concern over what was viewed as the weakening of the family. Two anxieties arose: first, schools were increasingly undermining family authority because education of children and adolescents caused decreased time in the home; and second, educators began to see changes in the ‘ideal family’ and ‘ideal education’ as interrelated. The home was to provide a socially, emotionally and physically healthy environment within which to raise the future citizens of the nation and, as Dehli (1994) reminds us, “mothers were not raising children for themselves, but for the state” (p. 212). If families were to be strengthened, then educators must address the family, or more accurately, mothers.

**Entering the Twentieth Century: Motherhood and Public / Private Spheres**

In the changing urban centers, reformers felt that it was the social responsibility of individuals (mothers in particular) to learn how to “cooperate and sacrifice their own interests for the welfare of the community”, placing society’s interests before their own (Spring, 1970, p. 55). This new sense of social welfare directed its attention to the educational system asking: What is to be done about childhood poverty, infant deaths, a declining birthrate, poor hygiene, and questionable children’s practices? And more importantly, whose responsibility was it to save the nation’s most valuable asset – the children? The answer can be found in Wayne Roberts’ (1979) aptly titled article: “Rocking the Cradle for the World: The New Woman and Maternal Feminism”.

Before the First World War, pressures from middle-class reformers, Labour and women’s organizations, “coalesced to remove children from wage labour in factories and small shops and worked to create ‘proper’ families among the poor” (Dehli, 1984, p. 87). The traditional belief that mothers were responsible for children and the increasing demand on middle-class women to take upon themselves a ‘mission’ to save the working-class and immigrant children (Dehli, 1984), resulted in an expansion of white, middle-class mothers’ social responsibilities beyond the domestic realm, into the public sphere. Wayne Roberts (1979), amongst others, called this
middle-class educational reform movement “Maternal Feminism”. This term is interesting in its dichotomous nature. ‘Maternal’ (home-private) and its association with ‘feminism’ (interpreted as public) is illustrative of the extended, yet limited, role women philanthropists and middle-class volunteers were expected to play. They were seen as the ‘clean-up’ crew. If the social ills could not be alleviated by the force of the nation’s caretakers (women), then the state would have to step in. In Ontario’s history, this ‘maternal feminist movement’ is one of the most important links between parents and schools. From spirited marches of Temperance supporters to protests for instituting milk programs for underprivileged children, upper/middle-class women ventured into the public realm quite boldly and with conviction (Davin, 1997; Schlossman, 1976).

“Othering” of Motherhood

In the education forum, upper/middle-class women lobbied the Toronto Board of Education for classes to be held to train immigrant and ethnic women in the skills of hygiene, child rearing, proper cooking and household techniques, and proper English language skills, all with the intent of homogenizing foreign women into the Canadian ways – the British ways. Not only were women being evaluated as good or bad mothers, but also as having or not having appropriate mothering skills. This dichotomy of good/bad and appropriate/inappropriate mothering behaviour can be extended into today’s understanding of parent-school relationships. As will be seen in my study, middle-class mothers, especially white, upper/middle-class urban mothers, have a definite notion of acceptable demonstrative parent involvement in their children’s school.

By the 1920s and 1930s, middle-class mothers were no longer the conveyors of all that had been idealized as motherhood and housewifery. Children were the responsibility of the emotional mother, but parent education and child study programs were put into the hands of the experts – a more “rational, logical, scientific and male” approach to mothering (Dehli, 1988, pp. 371-372). Child developmental experts, psychiatrist, nutritionists, nurses, academics, educators and the like had trumped mothers in their own areas of expertise. All mothers were now considered ‘unknowing’ of the ways of mothering, an allocation previously designated to “foreign born” mothers. Mothers were being scrutinized, studied, analyzed and given a whole new set of guidelines by which to evaluate their own family and household milieus. Although within the first two decades of the 20th century, with men off to war, middle-class women’s
participation increased in the workforce, especially as teachers (Dehli, 1994; Guillet, 1960), paid work was not presented to females as a motivating factor in their lives. It meant for females low wages and low occupational status and marriage was seen as a salvation and movement into women’s ‘real’ occupational goal – housewifery and motherhood.

**Parent-School Relationships and Mothering**

And how did all of this affect parent-school relationships? Dehli (1988), in discussing the new attitude expected of parents by educators in 1922, noted the suggestion that teachers were the ‘experts’ in child development and educational matters. Parents were told, “to ensure that children came to school in a ‘happy frame of mind’, without prejudice against the teacher, and it was their responsibility to get acquainted with the schools and the teachers, and to ‘reserve judgment’ in cases of difficulty” (Dehli, 1988, p. 178).

Home and School committees, led by middle-class women (mostly mothers), grew out of the desire for “cooperation of Home and School and State matters” (Dehli, 1988, p. 143). Women who were leaders of Home and School groups (mostly white and middle-class) were often involved in other organizations or clubs. Principals and teachers were usually supportive of these clubs although, over time, conflicts arose among the Toronto Home and School Association, their various clubs and the Toronto Department of Education. Problems focused around the hierarchy and reporting chains of authority (Dehli, 1988). Clearly parents and various factions of the Toronto Department of Education were realigning and looking to find a new voice. Dehli (1988) records, reminiscent of the turn of the century, how Home and School committees were concerned about the “poor and foreign” children because they might pose a problem in schools. Were the Home and School committees concerned for their own middle-class children and their exposure to the deficiency in morality, character and culture of these poor and foreign children, or were they truly concerned for the wellbeing of the *other* children, and their parents? The language used in minutes from meetings and literature of the time tells the story: classes are to teach “Canadian values to Jewish and Italian women”, “make good Canadians out of new comers”, teach the “Canadian way of life” (Dehli, 1988, pp. 181-183).

Eventually and through “negotiations over boundaries”, the Toronto Home and School Association settled into a role which persists today, as fundraisers, trip organizers, planners of
meet-the-teacher events and a variety of daily school activities (Dehli, 1988, p. 262). Unlike their role at the turn of the 20th century as philanthropists and volunteers, and acting as critics, political negotiators and social reformers, middle-class mothers of the new era were to be cordial and supportive. “Laws, regulations and practices related to school attendance and discipline were important in understanding the power which schools came to exercise over mothers, particularly working-class mothers” (Dehli, 1988, p. 290). In support of this statement, I found in my research that Parent Councils (formerly Home and School Associations) have also become tremendously regulated over the last few decades by Ministry of Education guidelines which affect the spending of monies raised through parent fundraising efforts. One frustrated mother, with whom I spoke but who was not part of my study, refused to further be involved in her children’s school. Over the last few years, she had taken a leadership role in fundraising over $150,000 for her children’s elementary school. The Parent Council’s choices in how to spend this money was continually overruled by the principal for expenditures elsewhere rather than the Parent Council’s desired allocation. The hierarchy between parents and schools continues to be played out today in a much more political and bureaucratic forum.

After the depression of the 1930s, the parent-school relationship continued to be influenced by educational and child development experts who defined child ‘normalcy’ by standardized measures and professionally trained teachers who evaluated pupils based on this expert knowledge. Parents were also being judged on their children’s behaviours and performance. Education was a middle-class and white activity, and for those parents and children who did not fit into this mold, educational professionals were critical and unforgiving. With World War II on the horizon and over the next decade, parent-school relationships were to come into the political and social forefront in a way never seen before.

The Next Seventy Years of Parent-School Relationships: (1940s to 2010s)

Historically, there has been a shifting meaning of the word ‘parents’ in educational discourse. In the mid 19th century, the word ‘parent/s’ in educational texts, if found at all, usually referred to fathers in business terms (decision-making and finances) and mothers in emotional or social terms (caring for children and ensuring a happy household). By the later part of the nineteenth and early 20th century, ‘parent/s’ was used more often in texts, but primarily
referring to mothers. The use of ‘parent/s’ became common discourse in education (verbal and textual) by the mid 20th century, although still often referring only to mothers.

**Ideological Changes: Equal Opportunity and the Positioning of Parents**

After WWII, the discourse around education brought into view an ideological change. In North America, the rhetoric of equal opportunity was influenced by: a postwar sense of humanity, a growing consciousness of democratic rights, a need to keep up with the Soviets in scientific and technological advances, and an increasing birth rate – the baby boomers. There was assumed to be a limited pool of people with technologically innovative attributes and therefore a demand for new technical skills to be taught to students who had previously been ‘written off’ (mainly working-class). New technical facilities and programs, thought to be designed primarily for working-class students and separate from existing collegiate institutes and high schools, resulted in middle-class parents feeling their children’s future status was being threatened by this new ideal of equal opportunity. As had always been the case, upper-class parents opted to send their children to private or elite public schools and working-class parents were prompted to send their children to technical/vocational schools, which left for middle-class children the high schools and collegiate institutes.\(^2\) Questions began to arise concerning the aims and directions of public education in Ontario.

Discourse from the child development experts in the 1950s focused on “mother deprivation” (primarily working-class mothers). The educational discourse around *mother-teacher* was varied. Female teachers were often warned about “over mothering” children (Freud, 1952) and yet, on the other hand, were encouraged to “mother” those children who were deprived of what was described by the experts as “appropriate mothering” (Steedman, 1985; Ulich, 1950). A new democratic way of thinking required a “new understanding, new relationships, new habits and a new way of doing things” (Campbell & Ramseyer, 1955, p. 1). This new way of doing things included teachers (particularly women teachers) acting as counsellors, family (middle-class) role models, social workers, psychologists and, as of the late

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\(^2\) Although since the late 1950s until today, there is no differential funding between high schools and collegiate institutes, at the turn of the twentieth century, funding was based on an understanding that high schools prepared students for the trades while collegiate institutes, thought to provide a more vigorous education, prepared students for university.
1950s, public relations officers; and of course, all of this would be delivered by teachers with a sense of self-fulfillment.

During the decade of the 1950s, parent involvement in schools was often couched in terms of the Home and School Associations or the Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) and consisted of mostly middle-class, white mothers. Early educational history of tensions between local communities and trustees/educational representatives has appeared in educators accounts of parent-teacher relationships, at least as noted by educators. Sykes (1953) contends that the PTA was to act as a buffer between parents and teachers, buffering a conflict which had frequently been drawn upon throughout educational history to describe the parent-school relationship (Dehli 1994, p. 84). In the 1950s, literature written for teachers, particularly at the high school level, stated that parents were almost invisible in many schools. It was the teachers’ responsibility to build bridges and dispel myths of a hierarchy based on the teachers knowledge and status; yet, much of the texts written for teachers talked about teachers as knowers and parents as recipients of teacher’s knowledge/expertise. For those parents of lesser education, it was claimed that they “cannot understand either the written communication from the school or the books and pamphlets that are written for parents. They learn more by observation and personal contact with teachers – teachers may use a student as interpreter” (Sykes, 1953, p. 33). In texts designed for teachers to enhance communication between school and home, this distinction between teacher as knower and parent as unknower was evident, as well as differentiated values and norms according to social class (based on socio-economic and ethnic/racial status). Much like questions asked by Dehli (1994) in the 1990s, I wonder if parent involvement initiatives have become another way of assigning blame to parents for children’s school failure, as has been historically the case. Although during the 1950s, changes in parent-teacher relationships were not yet evident, by the end of the next decade, the ideology of democracy/equality of opportunity in education and attention to the individual needs of every child became part of most middle-class families and public education discourse.

**Equality of Opportunity: Educational Discourse and Suggestions of Parent Rights**

The ‘soggy sixties’, as noted by Simon (1999), brought with it economic prosperity and profound changes which affected all levels of education. The ‘baby boomers’ moved on to secondary and post secondary schooling in larger numbers than had been seen in the past,
increasing the demand for high school teachers. Although he was discussing Britain’s educational situation, Simon’s comments are also relevant to Ontario’s education milieu at the time. According to Simon (1999), there appeared, at least rhetorically, a new attitude of delivering programs to all students and a growing interest in parent involvement and parent rights in the education of their children. The importance of developing good relationships between parents and teachers was now being recognized as an important element in successfully educating children. Teachers were expected to empathize with parents, “think of parents as people”, and think of parental resistance as reflecting parents’ insecurities about their own educational experiences and lack of awareness of changes in teaching styles and ideology (Stout & Langdon, 1958, pp. 13-17).

The decade of the 1960s was unique in several respects for education in Ontario. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s in the United States questioned differentiated education by racial divides and Britain’s struggle to find a new educational path to replace the 1940s tripartite system and eleven plus examinations which differentiated students by tested ability levels, fueled discontent and questioning of Ontario’s own educational philosophy and direction. This discontent about the ‘oppressive’ nature of the educational system, both on a societal and individual level, is reflected in the discourse and dialogue of popular North American academic writers/researchers of the time: Coleman (1969), Freire (1970), Jencks (1972) and John Porter (1965) and was also evident in the first of Toronto’s Every Student Survey of 1971 (Wright, 1971). The inequalities perpetuated by the educational system and divergent educational opportunities defined by class, gender, race and ethnicity dominated educational dialogue during the 1960s and 1970s. Schools, teachers and educational experts were once again considered to be the knowers and saviours and parents and children the recipients of their knowing, particularly poor, working-class and immigrant families. Thus, the hierarchical relationship between parent and school persisted.

There was another discourse prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly in middle-class North America. On the wave of the civil rights movement was a change in the attitude of parents towards their ‘rights’ as taxpayers, or in John Stuart Mills terms a “public notion of ownership of schools” (Sumption, 1966). The 1960s saw a revisiting of parent-school relationships through what can be described as parents becoming ‘strategists’ and managers of
the family’s status/place in the community (Musgrove, 1966). Educational literature began to reflect a business/marketing model, which became more prominent in the following decades. The contradictions of this time period are apparent in Musgrove’s discussion of the “inequalities of parents, which makes equal opportunity difficult” and thus, “it is the business of education in our social democracy to eliminate the influence of parents on the life-chances of the young” (1966, p. 135). Upper/Middle-class parents were believed to have a powerful and positive influence on their children’s education in contrast to parents who were poor, immigrant or of racial minorities whose influence was to be minimized or corrected. This notion of a right and wrong parental influence on a child’s educational chances, based on class, ethnicity and race, is historically and presently entrenched in the education system amongst educators, educationalists, as well as parents. My own research gives evidence to this.

The 1960s was a decade of change. What became known as the Hall Dennis Report, *Living and Learning* (1968), was a revolutionary document in Ontario’s educational history. The traditional core values and philosophy of education and how it should be delivered were being questioned and uprooted. Response to this Report was often extreme. Daly (1976) suggested the Report was a “bucket of molasses, sticky, sentimental and couched in prose and filled with illustrations which help ‘divert the attention from mediocre writing’ to get a ‘sentimental reaction from the reader’” (pp. 1-3). He further stated that the Report, “speaks to the heart of parents’ (not about real children), was a deliberately constructed piece of propaganda and talks to older persons who must learn to respond to the young – pseudo-psychedelic, want-to-be with it” (p. 4). Those who felt the aim of education must diverge from the traditional path and reflect a new democratic citizenship called the Report forward looking and “an analysis of where Ontario is going in its social and human development” (Noble, 1968, p. 1). Noble also suggested that it required, from the public and perhaps the educational organization itself, a new trust in teachers, in their “competence and authority” and in their decision-making and creativity in curriculum development (1968, pp. 2-3). As mentioned previously, the discourse of the post war period (democracy, individualism and equality of opportunity) was now becoming part of the day-to-day lives of children’s schooling and, ultimately influenced the nature of parent-school relationships in the 1970s.
The prolific building of educational facilities in the 1950s and 1960s trailed off in the 1970s as an economic and fiscal crisis loomed. Stamp (1975) stated that along with new parental agency was a discourse directed at school administrators which focused on “managing parents so they don’t disrupt the schools” (p. 1). Implicit in this notion is that schools belonged to the Boards of Education, the administrators and the teachers. Education is the business of the professionals, a persistent historical message dating back to the mid 19th century.

Decentralization, Equity and Accountability

In the 1970s, parents were being chided in public texts by educational associations and by educational experts, to put aside their belief that teachers know best and become informed about the public institution which they finance, as is their democratic right, obligation and responsibility. Educational reform became part of public discourse as something not only needed, but necessary. With the discontent in the quality of education and, partially influenced by theories of de-schooling, such as presented by Reimer (as cited in Illich, 1971), decentralization of educational decision-making appeared to be the answer to ensure equality of opportunity for the diverse needs of students. But, as Simon (1999) in Britain and Stamp (1975) in Canada suggested, perhaps decentralization was more the result of a bureaucratic move to download the decision-making responsibilities for a growing cost deficit to local communities, thus appearing to be concerned for community/parent rights for inclusion, yet making local communities responsible for the ever present fiscal deficit.

As discussed by Halsey (1997, p. 8), the new economic competition meant a tighter correlation was needed between education and work implying that, “almost total subordination of the education system to economic utility is becoming a necessary condition for economic prosperity in the 21st century.” Halsey (1997) pointed out that the New Right, emerging in the early 1980s, reasoned that it was the state’s involvement in individual lives which reduced competitiveness and an enterprising zeal (p. 20) and that “equality of opportunity has been redefined by the New Right as ‘equity’” which means the “right of each individual to a sound compulsory education with ever-rising standards, so that individuals can compete in the global labour market” (p. 22). This has been, as stated by Halsey (1997) a retreat from the 1960s and 1970s understanding of equality of results which “applied to identifiable social groups rather than individuals” and involved active intervention by the government to “create equality of
outcomes” for different groups (p. 22). This change of focus on individuals and their rights and responsibilities was reflected in an understanding that parents would make the most appropriate educational choices for the children. This New Right belief in less government intervention in individuals’ lives is reflected in my research in discussions around school choice. The creation of an educational competitive market in the 1970s and 80s has advantaged some parents and their children and disadvantaged others. Today, after 30-40 years, talks continue amongst educators and in the media, around educational disparities based on racial, ethnic and social class positioning of students. The notion of individual equality prevails, yet inequities persists.

Educational critics such as Davies (1987) and Ball (1993, 2003) have long suggested that the relationship between parents and schools is shaped by broader socio-economic and political ideologies. One of these ideologies is the marketing of education, as mentioned by Halsey’s (1997) discussion of the New Right. Ball and Davies believed that social class inequities are, in fact, the desired outcome of implementing market reforms in education. Ball (1993) states, “One of its major effects is the reproduction of relative social (and ethnic/racial) advantages and disadvantages” (p. 4). Ball also identifies the counter-effect of decentralization when discussing the effects of a National Curriculum or, might I add, Ontario’s Provincial Curriculum. These effects included the accountability through teacher and student assessment and public displays of school rankings. The New Right, as stated by Halsey (1997), thought that student and teacher assessments and public exposure of individual school results would consequently lead to schools needing to justify their results and, if needed, implement effective improvement strategies or run the risk of closure due to limited student enrollment. In my own study, I found evidence of this marketing strategy which, along with Board and school policies and procedures, advantaged some parents and children and disadvantaged others.

The realities of declining enrollment, increasing unemployment, economic globalization and continued fiscal restraint marked the decades of the 1980s and 1990s. A business ideology of accountability and quality assurance became part of the educational discourse. By decentralizing the responsibility for school/student success, the view in the 1980s and 1990s was that schools would become more competitive, as will be seen in the high school site in my study. Parallel to this increasing notion of decentralization and local school marketing was an increase in demand for accountability. In Ontario, this shift was directed by the Ministry of Education and the
Boards of Education. Parents took on an apparently greater role as decision-makers (advisors) in local schools (through Parent Councils), making them responsible for giving advice on school management (or at least rubber stamping local school management), but they also acted as critics, on behalf of their own children, in those very same schools. This resulted in parents evaluating the very teachers/administrators with whom they were expected to collaborate (Golby, 1989; Reynolds, 1989). Although parents in Ontario today do not directly evaluate teachers or administrators, in 1975 the Toronto Board of Education implemented a policy allowing parents to become members on the hiring committee, “having a say in” the hiring of principals (Gaskell and Kearns, 2005). After amalgamation, this TDSB policy was eliminated. Although recent attempts have been made to reintroduce this practice, the Principals Association won its fight to not have parents included in the hiring process, although some level of input, after the fact, has been approved (Brown, 2010).

Some parent advocacy notions, premised on expert advice, arose partly out of this decentralization of educational decision-making. The proliferation of strategies and tactics from the experts were meant to attract parents into the education arena and set the stage for parent-school collaboration and a greater parental role in their children’s education decision-making. Popular names of experts during the 1980s and 1990s, and some even today, are Joyce Epstein (1986, 1995, 2001), Bronfenbrenner (1986), Becher (1984), Ziegler (1987), and Fullan (1982). The general belief was that increased parent involvement in schools meant better educated and well behaved children. The advice given was based on research findings. These findings resulted in an endless array of strategies and tactics for teachers and administrators on how to: dissuade overly involved parents; involve working-class parents, overly busy parents (fathers in particular) and the newly immigrated who lacked English fluency. The point being that public and educational discourse presented schools and parents as needing to collaborate in the best interests of the students/children’s educational success.

Throughout history, and into the present, much of the dialogue concerning improving quality of education by way of parent involvement has an underlying theme of improving the educational opportunities of children in working-class and poor families. As stated by Davies (1987), there is plenty of evidence to suggest that
poor and minority parents care about their children and have a great deal to contribute to their education …But, society must have the political will….to intervene so that parent involvement plans don’t serve to reproduce rather than reduce existing inequities (p. 156).

Over two decades ago, Davies questioned the political will to involve parents in decision-making plans which would actually result in a reduction of social and educational inequalities. I, too, question this political will and confront this issue in my own study, particularly in relation to Board policies and procedures and the Ministry of Education parent involvement agenda.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, middle-class mothers, especially, were needed to take on the responsibility of organizing their children’s schooling through the creation of educational fora, such as home and school organizations or parent councils, in order to ensure the flourishing of a state governed socially constructed public. Historically, parents are often reduced to a listening or rubber stamping group when governments take control over what, where, and how curriculum is taught, and implement stringent mechanisms of accountability on schools and their educators (Halsey, 1997, p. 25). Also, there is less parental involvement, particularly at the high school level, and more alienation due to increased educational jargon, complex program descriptions and delivery, and less involvement in policy and decision-making at the local level. In order for parents to take advantage of school marketing strategies, they would have to be informed about school or Board policy and procedures, participate in multiple school site orientations and feel comfortable interacting with other knowledgeable parents and school administrators. This became obvious in my study in terms of school choice during the transition years to high school. Working-class, visible minority and immigrant parents are the least likely to participate in such a process, therefore making them less likely to be knowledgeable and informed about the full range of educational options for their children.

**Parent Informing, Empowerment and Involvement**

James Griffith concluded in 1996 that there have been “few empirical studies examining parent-school interrelationships” (p. 1550). This lack of research was disconcerting, he argued, considering the “implicit causal linkage in discussions that calls for organizational change in schools to increase parental satisfaction with education” (p. 1550). In reviewing much of the research, which had been completed in the early 1990s, Griffith (1996) concluded that “the
relation of parental involvement to satisfaction was moderated by how well parents were informed, empowered, and involved by the school, and their perceptions of a positive school climate” (p. 1549). This was also supported by the report *Public Attitudes Towards Education in Ontario 1984* completed by Livingstone, Hart and Davie (1985). More recently, in 2009, this longest public opinion survey on education in Canada, authored by Hart & Livingstone, found “Public views of Ontario schools have markedly improved since the years of discord in the late 1990s and early years of the 21st century” (p. 2). Over 60% of parents surveyed were satisfied with the school system, but results indicated a low parent confidence level in their local schools, and “even more so for educational policy” (p. 2). What is evident from this latest survey is that, although more parents appear to be satisfied with the overall Ontario school system, many continue to be skeptical about their local school operation and even more so about government educational policies. It is not surprising to me that parents are cynical about government intent to effect change, but it is surprising that parents also lack confidence in the operation of their local schools, even after schools have been mandated by the Ministry of Education, through increased bureaucratic structures, to increase parental involvement at the local level. Why is it that, well after 50 years of discourse around creating positive and collaborative parent-school relationships, we are still struggling with the task?

Fine (1993) suggested there is a need to confront an historical and contemporary face of public schooling which suggests “explicit exclusion of parents”. She also questioned the “parent empowerment flood” of the 1990s. Fine asked: “Why are parents being asked into the deficit-ridden public sphere of public education now, as if this were a power-neutral partnership?” (1993, p. 682). Fine goes on to recognize that changing the power relationships, especially in traditional institutions, is “the most complex task human beings can undertake” (p. 706). Of course Fine’s critical view of the relationship between parents and schools in the 1990s was challenged by authors such as Epstein (1993) who, in rebuttal to Fine’s position, stated her arguments were “old”. But other educational researchers, such as Rosenthal and Sawyers (1996), Pryor (1995), David (1998), and Lawrence Lightfoot (2003), all confirm the need for teachers and administrators to pursue the parent-school relationship, yet the strategies, methods and current practices seem to dissuade a greater number of parents from public involvement in their children’s school. Why? Speaking specifically about Ontario, parent public involvement in
schools has been a constant struggle. If educationalist’s strategies thus far had been effective, this discourse would not keep getting recycled and reinvented.

**The Bureaucratization of Parent Involvement in Ontario**

It seems that over the last 50 years, the call for parent involvement has vacillated. In the 1970s and early 1980s, public discourse called upon parents to become informed about education and their children’s learning, which they financed. It was their democratic right, obligation and responsibility. Educational reform was needed and necessary. In Toronto, the 1970s approach to parent involvement took its lead from the 1960s and 1970s concept of equality of opportunity and inclusion for all students. Wright (1971), in conjunction with the Toronto School Board, produced the *Every Student Survey* focusing on socio-cultural factors which caused kids to fail (non-white, immigrant and outside middle-class norms), as well as how educators envision parent involvement in children’s learning. The *Provincial Seminar on Multiculturalism* (1975), authored by the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Toronto Board of Education Work Study Group on Multicultural Programs, outlined concerns related to “minority education” and focused on equality of results for all identifiable social groups. This continued into the early 1980s when parents, as opposed to government, were to take on the responsibility for their children’s educational experiences, choices and results.

In 1991, the Board of Education for the City of Toronto established a Work Group whose mandate was to develop “goals, a plan and a monitoring mechanism for improving parental involvement in the schools and at the system level, and facilitating partnerships of parents and staff to support students” (p. i), which I might add appears to be similar to the more current Provincial Parent Involvement Advisory Committee (PPIAC) established in 2005. In the Work Group Report (1991) entitled, *Final Report of the Work Group on Parental Involvement*, there was praise for Toronto’s diverse range of secondary education programs, including those for adults and weekend learners. They noted that parental involvement declined when students entered secondary schools because there was: a larger geographical area from which students are drawn, an increased need for independence on the part of students (although the Work Group found students’ unanimously wanted parental support), a greater size of secondary schools (less accessible and more complex for parents to maneuver), misperceptions on the part of parents and teachers about each other, and the use of mass communication making contact less personal.
The Work Group (1991) called for the establishment of school-community councils for every secondary school, student mentoring programs, parent outreach programs to establish leadership in contacting parents, especially in terms of career information and resources, and urged the Director of Education to investigate the needs of schools and help them design effective outreach programs for their communities. Once again, there is no novelty in any of these strategies and the emphasis is not on parent-school collaboration. Rather, we see educators (knowers) being asked to direct and lead parents into becoming a knowledgeable public.

Partially in response to the Work Groups recommendations, in 1994 the Ontario government created the Ontario Parent Council which, in a final report recommended that parent participation, at the local school level, be encouraged through amending the Education Act. According to the Ontario Ministry of Education (2010) website on the history of school councils, this was to "ensure equity of access and consistency of approach for parents across Ontario.” The Ministry website also noted that in April 1995 the Ministry of Education and Training issued a Policy Memorandum which “required boards to develop policies that would establish school councils by June 1996.” Thus, schools began creating school councils in 1995. By 1997, the Education Quality Improvement Act mandated that there be school councils in every publicly funded school in Ontario. Since this Act was enforced, school level Parent Councils have required government clarification of the Parent Councils’ roles and responsibilities, educating members to this effect and developing guidelines defining the Councils’ financial doings and position in the educational bureaucracy. In 2005, the Liberal government introduced the Provincial Parent Involvement Advisory Committee (PPIAC), whose mandate was to help parents get involved in the education system and each publicly funded school Board in Ontario was to establish, by 2007, a Board Parent Involvement Advisory Committees (PIAC). According to TDSB accounts, the Board level PIACs were to provide the Provincial level PIAC, which operated under the Minister of Education, advice on how to increase parent involvement and to monitor parent involvement in local schools (TDSB, 2009). Over the last decade, parent involvement in Ontario has become a complex business and significantly more bureaucratized.

Five years after the Provincial PIAC and Board level PIACs were established, the Toronto District School Board is still attempting to make contact with a broad base of parents. As explained to me by one parent who was familiar with the Board level Parent Involvement
Advisory Committee, the change of Parent Council Chairs and the movement of students in and out of the education system and to different levels, makes such a mandate very difficult. Also, I note that any data collected by each school which may be used by the Ministry or Board would only reflect the traditional performance-based public activities of parents, not those which are performed in the home, in the community or outside the view of educators. From a managerial perspective, parents can be counted, identified and assumptions can be drawn about their involvement in their children’s education based on the collection of these data. But, what do parents, teachers, administrators or even researchers mean when they talk about parent involvement? Until this term is clarified and its multi-layers uncovered, developing policies and bureaucratic structures intended to get more parents involved in the education of their children will have little influence. Addressing this understanding of parent involvement is an integral part of my research.

Summary

Looking from an historical perspective, especially over the last 50 years, concepts surrounding parent-school relationships have fluctuated. From a rural Canada in the 19th century, where local families were responsible for building schools, hiring teachers and setting curriculum, Ontario parent-school relationships have become mandated, overseen and directed by the bureaucracies of the provincial government. Throughout my brief look at the history of the parent-school relationship in Ontario, I have touched upon: the early dualistic nature of education, the positioning of parents by gender, race, ethnicity and on the basis of assumptions, the fluctuating character of the politicization of parent rights and parent-school collaboration, and the effects of various economic strategies on this relationship. Researchers and educators continue to expound on how to get parents involved in the education of their children, but lack a common notion and clear understanding of what parent involvement means to those whose place is positioned within the concept itself - parents. The word parent is often used as an inclusive term that obscures divisions based on gender, class, race and ethnicity. In a demographic sense, the term parent also hides differences in positioning according to the social, political and economic conditions. The term parent, in educational discourse, mirrors the heterosexual, white, middle-class and Eurocentric family and thus, many actual parents, especially in urban centers, are found outside this normative discourse and feel excluded in educational dialogues.
My next chapter will hone in on the current literature related specifically to these concepts and focus on parent involvement, especially taking up the case of parent involvement during their children’s transition to high school and in the school choice process.
CHAPTER 3:
CURRENT LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS SPECIFIC TO MY STUDY

Although I had read much of the historical literature on parent-school relationships, I took guidance from my parent participants in directing my current literature review. Thus, the concepts in this chapter were those which emerged as salient during my parent interviews. They focus on three main aspects of the parent-school relationship: first, parent involvement and its multiplicity of understandings; second, transitioning to high school dis/continuities and third, school choice decision-making. Reflecting my research paradigm and method(ology), the presentation here will be guided by seven questions/concerns which arose during my interviews with parents that need to be brought into context with current literature findings. These questions are: What is meant by parent involvement? Why do parents get involved in their children’s school? Has the parent-school relationship changed in recent history? How do gender, race, ethnicity and social class affect parent involvement? What is emotional capital and what is its place in parent involvement? What is unique to the transitioning to high school process? and lastly, How do parents come to make a school choice?

What Is Meant by Parent Involvement: Understandings and Concerns

Historically, the term ‘parent involvement’ has been synonymous with parental performance, legitimized acts, and therefore subjected to “social regularities” (Foucault, 1972) that “engenders the rules and roles of involvement behaviour” (Lopes, 2001, p. 417). During my interviews, I realized that when I asked parents to explain how they were involved with their children’s education, everyone comprehended my question as, How are you visible (publicly noticed) at your children’s school? Throughout educational discourse, parent involvement has been socially constructed in terms of performance: attending/participating in bake sales, fundraising, volunteering, membership on parent councils, attending parent-interview nights, being audience to various school events and functions, and talking with teachers/administrators. I, too, entered my interviews with a vague notion of parent involvement located in public performance, which was meant to display interest and support in a child’s education. As a parent, this notion was firm and I often felt guilty for not attending elementary school council meetings or participating on fundraising committees, although I did bake for various school activities and
buy whatever was the latest fundraising adventure. Although I was extremely committed to my children’s learning at home, the guilt persisted. As a teacher I participated in supporting the notion that parents who cared about their child’s learning attended parent-teacher interviews, school events and/or responded to teachers’ requests for a meeting. This public performance notion of parent involvement created conflict in my own understanding of the parent-school/teacher relationship.

As stated by Gerardo Lopez (2001), even the term parent involvement “delimits who the primary players are - or ought to be” (p. 417) in children’s education. The school is the primary player while the parents are the subsidiary players being involved in what schools/educators deem is appropriate. In recent years, parent involvement also includes home supports, such as checking agendas and homework, assisting with projects, helping organize notebooks and, particularly within the past decade, providing various technologies to support school curricula (calculators, computers, internet access). These home supports are also measurable and visible in terms of producing outcomes which fit within the school curricula and agenda. Also found by Corter and Pelletier (2004), “Parent representatives on school councils placed more emphasis than other parents did on political roles for parents on volunteering and on fundraising” (p. 7).

Understanding parent involvement as public performance is reflected in educational discourse. Studies on parent involvement have been in researchers’ sights for over two decades, often not defined but assumed to have a traditional understanding. Teachers are often positioned as the protectors and parents as the protected. Pushor (2010) uses Memmi’s concept of protectorate which reflects a colonialist structure and certainly, historically, in the parent-school relationship “those with strength (colonizers) take charge in order to protect those without strength (the colonized)” (Memmi (1965) as cited in Pushor 2007b, p. 2). In an attempt to move parents out of this protected positioning, Pushor (2007a) used parent engagement in order to redraw the understanding of parent-school relationships beyond programs which are directed by the school and serve the unidirectional school agenda. Pushor hoped, by using the broader term parent engagement, there would be a re-theorizing of traditional parent-school relationships in order for parents to seek ways of establishing a voice and for them to be placed within the “school landscape” (2007, p. 2). Pushor’s use of parent engagement was “an alternative way to bring teachers and parents together in schools, an alternate possibility for changing the scripted
story of school” (2007, p. 3). Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) wanted to disrupt the historic structure of schooling, the power and authority imbalances and establish a mutually determined agenda. A new community was to be created with parents sharing their knowledge with teachers and both informing decision-making and outcomes for their children/students, families, communities and schools. But as has been the case throughout the history of parent-school relationships, parent engagement has been used interchangeably with parent involvement.

Researchers use parent involvement and parent engagement interchangeably and, as stated by Pushor (2007a, p. 4), parent involvement “is often used as a term of comprehensive coverage which does not differentiate the type of relationship being lived out between educators and parents.” I have searched for a term to replace parent involvement which does not have a preconceived socially constructed meaning, a term that would be inclusive of both the visible and invisible work which parents do in relation to their children’s education, and which also incorporates an understanding of a collaborative parent-school relationship. But, of course, there is no such term, for all our notions of the parent-school relationship are socially constructed, and, as can be seen throughout this chapter and my Historical Trajectory chapter, education is, itself, socially constructed.

More recently, research findings question the direct correlation which is often made between student academic success and our limited understanding of parent involvement (Jeynes, 2005; Corter and Pelletier, 2004; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins, & Closson, 2005). Certainly in my research, I was forced by parent participants to question my own educator’s understanding of parent involvement and to listen more closely to parents’ understandings. What became evident to me is that there is no one right parent involvement behaviour, activity, understanding or approach. Parent involvement varies according to gender, race, ethnicity, social class and parent personal experiences. What does this multifaceted understanding of parent involvement look like and what factors affect these understandings? These questions will be addressed here as well as in my findings in order to begin to untangle their complexity.
How and Why Do Parents Get Involved and What Are the Effects?

Although the 1990s did not seem to bring many new insights to the parent-school relationship, throughout this time period and the first decade of the 21st century a proliferation of published studies and literature was generated, which focused on how to get parents involved in schools. The questions I pose here are: For what reason(s) were parents encouraged to become involved in schools at this time and for whose benefit?

Student Achievement

Over these last two decades, a barrage of research has linked parent involvement to student achievement: grades, test scores, earned credits, attendance, graduation rates, post secondary enrollment, behaviour, social skills, increased social competency and social capital (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Fan & Chen, 2001; Griffith J., 1996; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Ho Sui-Chu & Willms, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Ingram, Wolfe & Lieberman, 2007; Keith, 1996, 2003; Jeynes, 2005; Roulette-McIntyre, 2003). This linkage between parent involvement and student achievement has been made in psychological, sociological and philosophical research. It has stimulated much discourse on developing parental strategies and skill development which were supposed to ease parent concerns about what they could do to improve their children’s academic achievement. Acknowledging that Canada is a diverse society with various cultural groups, rural and urban environments, family structures and socio-economic levels, Pushor (2007) also suggests that “engaging families in school has the potential to serve as one means of reducing the achievement gap between discrepant student populations” (p. 5). But what does “engaging families in school” mean?

Jeynes (2005) analyzed 41 studies which focused on the relationship between parent involvement and academic achievement of urban elementary students. He asked: “To what degree is parental involvement associated with higher levels of school achievement among urban students?” and “Does the relationship between parent involvement and academic achievement hold across race and gender groups?” (p. 238). He found that there was a positive relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement among urban students regardless of gender and race (p. 258). And, just as important if not more so, his findings identified which kinds of parental involvement had the most influence on academic success. Jeynes (2005) argued
that it was “the most subtle aspects of family support” that were found to have the greatest correlation to student academic achievement. These subtle aspects included parental expectations and “an educationally oriented ambiance—an encouraging atmosphere” (p. 262). It was “not particular actions such as attending school functions, establishing household rules and checking student homework” that made the biggest difference, but rather establishing “an understanding of a certain level of support and standards in the child’s mind” (Jeynes, 2005, p. 262). He contended that this held true regardless of culture, race and gender.

Corter and Pelletier (2004) questioned the evidence presented to support the contention that parent involvement boosts school achievement. They suggested that perhaps, “…involvement may be correlated with other factors that contribute to academic success (higher economic status, less family stress, parental involvement in other aspects of the child’s life, etc.)” (p. 9). Corter and Pelletier (2004) stated that “even in the age of evidence-based education, there isn’t overwhelming evidence that parent and community involvement boosts school performance” (p. 9). Deborah Bugg Williams (1998) found that parent’s expectations for their children’s education and their out-of-school activities are positively linked to all measures of their children’s achievement. Historically, the rationale for encouraging parent involvement (usually performance-based actions) in their child’s education has been to increase student academic success. As suggested by Corter and Pelletier (2004), “parent and community involvement needs a critical look, not more endorsements” (p. 8).

One of these other aspect, of which Jeynes (2005) spoke in general terms, might have included the knowing of teachers and having access to administrators (social networking-social capital), particularly for parents who were members of their school Parent Council. Having access to their children’s teachers, on a daily basis, definitely provides parents with comfort related to their child’s academic progress, as well as provides them with early home support, if needed. It is perhaps this networking with teachers, administrators and other parents which is the desired or unintended outcome of some parents who value performance based activities.

**Why Parents Choose to Get Involved in Their Children’s Education**

So far, I have presented varied understandings of parent involvement and the reasons given, primarily by educators and researchers, why parents should get involved in their
children’s education. But, from a parent perspective, why do parents get involved? Research has supported both the educational advantages of parent involvement as well as disputed or negated this research within and outside the field of education. My research has led to my investigating the understanding of other aspects of parent involvement which are the “psychological underpinnings of parents behavior”, as stated by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005, p. 87). Although Hoover-Dempsey’s research is located in the United States, it is useful to me because her approach is multidisciplinary and thus examines parent involvement from a social as well as a psychological perspective (Family-School Partnership Lab, 2010). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) caution us about the reliability of much of the parent involvement literature and contend that, from a multidisciplinary research perspective, it is “parents’ attitudes, behaviors and activities related to children’s education (which) influences students’ learning and educational success” [italics in original] (p. 106). As previously stated, parent involvement is a multifaceted and complex issue and there are many factors which are related to the motivation for parents to become involved. A few of these motivational factors include: parents’ childhood beliefs; aspirations and expectations for their children; the presence of stresses, events and social support in their lives; their belief that they should be involved; their perceptions of invitations from the school/teachers to be involved in the school; and, their children and the parents’ life context (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Parental role construction was defined by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) as, “parents’ beliefs about what they are supposed to do in relation to their children’s education and the patterns of parental behavior that follow those beliefs” (p. 107). According to some educational researchers (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Ruitenberg, 2009), these beliefs are socially constructed and created by parents’ personal experiences, as well as their experiences with teachers, administrators and other parents. Hoover-Dempsey (2005) stated that because the parent role is socially constructed, “it may change in response to intentional efforts to alter role construction” (p. 105). This is an interesting concept since the present social construction of the parents’ role in the education of their children has been historically embedded in the educational annals for over a century and a half in Canada. Educational research continues to reinforce the correlation between parent involvement and student achievement and this understanding of parent involvement continues to be accepted as performance based. So even if, as in the case of Pushor (2005, 2010), attempts are made to
change this well engrained socially constructed parental role, the historically socially constructed parent-school relationship persists.

Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) also noted two “realities”. First, the fact that not all parents need to be encouraged to become involved and often those who are overly involved supposed that “schools should give priority to” their own children and also to “their views, needs and social perspectives often to the implicit or explicit exclusion of other families’ needs and perspectives” (pp. 106-107). Secondly, parent involvement “declines in students’ later middle school to high school years” (p. 107). But Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005) do not give reasons for this decline nor focus their research on the transition years, as is also the case for most studies on parent involvement. This is an aspect of parent involvement which will be addressed by my study.

Has the Parent-School Relationship Changed in Recent History?

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot may very well epitomize the perceptual changes which have occurred over the last thirty years in parent-school relationships. Her 1978 book, “Worlds Apart: Relationships Between Families and Schools”, presented a relationship filled with power struggles, conflicts, cultural, class, racial and gendered divisions. Parents and schools were separated by a chasm of societal woes based on social, political and economic differences, typical of the 1960s and 1970s societal critiques. In her more current book of 2003, “The Essential Conversation: What Parents and Teachers Can Learn From Each Other”, Lawrence-Lightfoot presents a post-modern theoretical approach. Personal and event focused (the parent-teacher conference), she presents the inner thoughts, feelings and positioning of ten identified exceptional teachers. She still speaks of parents and schools being “natural enemies”, and “inequalities and entitlements” and subjectivities, but she now calls the once identified “chasm” a “borderlands and crossroads”, a place where negotiations and compromises can be forged. Although Lawrence-Lightfoot couches the parent-school relationship in a post-modern, personal, genteel and strategically placed fashion, at least in terms of 21st century perceptions, this relationship is still contentious, bureaucratic in structure and socially, politically and economically driven.
In distinction to this approach, Carol Vincent refuses to be distracted from the age old concepts of gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. This is reflected in Gerald Grace’s (1997) review of Carol Vincent’s latest book:

Vincent brings a sociological and historical focus to bear upon the New Right’s most cherished ideological weapon, “the parent”, reconstituted as “the consumer in education”. It is important because it refuses to accept the discourse of ‘the parent’ or of ‘parent power’ abstracted from ethnicity, social class and gender and it insists upon understanding the nature of the power relations between teachers and various constituencies of parents viewed both historically and in contemporary education policy situations. [italics in original] (p. 2)

In the first decade of the 21st century, research studies are still underway to establish strategies for building parent-school relationships and supporting improved parent involvement (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Dom & Verhoeven, 2006; Gutman & McLoyd, 2000; Plevyak & Heaston, 2001; Roulette-McIntyre, 2003). With hints of past arguments, Vincent (2001) and Vincent & Martin (2002) raise issues of variance by social class to “access and deployment of social resources” which “significantly affected how often, how easily and over what range of issues” parents approached the school (p. 109). Vincent and Martin also broadened their scope on parent-school relationships by stating that by understanding parent-school interactions, we will understand:

the ways in which citizens have been conceived by and involved in the public sphere. Indeed the changing relationships that parents have had with schools over the last fifty years can be said to reflect broader developments in the way in which the public has been conceived by, and involved in, the polity.² (2002, p. 110)

Vincent and Martin (2002) posed two questions in their study of secondary schools: Do we fully understand the nuances of parents’ relationships with schools? What are the relations among “gender, ethnicity, social class, family culture and the position and responsiveness of individual school sites” (p. 109)? They concluded that “different reactions may be hidden under the guise of parental silence” and “all these factors operate to set boundaries on who develops an active and effective voice within the school, and who is silent” (p. 124).

³ Polity- collective space for negotiation between public service deliverers and users, and a mechanism for a participatory approach to decision-making (Vincent & Martin, 2000)
How do Gender, Race, Ethnicity and Social Class Affect Parent Involvement?

In a commentary written in *The Toronto Star* (November 22, 2004), Joe Fiorito questions the Toronto District School Board’s directive to have their staff “figure out what factors cause kids to pass or fail.” The Board passed this motion the week before requesting a collection of such factors as “differences in gender, race, ethnicity, mother tongue, income and place of residence” and also stated that they “reaffirmed the long-established fact that there is no correlation between these factors and the inherent capacity of students to learn and achieve success” (p. B2). Fiorito asks that if all of these factors are not related to students’ learning, “then why the hell do trustees want to gather statistics based on gender, race, ethnicity, mother tongue, etc” (p. B2). These factors may not correlate to a students learning capacity in any inherent way, but they definitely affect students’ academic success and influence parents’ understandings of parent involvement. I will briefly discuss the current literature on each factor, while noting that they are interrelated in society’s complex economic, social and political workings and these factors cannot be so easily teased out.

**Mothers’ Work**

Shumow and Miller (2001), in their study entitled “Parents' At-Home and At-School Academic Involvement with Young Adolescents”, came to four conclusions:

- although fathers and mothers were both equally involved in education at home, mothers were more involved at school
- mothers’ education level directly correlated with school involvement, although this was not a factor for fathers
- students’ gender had no affect on parent involvement
- students’ desire to perform well directly correlated with at home parent involvement.

In my Historical Trajectory Chapter 2, mothers have been noted to be the most influential in their child’s life chances and school attainment, particularly discussed from a deficit perspective (circumstances of low-income and/or single mothers may result in a lack of completion of high school and/or academic difficulties). A number of sociologists have brought into light the gendering of parent (mother) involvement related to school responsibilities, whether at home or at school (Griffith, 1995; Griffith and Smith, 2004; Lareau, 1999; O’Brien, 2008; Reay, 1998).
The connection between mothering and school responsibilities has, historically and presently, been noted in terms of performance based school activities (attendance on Parent Councils, volunteering, fundraising, etc.). As mentioned previously, performance based parent involvement in schools and communities are the most visible and less intrusive sites for study, but they do not necessarily reflect the complexity of the parent-school relationship, particularly for non-white, working class and immigrant families. Gendered roles can also be seen in what has been called “gendered emotional capital”, as discussed by O’Brien (2007, 2008) and Lynch and Lyons (2008), just to mention a few authors in the history of mothers and educational work. Researchers have noted that parent involvement is a gender neutral misnomer masking the high percentage of educational work which is actually done by mothers (David, 2005; Griffith and Smith, 2004; O’Brien, 2007; Reay, 2000). Also, the term parent involvement muddies the “relational and emotional aspects of the educational work that is done to support children’s schooling, and narratives of care and mothering that are so central to these efforts” (O’Brien, 2007, p. 160). This emotional aspect is often absent in traditional understandings of parent involvement, so here I wish to focus on its relationship to mother’s educational work.

O’Brien (2007, 2008), David (1994), Griffith and Smith (2004) and Reay and Ball (1998) have discussed the neo-liberal notions that parents will support their children through private efforts of purchasing the best education possible and thus individual families and parents are then responsible for their children’s educational outcome. This perspective “tends to ignore emotional caring efforts that are not commodifiable but that support children’s education” (O’Brien, 2007, p. 160). O’Brien (2007) further states that it is mothers who are primarily responsible for emotional caring and that the toll “is particularly heavy for those mothers who have little material and emotional resources and who occupy marginal positions in society” (p. 160).

**Race, Ethnicity and Immigration**

Many of the studies discussed in this section were completed in the United States, but their findings shed an interesting perspective on how race, ethnicity and immigrant status affect our understanding of and orientation to the concept of parent involvement. Ho Sui-Chu, and Willms, both researchers at Canadian universities, conducted their 1996 study in the United
States. They found parents of Hispanic, African American and Asian descent were as active as white parents in their middle and high school children’s education, but in different ways. They found these variations to include: African American parents reported higher involvement at home than white parents and Asians and Hispanics parents reported more supervision at home than white parents. It was also noted that all families were involved at home, but those with higher income levels and social class tended to be more involved in the school (public performance). In studies where the concept of parent involvement includes public as well as private performance, race, ethnicity and social class are found to have different influences than when parent involvement is understood to mean only public performance.

In the United States from interviews and classroom observations, Annette Lareau and Erin Horvat (1999) observed that white, middle-class families were more comfortable and trusting of school staff because they had similar social capital (“social networks with other parents in the community who provide informal information about the teachers”) and cultural capital (“vocabulary, sense of entitlement to interact with teachers as equals, time, transportation and child care arrangements during the day”) (p. 42). This alignment of white parents with predominantly white staff allows the white parents to work more easily with school staff than black parents. Even though school staff thought they welcomed all families and were neutral in response to parental requests, Lareau and Horvat (1999) found that the staff recognized only a small number of acceptable behaviours. Teachers wanted parents to be “positive and supportive, but also to trust their judgments and assessments” (p. 42). When black parents questioned teachers’ perceptions, they were identified as destructive and unacceptable. One note of caution here is that usage of the term black parents is not meant to be inclusive. Within the black parent community, there was found to be a social class difference. Middle-class black parents were more likely to diffuse any racial discrimination discussed by their children in the home before it became apparent to teachers at school. To this, Lareau and Horvat (1999) stated, “These patterns point to the importance of differentiating between the possession and activation of capital” [italics the authors], and noted the skill and shrewdness in the activation process is not always distinguished in research literature (p. 44). I will return to these findings in Chapters 4

4 Unless capitalized within a direct quote, no racial groups will be capitalized in the text of this dissertation.
and Chapter 5, when I analyze my own participants’ responses.\(^5\)

Another factor which affects students’ learning is the family’s immigration status and identification as a visible minority. Interviewing and participating in the lives of five immigrant/migrant families in Texas in the United States, Lopez’s (2001) found that im/migrant parents perceived themselves as being involved in their children’s education, although the parents rarely went to school functions. Involvement, to the parents in this study, meant teaching their children to value education through their own personal experiences of hard work. Lopez (2001) further stated that:

As we make the transition into the twenty-first century, they (schools) will face new and different challenges that place growing demands on school organizations to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student population. . . . They will no longer be able to rely on a one-size-fits-all approach to parent involvement…. Schools should begin to identify the unique ways that marginalized parents are already involved in their children’s education, and search for creative ways to capitalize on these and other subjugated forms of involvement. (p. 434)

As will be discussed in my findings, immigrant parents often have non-traditional understandings of parent involvement based on their own experiences, status in society and parent positioning and knowledge of the school bureaucracy.

Carreon, Drake and Barton (2005) interviewed 17 immigrant parents in the United States, along with a group of nonimmigrant parents, in a 3-year research project which examined immigrant parents and their “engagement experiences” with the school. They found that, for the parents whom they interviewed, parent engagement was “a process for both the parent and the child, one of gaining crucial access to and understanding of the host culture. It is also a product leading to new status within the school community” (p. 494). Carreon et al. (2005) also argued that parent engagement needs to be realized from a non-traditional perspective.

Schofield (2009) and Anisef, Brown, Phythian, Sweet and Walters. (2010) have espoused concerns about the high drop out rates of immigrant and visible minority students in high schools. They have added that one-half of Canada’s immigrant and visible minority populations live in larger cities, such as Toronto, and one out of every five people in Canada is expected to

\(^5\) I note here that I do not wish to suggest, from presenting Lareau’s and Horvat’s findings or any other research findings including my own, that I understand all parents from any racial, ethnic or social class to be/respond/behave in the same way. Rather, I recognize there are variances within each social grouping.
be a visible minority member by the year 2017. Schools, especially in large urban centers, must develop alternate ways of viewing parent involvement beyond the traditional perspective in order to ensure parents and students have the social and cultural capital upon which to make future educational and career decisions. Many complex factors affect the educational success of immigrant and visible minority children, including age at entry into Canada, family socio-economic status and the host country’s ability to provide adequate educational and economic support. As well, Anisef et al. (2010) pointed out that the old model of straight line assimilation (increasing success with each generation) no longer holds. Their findings support the segmented assimilation theory (different patterns of adaptation characterize different immigrant groups) which identifies the need to understand each immigrant and visible minority group from within their own personal perspectives and experiences.

Over the last two decades, an abundance of studies in the United States, as well as in Canada, have been completed on various immigrant and visible minority groups in relation to student achievement and parent involvement (Corwyn and Bradley, 2008; Dei, 2006, 2008; Douglas et al., 2008; Kao, 2004; Kao and Rutherford, 2007; Olivos, 2006; Rushowy, 2009; Schneider and Lee, 1990; Turney and Kao, 2009). Over the last five years, a barrage of Toronto newspaper articles have also focused on immigrant and visible minority groups (Brown, 2009; Flavelle, 2006; Goar, 2009; Hall, 2005; Keung, 2006, 2007, 2010). These only represent a few articles from one prominent newspaper in Toronto. From research findings and newspaper coverage, it is evident that each cultural group must be recognized for its own unique perspective. Boards of Education and Ministry policies sometimes lump all immigrants and visible minority parents under one umbrella or develop one set of understandings around strategies for immigrant or visible minority students and parents. This is particularly problematic in diverse urban centers such as Toronto. Administrators are often left trying to implement policies in their local schools with parents whose understandings and experiences are not consistent with the suggested intent of the policy. For example, in the late 1990s the Ministry of Education mandated that Parent Councils must be created in every public school in Ontario. Parents in high immigrant or low socioeconomic communities may show little interest in participating on such a Council, as is evidenced in my study, but principals are required, by law, to establish such a parent group. This puts administrators in a position to find subversive ways of establishing Parent Councils at their schools. From my personal experiences as an educator, I
have heard/seen principals coerce parents into using their names as members on the Parent Council. This way the principal can give evidence to the school Board that a Parent Council exists where, in fact, there are no active members. Other administrators, particularly at the high school level, comply with the policy of creating a Parent Council but control the agenda, decide who gets on the Council, direct discussions and the use of perceived parent power to support their own pet projects. Top down directives and policies are often ineffectual at the local school level. Parents’ involvement in their children’s education can be best understood from the parents in their local communities not from mandated top down policies. My study attempts to shine a light on some of these understandings within two local school communities.

**Social Class**

The last factor to be discussed in relation to factors affecting student learning and parent involvement is social class. Although its intersection with gender, race and ethnicity has been previously touched upon, I turn to Levine-Rasky (2008) for a further understanding of their interplay. She suggested that, “Class is not understood in the abstract. Nor is it a static or discrete category….As a cultural practice, class positions are achieved and enacted as lived reality” (p. 465). The lived reality of middle-class parents is that they are more likely to be directly involved with the school, provide supplementary learning opportunities, have superior contacts with school personnel and establish “confluence” between the school culture and their own homes. This finding is supported by Lareau (1989). The intersection of social class, race and ethnicity is discussed in Levine-Rasky’s (2008) article entitled, “Middle-Classness and Whiteness in Parents’ Responses to Multiculturalism”. She used the intersectionality among three dimensions of middle-classness (practice, relationality and maintenance) to explain the positioning of parents in her study as “not simply racism nor ethnocentrism nor even exclusion based on social class differences” (p. 466). Levine-Rasky’s research community reflects, to some degree, my experiences in one of my upper/middle-class, white homogeneous communities. How “whiteness” works is through mechanisms by which “power is practiced among whites” and the participation in systems of domination which “benefits those groups who occupy a social location of power or who engage in the performance of power” (p. 467). These are reflective of the intersection between class, race and ethnicity which I have also noted. In conclusion, Levine-Rasky (2008) commented about her white, middle-class community, “They engage in difference-
making (practice) and in evaluating their needs relative to that of others (relationality). Finally, they invested in the active reproduction of their raced, classed and ethnic selfhood in the area of school choice (maintenance)” (p. 483). My discussion on the intersections between class, race and ethnicity will be explored in later chapters, especially in reference to one of my school sites which mirrors the “whiteness” of Levine-Rasky’s research community and its intersection with middle-classness.

Researchers such as Beck (2007), David (1998), Levine-Rasky (2008), Power, Whitty, Edwards, Wigfall (1998), and Reay (2001) have added support to the fact that middle-class schools advantage middle-class students and disadvantage lower/working-class families. This advantage splitting is particularly noted in a report released by the Centre for Urban and Community Studies (2007) at the University of Toronto which stated, “The City of Toronto is becoming increasingly divided by income and socio-economic status”, also noting that Toronto is no longer “a city of neighbourhoods” but rather a “city of disparities” (p. 30). In response to this report, Slinger (2008) noted that gentrification of Toronto has resulted in the “city splitting into closed enclaves determined by who can afford to live where” (p. 12). It is advantage splitting, along with neighbourhood population changes, which are important to the parents in my research communities in determining where to live, which schools their children should attend and whether or not to participate in school events. As will be evidenced in my findings, social class, race, ethnicity and gender are all very much intertwined and very difficulty to untangle.

In reflecting on the introduction to this section, Joe Fiorito’s (2004) musings about why the Toronto District School Board had not realized they already had much research information related to their question: “What factors cause kids to pass or fail?” comes to mind here. In relation to differences in gender, race, ethnicity, mother tongue, income and place of residence, there is a long history of social science research findings, including Wright’s (1971) Every Student Survey which focuses specifically on Toronto. The research results are clear on what factors cause kids to fail and also on how educators envision parent involvement in their children’s learning. But, how do parents see themselves involved in their children’s learning, particularly at the local school level? My study attempts to address this question.
What Is Emotional Capital and What Is Its Place in Parent Involvement?

The intent of my discussion here is not to present a full explanation or understanding on any aspect of capital, but rather to clarify my own understanding for this study of social, cultural and emotional capital.

Lareau’s and Horvat’s (1999) and Reay’s (2000) understanding of social and cultural capital reflected Bourdieu’s (1986) conceptualization, as well as Helga Nowotny’s concept of emotional capital, which she saw as “a variant of social capital but characteristic of the private, rather than the public sphere” (in Reay, 2000, p. 572). My understanding of capital in this research is first that social capital includes parents’ “social networks with other parents in the community who provide informal information” (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 42) about: school functioning, teachers and administrators and information sharing on the transitioning process and school choice. Second, cultural capital relates to parents’ knowledge and skills in the educational forum concerning how the school works, the transitioning process and school choice, their own educational achievements, and a “sense of entitlement to interact with teachers as equals” (Lareau & Horvat, 1999, p. 41). I will also include two subtypes of cultural capital: embodied and institutional capital, as discussed by Bourdieu’s (1986). I understand the term embodied to mean any socially inherited sense of one’s self in relation to learning abilities, educational and career aspirations and achievement. This will be particularly important in my examination of my parent participants’ school choices and educational aspirations for their children. The institutional aspect of cultural capital acknowledges any academic credentials, qualifications, institutional recognition, as it applies to the transitioning and school choice process. This, again, will prove especially valuable during my discussion on school requirements for entry into specialized programs when asking, how did certain children come to have the right credentials for entry while others did not?

One aspect which is a variant of Bourdieu’s (1986) discussion of capital is emotional capital, an extension on his framework of social capital, as mentioned by Reay (2000, 2004) and focusing on the private sphere. Emotional capital is particularly critical to my discussion on parent involvement, especially because: first, mothers are the predominant active parent participants in my study and are often discussed in terms of their emotionality (emotional nature or quality). Much research indicates that parent involvement is a gendered activity in relation to
education (David, 1998; Griffith and Smith, 2004; Reay, 2000; Reay and Ball, 1998); second, the interrelationship between emotional capital and social class are essential to any discussion on education since education is itself socially constructed. Reay (2000) states that “Understandings of mothers’ involvement in their children’s schooling are enhanced by including an analysis of the emotions, both positive and negative, that infuse mothers’ activities” (p. 568). Reay (2004) described emotional capital as “generally confined within the bounds of affective relationships of family and friends and encompasses the emotional resources you hand on to those you care about” (p. 60). She saw emotional capital as having both “positive and negative efficacy” (Reay, 2004, p. 62), depending upon the mothers’ own degree of emotional involvement in the emotions of their children. O’Brien (2007) stated that fathers are sometimes involved in “educational care work”, usually if the mother is not available (ill, away from home) or if there is a serious concern related to the child’s “emotional or learning difficulties” (p. 68). My own research does not totally support O’Brien’s findings, especially for immigrant families where the mothers were not confident in their English skills and where fathers were the main participants in my interviews. I also include in my understanding of emotional capital parents’ concerns/worries about their children’s transitioning to high school and making the appropriate school choice.

Reay (2000) and O’Brien (2007) concluded that, in our present climate of social, political and economic uncertainty, mothers’ involvement in their children’s education has become more intense. Reay (2000) noted that “high levels of anxiety cut across class and race”, but she also found differences between working-class mothers and middle-class mothers prioritizing of happiness gained from educational achievements. Some middle-class mothers “have the material resources to buy a high degree of certainty of academic success” for their children while some middle-class and working-class mothers are left with apprehensions about their ability to support their children in an “increasingly competitive educational market which impacts on both children’s and mothers’ emotional well-being” (pp. 582-583). O’Brien (2007) supports Reay’s contention that “neo-liberal perspectives are increasingly pervasive in educational and public discourse assuming that parents, through their private efforts and resources, will support children through the purchase of the “best education”” (p. 160). Griffith and Smith (2004) also agreed that the prevalent discourse in education today makes individual families and parents responsible for participation in their children’s education and for the outcomes they achieve. Even though public education is recognized as just that, public, the responsibilities for decision-making around
educational choices are held to be private. O’Brien (2007) states, “Such a perspective tends to ignore emotional caring efforts that are not commodifiable but that support children’s education” (p. 160). Reay (2000) commented that first, emotional capital is the “one capital which is used up in interactions with others and is often for the benefit of others”; and second, problems arise out of the assumption that academic success is uniformly positive (p. 583). In Reay’s (2000) study, working-class parents were not willing to sacrifice their children’s emotional well-being for academic success; whereas, middle-class parents felt the cultural capital gained through higher educational attainment was worth the emotional “trade-off”.

O’Brien’s (2007) study focused on mothers’ emotional work during their children’s transition to second-level schooling. She found:

Mothers perform emotional caring labour without expectation of recognition or reward, and at specific costs to their own well-being. While men may sometimes assist their female partners in this work, the norm is for mothers to be assigned the primary responsibility for emotional caring. The toll of this responsibility and effect on mothers’ own well-being is particularly heavy for those mothers who have little material and emotional resources and who occupy marginal positions in society. (p. 160)

O’Brien (2007) aimed at explaining the social processes which “ensure that they (mothers) continue to perform this inalienable moral work and to highlight the inequalities associated with mothers’ care in the field of education” and:

  take the emotional caring that is assumed by the education system, and done primarily by mothers, from the private and often invisible space of the home, and to locate it on the educational map as a form of productive and moral work. (pp. 160-161)

I will also argue that private educational emotional caring work done in the home must be made visible/recognized in order to fully understand parents’ (mothers’) educational work.

This dissertation focuses on transitioning to high school which, as stated by O’Brien (2007), requires a “great deal of additional care work at this time of change” and is described by mothers in her study as “donkey work” (p. 176). Emotional care work includes listening to children’s questions, concerns and anxieties, as well as hearing/responding to messages sent home for decision-making on transitioning and school choice. More will be discussed in my findings on School Choice (Chapter 6) and Transitioning (Chapter 7), but suffice it to say here,
along with the physical, cognitive and social work required of parents (primarily mothers) during transitioning, emotional care work requires a certain level of emotional capital in order to ensure both children’s and parents’ well-being.

What Is Unique to the High School Transitioning Process?

Students and parents experience a number of transitions during their journey through the educational system: home to school, elementary school to middle/junior high school and/or high school, and then to post secondary education or the workplace. Anderson, Jacobs, Schramm & Splittergerber (2000) have divided these transitions into developmental changes (individual physical, intellectual and emotional) and systemic changes (those built into the public school system). These two transition change groupings do not exist independent of each other, rather they closely intersect, as is evidenced in my own study. Anderson et al. (2000) stated that research has, until the late 1980s, “operated within a framework in which students’ problems with school transitions were believed to result primarily from developmental changes” (p. 326). Literature focusing on puberty and the angst of adolescent development, particularly during these transition times, were and still are numerous in fields of psycho-social adolescent and child development literature (Benner, 2007; Blyth & Simmons, 1983; Hirsch and Rapkin, 1987; Isakson and Jarvis, 1998; Silverberg and Steinberg, 1987). More recently, socio-educational research has begun to hone in on “contextual factors on students’ abilities to negotiate the demands associated with systemic transitions” (Anderson et al., 2000, p. 326). It is this systemic transitioning which is the focus of my research.

Systemic transitions from elementary/middle school to high school include: change of school size, increased departmentalization and formal tracking of students’ academic progress, attendance and behaviours. These are what Rice (2001) called “institutional discontinuities”. She also identified “social discontinuities” to focus on: students’ relative ability in relation to their peers (rather than on individual improvement), changes in diversity of the student population, relations with teachers and a sense of belonging. Simmons (1987) contests that the systemic transition to secondary type environments (middle/junior high and high school) is purposefully developed in order to better reflect society’s bureaucratic environments which are impersonal, specialized, and emphasize rules and regulations (p. 6). The institutional and social discontinuities, of which Rice (2001) speaks, become clearly evident in the transitional process,
especially when students are applying to specialized programs, and are voiced in my parent participants’ experiences and teachers’/administrators’ expectations.

Blyth and Simons (1983) and Lord et al. (1994) noted that students who were independent from their parents’ supervision at a younger age had greater difficulty with systemic transitions. As indicated previously, parental support and supervision throughout children’s high school years is important, perhaps not as much academically as emotionally and psychologically. Making the transition to high school has been noted by Lucey and Reay (2000) as not only filled with anxieties and fears but also a “very real sense of excited anticipation” (p. 191). They state:

The sometimes tortuous negotiations around masculinity and femininity (in which biology plays its unpredictable part), race and ethnicity, social class and culture cannot be understated [sic]. There are many moments in individual’s lives in which these factors are brought into sharp focus and the transfer to secondary school is one of those. (p. 192)

As mentioned by Lucey and Reay (2000), “It is difficult to separate children’s anxieties from those of the adults around them” (p. 193). Taking the standpoint of parents, my research assumes an interconnectedness which cannot be untangled between parents being influenced by their children’s anxieties and excitement, and the children being influenced by their parents’ anxieties and excitement or lack there of. It became apparent that anxiety and excited anticipation were both a part of my parent participants’ experiences.

Allen (2005), Anderson et al. (2000), Gentle-Genitty (2009), Holcomb-McCoy (2007), and Lewis and Foreman (2002) identify factors which pose the most difficulty in successful transitioning to high school, which include: gender bias and expectations, prior behaviour difficulties, academic achievement, and socio-economic and race positioning. Taking into account that these researchers focus on the United States where african American and hispanic Americans are disproportionately living in poverty, Anderson et al. (2000) notes that it is difficult to “disentangle the effects of race from those of social class” (p. 328). This entanglement of race and social class is often discussed in educational literature drawing upon cultural assumptions in the connectedness between parent involvement in their children’s education and parents’ socio-economic, race and ethnicity status. Parents with lower socio-economic status, who are non-white and/or immigrants, are often painted as lacking in interest,

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6 The word transfer in Britain is equivalent to ‘transition’ in Ontario (Yolande Muschamp, 2009).
involvement and participation in their children’s schooling. These socio-cultural assumptions placed on the concept of parent involvement by a dominant white, middle-class educational system, do not always reflect the real and lived experiences of parents and their children who are non-white, visible minority members and/or from various socio-economic levels. A stunted understanding of parent involvement (visible and public) does not reflect my parent participants’ understandings, particularly those who do not fit within the boundaries of these socio-cultural assumptions. I do not deny that data seems to indicate that students from lower socio-economic neighbourhoods, particularly in urban centers like Toronto, do not fare as well, academically, as students in more privileged neighbourhoods. This has always been the case throughout educational history. But, placing the blame squarely on parents’ lack of interest and involvement, does not explain how race, ethnicity, social class and gender are lived out in the transitioning process nor how systemic processes and procedures often exclude some students (and parents) while including others. However, it does demonstrate how parent involvement is socially constructed on one set of norms according to which educators, researchers and parents judge themselves, as well as others.

My research focuses on one transitional period: transitioning from elementary/middle school to high school. This transitional period has recently become the focus of research which often assumes the expected response of parents after their children have left elementary school, is to become “less involved with their children’s homework and participate less in school activities after transition to high school” (Roderick et al., 1998, p. 2). Researchers such as Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001), Isakson and Jarvis (1999), and Stone (2000) also bring into their research this assumption, as did I, which is based on a traditional understanding of parent involvement (public and visible as measured by educators and other parents). Roderick et al. (1998) expanded their focus of responsibility on getting parents involved by explaining that “Increasing parents’ involvement in and support of their children’s education must begin by changing teachers’ and high schools’ practices”(p. 2). They identify Grade 9 teachers as being less likely to communicate with parents than Grade 8 teachers and also high schools focusing their communication on rules and problems, whereas parents want interactions around academic concerns (pp. 3-4).
Four criteria are discussed in the literature in relation to parent involvement and adolescent academic success. According to Roderick et al. (1998), children make the transition most successfully if parents: talk with their children about education and provide daily monitoring and support, set and hold high expectations and aspirations for their children’s education, help their children develop problem solving and decision-making skills, and share a common understanding with teachers about the school’s goals for their children. This set of criteria is interesting from several perspectives. First, most are invisible to educators and are often assumed by the child’s success or failure. Second, parents may or may not have the cultural and social capital to monitor their children’s school work, from a knowledge, skill and personal experience perspective. Third, communicating with teachers and understanding the school’s expectations and goals may be particularly difficult for parents who lack knowledge, skills and confidence in interacting in an educational forum. But, at the same time, the most encouraging aspect of this set of criteria, as stated by Corter and Pelltier (2004), is that much of this may already be going on in the home but is not being acknowledged. I found this to be the case in all the homes of my parent participants.

Falbo, Lein, and Amador (2001) mention an additional criterion for successful student transitioning to high school, which is critical to my findings. This is parent social networking for their children. They talked about parents “purposely nesting their teens in specific networks before the teen entered high school to facilitate the student’s transition.” Parents who did not have access to “a positive peer network within high school were facilitated” by their children’s participation in church, teams, clubs or school leadership activities (p. 526). It was found by Falbo et al. (2001) that it was critical for parents to encourage their children to interact with peers who had a positive and desirable influence on their children’s academic and social success.

Transitioning to high school has its own unique set of challenges not only for students but also for parents. The triangular (triad) relationship between parents, their children and schools (parent-child-school) is often forgotten, especially in high schools, in the forging of transition processes aimed at student academic success. The concepts and perspectives discussed in this section are the focus of my study and will shed light on the importance of understanding parents positioning in this triad relationship.
**How Do Parents Come to Make a School Choice?**

School choice policies vary between countries and provinces, making research findings somewhat difficult to apply to one Board of Education in Ontario. Research done in the United States on educational policies around school choice has greatly been influenced by its history of desegregation and legal rulings such as the Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* and No Child Left Behind legislation in 2001. These have had a profound affect on parental choice of schools for American children. In the United Kingdom, school choice has been influenced by the inclusion of religious and same-sex schools in state supported programs. Much of the British research on school choice focuses on cultural, economic and political analysis from a theoretical perspective on social class privilege, gender roles and parental worries related to what is at stake for their children in the educational market. Anne West (2005) discussed the “quasi-market” in the British school system based around government school choice policies. She identified two “quasi-regulatory frameworks” introduced by the Labour government in the later 1990s which were set to alleviate some of the concerns raised by parents around unequal access to school admissions. First, a School Admission Code of Practice was introduced to “provide details of the information that should be provided for parents and guidance concerning conduct of the admission process” (p. 94). This included non-interviews of parents during the application and admission process and revisions in 2003 to include non-interviewing of children. Secondly, a school adjudicator was introduced to resolve concerns raised by parents around unfair admission practices of individual schools (pp. 94-95).

In Ontario, school choice has been theoretically influenced by the UK’s national market-model of schooling (parents will choose the best schools to provide the most effective education for their children), as well as the notion of developing a competitive marketing strategy in difficult economic times. Maquire (2006) has noted that school choice has often been championed “as the great social equalizer, offering disadvantaged families a broader range of educational options” (p. 9). In an examination of factors which affect school choice, Sally Erling and Jan O’Reilly (2010), along with other researchers (Maquire, 2006; Paquette, 2005; Phillips et al, 2004), have indicated that “if choice is being offered then all parents must have the capacity to exercise this choice on a level playing field” (Erling & O’Reilly, 2010). Although my study does not examine school choice from a broad perspective (i.e. public, private, religious),
one aspect particularly pertinent to my study is the concept of specialized schools. Specialized schools are sometimes compared to the American magnet school model which was introduced to give parents a choice of integration for their children. In Ontario, introducing specialized schools was touted to give parents a greater choice of programs based on their children’s individual talents, but has also been used by some schools as a marketing tool to counter declining enrollment and selectively choose students, especially in diverse urban centers where schools are located more closely to each other and thus more competition may ensue. This has been supported by a study completed by West, Hind and Pennell (2004) who found that “specialist schools were more likely than non-specialist schools to report selecting a proportion of pupils on the basis of aptitude/ability in a particular subject area” and “a variety of criteria were used which appear to be designed to select certain groups of pupils and so excluding others” (p. 347).

The issue of specialist/specialty school selection and their perceived choosing of students (creaming off the best) based on aptitude/ability will be detailed in Chapter 6 which focuses on my parent participants’ high school choices.

Much school choice research has been influenced by postmodern consumerism theories and the belief that choice-making practices must be researched from a real social context. Discourses used by Foucault (binaries in constructing subjectivities) and Bourdieu (habitus, cultural, and social capital) are often used in these discussions. Mentioned in Andre-Bechely’s (2005) research, is the fact that literature reviews on school choice clarify that, regardless of their racial, ethnic, class and language background, parents/guardians “enter into a relationship with schooling institutions known for inequitable organizing structures and practices and unequal opportunities” (p. 268). My review of current research findings related to parental school choice reflects many of the concepts and discourses mentioned above. These will be taken up again in my findings as parent participants choose between high schools and reveal how they negotiate the school choice process which is organized by schools and the Board of Education, as well as confront their own personal social positions.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the 1990s brought with them an introduction of market forces including an element of competition between schools and school boards in the Ontario educational system. Parent school choice was introduced along with public school/student performance ratings (accountability) and local decision-making (decentralization). School choice was brought into play at a time when school boards were facing economic
hardships and, for the Toronto Board of Education, declining enrollment. In Toronto, specialty schools and specialty programs were meant to draw students not only into schools with limited enrollment but also away from private and religious schools, as well as other boards of education.

**Social Class and Inequities**

In the Foreword to David, West and Ribben’s book (1994) entitled *Mother’s Intuition? Choosing Secondary Schools*, Bernbaum stated that the problem with discussing parental choice is that:

> families differ in their ability to find the processes by which they might achieve those worthwhile objectives. …The better off the family, the better educated the family, the more likely they are to be able to successfully realize their choices for their children. (p. x)

A multitude of research findings based on parent school choice have uncovered inequities based on race, class, gender and language proficiency and have also raised many questions about the school-directed parental choice process (Andre Bechely, 1999, 2001; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Bowe, Ball & Gewirtz, 1994; Brown, 1997a; Byrne, 2006; Wilson Cooper, 2007; Clarke, 2006; David, West & Ribbens, 1994; Levine-Rasky, 2007, 2009; Reay & Ball, 1998; Reay, David & Ball, 2005). Parents vary in social, cultural and emotional capital which is needed to acquire, comprehend and respond appropriately to the school choice process. Also, a growing number of parents, particularly in urban centers, must confront schools and other parents’ understandings of those who do not fit the white, middle-class education system.

Much has been stated about the advantages of families from white middle-class backgrounds, which also applies to the school choice process (Bowe, Ball & Gerwirtz, 1994, 1995; Ball & Vincent, 1998; Brantlinger, 2003; Byrne, 2006; Lareau, 1989; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Levine-Rasky, 2007; Levine-Rasky & Ringrose, 2009; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Subtleties between parents of different races, classes and immigrant/language backgrounds were the focus of Byrne’s (2006) and Levine-Rasky and Ringrose’s (2009) research where they discussed, from their studies of white middle-class parents in urban settings, the complexities of parental school choice based on the social context of the school. Levine-Rasky (2007) discussed what she calls the “polyvalent” discourse of inclusion and exclusion, while Ball (2003) talked
about the “moral balancing act” of middle-class parents who support the principle of inclusion, yet their school choices demonstrate a conflict in action. The “discourse of social responsibility coexists with that of personal interest …Yet we see how social principles can be sacrificed to preserve individual advantage” (Levine-Rasky, 2007, p. 411). The middle-class, Levine-Rasky further stated, “knows itself not only through distinctive practices but through the erection of boundaries…..Marking out who is excluded is just as important as marking lines of belonging” (2007, p. 411). Levine-Rasky further argues that middle-class parents appear to have a conflict between choosing schools for their children which reflect racial and ethnic diversity, yet desiring a “modem” of homogeneity. This is particularly the case in Canada where multiculturalism has been co-mingled with national identity. A dualism emerged in Levine-Rasky’s and Ringrose’s (2009) Canadian study on Jewish mothers’ school choice. This dualism was reflected in the mothers’ narratives of “one of us” or “others”. For these mothers, “School choice is [thus] thoroughly inflected with imperatives to preserve middle-classness and Jewish ethnic identity, and constituted through binary-making” (p. 255). Throughout my Historical Trajectory Chapter 2, I also identified the struggles of middle-class parents to maintain their social position in the growing Canadian bureaucracy. Although my study does not focus solely on Jewish mothers, binary-making is evident in my interviews with parent participants, particularly those from middle-class, white, and homogeneous communities.

**Factors Affecting School Choice**

In school choice, besides the setting or mix of race, ethnicity and culture of the school of choice, other priorities in parental decision-making include: social networks of mothers and children (friends, siblings, neighbours), after-school activities, travel distance and accessibility, reputation (safety and academic standing), school climate (ethos), and structural factors (size, gender ratio, religious affiliation, resources availability) (Byrne, 2006; David, West & Ribbens, 1994). Unlike assumptions made by those who work in the school system itself, researchers have found that academic standing is not one of the top priorities for parents in school choice. Rather, it is the subtle factors, the social and everyday realities of parents and children which have a greater affect on the decision-making, much like the subtle understandings of parent involvement which have a greater influence on children’s academic achievement.
Of particular note here is the research understanding that the work of parent school choice is often referred to as *mother’s work* because, as a participant in O’Brien’s (2007) study stated, it is often the mother’s job to complete the onerous donkey work. Final decision-making around school choice is made with varied degrees of input amongst mothers, fathers (if in the home) and the transitioning children, depending upon class, race, ethnicity, immigrant status, language proficiency and the parent-child relationship (Byrne, 2006; Levine-Rask, 2007, O’Brien, 2007, Reay, David & Ball, 2005). A variation of family member(s) input into school choice decision-making is particularly evident in my own study and is important to understand during the development of school and Board policies around school transitioning and choice.

Stephen Ball and Carol Vincent (1998) found that one of the important factors affecting parental school choice is the “hot knowledge” or grapevine information shared among mothers who frequent the school. Hot knowledge is often acquired through intricate social networks with neighbours, friends, family and educators. Ball and Vincent (1998) found that parents place greater importance and reliability on this informal information than “official knowledge” produced by schools themselves or published examination results (p. 378), possibly comparable to Ontario’s Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) results. Ball and Vincent (1998) further explain that “grapevine knowledge is socially embedded in networks and localities and is distributed unevenly across and used differently by different social-class groups” (p. 377). As discussed by Dehli (1996), grapevines and informal networks derive from and reproduce people’s cultural scripts. This grapevine/social network was important to most of the parent participants in my study, although the extent and accuracy of informal and formal information varied.

**Parents’ Personal Experiences**

The last concept to be discussed in relation to analyzing the school choice process is what Sara Lawrence Lightfoot (2003) called “ghosts in the classroom”; parents’ memories of their own education. Levine-Rasky (2007), Levine-Rasky & Ringrose (2009) and Rittman (2001) discuss the importance of parents’ subjective and socially constructed selves in understanding how they view school choice and the transitioning process. Most of the parent participants in my study had not experienced high school choice in their own education. This presented a conflict in their understanding of the transitioning process and what they felt was best for their children.
Parents often refer to their own life experiences in bringing an understanding to the transitioning and school choice process; therefore, parents who have had a negative personal experience in moving to high school or who do not have the social network, language or cultural capital from which to draw, often experience high levels of stress and anxiety.

Historically, school choice has always been a part of upper class, white families in Ontario, while for middle-class parents it has only been an issue in the educational landscape for the last few decades. Complexities around school choice involve parental subjectivities, bureaucratic intentions and societal political and economic perspectives. Only recently have researchers uncovered the real choices parents may be afforded and how policies and practices often misdirect parents (Andre-Bechely, 2005; Ball & Vincent, 1998; David & Stambech, 2005; Levine-Rasky, 2007, 2009).

Summary

This chapter has focused on an overview of the current literature based on questions arising out of my interviews with parents. I have discussed parent involvement; the positioning of parents by gender, race, ethnicity and social class; emotional capital, and transitioning and parental school choice. These concepts shed a spotlight on the multitude of voices presented by my parent participants, their everyday experiences and the hows and whys underlying the decision-making process around school choice and transitioning to high school.
CHAPTER 4:
RESEARCH PARADIGMS, METHOD(ology), DESIGN AND SITES

Over 25 years ago, I began my journey into completing a doctoral degree and the lens with which I used to focus my ED.D. research was one that critically analysed the patriarchal regime. From an historical perspective, my preliminary work concluded that a patriarchal structure had directed girls and women into a gender specific education, set up barriers for their entry into male dominated professions and had successfully engrained women to believe that they had, misguidedly, come a long way in the battle for equity. During the last two decades, I have discovered that, in fact, my focus on a patriarchal regime had sent me into battle with a very narrow and limited lens. It was Eurocentric (white and middle-class), dualistic (male/female) and exclusionary (belief in a universal woman). I no longer believe that understanding the whys of women’s/people’s actions and reactions can be explained through one theory, one binary or, in fact, one of anything. There is no one correct truth to be uncovered. Researchers can only hope to give a voice to the multiple perspectives and understandings of their participants.

