

# The Parent as 'Subject' - Beyond Liberal Discourse in Parental Involvement in early Childhood Education

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There is a growing trend towards parental involvement programmes in early childhood education. In most of the programmes, the major objective is to enhance the parents' ability to facilitate their children's development, particularly where the conditions for 'normal' development are found wanting. This reformist trend is reviewed in the first part of this article. In the second part, the review will serve as a backdrop to a critique of liberal discourse in parental involvement, leading to a reconceptualization of the issue. The argument carried through this article is that the notion of parental involvement is central to the process of democratic control, and therefore needs to be grounded in a political project that engenders personal and social empowerment of parents. Such a project demands a pedagogy that recognizes the different voices, knowledges and identities that constitute the parental body; a pedagogy that is fully cognizant of the fact that parents differ in terms of location, cultural capital, habitus, and personal experience within the education system. In other words, there are parents who have benefited from the social relations that characterize mainstream schooling and others, perhaps the majority, that have experienced a sense of powerlessness. It is the latter category of parents that the project for parental involvement in question will mostly address. By adopting a language of critique, traditionally disenfranchised parents will dig into the past to reclaim their personal, class and gender history in order to subjectively understand why conservative and liberal discourse in education has failed them, with a view that they will eventually embark on a project of possibility that will not only promote equal partnership but also substantial transformation in the educational process itself.

## The Theory, Research and Practice of Parental Involvement in Early Childhood Education - A Review

There is a general understanding among early childhood theorists, researchers and practitioners that the family milieu represents the most significant part of the environment of the young child (Bauch, 1990; Epstein, 1987; Meyerhoff & White, 1986). Parents and other members of the family are conceived of as primary educators in the life of the child, and it is widely held that, initially, scholastic achievement may be more related to family influences than any other variable (Central Advisory Council, 1967; Range et al., 1980; Tizard & Hughes, 1984).

The current emphasis on parental involvement may be linked with the almost obsessive, albeit reformist, search, in early childhood quarters, for the kind of environment that would enable a child to develop to his/her full potential. Historically, in the West, such a search can be traced back to the liberal discourse of Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). Infuriated by the absolutist regimes of his day, Rousseau sought to address contemporary injustices by suggesting an alternative *social contract* based on the concept of equality. Rousseau's new society centred round his unconditional faith in society's ability to regenerate itself under particular social conditions. For Rousseau, regeneration was tied to one major condition - protecting Emile from the society he knew, freeing the boy from artificial restraints (Weber, 1984). He implored mothers (sic) to let their children eat, run and play as they wanted and to trust the child's impulses, and to "cultivate, water the young plant or it dies, it will one day bear fruit delicious to your taste" (in Archer, 1965, p.56).

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1747-1827) sought to concretize Rousseau's liberal vision by organizing classes for children of peasants in his home. While experimenting with materials and meth-

ods of teaching, Pestalozzi maintained a constant faith in the nurturing potential of the family. Homes, to Pestalozzi's mind, could provide children with a solid foundation in moral growth, self development and social regeneration. He wrote: "for children, the teachings of their parents will always be the core, and for the school master, we can give thanks to God if he is able to put a decent shell around the core" (in Berger, 1981, p.40).

Friedrich Froebel, a contemporary of Pestalozzi, emphasized mothers' role as first educators (sic). From its inception, Froebel's kindergarten movement recognized parents as important components in early childhood curricula. In his book *Mother Play and Nursery Songs with Finger Plays*, a manual for mothers to use with their children (sic), Froebel welds play, an ideal medium, to his mind, for the release of the child's creative energy, with his faith in parental (read mothers') involvement.

In the twentieth century, theorists continued to provide inspiration to supporters of parental involvement. As with previous centuries, most of the theorists operated within the liberal tradition.

Erik Erikson's *Childhood and Society*, first published in 1950, analyzed eight stages of development. He emphasizes the first four stages of childhood: trust vs mistrust, autonomy vs shame and doubt, initiative vs guilt, and industry vs inferiority. His theories reflect the belief that social and emotional health, of utmost importance to the child, depends on a nurturing early life.

Piaget (1896-1980), the Swiss genetic epistemologist, studied changes in how children process information as they mature. His research led him to suggest that children, in their quest to adapt to the environment in ever more efficient ways, learn by internalizing increasingly complex and sophisticated techniques of survival. Piaget calls these techniques "schemes".

