



# Meet the Parents... *Where They Are:*

## Culturally Responsive Approaches to Family Engagement

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**A**lthough it may not be clear what Mr. Dahl means by a *sparky* parent, there is value in examining another kind of spark: the one that ignites parent or family engagement with the school.

Family engagement has a significant impact on positive student outcomes including academic achievement, student engagement and well-being. Educators and families have a good track record of collaboration and mutual support that have included in-school activities, home support and school-home communication. That is to say, the track record has been good with respect to the parents and families who traditionally engage with the school to enhance the learning and growth of their children. But what of the often-untapped potential of families who do not engage in the


opportunities offered by the school and whose participation may be impeded by barriers such as language, cultural beliefs, perceived power imbalances and their own experiences with school?

One of the answers to this complex question lies in the examination of what is

happening in many contemporary school contexts where culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy (CRRP) is transforming classrooms and schools through inclusive practices that recognize that student learning is closely connected to language, family structure and social and cultural

“When you grow up and have children of your own, do please remember something important: A stodgy parent is not fun at all! What a child wants—and **DESERVES**—is a parent who is **SPARKY!**”

— ROALD DAHL



identity (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022). It follows that parent engagement strategies which aim to engage and include all parents, especially those who do not respond to traditional parent engagement opportunities must also be culturally responsive and relevant.

Not only have culturally responsive and relevant approaches to parent engagement proven successful in diminishing barriers for marginalized families (Leo, Wilcox & Lawson, 2017) but they have also served to challenge the dominant norms that frame the traditional engagement scripts and invitations that have excluded many families due of their lack of relevance to the culture, identity, and experiences of these families (Ishimaru & Takahashi, 2017). The question then becomes what can be done in practical terms to embed CRRP approaches in family engagement. There are two initial steps that can set schools and families on the right path for meaningful and active collaboration: establishing a shared and collaboratively developed understanding between school and home about what constitutes engagement and using the power of specific invitations to spark interest.

There are often varying definitions of what constitutes family engagement, with educators and parents often operating based on different and often unarticulated assumptions (Gross et al., 2019). The lack of a shared understanding is one of the obstacles to engagement. In addition, presenting parents with a pre-established list of activities based on the school's definition of engagement from which they may choose disenfranchises not only those who hold different perspectives on engagement but also those who do not see a space for their contributions.

One effective strategy to address this disparity in definitions and barrier to participation is to begin the dialogue about engagement by inviting families to shape the context for and nature of parent engagement. There are several ways to open this conversation which could include using a class newsletter

or website, direct and personalized email to parents or an informal conversation at the school. We begin to “flip the script” of conventional family engagement when we invite parents to share their stories which might include their personal experience in school, how they see the role of the family in their children's education, what barriers might prevent them from engaging and what would encourage engagement and create an environment of comfort and welcome,

To render this strategy more culturally relevant, it is useful to consider engaging parents in their home language by using a translation service to send a personal letter or by empowering a parent with the same language background to begin the dialogue. Featuring profiles of families from similar backgrounds that challenge what might be seen as the traditional family may also reduce barriers and assumptions about what engagement might look like.

Following the collection of family input on what constitutes engagement based on their interests, capacities and identification of potential barriers, specific and individual invitations to families may be developed that reflect this input. One of the most effective strategies for increasing family engagement is the use of specific invitations from teachers (Anderson & Minke, 2007). Crafting specific invitations that not only acknowledge family interests but also address the identified barriers can enhance opportunity.

If, for example, language has been identified as a barrier for families, there is an opportunity to capitalize on plurilingual approaches to education which are especially valuable in French Second Language (FSL) contexts. Given that a high number of Allophone families choose French second language and in particular French Immersion for their children (Canadian Parents for French, 2011), there is a great opportunity to engage parents from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds

to participate in and share their language and cultural learning experiences.

Engagement of these parents may include some of the following opportunities or activities that reinforce the language learning and development of intercultural competence of learners:

- Invite parents to contribute cultural artifacts and come to school to speak to them or to read to students in their home language,
- Invite parents to share their language learning journey, what supported them in their learning and how they overcame obstacles,
- Participate in a curriculum activity at school exploring the diversity of family structures and where there is a connection to their own social identity.

Families can not only participate in the traditional activities that support the school community and student learning but can also integrate their lived experiences, aspirations and challenges into the life of the school.

While these suggested strategies may not meet all parents where they are, they represent an opening and a beginning. When they complement the many excellent opportunities that schools currently offer, they start a conversation, broaden perspectives and spark new possibilities. ■

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