This chapter includes a discussion of: my inquiring paradigms, my method(ology), a brief history, location and description of my three research sites, the process of locating and entering these sites, problems and issues, the data collection process and parameters, and my data analysis and presentation.

My Inquiring Paradigms

It was during my re-entry into graduate studies and specifically during a Qualitative Methods course that I began to realize the importance of paradigm positioning, identifying and being clear about my own position, and recognizing how this affects my perspective on doing research. As recorded in my reflective course notes: “To be able to recognize positions or multiple positions is essential to questioning and interpreting my work and my own way of thinking” (2007, January 10). Later I noted, “There doesn’t have to be ‘a’ method or ‘a’ way of doing things” (2007, January 17). Almost three decades ago in my previous graduate work, I focused solely on the dualistic nature of gender and the perpetuation of this dualism in a patriarchal education system. I understood there was a correct methodology by which to conduct
my research without any self-reflection or understanding of my own epistemological positioning. I now accept that identifying with only one paradigm can carry with it assumptions and dichotomies, especially prior to completing research, which puts restrictions on not only selecting research materials but also on what is heard and seen by the researcher. Participant voices may not be heard or, even worse, sacrificed in an attempt to draw out corroborative findings. Thus, I have chosen to approach my research from a number of paradigm positions, focusing on critical analysis and constructivism. I used these in listening to the participants’ voices and analysing their sayings.

My work within a critical and constructivist paradigm is based on Guba’s and Lincoln’s (2005) understanding of paradigm positioning. For this dissertation, my ontological inquiry of critical analysis is based on the notion that reality is “shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic and gender values and crystallized over time” (Guba and Lincoln, 2005, p. 195). I would add race to this list. I also join Guba and Lincoln (2005) in their disagreement with “criteria for judging either reality or validity as absolutist; rather, it is derived from community consensus regarding what is real, what is useful, and what has meaning” (p. 197). They extend this into a discussion on the basis of a “constructivism ontology” as being an understanding of local and specific co-constructed realities; thus, understanding reality as socially constructed. In my own research, parents will talk about their own realities (truths) and those realities may or may not be shared by myself or other parents. But, it is important to keep in the forefront that parents’ realities, as all people, have been shaped by the construction of their own social realities and experiences. My perceptions of reality are not necessarily those of my participants, or may be a combination of both (co-constructed) which I believe is one of the strengths of jointly using critical and constructivist paradigms.

Also, using these paradigms has permitted me to offer parent participants, what Guba and Lincoln call, an “inquirer posture” (a voice). They distinguish between a critical theoretical and constructivist approach by differentiating the former as the researcher taking an advocacy or activist role, where the latter positions the researcher as “a passionate participant, a facilitator of multi-voice reconstruction” (2005, p.196). Both paradigms support the researcher as being involved in the reconstruction, re-socialization, empowerment and liberation of the researched. Since the outset of my study, I have comprehended my role as a researcher not only as a recorder
of parent voices and as an advocate, along-side parent participants, but also as a facilitator of parent empowerment. I hope that knowledge of parents’ understandings around the educational decision-making process during the high school transitioning years can expose historical and present inequities in policies and procedures which can, if the desire is present, lead to change in the parent-school relationship.

Epistemologically, I also believe in value-mediated findings (as discussed by Guba and Lincoln 2005) whereby the researcher and knower/participant bring to the findings co-constructed knowledge. They both bring to the study their own personal experiences, interpretations and sometimes a shared understanding. But the findings are a meshing together of the researcher’s and the participants’ knowledges, and the participants/knowers are just that: the knowers, with whom the researcher is not hierarchically positioned, but rather functions as a listener, inquirer and recorder, all of which are interpreted from the researcher’s own understanding of reality. Thus, as a researcher, my interpretation of parents’ everyday doings and sayings will be heard from my own position as a teacher, a parent and a student. Using a critical and constructivist paradigm inquiry, it is necessary to clearly state the values and positioning I bring to my research. These are identified, placed on the table and made conscious for the researcher, participants and readers to see, and assumptions are open to questioning.

Finally, methodologically, Guba and Lincoln (2005) discuss a need to understand a multi-voiced re-construction of reality (there is no one voice of understanding nor one reality). In my own research, there are a multitude of voices reflecting knowledges which go beyond the local and subjective and, as stated by Dorothy Smith (2005), an understanding that we all live in a world of shared realities and common meanings that show us how to interpret and re-interpret our social spaces. Guba & Lincoln (2005) argue that the commensurability of some elements of various paradigms is essential in order to question assumptions of each paradigm in search of understandings of realities between researchers and participants. It is only through open borders between paradigms that taken for granted beliefs and truths can be brought into question. The “emancipation” of multiple and diverse voices might then be heard from their own realities, not merely from the realities of others.

Using critical and constructivist inquiry paradigms is more than hope for equity and social justice, as mentioned by Guba & Lincoln (2005). The participants, as well as researchers,
can bring into question their own assumptions, beliefs and positions as a result of simply participating in the research process. Even though there may not be any apparent reactions attributed to the participants, they may be influenced, in some introspective way, by their own reflections. In this way, inquiring from a critical and constructivist perspective makes conscious the researcher-researched relationship. I suppose the never-ending spiral of questioning around researcher-researched power relationships might be troublesome to some but, to me, finding *the correct truth* is positivistic and could actually result in incorrect assumptions and ‘untruths’. Although the realities of my participants are my own hearings, I will continue, throughout the research process, to question not only my findings but also my own positioning in these findings. In this way, I will be better able to see, hear and represent the multiple voices and divergent thoughts of my participants.

Questions which arose from my Methods Course include: How can one ever see the reality in others’ truths? Is it possible or necessary to see others’ reality apart from your own? Can a white, female researcher of privilege enter into the realities of a non-white and non-privileged parent’s *truths* and experiences? Raising questions and bringing into consciousness divergent voices/truths/silences is essential. Also, parents’ voices are identified and reflected in my findings, along side my own. Understanding how our own truths and realities have affected our *seeing* and *hearing* of diverse voices and truths of research participants is only what any researcher can hope to do, regardless of racial, ethnic, cultural, gender and socioeconomic differences between the researcher and the researched.

**My Method(ology)**

Taking into account my past limitations, present research paradigms and the need to hear, understand and focus on parent participants’ positioning in the parent-school relationship, I was inspired by Institutional Ethnography (IE), a method of inquiry developed by Dorothy E. Smith (1998, 1999, 2005, 2006). My interest in IE was influenced by my experiences and understandings as a mother, a teacher and a doctoral student, as well as my desire to question traditional social science theoretical approaches in investigating the social. Whether it is premised on sociology, psychology or philosophy, I am persuaded that traditional approaches to research do not unearth an understanding of the everyday actions and interactions of parents in educational institutions. I wanted to focus my research on the everyday experiences and
understandings of my parent participants during their children’s transition to high school. Questions formed around parent-school relationships during this transitioning would then originate from my parent participants, but cannot exclude my own position or hearing as a parent, teacher and academic.

The distinction between the use of methodology and method of inquiry, which is differentiated by Smith (2006), is that method of inquiry places the emphasis, “always on research as discovery rather than, say, the testing of hypotheses or the explication of theory as analysis of the empirical” (p. 2). This is consistent with my understanding of doing research from a critical and constructivist position and developing an inquiry into how institutions implement policies and procedures over multiple sites affecting the everyday world of people and, specifically in this study, parents. Although I have been greatly influenced by the IE method of inquiry, I diverge from its movement into “the generalized and generalizing relations of the apparatus of ruling and of the economy” (Smith, 1998, p. 147). I do agree that social interactions, particularly those within institutions such as education, are often textually mediated and organized outside the local setting (extralocal) and have a direct effect on the “happenings” and organization of people within the local setting (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Certainly researching the organization of educational institutions and their coordination of peoples’ knowledges becomes evident in my own findings, and it is also clear that institutional texts (written, oral and visual) organized my parent participants’ actions, interactions and events in the transitioning and school choice process. But, at this time, I have chosen not to extend my findings into the mapping out of the extralocal in the institutional processes. Generally, I will identify the influences on parent-school relationships and decision-making at the local level and place my focus on understanding parents’ voices within their everyday lives in their extended local settings (elementary to high school).

I began my interviews using parents’ experiences to explore how their knowing was organized, by whom and by what, and analyzing how their everyday lives had come to be subjugated and shaped by forces outside and often invisible to them. In doing this, I used Smith’s (2005) notion of “standpoint of social relations” and discussed how institutional processes contribute to the knowledge of certain parents while excluding others. In order to make sense of this, I needed to learn from those involved in these happenings – my parent participants. Using
the standpoint of parents, I investigated the everyday events of educational work around their children’s transition to high school and explicated how they had come to these particular understandings. I was also conscious of not objectifying parents’ experiences and was cognizant of a researcher-participant hierarchy. The parent participants’ are the experts in what is going on in their everyday world, and their experiences were the source of my questioning which focused and guided my inquiry into the analysis of how those experiences placed parents into local social relations with schools, and how they were shaped by social processes and practices happening beyond those immediate experiences (Campbell & Gregor, 2002; Campbell & Manicom, 1995). Being inspired by the IE method of inquiry, I hope to be able to see outside of and beyond a theoretical and methodological analysis of the parent-school relationship during their children’s transition years to high school, which is one of the most crucial decision-making times for parents and their children.

I will also show how the educational contexts of transitioning to high school and school choice are socially and historically situated. My review of literature has shown that the transition and decision-making process around public school choice has been constructed by “competing goals in support of equity versus education supporting the market economy” (Andre-Bechely, 1999, p. 57). Also, I will explore how institutional discourses have constituted and positioned parents, mothers in particular, in roles that reproduce the historic parent-school hierarchy. I will uncover inequities resulting from educational policies and procedures and identify how social class, race, gender, ethnicity and capital matter.

A Brief History, Location and Description of My Three Research Sites

My decision to complete research within the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) was based on a desire to understand how parents and schools in a diverse, urban community experience the process of transitioning to high school and how they go about making school choices. As well, I chose to complete my research in an organization where, from my own experience as a teacher, I was familiar with the overall structure, functioning and some of the political history of the bureaucracy. To situate my research sites, a brief history of the amalgamation of the Toronto Board of Education with five other surrounding boards of education is necessary.
In January 1998, the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) came into being as a result of the amalgamation of six separate school boards. Jane Gaskell and Laura Lee Kearns (2005) and Duncan MacLellan (2007) note that two political reasons are often stated for this amalgamation. First, in the general election of 1995 in Ontario, the Harris Government focused on reducing taxes, spending less and decreasing public debt. These spending policies were summarized in the *Common Sense Revolution* and in the passing of legislation to amalgamate five Toronto municipalities and the City of Toronto into a new City of Toronto. Education did not remain untouched. In January 1997, the *Fewer School Boards Act* (Bill 104) was passed, resulting in a dramatic reduction in the number of school boards and trustees, as well as a new educational funding formula no longer based on residential property tax, as had been historically the case. For Toronto, this resulted in the amalgamation of six English Public School Boards into the largest school board in Canada, named the Toronto District School Board.

The second more implicit reason given for the amalgamation of these six school boards was the neo-conservative Harris government’s desire to shut down the left-wing City of Toronto school board which had focused on inner city schools and inequities within growing and diverse communities. Gaskell & Kearns stated that, “A more interventionist provincial government, with rural and suburban roots and a ‘common sense revolution’, amalgamated Toronto with more suburban boards. This resulted in a mass exodus of activists from Toronto schools” (2005, p. 15). With the funding formula recalculated, Toronto lost resources, the power to raise money locally was undermined and, according to Gaskell & Kearns, “immigrant populations moved to less expensive housing in the suburbs” (2005, p. 15).

It is within one of these suburbs in the newly formed City of Toronto where my research sites are located. And it is within one of the 22 Wards and 4 Districts of the TDSB where I conducted my study. It should be noted that each of the four Districts function independently in terms of programs offered and the designation of schools according to their academic, technical and specialized programs/school status. For example, technical and vocational schools may be called Business and Technical Institutes in one District, while in another may not be designated by program at all. Also, in the TDSB, high schools may carry the title of high schools, secondary schools or collegiate institutes, historically reflecting a turn of the 20th century differentiation based on whether the schools prepared students for university, post secondary training or the
workplace (differentiated funding was also allotted by name). The amalgamation of these six previously distinct Boards of Education has not resulted in one congruous set of policies and procedures. This benefits some Wards and communities, yet disadvantages others.

During the decade of 1995 to 2005, the area I selected to study changed from a predominantly middle-class white suburban district to 55% of its residents being visible minorities (Dale, 2009). This former suburban area includes a variety of neighbourhoods. Some are homogeneous in race, ethnicity and social class while others are diverse. The parent participants in my study represent a number of these neighbourhoods. Some are homogeneously white and upper/middle-class communities within which some parent participants have grown up themselves and hope that their children will have a similar community type educational experience. Other neighbourhoods are heterogeneous, composed of new and well established immigrants and visible minority families. They are blended into a variety of housing settings from middle-class homes to subsidized high rises.

The participants’ voices are rich in description of their everyday lived experiences in their communities and bring reference to how their differences play a part in the notions of parent involvement and the transitioning and school choice process. Descriptions of these school sites (Castle Dawn, an elementary school, and Braun, a middle school) and the high school site (Royal Secondary School) will be presented here. They help to locate my parent and educator participants within these three distinctively unique school communities.

**Castle Dawn Community Site**

Castle Dawn is a Kindergarten to Grade 8 elementary school and is located in an exclusive (by geography, as well as by white professional residents), small upper/middle-class neighbourhood. The neighbourhood dwellings consist primarily of upper/middle-class, detached homes built in the 1950s and 1960s or, more recently, newer homes built on torn down bungalow properties in order to make way for larger multi-level homes. Stephen, one of the Castle Dawn fathers whom I interviewed, described the school as “like a private school” because of its small and “very safe environment”. In a discussion around his child’s transition to high school, he stated, “She’s leaving the gated community.” Stephen further described Castle Dawn as a
“community school” where, “a large part of the community is built around the school. I kind of look at it as an extension of child care. It is raising our children with us.”

Castle Dawn is a small school in its structure and student body. It is surrounded by natural and human dividers (parks and a highway) separating it from other communities. This contributes to its exclusivity. The setting reminded me of my own rural elementary school, although Castle Dawn is located in a Toronto urban setting. The principal of Castle Dawn, Sharon, commented about its homogeneity, “We do have a very homogeneous environment. We do have to remember to bring in other perspectives into the school and highlight what’s going on in the rest of the world.”

Some of the Castle Dawn parents chose to live in the community prior to the birth of their first child or moved there shortly after. A number of parents talked about selecting this area based on the reputation of the local elementary and high school. Bonnie, a Castle Dawn mother, stated, “We were here well before we got into school” and Castle Dawn is “a huge neighbourhood focal point. It has always been a lovely neighbourhood, but once you get your children into there (Castle Dawn) and start just mommy networking, and therefore family networking, this neighbourhood just comes alive.” Barb proudly mentioned that some of her daughter’s friends have known each other since they attended daycare, for about 10 years. She further explained that, “80% of the people in this area will go to Castle Dawn, so you are kind of forced to see them on a daily basis. … So you know them. It’s very communal.” Barb noted that Castle Dawn parents see each other frequently at school functions, special events, dinner parties, fundraisers, street parties or merely passing on the street. For many Castle Dawn parents, their neighbours are their friends and social contacts. Some of the descriptors used by Castle Dawn parents’ best illustrate a protected community milieu: insular world, controlled, sheltered, safe, and a comfort zone. The uniqueness of this small upper/middle-class white community school is in dramatic contrast to my second site.

**Braun Middle School Community Site**

According to the City of Toronto’s Toronto Neighbourhood Profiles (2007) which was based on Statistics Canada Census (2006), Braun Middle School draws students from a number of distinctly different neighbourhoods. I will focus on two distinctly contrasting areas within
which my parent participants live. In both these Braun neighbourhoods, there is a large number of children between the ages of 5 to 14. The first neighbourhood can be described as having a growing immigrant population (44% increase between 2000 and 2006); over 33% of children speak a language other than English in the home, a higher percentage of renters and lone parents; more apartment buildings, more multi-family dwellings and over 50% of its family income is under $50,000. The second neighbourhood has a greater percentage of immigrants compared to the rest of Toronto, but most are not recent arrivals; a greater number of residents from the British Isles and Europe; over 80% speak English in the home, a lower number of renters and more one-family dwellings, and one-third of its families have an average income of $100,000 and over. As described by the Braun M.S. principal, this is truly a “divided parent community”.

Speaking specifically about Braun Middle School, the TDSB School Profile (2008-2009) indicated: 47% of the students’ primary language is other than English, although only 12% of its students are born outside of Canada. As the above statistics suggest, Braun Middle School boundaries include a range of neighbourhood residences from upper/middle-class homes to lower socio-economic townhouses and subsidized high rise apartments. Unlike the Castle Dawn community, the Braun community is economically, racially, ethnically and culturally diverse.

Braun Middle School is a Senior Elementary School (Grades 7 and 8), being fed by five different Junior Elementary Schools (JK to 6). Two of Braun’s feeder school neighbourhoods are similar to those of Castle Dawn (homogeneous, white upper/middle-class, professional parents and detached homes). These two homogeneous Braun neighbourhood feeder schools are located on the other side of the highway, as is Castle Dawn, compared to the three remaining feeder schools. These three feeder schools are broadly diverse (middle to lower socio-economic status; long time residents, recent immigrants and transient families; single parents, couples and extended family households and semi-professionals, underemployed and unemployed). This diversity, especially for those students on the other side of the highway, provides challenges, as well as benefits, and definitely has an influence on parent-school relationships.

Braun M.S. is a large school in structure, has two and a half times the student population as Castle Dawn and is, according to parents and teachers, overcrowded, particularly since Middle School students do some travelling between classes. Joanne, a Braun mother, talked about the problems arising in the hallways, especially during class changes, “The hallways are congested
and you see a couple of kids starting to fight in the hall and so it’s a very different atmosphere when you have all these big kids.” My parent and teacher participants all agreed that Braun M.S. is a tough school and the students are at a tough age to teach.

Growing up and returned to one of Braun’s middle-class neighbourhoods, Joanne distinguished between what she called “two areas of town”. One of the Braun feeder schools on the Castle Dawn side of the highway is described by Joanne as, “affluent, like the houses are more expensive and the area is more protected.” In comparing her own neighbourhood on the Braun side, she stated:

We’ve got public housing and our neighbourhood here is nice. You get the same house but it’s a different price. So people tend to be, like a social status symbol almost to be in the other area. …It’s sort of one of those unspoken things. Nobody rubs your face in it or anything, but it’s sort of there.

This community divide seemed to be quite a common notion among parents, administrators and some teachers.

One of the descriptors parents from Braun Middle School used to describe their community was diverse. They talked about their experiences, perceptions and understandings of the racial, ethnic, class and cultural divisions within the various neighbourhoods in their school communities. Leslie, a single mother of two who grew up and still lives in the same middle-class Braun neighbourhood, also characterized different areas in the Braun school community. She spoke of a neighbourhood close to her own, “It is a rough, rough area… where there’s a ton of gang activity. They’re all at Braun Middle School, so there are a lot of drugs there and a lot of gang activity. All that kind of stuff.” The parents are not the only ones among my study participants aware of the diversity of students attending Braun and the influence it has on parent involvement and the transition process. Teachers and administrators are equally cognizant of Braun’s diverse communities, as will be illustrated in later chapters.

Braun M.S. is a community divided by physical landscape, class, ethnicity, race and socio-cultural knowledge and understandings. Parents and educators lack of awareness of diverse understandings of parent involvement in this community, especially in reference to the transitioning process, has a definite effect on the Braun parent-school relationships.
Royal Secondary School

As is the case with most high schools in urban areas, Royal S.S has a number of feeder schools located in diverse neighbourhoods. Royal S.S. is one of three possible designated high schools for Braun students and the only one for Castle Dawn students. Braun and Castle Dawn communities (in addition to 3 other schools) feed into Royal S.S.. The diverse student population at Royal poses a concern for some Castle Dawn parents, which acts as a continuation of Braun’s already diverse milieu (racial, ethnic, cultural, social class). Royal is located within an urban community which has had a 44% increase in immigrant population between the years 2000 to 2006. This increase was primarily in youth between the ages of 5 to 14, according to the City of Toronto’s Social Profile of Neighbourhoods based on Statistics Canada Census (2006). Royal draws its student population from single-home dwellings to multi-story and multi-family dwellings. Although one-third of its population has an annual income of over $100,000, a variety of income ranges exist in its neighbourhoods, with a significant percentage (45%) of residents falling below $29,000 (Social Profile 2006).

Royal S.S. has a long history in one of Toronto’s legacy Boards. It has changed names several times reflecting funding, a desire for re-imaging and the need to attract a greater clientele from an ever increasing immigrant community. At the end of the 1980s and early 1990s, the legacy Board where Royal was located was closing empty schools due to economic hardships and a declining student enrollment. As one Royal educator stated, reflecting on concerns of the time, “Royal was such an empty building and they would take any kids to keep up the enrollment and keep the staff alive.” This educator also mentioned that the Board of Education was going to “give one of its schools to the Metro Separate Board, and they didn’t want to give up a school that had a big mass of land”, especially Royal which is situated on valuable city property. As was the case for many schools during these economically difficult times, Royal advocates were searching for strategies which would lead to increased enrollment to justify staying open.

Several parent and teacher participants gave credit to one principal who developed a unique concept for marketing Royal. Parallels can be drawn between this principal’s strategies and the introduction of magnet schools in the United States and the UK national market-model of schooling which provided parents with the most desirable education for their children, based on the perceived parent community needs (Ball, 2003). The principal foresaw the needs of a
growing (immigrant) parent population as: a high school within the public school system (publicly funded) with a reputation and identity similar to a private school (uniformed, high achieving students, strict rules of conduct and exemplary programming). This principal guided Royals re-imaging into a high school well sought after by parents inside and outside the community.

Some of my participants, who were cognizant of Royal’s history, credited this principal for his innovative and visionary plan which attracted more serious academic students, particularly from a growing immigrant population. But according to Margaret, a long time Royal educator, in addition to the vision of this principal,

The creation of Royal was done by the staff. It wasn’t a plan that came from outside. A lot of the building (of a new school image) started from the staff. The principal was brought in and he had carte blanche to pick the people whom he wanted to build Royal.

Perhaps because of its land value, the Toronto Board did not want to be forced to close Royal and sell the property. The Board appeared to go to extraordinary measures to ensure Royal’s survival considering the cost of maintaining an older building and reassigning a new principal. Moreover, as Margaret suggested, all the staff were required to reapply for their jobs if they wished to work under the new school model or face being relocated. At present, Royal S.S. is a well sought after high school, by both parents and students within as well as outside its community.

**Locating and Entering My Sites: Problems and Issues**

The business of obtaining school sites in which to recruit parent participants was not as straightforward as I had originally thought. I carefully decided upon my starting contacts using two criteria: an urban setting and travel distance. The second criterion was particularly important because the TDSB is the largest student populated Board of Education in Canada and its geography spans a considerable area. Since I live outside the TDSB boundaries, I was conscious of the fact that, as the sole researcher, I was restricted by geography, to a doable number of interviews. In addition, I wanted to experience opportunities available to Grade 8 parents: Information Nights, high school Open Houses and information-getting (verbal and written). And, I did not want weather conditions to play a major role in my attendance. At the outset, I was
optimistic and considered that I might have too many willing parent participants and I planned a selection process. Reflecting back on this notion, I indeed was overly optimistic.

**Phase 1: Contacting the Schools**

My research began by making cold calls to high schools in two chosen districts of the TDSB. I wanted to obtain permission from one high school administrator who was interested in my following Grade 8 parents from two of its elementary feeder schools through the transition and school choice process. I contacted four high school administrators by phone and sent an email with my Letter of Introduction about myself and my study. One high school administrator did not respond to my call or Letter of Introduction, two were interested in my research subject but already had researchers participating in their schools and did not want to overwhelm the school staff (although I pointed out that my research was focused on parent participants). The fourth high school (Royal Secondary School) was recommended by one of the two principals who declined to participate, indicating that Royal’s principal might be interested. I made the initial contact (by phone and email). In anticipation of a confirmation from the principal at Royal S.S. (I understood the inner circle of principals to be small, this being confirmed later in my study), I went on to phase two which was contacting the feeder schools.

The principal at one of Royal’s feeder schools, Braun Middle School (7 & 8), was positive about my research and agreed to pass on my Letter of Introduction to the Parent Council Chair. The Chair was then to bring my request to the next meeting and get back to me. After Braun’s Parent Council meeting, Nina, a Parent Council member and Grade 8 parent, contacted me by email. Our discussion resulted in Nina revealing that she also had a child attending Royal High School and was willing to follow-up with the principal to obtain permission for me to conduct my research on that site. In the following weeks, during a meeting at Nina’s home, she confirmed that the principal of Royal Secondary School turned over the responsibility for participating in the study to their Parent Council, of which she was a member. It is interesting to note here that both Braun M.S. and Royal Secondary School administrators left the final decision to participate in my research to their Parent Councils. Thus, Nina was my bridge into both Royal Secondary School and Braun Middle School. Most importantly, Nina was familiar with the administration and politics in both schools and was an invaluable help in broadening my understanding of these two sites.
**Phase 2: Contacting Parents**

At Braun M.S., the principal had assigned my study to Ricky, the Vice-Principal. In a meeting with Nina and Ricky, we agreed that my Letter of Introduction and request for participants would be distributed to all Grade 8 parents (except for special needs students whose parent-school relationship is legislated) with the final report cards. A note of approval from the Parent Council and administration accompanied my request for parent participants. All in all, from the cold calls in April to the letter distribution in June, the timing was wrong. As stated by Nina, “I caution distribution of the letter too late in June as this might not give parents enough time to respond, especially since June is such a critical month with graduation events, report cards, etc.” Throughout the closing weeks of school and throughout the summer, I received no responses.

I also spoke with two other elementary school principals. One forwarded my request to the guidance counsellor who was responsible for a total of 6 schools. She spoke on the phone for some time about the overwhelming nature of her job and how the parents would probably not be interested since they did not show up for school meetings. She felt that parents, uncritically, “trusted the system” to make decisions about their child’s future and often had incorrect information. Her frustration was clearly evident and, in the end, she felt she could not take on another responsibility at this time. The third elementary school principal was from Castle Dawn and agreed to meet with me for a further discussion. After our meeting, she saw my research as possibly crucial to understanding parent involvement and the transition process and thus agreed to distribute my Letter of Introduction to the Grade 8 parents, along with her note of approval, with the final report cards.

Whether parents in both schools did not wish to take part in the study, did not read the Letter of Introduction because it was addressed to Grade 8 parents and they already perceived themselves as beyond elementary school at this point, or, as Nina suggested, they were just too busy, I do not know. But I received no interest from the Grade 8 parents from either school and thus had to wait for the following September to make new contacts with the up-and-coming Grade 8 parents.

In retrospect, this gave me an opportunity to participate in three experiences which proved invaluable to my understanding of the transition process and my research communities.
First, alongside Grade 8 parents in the community the following year, I had the opportunity to participate in: both elementary school information nights, three local high school Open Houses and obtain the paperwork applicable to families living in the community (in-area), as well as those applying to specialty programs from outside the community (out-of-area). Secondly, in gaining insight into my community from the perspective of a Grade 8 parent, I was able to establish one of the most valuable parent contacts (Nina) in my study. One of Nina’s children was transitioning to Grade 9 and her personal reflections helped chart out the complex intricacies and inequities in the transitioning process, as well as in the parent-school relationship.

My third invaluable experience during the stall in recruiting parent participants was the use of this opportunity to become familiar with the school communities I had identified: Royal Secondary School, Braun Middle School and Castle Dawn Elementary School. I reviewed each school’s website for parental information related to transitioning and school choice. Through the two elementary school websites I was able to get, from a textual perspective: school goals, Parent Council Minutes, school newsletters and, for Castle Dawn, the EQAO scores (Braun M.S. was not within the EQAO testing grades which are grade 3 and 6 and grade 10 for literacy only). The Royal Secondary School website was only accessible to parents and students who attend the school and not the general public. Upon request, I was denied access to this private public school website since I was told that it was for parents and students only. I also used the main TDSB website to familiarize myself with information directed towards parents and geographical boundaries for my sites. Throughout the summer, I became familiar with the landscape and geography of each community giving me a better understanding of the uniqueness and diversity of the neighbourhoods within each community.

In August, I contacted both schools to establish a new plan for requesting parental contacts. Ricky, the Vice-Principal at Braun Middle School, agreed, once again, to pass on my information to the new Chair of the Parent Council which was meeting that evening. One of the problems I was soon to learn was the constant movement of Parent Council Chair persons, especially in a middle school such as Braun, where students are only in attendance for two years. Ricky had previously denied my access to speak with the Parent Council about my research on the basis that they had to approve my entry into their meeting. Two weeks after Braun’s Parent Council meeting, I had not heard from Elizabeth, the Parent Council Chair (Nina had been my
contact the previous year). So I contacted Ricky and she sent me Elizabeth’s email address for direct contact. After two months of shifting responses and placing strong demands on Elizabeth to respond, I finally got an email asking for my telephone number, which had been on all my contact information given to the Parent Council. After three months, Elizabeth and I had a meeting scheduled to discuss my entry into the Braun Middle School community and the process of introduction to the Grade 8 parents.

By mid January, I had dropped off 250 Introductory Letters and return envelopes to Braun M.S. requesting Grade 8 parent participants. These were distributed by home room teachers, to be taken home by students for parent completion and returned to a drop off box in the office. I called a week later hopeful of returns, but was told they had just been sent out the previous day. After two more weeks, I received a positive response from Braun M.S.. 7 questionnaires had been returned: 2 with contact information [1 with only an email address and, after 4 attempts, I received no response]; 1 provided a telephone number but had not understood the purpose of the invitation. Through a conversation with his English-speaking daughter, I learned that the parent did not want to be a participant; 1 response had an illegible name but no contact information, and 4 completed questionnaires had no contact information. This was disappointing, especially because not one of the Parent Council members completed the questionnaire with contact information. This presented an additional dilemma.

I found it interesting that both Braun Middle School and Royal High School required that the Parent Council approve my research, while Castle Dawn did not. In reflection, I suggest that because Castle Dawn is such a small school that the principal, who had been there for over three years, may have informally received approval from Parent Council members since she saw them on a regular basis. At Braun Middle School, a school with over twice the student population as Castle Dawn, the all new administration had only just completed their first year at the school when I introduced my study and it was Elizabeth’s first foray into being Chair of the Parent Council. The administration may have wanted to step lightly because of personalities or, because my research was parent focused, wanting to give the Council the responsibility of approval. Also, from a political perspective, the TDSB had allocated power to the Parent Councils to be involved in the selection process of school administrators. In any case, it was obvious that my entry into the Braun Middle School site was definitely going to be touchy. This was not what I
had anticipated, although I should not have been surprised given my own years of involvement in educational bureaucracies. This only confirmed my previous scepticism about parent research studies which rely only on data from impersonal questionnaires/surveys in order to establish an understanding of parent involvement and parent-school relationships. Which parents actually choose to respond to such research invitations and do they feel required to participate? I have always contended that interviewing parents with the intent of listening to their voices would lead to a greater understanding of the “silences” mentioned by Vincent (2000) and the barriers established between parents and schools, as mentioned by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003). I conclude that my findings demonstrate this.

After my unsuccessful attempt at questionnaire distribution, I boldly sent an email asking Elizabeth when she was available to be interviewed and, surprisingly, she responded with some possible dates. As suggested by my thesis supervisor, after I interviewed Elizabeth, I once again asked her to contact some parents who she thought might be willing to be interviewed and email me their contact information. Two weeks later, the snowball had begun to roll and, by the time it came to a stop, I had 5 Braun M.S. parent contacts with interview dates for each. Whether Elizabeth felt more comfortable to ask other parents to participate in my study only after being interviewed herself or whether there was some other non-determined reason, it appeared that Elizabeth was now willing to actively encourage my access to other Braun parents.

While manoeuvring this lengthy entry process into Braun Middle School, I had reacquainted myself in September with the principal at Castle Dawn and attended the first Meet the Teacher Night. For my second year of entry, there was only one combined Grade 7/8 class (10 Grade 8 students and one teacher). I hovered around the classroom door identifying the Grade 8 parents and introduced myself and my research study, asking for their participation. The gathering was a very social experience since the teacher had taught most of the students at least once previously and most of the parents already knew each other. Information on the Grade 8 curriculum sat on a chair near the teacher’s desk. Some parents took one, but most proceeded to socialize and talk with the teacher and other parents. By the end of the evening, five parents had given me their contact information, although only three, upon contact, agreed to be interviewed (this was 33% of the parents). So, my parent participant interviews were arranged at Castle Dawn long before I had made one parent contact at Braun Middle School. This too is significant
and understandable considering the differences in parent agency, parent-school relationships and degree of homogeneity/heterogeneity in and between the two school communities.

By mid-May, a year after my initial entry, I had completed my second phase of interviewing Grade 8 parents in both elementary schools and began phase three of my study.

**Phase 3: Interviews With Grade 8 Educators**

During this phase, I arranged interviews with the Grade 8 teachers, administrators and the one guidance counsellor who was responsible for both elementary schools. By the end of the second school year, I had completed all my interviewing at Castle Dawn, and, although completing the administration and guidance interviews at Braun M.S., no Grade 8 teachers had responded to my invitation to become a participant in my study. In retrospect, I understand the politics of what was happening at Braun M.S. at that time. A completely new administration was just completing their second year at the school and there had been a number of teaching staff changes resulting in a number of teachers, new to the profession, being hired. The new teachers were just trying to deal with the end of the year procedures of marking, evaluating, graduation and all the issues around students transitioning to high school. The administration was working on developing plans for reorienting Braun M.S. into a new learning milieu. This was confirmed by the Braun Grade 8 teachers whom I interviewed during the first three months of the following school year.

After reconnecting with Ricky, the Vice-Principal at Braun M.S., I was invited to a start of the year barbeque during this third school year contact. All parents were invited to this social to meet and greet their children’s teachers, although some families were fasting for religious reasons. During this evening, I approached a number of Grade 8 teachers about participating in my study and received 4 positive responses and acquired two more during the interviewing process. My contacts had now been made and teacher interviews finally begun at Braun Middle School.
Phase 4: Re-interviewing Parents

This phase took place near the end of the parents’ first semester of their children in Grade 9. I re-interviewed parent participants in order to hear their reflections on the transitioning and school choice process and their own high school choice.

Phase 5: Interviews With Grade 9 Educators

Simultaneously, with the 4th phase, I arranging interviews with Grade 9 teachers, an administrator and guidance counsellor at Royal Secondary School. Nina, my original Parent Council contact from Braun Middle School, now had 2 children attending Royal Secondary School and was also a member on the Royal Parent Council. The acting principal (the principal had suddenly become ill) at Royal indicated that I needed to get the permission from the Parent Council to complete my interviews since the subject matter dealt with parents. I contacted Nina, now co-chair of the Royal Parent Council, who agreed to speak with the other co-chair, David. They suggested I send a Letter of Introduction for teachers to both Co-Chairs and subsequently I was invited to the next Parent Council meeting in October to present my case. I made a brief presentation explaining my study. The reception and questions were very positive and I received unanimous approval to proceed in contacting Grade 9 teachers. My Letter of Introduction was given to the office by David, upon which the office staff forwarded a copy to each Grade 9 teacher through the Board internet email system. Now, it has been my experience in the past that this form of communication is rarely given much attention by teachers, probably due to the large number of emails received through this electronic means. My suspicions were confirmed. I did not hear from a single Grade 9 teacher.

My most valuable contacts, in my plight to obtain Grade 9 teacher participants at Royal, came from a Parent Council meeting. I met the principal to whom, upon advisement, I was most gracious and thankful for allowing me into his school. I was also able to obtain permission to interview David, the co-chair, and from there he contacted a Grade 9 teacher whom he felt would be interested. The snowball began to roll. Another important contact was Margaret, a guidance counsellor at Royal, who had made a presentation to parents at the Parent Council meeting. Having heard her presentation, I was able to draw upon this familiarity in a phone conversation to request an interview. By the end of February, almost two full years (and into my third school
year) since my initial cold calls in search of sites and participants, I had completed my interviewing. By way of a count, I had interviewed: 14 parents (11 were re-interviewed), 9 teachers and 4 administrators/counsellors. A total of 38 interviews were completed for my study.

**Data Collection Process and Parameters**

Taking the standpoint of parents whose children were transitioning from Grade 8 to high school, I chose to interview parents twice, once while their children were in Grade 8 and again after their children had almost completed one semester of high school. Using parent participants’ everyday experiences around transitioning and school choice, I developed questions for teachers and administrators in order to gain insight into their perceptions of parents’ experiences, thus opening up a more vivid understanding of parent-school relationships. Since the number of parent participants was not large, I chose to interview all parents who indicated an interest in being a study participant. I do not claim that my participants are a random sample or even representative of the communities in which they live. In fact, the results from a brief demographic questionnaire distributed to parents and teachers/administrators (see Appendices A & B) after their first interviews, indicated all participants had a post secondary education; some outside of Canada (see Appendix C & D). This suggested to me that all parent participants and educators valued post secondary education, had acquired a certain level of cultural knowledge, and may have had enough personal confidence in their own educational experiences to see value in their reflections. Even though my participants may not have been a representative sample of their parent community, their responses are of value in understanding the parent-school relationship, particularly in the way ethnic, racial and social class parents position themselves and are positioned by educators, as well as by other parents.

In three interviews both parents were present at the first interview, although in one case the father participated only peripherally (reading the newspaper on the couch but interjecting comments). This father was not present for the second interview. In a second case, the brother of the father was present and introduced as an academic scholar. He proceeded to work on his laptop throughout most of our interview, but kept an ear on the discussion. [Perhaps this family, of immigrant status, needed to be reassured that I was not a threat to them.] All the remaining parent interviews were conducted with mothers of Grade 8/9 students. Prior to each interview, I reviewed with participants my written Letter of Introduction (see Appendix E) reiterating my
position as a doctoral candidate, my research purpose, the intended number and length of
interviews, the confidentiality, anonymity and use of pseudonyms of all participants and sites,
tape recording of the interviews, and some possible benefits to participants. Each participant
signed a consent form confirming their understanding of the research study parameters; as listed
above and, upon receipt, they could edit their own transcripts. Transcripts were emailed to each
respective participant and, out of 38 interviews, only three participants wished changes in the
written transcript, primarily adding clarification to their own statements. Participants were asked
to indicate their desired location for conducting the interview. One parent interview was
conducted in a food court, two on the phone and the remainder were conducted in the parent
participants’ homes. Each initial parent interview was approximately one hour in length.

Letters of introduction were also given to educators (see Appendices F, G, H) and
discussion was had prior to each interview, as with my parent participants. The length of
interviews with classroom educators ranged from one to one and a half hours in length at a
location designated by each educator. All educators chose to be interviewed at their school site,
except one who chose a local coffee shop. Although all classroom teachers had at least two years
experience (see Appendix D), those who had fewer years in the classroom were initially reluctant
to participate in the study because they perceived their knowledge around parent-teacher
relationships as being inadequate. Little to no training in interacting with parents had been
provided either as part of their educational training or at their local school site. It was clearly
learning by trial and error. With encouragement and reassurance that their experiences were of
value, a total of 9 teachers were interviewed. Interviews were also conducted with 2
administrators and 2 guidance counsellors. Using the standpoint of parents, the interviews with
educators proved to be extremely valuable in clarifying how they defined parental involvement
and understood the transition and school choice process. Procedures at the elementary school
level were largely developed and designed by the TDSB in conjunction with schools. The Grade
9 entry/registration process at Royal Secondary School, especially to their special program, was
school developed but followed Board guidelines.

In phase 4, I re-interview the Grade 8/9 parents whose children had now almost
completed their first semester in high school (exams were being written). I re-interviewed 11
original Grade 8 parents where three families introduced me to their grade 9 daughters. Two of
these families lives in the Braun community and had immigrated to Canada a number of years ago. They wanted me to hear how their daughters had experienced high school along with themselves. One of these Braun fathers wanted me to also see how his daughter had matured. After our re-interview, one Castle Dawn family wanted me to see the beauty and “wholesomeness” of their daughter, as well as discuss a particular concern related to her academic support. Although I had not received written permission to talk with their children, these two families encouraged and requested my interaction with their children.

I conducted one interview with two parents who were on the Parent Council at Royal S.S. whose children were in senior grades. I also met one other Grade 8/9 parent at a Board Parent Conference and she requested to be interviewed for my study. Even though this parent lived in another Toronto school community, she had just gone through the transition and school choice process and had similar concerns and experiences as the parent participants in my chosen communities. I did not re-interview her but rather used her response as a confirmation that TDSB parents of Grade 8/9 children are struggling with similar issues related to information-getting, transitioning and school choice in many communities beyond my own research sites. She also confirmed many notions discussed by my other parent participants around the nuances of the parent-school relationship.