By providing stimuli for assimilation, and contradictory evidence that challenges existing schemes, the environment, according to Piaget, plays a crucial role in the process leading to the accumulation of increasingly sophisticated schemes. Hurst (1987) points out that three notions pertinent to the understanding of this process are the need for repeated experiences from which conclusions can be drawn, the crucial role of feedback from the environment (whether human or not) in confirming or disproving the child's ideas, and the role of imitation as mani-

fested (first) in physical movement and (then) with various modes of play and representation. In the repetition of experience, the provision of feedback and an environment conducive to imitation, significant adults that come into contact with children contribute heavily to their learning. Parents can be seen, for this reason, to play a leading role in the development of their young children.

Vygotsky (1896-1934) provided the early childhood community with an alternative paradigm. Inspired by the social philosophy of Marx, he speculated that "all fundamental human cognitive activities take shape in a matrix of social history and form the products of sociohistorical development" (Luria, 1976, in Thomas, 1985, p.304). From this perspective, Vygotsky (1962, 1978) theorized that just as society has developed historically by interacting with the products of its own activities, so the individual child must develop psychologically through his/her experiences in that society. The historical dynamics in which the child operates and the child's own developmental history with respect to his/her experiences in that society are conceived by Vygotsky as major determinants of the child's developmental march from basic interaction to higher mental functions. In Vygotsky's scheme, adults, particularly parents, play a crucial role in providing the child with the cultural context and the cultural tool of language through which the child's development proceeds.

Driven by this emphasis on the use of language as a cultural moment psychologists of Vygotsky's school urge parents to involve themselves closely in their children's language acquisition. Pearson (1991) reports that parents from the former Soviet Union "are given specific recommendations as to how to reinforce the language skills of their children so that they can use them to organize their inner life, their emotions, and their will, as well as their ideas. The richer a child's language, the stronger and more flexible will be the "tool" with which he or she can manipulate and interact with the outside environment" (p.156).

Convinced of his belief that early experiences were crucial, Hunt (1961) concluded that "it might be feasible to discuss ways to govern the encounters that children have with their environment, especially during the early years of their development, to achieve a substantially higher level of intellectual capacity" (p.363)

In the U.S., Hunt's belief in environmental mediation as a means for achieving higher mental

functions was shared by a growing pool of researchers, particularly behavioural psychologists, interested in early childhood. This idea also caught the imagination of policy makers in the U.S. who, faced by the political turmoil and social unrest that characterized the 1960s, identified early childhood intervention programmes as one of the means for breaking the cycle of economic deprivation. Early intervention, it was believed, would solve the problem of underachievement, and could help "deprived" children become more effective in their interactions with the environment. This rationale led to a dramatic increase in early childhood provisions (ex. Head Start, Home Start and Project Follow Through) that, from their inception, involved parents to different degrees. In 1968, the British counterpart to the U.S. early childhood contribution to the *War on Poverty* was launched in the form of the five Educational Priority Area Projects (Smith, 1980).

While the *War on Poverty* ceased to provide the main impetus for parental involvement, participation of parents has become a fixture in many early childhood programmes. The models adopted by early childhood programmes reflect different conceptions of parental involvement. Bauch (1990) distinguishes between two models - a delegation and a partnership model. In a delegation model, parents are involved in a minimal way by, for example, monitoring the child's progress and attending school events. This model is usually prevalent in traditional educational systems where parents and teachers are viewed as separate entities playing different roles. Usually, in schools that adopt the foregoing model, decisions regarding school management, curriculum and staffing are considered as professional chores. As a result, parents are barred from sites of power.

On the other hand, Partnership models view education "not as a service to be delivered but as a process of human development in which all the partners' contributions are integrated so as to make meaning whole for the child" (Bauch, 1990, p.74). Partnership models vary from parent education which includes the concept of bringing parents into the classroom, training parents for more effective parenthood, and general education, to paradigms that include parent participation in the control of programmes (Day, 1980).

While the last three decades have seen a continuing upsurge of interest in the concept of parental involvement, a great deal of effort has been devoted to provide early childhood stakeholders with

evidence regarding the role of home environments in early childhood development (e.g. Baumrind, 1967, 1971; Clarke-Stewart, 1977; Cochran, 1987; Colwell, 1961; Consortium, 1982; Cornelius, 1989; Dion, 1974; Ginsburg & Russell, 1981; Hetherington & Parke, 1975; Nelson, 1973; Parke & Collmer, 1975; Tizard and Hughes, 1984; White & Watts, 1973). This genre of research continues to convince many in the early childhood realm that the role of the home as a formative resource for affective, social, cognitive and linguistic development is fundamental. In some cases, studies also highlight what a crucial role parents play in comparison to overburdened teachers (Tizard & Hughes, 1984).