Throughout this almost two year interviewing period, I was able to attend two Information Nights for Grade 8 parents (one for Castle Dawn parents and one for Braun M.S. parents) and six Information Nights for Grade 8 parents held at three high schools within my research communities. The information received from these gatherings, along with the TDSB and schools websites, provided the basis for my textual analysis of information offered to Grade 8 parents on transitioning and the school choice process and procedures. This analysis will be in Chapters 5 to 7, as well as serve as the basis of my policy and procedure discussion in the concluding chapter.

**Interviews, Data Analysis and Presentation**

I began each interview with a generalized, yet personal question bringing into light parents’ everyday experiences. This was consistent with my paradigm positioning. Parents were asked to describe a typical school day in their home. Listening to their responses, my questions
followed accounts of their experiences and understandings of parental involvement in schools, guiding the discussion towards their children’s transition and school choice experiences. Each question generated another set of questions adding to my understanding of each parent’s everyday experiences in these processes. Prior to entering the parent interviews and re-interviews, I had developed some directive questions (see Appendices I, J), but I used these as a reference, as parents often led the discussion touching on areas of interest to my research and sometime raising issues and concerns not previously set out in my question guide. I transcribed each interview from the tape within one or two weeks after they were conducted, thus permitting me a more accurate recall of participants’ body language and intonations. A copy of the transcript was sent to each participant for editing. This time frame was crucial because I felt it was important for participants to still be engaged in and clearly recall our interview in case they felt editing was necessary. This proved to be quite successful in that few participants requested editing and those who did only requested minor changes. After each interview, I also recorded my thoughts and personal reflections in a diary noting the interview milieu, participants’ personal reactions and questions still haunting me about their parent-school relationships.

After completing my first set of parent interviews, I noted common issues, concerns and questions which I wanted to address from the educator participants’ perspectives. Using the standpoint of parents, I focused on these issues, concerns and questions during my interviews with educators. Thus, the questions I asked of educators were developed from my parent interviews. All educator interviews began with a general question about how they had arrived in their current school in order to give me a starting point in the interview (see Appendices K, L, M, N, O).

Upon completion of all my interviews (parents and educators), I reread each transcript and coded them according to emerging themes by interviewee groups (parents, teacher, counsellors and administrators) in order to reflect on similarities or differences between and among groups. In my findings, I draw upon some parent responses more heavily than others. This is because some parents more clearly and descriptively typified many parent participants and some present concerns and issues only alluded to or touched upon in the delicate balance in the researcher/researched relationship. Some parents were more open and seemed to be more
cognizant of their feelings and experiences, while others perhaps were cautious about revealing/saying too much of their personal experiences in such a public way.

I came to understand differences in the meaning of parent involvement in the every day doings of parent participants, as well as differences between parents and educators. These differences reflected societal positions based on class, race, ethnicity, gender and immigration status. Also, parent participants’ differences also reflected their own personal experiences with schooling in addition to their current social community. Throughout my analysis, it became apparent that the transition to high school and school choice can be a complex process involving a multitude of decision-making skills based on textual information provided by the school, as well as parental social networks (other parents, friends, teachers, administrators, counsellors, etc.). All of the parent participants viewed this decision-making process as critical to their children’s future post secondary education and career directions; yet, it also became evident that some parent participants, even in the same community, had more social, economic, cultural and emotional capital upon which to draw in making what all parents defined as one of the most important educational decisions in their children’s lives. Information made available to parent participants in the decision-making and the school choice process varied according to social class. As Smith explains:

Class is not understood as a secret power behind our backs, determining how we think, how we understand the world, and how we act. Rather class is seen as a complex of social relations coordinating the activities of our everyday worlds with those of others with whom we are not connected. (1987, p. 134)

My literature review and framework for this study are based upon concepts of race, ethnicity, social class and gender. Highly conscious of this, I examined how the transition process was discursively organized, how school choice, at the local level, was textually and orally (grape vine knowledge) mediated and how bureaucratic procedures, policies and ingrained school/education assumptions affected the parent-school relationship.

As much as possible, I present my data through the parent voices in order to reflect their understandings, their positions and their divergence from the generally accepted notions of parent involvement. Although I might have traced social relations by mapping local and external school and Board discourses, as is the usual approach of IE (Smith, 2005; Campbell & Gregor,
I have chosen to focus on the parent participants’ voices in my study. In this way, I want to highlight parent participants’ everyday experiences and make suggestions for policies and procedures which may be considered by parents and schools at the local school level.

In the next three chapters, I present my findings. Conscious of my possible editing and presenting perceptions which support my position, I present Michelle Fine’s (1992) argument that, “The problem is not that we tailor but that so few researchers reveal how we do this work” [italics the authors] (p. 218). She presents a number of challenges which I also faced in analyzing a diverse group of adults:

When my work moved to adults – particularly parents/guardians, educators, or other adults who sit between oppressive institutional arrangements and the lives of children – I collected far more nuanced analyses. Neither monolithic voices of critique nor single voices of institutional praise. These women were multiple-situated, and their perspectives were stuffed with social contradictions. The braiding of their commentary was rich but not easily captured with the categories familiar to social analyses. Laced with perspectives of dominant classes, they wanted desperately to believe in public institutions, and, at the same time, they routinely witnessed the institutional inadequacies of these schools, and felt absolutely responsible for the lives of children, who lived at levels of substantial economic disadvantage. These women set forth rich, complex, and hard-to-code voices. (pp. 217-218)

Unlike Michelle Fine’s study, my adult parent participants’ voices also included men/fathers, although to a much lesser degree than women/mothers, and are varied in terms of economic dis/advantage. But in presenting my parents’ voices, I too saw contradictions, a hesitancy to put their children and themselves in opposition to the beliefs of public schools. It is my hope to bring these contradictions, the inadequacies of the bureaucratic processes of transitioning and the hopes of parents to light through presenting their everyday experiences in their local settings rather than from an institutional or extra-local perspective.
CHAPTER 5:
PARENT INVOLVEMENT

In the next three chapters, I present my understandings and interpretations of participant interviews and experiences during my two years in the field. I am conscious of my positioning as a mother, a teacher and a doctoral student, all of which have assisted me in understanding the participants, both parents and educators, and allowed me to intrude into their daily lives. Parents graciously allowed me into their homes and lives at a time when they were vulnerable to the educational bureaucracy and unsure about their role as parents and as decision makers in the transition process between elementary and secondary school.

High school transitioning is one of the most crucial time periods in the parent-school relationship. In the next three chapters, I show how most parents are involved (publicly and/or privately) and how some are marginalized or silenced by cultural assumptions, societal social expectations and/or educational bureaucratic processes and procedures. Wherever possible, I use parental voices to support my analysis and intersperse educators’ understandings into the mix in order to hear where parents and schools may have similar or different experiences and views. This sometimes presents an uncomfortable borderland in the parent-school relationship.

This chapter is divided into three main sections: Parent Involvement and Public Performance (using an example of Parent Councils), Parent Involvement and Emotional Capital and Parental Expectations. Influences of race, ethnicity, social class and gender will be intertwined in my discussion on various aspects of parent involvement, emotional, social and cultural capital. Transitioning to high school and parent school choice are the intersections by which I discuss parent-school relationships.

Parent Involvement and Public Performance

Parent Council Membership as an Example of Public Performance

Before proceeding into my discussion on parent involvement, I wish to note that in my study *parent public performance* refers to a socially constructed activity or behaviour which can be observed and is often defined by, in the case of education, teachers, administrators and other
parents. Private performance of parent involvement usually encompasses those activities or behaviours which are not overtly visible to those outside the home and that may not be recognized by parents themselves as parent involvement.

As pointed out previously, parent involvement does not have a static meaning, especially when crossing parent-school and socio-cultural boundaries. I sensed most parent participants began our interview with an understanding (theirs and mine) that parent involvement was based on parental public and visible performance in their children’s school. I, too, had an understanding that parent involvement could be measured by activities performed in the school or overtly evident to teachers (i.e., homework completion, test and assignment evaluations). Public performance is a relatively non-intrusive measure of parent involvement and often confirms (for parents, teachers and bureaucracies) the notion that parents actually do participate in and care about their children’s education. From a bureaucratic perspective, parent public performance can be aligned with parents wanting to see/participate in where/how their tax dollars are actually spent. But, when I delved into their doings, beyond accounts of meetings, committees, fundraisers and fun fairs, parent participants were often taken aback. Listening to their accounts, I wanted to know, from a parent’s perspective: how they realized parent involvement (especially during their children’s transition to high school), what part the school played in developing these understandings during this crucial process and what goes on in the home that is not traditionally measured (invisible and private parent involvement).

The first set of parent interviews began with the following question: “What does a typical school day look like in your home?” Most parents related a morning routine (i.e., getting out of bed, breakfast, making lunches, off to school) and then ended with how their children arrived home (driven, walked, biked…), as if the connection between home and school had now been completed. I inquired about how school was brought into their homes, purposefully remaining vague which led parent responses in divergent directions. Some parents talked about evening school meetings, sports events and school performances. Others talked about helping their children with homework, studying or driving their children to out-of-school activities (hockey, art classes or volunteer work) which required a delicate balance among school obligations, out of school activities and daily routines in the home. But all parent participants talked about having conversations with their children about school, which usually began during dinner preparation or
while eating. These discussions focused on homework and/or assignments, the events in their children’s and their friends’ lives and the looming questions around high school choice, course selections, peer group selection, and career goals. Many parents seemed to be filled with emotional angst and uncertainty about advising their children along a chosen educational path and/or career, as well as reassuring their children around the emotions associated in transitioning to high school. This was so for all parents, including those who had personal experiences in the Ontario education system and had acquired vast social networks over the last two years which supplemented their own research on various school options and student transition experiences.

As an educator and a parent, I participated in the notion that caring parents usually attend school meetings and events, though they would not necessarily be members of the Parent Council. As a parent and teacher, my personal comfort zone was the high school milieu. I felt less familiar with elementary education than high school, so I attended my own children’s high school Parent Council meetings even though, on most occasions, I just sat and listened. I saw public parent involvement through Parent Council membership at the high school level as more critical than at the elementary school level. This is contradictory to the research evidence that suggests a decrease in parent public participation at the secondary level. At the outset of my research, I was curious about this contradiction. Parent Councils, at the bureaucratic level, are believed to represent school parent communities. This was given evidence when I sought out parent participants for this study. Administrators in two of my three school sites referred me to the Chair of the Parent Council in order to obtain their approval for interviewing parents. Either the administrators had the notion that the Council spoke for the whole parent community or they were happy to delegate this task elsewhere. My research findings indicated that the Parent Councils in neither schools spoke for the entire parent community.

As Corter and Pelletier (2004) noted, most parents in attendance at Parent Council meetings place a greater emphasis on their political role within the educational system than parents who do not attend. Those who attend usually focus on their own political position rather than the interests of the broader student and school community. From the literature and my own experiences, Parent Council members, even if they are focused on their own agency, often feel they are participating in the development of Board and school policies. The reality around
parents’ political persuasion and acting as agents of change was more accurately stated by David, one of the Co-Chairs on the Parent Council at Royal:

Here is the purpose of the School Council: it’s to be an advisor to the principal. It’s really a forum that allows a connection with parents in the community when the principal has issues or matters that need community consultation. We naively, many Councils naively put together their by-laws and figure out what they’re going to do as institutions and don’t understand that much of that was already done for them in the law. The role of parents is to show up, offer opinions and ask questions, in a forum that influences what the principal and vice principals will do. Of course parents do that without having too high expectations that everything they say will be acted upon.

Whether this perfunctory Parent Council role places parents as secondary educational players, as suggested by Lopez (2001), or positions them as being protected by their protectors (the school system) as suggested by Pushor (2007a), or even positions parents as unknowners (lacking in knowledge/skills), as my historical trajectory chapter suggests, well entrenched social and bureaucratic norms dictate that parents are given a voice, even if it is only to support the already made decisions.

All participants in my study, including educators, agreed that parent involvement required two essential public appearances: attendance at parent-teacher interviews and at any of their children’s public performances. But those parent participants who were also Parent Council members felt that non-participation at Council meetings meant lack of full involvement in their child’s schooling. This was not the case for most educator nor parent participants who were not members on the Parent Council. As Beth, a Grade 8 teacher stated, “I never would assume, personally, that lack of attendance in the community necessarily equals to lack of concern or caring or whatever” (p. 13). And Ricky, an administrator, reflecting on her personal experience at her children’s School Council meetings, stated, “I stepped down as Chair and slowly dropped off my involvement, but I would hardly consider myself an uninvolved parent.” The notion of parent involvement, including membership on the Parent Council, is furthered by Ricky who recounted the political orientation of Parent Councils, much along similar lines as David when he defined the role of Parent Council,
With the advent of the School Council and all the other reformations that happened in education, a lot of stuff has changed in terms of the accountability of School Councils and parental involvement. But I think it mostly surrounds money and that kind of thing, not so much on decision-making. There are some things that the Parent Council has some input on and some that they don’t. But again, a lot of that is left up to the principal. …But there is this accountability in terms of keeping the School Council informed and it’s almost like, if you want the information, then come out to the School Council, otherwise we are not entitled to tell you.

So from an educators’ perspective, the Parent Council has a perfunctory role within a school and the true agency lies with the principal, as has been historically the case in Ontario public schools. Perhaps working in the educational forum allows educators a more holistic picture of all the players and thus allows them to place the Parent Councils within a broader bureaucratic power hierarchy. As well, the parent-school relationship does not appear to have changed over time, in spite of the intended effect of mandatory inclusion of Parent Councils in every school. Parents remain observers (unknowers/protected) and schools the doers (knowers/protectors).

**Why Do (or Don’t) Parents Participate in their Children’s School?**

Getting volunteers to serve on Parent Councils has long been a problem for many schools, as stated in a recent People For Education pamphlet (Tips For Parents, 2010). This issue was also mentioned by some parent and educator participants in my study. The People for Education 2010 Report on Ontario’s School Councils, which is based on a survey of Parent Councils across Ontario, presented evidence of a disconnect “between current provincial school council policy and what school councils actually now consider their more important roles – enhancing communication” (p. 8) with parents in the school community. The survey results also indicated that there is a disconnect “between parent engagement policy and what research tells us about what makes the greatest difference for individual student success” (p. 8). Chapter 3, as well as the People For Education Report (2010), discussed the historically based “misunderstanding” of a direct correlation between parent public performance in schools and their children’s academic achievement. As my findings demonstrate, parent involvement in the home and the informal level of parental support (emotional, psychological, social networking)

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7 School Council and Parent Council are synonymous in this study. The formalized School and Community Council (SCC) is also sometimes used in the same reference.
can be more critical in a student’s academic achievement than a parent’s public performance in schools.

The most poignant moment in my study around parents’ understanding of their involvement in their children’s schooling occurred during a discussion group where I had invited all participants to the local library to hear my preliminary findings. Only 5 parents (no educators) attended. I ended our discussion by suggesting that the concept of parent involvement moved far beyond the notion of visible public performance encompassing interactions in the home where parents communicate and connect with their children about many issues related to transitioning, as well as a multitude of personal and school related concerns and questions. Aarif, a father who was educated outside of Canada and had expressed worry about his lack of knowledge about the Canadian education system, said, “You mean I AM an involved parent?” He said this with such joy and pride that it startled me and made me reflect on what he must have been feeling and thinking during our two interviews. The interviews with Aarif and his wife, Sofia, are quite telling about what the notion of visible performance obscures, especially for parents who are not familiar with the bureaucracy of the Ontario education system and uncomfortable with their own performance in a public forum.

**Braun Middle School**

When I interviewed Aarif and Sofia, Aarif was the primary speaker because, according to him, his wife was very self-conscious about her English skills. Now, in spite of their post secondary education in their home country, Aarif and Sofia work part time in service jobs. When asked if they were involved on the Parent Council at Braun and if they felt it represented the community, Aarif answered:

We did not participate in the Parent Council at Braun. But at [the Junior feeder school], we so many times we go there and discuss there. …But the problem here [Braun] is, here are the multicultural people and they have a lot, lot of opinions. But nobody is going to participate in that because so many people are afraid to talk and go there. I think because we’ll go and we’ll find very few people there. I think it’s because of cultural barriers and the second thing is the people who are leading there are conducting trustees and all of the persons there, the principal. They basically don’t realize that other people come from other countries. I’m talking about this area, so they presume that everybody knows. So they discuss -
like they are talking about particular problems, but so many problems we don’t even understand. We are shy to ask that they will laugh at us, ‘What a stupid question they ask’.

Even though Aarif and Sofia attended Parent Council meetings at the Junior School, they felt that cultural barriers stopped many parents in their community from participating as members of the Braun Parent Council. Aarif mentioned that many people (assuming he meant immigrants, visible minorities and non-middle-class) are afraid to go to the meetings and talk because they are made to feel marginalized, powerless and ignored. The presumptive cultural capital of the white, middle-class parents (primarily mothers) who largely make-up the Braun Parent Council has resulted in Aarif and Sofia feeling they are lacking in the skills necessary to be effective and contributing members on the Council. Aarif and Sofia both mentioned that they have not been in Canada long enough to know the school milieu. Aarif explains, “We are learning and listening. …But to be an active participant, we must have to go through all these things.” In spite of their university education outside of Canada, Aarif and Sofia felt that participating on the Parent Council was both threatening in terms of their being misinterpreted, as well as potentially embarrassing in terms of others identifying them as unknowns and stupid. They also felt threatened by the presence of authority figures (principal and trustee).

Using Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of embodied cultural capital, Aarif and Sofia were confident to discuss educational matters (knowledge, educational and career aspirations and achievement) with their children within their home. But, once faced with displaying this same level of confidence and sense of self in the public forum, the value of Aarif’s and Sofia’s own cultural capital came into question. The negative sense of their immigrant status, as perceived and experienced in their community, has resulted in Aarif and Sofia being misunderstood and assumptions being made around their lack of public performance of parent involvement in their children’s school.

Aarif also stated that he and Sofia (as immigrants) “only know that Canada has a very good educational system. So if our children are there, we are happy.” This happiness did not hide the differences in positions on educational priorities, which Aarif expressed in the following two examples. Aarif illustrated how he and Sofia, as immigrant parents, are aware of school board issues, yet rely on their own understandings and experiences in order to try and make sense of
school and Board decisions. For the first example, Aarif talked about a particular political issue which arises annually with the TDSB. Aarif said:

Parents here, it’s a multicultural…they don’t participate and give their situation because when they talk about, like closing of swimming pools because the funding is not available, they want us to come and fight for that. So my wife says, will we go and make a protest for that? I said look at our system where we lived. We never have seen any swimming pools. So this is their problem because they are use to the swimming pools in their schools and other activities. We are not. So that’s actually their problem. We don’t know what to think. We don’t know. So that’s the basic cultural barriers. So that will make us more backwards and we don’t want to go and participate.

Once again Aarif positions himself and Sofia as ‘backwards’, perhaps similar to how they are positioned by the non-immigrant parents, as will be seen later. I ask: Is this really how he positions himself or is this how he positions himself when talking with a white, Canadian born teacher/researcher? In either case, Aarif has made clear that he is viewed as an outsider, which is consistent with his positioning by some members on the Braun Parent Council.

The assumption by most Parent Council members in communities such as Braun, where large parts of the parent community are not represented, is that the parents who don’t attend meetings don’t care or are not interested. It is often not a lack of interest or caring. It is a question of different socio-cultural values and experiences which makes swimming pools an irrelevant issue for them and perhaps many parents in their community. But Aarif suggests that, “Maybe our children and our children’s children will go to the protests because they have experienced this whole system and they understand the fight. They understand situations and things they can do.”

Later in the interview, Aarif talked about a discussion with his daughter around one fundraising goal which was set by the Braun Parent Council. Aarif recounts:

She (his daughter) sometimes complains, ‘I don’t understand, father, why they want a SMART Board. It’s very expensive, but they don’t have copies of new text books. They have old textbooks. Why don’t they put money into good books rather than the SMART Board which is not as useful?’
There is a clear conflict between what the Parent Council deemed a valuable educational resource and what Aarif and his daughter deemed important. This difference is also noted in Elizabeth’s (the Chair of Braun’s Parent Council) discussion on the importance of fundraising for a SMART Board, “So the kids know what it is and they respond to it. If their world is computers, it makes total sense that they access lessons on computers.” It may make perfect sense to Elizabeth and the rest of the Braun Parent Council to fundraise for a SMART Board, but for many of the parents in the Braun school community, who are not represented on the Council, there is perhaps little understanding and relevancy for this fundraising goal. The primarily white middle-class mothers on Braun’s Parent Council clearly do not speak for the entire parent community, perhaps not even many, which they are expected to represent.

**Castle Dawn Elementary School**

Carrying over this discussion of SMART Boards into the Castle Dawn community, there was little evidence of socio-cultural differences among parents and between the school and parents. The middle-class Eurocentric values of the school system are reflected in the Castle Dawn parent community. In a discussion with Beth, a teacher at Castle Dawn, about new technology, such as the SMART Board, she declared that the:

> Onus is on teachers to get with the program. …This SMART Board, I could use this in a Grade one class, easily. In fact, it would be fantastic…I told the principal, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing.’ She said its okay. We’ll get it for you and you just do what you can.

There did not seem to be a question of fundraising for this new technology at Castle Dawn as was the case at Braun, but rather persuading and training teachers in its use in the classroom.

The intersection among class, race and ethnicity is clearly evident in the differences between the approaches to the acquisition/need of a SMART Board in my two elementary school sites. Levine-Rasky (2008) discussed the dimensions of white, middle-class power, the benefits of their social location and their engagement in the performance of power. The responses of Castle Dawn’s teacher and principal to acquiring a SMART Board (performance of power) suggested there was little financial effort or question of its value for the students in this homogeneous, white and upper/middle-class community. But, for the Braun community, diverse
in class, race and ethnicity, the SMART Board is a financial burden and its value is questioned by some parents and students. Perhaps the Castle Dawn parents presumed their children will be advantaged by all the latest technological teaching tools, thus supporting Levine-Rasky’s (2008) argument related to the social positioning and performance of power elicited by “middle-classness and whiteness”. But parents in more diverse neighbourhoods, such as Braun, merely want enough books for each student in the class. The “difference-making”, of which Levine-Rasky speaks, is clear. Parent involvement, in the case of Castle Dawn parents and its educators, is then a public performance of their social position which reassures their children of the necessary cultural capital needed for future career options. Other researchers (Beck, 2007; David, 1998; Power et al., 1998; Reay, 2001) have also supported this position of advantage splitting between middle-class and lower/working-class families in a predominantly middle-class education system.

Race, Ethnicity and Social Class: How Do They Play Out in Parent Involvement?

Braun M.S.

Keeping in mind what Vincent and Martin (2002) pointed out, “Different reactions may be hidden under the guise of parental silence…all these factors operate to set boundaries on who develops an active and effective voice within the school, and who is silent” (p. 124) . Perceptions of parent involvement are indeed multilayered, as well as understandings of the purpose of school Parent Councils. Elizabeth lives in one of Braun’s more affluent neighbourhoods and has taken on the role of Chair of the Parent Council with great vigor. When asked about a typical school day in her household, she focused on the extraordinary amount of time this new role required. In contrast to David’s and Ricky’s previous explanation of the Parent Council’s role as advisor and listener, Elizabeth saw her new role as Chair as a full-time job. She noted:

A typical day for me can be spent in touch with the school quite a lot… I tend to organize a lot. Then trying to get other parents involved and work through some of the organizational aspects of certain things that take place at the school for fund raising or event nights and linking parents to those things and trying to find opportunities to bring parents in.
Her frustration in trying to increase the visible and public performance of parents in the school can be observed in her recounting of a conversation with the principal. She pinpointed a specific group of parents from one cultural group who she felt were not being fully involved:

They’re all from the same cultural background. They’re the parents who never come into this school, but they’ll sit out in their cars and wait for their children for half an hour. Why - to cause traffic jams and everything to pick up their kids? But they never walk into the school unless it’s graduation or information night or something like that.

Elizabeth is not only annoyed at the parents she refers to as “from the same cultural background” but also at her inability to get them to publicly demonstrate their parental involvement, even though she is aware of her perceived position of power as Chair of the Parent Council and her privilege as a mother living in an affluent, white neighbourhood. Elizabeth spoke outwardly about some of the issues which she felt “immigrant parents” faced, such as: language barriers, cultural familiarity, concern for their child’s safety, and the confidence needed to enter an unfamiliar educational bureaucracy. But, she did not make the connection between these barriers for immigrant/visible minority parents and what she saw as her job to increase the parent performance at Braun Middle School. Elizabeth saw this group of parents as posing a barrier in her effectively performing her job as Parent Council Chair.

Elizabeth was not the only parent confused about the lack of public involvement of parents from the immigrant/visible minority school community. Joanne, also a Braun Parent Council member, lives in a white, middle-class neighbourhood, although less affluent than Elizabeth’s. When asked if Braun’s Parent Council represents the parent community, Joanne stated:

Well, I would say again you are looking at the (neighbouring school) crowd which is pretty much all white. There’s maybe two people who aren’t white, but the make-up of the school is a lot more, not African Canadian, not the largest portion in this community, but the (identified cultural group). That’s the biggest chunk. It struck me with that at (Junior School) as well, trying to get some of these people involved. Some of them have shown up, but I don’t know how they feel, whether they’re out of place. I’ve said let me know if there’s something else they’d like to see or something else you’d like to talk about. But they come and they sit and they watch and then they don’t come back. So I don’t know.
Joanne went on to say that at Ward Council Meetings and at Parent Conferences there have been discussions around reaching out to the broader community and “telling people you don’t have to be…it’s not an ethnic thing. It may be more of a cultural thing, I guess.” She added, “I don’t know if it’s because most of the people are white that they don’t feel comfortable coming and contributing. I’m not sure what it is.” The limited public performance of immigrant or visible minority parents in many communities seems to be not only a Braun community experience but also one across the Board. Public displays of parent involvement are mostly a middle-class and white mother activity. This contrasts with the discourse of the 1970s and 1980s which focused on developing heritage language programs and countering racial and ethnic educational disparities (Coleman, 1969; Freire, 1970; Jencks, 1972; Wright, 1971).

Lisa, a Braun educator, gave an example of how lack of awareness by the upper/middle-class, white Parent Council members about the racial, ethnic and social class status of all community parents resulted in exclusion of some students while giving preferential treatment to others. She discussed:

We had this fundraising where the students sold coupon books. Each kid had to go and try to sell these $25 restaurant coupon books. In our school, what percentage of the 500 kids at our school… how many of those parents actually go out to a restaurant, really, first of all. And then, who ever sells the most coupon books gets these prizes, classes get pizza parties. They called up, last week, the winners who sold the most coupon books. Who Won? Two white kids. What did they get? They got a $100 gift card to Future Shop and a $50 gift card to Best Buy. You think, really? Great! One of the rich, white kids who lives in an exclusive neighbourhood gets a gift card to Future Shop for selling the most…it just seems sort of…but I get what they’re doing.

Interestingly, my interview with Elizabeth and Joanne suggested that neither understood why many non-white and/or immigrants parents were not interested in attending Parent Council meetings. On the other hand, Leslie, a white single mother living in a similar Braun neighbourhood to Joanne, had a very different perspective. Being an educator and working within the broader Braun community, Leslie had daily contact with parents and children from a number of socio-cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. She talked about understanding some of the issues which immigrant and visible minority parents faced on a daily basis, as well as their
positioning as a result of their own unfamiliarity with the expected parent-school relationship and their feelings of inadequacy related to their English skills. Leslie reflected:

I know that a lot of parents almost walk around the school like, ‘I shouldn’t be here’. Language is often a barrier and that’s huge, but it’s just like teachers are ranked up on this pedestal and society, culturally. They don’t want to look you in the eye because they feel that there is this uneven thing and we’re out there saying, ‘We need you. Give me more, give me more.’ They are just so stressed trying to settle and they don’t understand and they don’t feel comfortable. They feel lost and then again it’s a lot of the teachers’ responsibility to try and get them into interviews.

Leslie, a parent who is also as an educator, was educated in Ontario, does not agree with this hierarchical approach to parent-school relationships. She is clearly uncomfortable with being revered for her knowing when she states, “I always feel like they put me up somewhere and I’m really uncomfortable on this little pedestal thing where I don’t belong.” Because of Leslie’s position as an educator, her long standing in the Braun community and her whiteness, Leslie was positioned by a number of immigrant and visible minority parents as having socio-cultural capital upon which to draw in her own attempt to understand the workings of the educational bureaucracy, especially during this complex time in her own child’s transition.

When asked about her attendance at Parent Council meetings, Leslie clearly indicated her lack of desire to participate, with no need to qualify her response. Leslie further talked about what she sees as caring and involved parents:

They tend, if they have the time, to get more involved in their children’s education, in their children’s after school activities, in their children’s lives. They’re there and they’re encouraging and helping them make decisions they need to make…. I know there are lots of parents who are working two or three jobs and they just don’t have the energy or the time. The kids are at the bottom of the pile. I don’t mean to say this to excuse them because you have to find the time. ...There are lots of socioeconomic challenges that they’re facing. I’ve become a little bit more sensitive. There are parents out there who I can easily judge and say are not doing a good job, but I have a better understanding, for some of them, as to why.
As a result of her work as an educator within the Braun community, Leslie was able to voice the concept of caring and involved parents from a much different perspective than Elizabeth and Joanne. Leslie struggled with her own perception of parent involvement, but she had come to terms with understanding her involvement in her own children’s school as not requiring visible public performance, unless her children were experiencing difficulties, her children were participating in school events or there was a parent-teacher meeting. Leslie discussed several occasions when she had to contact educators concerning issues (academic and social) around her children’s schooling and she certainly did not hesitate to do so. Because of her employment in the education field, Leslie stated she was also able to get inside information about schools (less public information) and perhaps had greater suasion with the school personnel since she was one of them (not only an educator but also white and middle-class).

Nina, my first parents contact at Braun, felt that she and other visible minority parents and children in her children’s former Junior school (located in an affluent white neighbourhood) were being discriminated against and she did not attend Council meetings at that school. She had heard from other parents at the school that “It was so highly political because the neighbourhood was in an affluent area. You have a lot of stay-at-home moms who got very involved. The good thing about the school is amazing parent participation.” Nina talked about the over the top fundraising events which raised “tons of money.” She added, “So you didn’t have to worry.” Nina, a working mom, felt apart from these moms who did not work outside the home and were able to volunteer and contribute many hours to school fundraising activities and events. On the other hand, she felt relieved that other mothers were taking on this responsibility, thus alleviating her sense of obligation to publicly participate.

When her children moved into Braun Middle School, Nina stated that, “I probably need to get involved in the school.” Nina was intimidated by the dominating Parent Council members at the junior school and the racism she experienced there. She concluded that other parents were managing well without her. But, Nina did not appear to be intimidated by Braun’s Parent Council. When her children moved to Braun Middle School, Nina joined the Parent Council, even though the majority of other members were white and from Braun’s upper/middle-class neighbourhoods. Was this because Braun was more diverse in its racial, ethnic and social class population? She did not say, but her lack of participation on Council at the Junior School was
most likely based on her discriminatory experiences from other parents and educators. Braun’s Parent Council members were not so dissimilar from those of her children’s Junior School, yet she definitely had an understanding ear and voice with the new Braun administration.

Kuman, an immigrant and visible minority parent from the Braun community, had yet another perspective on school Parent Councils. Kuman had lived in Canada for 25 years and his wife, Arin, for 11 years. Both Kuman and Arin had a post secondary school education in their country of birth. They were referred to me as “immigrant parents” who might be willing to be interviewed. Kuman was confident in his language skills, unlike Arin who was less willing to voice her opinion. Kuman saw their involvement in the Junior School as quite active. He stated:

We try to work with the schools and try to help them out as much as possible, volunteer opportunities. We try to get in when we can. My wife was pitching in with the homework bag program for three years. Then, at other times, whatever function is at the school where parents can go and are interested in going, we usually go to all the functions. We communicate with the staff and the principal.

When asked if parents are heard, Kuman responded with a “yes” and then explained how he felt that parents do not work together to create change, “Sometimes, unfortunately, the administrators come in and they do their things and think this is leadership. They think this is how they should run it and not consult with the parents.” He became very disillusioned in his efforts to unite the Junior School parents around a new principal’s “chop, chop chop” techniques with no parent input. He stated that “Nowadays everybody is busy and it is difficult to come together and say, ‘Look we’ve got to take a stand and do something’. It is not always ideal when one is put in that position where you have to …It’s like a negative billing option rejection.” Kuman went on to explain that parents are forced to wait until given information about something they don’t like and then speak up, as opposed to being consulted originally. He noted, “I guess one has to pick his battles and we’ve tried not to put opposition to everything.” Thus, Kuman has chosen to be selective in his parent-school interactions. Whether Kuman felt too much opposition would affect his family’s relationship with the school or resolved to stay quiet because he felt powerless is only a supposition, although his hesitancy to respond to a problem arising in his daughter’s high school (to be discussed in a later chapter) gives evidence to a belief that he may in fact feel silenced by the nature of the expected parent-school relationship.
Further in the interview, when pressed about whether Kuman felt the Parent Council was representative of the Braun parent community, he stated:

To be honest with you, I have not gone there more than once or twice. Probably not! It’s not representative. But I mean things like voluntary, it’s not exactly proportional representation because we’ve got so many of this visible minority or that visible minority, then so many members on the Parent Council should be [from these groups] ... My opinion would be the perception is that this Council really doesn’t have power, does not do much, basically. It’s an ad hoc thing that is more of a consultative thing and has no enforcement powers and cannot really make any changes. And then, who cares to go to these boring meetings where somebody comes and talks, honestly.

Personally, Kuman is deeply interested in world politics. But he has assessed the Parent Council at Braun M.S. as lacking in agency which resulted in his lack of participation. He perceives local school structures in Ontario, such as Parent Councils, as powerless, with little real clout as a change agent. Kuman also referred to visible minorities in the school as not being proportionally represented on Braun’s Parent Council, which is illustrative of minority parents’ powerlessness, perhaps reflecting his own experience. When confronted with making decisions concerning his own child’s future during the transition process, Kuman struggled with his own lack of cultural knowledge and feelings of agency.

For some parents at Braun M.S., the Parent Council represented an opportunity to become counted in the measure of parent public performance. For these parents, it broadened their social network and permitted a demonstration of their leadership skills for personal and political gain. For others, it meant being involved in fundraisers in order to enhance school and student resources. But for all participants in this study (parents and educators), Braun Parent Council did not represent the parent community in terms of racial, ethnic, class and cultural diversity, and a few suggested the needs of the entire Braun community were not being met. From a researcher’s perspective, I noticed a disquieting feeling of frustration, apathy and marginalization within the Braun parent community. This disquiet was reflected in a lack of interaction amongst the diverse groups of parents and a feeling of voicelessness, especially from the immigrant and visible minority parents.
**Castle Dawn**

So far I have focused on the Braun Parent Council as illustrative of parents’ perceptions of parent involvement. I will now present the Castle Dawn participants’ responses to the same issue of their involvement on the school Parent Council in order to tease out the differences between these two communities in their understanding of parent involvement.

Castle Dawn, as mentioned previously, is located in an exclusive part of Toronto, resided in by white, upper/middle-class professionals in single family dwellings. Bonnie, one of my Castle Dawn parent participants, identified herself as a Parent Council member although she did not attend meetings since she was usually busy in the evenings taking her children to extra-curricular activities. The remaining three parent participants did not participate on the Parent Council, each stating they didn’t have time or were not interested. Beth, a teacher participant on Castle Dawn’s Parent Council, stated:

Parent involvement has not been good. You have the same parents at every meeting for the past three years, pretty much the same. We might lose three and gain three, but it’s around 8 or 9 parents who regularly come. They are doing everything they can, like having speakers come in, all the bells and whistles. Maybe 15 people will come for that [speaker] and as soon as the meeting part starts, they leave and the same nine carry through for the rest of the meeting. …Apparently 5 or 6 years ago there were like 30-40 parents. It used to be very big. Now the parents on Council are saying, ‘What are we doing? Where is everybody? What’s happening here?’ We did literacy nights and math nights and for the last two years we had to cancel literacy night because we didn’t have enough people agreeing to come.

Beth went on to say that, even though the parents don’t attend academic functions, the school gets over 100 people for spaghetti or movie nights. She seemed confounded and felt that, although Castle Dawn parents have a long history of involvement in the school

I don’t think they are as involved as we think. I think that’s a myth. There use to be a lot of stay-at-home moms and they would be just hanging out. They aren’t around as much. People are working. Economic times are different. Also there is more of a perception that, ‘I can read to my child’. My child can read.
Later in the interview, Beth said that she was aware of an inner city school which hyped-up literacy and math nights with the kids in order to put pressure on the parents to attend. This worked for that particular school and Beth felt that perhaps this would also draw more parents into Castle Dawn for those events. Using children to coerce parents to attend literacy or numeracy evenings speaks to either a desperate need by schools to account for the visible performance of parents in the community because of Ministry of Education and Board mandates, and/or recognition that children have a greater influence on parental behaviour than schools themselves. Also, with an ever saturated market of children’s learning resources and dwindling funds for school resources, perhaps Beth is correct in assuming that more parents are sharing the responsibility of ensuring their children have the basic skills, whether by their own tutelage or through purchasing one of the many outside of school services. That is to be left for another research study.

During my visits to Castle Dawn, I noticed a number of parents casually entering and leaving the school and also a large number of parents hanging around outside the school, chatting amongst themselves and waiting for their children to leave for lunch or school dismissal. Doors were not locked, unlike Braun’s school entry. Some parents drove, but many walked to the school. Attending the beginning school barbeque and Information Night at Castle Dawn in my second year of this study, I noticed the familiarity with which most parents interacted outside, in the gymnasium, in the hallways and the classrooms. This small exclusive neighbourhood school lends itself to social involvement but clearly, from Beth’s remarks, parents did not see a need to extend that involvement into the more bureaucratic structure of Parent Council.

Although Bonnie, a Castle Dawn parent, confirmed the above teacher’s perception of a declining Parent Council in saying, “They can hardly scrape together 6 people”, an administrator at Castle Dawn, Sharon, appeared to contradict the decline of the Parent Council involvement. But on closer examination of the transcript, I saw Sharon had made no reference to numbers, only that the Parent Council was “phenomenal, extremely active and supportive”. Also, Sharon stated that parents tended to organize in subcommittees outside of the school. A small group of parents do all the organizing through the Parent Council and other community parents (non-council members) assist when necessary. Certainly this was confirmed by Bonnie who was a member but did not attend Council meetings. She reflected, “I’m not the leader type. I’d rather
just do stuff. Just tell me what you need done and I’ll do that.” This is consistent with my description of Castle Dawn as a homogeneous and cohesive community made up of parents who are, in addition to being school parent colleagues, social friends. Their parent involvement was not always visible to educators, but they had established a very tight social network.

Castle Dawn parents appeared to support Levine-Rasky’s (2008) contention she makes in her article, *Middle-Classness and Whiteness in Parents’ Responses to Multiculturalism*, that “whiteness” works through mechanisms by which “power is practiced among whites” (Parent Council/subcommittees/social networking) and participate in the “system of domination”, which benefits the parents who “occupy a social location of power” (p. 467). By choosing to take up this position of power (volunteering to perform required duties in the educational forum), Castle Dawn mothers may be ensuring their power position (and that of their child) in the educational system. This is most vividly noted when Castle Dawn parents call upon their social and educational contacts in order to examine and support their options in the transition and school choice process.

Parent participants at Castle Dawn did not place importance on public performance at Council meetings, although they found it vital to attend parent-teacher nights and their children’s school performances, as did all the parent participants in my study. Clearly, by the teacher and parent participants’ responses and my own observations, visible public performance through membership on the Parent Councils was not essential for social networking, and/or cultural and political capital. Perhaps this was also apparent to the parents, thus resulting in a decline in Parent Council membership over the years.

At this time I will interject into these finding an interview I conducted with Patricia, a parent living in a neighbourhood outside my research community. We met while attending a Parenting Conference where she asked to be interviewed for my study. I could hardly say no when Patricia was so adamant about her parent voice being heard. Patricia lived in a neighbourhood similar to Castle Dawn, but in another area of Toronto. After our interview, I realized that the issues raised by Patricia were not dissimilar to those of other parents in the TDSB and perhaps in many urban centers throughout Ontario.
Patricia had been an extremely publicly involved parent for almost a decade in her children’s elementary school years. She reflected that it was not until after five years, as a member of the Parent Council, that she began to understand the politics and hierarchy of power in the parent-school relationship. Patricia’s desire to be interviewed stemmed from her own experiences, disappointments and frustration which reflected a discrepancy between her expectations as a parent volunteer and her reception and response from educators, as well as other parents. Patricia had contributed many volunteer hours in planning and organizing school events, assisting with fundraising hundreds of thousands of dollars for her children’s school and creating and maintaining, as she termed, “City award winning gardens” on her children’s elementary school property.

Two events made Patricia realize that her hours of volunteering were not valued. Firstly, decisions were made about the use of monies acquired through parent fundraising without involving the school’s Parent Council. In her school, the final decision was made by the principal. Politically, the use of the funds was couched as “at the principal’s discretion”. Over the years Patricia became aware of, and even participated in, the parent-school hierarchy which was assumed but never discussed. Her reflections are telling.

As a parent, who wants to be the one to say, ‘There’s something really fishy where all the money has gone…..The reality is, you don’t want to be the parent who’s asking those tough questions because I know the way it works to stifle the Parent Council because I did it when I was the past Chair. It’s like when the principal says she’s really concerned about this, blah, blah, blah. ‘Oh, I’ll save you principal’ it’s just that kind of …You know, as long as principals rule the roost and teachers are afraid to cross the principal and everyone’s afraid to cross the janitor…

The second event which Patricia felt was a “big eye opener” concerned her voluntary work which demonstrated how undervalued her contributions were at her children’s school.

After nine years of doing it (maintaining the gardens), to the point of where I had 10-12 parents helping out…. So we got it to the point that it was good enough and I would enter it into the local gardening contest which the City of Toronto runs. It’s like, I’m leaving next year and most of the people on the gardening committee are the mothers of my son’s class. We’ll be gone and we need new blood… The
younger parents just don’t have the time or they don’t have the interest. The Head teachers don’t want anything to do with it.

Patricia suggested hiring a college student and thus “They would be able to add to their portfolio for when they want a business.” The principal was hesitant about offering an honorarium and so Patricia said, “I just walked away from it. Did any teachers pick up the torch? No. Glad to know that it was a huge waste of my time.”

Patricia relayed another disappointment upon realizing that the school’s talent show and various speakers were brought into the school not merely as learning resources for the children but to allow the teachers more time to complete their report cards. In her final year as Chair of the Parent Council, she noticed the new, younger parents did not have time to help create the yearbook, organize special events or volunteer in the class or for subcommittees, as she and other parents in her neighbourhood had done in the past. Even at the Board level, Patricia felt that there was a disconnect between what was promised and what was actually done. Although she admired the regional Parent Involvement Action Committee (PIAC) Board representative, Patricia felt few of the strategies discussed could actually be implemented at the local Parent Council level without outside intervention.

Patricia identified a number of contradictions she experienced during her foray into the public parent involvement forum. She reflected, “It’s sort of a game that goes on” of decision-making and power pretense for parents. When do the parents actually get to decide how the funds they raised get spent? There is a disconnect between Board policy and implementation (no homework policy and need for increased literacy skills); the politics of being a publicly involved parent and being seen as a problem parent; struggling with the decision of whether to send your child to a specialized school or a local school (“Are we bad parents” for not putting him in a specialized program?”). Patricia concluded that, in her last year on the elementary school Parent Council, she had adopted the attitude that, “If I am the most hated mom in the school” for speaking up, “I really don’t care.” Her concerns and focus now were on her own children and not the good of the school community.

Bitter, perhaps! But Patricia had decided to focus on only her own children and not the betterment of the whole school community, which perhaps many parents have concluded. Was Kuman’s or Aarif’s decision not to participate on Braun’s Parent Council because they felt, as a
result of their visible minority status, they weren’t being heard so different from Patricia’s silenced voice? Did the Castle Dawn parents, who chose not to be a member on the Parent Council, perhaps already realize these political games and contradictions of which Patricia spoke?

Although it is apparent that on school board issues such as the funding of swimming pools and decision-making around school uniforms, if parents and perhaps teachers unite around common concerns, they have the political clout to change or alter bureaucratic board decisions. But for the most part, as Kuman experienced in his children’s Junior School, parents are divided and isolated in most school communities and sometimes fear that there will be repercussions on their children if they push too hard. As school communities increase in size, diversity and complexity (as is often the case in high school milieus), parental influence and agency is even less likely to be effective.

An overall understanding of parent involvement can not be measured at the District, Board or Provincial levels. In the early 1800s, schools were designed by elites in local communities and the area Trustees to meet the needs of their children. Today, local communities vary according to racial, ethnic and social class, as do their understandings of public and private performance, socio-cultural values and parent-school relationships. This makes it impossible to define parent involvement or Parent Councils from a single perspective. As seen from the voices of many of the participants in my study, the one structure (Parent Council) legislated in every school in Ontario, which is supposed to represent its school community, does not speak on behalf of all parents in its community. Perhaps more local and less centralized bureaucratic structures would better serve the needs of both parents and their children in the parent-school relationship.

Parent Involvement: Emotional Capital (A Private Doing)

The focus to guide my findings on parent involvement in this section is emotional capital. I draw upon Reay’s (2004) understanding of emotional capital to define my understanding of it. Reay defines emotional capital as, “generally confined within the bounds of affective relationships of family and friends and encompasses the emotional resources you hand on to those you care about” (2004, p. 60). My use of emotional capital will include parent participants and their children’s concerns/worries/anxieties/anticipation about transitioning to high school and school choice, as well as the resources parents draw upon to deal with these positive and negative aspects of change. As stated previously in this chapter, I will draw upon parent voices.
and experiences to illustrate how emotional capital is interrelated with other forms of capital (social, political, cultural, and economic). In addition, I found an interrelationship between emotional capital and social class, particularly when observing a distinction between the two different elementary school sites in my study.

Research literature indicates that decision-making around school choice and navigation of the transition process requires social capital (networking), economic capital (choice between private, public education and extra curricular activities), cultural capital (institutional and embodied), emotional capital (emotional response to school and program choice, peer-school relationships and a child’s wellbeing: physical, academic, social, and emotional) and a parent-child relationship. As indicated by O’Brien (2007), the responsibility for the emotionality (an emotional response or reaction) during the transition process is, for the most part, a private family process. Although some schools attempt to insert responses to perceived or understood emotional adjustments into their exit and entrance procedures (i.e., Information Nights, staggering Grade 9 entry to high school, student-teacher mentoring, student and parent tours, Grade 9 barbeques), mothers in my study were often left feeling isolated and wondering if their emotional concerns were shared by other parents. I specifically used mother participants here because, of the three father participants in my study only one mentioned emotional concerns as a factor in the transition process. In contrast, all of the mothers discussed emotional concerns (their own and their children’s) around transitioning to high school. Fathers were always jointly interviewed with the mothers, perhaps explaining why gender concern divisions were often observed (fathers focused on academics and mothers more often raised emotional concerns). Parent participants’ emotional capital varied.

My understanding that emotionality is, in fact, a private family matter was gleaned from my parent responses, but more significantly from the questions they asked once the taping had finished, especially by those parents not familiar with the education system. All parent participants knew I had been a high school teacher for many years and thus, familiar with the education system. At the beginning of each interview, I reiterated this fact as well as my experience with the transition process with my own children. Most parent participants realized my role as a researcher to be an inquirer about their doings and understandings around parent involvement. But some parents also used this opportunity to share and enquire about their
concerns asking questions about the school system, the transition process, high school choices, and even about the expected behaviours of teenagers. It became clear to me that parents who had little social and cultural capital were often left to their own devices in making critical choices about their children’s educational futures. Upper/middle-class parents, who were familiar with the education system, had established social networks with other parents with whom they could share and validate their emotional concerns around their child leaving a familiar local community and heading off to an unfamiliar and enigmatic high school. As mentioned previously, emotionality is often a private and silent aspect of parent involvement, associated with parent social, economic and cultural capital. I will focus here on specific aspects of emotional capital: parent anxieties, interrelatedness with social (networking) and cultural capital, ghosts from the past. These are only illustrative of the most significant aspects of emotional capital which I had observed during my interviews.

**Parent Anxieties and Emotionality**

I had the unique opportunity to delve into parents’ private thoughts (those they were willing to share) and saw their insecurities around educational decision-making and emotionality in terms of the well-being of their children. Barb, a Castle Dawn mother, indicated the extensive research she had completed over the last two years around school choice and transitioning, yet her biggest concern was, “Is it a very good fit?” for her daughter. Barb often used “our” and “we” in reference to her expression of anxieties surrounding the selection of the “right” high school for her daughter. Barb and Stephen, her husband, expressed the importance of: the school “feeling right” for their daughter and themselves (socially and emotionally), the influences of new and old peer groups, the travel distance (outside of their exclusive community), a possible change in their present close parent-child relationship, and whether their daughter could manage the academic rigors of high school (which was the least emphasized concern of parent participants). The emotionality around these concerns created a stress level which could not be soothed by attending high school Open Houses, although meeting warm and empathetic teachers at the schools did seem to relieve some of the parents’ nervousness surrounding student-teacher relationships.

Elizabeth, a Braun parent, expressed these anxieties around her son’s entering high school:
Both my husband and I are a little scared about it. Because our son is very social, I think he’ll meet new friends and generally he’s liked. But, you also wonder if he’ll be a target because he is a pacifist. He doesn’t engage in any confrontation and he doesn’t want to be involved in it. Sometimes when kids are like that, they become targets. So you know we are a little scared, but there’s enough of his friends there and enough of the kids from the neighbourhood as well who are going there that I think he’ll have a comfort level that may not be…

Elizabeth, Barb and Stephen all lived on the right side of the Braun divide (upper/middle-class, predominantly white professionals) in two different but close social network neighbourhoods which allowed them to draw on these social relationships to ease their anxieties. However, sometimes being part of such networks presented more questions.

Barb and Stephen used an acquaintance to illustrate their fears about their own daughter’s entry into high school. They stated that this acquaintance, who had just entered high school, changed in appearance from “meek, demure and shy” to “ultra punk with red hair.” Although not concerned about outward physical changes, Stephen expressed concern that his daughter would “somehow lose this wholesomeness that she has now.” He explained, “It’s the attitude that I’m worried about. She gets this attitude that separates her from us and she gets comfortable just being something that is opposite to what she knows we want her to be.” It was their close parent-child relationship which Stephen feared losing the most during his daughter’s perceived newly acquired independence. After their daughter had completed a semester in high school, my second interview suggested that, for Barb and Stephen, their strategies in parenting were the most challenging aspects of the transition process.

Leslie, an educator in the community, worried about her daughter’s emotional fragility. Although familiar with the process, Leslie was not assured that her daughter’s peer group nor the new student-teacher relationships would be positive, thus making the entry to high school a “crap shoot”. Leslie tried to draw upon her educator relationships, read all the literature offered and attended any parent meetings offered at the high school in order to reduce her daughter’s and her own anxieties around the coming change. Leslie stated, “I don’t want a whole lot of surprises and I’m afraid I am going to get some…. It is a bit of my anxiety because I don’t know if there are things I haven’t asked that I should know about.” Leslie often talked in the first person (I) when
discussing her daughter’s emotional preparation for high school. She took on the full responsibility for her daughter’s settling in, which is shown in comments such as,

>I hope I will get more information about the day-to-day stuff. I just hope that I’m knowledgeable enough to know what I should be asking. Have I been given enough information to know what to ask? I went to their Open House and got a lot of information that we really didn’t need.

Although appearing sometimes contradictory (not enough/too much information) Leslie, as a single parent, was trying to ensure that her daughter, who sometimes experienced “emotional meltdowns”, was safe and emotionally prepared for high school, although, as she pointed out, there are many aspects of the transition for which a parent cannot be prepared.

The fact that anxieties around transitioning are not only felt by students, but also by parents is rarely discussed, researched or addressed by schools in the transition process. It is important to note here that my initial research question: “why does parent involvement appear to dwindle during the high school years?” can perhaps be partially answered by the increase in parental anxieties and parents unfamiliarity with their child’s educational experience. Parents may be reticent to become publicly involved in their children’s high schools due to their own emotions associated with this change. As well, there is the notion that once children are in high school, they should take on more responsibility for their own educational choices, emotional and social selves, leaving parents to rely on communicating with their children at a time when children tend to be more communicative with their peers. At each of the high school Open House presentations, I observed that parents were told by educators that now that their children are entering high school, it would be natural for them to pull away from their parents and for parents to become less involved in the day-to-day decisions around schooling. The transition to high school is definitely assumed and perceived as the point at which the parent-child relationship begins to change, perhaps giving credence to Stephen’s concern for his daughter’s change of attitude which could separate her from her parents.

To alleviate some of the anxiety around the uncertainty of the high school milieu, parents sometimes relied on procedures of the transition process to reassure themselves about their school choice. Procedures such as signing a contract, or wearing a uniform, and the number of security cameras, the number of school lock downs and even a prestigious name were given as an assurance that the school of choice was/was not safe for their children to attend. These things
were seen as proof by the parents that the educators were in charge and the students were under control. My parent participants also used me as a possible resource to reassure them about their children’s up and coming high school experience. They asked me how I felt about their chosen high school, even though I explained I had no personal experience with the high schools in their community.

Parents in both my elementary school sites who had extensive social networks (social capital) and could draw upon this capital to alleviate or reduce their anxieties around transitioning were less stressed than those parents who had a limited social network and thus little social capital. Stressors associated with the unknown high school experience and course selections created a particularly emotional experience for those parents who were not educated in Canada. An interesting observation is that some immigrant parents could draw upon their own emotional capital, especially those who had experienced educational change, and they shared that emotional capital with their own children. As expressed by Reay (2004), emotional capital “encompasses resources you hand on to those you care about” (p. 60).

In the follow-up interviews, which were conducted once the children had completed the first semester at their chosen high schools, two of the three parents from Castle Dawn were unhappy with their child’s school choice. As will be detailed in Chapter 6, this unhappiness stemmed from a conflict in social and cultural values related to their children’s peer relationships. All three parents talked about emotional happiness of their children being a big factor in the evaluation of their high school of choice (happy with peers, teacher relationships, academic performance and social stressors).

Social (Networking) and Cultural Capital

There are several factors which parents can draw upon to deal with the emotions around transitioning. One previously mentioned is social networking, part of what Lareau & Horvat (1999) discussed as social capital. Parents use social networking to confirm or negate their own anxieties related to their children’s well-being. During our second interview, Elizabeth credits this social networking as, “My biggest support. My biggest source of information was not the school. It’s the parents and the other kids who have been through it, even a year ahead of my son.” Other parents, such as Aarif and Sofia, who were not familiar with the education system,
developed a small social network of families whose children had already entered high school. They encourage their daughter to talk with these neighbours in order to provide answers to her questions: “What happens when I go? How is high school working? Are they feeling comfortable?” Their daughter’s two major concerns are not ones Aarif and Sofia were equipped to answer: “How can I make friends there and what courses do I have to choose?”

Another parent, Arin, who was a stay-at-home mom, felt her English language skills were weak and she had few people, other than her daughter and husband, whom she could ask for information about the high school experience and check on her own emotions. In both interviews, Arin expressed concern for her daughter at high school, partially because she had little social capital as well as cultural knowledge about the Canadian high school experience. Kuman, her husband, had an overall understanding of the transition process, although he was not familiar with the intricacies involved in school choice, course selection and the criteria needed for admission to specialized programs. His social network consisted primarily of families of immigrant status and similar cultural backgrounds to his own; thus, his cultural capital (knowledge of the school process of transitioning and school choice) was limited. Also, during his children’s elementary school years, Kuman appeared to have an embodied sense of self in terms of his own goals and achievements, which was demonstrated in his initial sense of entitlement in interacting with teachers and administrators, two characteristics often used to define cultural capital. Yet at the high school level, Kuman became less confident and unsure about how and of whom to ask questions, as if his cultural capital had changed during this transition. As mentioned at the onset of this research, parents appear to change in their embodied sense of self (sense of their own cultural capital) when their children move from elementary to high school. This change is puzzling.

Many of the parents on the Braun side of the divide, particularly those with little personal experience in the Canadian education system, had limited information related to educational transitioning, school choice and procedures required during this process. This made them primarily reliant on any written material sent home from the school, presented at Open Houses or explained by their own children. Those whose knowledge of English was limited or who were

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8 Embodied sense of self: a socially inherited sense of one’s self in relation to learning abilities, educational and career aspirations and achievement as discussed by Bourdieu (1986).
unfamiliar with the education jargon often depended upon their children to share their understanding of the information in order to make critical decisions around school choice and program and course level decisions. Ricky, a Braun school administrator, noted with concern, “That being told from a 12 and 13 year old’s perspective.” Those parents who had strong social networks, a comprehensive understanding of the educational processes, procedures and jargon (cultural capital) and were confident to approach the school (elementary and high school) to clarify the transition process and school choice procedures (embodied sense of self) were more often white, Canadian-born parents who were from upper/middle-class neighbourhoods and had some personal experience in the Canadian education system.

Alistair, the guidance counsellor for Braun and Castle Dawn, stated that he saw about 60 Grade 8 parents concerned about transitioning. (This number represented less than 25% of the Grade 8 students under his charge.) This certainly is a phenomenal number of parents under the responsibility of one guidance counsellor, a theme of guidance understaffing which was mentioned by all parent participants. A Braun parent noted,

There is one guidance counsellor for five schools, which to me is horrible. This is unacceptable. …That guidance counsellor is overwhelmed, overloaded and then the kids don’t get help, at this crucial age. At this Grade 7 & 8 age, it is absolutely critical.

Part of the role of a guidance counsellor in the TDSB is to inform and guide parents, as well as students, in the decision-making process during transitioning. Yet, with the multilayered task of not only informing and guiding an unreasonable number of Grade 8 students and their parents, the guidance counsellor must address issues of language barriers, changing Board policies and procedures, administrative demands, not to mention the day-to-day concerns which arise in 5 elementary and middle school milieus. For those parents with little social and cultural capital to bring to the transition and school choice process, educational resources seem scarce.

Dealing with a lack of cultural capital and having few social networks to rely upon, some parents who were educated outside of Canada had a difficult time relating their own educational experiences to that of their children. Sofia, trying to help her daughter choose courses for high school, stated, “What she (her daughter) wanted to ask is what subjects should I choose which will help me get a proper profession? When I was a student, I wanted to be a dentist, but I didn’t
know what subjects I had to choose.” Consequently, because of Sofia’s wrong choices for a career in dentistry, she was directed toward textiles. Perhaps her sex may have also played a part in her being redirected in her country of origin, but this was not mentioned. Aarif and Sofia said that they felt it was better to let their children “decide for themselves what they actually really want to learn.” Also Sofia stated that “(her daughter) and me, we are in the same position now” because both are trying to decide on a career direction. Aarif and Sofia’s daughter did not have the advantage of having parents who had a great deal of social and cultural capital to help support her transition to high school.

Reliance on social networks and cultural capital is essential in lowering the anxiety level around transitioning and school choice for parents and their children. As Reay (2000) found, anxiety is not class or race specific. At the same time, parent participants in my study who had less cultural knowledge, difficulty with the language and interpreting the process and procedures and those who had no experience in the Canadian education system were definitely at a disadvantage in the decision-making and choice processes. The emotional anxieties around whether or not they had made the right decisions in terms of school choice, programs and levels of study for their children’s future were particularly observed amongst those parent participants who had the least complex social network and cultural capital upon which to draw. Transitioning to high school requires what O’Brien (2007) names “additional care work”, described by her mother participants as “donkey work” (p. 176). The parents who had the time and resources (computer savvy, social network, cultural capital) were better able to assess their choices, evaluate the process and position their children in terms of the required procedures in order to provide them with the best opportunities for success. In my study, these parents were upper/middle-class, white and had extensive experience in the Canadian education system. All my parent participants were post secondary school educated and thus had a certain degree, although varying, of experience and capital to bring to this process. What about those parents who do not have a post secondary education and even less cultural capital? How do they fare in the transition and school choice process?

**Ghosts of Education Past**

Another aspect some parents draw upon to make sense of or deal with the emotions around transitioning is their own personal experiences of schooling. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot
(2003) talked about “generational echoes” or “ghosts” when parents unconsciously replay their own childhood experiences in shaping the present. Ruitenberg (2009) termed the recounting of one’s own experiences to explain the present as “ghosts of intimate relations” and the “haunting inheritance”, also calling what parents carried with them “haunting spirits and specters” (p. 298). When educators talk with parents who are uncomfortable about some aspect of their child’s education, it is not uncommon, if given the time, to hear frustrations arising from their own educational experiences as a child. This was also seen in the recall of my own parent participants.

One parent, Stephen, discussed his childhood haunting in relation to his daughter’s comfortableness in entering high school. “She’s comfortable. She’s more comfortable than either of us would have been when we were in high school. She’s got self-esteem and confidence. She’s together and I think she’s going to be well liked. But still, I worry.” Stephen spoke about his own educational experience being raised by immigrant parents and their eagerness to have him succeed. He recalls when telling his father he wanted to study history at university, “My dad said we’ll put you through school, but I don’t recommend you do history. That’s something you do when you retire. You can read history, but history is not going to get you anywhere in life.” Stephen studied business at university. Reflecting on his own immigrant parent-child experiences, Stephen further noted:

If your parents are working two jobs they are going to want to see their kids do something with their lives because they are coming over here and you might have a father who’s working two jobs and driving a taxi at night to put you through school. They are doing that so their kids can become doctors or lawyers. It’s the same with my folks.

The dictates of Stephen’s father related to studying history may have contributed to how animated Stephen felt about his daughter determining her own educational pathway. Both Stephen and Barb, in unison, responded to an inquiry if their daughter was going to attend Royal S.S., with “They wear uniforms!” When pressed about their concern about wearing uniforms, Stephen stated, “I wouldn’t want to wear a uniform. It takes away from your identity.” Perhaps the ghosts of his own father’s dictate around university programming haunted his position in relation to his daughter’s choice of high school.
Elizabeth, as well as other parents, raised her own ghosts around her anxieties when she entered high school, but she also reflected on her successful end journey. Elizabeth recalls:

When I was in high school, it was very difficult the first year and the same for my husband because he was very shy and he went from a small school in the country to a huge high school … I was somewhat similar. I came from a very small school and all the kids who went to the high school had come from a more sophisticated … they had gone to Junior High. We were like the country bumpkins meeting up with these guys from (an exclusive area in Toronto)….So I think he’ll (her son) will probably be fine.

Although their personal anxieties arose in relation to their children’s transitioning to high school, Elizabeth, Barb and Stephen were able to draw upon their own experiences by which to direct, guide and advise their children. In this way, they could convert emotions around their own ghosts of schooling into cultural capital for their children.

Also, teachers are often affected in their interaction with their students by their own ghosts, which can be seen through Joseph’s eyes, a Braun Grade 8 teacher, whose parents were immigrants to Canada.

I experienced this as my parents being immigrants. The children are that hope for their great Canadian dream, or what have you. A lot of them come with limited skills or their skills are not recognized. There are language barriers. They work 2 or 3 jobs sometimes to make ends meet. Both are working, so really it’s up to the kids to make good on their sacrifice.

While attending a Braun parents Meet-the-Teacher-Night, I observed Joseph whom I quoted above. He was talking with a parent in the hall and appeared very attentive and compassionate with a mother and daughter who were explaining some personal difficulties. During our interview, I asked him if he was conscious of his connection with parents. Joseph stated, “Not conscious, but intentional. I guess it is part of who I am.” He discussed his mother’s lack of confidence in her English skills. She did not approach teachers nor enter the school, but she did ensure that the children did their homework. Although Joseph’s father, having been in Canada since he was a teenager, was the public “voice at the school”, his mother was involved in the private sphere at home. Joseph talked about being conscious of not “using my professional occupation as a barrier between yourself and other people.” Perhaps his ghosts carried over into
his teaching role in understanding parent positioning in the parent-school relationship, as well as his personal sense of empathy for students whose parents may not be completely familiar with the education system. Parents’ emotions associated with their own experiences, as a student, can not help but filter through to their children. When parents compare their own educational experiences with those of their children, it is important to note that ghosts/hauntings can have an emotional affect on the parent-school relationship, as discovered by Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003).

**Gender, Social Class, Race and Ethnicity and Emotional Capital**

All of the above factors are interrelated in the parent-school relationship, particularly during critical transitioning times. Parent participants at Castle Dawn had developed a varied register of social capital upon which to draw in their educational decision-making. They had varied social networks (other parents, teachers, family and friends) and cultural capital (both embodied and institutional) from which to extract information around transitioning and school choice. Their sense of entitlement, confidence to inquire, personal experiences in the Ontario education system and awareness of the social and emotional issues surrounding transitioning to high school placed these parents in a position to examine various alternatives for their children based on their understanding of their children’s academic, emotional and social needs. Barb, for example, had connections with other parents whose children attended both public and private high schools, had a comfortable relationship with her child’s teacher, administrator and the school’s guidance counsellor and had attended a number of high school information sessions.

She had a basic understanding of educational jargon which allowed her to feel prepared to weigh the options and make a clear and decisive decision around program, curriculum and school choice. Although Reay (2000) discussed differences between working-class and middle-class mothers in terms of priority given to happiness of their children in educational decision-making, she emphasized the importance in educational conversations to recognize the interrelationships between emotional capital and social class. All my parent participants were doubtful about making the right choice for their children, regardless of social class, race and ethnicity.

Aarif, new to the Ontario School system, talked about his lack of knowledge, “We don’t know what school is like….*My daughter* always wishes us to know. She says, “This is very important. You must be there.” We already know a lot of things, papers and everything, but she wants us to know about things too-how transition is. ..She and we are all going through this
process together.” Aarif’s and Sofia’s positive attitude towards learning about the education system along side their daughter has permitted both parents and child to be on an equal footing, although during our second interview their daughter clearly had more cultural knowledge which became apparent when her parents asked her to talk about her high school experiences. Aarif and Sofia seemed very proud, not only of their daughter’s academic progress but also with her new found knowledge of high school life.

Aarif spoke of his daughter’s anxieties on transitioning to middle school which arose again in her transitioning to high school,

Basically she was afraid, which is natural because it is a big school. Whether I find my friends I had in Grade six, but at that school (middle school) so many other schools come and you don’t know if we’ll be in the same class or not. So, what will happen if she doesn’t have any friends? Now she realizes, first time, that, ‘No, I have got a lot of friends – my old friends and my new friends’. So that has been a good experience. She has felt a good experience there. So she is still in this condition now that she is going to Royal and she feels it is a very big school and what happens when I go.

Aarif and Sofia were very cognizant of their daughter’s anxieties and fears about transitioning. Aarif spoke of his conversations with his daughter around these concerns and how he saw his job as a parent was to help her build up her confidence level by referring to her past positive adjustments and through discussing his own experiences as a student. Their daughter has had the benefit of both Aarif’s and Sofia’s emotional resources, in spite of their own lack of cultural knowledge of the Ontario education system. While parents with little cultural capital are often unfamiliar and uncomfortable in the educational forum, they may have a great deal of varied emotions to share with researchers if this aspect of parent-school relationships was more often discussed and heard.

Another parent, Arin, who was present at the interviews but spent most of her time caring for her very active toddler, spoke rarely because she was shy about her English skills. But, near the end of our first interview when I asked her if she had any concerns about her daughter going to high school, Arin stated, “I have a lot of concerns. Like my daughter is getting older. She is a teenager. She is going to high school. What happens there? What are they doing there? Is she good at the school? I have a lot of things.”
In my literature review, I discussed Reay’s (2000) belief that the conversation on mother’s involvement in schooling (usually gender specific) would be furthered if it encompassed “an analysis of the emotions, both positive and negative, that infuse mothers’ activities” (p. 568). I concur with Reay that ignoring emotions in the parent-child relationship ignores an essential element of parent involvement in education. Aarif and Sofia, while having little knowledge of the transitioning process and school choice procedures, are able to share their daughter’s experience through listening to her continued flow of information. Sofia explains this interaction, “Every evening, especially if I am busy in the kitchen, she always comes to share everything. Everything she discusses.”

Sofia has friends whose children are at their chosen high school and her daughter “talks to her about so much information she’s always taking from them. She has a keen interest and she talks with us all night, every night.” Aarif also noted that his daughter is “always curious about the other girls who are our neighbours. They are studying there and …So she has conversations with them about how high school is working, how they are feeling comfortable and all those things.” Sofia and Aarif were pleased that their daughter values their listening and advice around various social, emotional and school issues. One example of such advice was demonstrated when Sofia discussed her daughter’s interest in drama. When her daughter asked whether to take Drama in Grade 9, Sofia said, “Why not! Drama will help her develop leadership qualities maybe. She just made a speech in front of the whole class.” Sofia talked about helping her daughter get past being afraid and helping her develop confidence. She said her daughter was feeling “so good” and “she believes now.” After giving her first speech in school, Sofia recounts her daughter’s excited words, “It’s not as scary as what I thought in front of so many people. I can talk Mamma! She is good now.”

Aarif and Sofia had been anxious about their daughter’s transition to high school. But after their daughter’s entry and during my second interview, Sofia stated “We have become more relaxed.” Although Aarif and Sofia had little knowledge of the Canadian education system to share with their daughter, their embodied cultural knowledge and emotional capital seemed to help instill in their daughter the self confidence and esteem necessary for her to deal with changes such as those presented in the transition to high school.
Kuman and Arin, also immigrant parents in the Braun community, were concerned as well about the emotions surrounding their child’s transitioning to high school. Kuman spoke more in academic terms and behaviours related to their daughter needing to take on more responsibility and be more focused and serious about her studies. He indicated that, “We made that clear to her that we expect her to not only do well this year (Grade 8), but also keep on working on it and be prepared to change some work habits.” Kuman goes on to explain that “a general concern or advice would be to stay away from any kind of gangs, mind your own business. You are there to study. You are not there to mingle with the crowd, apart from some reasonable socializing.” On the other hand, while Arin confirmed her husband’s point of “not getting involved in something that does not involve you”, her main concern focused on her own lack of knowing what goes on in Canadian high schools and what social and personal changes might happen to her daughter as a result of this transition. Arin’s disquiet was, for the most part, focused on the emotions of her daughter while her husband honed in on the academic and social aspects of high school.

All parents, whether familiar or not with the Ontario school system, had anxieties, uncertainties and questions about many aspects of decision-making around their children’s transition to high school. All the parent participants from Braun M.S. were confident that Royal S.S. was the right school for their child. But once the school and programs were selected, their main concerns were their children’s peer relationships, safety in terms of travel to and from school, being the ‘little fish’ in a very big and diverse pond, and a change in the teacher-student relationship (less personal). Parents who had not personally experienced the Ontario education system felt uncertain about their children’s programming and were more worried about their children’s emotionality and ability to adjust to a very different set of demands socially, culturally and emotionally.

Although I mentioned that two of the three Castle Dawn families were not happy with their choice of high school, all the Braun parent participants felt good about Royal being their choice. This is especially interesting because the Braun parents, for the most part, had less cultural knowledge and fewer social networks available to them related to the transitioning and school choice process yet, they were happier with their end choice. Was this true because the Braun parents had a highly academic and reputable high school in their area? They were less
familiar with the alternatives available across the TDSB. Having less cultural capital, did the Brahun parents have fewer expectations for their children’s high school experience? Or, was it that my second interview with the parents occurred after only one semester of high school? It would be interesting to see if the Brahun parents’ sense of happiness with Royal S.S. held true once their children neared the end of their high school career.

**Parental Expectations**

The third and last aspect of parent involvement to be discussed here is what Jeynes (2005) talked about in terms of the importance of parental expectations and an encouraging atmosphere at home to support student academic achievement. Many parent participants expected that their children would need a greater sense of responsibility and commitment towards their school work in high school. Stephen, a Castle Dawn parent, stated “I went to university, my wife went to university, our daughter is going to university and her sister is going to university. It’s not a question. It’s just what they’re going to do.” There was no doubt that Stephen expected his children to follow in his and his wife’s footsteps and attend university. Most parent participants felt high school was going to be a greater challenge, academically and socially, so expressed their expectations in specific terms such as taking more responsibility around homework and assignment completion, reading more and using the computer for school work instead of social networking. It is important here to remind the reader that all my parent participants had a post secondary education and, even though their life circumstances varied greatly, they saw education as a valuable tool for their children’s future success and happiness.

For the most part, the mothers were responsible for ensuring that homework and assignments were completed and taken to school. This is consistent with the historic and present gendered position of women in relation to the parent-school relationship. Parents also expected high school to pose a greater challenge, but require less parent involvement, especially in regard to interacting with teachers, knowing their child’s homework and daily routine, and knowing all their child’s peer relationships. Whether this was considered from their own personal experiences, from educators or the popular media, I did not ask. But parent participants were surprised to hear that parent expectations were part of my understanding of parent involvement. They understood this as *parenting*, as if ‘parent’ and ‘involvement’ were not interrelated. Somehow ‘parenting’, or the emotional, social and cultural aspects of the parent-child relationship...
relationship, is not included in the public concept of parent involvement. Parents are socially positioned to understand their relationship with the school as parent-school/teacher not including the parent-child relationship; thus, leaving the parents out of the school/teacher-child relationship.

Summary

The parent-child relationship has remained private and disconnected from the parent-school relationship. Suppositions are often made around educational parental home support which is usually measured by the academic and/or behaviour performance of the children. This is even more so for immigrant, working-class and visible minority parents who are less likely to participate in public displays of parent involvement. Beck (2007), David (1998), Lareau (1999), Levine-Rasky (2008), Power et al. (1998), and Reay (2001) have shown that middle-class schools advantage middle-class students and disadvantage working-class families. I will add immigrant families to this picture. Educators often position parents as lacking in school knowledge and act as the protectors of students (Pushor, 2007), particularly during the critical decision-making transition years.

In my study, parent involvement could not be simply measured by parental public performance in/for the school. Parent involvement, for most of the participants, included day-to-day discussions and directions related to school work, peer relationships, anxieties, making decisions around future educational and career goals, teacher-student relationships and the sharing of personal and emotional experiences. These are all private situations that are rarely discussed in educational research on parent involvement, particularly the extent to which a parent’s social and emotional capital plays a part in their children’s academic, social and emotional success. The interconnections in this parent-child-school triad are often overlooked by educational researchers who separate out the parent-child relationship (discussed by psychologists) from the parent-teacher/school and teacher-child relationships. This leaves parents awash in a sea of binary relationships (teacher-student, parent-child and parent-teacher) which either excludes them altogether or minimizes their voices. My parent participants and I, at the onset of this study, did not see an educational interconnectedness among parent-child-school. This was illustrated in parent responses I noted when parents were asked to describe their daily routine on a typical school day. The day began readying for school and ended in their children’s
arrival home. Upon expanding this view, the parents and I saw much more than was ever presumed.

This chapter has introduced the complexity and multi-variance in the concept of parent involvement and parents’ emotions surrounding the transition and school choice process. Participating or not on school Parent Councils was the crux around which my discussion on the interconnectedness of gender, race, ethnicity and social class was originally based. Using the complexity and interconnectedness of the parent-child-school relationship presented in this chapter, I will now bring into focus the transition to high school and school choice process, as seen by parents and educators from my three school sites.
CHAPTER 6:  
SCHOOL CHOICE

Much has been discussed about the two elementary school sites in this study, their differences and similarities in the angst and uncertainties around the school choice and transitioning process. Although it has already been referenced in chapter 5, I will now bring into the spotlight my third site: Royal Secondary School. In making a choice of high school for their children, parents can be positioned anywhere along the bureaucratic continuum. On one end of the continuum, some parents are marginalized and disadvantaged and on the other some parents are fully included and advantaged by the Board’s procedures and policies, as well as their own social, cultural and emotional capital.

Although my interest is not to draw out the bureaucratic strings which connect the local to the extra-local, as Smith (2005) does, I do wish to bring into play how the TDSB policies and procedures extend to the local and guide and position parents from Braun and Castle Dawn in the school choice process. Consistent with previous chapters, parent participant voices will be the main focus of my understanding of this school choice process which is a critical time in the lives of parents and their children.

I will briefly recall Royal Secondary School’s reinvention and its aura of elitism frequently alluded to by both parents and educators. Then I move into Toronto District School Board policies and procedures around school choice, as seen by Castle Dawn and Braun parents, leading into the educators’ voices on the bureaucratic decision-making process. I will address two important questions which guide parent inquiries and choice making around the intricate task of balancing the needs of their children with the demands of the school Board and school policies and procedures: What high school(s) are considered in-area? What do TDSB out-of-area high schools or special programs/schools have to offer? In conclusion, I present perceptions and voices of parents and teachers on the school choice and transition process, as well as draw into the picture Grade 8 teachers’ and guidance counsellors’ concerns.

Royal Secondary School has a diverse student and parent population, diverse in race, ethnicity and social class. Having survived the declining enrollment years of the 1980s by restructuring, as discussed in Chapter 4, and maintained its prestige throughout the 1990s, Royal
is now a well sought after high school, by parents and students within and outside of the TDSB. Parents at Braun as well as Castle Dawn felt that Royal had a great reputation and would be high on their list of high school choices if, in fact, they wanted to look elsewhere. Leslie, a parent who grew up and still lives in the community, attended Royal prior to its remake in the late 1980s and 1990s. She noted about its image then, “The perception of the school was so bad when I was growing up. There was vandalism, the police were there all the time and the drug situation in the school was absolutely out of control.” When asked why she felt the name was changed, Leslie said:

It doesn’t matter a whole lot *(what the school is called)*. I like word of mouth…. I don’t know how they turned the school around. I understand they have because of the people I know who have children going there and they say yeah, it is a good place and there are some good standards in place and there’s some expectations of behaviour that is clear and enforced and that’s all good. [italics is researchers]

I used Royal as the pseudonym for the high school site because its reputation carries with it an aura of what parents and teachers described as; prestigious, high academic standards and even elitist. For parents, as illustrated by Leslie, the aura around schools is often developed from the grapevine (hot knowledge) from other parents or through the understandings of their children. Ball and Vincent (1998) found “parents place greater importance and reliability on this information than ‘official’ knowledge produced” by the schools (p. 378). Many of my parent participants, especially for those whose experience in the Canadian education system is limited or whose primary language is not English, rely on this source of information for decision-making. The TDSB does publish parent information in various languages, but there is a certain confidence level and self-disclosure needed to ask for these translated materials. Many parents, who have been in the country for a longer period of time, as had the immigrant parent participants in my study, rely upon their children and a small social network of parents to understand the procedures and processes of transitioning and school choice.

Margaret, an educator at Royal, talked about what made Royal unique. She explained some of the big differences between Royal and other high schools. Royal had: a unique timetable, a mandatory uniform, and expectations for students to take ownership for their own independent learning and involvement in their community. When asked how Royal had managed to maintain its uniqueness and high educational profile in the community for so many years,
Margaret credits its strong administration and the energy and willingness of the staff to fully participate in all aspects of student life (sports, committees, counselling, mentoring, motivating,…). In reflection, Margaret presented a key question asked of all new Royal staff: “Yes, you can teach, but what else can you bring?” She explained the intent behind this question, “There is room for us to still grow and I think we keep enhancing and expanding what we offer because we’re not done. And the day we’re done will be sad.” The milieu at Royal was premised on the understanding of parents’ and students’ educational needs in the local community, while continuing to reassess those needs in order to maintain a strong public perception for over two decades since its inception.

Today, Royal S.S. markets itself as offering a challenging curriculum, unique programming and Specialized Programs. Specialized Schools and Specialized Programs have been, and still are, used as marketing tools to counter declining enrollment and selectively choose student admissions. During its inception as a new school, Royal was designated as an alternative school which allowed for its selection of students. In recent years it has been redirected by the Board as a community school, although as a few educators indicated to me, almost one-half of its student body is selected through Specialized Program entry. West, Hind and Pennell (2004) found that specialist schools (and I will add specialized programs) are more likely to select students on the basis of aptitude and ability (academic and/or specific skill related), which are often designed to select certain groups of pupils and exclude others. In my discussion of Board and school procedures and policies for entry to specialized programs/schools, this will become even more evident.

Parent participants perceived Royal as a great, safe and academic school. When asked what makes it so, parents talked about the uniform, the special programs, the discipline and the lack of violent incidents, as well as the written commitment each student and parent must sign before entry. This included the wearing of uniforms, following codes of behaviours, completing additional community service hours, paying a Student Activity Fee and following the unique timetable. Concepts of elitism, selectivity and exclusion were mentioned primarily by some educators at the elementary feeder schools. When Margaret was asked about the perception of Royal as elitist, she reflected:
I know that it’s not so much as you see yourself as elitist, but you see yourself as working with kids who want to do things and want to love school and love the activities and love being connected and engaged and that’s not elitist. But there are probably just as many who don’t love that…

She extends the conversation later into how other principals are suspicious of how Royal S.S. can maintain such a high academic milieu:

When Royal was created and we were still (part of the legacy Board), all the other schools hated us. They accused us of taking the best kids. It was just sour grapes on every other administrator’s part. The present Royal principal’s introduction to Principal Meetings was that every other principal dumped on him with all their years of hatred to Royal. There wasn’t a welcoming comment and just the accusations of ‘we’re still taking the best’ …and not accepting that our lottery is true even though the Superintendent comes down and the parents. It is run by a computer. Everybody gets a receipt. The receipt numbers are in the system. It’s nobody going, ‘Well we’ll put that one back.’

The lottery mentioned here has been held for many years in TDSB schools where out-of-area student applicants outnumber the spaces available once the in-area students and Specialized Program applicants have been chosen. The competitive spirit of education can be heard in Margaret’s comment about the principal being suspected of unfair play in terms of “creaming off” (West et al., 2006) all the best students from not only Royals’ designated community but throughout the entire Board.