Projected outcomes of parental involvement programmes have been the subject of extensive research (Berrueta-Clement et al., 1984; Lazar & Darlington, 1982; Levenstein, 1970; Madden et al.; Olmsted, 1991; Pfanensteil & Seltzer, 1989). In early childhood circles, these outcomes provide "a rationale for the belief in the potential of professionals and programmes to contribute significantly to children's development and well-being through their parents" (Cataldo, 1980, p. 176). While it seems that there are some strong leads into the impact of parental involvement programmes, some researchers have rightly cautioned about the limitations that exist in our knowledge of the benefits of parental involvement programmes (Lazar & Darlington, 1982; Pfanensteil and Seltzer, 1989). Most of the research is quantitative and positivist in nature, often targeting children from impoverished backgrounds. Evaluation has too frequently been focused on cognitive development and gains in intelligence (sic). Moreover, most of the research deals with short term effects. Finally, experimental or demonstration programmes have operated in settings outside the public school system.

## **Parental Involvement Research and Programmes - A Critique**

The historical moment that spawned the proliferation of parental involvement programmes in early childhood education in the U.S. was marked by a Federal Government swamped in a deep legitimacy crisis. Challenged by a powerful civil rights movement, that was taking the U.S. Government to task on several issues, ranging from racist policies to systemic poverty, authorities rushed in to diffuse dissension. Their response was liberal/reformist in nature, characterized by a massive programme of "rehabilitation" termed *War on Poverty*. As indicated

earlier, early childhood programmes with a parental involvement component formed an integral part of the strategy.

Backed by positivist researchers who identified the deprived others, using all kinds of scientific measurements to define their deficiencies, planners turned their guns on to the very victims of oppression rather than problematizing the oppressive system. Children and families from traditionally disenfranchised groups, viewed as deprived by white, middle class standards, were flooded with a cultural capital that failed almost completely in coming to terms with their stories, histories and knowledges. The main objective of the programmes was to bring "deprived" children back to "normality", and possibly increase their chances of future scholastic success. In Freire's (1972a) words:

Their real desire, on the contrary, must be, let us repeat, to 'recuperate' the educatees, which is as much as to say, to adapt them to the system (p. 175).

By correcting deficiencies that positivist researchers identified as major correlates of poor achievement, it was predicted that "the ambitious efforts of teachers will [not] fail as a result of community and familial influence that may have affected the children's perceptions of themselves and their view of their world" (Range et al., 1980)

The reformist agenda that inspired the birth and growth of parental involvement programmes, left the causes of poverty, a concrete manifestation of social inequality, undiagnosed, focusing, instead, on the symptoms (ex. poor achievement). By pathologizing the personal, and celebrating test scores as supposedly objective indicators of the social, the foregoing programmes, and the whole concept of a *War on Poverty*, camouflaged the real function of the state and its institutions as sites of hegemonic discourse.

To return to the issue of legitimation, the vast literature in the critical tradition that has been published over the past thirty years attests to the contradictory function of education systems operating in capitalist societies (Apple, 1978, 1979, 1982; 1985; 1988; Apple & King, 1977; Apple & Taxel, 1982; Apple & Weis, 1983; Aronowitz, 1973; Bernstein, 1977; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Carnoy, 1982; Willis, 1977; Young, 1971; Young & Whitty, 1977). While modernizing their crust by trying to accommodate the agendas of different interest groups, these systems continue to

play a leading role in reproducing unequal societies by maintaining a false meritocratic ideology that legitimates ideological forms necessary for the recreation of inequality. Against this backdrop, one may argue that most of the parental involvement programmes, featuring parents that have no control over the socio-economic structure, represent an attempt at legitimizing current social relations while giving parents the illusion of control. Pseudo participation in the context of parental involvement leads to the bureaucratization of parents, and further parental alienation from sites of power. It also leads to cultural marginalization, since, as Freire (1972a) clearly points out, in view of the fact that dominant groups are usually in a position of power to set national and local agendas:

Their ideas and values, their way of being, are announced as if they were-or should be-the ideas, values and way of being of all society, even though the popular classes cannot share them, perhaps of their ontological inferiority (p. 175)

## **Parental Involvement Programmes - An Alternative Vision**

As indicated above, liberal discourse in parental involvement has had the effect of superficially addressing the oppressive reality in which disenfranchised families are living, turning parents and their children into 'objects' for rehabilitation. An alternative vision for parental involvement programmes is based on an emancipatory project that centres around the concept of parents as 'subjects' (Freire, 1972b). In this concept, parents are conceived as authentic beings capable of engaging in creative endeavours and critical thinking. According to this conception, all parents have the potential to be intellectuals (Gramsci, 1971) and to regard the world as a place where their contribution can make a difference (McLaren, 1989). Thanks to the confidence inspired by this process, parents with different roots and social locations reclaim their subjectivity and are reborn as transformative agents. Therefore, parents become active beings, and, in so doing, regain control over their reality. As indicated by Shor, this process ensures that liberation - the triumph of activity over passivity - becomes a permanent condition and that dialogue becomes an important ingredient of an ongoing liberatory process (Shor & Freire, 1987) a product of critical consciousness. Such a transformation not only guarantees a variety of voices but also keeps hegemonic groups at the furthest remove of exploitative positions. This proc-

ess can therefore be considered as a counterhegemonic pedagogy, whereby, as a result of the control they establish over their material existence, parents, as citizens, become the virtual guarantors of social justice.