Although Royal S.S. is not unique in the TDSB (there are a number of schools in high demand), its image and special status in the parent community seems to come from not only word of mouth, as Leslie suggests, but also an aura of a controlled learning environment maintained by a caring and knowledgeable staff. Royal’s reputation has reached far beyond its Board designated boundaries. While attending a Parent Council Meeting at Royal to introduce and get support for my study, I entered into a conversation with one mother who indicated to me that her daughter had to take the subway and bus from across the city to attend Royal. Although she did point out concerns about the length of travel, she felt that Royal’s great reputation, particularly in the Specialized Program in which her daughter was a student, overrode these safety concerns. Also, while waiting in line to attend an Information Night, I met a mother who had come from another Board of Education and felt, because she worked in Toronto, her son
might benefit from attending a school of Royal’s caliber. Both mothers had heard about Royal through friends and colleagues, being so impressed that they ignored other concerns (transportation, peer relationships) for what they perceived as an excellent academic learning environment and unique personal opportunities. This is counter to Bryne, West and Ribben’s (1994) research findings which indicated that academic standing was not one of the top priorities for parents in their UK study about school choice.

My curiosity about the aura surrounding Royal began during my attendance at two Information Nights for Grade 8 parents. From each I noted the following experiences: each session (two on each evening) had a line-up of parents with some being turned away; parents sometimes waited for up to two hours to get a spot in line and sometimes had their spots held by family or friends until they finished work; parents from outside Royal’s boundary were in attendance and parents with whom I spoke in these sessions had primarily heard about Royal by word of mouth and felt their children would get a heads up on university entry by attending this school. This, indeed, added to my understanding around Royal’s aura. In 1983, Sara Lawrence Lightfoot wrote *The Good High School* in which she studied six high schools and examined not only the educational goals of each but also the aspirations of subcultures within each community. In my study, I only got a glimpse of Royal’s subculture, but perhaps my findings will open the door to further research into a more extensive study into the unique aura and subculture of what Lightfoot (1983) called *The Good High School*.

**Policies and Procedures Regarding School Choice**

In this section, I present my understanding of some of the policies and procedures laid out by the TDSB and my participating schools, while also interjecting the voices of parents and educators into this discussion to highlight their mis/understandings, how parents are positioned in these policies and procedures and the lack of social, cultural and economic capital of those for whom this process is the most critical. In the everyday world of my parent participants, they must negotiate bureaucratic school procedures and processes in the school choice forum.

As a mother of two children having traveled through the transition process and as an experienced high school teacher within the TDSB, I expected to be familiar with the policies, procedures and phraseology of this process. I found this was not the case. As a teacher
participant in the bureaucracy, I understood the concept of in-area and out-of-area from the perspective of projected student enrollment, feeder school locations and the importance of residential addresses to the extradition of undesirable students. [One of the first items checked for students who are presenting difficulties in a school is often their residential address. If they do not live within the Board designated boundaries for that school, they can be asked to attend their home school, by address. The opposite is sometimes true as well. If a student is highly academic and appears to be an asset to the school, in-area boundaries are sometime overlooked.] As a researcher and now positioned outside the Board bureaucracy, I began to get a different perspective on the politics behind the dividing lines in the parent-school relationship in relation to the school choice and transition process.

My personal experience of transitioning was similar to that of some parent and educator participants. We attended the high school which was located closest to where we lived. Many of the parent participants in my study encountered a different experience in their children’s transition to high school. Several parents described the process as more complicated, similar to applying to university and very confusing. Some parental confusion arose from the Board’s policy of in-area and out-of-area and Optional Attendance rules and application procedures. The TDSB policy reads:

Students who reside within the City of Toronto have the right to attend a school which is designated to serve their residential address. Students also have the opportunity to access schools outside of the school that is designated to serve their residential address by applying on optional attendance. Acceptance at these schools is subject to space availability and program suitability. (P.013 SCH: Optional Attendance - TDSB)

Entry into an out-of-area school depended upon a school’s identification as having a limited (accepting out-of-area student applicants) as compared to a closed (not accepting out-of-area student applications) optional attendance status. This status is updated every January for the next September. This presents two questions in the parental transition and school choice process, assuming the parents are selecting within the TDSB:

- What high schools are considered in-area, based on the Board’s boundary allocations?
- What do TDSB out-of-area high schools or special programs/schools have to offer?
These questions had to be addressed if parents wished, were able and/or desired to examine the full range of school and program options suitable for their children.

A number of mechanisms are put into place by elementary and secondary schools and are meant to provide answers to these questions for parents. But, do they clarify or muddy the waters in the school choice and transition process?

**What High School(s) Are Considered In-Area for Castle Dawn and Braun Parents?**

Before examining the specific cases of my parent communities, I would like to emphasize that Board policy states that students “have the right to attend a school which is designated to serve their residential address.” Parents and students are therefore reliant upon the Board residential boundary designations in order to decide which transition and school choice procedures and processes (in-area or out-of-area) are necessary. My discussion will be directed towards high schools which are focused on educating students for college and university, keeping in mind that parents and students wishing to inquire about business, technical and vocational programs may require a different transition process.

**Castle Dawn**

The mere smallness of the Castle Dawn school community had its advantages when it came to in-area schools. Transitioning 10 to 20 Grade 8 students at Castle Dawn can be a more individualized process than transitioning 200 or more students at Braun. The Castle Dawn Grade 8 teacher was quite familiar with each student and their families. Also, Castle Dawn parents, for the most part, have greater social, cultural and economic capital than most Braun parents, and a lengthy established parent-school relationship, thus a question of school choice and support in the transitioning process is also more of a shared concern. Historically, Castle Dawn parents had two in-area high school choices based on Board established boundaries and family residency: Royal S.S. and Battersley H. S. In the year prior to my research, Battersley was removed as one of the in-area choices as a result of Board boundary changes. These changes were explained to me as being due to increased housing developments resulting in overcrowding at Battersley, thus requiring a reorganization of the in-area boundaries. This made Royal S.S. the sole in-area high school for Castle Dawn students. The significance of this change in boundary, besides eliminating any other local in-area school choice, meant that students who wanted to enter
Battersley would now have to apply on Optional Attendance (as out-of-area students to that school), thus not ensuring their entry. According to an educator at Castle Dawn and owing to the close relationship between the two principals of Castle Dawn and Battersley (after many years of working together), if parents wanted their children to attend Battersley, procedures and processes could be put into place circumventing Board established policies which would ensure Castle Dawn students entry into Battersley. (Battersley was a popular high school because of its Specialized Program). Beth, a Grade 8 teacher, explained it this way:

On paper and if the Board was asked they would say that officially (Royal was the only in-area school). The truth is, because we have always historically gone to Battersley, the principal there has already said many times, a couple of kids from Castle Dawn is no big deal. So we write on the optional attendance form ‘Former feeder school to Battersley’, and if you had a sibling who went there and that kind of stuff, they would put us at the top of the optional attendance list. They don’t really have to, but every kid who has wanted to go so far has got in…. Castle Dawn kids aren’t a hardship in the school. In fact, they probably help the school. They are generally academic kids.

One of the fall-outs of this boundary change was the division of a Castle Dawn group of Grade 8 friends who had been together since early elementary school. Some of this group of friends lived within the new boundaries for Battersley and others did not. Castle Dawn parents, Barb and Stephen, explained that all through elementary school their daughter and her group of friends planned to attend Battersley together. Barb stated, “We went on the assumption that this is something we can choose next year.” But upon attendance at Batterley’s Open House, “The principal announced that it was a possibility” that Battersley would not be an in-area school choice for Castle Dawn students. “We found out after the fact,” Barb expressed frustration in the response of Castle Dawn’s principal to this change, “I don’t know why the principal wouldn’t have marched right down there and said, ‘Look at us. We’re just little’. You know. But maybe they did and they were told there’s no way.” Barb further mentioned a protest meeting which was held by parents in the Castle Dawn community to which Stephen commented, “It’s kind of funny when you think about it. It (pressure on the Board) would have to come from the parents.” Barb’s initial reaction was that the principal should fight on behalf of Castle Dawn parents and students to maintain the status quo, yet resolved that the Board-Principal hierarchy would determine the final outcome. On the other hand, Stephen felt that, if parents united, they could
affect change. In this case, the Castle Dawn parent protest resulted in an unsuccessful lobby for change to the Board’s new boundary policy.

Within the context of a family discussion over school choice, Stephen commented about the splitting up of his daughter’s friends and took a fatalistic approach, “Things happen for a reason.” Stephen and Barb did not want their daughter to attend Royal for precisely the very reasons some parents wanted their children to attend. Stephen and Barb felt the curriculum might be too challenging for their daughter and they disliked the mandatory uniform because, “It takes away your identity.” They were concerned about their daughter’s sense of individuality, perhaps reflective of Stephen’s own experience. Thus, Stephen and Barb chose to look beyond their immediate community for possible out-of-area school choices.

**Braun M.S.**

A larger geographical residential area denotes a larger student population at Braun M.S., thus three in-area high schools have been designated to families in different Braun neighbourhoods. In some cases, depending upon their address, parents have a choice between two in-area schools, but the regulations state that “Once you have been admitted to one of the listed schools, you are expected to attend that school until graduation. If you wish to attend the other listed school(s) you must apply under Optional Attendance” (TDSB “Find Your School” 2010). This also applies to students who are accepted on Optional Attendance in out-of-area schools which is one of the reasons why some Braun parents were deterred from considering any out-of area high schools. [This was perhaps the intent of the TDSB policy.] As mentioned by some parents, if their children were not happy and/or successful at a chosen out-of-area school, they would not get automatic entry into Royal, their former in-area school. With its beyond capacity student body and lottery system, most Braun and Castle Dawn parents were not willing to take the risk of having to apply to Royal the following year on Optional Attendance when they had automatic entry this year. Not all parents comprehended this regulation.

In my second interview with Debbie, whose daughter moved from Castle Dawn to Battersley but was unhappy with her Grade nine experience, she thought that her daughter would be automatically eligible for entry into Royal the following year. Debbie had initially negotiated her children’s entry into Castle Dawn, an out-of-area school for her family, and thus had little
leverage to negotiate her daughter’s entry into Royal since she was both outside its boundaries, as well as had chosen Battersley (her in-area school) as her home school after Grade 8.

It was not only the parents who were unaware of this policy, but also some Grade 8 teachers. Beth, an educator at Castle Dawn, gave evidence to this:

So I’m talking to some of the moms whose children had already gone to Battersley and they are saying they want their children to go to Royal next year and going to Battersley was a mistake. But it’s their home school and the way the system works is that if it is their home school, Royal can’t turn them away. They can’t.

The piece of information on Board policy that Beth lacked was that once a parent registers their child in a high school of choice, whether initially in-area or not, that school was now considered their in-area (home) school.

For all the Braun parent participants, Royal was their designated in-area high school. Although two parents did attend Open House forums for out-of-area schools, most were happy that Royal was their designated high school. Perhaps as one educator voiced, “I don’t see why you wouldn’t go there….I say Royal is an excellent school and has an excellent reputation and a high academic focus. People fight to get in there.” Most parents felt fortunate to live within Royal S.S. boundaries, even those who had purposefully moved into their neighbourhood for that reason. Whether parents preplanned for their children to attend (mostly upper/middle-class parents) or it was a fortunate occurrence (immigrant and visible minority parents), Royal was seen as a desirable and advantaged high school.

What Do TDSB “Out-Of-Area” High Schools or Special Programs/Schools Have to Offer?

Stephen and Barb were not happy with Royal as their designated high school, so it was necessary for them to draw upon their social and cultural capital in order to understand Board policies and procedures around Optional Attendance for out-of-area students. At the Grade 8 Parent Information Night offered to Castle Dawn parents, but held at another local elementary school, the Optional Attendance Fact Sheet9 which was given to parents stated, “Students may

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apply to a maximum of two ‘Regular Schools and Programs’ and two ‘Specialized schools and Programs’ under the Optional Attendance Policy.” The application process into an out-of-area regular school requires: parents/students to identify if the school is open to optional attendees, complete the Optional Attendance Form, personally bring the Form to the secondary school before a designated date and if the school is deemed limited, a lottery will be run to determine which applicants have been successful. Notification is made in mid-February. The fact sheet reiterates that if the parent/student accepts the offer of admission then “subsequent request(s) for admission to the “geographic home school” or any other school must be initiated ONLY through the Optional Attendance process.” This procedure is to be followed if attending out-of-area regular schools, but if parents choose to apply to a Specialized School or Program, the process will have only just begun. For most Braun and Castle Dawn parents, the in-area entrance process to Royal required some additional steps which included: attending a “Registration/ Interview” on a designated date and time, with a parent or guardian present; pay $50 in Student Activity Fees; provide proof of address and provide a copy of the most recent Grade 8 report card for academic placement.

Entry into special programs and schools requires additional procedures, often set out by individual schools. Although the TDSB website lists all of the special programs and schools offered, it does not include Royal as one of these sites. Royal notes itself as having a TDSB designated Specialized Program in the booklet distributed to parents at their Information Night. Their Specialized Program requires in-area and out-of-area applicants to complete a Lottery Application form (due prior to the registration date), summarize the students’ activities highlighting their community involvement as well as school involvement (to be signed by the student and the parent/guardian), provide a copy of the student’s most recent report card and two confidential references (questions included with the Lottery application). If the student is in-area and is not chosen for Royal’s special program, he or she may complete the registration process at a later date. If the student is not chosen and is out-of-area but still wishes to attend Royals regular program, she must submit an out-of-area lottery application. This application process is a daunting experience, even for a seasoned teacher such as me.

In a state of confusion after attending my first Grade 8 Parent Information Night at Royal, I had to wonder how parents who are familiar with the education system and have an extensive
social network and cultural knowledge manage to maneuver this process. It must be even more intimidating for parents who have little social, cultural and economic capital to bring to the table. It has to be all-consuming and stressful.

For Royal’s special program, as well as other surrounding high schools offering specialized programs, the procedures are presented at each of their Open Houses and the paper work is handed out then. The complexity of the process is explained, along with the fact that it is time sensitive and sometimes requires specific skills. I will present some specific examples to better explain how parents who choose specialized schools or programs must prepare their children, well in advance of entry into Grade 8, with opportunities to maximize their qualifications and experiences in order to capitalize on the application process. The Special Elite Athlete Program requires applicants to have participated, for at least one year, in a sport at the Provincial Level, in order to be considered as an applicant, as well as compete in physical testing activities designed by the high school to assess athletic ability. The Specialized Arts Schools and Programs require students to have an art portfolio consisting of extra-curricular experiences (drama, art, acting classes, etc.) which is brought to an interview and applicant process. Leadership Programs require students to have participated in a number of leadership activities in elementary school, as well as in their community. In order for students to be able to demonstrate such experiences in the application process, students and parents would have to have previous knowledge about these requirements a number of years prior to applying for entry into the program; have the economic capital to support extra-curricular activities (this can be costly, especially in terms of the Elite Athlete Program); have the cultural knowledge to assist their children with the process of application completion, teacher/coach references, preparation for interviews and, in some cases, performance readiness. Thus, it was not surprising for me to hear that all the Castle Dawn students who applied to Royal’s Specialized Program had been accepted, while among the Braun parents I interviewed, only two students applied and one was accepted. The remainder of the Braun parents/students did not apply for the special program, but entered the regular program which assured their entry by Board designated residential address.

It was clear to me from the teacher/administrator interviews I conducted at Royal that the specialized program students made up close to one-half of the student body in the school and were provided with unique opportunities, programming and special status. This status was
proliferated through an aura of elitism promoted by the teachers, administrators, parents and students themselves. Royal’s specialized program, and it is probably fair to say most specialized programs and specialized schools in the TDSB, privilege primarily upper/middle-class and professional families who have the social and cultural knowledge, not to mention economic capital, upon which to draw in order to solicit the most advantaged programs (according to the parents) offered by the Board. This was also supported by findings in Sinay’s (2010) research solicited by the TDSB.

How Did Parents, Teachers and Administrators Perceive the School Choice and Transition Process?

Parent Perceptions

All but two of my parent participants selected Royal as the high school to which their children would transition. I discovered during my interviews that the aura surrounding Royal had been established and perpetuated through word-of-mouth. As Leslie stated, “It’s not until you know somebody inside that you understand what a school is really like”. Parents discussed this aura focusing on three main points of what they had heard. First, Royal had an excellent academic record having received distinguishing awards for its academic excellence (although most parents were unable to explain the name or origin of these awards) and a high percentage of graduates go on to attend university. Second, from many parents’ experiences and understandings, uniforms symbolized prestige, school loyalty and authority. Third, parents and students had to sign a contract of commitment with the school. Most parents were able to verbalize what was entailed in this contract or its purpose and were aware that a breech of this contract could mean removal from the school. Leslie, as a parent and educator, reflected on what the contract meant to her:

It is a fairly basic contract. You know: I will be respectful. I will show up to school on time. I will follow the rules. That kind of thing. ...Even before school started, before we accept you, you need to know that these are the rules that we are playing by.

When asked if Leslie received a copy of the signed contract for her own records, she noted, “No, we didn’t get copies which would have been helpful, but I guess administratively very difficult.
Then we would be complaining that they’re wasting paper and tax payers’ money.” The Royal contract seemed to represent order, authority and an assurance of administrator and teacher discipline. It offered the parents a note of safety and a semblance of a meaningful learning environment.

Kuman, a Braun parent unfamiliar with the school procedures, discussed being “sent home literature that the kids from here can go to these places. I think there was some stipulation that perhaps kids from that school (Royal) would have maybe a better performance in a certain high school.” Kuman adds, that the fact that:

It has a prestigious name is synonymous with higher standards maybe. An environment of higher learning and the fact that the school has got a dress code (meaning uniform) maybe also adds to the mix and makes it more attractive and more interesting.

He explained his draw to Royal’s special program, even if his daughter was not accepted, as “now-a-days with the job market being so competitive, everybody looks for an edge to have an advantage over the next boy or girl in line.” Kuman and his wife, as well as Leslie, did not attend any of the Open House meetings offered at any of the high schools. Instead, they relied upon their social networking (families in their neighbourhood) and Royal’s reputation to make a high school choice for their daughters. Although many of the other parents talked about their sons or daughters wanting to attend Royal, primarily because their friends were planning to attend, in our interviews Kuman did not factor peer group choice into his daughter’s high school selection.

When asked about the entry process into Royal, Elizabeth, a Braun parent, confirmed that it is a complex process stating:

I know this because I was a reference for a number of kids here that wanted to go to Royal. They would have gone to Royal anyway, but they wanted to get into the special program and this is an interview process. People phone you and ask all these questions, as a reference. You have to have a portfolio of the things you’ve done. As it turned out, none of them went to Royal. They went to Battersley because all their friends were going to that school.

When asked which high school Elizabeth’s son was attending she stated, “We’ve made a decision and he’s going to Royal.” She discussed moving into the neighbourhood long before her
son was to attend high school because Royal was “a great school”, having heard this from friends who already lived in the neighbourhood. When presented in Grade 8 with all the possible special programs and schools available in the TDSB, Elizabeth said she “started to look at all the options”. She and her husband had considered a specialized school which they felt might be suited for their son’s talents, but then considered “You have to get up earlier, and get on the subway and a bus to get to school,” and her son wanted to go with all of his friends. So entering Royal in the regular program (as an in-area student) was their final decision. Although Elizabeth, who had an extensive social network, cultural and economic capital, could have navigated the special program entry process, perhaps in her experience as a referee for other students she realized the regular program guaranteed her son’s entry.

Aarif, unfamiliar with the educational system and procedures, indicated that his daughter wanted to go to Royal. He stated:

I don’t know much about this school but she (his daughter) researched by herself and she says this is the academic school. This school is better than the other schools. We don’t know actually whether this is right or wrong, but she says she always wants to go there. She is in the same area. She wants to go there.

Although Aarif stated that he had gone to the Grade 8 Information Night at Braun and the Information Night at Royal and had received pamphlets on high schools from Braun, his daughter ultimately made the choice. Aarif mentioned that his daughter had encouraged him and his wife to attend the information meetings, but he had difficulty following the discussions. He stated that Royal’s Information Night was particularly “a little bit boring” because it was very long (1 1/2 hours) and filled with unnecessary details, although he ended his comment by saying, “But it is important.”

Having attended the same Information Meeting, I was also wondering how much information was too much for Grade 8 parents to absorb. The agenda was filled with Board and Royal High School entry procedures and regulations, various Grade 9 course selections, graduation diploma requirements and a lengthy power point presentation from the Parent Council. All of this was filled with educational jargon which may or may not have been familiar to the Grade 8 parents. But, nonetheless, parents were lined-up to get in and there was a demand for tickets. Perhaps because of its popularity, the information was assumed by parents to be
important and necessary. The silence of parents at this meeting (no one asked any questions but all were politely quiet for a lengthy period of time) may also have reflected an established hierarchy between the orating teachers/administrators on stage and the listening parents and children in the audience below.

While in the waiting-line for tickets to Royal’s Information Night, one mother mentioned that if she lived in the area she would not attend this meeting because she knew by reputation this was a great school. But being out-of-area she needed to find out the process for applying and obtain any forms and dates which might guide her through the process. Most of the parent participants in my study reflected this sentiment and thus did not attend Royal’s Information Night. They were able to obtain the needed information from their elementary school guidance counsellor, who distributed the forms and discussed the transition procedures through guidance classes for Grade 8 students in their elementary schools. The elementary guidance counsellor also held Information Nights for Grade 8 parents and sent home literature with the children for parental perusal. But, as mentioned previously, this was the work of one guidance counsellor responsible for five elementary schools supporting 300-400 Grade 8 students.

Concerns About Guidance Counsellor Support

I feel it is important here to briefly talk about an issue which was mentioned by most parents and several teachers in my study. In the TDSB, the reduced staffing of guidance counsellors has been an issue of contention for parents and teachers for a number of years. The guidance counsellor, who was responsible for the transition and school choice process in both elementary school sites in this study, was felt to have been given an impossible task of overseeing too many Grade 8 students (in addition to the other students in each school), training teachers, counselling students and parents and presenting forums to update and inform both students and parents. Elizabeth, a Braun parent, stated:

It’s absolutely ridiculous. When you are at one school already with 460 kids and it’s a very demanding school with a lot of social problems and yet he has four other schools he has to take care of. … He’s there all the time. He is so devoted to this school and the kids. I don’t know how he does it, but he seems to figure it all out. He’s amazing.
Bonnie, a parent, talked about her experience with the school’s counsellor, besides his regular meetings with her son’s Grade 8 class:

We’ve been getting a few notices home and we got an email and everything for that night. This is set up by the guidance counsellor. I guess he is like a transient guidance counsellor for a few schools. So he has set this Information Night up just about applying to high school and whether you want to send your kids to another place or whether you want to get them into specialized programs or whatever.

It is interesting that Bonnie used the word “transient” to illustrate the Counsellor’s coming and going to multiple schools to which he has been assigned. The guidance counsellor seems to be given the daunting task of ensuring all 300-400 Grade 8 students and their parents, in his 5 designated schools, understand the process and procedures for the high school application and school choice process. Considering how complex and confusing this process can be and the diverse ethnic, racial, and social class communities in which the Counsellor works, this is a near impossible task. Unless parents come forward with questions and concerns, which as Leslie mentioned is difficult because “you don’t know what you don’t know”, or they do the intense investigation into school choice options, which is not always possible due to time constraints, lack of cultural knowledge or technological skills, school choice and transitioning to high school is often bureaucratic. Parents have their children attend the Board designated high school, sign a multitude of Board and school documents to be returned in a time sensitive and school specific manner and show-up when requested.

When Kuman, a parent who was educated outside of Canada, talked about his futile attempts to contact the guidance counsellor at Braun, he discussed a “broken system” and how it reflected on the students, especially transitioning students:

Well, I think part of the problem may be, a big part of it, is all the cuts to funding, perhaps during the Harris years. Unfortunately once the services are cut, it is very difficult to restore them…. One case is the guidance counsellor. There is one guidance counsellor for five other schools which to me is horrible…. So that guidance counsellor, he is overworked, overloaded and then the kids don’t get help, at this critical age, because at this Grade 7 & 8 it is absolutely critical. It’s just a very critical age where they need the most help to have somebody to work
with them to assess their needs, so the ratio maybe has to be lower for these teen years.

Part of the frustration for Kuman was grounded in his initial expectation that Canada’s education system was superior to that which he experienced in his home country and he was struggling to readjust his expectations. As well, he does not have the relevant cultural knowledge from which to draw in making decisions around school choice, program and course selection. Has he made the right choice for his daughter? Can he trust the school to make the correct decisions? He chose not to attend the Information Night at Royal, perhaps a wise choice since it was heavily laden with educational concepts and procedures with which he may not have been familiar. Kuman, along with his wife and daughter, chose Royal because of information which was sent home from the school, the hot knowledge received through the grapevine and perhaps, just as importantly, they lived in-area to the high school.

Teacher Support in the School Choice and Transitioning Process

It might seem that Grade 8 teachers may be an invaluable source of information to parents since it is sometimes understood that teachers know their students and understand the educational processes and procedures around transitioning. From my interviews with Grade 8 teachers, their support and knowledge depended upon a number of outside factors: How well does the teacher know the students (to help fill out applications, complete reference letters and assign Grade 8 marks, which must all be submitted by February—not a long time for a teacher new to a class in September)? How long has the teacher been teaching Grade 8 and thus is able to draw upon previous years’ experiences? Has there been any training provided for Grade 8 teachers to familiarize them with the rules, regulations and Board procedures and policies around school choice and transitioning? Is the teacher familiar with the in-area and out-of-area high schools and the optional attendance process, as well as various specialized programs/schools available to TDSB students? These questions are critical in the decision-making and successful transition of many students, especially where some parents may have little social and cultural capital to bring to this process.

In my two elementary school sites, the teacher-student relationship and the support for parents and teachers in the transition/school choice process were very different. At Castle Dawn,
the Grade 8 teacher had many years of experience, had taught the same students previously and had come to know them and their families quite well. This teacher was confident in her ability to communicate her suggestions to the parents for appropriate programming and school selection. However, in spite of her years of experience, this Grade 8 teacher did not understand/know the Board policy around changing high schools once students are registered in another school. Or perhaps she felt Castle Dawn parents/administrators could circumvent Board policies at Royal S.S., as was the case at Castle Dawn with Battersley.

In contrast, Braun teachers were, for the most part, new to the profession (2-3 years experience), not familiar with the students or their families prior to the application process, not familiar with the local high schools nor specialty schools or programs. They received some training through the guidance counsellor, but as a number of teachers pointed out, it was a very different transition process from their own personal experience which made it confusing. Sonia and Alicia, both young Braun teachers, noted that some parents had asked for their opinion on a number of the schools in the area but they did not feel comfortable or knowledgeable to give a response. Their uncomfortable feeling about sharing their limited knowledge with parents and students related to area high schools was also voiced by most of the teacher participants at Braun. Lisa, a teacher, had taught Grade 8 for a number of years and had been on the Transitioning Committee. She was confident in her knowledge base, the transition and school choice process and making recommendations to parents. If you were lucky enough, as a parent, to have this experienced teacher as your child’s teacher (1 out of 8 chances), then this teacher would be an invaluable resource to both parents and students. But is the luck of the draw or relying on an overwhelmed guidance counsellor the best we can do for these parents and their children?

One question which was posed to me by a colleague is: Why is it necessary to have a choice of high schools anyway? Since the financial struggles of the 1990s, education has become a competitive business where marketing school programs and establishing an aura of success is critical to a school’s livelihood. Some parents are, in the guise of parent power, a sought after commodity in the education market. As discussed by Ball (2003), Ball and Vincent (1998), Levine-Rasky (2007) and Vincent and Martin (2002), specialized schools have been touted as giving parents a greater choice of programs based on their children’s individual talents. In
reality however, these schools and programs have been used as a marketing tool to counter declining enrollment and selectively choosing desirable students, especially in diverse urban centers where schools are more closely located to each other. As the cynicism of Kuman suggested, parents have little agency in the educational forum, but are the means by which schools acquire agency in their own business of education.

Summary

Parent school choice appears to offer a range of options to everyone but it is, in fact, guided by bureaucratic procedures and policies. For parents, much has changed since the early years of Ontario high schools’ inception. Procedures, rules and policies set out by the Board, as well as parental access to social, cultural, and economic capital, guide parental choice and their children’s future career options. The school choice and transition process clearly divided parent participants in this study into the advantaged parents who had social, cultural and economic capital and those who did not. Race, ethnicity and social class played a large part in this division. Although Royal S.S. was the in-area school for both elementary school sites, the Board’s touted concept of parent school choice, in reality, is false. Not all parents have the social, cultural and economic capital by which to understand/follow the laid down policies and procedures in an economically constrained educational system which can not afford the support to parents needed to navigate this complex process. School choice is then really a limited commodity and parents must mobilize their own cultural and economic capital in order to access the school of their choice.
CHAPTER 7:
DISCONTINUITIES AND TRANSITIONING

Transitioning from home to school is a process most parents must face at some point in their children’s Canadian educational experience. Whether it is transitioning to a caregiver’s home, a daycare, kindergarten or Grade one, for some parents, anxieties and qualms around transitions begin very early, while for others it begins upon entry into the elementary school system. In any case, it is not easy for parents to make decisions around their children’s transitions, whether it be into the educational system or from one level of schooling to the next. My study entered the lives of parents when their children were transitioning from elementary/middle school to high school, a critical time in their lives when change and adjustments must be negotiated in the parent-child-school relationship.

Chapter 5 addressed assumptions of parents and educators around the concept of parent involvement as a visible and public performance. I showed that parents are involved in many ways, but much of their activity remains invisible to educators. As previously discussed, child development experts between the 1950s and the late 1980s focused on the physical, emotional and intellectual development of children. Thus, educational research and strategies at that time honed in on these aspects of adolescent growth during the transition from elementary to middle school. It was generally accepted that adolescent growth was fraught with concerns around the physical and emotional conflicts of pubescence, a desire for independence and the need for a greater sense of responsibility. Not until the late 1980s were parents included in educational discussions as part of a triad of the parent-child-school relationship. In this chapter I will argue that this parent-child-school triad is often configured around parent exclusion and marginalization, especially during the transition to high school process. A number of bureaucratic procedures and assumptions about educating adolescents result in an absence of parent voices.

Two notes must be added here to remind readers that when I refer to parents I most often mean mothers. As O’Brien (2007) and a plethora of other educational researchers have found, education is often mother’s work. There were few exceptions in my study where immigrant fathers were the main family spokespersons, with mothers adding to the discussion. Secondly,
although the parent participants in my study are diverse in race, ethnicity, social class and marital status, which brought its own set of unique quandaries, all of them had a post secondary education. Thus, they conveyed a positive sense of self in terms of their own and their children’s expected educational experiences. The problems and concerns which I will/have mention(ed) might be greatly magnified for those parents who have struggled with their own educational status. This was evidenced in Lucey and Walkerdine’s (2003) study focusing on working-class young women and the difficulty in “emotional dynamics in their families” (285). They extended their study into how this influenced the young women’s own sense of self in their new social positioning.

I have chosen to use Anderson’s et al. (2000) and Rice’s (2001) concept of institutional discontinuities with which to interpret the voices of the participants in my discussion on transitioning. They use institutional discontinuities to examine the interrupted continuity of life for students when they are required to move from one educational level to another. My study diverges in two significant ways from Anderson’s et al. and Rice’s research: I focus on transitioning to high school (they focus on elementary to middle school) and I examine how their concept of systemic transitions affects parents rather than children, although one cannot so easily separate out parents’ and children’s doings. I bring the noise of parent voices into the silence which rings clearly on parental experiences and feelings of marginalization and exclusion, and positions them as outsiders in the high school transitioning process.

The two areas of institutional discontinuities used by Anderson et al. and Rice are organizational and social. I focus on these from a parent perspective and explain the discontinuities as follows. Organizational discontinuities in my study include change in size of the school structure and population; academic streaming of students by ability rather than effort; increased emphasis on rules, regulations and academic standards; parents’ and teachers’ expectations; and assumptions of increased student autonomy and parental disassociation at the high school level. Social discontinuities include changes in diversity of the school population (race, ethnicity, social class); less personal relationships between teachers and students, and parents and teachers; and a different sense of belonging. Using these areas of discontinuity, I present parental concerns around the transition to high school, as well as their excitement for their children’s new experiences and opportunities. Parent participants expressed a greater
concern for social rather than organizational discontinuities, perhaps finding that their children adjusted to the organizational discontinuities much more readily than the social ones. Most high school students adjust to school size, new rules, regulations and expectations within a short period of school entry; whereas, social discontinuities are continuous in the high school teacher-student, parent-child, student-peer and teacher-parent relationships and are always in flux alongside a child’s sense of self and belonging.

Organizational Discontinuities: School Size and Population

Braun Middle School

Braun Middle School is comprised of students between the ages of 12 to 14. Although this is a narrow age range, the building structure of this middle school is considerably larger than that of most elementary schools. Braun houses a large number of diverse Grade 7 and 8 students who are fed from five Junior Elementary Schools into its school milieu. Parents and educators felt that having only two years to establish a teacher-student and parent-teacher relationship made it difficult to develop a trust relationship and also establish a sense of belonging to a school community. This was mentioned previously in terms of the difficulties in establishing a Parent Council.

Middle school is a student’s first introduction to the form of institutional bureaucracies associated with high school (timetable and class changes, several specialized subject teachers, lockers, a larger building structure, etc.). The rationale for creating middle schools evolved out of a perceived need to bridge the gap (institutional discontinuities) between elementary and high school environments, as well as to quell the social and emotional difficulties attributed to adolescent psychosocial development through a unique milieu directed at adolescents’ sense of belonging. Whether or not creating a middle school model supports adolescent psychosocial development is highly controversial in the eyes of my parent and educator participants. For some, the controversies often arose from personal understandings of whether it was important for the middle school to prepare children for the structure and routines of high school. For others, it was a matter of the children being allowed to continue to experience education within an individualized, more personal and less transient teacher-student relationship, as is understood to occur in an elementary school milieu.
Parents and students at Braun M.S. had already made the transition from a small junior elementary school (kindergarten to Grade 6) to Braun middle school and had experienced institutional organization and social discontinuities in terms of school size, increased population, changing peer relationships and acquiring a new sense of belonging. Making the transition from middle school to high school involved similar discontinuities, but parental anxieties around high school policies and procedures, their children’s social adjustment and academic rigors were still very much a part of the Braun parent experience.

Parents sometimes referred to their own experiences (ghosts) with which to make sense of the Braun Middle School environment. One parent discussed her middle school experience as easing the transition to high school (it familiarized her with lockers, class rotation and less intimate teacher-child relationships). Another parent spoke of the students at Braun as “still only children” and thus needing the care and personal touch expected of elementary school environments, similar to what she had experienced. I am not presenting a debate here on the pros and cons of segregating adolescents according to psychosocial theories of adolescent angst or their developing independence and changing social relationships. Suffice it to say that Braun parent participants did not feel they had a school choice in moving from the junior school (JK to 6) to Braun M.S. (7 & 8). They felt the junior school which fed into Braun M.S. had been determined by TDSB policy based on their residential address, unless of course they considered a private school. When Braun parents were asked if they had considered enrolling their children in an out-of-area K to 8 school, most had not. They simply abided by the Board school attendance policy. Some parents raised issues around attendance at out-of-area schools such as safety concerns if their child had to cross a major roadway and the longer distance traveled from home to school (the TDSB does not pay for transportation to out-of-area schools). In addition, parents talked about the value of their children developing close, neighbourhood friendships. The debate on whether separating students in their young adolescent years persists and is definitely a peppery and contentious issue for both parents and educators.

**Castle Dawn Elementary School**

In contrast to Braun M.S., Castle Dawn Elementary School encompasses Junior Kindergarten to Grade 8 students (ages 4 to 14). The school is small in structure and student body and exclusive to the immediate residential community. Most Castle Dawn students attend...
the school from JK to 8 which contributes to a safe and familiar milieu. Or, as Stephen suggested, it is an extension and continuation in his children’s home life, “It is raising our children with us.” This community spirit spills over into the elementary school where parent-teacher and teacher-student relationships are well established over their ten year attendance period. But this also made the institutional discontinuities in transitioning to high school more dramatic for Castle Dawn parents and their children. Stephen noted, “And going off to high school, it’s no longer Castle Dawn, it’s no longer totally controlled and it’s no longer in our insular world.” All Castle Dawn parents expressed that they and their children were ready, eager and excited about moving to high school, in order to expand their peer group relationships and experience new academic opportunities. Yet, every parent participant in the Castle Dawn community expressed concern related to their children being a “small fish swimming in a big pond”. The massive high school structure compared to Castle Dawn was daunting and the parents and children felt anxious about their children’s safety in travelling outside their community, not to mention the security within the confines of the high school building itself.

Sharon, an administrator at Castle Dawn, felt the JK to 8 school model was wonderful for the students’ development of a sense of belonging. But she also identified what she felt was lacking in the transition skill development, “Though JK to 8 is fantastic, they’ve never had to rotate classes before, they’ve never had the opportunity to have lockers and they’ve never had the opportunity to walk from class to class on their own.”

The big high school forum, with its accompanying massive student and teacher population, created anxieties for Braun and Castle Dawn parents and their children. As Joanne stated about her son, “He’s concerned about getting lost in the school and that type of thing because it’s so big.” But in their second interviews, parents indicated that their children had adapted to these types of organizational discontinuities near the end of their first semester at high school. Of greater importance to most parent participants were their children’s safety (to and from school as well as amongst older students in the school), academic and social success and a sense of belonging to the school community.
Organizational Discontinuities: Expectations, Academic Streaming, Communication Changes

Expectations

Just as important for parents on their children’s entry to high school were the assumptions and uncertainties around the new expectations of the high school milieu: Who does a parent contact if their child is having difficulties? How does the parent-teacher interview work? How much and what types of support are parents expected to provide for their children?

Teachers’ Expectations

Parents assumed there was a discontinuity between the expectations at the elementary/middle school and those at the high school level. This difference between the two levels of education was also identified by teachers and administrators at both Braun and Castle Dawn. Educators felt it necessary to assist Grade 8 students and parents in the preparation for the depersonalized high school milieu, a lack of interest by high schools in individual student performance, an increased need to conform to rules and regulations, and an increase in academic rigor and independent student responsibility for work completion and decision-making. Maria, a Grade 8 teacher, discussed how she tried to prepare her students for high school:

We often talk about high school and tell them this is how it is. For example, when we do assignments, a lot of the assignments and projects that I do I only let them do in class because I know that when they get to Grade 9 they can not take it home… We are trying to prepare them for that which is quite different because it doesn’t click in their heads yet. It will click when they get into Grade 9 and go, ‘Oh, shoot. I should have listened to you in Grade 8’.

Lisa and Beth, also both Grade 8 teachers, talked about the disconnect they were hearing from former students. A concern was raised by previous Grade 8 students who visited them, pointing out areas of learning which they felt were not included in the Grade 8 curriculum, especially in math. Both Lisa and Beth were on the transition committees in their respective schools and sought to fill this gap but, in reality, this would take a great deal of coordination between teachers at two different levels of education and time to develop an intimate knowledge of both curricula in order to ensure a smooth transition for their students. Perceived
discontinuities between these two levels of education are anticipated by teachers. This is illustrated in Lee’s quandary, who is a young Grade 8 teacher, over how much “hand holding” to give her students:

I can’t remember what high school was like, but I sort of remember. The expectation is that they are going to be a lot more independent and function a lot more by themselves without hand holding. But, in order to teach well, you still have to do a lot of that hand holding… Also, with that expectation that they are moving on to high school, it is really a big pressure for them and a good motivator too.

Parents’ Expectations

Not only do educators carry expectations of discontinuities during students’ transitioning to high school, but parents do as well. Perhaps parents’ expectations are fuelled by educators’ assumptions and expectations, as I observed during the high school Open Houses and Introductory Meetings for Grade 9 parents. Parent participants’ expectations focused on their children’s need to work harder, take on a greater responsibility for the rigors of a more difficult academic curriculum and adjust to a less individual, caring environment. Kuman expressed his concern for his daughter’s realization of these changes and stated, “We hope that she would understand that and realize on her own what she had to do, not us necessarily forcing her.” Nina talked about how difficult it was for her daughter to realize the demands of Grade 9 and “getting used to the system of high school…. I think it is a make it or break it year because whatever they develop in Grade 9 is what will take them through.”

Lucey and Reay (2000) stated that along with anxieties and fears, parents also have an “excited anticipation” surround their children’s transitioning to high school. Many parent participants expected their children to gain a greater sense of independence upon entering high school, perhaps a concept well ingrained in our educational expectations from the child development experts beginning in the 1950s. This was observed by most parents in a positive light. For example, Sofia spoke about herself as “becoming more relaxed” and how her daughter is independently taking the bus and volunteering after school, well beyond the graduation requirements set by the Ministry of Education. Both Aarif and Sofia showed a proud parent grin when they noted that their daughter had “learned a lot from volunteering. We are happy that she
is a little bit more bold because she was shy. That’s improving. So we like it.” Other parents mentioned this new found independence in terms of their children’s peer group, to be discussed later, but felt their own adjustment, as parents, required having to trust their children’s decision-making in peer relationships as well as academic choices.

Both educators and parents had acquired expectations based on assumptions that there were differences, perhaps gleaned from social networking, materials sent home from the school or from their own personal accounts. Whether my parent participants’ expectations around high school were actually met was difficult to assess after only one semester, but a number of parents expressed frustration with the teaching style being less personal, particularly in math and science. Stephen stated:

I don’t think she’s learning much. I sit down with her for an hour and she gets it. What is she getting out of it? Where is my money going? Why am I doing this with my child if for 3 weeks she’s going to this class, studying from a teacher who has really, unfortunately, no concept of communicating ideas and concepts in a way that is palatable to a young child’s mind…Maybe she prefers it when I teach her because it’s one-on-one. I don’t know.

Stephen’s aggravation towards what he perceived as a more depersonalized, less individualized teaching style is apparent here, especially since at Castle Dawn his daughter’s teachers were well aware of each student’s learning style, sometimes having taught them at more than one grade level. Sofia, from her own educational experience outside of Canada, realized high school to mean teachers presenting information through a lecture format. She found in her daughter’s high school, “Studies change now. More and more I think it’s independent studies now-a-days. Teachers let them work by themselves and do everything. Before this, they always taught them. Now they just give them ideas.” Sofia illustrated here a discontinuity between her own educational experience and that of her child, which sometimes adds to parents feeling like an outsider in their own children’s educational experience. Although one might expect this of parents who, like Sofia, were educated outside of Canada, this feeling of disassociation was also mentioned by parents who had been educated within the Canadian education system.
**Academic Streaming (Rules and Regulations)**

Another expectation of institutional organization discontinuity that was discussed, but not thoroughly understood by all parents, was the variation in academic streams. Prior to their children attending high school, parents had to select which of the following curriculum levels they wished their children to enter in high school: academic, applied or locally developed courses. Many parents, especially those who have not been exposed to these curricular levels, may have been guided in this choice by their children, their children’s teachers and/or a guidance counsellor. Parents and educators alike may or may not have a full understanding of the significance of their choices in terms of the child’s/student’s future career options. One Grade 8 teacher, Lee, expressed her own lack of awareness of course levels, which could have possible implications for student success in the future:

> A lot of times parents are concerned about going to Grade 9 and want information …There is a disconnect of ‘Okay this is the way you choose your courses. This is what are the skills that you need to really do well in Grade nine.’ We guess, but really I don’t really know that I’m 100% correct and they’ll make it okay when they transition.

Understanding that students can study different subjects at different curricular levels is unfamiliar to most students and parents, and sometimes teachers. During or after our interview, many parent participants from both Braun and Castle Dawn asked me to clarify or explain these academic levels and the possible consequences of their choices.

Appropriate curricular level choice is critical for a number of reasons. A students’ subject level selection in Grade 11 and 12, which directs post secondary entry and career options, is sometimes dependent upon Grade 9 and/or Grade 10 course levels of study, much the same as Sofia mentioned in terms of her own error in selecting the wrong courses for entry into the dentistry profession. The Ontario Ministry of Education states that students can take transfer courses to upgrade their academic skills, if they wish to enter a higher level in the following grade level. According to my own professional experience, however, this is rarely done and students who begin one academic level of study usually remain at that level until graduation or move to a lower level, if they are having difficulty. I understand, as expressed at the two Information Nights for Grade 8 Parents at Royal S.S., the frustration of educators who see
students struggling academically for many years because they have selected high school course levels which proved to be too difficult for them and this often results in student failure, dropping out of school and/or behavioural difficulties. But, as several parent participants mentioned, most parents have expectations for their children to attend university and thus choose the course levels which they believe (or have been told) streamline their children in that direction. Educational discourse from the Ministry of Education and the common belief amongst educators is that the present Ontario education system allows students to travel easily between academic levels. Contrary to this, my years of experience in the high school system suggest this is not so. Perhaps the transition period to high school is not the ideal moment for parents and children to decide upon the appropriate academic stream which will direct post secondary and future career options.

**Communication Changes**

The deficiency of information heard/given, related to and acted upon in relation to academic choices for students, can be seen in Kuman’s discussion on how he felt lacking in information “regarding different levels. Generally things like this you would have liked to have been given some advanced information. One may not get what one would like.” Often parents have to rely on the accuracy of the information given to them by their children and/or their children’s teacher. Aarif and Sofia had to rely on their daughter and her teacher to select the appropriate curriculum level for Grade 9 due to their lack of understanding of how the system works. Even though Sofia talked about her own missteps in selecting courses for her desired dentistry profession, Aarif and Sofia were unable to ensure a similar experience would not be had by their own daughter.

An additional frustration for new Grade 9 parents arose as they wondered who to contact in case there was a question or concern. Leslie and Kuman both admitted to confusion over who to contact should there be a need: their child’s subject teacher, mentoring teacher, homeroom teacher, administrator or guidance counsellor. Kuman expressed what he felt was a disconnection between his experiences at Braun M.S. and Royal S.S.:

> There seems to be a different level of communication when she (his daughter) was in middle school as opposed to high school. In high school, they seem to throw a lot of things at student services. You can’t even find an office staff. (His daughter) tried to speak with the people…it becomes less personal.
Another example of such a disconnect or lack of communication with Grade 9 parents about “how the high school runs things” was expressed by Arin who did not understand the fluctuating high school attendance schedule. She did not comprehend the “late starts or no school or half days.” Leslie also expressed surprise and concern over the irregular high school schedule during exams:

Would I expect them to deal with exam questions at the beginning of the year? Not really but, for instance, I didn’t know that you are expected – there are two days out of the exam period where there are classes in the morning and the kids are expected to attend in the morning and then write exams in the afternoon. Well, she isn’t going to be attending classes in the morning and then writing an exam in the afternoon. But that kind of clarification of events and things like that would be helpful, especially for first time parents.

Both Arin and Leslie were used to notices coming home from the middle school about any school schedule change. At the high school level, that information is more often given verbally to students/children who are left to explain (or not) to their parents what is often not clear to themselves, especially these types of discontinuities for Grade 9 students.

I should note here, when the number of days allocated for exams were reduced by the Ministry of Education, high school teachers and administrators used creative ways to abide by these new regulations, yet still have the time required to invigilate exams, mark and prepare for the next semester. This creativity included most schools having classes in the morning and exams in the afternoon, thus being able to count the day as a teaching day not an examination day. This is part of the mystery behind the high school milieu created by an unspoken way high schools do things. These unwritten procedures in high schools are not meant to be completely comprehended by parents or students, but rather are often used to balance the administrative demands placed on teachers by the Ministry of Education, the Board of Education and/or the school administration. Changes around scheduling, for example, are not usually shared with parents thus creating high school bureaucracies which result in a hierarchical relationship between schools and parents.

The lack of information about discontinuous curricula and processes and procedures leaves parents and students vulnerable to the educational bureaucracy, as well as high school
teachers and administrators who are separated as *knowers* and Grade 8 parents, students and teachers who are assumed to be *unknowers*.

Armed with misunderstandings, misinformation and little guidance, many parents are left having to make critical decisions around high school choices which may limit the opportunities open to their children in the future. Some parents leave the choice to the school, trusting them to make the appropriate decisions for their children. Some parents are, as Aarif stated, bold enough to ask questions over and over again until the choices are clear. But one Braun parent, Leslie stated, “How do you know what you don’t know?” Institutional organization discontinuities resulting from transition to high school often place parents in a marginalized position, disassociating them from the parent-school relationship, as well as from the parent-child school experience. School policies and procedures are not always discussed with parents, but rather are left to be relayed, or not, by their children. In addition, the parent-child relationship is often ignored or considered irrelevant in the day-to-day functioning of school business, only to be found *useful* when a dysfunctional situation arises and parents are called into the school to help (or take over the problem), such as persistent truancy, behavioural concerns or academic failures.

**Social Discontinuities: The Diversity of School Populations**

The second area of Rice and Anderson’s at al. Systemic Institutional Discontinuity is social discontinuities. Social discontinuities in the transition from elementary/middle school to high school include: changes in diversity of the school population (race, ethnicity, social class); the depersonalization of the triad relationship (parent-child-teacher); and a different sense of belonging. Organizational and social discontinuities are not independent of each other, but rather sometimes overlap. For example, school relationships can be impersonal not only through the size of the student and teacher population but also through the assumptions, expectations and experiences brought to these relationships by parents, students and educators.

**Castle Dawn**

The diversity in race, ethnicity and social class at Royal S.S. was identified as significant in the school choice process for two Castle Dawn families in particular. This is an example of social discontinuity. First, throughout our initial interview, Stephen and Barb made a distinction between those outside their small homogeneous, white and professional community and
themselves. Barb referred to families outside the Castle Dawn community as a “different mix of people”. Stephen stated:

I’d say 50% of some of the schools around here, the parents aren’t born in Canada. And they probably think that the only way to get ahead is to go to university. So they’re (the counsellors at the Grade 8 Information Meeting) trying to open their eyes that there are other avenues. Other things that they can do: college and trades and things like that.

This separation of *them* and *us* is reflected in Stephen’s and Barb’s consideration of Royal S.S. as the high school of choice for their daughter. Royal, Stephen stated was, “very academic…I mean they have a hard time getting anyone to do the arts programs there [which was his daughter’s interest]. There’s a huge ethnic population there. A lot of Indians, like a lot of people that have a…” Stephen reaffirms that our conversation is in fact anonymous, as if he had, or was about to say, something perhaps not for public hearing. At this point Barb interrupted and attempted to clarify Stephen’s response:

The parents are not Canadian. They tend to be the ones that have a very strong belief that science and math are the most important….There’s a huge population of people who do not speak…English is not their first language. So for her (their daughter) it’s a little odd and she doesn’t really know anyone who actually likes going there.

Stephen and Barb were very self conscious about their positioning of what they called “immigrant” and visible minority parents in relation to themselves, in spite of the fact, or because of it, that Stephen is the son of immigrant parents. They chose an out-of-area high school which is situated in an upper class, white and elite neighbourhood of Toronto, despite the fact that their daughter had to travel to school well beyond her community. In our second interview, this school selection posed a problem for Stephen and Barb in terms of their daughter’s establishing new peer relationships which were not always compatible with their own values and parenting style.

The second parent who was influenced by the diversity of the high school population was Debbie who lived out-of-area for Castle Dawn, yet her children were permitted to attend. Because Debbie was out-of-area also for Royal S.S., according to her residential address, she chose the in-area high school, Battersley. The racial and ethnic diversity at Battersley was very
different from Castle Dawn’s upper/middle-class, homogeneous, white community. In our second interview, Debbie said her daughter found Battersley very cliquish and it was difficult to make friends because there were a lot of various cultural/racial groups who “stuck together” and it was difficult for Debbie’s daughter to fit in. Debbie, in our initial interview, felt her daughter’s social connections would be instrumental in her academic success at high school. At the time of our second interview, Debbie was considering a change of school for her daughter for the following year.

Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001) argue that one of the criteria for a successful student transition to high school is parent social networking for their children. In both Debbie’s and Barb’s and Stephen’s case, their children attended schools where they had few, if any previous friends and the parents had not actively established a viable social network. Debbie identified the unfamiliarity of the racial and ethnic diversity and segregation of the student population at Battersley as a major factor in her daughter’s unhappiness. Debbie’s concern seemed to stem from her daughter’s unhappiness with finding a comfortable (white and privileged perhaps) social group rather than from her own need to secure white privilege. Barb and Stephen did not voice their daughter’s unhappiness with their high school choice (similar racial and ethnic student population as Castle Dawn), but rather their discontent with the values and lifestyle of their daughter’s chosen peer group. Perhaps as Falbo, Lein and Amador (2001) suggested, parent social networking may be critical to understanding the correlation between the culture and overall milieu of a chosen high school and their own (and their children’s) personal expectations and values.

Braun M.S.

Braun parent participants did not see a major change in diversity of student population between middle school and Royal Secondary School (social continuity). In fact, some white parents saw the influence of the immigrant and visible minority students at Royal as creating a positive academic milieu perceiving immigrant students as hard working and focused on their studies, more so than non-immigrant students. They saw this as a good role model for their own children. Social class was only directly mentioned by parent participants at Braun and Castle Dawn in terms of Royal’s uniform being an equalizer for those who could not afford “labelled clothes”.
So, the diversity of the school population and the assumptions realized by parents around racial and ethnic diversity created a greater discontinuity for Castle Dawn parents than for Braun parents who were already familiar with a diverse school population.

Social Discontinuities: The Depersonalization of the Relationships Among Parent-Child-Teacher

Teacher-Student Relationships

Parent and child excitement around developing new peer relationships at high school was tempered by the anxieties and anticipated less personal teacher-student and teacher-parent relationships. Parent participants also expected some disassociation in their existing parent-child relationship, partially because this is what they were told and read about adolescent behaviour. As previously mentioned, students and parents were told at the elementary/middle school level that, unlike at elementary school, high school teachers do not have the time to get to know each student due to the high student-teacher ratio. Also, parents and students were forewarned that high school teachers expected students to be independent learners. Teachers also recognized this to be true as Lee, a Braun M.S. teacher, stated:

I have this impression of high school which may be unfounded, but...I have some friends who are high school teachers and they say you don’t really get a chance to know them [students] that well, unless you teach a club or something. The ones who need that follow through aren’t going to necessarily join clubs. So, how are you going to keep on top of them?

Darlene, a Royal S.S. teacher, discussed her expectations for Grade 9 students, “I treat Grade 9s like adults. I don’t coddle them. I’m clear with assignment due dates. I’m clear with my expectations.” Another Grade 9 teacher, Valerie, explained how she expected the Grade 9s to “Adhere to the rules, go to class, get involved. They don’t have to be spectacular students. It’s a huge building, a huge academic load and new friends and everything else.” High school teacher participants spoke about Grade 9 students primarily in terms of curricula and behaviour; whereas the elementary/middle school teachers honed in on shortening the gap between academic, organizational and social discontinuities. I did experience teachers interested in identifying discontinuities between the two educational levels (elementary and high school), but they were
unaware of how to identify these discontinuities which are not often voiced by parents and students. Little research has focused on social discontinuities from the perspective of parents and children and even fewer in the Canadian educational forum.

**Parent-Teacher Relationships**

**Parent-teacher interviews**

During our second interview, Kuman was asked if his daughter’s high school had lived up to its reputation. He responded, “I’m not convinced yet.” As a number of parent participants from Braun and Castle Dawn expressed, they were looking forward to meeting their children’s high school teachers, but they were uncertain about the procedures. The high school rules and regulations around parental involvement (public performance) were not clear to most parent participants and made, for them, the transition to high school somewhat uncomfortable and frustrating. Joanne talked about needing to sign-up online for parent-teacher interviews, but technical glitches in the school’s program did not allow her to schedule interviews with all of her son’s teachers. Joanne and Elizabeth relayed that their children were told by teachers that unless they were struggling in a subject, it was not necessary for parents to attend. Parents, who abided by this advice and relied on teachers and their children’s account for the information, did not schedule interviews. Unfortunately, these parents expected to have a second opportunity to meet their children’s first semester teachers, as is the case at the elementary/middle school. But, at high school there was only one opportunity per semester, the semester system being a new concept to most Grade 9 parents. This was a learning experience for the transitioning parents and most parent participants vowed to schedule interviews the following semester, regardless of what information was sent home or heard from their children. Not only was there a discontinuity of school practices between elementary and high school, there was miscommunication between parents and the high school. Perhaps information is more often given to the students at the high school level expecting it to be relayed to the parents. But in the transfer of this information, it either may not have been passed on, imparted incorrectly (the students may themselves not understand the new procedures) or parents heard the message differently.

One formal event which highlights parent-teacher interactions is the Parent-Teacher Interview Night. As mentioned previously, there is sometimes a disconnection and certainly lack
of communication associated with information being relayed to parents or received by them. If appointments are organized to meet their children’s high school teachers, the procedures restrict the parent-teacher interaction to 10 minutes within a 2 hour time frame, as is the case at most high schools in the TDSB. At the high school level, parent-teacher interviews require parents to: perform clerical and organizational duties (scheduling appointments during a designated time period), be concise in their communication (10 minutes each with travel time to each appointment or filling large gaps between appointments), and having patience (waiting for a busy teacher who may have had prolonged interviews thus altering their remaining schedule). In addition, at some high schools, such as Royal S.S., the meeting place is in a public forum such as the cafeteria, gym or library, where desks line the room and chairs are placed in front for parents and/or students. Parents line up in front of the desk (leaving a reasonable distance for a semi-private conversation to occur). Perhaps this open concept forum is designed to dissuade possible lengthy interviews or confrontational situations. At my own children’s high school, I also experienced this public forum arrangement during parent-teacher interviews. I always felt it lacked a personal, private and caring ambiance. Imagine the echoes of conversations between parents and teachers elsewhere in the room or chairs scraping across the gym floor as parents and teachers get settled or uprooted for/after their 10 minute interaction. These are the background noises, all occurring during a personal conversation about your child’s grades - not very personal or encouraging for further interactions. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) called the parent-teacher interview a “twice-yearly ritual.” She focused her discussion on ten teachers who used this interview as an opportunity to build effective relationships with parents. But, for most educators and as stated by the parent participants in my study, these interviews are a perfunctory activity, merely a public display of caring about their children’s education.

**Communication between high school teachers and parents**

Roderick (1998) found that Grade 9 teachers were less communicative with parents than elementary school teachers. This was apparent in my findings as well. Sharon, an administrator, talked about her impression of the high schools, “trying really hard to get more communication” with parents because:

that’s where we get less communication…But it’s difficult when your child is 17 and parents tend to…its almost like the gradual release of responsibility in the
classroom. You start to sort of let go of the reins a little bit and give them more individuality. That’s what they want, but at the same time schools still need people to be connected. They still need parents to be connected.

Parent participants in my study found that if they approached a high school teacher, the teacher was receptive and very understanding. But high school teachers were not likely to make the first move in contacting parents as often as their elementary school colleagues, as noted by Roderick (1998). Leslie, an educator herself, whose daughter got overwhelmed during the first semester at high school by academic expectations, called some of her daughter’s teachers. She reflects on her surprised response, “There wasn’t a lot of grilling. There wasn’t any suspicion. They were very accepting that there was a good reason for this. It was fantastic.” Whether Leslie’s educator background led her to consider that high school teachers might “grill her” and be suspicious of her contacting them is interesting in light of a comment made by Beth, in the following paragraph, who is a seasoned teacher at Castle Dawn.

In discussing her beginning years of teaching, Beth reflected on her feelings as an elementary school teacher about contacting parents, “I was afraid of parents. I think that teachers are intimidated by parents. I think that teachers are afraid of being evaluated and judged.” This positioning of teachers as apprehensive in the parent-teacher relationship is not new in my experience as a high school teacher, but is rarely apparent to those outside the high school forum. I noticed colleagues’ hesitancy when going into parent interviews. They usually identified some element of their teaching style, the curriculum or their response to a student’s behaviour which might be challenged. In discussing some aspect of difficulty teachers were having with students, I asked if they had called the parents and I usually received a negative response and unwillingness to do so. Whether there was a reluctance to call parents for fear of being challenged, as suggested by Beth, I don’t know. But the most common response I heard was that the students had to be more responsible for their own problems; thus leaving parents out of the loop. One Grade 8 teacher’s perception of the high school parent-teacher relationship was that, “Teachers in the high school, the impression I get, is that they are not really interested in what parents have to say. Almost like parents shouldn’t be involved.” Until high school parents’ voices are more fully understood, heard and valued in the education process, the teacher-parent relationship will continue to be at arms length.
There is an assumption that parents need to stand back and let their high school aged children take responsibility for their own education. These are assumptions built around adolescent child development expert theories and historic high school boundary building between parents and educators. But as mentioned in my literature review, parent awareness and involvement in their children’s high school is not only necessary but desired by their children. Procedures and processes at the high school level do not always encourage parent-teacher interactions. In fact, they often discourage it on the premise that adolescents need to take on more responsibility for their own education.

To facilitate parent-school communication, an overall calendar of events is often available in a student’s agenda book and, for Royal, was mentioned at the Grade 9 Parent Information Meeting. But, to my parent participants, this information was lost in the plethora of high school organizational information, new educational jargon and rules and regulations specific to students at Royal. The school’s website undoubtedly contained this information as well, but most parents had not signed up for a password to enter this private domain and, like myself, were not able to access Royal’s website information sharing.

Royals’ private public website and use of technology

As previously mentioned in my overall description of Royal S.S., Royal’s website is strictly monitored and can only be accessed by parents and teachers. An example of its exclusiveness was discussed by Nina, a parent and Parent Council Co-Chair at Royal, who mentioned that grandparents, who lived a considerable distance from Royal and wanted to see what was happening at their grandchildren’s school, had their request denied, although later, with pressure from the Parent Council, this was overturned. [My request to access the website, although supported by both Co-Chairs of the Parent Council, was denied by the principal.] During my interview with David, the other Co-Chair, it was indicated that only a fraction of families (less than 10%) actually requested a password. David’s response was, “So what we are seeing is a hierarchy of needs being expressed here. Although parents will say they can’t get in, it’s largely because they didn’t do it. It’s not because we didn’t make the information available.”

We see two occurrences happening here. First, David used the language they and we in reference to parents at Royal and the Parent Council. Second, parents are assumed to have
computers, be skilled in their use, be able to afford internet connections and have a desire to access the school’s website. Royal S.S. communicates important parent information and resources through this private website. The assumptions are both elitist, class based and marginalize those parents who can not afford nor have the skills, time or interest in accessing Royal’s private ‘public’ website

New technology has definitely permitted a less personal form of communication between parents and teachers. A number of teacher participants indicated that they communicate with parents through email whether it was to inform them about an event or student difficulties. This can depersonalize the parent-teacher relationship by omitting face-to-face contact which is helpful in reading body language and getting immediate feedback about concerns and issues. Also, most educators are instructed to limit their emails to brief discussions of a business nature due to growing concerns over public access and legal liabilities. On the other hand, teachers who may not feel comfortable talking directly with parents (or visa-versa), may choose to do so using this less personal technology. Also, email communication between parents and teachers can marginalize those parents who cannot afford or do not have the skills (language or technical) to communicate with teachers in this format. As one Grade 8 teacher stated about a parent who did not have internet access at home, “How is she supposed to use some of those resources to help to be knowledgeable? And it’s not that she doesn’t care. She cares immensely about her daughter.”

In an attempt to interact with parents, school Boards have turned to an automated telephone system of messaging parents about events, student lates and absences. Although this is less costly for the school board, it is also less personal, but some parent participants indicated that they did appreciate the information directly being sent into their homes in this way.

**Awareness of local parent needs**

Another aspect of the parent-teacher relationship brought to the forefront by parent and teacher participants is a need for awareness and understanding of immigrant parents’ and their children’s positioning in the high school environment. The parent-teacher and teacher-student relationship can sometimes be fragile and misunderstood. Darlene, a high school teacher, talked about this awareness:

I do get some parents calling, and it’s mostly parents of girl students who they are just a little bit worried about… I got a call this year from a parent asking if the
girls are separated from the boys (on a leadership camping trip). You could tell that this was a more recent arrival to Canada…The girls also have to go home after school and they can’t do extracurricular activities. They can’t go to other people’s houses. They still have very traditional values

Darlene further discussed the changes at Royal made to accommodate those students who wanted to join clubs but could not stay after school. Also, high school students wanted to make their own journey to and from school, leaving parents to wonder, as Arin stated, “What is actually happening at school?” Perhaps this parental concern for their children’s safety and maintenance of traditional values explains why there is always a major traffic jam in front of both Braun and Royal before and after school, as is the case at many schools in the TDSB. Thus, high schools must be sensitive to their unique local parent community and focus on the discontinuities experienced by students and parents in order to affectively and openly continue a dialogue between parents and teachers, an essential ingredient in the successful transitioning process.

The Fragility of the Parent-Child-School Relationship

The focus of my research in the last section has been on the parent-school aspects of the parent-child-school relationship. Although I did not interview students/children, parents are usually affected by the emotions, anxiety and excitement of their children. The transition to high school is a major point of change for many families. The triad relationship among parents, children and teachers is often uncertain and assumptions dominate these newly forming relationships. For my parent participants, their parent-teacher and particularly their parent-child relationship was centred on a number of emotional discontinuities and left them uncertain about their role in their children’s education, absenting them from the parent-child-school triad.

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, parents and educators alike expect elementary school teachers to be compassionate, caring, understanding and as one parent espoused about this relationship, “The connection with the teacher is huge.” On the other hand, through historic perceptions and assumptions, and given evidence in my study, high school teachers are expected to be vastly different: less compassionate, less caring, less understanding and less personal, leaving parents in an emotional limbo. Often the rationale given for this discontinuity between elementary and high school parent-teacher relationships is based on the positioning of Grade 9
students as needing to gain a greater sense of independence/autonomy, acquire decision-making skills and become more disassociated from their parents in order to better foster their own sense of citizenry. This rationale for the expected aloofness of the high school milieu often left my parent participants feeling disconnected from their children’s educational experiences and in an emotional quandary. Vincent and Warren (1999) talked about the dissemination of “specific ideas and beliefs concerning the way in which parents should position themselves in relation to the education system” (p. 178). In my study, all participants positioned high school teachers as knowers and parents as unknowers of the academic curriculum, as well as the ways of the high school milieu.

Leslie sensed teachers at Royal S.S. were, “really trying to build relationships with the kids and that is just awesome because then everything happens: respect both ways.” But not all parent participants were as supportive of Royal’s teacher-student relationship, although in reality it was difficult for parents to assess after only one semester of high school. One Castle Dawn parent felt that the transition to high school was more an emotional adjustment for herself than for her child. After volunteering at the elementary school on a daily basis, she was no longer part of her son’s daily high school experience. She expressed this discontinuity with a feeling of disconnect, “He doesn’t need me there at all!” This emotional adjustment to a new parent-child-school relationship was expressed by many parents who felt more isolated from not only their children’s school experiences, but also from their children’s peer relationships. One mother, Elizabeth, talked about the need for parents to “get used to” the idea that you no longer will always know your child’s friends. In speaking with another parent who had difficulty accepting this new parent-child relationship, Elizabeth felt it, “was not a bad thing because they have brought their kids up to make judgments about other individuals, good or bad.” During my second interviews, I heard parent concerns about: their children had not kept them informed about their whereabouts, trepidations around their children going to a friend’s home after school whom they did not know, and establishing relationships with a more diverse racial and ethnic peer group. Parents shared in the excitement of their children’s new friendships, yet they were also apprehensive about what Elizabeth called their children’s judgment in selecting new, safe and positive peer relationships.
Parent Experiences: Fragile Relationships

The fragility of the triad relationship (interconnectedness of parents, their children and educators), can be seen through the experiences of three families (5 parents) who indicated a high level of concern surrounding their children’s peer relationships. This created emotional anxiety and self doubt about these parents’ choices of high school. The first family was Debbie who indicated her daughter had chosen the in-area high school which was very different in its racial and ethnic student population from that of Castle Dawn. Her daughter’s anxieties around forming new peer relationships had Debbie considering a change of high school for the following year. The second family, Kuman and Arin, had received a number of calls from their daughter’s high school teachers concerned about her “unreasonable socializing”. Kuman and Arin talked about their daughter needing to be more assertive in telling her new friends not to talk with her during class because, as Arin stated, she is “getting into trouble for talking a lot and disturbing the other kids.” Kuman felt this was an opportunity to teach his daughter to:

Stand up for yourself. You have to start somewhere. I don’t say upset your friends, but you also have to protect your reputation. What if the teacher is not thinking highly of you? That may affect their judgment later if they are being asked to recommend you for something. They may say no.

Both families here were challenged by the discontinuities between elementary and high school expectations: Debbie by her daughter’s unhappiness in a new and opposing high school milieu and Kuman and Arin by their need to discuss with their daughter balancing her academics with peer relationships and the importance of understanding and abiding by teacher expectations.

The third and last example of anxieties surrounding the changing parent-child-school relationship was the most dramatic and, for the parents perhaps, the most challenging. During my second interview with Stephen and Barb, parents within the Castle Dawn community, I was asked to respond to a number of parenting questions. Although Stephen and Barb were initially quite content with their choice of out-of-area high school, it resulted in a number of surprising ramifications. Their choice of high school was primarily based on its unique programming for their daughter, its primarily white, upper/middle-class student body and its expressed “safe” environment. After only the first semester, Stephen and Barb were faced with discussions with their daughter around drugs, alcohol, sex, peer pressures, technological overload (hours of
Facebook, email, cell calls, texts…). All of these issues of concern challenged Stephen’s and Barb’s parent values, not having been of concern at elementary school. Stephen particularly, in his discussion with his daughter, tried to draw upon his own adolescent experiences and nurture the fact that his daughter had good judgment and would make the right choices. As he had feared, Stephen and Barb’s daughter was, indeed, loosing her wholesomeness.

Stephen and Barb had relied on the new high school to keep their daughter involved in sports activities after school, as was the case at Castle Dawn. But their chosen school did not offer any sports for Grade 9 students. Thus their daughter often ventured off with her new friends to various parts of Toronto without her parents permission or knowledge. Stephen asked his daughter about the parents of her new friends, “Do they not care where their children are?” Barb and Stephen saw their parent-child relationship eroding with their daughter’s exposure to her new friends and their varied parent-child relationships. Partially to reduce some of their daughter’s free time, Barb established a small and lucrative business with her daughter that kept her busy after school and on weekends. Thrown full force into the adolescent parenting quagmire, Barb and Stephen were still hoping for a “quiet rebellion” where they only had to address “punk red hair” or simple changes in their daughter’s attitude. The sometimes ignored parent-child relationship by educators and researchers who focus on only part of the triad relationship (teacher-student and teacher-parent) misses a valuable part in understanding the parent-child-school relationship.

In examining the parent-child-school relationship and considering the aspects previously discussed around parent involvement, it is sometimes parents who smooth over the discontinuities during the transitioning to high school, although parents are often left out of much of the high school transitioning process. When asked how his daughter was managing at high school, Aarif discussed how her worry about making new friends was short lived, but her anxiety around the increase of homework created a lot of stress on his daughter, as well as for his wife and himself. Aarif stated that his daughter didn’t really need help with homework, but rather in managing her stress. Sofia added, “She always sits beside her father and says she needs some help. She needs some help in what you can say to her, not in her routine.” Aarif reassured his daughter about what she knew and bolstered her confidence level in her studies. It was the parent-child relationship for both Aarif and Sofia and Stephen and Barb which instilled greater
confidence in their children rather than the teacher-student or parent-teacher relationship. It is interesting to note that in these two families, the parent-child-school relationship was linked by the fathers. But of course these parent-child relationships are usually invisible (experienced in the home) and not exposed for public viewing.

The parent-child-school relationship is often viewed as parent-teacher and teacher-student (public and visible), yet the parent-child relationship is private. Until the interconnectedness between the private and the public of the parent-child-school triad relationship is recognized and made visible, educational research will continue to miss the importance of the parent-child relationship in education, reinforcing the borders between parents and schools.

Social Discontinuities: Sense of Belonging

The last area to be discussed in terms of social discontinuities was a concern for all parent participants. Developing a sense of belonging is sometimes indiscernible. For my parent participants, it was their children’s making new and positive friendships, maintaining a good (relative to the child) academic standing and getting involved in clubs and sport activities. It was feeling and becoming a part of their new high school environment. As has been previously discussed, Debbie’s daughter was unable to find this sense of belonging because of such a dramatic socio-cultural shift from her elementary school and Stephen and Barb’s daughter did find a sense of belonging but outside of her parents’ comfort level. All other parent participants felt their children, so far, were adjusting well to the academic and social changes in high school. This sense of belonging in their new high school life was one aspect of Royal S.S. which was positively referenced by many parent participants. As Valerie, a Royal teacher, explains, “Most teachers in this school participate in at least one thing. Some teachers do a couple or one teacher will do a massive big thing and that would be their responsibility… I think there’s an expectation but nobody every checks.” Many parent participants actively encouraged their children to join one of the many activities at Royal in order to develop a greater sense of belonging to the broader school community. This element of transition seemed to my parent participants to be the identifier of their children’s full transition to high school, the point where their children truly belonged to the high school community. High school is recognized/assumed by many to be more
reflective of bureaucratic structures in the broader society and perhaps parents are relieved when their children seem to be fitting in to the high school milieu.

**Summary**

This chapter has examined students’ transitioning to high school as experienced by parents. This transition is a process that often results in parent anxieties over organizational and social discontinuities. In spite of assumed and real discontinuities between elementary/middle school and high school, social discontinuities created the most anxiety and concerns for parents. The emotions invested in transitioning and school choice decision-making were evident throughout the parent interviews in my study, along with the importance of social and cultural capital in lessening some of this angst. Parents who had a greater social network were able to call upon these connections to validate, dispel and/or identify various organizational and social discontinuities prior to their children’s entering high school. For those who had few social networks or personal experience in the Canadian educational system, educators did address organizational discontinuities by providing tours of the school, information about high school diplomas, uniforms, contracts, behaviour codes, course selections, etc. But organizational discontinuities, as opposed to social discontinuities, are much easier to speak to. Students adjust to these changes more readily. It is vital for educators to also address the emotional aspects of parents around transitioning and school choice in relation to social discontinuities, as discussed in this chapter. Also high school educators need to confront assumptions understood by parents’, students’ and elementary school educators’: parents do not care about their children’s daily activities, high school entry requires students to make decisions independent of their parents and be self responsible. These assumptions dispel the importance of the parent-child-school triad relationship and only serve to silence parents in their children’s high school experiences.

At the local level, parents have much to say, but they are rarely heard. It is critical for educators and parents to have open discussions around the educational hierarchy (educators as knowers and parents as unknowers), especially at the high school level. Parents’ understandings in my study were personal, based on their lived experiences and revealed how transitioning is realized from outside the educational bureaucracy. Traditionally, parents’ voices have been muted in educational affairs, especially when parents are viewed as having little power and/or little knowledge of educational doings, as is often the case in high schools. As children move
into the high school forum, parents’ voices are usually spoken and heard less. Parents feel less valued, marginalized and discounted. Notions such as children’s (students’) need to disassociate from their parents in order to become more independent, develop better decision-making skills and become self directed are dispelled by researchers, such as Jeynes (2005), whose findings suggested, “the most subtle aspects of family support” (parental expectations and ‘an educationally oriented ambiance-an encouraging atmosphere’) were found to have the greatest correlation to student academic achievement” (p. 262). Thus, educators need to nurture the parent-child-school relationship, particularly during the transition years to high school, and discover from local parents what they need to hear in order to assist in making some of the most critical decisions in their children’s educational career.
CHAPTER 8:  
CONCLUSION

I have three aims for this final chapter. First is presented an overview of the purpose of the study and my positioning in relation to it and second, a review of the main concepts and conclusions with an explanation of how my research contributes to the understanding of parent-school relationships. These will provide a context for drawing out implications for future research in parent-school relationships. Lastly, questions are posed that arose out of my research which suggested changes, at the local level, in policies and procedures directed at the transition and school choice process in order to begin to place parent-school relationships on a more stable ground.

Overview: Purpose of the Study

At the outset of my research, I proposed to identify key influences on parent-school relationships focusing on the transition and school choice process between elementary/middle school and high school. I listened to and reflected on parents’ voices within their everyday lives as they journeyed through this process. My research took the standpoint of parents and I positioned myself within a critical and constructivist paradigm and was influenced by the Institutional Ethnography methods of inquiry. I discussed how institutional processes contributed to the knowledge (cultural capital) of certain parents while marginalizing and excluding others and demonstrated how the educational context of transition to high school and school choice are socially and historically situated through institutional discourses. I discussed how parents (particularly mothers) are positioned in roles that reproduce an historic and gender based parent-school hierarchy. I uncovered inequities resulting from education policies and procedures and identified how social class, race, ethnicity, gender, and capital matter.

My journey into the everyday lives of parents permitted me to hear their concerns, quandaries and perceptions around the parent-school relationship and the emotions attached to the transition and school choice process. I have learned from my parent participants that every parent, every neighbourhood and every school community has its own understanding of parent involvement, its own position on the parent-school relationship and its own set of social, cultural
and economic factors which shape this relationship. Perhaps local communities may not be so
different from those small rural communities in the 19th century where parents and local officials
massaged educational policies to fit their own milieu, needs and wants. Of course the difference
today is that we no longer think in terms of education in local communities, but rather education
as a bureaucratic process dictated by Provincial and Board policies, procedures and directives.

Main Concepts and Interpretations:
Establishing a Context for Drawing Implications

The guiding questions here used to present the main concepts from my study are drawn
from the parent participants. These are:

1. How does the social construct of parent involvement affect the parent-school
   relationship?
2. How do transition and school choice policies and procedures advantage some parents
   while marginalizing or excluding others?
3. How are parents silenced by historically based social constructs, hierarchies and
   assumptions, particularly at the high school level?
4. What do parents bring to the parent-school relationship?

How Does the Social Construct of Parent Involvement Affect the
Parent-School Relationship?

In Chapter 5, I discussed the multilayered concept of parent involvement. Certainly the
participants in my study perceived parent involvement as visible, public and demonstrative of
caring about their children’s education. Private parent involvement (beyond the publics gaze) in
their children’s education was not understood by the participants as parent involvement, but
rather viewed as parenting, a separate and distinct category from parent involvement. Most
discourse at the Ministry, Board and elementary school level suggests that parents should
become involved by volunteering, fundraising, reading to their children, helping with homework,
becoming a Parent Council member, or even bettering their parenting skills. Little is specifically
directed towards parents of high school students. Being placed in the unique position of entering
parents’ homes and hearing their understanding and concerns around transitioning to high school
and listening to their notions of parent involvement made me conscious of how important it is for
parents to be recognized by educators and/or be reassured about their educational decisions which directly affect their children’s academic, social and emotional success in high school.

It became clear to me that parents are often misguided by educational discourse describing which parental activities are the most important for their children’s academic success, especially during the transition years. Many discussions, policies and procedures are designed to provide parents with demonstrative evidence of their and the schools’ involvement in students transitioning to high school (Open Houses, signed forms, meetings, paying fees and buying uniforms). Private parent involvement is not often considered valid in the parent-school relationship because we (researchers, educators and parents) have tended to measure parent caring/involvement through publicly visible binaries (attend-or not, participate-or not, care-or not) and quantitatively (how many times). Elizabeth, Braun’s Parent Council Chair, worked hard to get parents into the school as if this was the true measure of parent involvement and perhaps equally a measure of her own success as Chair. But I discovered that all my parent participants were indeed involved in their children’s transition, even though it may have been well beyond the public gaze.

The bureaucracy behind the notion of parent involvement is multifaceted and unwieldy. The hierarchy starts at the Ministry level (Parent Involvement Committee and the Parent Engagement Office) then filters to the Boards of Education (mandated Parent Involvement Committees), and then fans out to each school (mandated Parent Councils). Parent involvement is socially constructed as public performance and many of my parent participants felt a tinge of guilt for not being involved enough. The bureaucratization of parent involvement has created mandated public performances (Parent-Teacher Nights, Open Houses, Information Nights), as well as an internalized moral obligations (guilt) directed at parents if they do not meet a socially defined public performance criterion associated with being a caring/involved parent. I am reminded here of Aarif, who retorted, “Then I AM an involved parent!” when suggested that parent involvement includes private performance in the home. This suggested that he had begun to internalize the historic and social construct of parent involvement to mean public (visible) performance.

My discussion of parent involvement may be presented as public and private, but my intention is not to present parent involvement as a binary, rather to open up the concept to that which has been/is invisible to educators and parents, as well as presented in educational discourse.
With an ever increasing immigrant population residing in Ontario and thus varied notions of parent involvement, it is essential that educators, at the local school level, listen to how parents see themselves involved in their children’s education and not be pressed to count parent bodies and institute political policy mandates which may have no relevance to their particular parent community. In both my elementary school sites, the number of parents on the Parent Council was small. Castle Dawn parents had established less formal ways (on a needs basis) of parental inclusion in various school activities. At Braun, only white, upper/middle-class mothers saw the value of being members on the Parent Council, although, as Aarif mentioned, the immigrant parents had much to say, but unfortunately they were not heard. This suggests that the Ministry mandated Parent Council does not represent the needs of the Braun parent community, as perhaps is the case in many school communities in Ontario. If the parent-school relationship is to be nurtured, new ways of connecting with parents in local communities, beyond bureaucratic structures, need to be sought out, encouraged and implemented.

How Do Transition and School Choice Policies and Procedures Advantage Some Parents While Marginalizing or Excluding Others?

Policies and procedures

Board policies and procedures were not interpreted, nor understood nor utilized by all parents or educators equally in my two elementary school sites. Parents and educators in the Castle Dawn community discussed how Board designated school attendance policies and procedures could be circumvented or utilized to their advantage, particularly because they had certain cultural knowledge (how the school works) and social networks (who to ask/contact). This, along with their economic capital, enabled parents to access a greater variety of school choices (private as well as public) through a more extensive social network of friends, neighbours and educators. Social networking was of great importance in comprehending transition procedures which required understanding of educational documents and accurately completing time-sensitive paperwork in order to ensure entry to a desired school and/or program. One Castle Dawn parent, a working single mom who lived outside the Castle Dawn community, found herself isolated from the grapevine knowledge shared by mothers at the school. This hot knowledge was a valuable resource for most Castle Dawn parents, thus requiring this single
working mom to spend many hours “digging” for information about school options, Board policies and required procedures.

Contrary to the Castle Dawn community, Braun parents who lived in middle to working-class neighbourhoods were disadvantaged by a lack of social, cultural and economic capital and were less likely to take advantage of the full range of school options offered by the TDSB. Parents in Braun’s less affluent neighbourhoods felt they had little choice but to follow Board policies on school attendance, as they understood them. Braun parents accepted that if they made the wrong choice in selecting an out-of-area school for their children, the doors would be closed for assured entry to the local high school (Royal S.S.) the following year, as policy states. Braun parents realized, and I would agree, that they had less agency in the educational system than Castle Dawn parents. Parents wishing to challenge Board policies are more confident if they have political, social and cultural capital, as well as an extensive social network. Although all Braun parents ranked Royal S.S. as an excellent school for their children, they did not feel they had a real choice, considering the risk at stake for entry. Perhaps community schooling (attending your local school) was the intent of the Board’s home school policy, but parents with greater social, cultural and economic capital were not dissuaded by these policies in considering other options, knowing that if their children needed to change home schools, they could call on their social network and cultural knowledge to circumvent or at least argue against the Board policy. Clearly, Braun parent participants were intimidated by restrictive Board policies, while Castle Dawn parents were not, and the lack of social, cultural and economic capital of Braun parents resulted in their compliance with a sea of bureaucratic policies and procedures.

Specialized programs/schools

Research (West, Hind and Pennell, 2004) indicates that specialized schools and programs select students who have specific qualities or skills defined by these specialized programs, for example Elite Athlete Programs or Arts Schools or International Baccalaureate Programs. Erhan Sinay, in a research report solicited by the TDSB, talked about the exclusivity of these specialized programs.

With few exceptions, social composition of the students who attend alternative schools and specialized schools and programs are more likely to come from families with a higher SES, non-immigrant status, a two
parent family structure, and have parents with a high level of education. (2010, 83)

So in itself, these programs are self selective and thus are not openly accessible to all students in the TDSB. Suggesting all parents be informed and helped in their understanding of the full range of school/program choices available (as stated by TDSB policy) allows parents the possibility to access the best programs to meet the educational, social and interest needs of their children. In order for all parents to be in such a position, two changes must be implemented to make this a reality. First, parents must be informed well in advance of Grade 8 of their choices in order to allow them time to assess, visit and possibly network in order to choose the best fit for their children. Although guidance counsellors are responsible for getting, sharing and distributing information about transitioning and school choice, as well as ensuring that specific policies and procedures are followed, this is only one of the many jobs required in a long list of other school assignments. Guidance counsellors must not be the sole educators given the responsible of informing all parents and implementing school choice and transitioning procedures.

Second, transition teams, while already in existence in most elementary schools, should move beyond their usual focus on the mechanical aspects of the transitioning process (relaying information to students, getting the paperwork done, applications submitted, and ensuring necessary information is shared with the high schools). Many parents need a longer and more intense personal approach to understanding how the transition and school choice process works, especially parents who are unfamiliar with the school system or who have themselves struggled with the education system. One counsellor frustratingly relayed to me that parents “trust the system” and rely on educators to make decisions about their children’s future. She stated that parents often have incorrect information which results in children failing, becoming discouraged and dropping out of school. It is essential that parents and schools, especially in less advantaged or immigrant communities, collaborate on understanding the intricacies underlying the transition and school choice process. Parent voices need to be solicited, heard and included in any collaborative changes in these processes in order for parental concerns to be addressed. In this way all parents will have a greater opportunity to develop the best possible choice in the interest of their children’s educational future.

From my interviews with grade 8 teacher participants, I learned that they are not usually aware of policies, procedures and school options available to their students in the transition and
school choice process. Grade 8 teachers can be an invaluable resource to parents in these processes, but they need to be trained and educated about Board policies, procedures and school choice options open to their Grade 8 students and parents. This certainly was the case for parents who were lucky enough to have children in classrooms with experienced, knowledgeable and resourceful teachers. Perhaps Grade 7 and 8 teachers need to be given the opportunity to acquire this knowledge through training, as well as visitations to various high school options in their school community.

Understanding policies and procedures associated with applying to specialized schools and programs can be individualized and complicated. But the emotional elements associated with parent decision-making are even more complex. One mother, living outside my two elementary school sites, reflected, “Am I a bad parent because I did not send my child to a specialized program?” Living in an affluent neighbourhood and having a strong social network within her community (much like that of Castle Dawn), this mother was aware of her options in the school choice process, but was still uncertain whether her decision would have a negative effect on her child’s future. Her emotional quandary had me ask, what if she had applied for a special program and her child did not get accepted? Would she also question whether she provided the right experiences for her child or question the written application which she would have diligently completed? The reality is, parents (primarily mothers) are doing the donkey work in these procedures and it is mothers, primarily, whose emotions are being laid on the line and questioned during the transition and school choice process. Specialty programs and specialty schools are rarely considered as options for those parents who do not have the social, emotional, cultural and economic capital with which to wade through the policies and procedures required for entry.

Specialized programs/schools are not solely instituted to better the experiences and interests of students in the local community. It is often forgotten that the impetus behind instituting many specialized schools/programs is to counter declining enrolment and diminishing resources, as was the case with Royal S.S. Specialized schools/programs are thought to attract students from outside the public school system, as well as outside the TDSB, hoping to cream off the best students from across the GTA (Hammer, 2011). Perhaps not out of a moral obligation towards equity, the TDSB has proposed opening an Africentric High School and ten gender based elementary schools. Whether specialized schools/programs advantage certain students and
disadvantage others depends on a number of factors which will not be delved into here. But during my research, it would appear that it is the aura around these programs which attracted many parents and students, thus giving the schools and their programs, at least in the case of Royal, an elitist connotation.

One Braun father, not educated in Canada, whose daughter was not accepted to the special program at Royal, stated that every parent is looking for a heads up for their child in such a competitive world. He believed if his daughter had been accepted into the special program, she would have had an advantage over other students and increased her marketability. One the other hand, another father, who was educated in Canada and whose child had just graduated from the special program at Royal, felt that the program had very little to offer his child, other than a special certificate, which he did not feel affected his child’s university applications. At the end of his son’s high school experience, he felt his child had no marketing advantage by having attended this special program. The fact that none of the students of immigrant parents in my study of those who applied and all of the students of upper/middle-class, white parents got accepted to the special program at Royal may be a coincidence, but it would be interesting to investigate why this was so from an application process perspective.

**Communication**

How is it that only some parents know well in advance about the requirements to specialty programs/schools at the high school level, thus ensuring their children are well equipped and skilled for the entry process? One parent suggested that “if I knew about these programs when my child was in Grade 7, I may have been able to help her.” Communication with all parents about these specialized schools/programs is sometimes lacking. Policies and procedural applications are often set out well in advance by Boards of Education for legal reasons in order to deflect any future legal problems rather than for parent comprehension. Such policies and procedures mentioned in this study include a system of lottery selection in overcrowded schools, the in-area and out-of-area school policies and an application process for entry to specialized programs/schools. These policies and procedures are often confusing to parents and educators alike and in need of detailed explanations. With people resources to assist parents being scarce, the internet is often used by upper/middle-class parents, in addition to social networking. But, what if a parent lacks computer skills or is not proficient with
educational jargon to navigate the Board or school sites or does not have a computer and/or internet service at home? It is assumed by educators that, in our technologically savvy world, all parents and students have access to a computer, their own or some one/where else’s. While guidance support is limited and policies and procedures are becoming ever more complicated, parents must rely on their established social and cultural capital to navigate the transitioning and school choice process.

For the less advantaged parents, as was the case for many parents at Braun, they had to place a heavy burden of trust on educators to make the right decisions about a high school choice and the high school entry process. This was necessary for some parents, even though they may have distrusted the education system, due to their own or their children’s educational history. They may have experienced bias, racism, ethnocentrism and/or class discrimination. Although I do not have direct evidence from my study to support this as fact, researchers such as Bryne (2006), Dei Safa (2008) and Lucey et al. (2003), have given evidence to support this type of discrimination.

How Are Parents Silenced?

Two notions are assumed to be true by researchers, educators and parents: at the high school level, parents don’t care about their children’s day-to-day educational experiences and that students entering high school must be more independent and responsible. After thirty years of teaching in upper/middle-class and at risk neighbourhoods and listening to parent participants in my study, I found that parent voices are similar. Most parents care about their children’s overall high school educational experiences and want their children to be academically, socially and emotionally grounded. Parents tend to back-off from involvement with their children’s day-to-day education work in high school. Their concerns are more covert and manifest themselves through anxieties or even guilt about their parental involvement (public performance) and awareness of educational matters. The problem has not been that parents (primarily mothers) don’t care or lack interest in their children’s educational success at the high school level, but rather that parents are positioned by experts, educators and educationalists as unknowers of high school matters or even blamed for their children’s lack of educational success. Blaming parents is a more common response than examining how high schools marginalize or exclude parents in their policies and procedures, particularly during the transition and school choice process. This
process is often complex and filled with educational jargon, policies and procedures at a time when parents are under-resourced and feeling vulnerable in the maze of educational bureaucracy.

During Grade 8 parent-school fora, elementary and high school educators should emphasize organizational discontinuities, as well as social discontinuities. In order for these transition fora to be both functional, as well as relevant, educators need to understand what parents require and find useful for a positive transition and school choice experience. Using an example of Royal’s Information Night for incoming Grade 8 parents, educators/presenters were only cognizant of relaying the rules, highlighting the award winning programs and talking about procedures with the listening parents as opposed to addressing the emotional, social and day-to-day concerns which were discussed by parent participants in my study. Continuing to reinforce assumptions that parents do not care about the day-to-day activities of their children at the high school level often results in parents not being given a voice and not being recognized as having legitimate needs during the transition process. Thus, educators will continue to present their own agenda with little regard for those to whom it is directed, unless parent voices are brought into the planning and presentation process.

The second notion assumed to be true is the belief that children must become more independent and responsible upon entry to high school. Parents and some educator participants struggled with the positioning of adolescents, particularly 13 to 15 year olds, as needing to develop a greater sense of autonomy and independence. Nevertheless, there was an alignment of this notion between Grade 8 and Grade 9 educators in understanding that the focus must be shifted away from the parent-child or even parent-school relationship to be redirected towards the student-school relationship. As a parent of a Grade 8/9 student, this is a particularly difficult notion to accept since, from birth, their child was/is legally, emotionally, financially and/or physically dependent upon the parents. Indeed, this creates an interesting interplay in the triad (parent-child-school) relationship, sometimes leaving the child in the middle of a power play between parents and educators. The rush to bring transitioning adolescents (13-15 year olds) into the adult world has its peculiarities not only in Grade 8 teachers’ encouragement (often themselves not familiar with high school expectations), but also in the high school forum where policies and procedures are often designed and developed out of sight and without explanation to parents in the guise of encouraging adolescent independent decision-making and responsible
citizenry. This is reminiscent of the historical positioning of parents as outsiders in their own children’s education.

**Disassociations**

If parents are to be listened to, heard and meant to be part of their children’s high school experience, then high schools need to demystify many of the procedures, policies and doings, particularly during the transition years. They can do so by bringing into view the social disconnects between elementary/middle school education and high school, the emotional concerns felt and experienced by some parents, becoming aware that most parents and their children are involved in a variety of ways in their children’s schooling, including those outside the educator’s gaze, and dislodging assumptions and perceptions that high school teachers are less interested in their students. Educators also need to become cognizant of these views. This will make the high school experience less intimidating for parents (and their children), allow parents to be included in the everyday educational doings of their children (encouraging the parent-child-school relationship), and begin to break down the borderlands in the parent-school relationship, particularly in the high school milieu.

There are dramatic disassociations in parental experiences between elementary and high school. Although all parent participants in my study had a post secondary education, there appeared to be an aura and mystique around high schools. This mystique revolved around parental uncertainty of policies and procedures at the high school level and a changing hierarchical relationship between parents and teachers. Questions arose with my parent participants around understanding the educational jargon of different course levels and program selections, how the semester system actually works, why are some high school schedules modified, and was attending parent-teacher interviews necessary? The quantity of information presented at Royal’s Information Meeting for incoming Grade 9 parents related to school policies and procedures was overwhelming and lengthy for most parents. Discomfort with the disassociation between elementary and high school was so massive for a few parents that they were discouraged from attending future meetings and left everyday educational matters to their children and the school to negotiate.
There was another disconnect for parents in the high school parent-school relationship. Through hearsay from other parents and from listening to presentations at Open Houses and information meetings, parent participants assumed the high school parent-teacher relationship would involve: less communication from the school, little contact with their children’s teachers and fewer sharing of educational experiences by their children. These assumptions are not merely perceptions but in fact real at the high school level and carefully nurtured. The discourse explaining to parents the elementary to high school disassociations included: larger teacher-student ratios, larger buildings, more complex and difficult course content and student evaluations, more reliance on students to relay information to the home, and a need for students to become more independent and responsible decision-makers. I suggest these all serve the purpose of enhancing teacher-student relationships and diminishing the parent-school and parent-child relationship at the high school level.

Transitioning to high school was also expected to have a dramatic effect on the parent-child-school relationship. Besides parental adjustments to their children’s new peer relationships, parents were expected to leave much of the educational decision-making to their children and educators. Because I only had a glimpse at this parent-child-teacher relationship (one semester at the high school level), it is not possible to say whether this relationship changed during further high school experiences. But discussing this with two parent participants who had older children at Royal, thus having had a longer time in which to evaluate the high school parent-child-teacher relationship, I would suggest that this relationship may not dramatically alter from the experiences discussed by my Grade 8/9 parent participants. For the two parent participants who had older children at Royal, their high expectations for their children’s high school experiences, in fact, become tarnished once their children became well entrenched at high school. A father was disappointed when he felt his child had not received the elite education he had expected, and a mother had left the supervision of her daughter’s special program to the educators. Entering her final year at high school, the daughter discovered she lacked the needed graduation requirements to be awarded the special program status. The daughter had to rush to complete these requirements at a time when she was also focusing on entry to university. Both parents felt the high school system had disappointed them and their children.
What Do Parents Bring to the Parent-School Relationship?

I premise any suggestions for change by noting that no one set of generalized policies, procedures or social interactions could possibly be developed to effectively meet the needs of all parents in all schools in any urban centre. The diversity of parent communities is immense in Toronto. Thus, the needs are unique to each neighbourhood, let alone school community. At the local school level, understanding the social and cultural worlds of each school’s community can begin the process of nurturing a positive parent-school relationship. One size does not fit all in urban communities, contrary to many of the top down policies, procedures and guidelines set into play by political pundits and educationalists. In the work of Dei Safa (2006, 2008); Dei Sefa & Rummens (2010), much can be learned through examining school communities and understanding the “constructed identities” nurtured not only by educators, but also by students and parents themselves.

Assuming that there is a will at the local school level to improve positive parent-school relationships, a fresh look needs to be had into each local school community in order to assess their present parent-school relationships. This can not be left to Parent Councils alone, but must rather include all parties whose interests are at stake (a broad cross-section of the parent community, as well as teachers and administrators). A wide range of parent responses needs to be solicited and some preliminary questions need to be asked: What does the parent-school relationship look like presently? How do parents see involvement in their children’s education? What do parents see as their involvement in their children’s school and in their home? How do parents’ and educators’ views on parent involvement align or diverge? What changes and directions are envisioned by both parents and educators in any new relationship? How can these changes be facilitated?

Parent participants in my two elementary school sites represented a very small and unique segment of Toronto parents, but their voices expressed a number of disconnects in the parent-school relationship. Some noted the disharmony between school and parent expectations, others felt marginalized and yet others felt advantaged. Some parents felt Board and school policies dictated their educational choices and others did not know they had choices. The disconnects and suggestions for change stated here are specific to my three school sites and
communities, but they are applicable to many communities throughout the TDSB and perhaps other urban centres throughout Ontario.

What do parents bring to the parent-school relationship? I was inspired to ask this question by the many parents with whom I’ve worked both in this study as well as over my educational and research career. As a parent, I felt those moments of guilt when I didn’t have time to bake the cookies for the latest fundraiser or attend the Parent Council meeting knowing that I was one of only a few parents who did usually attend. I also developed a number of competing notions and assumptions about the parent-school relationship which were discomforting as an educator and as a parent. As Aarif and Sofia demonstrated in understanding their daughter’s need for bolstering of self-confidence, parents have an enormous amount of personal experience to bring to the parent-school relationship and educators have much to learn. Parents often present, for public viewing especially at the high school level, what they understand as socially appropriate behaviour of parent-school relationships, while keeping their true feelings and thoughts covered out of fear of reprisal towards their children, fear of intimidation by a more knowledgeable and powerful education system or concern for being identified as lower in social positioning (gender, race, ethnicity or social class). All of these I have heard, seen or felt during my research for this dissertation.

As educators and researchers, we have much to learn from parents if we are willing to openly listen, step outside of our own comfortable assumptions and positioning and draw upon the multitude of experiences and knowledge which parents have to share in the re-creation of a new parent-child-school relationship. Borderlands between parents and schools, of which Lawrence Lightfoot (2003) speaks, are permeable if there is not only a political will, as discussed by Fine (1993) and Davies (1987), but just as importantly the desire by parents and educators, at the local level, to carve out a relationship which is meaningful to their own school community and positive for the educational experiences for those who often get lost in the political and social constructs of the education bureaucracy - the children/students.

What I Have Learned From the Participants!

In reflecting on my study as a whole, I am astounded at how much I have learned from the participants. During my interviews, I constantly heard them state how lucky my own children
must have been to have me as their mother all through this critical time in their educational career. What I heard them saying was that they considered myself as a knower in the transition and school choice process resulting in less anxiety and assured of making the right decisions. In reality, although I did comprehend the high school educational jargon and curricular information more readily, this did not dispel the anxieties around my children moving into the high school forum and all the emotions and relationship changes which were to follow. My participants added to my consciousness around my own experiences, as well as those of my children. In addition to acquiring a greater awareness of my own every-day realities as a parent, a teacher and a researcher, some of my learning from the participants in my study includes:

- Parent involvement is a socially constructed notion of public performance (primarily mother’s work) which can not be fully measured, mandated through government policies nor defined as absolute to any one parent/school community (especially in diverse urban centers). Mandated parent involvement primarily takes up middle-class, white, mothers’ understandings of their parent-school relationship, ignoring the diverse and multifaceted nature of urban centers such as Toronto.
- Parents, educators and researchers do not usually include involvement in the home (beyond the gaze of educators and other parents) in their understanding of parent involvement.
- Parents’ anxieties and concerns around the transition and school choice process are often driven by lack of or hurried information-getting. These anxieties are not often addressed by educators during transitioning and more often are mothers’ experiences.
- All parents do have a voice, but they often choose not to be heard out of fear of reprisal, a feeling of powerlessness, and/or belief that their opinions and concerns are not valued. Those parents with less capital (economic, social, cultural and emotional) are least likely to give voice to their concerns and least likely to be heard.
- Parent-school relationships are well embedded in socially constructed assumptions nurtured by educators, as well as parents, and reinforced by Boards of Education and the Ministry of Education discourses.
- Educational bureaucracies have become increasingly complex and beyond the understanding and usefulness of many parent communities, especially those who are marginalized in society by class, race, ethnicity and citizenship status. Parents with less cultural, social and economic capital are less likely to have access to understandings of policies and procedures which define the transitioning and school choice process.
- Special programs and schools are not necessarily an advantage to all students as much as they are to quell the tide of declining enrolment and economic deficiencies. Parents of students attending special programs and schools are primarily non-immigrant, middle-class and well educated.
The mystique embraced and assumptions nurtured by high school educators fosters borderlands between elementary and high school educators, parents and educators, students and teachers, and discourages the creation of a parent-child-school relationship.

Educator training does not value parent-school relationships, evidenced by the lack of programming in its training institutes.

Concluding Remarks and Reflective Questions

In this dissertation, I have wished for my parent participant’s voices to be heard and to be an inspiration to other parents in local school communities in order to question their relationship with the school, to reflect on their experiences and understandings, and to challenge marginalizing and exclusionary practices, policies and procedures developed by schools, Boards of Education and the Ministry of Education. Through close and critical examination of local parent-school relationships, parents and educators can work together to define their own understands of parent involvement and set their own processes in place which best serves the interests of the children in their community.

In order to bring about change, I have presented questions encompassing a number of significant areas of my dissertation in hopes of inspiring local reflections on the way we do things, how we do things, who does them and for whom are they being done. I will be bringing these questions to my research sites in order to begin a conversation which I hope may effect change in the parent-child-school relationship. It is through entering into the local school sites and discussing my findings with parents and educators that I hope to begin this conversation.
Reflective Questions
Transitioning, the School Choice Process and Parent-School Relationships

Parent Information Sharing

Is it possible to introduce concepts of transition and school choice at an earlier grade level than Grade 8 (perhaps Grades 6 and/or 7)?

Can specialty program/school requirements be shared with parents during these earlier elementary school years?

Human Resource and Training

How can the transition process/procedures and school choice options become part of the knowledge base of a wider range of educators? This could add to the human resource circle by providing needed skills to teachers who can act as valuable resources to Grade 7 & 8 students and parents. Perhaps this might shift the guidance counsellor’s role from imparting information to training teachers to become a resource for parents and students.

Should facilities of education offer a required course for new teachers concerning developing positive parent-teacher relationships or integrate it into one of the existing courses?

Continuity in Transitioning from Elementary to High School

How can disassociations between elementary and secondary schools be lessened for parents and students? How can high schools be demystified for parents and students?

Should differences in policies and procedures between the two levels of education be discussed among elementary and high school educators and administrators, and shared with parents and Grade 8 students?

How can assumptions about each level of education be drawn out, discussed and put on the table by parents, teachers and administrators? (i.e., students entering high school are expected to be more independent, responsible and educational decision makers; parents are to become less involved in the day-to-day education of their children)
How can Open Houses and Information Nights for Grade 8 parents (possibly including Grade 7) be more contributing to what parents want to know not just what schools think they should know?

How can parents increase social networks with other parents who have had similar experiences, backgrounds and understandings in order to share, in a safe way, their concerns and questions about their children, their school experiences and the emotions surrounding transitioning and school choice?

**Inclusion for All**

Can a forum be created which allows all parents to express their expectations, their experiences and their concerns without fear of reprisal, prejudice and negative positioning?
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Appendix A

Demographic Information for Parents

Demographic Information for Parents

A) How many children live at home?
   i) 1 age __________
   ii) 2 ages __________
   iii) 3 plus ages __________

B) What is the gender of your son/daughter in Grade 8?
   i) Female
   ii) Male

C) Please indicate your marital status.
   i) single
   ii) divorced
   iii) married
   iv) separated
   v) other Please Explain: ________________________________

D) Please indicate your age group.
   i) less than 29 years
   ii) 30 - 39 years
   iii) 40 - 49 years
   iv) 50 years or older

E) Please indicate the highest level of education you have attained.
   i) less than high school
   ii) high school
   iii) post secondary
   iv) graduate studies
   v) other: Please Explain: ________________________________

F) If you have a partner, what is their highest level of education?
   i) less than high school
   ii) high school
   iii) post secondary
   iv) graduate studies
   v) other: Please Explain: ________________________________
G) Where were you born?
   In Canada  _____
   Outside of Canada  _____

   If so, in which country? ___________________

   How long have you lived in Canada? ______ years.

H) If you have a partner, where were they born?
   In Canada  _____
   Outside of Canada  _____

   If so, in which country? ___________________

   How long have they lived in Canada? ______ years.

I) i) What is your present occupation? ____________________________

   ii) If you have a partner, what is their occupation? ________________________________
Appendix B

Demographic Information for Teachers/Administrators

Demographic Information for Teacher/Administrators

A) Please indicate your age group.
   i) less that 29 years
   ii) 30 - 39 years
   iii) 40 - 49 years
   vi) 50 years or older

B) For how many years have you been teaching? ______

C) How many years have you worked with Grade 8 or Grade 9 students? ______

D) Please indicate the highest level of education you have attained.
   i) post secondary
   ii) graduate studies
   iii) other: Please Explain: _____________________________

E) Where were you born?
   In Canada _____

   Outside of Canada _____
   If so, in which country? _____________________________

   How long have you lived in Canada? _____ (years)

F) Do you have any children?
   Yes _____ What is/are the age(s)? __________________
   No _____
### Appendix C

**Parent Participants***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym / School</th>
<th>Children Age</th>
<th>Age Range / Marital Status</th>
<th>Birth Place / Self / Partner (Years In Canada)</th>
<th>Occupation / Self / Partner</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aarif / Sofia Braun</td>
<td>10, 14</td>
<td>40-49 married</td>
<td>South East Asia/ 10 (both)</td>
<td>Service Industry (Both)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabeth Braun</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>50+ married</td>
<td>Canada / Canada</td>
<td>Retired / Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne Braun</td>
<td>8, 12, 14</td>
<td>40-49 married</td>
<td>Canada / Canada</td>
<td>Business (PT) / Finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leslie Braun</td>
<td>12, 13</td>
<td>40-49 divorced</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Educator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuman / Arin Braun</td>
<td>1, 5, 9, 13</td>
<td>40-49 married</td>
<td>Middle East (25) / Middle East (11)</td>
<td>Health Tech / Stay at home Mom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina Braun</td>
<td>8, 14, 16</td>
<td>40-49 married</td>
<td>West Indies (both) / 31 / 21</td>
<td>Finance / Industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonnie Castle Dawn</td>
<td>12, 13</td>
<td>40-49 married</td>
<td>Canada / Canada</td>
<td>Clerk / Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barb/Stephen Castle Dawn</td>
<td>6, 13</td>
<td>40-49 married</td>
<td>Canada / Canada</td>
<td>Stay at home Mom / Business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debbie Castle Dawn</td>
<td>10, 13, 15</td>
<td>40-49 divorced</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>David Royal S.S.</td>
<td>16, 19</td>
<td>50+ married</td>
<td>Canada / Canada</td>
<td>Self-employed / Educator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Patricia Outside sites</td>
<td>10, 14</td>
<td>40-49 married</td>
<td>Canada / Canada</td>
<td>Business (PT) / Business</td>
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*All parent participants responded to having obtained a post-secondary education. Parents born outside of Canada received their post-secondary education in their country of origin.*
## Appendix D

**Teacher / Administrator Participants**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Alias / School</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Years Teaching / Grade 8 or 9</th>
<th>Birth Place / Years in Canada</th>
<th>Children Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beth / Castle Dawn</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>6 / 2</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>7, 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa / Braun</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>7 / 7</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>6 mons., 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee / Braun</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>3 / 2</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky Braun</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>14 / 2 admin</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>9, 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia Braun</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>3 / 2</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alicia Braun</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>2 / 2</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria Braun</td>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>3 / 3</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph Braun</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>2 / 1</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alistair Braun / Castle Dawn</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>19 / 9</td>
<td>West Indies / 20</td>
<td>21, 21, 27, 30, 36</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharon Castle Dawn</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>6 / 8 admin</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>4, 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darlene Royal S.S.</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>4 / 4</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie Royal S.S.</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>3 / 3</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corinne Royal S.S.</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>31 / 31</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>21, 23</td>
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</table>
Dear Parents,

As a parent of two children, I am aware of the importance of the transition years to high school (Grade 8 to Grade 9). I am also a retired teacher and Doctoral Student at the University of Toronto researching parents’ understandings of their child’s transition to high school. This can be a critical time in your child’s education and I hope my study will lead to a better understanding of how you, the parents, come to see ‘parent involvement’ and ‘what matters’ for your child’s success. I hope the findings will result in a better understanding of parents’ voices during these important transition years.

My research will begin by interviewing Grade 8 parents and then re-interviewing them during their child’s Grade 9 high school year. Over this one year period, a commitment of about 1 hour of your time for each of the two interviews is required, at a time and place of your choosing. When my study is complete, you will be invited to a discussion of the findings. It is hoped that this will be the start of an ongoing dialogue between parents and schools around expectations during the transition years. Please be aware that confidentiality and anonymity will be strictly adhered to with your identity and school disguised. An audiotape of our interview will be made and, at any time, you may request the tape be stopped or any part erased.

Although I can not compensate you for participating in my study, there are some benefits which may make it worthwhile. In the process of talking about your relationship with your child’s school and teachers, you may find ways to further advocate for your child’s success. Also, through our discussion of the transition years, you may raise questions which can be answered before your child enters high school or assists in your child’s high school success. I also anticipate that other parents/teachers/schools may benefit from the findings of your participation in this study.

I hope you will consider being a participant in this important research study. If you are interested in being a participant or have any questions please contact me, Mary Bullen, at: (phone number or email address).

Thank-you for taking the time to consider being a part of my study and I hope to hear from you soon!

Sincerely,

Mary Bullen
Researcher: Mary Bullen BASc, M.Ed, Ed.D. Candidate
Appendix F

Elementary Teachers Letter of Introduction

Hello Teachers/Counselors,

I am a retired Toronto Board of Education high school teacher and a candidate for the Doctoral Program at the University of Toronto (OISE). My dissertation research project: Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School, is a qualitative study analyzing parents’ and teachers’ understandings of parent involvement during transitioning to high school. As you know, this is a critical time in a child’s education, so I hope this study will bring a unique understanding to how parents and teachers come to see parental ‘educational work’ and make visible ‘what matters’ during the transition from Grade 8 to Grade 9.

My proposal has been approved by the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto and the External Research Review Committee (ERRC) at the Toronto District School Board. Anonymity of research participants and school locales will be ensured, while data collected from my interviews will be carefully protected.

If you are or have been a Grade 8 Teacher/Counselor, I hope you will become a participant in this research and contribute to our knowledge of ‘what matters’ during these important transition years. As a participant, your time commitment will be approximately one hour at a time and place of your choosing. Please be assured that our discussion will be completely confidential and anonymous.

Upon completion of this study, I will facilitate a discussion for all those interested in to share findings and initiate a dialogue between parents and schools around parents’ and teachers’ understandings of ‘educational work’ during the transition years.

If you are interested in participating or would like more information, please contact me at the email or telephone numbers given. Thank you for taking the time to consider being a participant in this important research.

Sincerely,

Mary Bullen (Researcher) M.Ed, Ed.D. Candidate
(Email address and phone number)
Appendix G

High School Teachers Letter of Introduction

Hello Teachers, Counsellors and Administrators:

As a retired TDSB high school teacher and a parent, I am aware of the importance of the parents understanding of schooling, particularly during the transition year to Grade 9. As a candidate for the Doctoral Program at the University of Toronto (OISE), I have taken these understanding and feel my research project (Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School) addresses some of the issues around Grade 8 student transitioning to Grade 9. My study is qualitative and is analyzing parents’ and teachers’ understandings of parent involvement during these years. As you know, this is a critical time in a child’s education. I hope this study will bring a unique understanding to how parents and teachers come to see parental ‘educational work’ and bring to light ‘what matters’ during the transition to high school.

I have completed the first phase of my work (interviewing Grade 8 parents, counsellors and administrators) and now wish to interview R.H. King Grade 9 teachers, counselors and administrators. I am very excited to hear the voices of R.H. King staff in terms of Grade 9 parent involvement and look forward to hearing your perspective. Your time commitment will be no more than one hour at a time and place of your choosing. Please be assured that our discussion will be completely confidential and anonymous.

My proposal has been approved by the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto and the External Research Review Committee (ERRC) at the Toronto District School Board. Anonymity and confidentiality of research participants and school locales will be ensured, while data collected from my interviews will be carefully protected.

I plan to hold a discussion group before the end of this school year in order to share my preliminary findings with those who are interested. You will get a special invitation, so I hope to see you there.

If you would like to participate or would like more information, please feel free to contact me at my email or telephone number below. Thank you for your support and I look forward to meeting with you soon.

Sincerely,

Mary Bullen (UT Researcher) Ed.D. Candidate
(Email address and phone number)
Appendix H

Principals’ Letter of Introduction

Letter of Information to the Principal

I am a retired Toronto Board of Education high school teacher and a candidate for the Doctoral Program at the University of Toronto (OISE). I am initiating my dissertation research project: Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School. This qualitative study proposes to analyze parents’ and teachers’ understandings of parent involvement during transitioning to high school. At a critical time in a child’s education, I hope this study will bring a better understanding to how parents and teachers come to see parental ‘educational work’ and make visible ‘what matters’ for a child’s academic success. This collaboration of voices may result in a change in transitional policies and procedures in local high school settings.

I am writing for your permission to conduct fieldwork for this research project in your high school and two of its feeder schools. The objective of this fieldwork is to understand, from a parent’s perspective, what is meant by ‘educational work’ and how this understanding has come about. Fieldwork would be conducted over a period of approximately one year and would involve:

1) Interviewing parents of children in Grade 8 and again during their Grade 9 year
2) Interviewing teachers of Grade 8 and Grade 9 students
3) Attending school directed parent group transition meetings/events and taking notes about how parents and teachers understand the transitioning process
4) Reviewing texts (oral or written) such as transition literature, parent invitations/brochures/hand-outs, and Board policies and procedures. These texts will be examined on the bases of intent and clarity of parent understanding.

Upon completion of this study, I will facilitate a meeting for all informants in order to share the findings of this research. This coming together of all informants may begin a dialogue between parents and schools around expectations during transitioning and clarify understandings of parent ‘educational work’.

My proposal has been approved by the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Toronto and I am now seeking ethics approval from the ERRC at the Toronto Board of Education. Anonymity of research participants and school locales will be ensured, while data collected from my interviews will be carefully protected.

I hope the your school will participate in this study, which I feel will contribute to the understanding of parent-school relationships and students’ academic success in their local educational settings. If you are interested in participating or would like more information, please contact me, Mary Bullen, at (phone number and email address) or my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Margrit Eichler at (phone number).
Thank-you for taking the time to review this letter.

Sincerely

Mary Bullen
Appendix I
Directive Questions (Parents)

Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School

Greetings, Review of interview plan, sign consent

1/ Parents understanding of ‘educational work’

a) Let’s start with you describing a typical day in your household. When do you get up? What do you do then? When does this happen? What happens before/after that? How does your child(ren) get to and from school? When does s/he get home? What are your evenings usually like? Who does what? How is that done? Tell me more.

b) Tell me about your child’s experiences in Grade 8. What has been your experience? Has this year been different from other years (decision-making around high school, course/program selections, graduation, trips…)? Can you tell me something about that? How do you/your child feel?

c) Describe the types of school work your child usually brings home? What happens when your child has a problem with school work? Explain. Give an example

d) Have you been made aware of the teacher’s expectations for Grade 8? How did you become aware of these? How do the teacher’s expectations compare to your own/your child’s? Explain. Give me an example.

d) Do you usually communicate any problems to the teachers?

If yes, how do you usually do this? (send a note, leave a message, make a personal call, email …). Give an example. What kind of response do you get? Is this the type of response you expect? Then what….

If no, what do you think would happen if you talked with the teacher? Explain. Give me an example.

2/ Parents Educational Work in Transition

a) Describe what you think high school will be like for your child? What about for you? Explain. Are there differences/similarities between elementary and high school that you expect to find? Can you give me an example?

b) How have you learned about these differences/similarities? From teachers/administrators, readings, going to meetings, the media, personal experiences, other parents, your child?
c) Have you received or gotten information about different high schools in your area?
If yes, how did you get this information? Tell me what types of information you received. What did it tell you?
If no, are you familiar with the different high schools in your area? How did you hear about them?

d) How is/was the decision made about which high school your child will attend? Explain. Are there any particular reasons why your child is going to that high school? What were the influences around this decision? Did anyone share in this decision with you? How does your child feel about this decision?

e) Are there any questions around your child’s transition to high school which you feel have not been addressed by the school? Explain.
Appendix J
Directive Questions (Second Interview Parents)

Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School

Greetings, Review of interview plan, Confirm signed consent

**Parent understanding of ‘educational work’ and the Transition Experience**

a) Now that your child has been in high school for almost a term, describe what a typical day would look like at home. When do you get up? What do you do then? When does this happen? What happens before/after that? How does your child(ren) get to and from school? When does s/he get home? What are your evenings usually like? Who does what? How is that done? Tell me more.

b) Tell me about your child’s Grade 9 experience this year, so far? What has been your experience? Has this year been different from other years? Can you tell me something about that? How did you/your child feel?

c) Have there been any unexpected experiences for you or your child? Explain. Give an example. Did anything about high school surprise you? Have other parents/children had this experience?

d) How have the Grade 9 teachers’ expectations compared with your own/your child’s? Explain. In what way(s) are they the same/different? How does/did this make you/your child feel? Can you explain the differences/similarities in your expectations? Give an example?

e) If your expectations varied from the teacher’s, would you discuss this with the teacher? If yes, how would/did you communicate the difference(s) with the teacher? What did/do you think would happen? If no, what do you think would happen if you did discuss the differences with the teacher? Explain.

f) Have you attended any high school events this year (teacher/school meetings, presentations, events, School and Community Council)? If yes, which one(s) did you attend? What were your experience(s)? How did they make you feel? If no, were there any events you would have liked to have attended? What happened? Explain.
g) Is there any aspect of the high school experience which you feel the schools should address? Would you talk about this with anyone at the school? Whom? When? Why not? Explain.
Appendix K
Directive Questions (Grade 8 teachers)

Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School

Teachers Understandings of Parent Educational Work

• Let’s start with you telling me about your journey to this school.
• Would you describing a typical Grade 8 class?
• What are your expectations for Grade 8 students?
• What do you think parents’ expectations are for their Grade 8 child?
• In what way(s) are they the same/different from yours? Explain.
• How do you think parents are involved in this transition year?

Teachers’ Perceptions of Parent Educational Work in Transition

• What do you think the high school experience will be like for your Grade 8 students?
• What differences and similarities between elementary and high school do you think the parents expect?
• How do parents come to understand the high school experience?
• How are decisions made around which high school a student should attend?
• Are there any aspects of the high school experience which you feel the schools should address?

• Do you have any questions for me?
Appendix L
Directive Questions (Grade 9 Teachers)

Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School

- Can you explain your journey to the high school?
- How would you describe a typical Grade 9 class? (skills, behaviour, diversity, expectations)
- What are your expectations for Grade 9 students? Do you think these expectations are the same as the Grade 9 parents?
- Do you think Grade 9 parents are ‘involved’ in their children’s learning? How? Should they be involved? What do you think ‘involvement’ does/should mean?
- Why is this high school given its name? What does it mean?
- What are the feeder schools to your high school? What is the entry process into your school? How are the students chosen? How do they get into the special program? Who chooses? Who set the criteria?
- How do you think parents make decisions, or do they, around which high school their children should attend?
- Do you see a range of students applying here? What types of supports do you have for the students who are academically challenged?
- Are you involved in the transitioning of Grade 9 students in any way at your high school?
- Are there any issues around transition which you think should be addressed? If so, by whom?
Appendix M
Directive Questions (Grade 8 Counsellors)

Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School

- Can you tell me something about how you came to be a guidance counsellor? What has been your journey in the education world? How long have you been a guidance counsellor for Grade 8 students?

- You are responsible for schools from JK to 8, Middle Schools and Alternate schools? Do you see parents liking one structure better that the others?

- You are responsible for quite different parent communities. Do you see this affecting the schools milieu in any way? Do you see any differences in parent involvement in transitioning to high school in these communities?

- How are you involved with parents in the transitioning to high school process? How have you come to understanding your role? Are there differences among your communities?

- Do a lot of parents complete applications to out-of-area high schools? Are there differences in your communities?

- What are some of the concerns parents have about their child’s transitioning to high school? Are the children’s concerns the same?

- What are parents’ expectations for their children in high school? Do you see these as being realistic?

- Are you part of the Parent Councils at your schools? What is your role on the PC? What has been your experience as part of the PC?

- If you were to change anything about your role as guidance counsellor during the transitioning years, what would that be?

- Do parents have trust in school decisions?

Any questions for me?
Appendix N
Directive Questions (Grade 8 Administrators)

Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School

- Can you tell me something about how you came to be an administrator at your school? Describe your journey.

- How would you describe your school? What is its schools milieu?

- Generally, how would you describe parent involvement here?

- What do you think is the purpose of the Parent Council? Is it representative of the community here? Does it reflect the needs of your school?

- How do you see parents involved in their children’s transitioning to high school? How does the process of transitioning work in this community?

- Why do you feel specialized schools are so much a part of this community?

- The local high school is talked about by parents as an ‘academic school’, with particular mention to its special status. What has been your experience with students going there? What is it about its special status which is so attractive to parents?

- Do you see the establishment of PIAC at the Ministry level a positive move to improving parent involvement? How has it affected your school, or does it? Is accountability required by the Board/Ministry for parent involvement?

- If you were to change anything about how parents are involved at this school, what would that be?
Appendix O

Directive Questions (High School Administrators/Counsellors)

Parent Involvement/Educational Work: Transitioning to High School

- Can you explain your journey to your high school?
- How would you describe a ‘typical’ Grade 9 group of students entering here?
- What was the motivator behind re-titling the school? Are you aware of parents’ perceptions of your high school? Do you think these are accurate?
- How many feeder schools enter your high school? Do the in-school/out-of-school boundaries stay the same or continually change? What is the entry process into your school?
- What is the difference between a specialist school, specialized programs and alternate schools? Are there Board requirements to for each of these or can a school decide to take on these special designations?
- Can you tell me about your special program? How do students enter this program? Is there a point system your special program like in the IB programs?
- What could parents do in grade school to increase their chances of their children’s entry into the special program?
- Do you think that most of the students who come to your school have chosen their high school correctly? What role do you think the parents play in this decision-making?
- Do you see a range of students here? What types of supports do you have for special needs and/or at risk students? Are there any clear divisions between students based on race and/or ethnicity?
- What role does your school take related to assisting Grade 8 students in the transition?
- Do you feel parents here are involved in their children’s education? How? What would you like to see parents do differently or continue to do?
- Do you feel that you school’s Parent Council plays a vital role in the success of your school? Do you ever use the WIKKI maintained by the PC? Why do you think access is restricted?
- Do you have any questions for me?