## **Parental Involvement as Counter Hegemonic Discourse**

The above vision calls for a reconsideration, and eventual reconstruction, of present relations and configurations of power. It is, therefore, counterhegemonic in its ambitions.

Parental involvement as counterhegemonic discourse is based on the fundamental realization that "education cannot be neutral" (Freire, 1972a, p.173). In a talk at the Institute of Adult Education at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Paulo Freire (1973) reiterated that:

It is impossible for me to ask you to think about neutral education, neutral methodology, neutral science, or even a neutral God. I always say that every neutrality contains a hidden choice (p78)

By presenting the process of education as a neutral category, the ideological commitment of a system that helps legitimize structural bases of inequality remain unchallenged (Apple, 1985).

Parents should realize that most of the 'deficits' that themselves and their children are often correlated with, are not earned by themselves but are the product of a society that is defined by "asymmetries in the abilities of individuals and social groups to define and realize their needs" (Johnson, 1983, p.11). In other words, children and their families are not functioning in a social vacuum, but rather in a system that is characterized by social stratification and tensions (Freire & Macedo, 1987). Thus, a parental involvement programme that sets out to establish the link between the structural base, culture and power will help parents to come to terms with the material and cultural basis of their oppression, and eventually realize that the "process of dehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is not a given destiny but the result of an unjust order that engenders violence in the oppressors, which in turn dehumanizes the oppressed" (Freire, 1972b p.21).

Given its concrete, historical nature, parental involvement programmes should centre around the belief that the unjust order can be reversed. For disenfranchised parents, retrieving their personal memories and stories should provide them with a

useful starting point for understanding how the state and its superstructural institutions have unjustly excluded them from sites of social and political control. As bearers of 'dangerous memory', parents shed their peripheral existence and transform themselves into the very protagonists of the programme by engaging in a critical confrontation with their reality. As the programme unfolds, parents should be able to reclaim their voice by affirming their own class, culture, racial and gender identities. It is through these unique instances of self-expression that parents will realize that calls for consensus and homogeneity represent an attempt at "spreading and making legitimate ideological meanings and practice, attempting to win people over and create unity on the contested terrain of ideology" (Apple, borrowing from Gramsci, 1985, p. 16).

## **Parental Involvement Programmes as Liberatory Pedagogy**

Roger Simon (1987) refers to pedagogy as "a more complex and extensive term than "teaching"...To propose a pedagogy is to propose a political vision" (p.371). A programme that is conversant with the reclamation of parental voice is, therefore, incompatible with "banking education" - a reactionary, educational experience that has barred many parents from developing the skills for critical engagement with their world, "subordinating them to the knowledge, values and language of the status quo" (Shor, 1993, p.33).

Liberatory pedagogy is the only form of education through which it is possible to develop a dialectic form of thinking which contributes to their transformation as subjects in their sociomaterial reality. Through liberatory pedagogy parents come to understand themselves better within a historical context. For cultural workers, liberal pedagogy represents a tough choice. In his most recent work, Shor (1993) describes the resistance he encountered in trying to engage students in liberatory pedagogy. However, initial resistance can be surpassed, as Ira Shor (1993) himself attests:

To my amazement, this silent group began an avalanche of remarks. The students found their voices, enough to carry us through a ferocious hour, once I found a "generative" theme, an issue generated from the problems of their own experience (p.3).

Liberatory pedagogy is different from "banking education" in that the educator "seeks to with-

draw as the director of learning, as the directive force" (Shor in Shor & Freire, 1987, p.90). In another piece, Shor (1980) speaks of the "withering away of the teacher" (p. 100). Freire (1987) takes up this issue and clarifies that the "withering away of the teacher" does not mean the abolition of the directive role of educators. However, he distinguishes between the *directive liberating educator* and the *directive domesticating educator*. While both educators exercise authority, a directive domesticating educator usually transforms authority into authoritarianism. McLaren (1989) argues that the choice between a liberating and domesticating educator is essentially a moral choice between "creating a passive, risk free citizenry" and a political citizenry capable of fighting for various forms of public life" (p. 158)

By "withering away" and engaging in liberatory pedagogy, traditional classes are replaced by cultural circles where parents and cultural workers engage in: a live and creative dialogue, in which everyone knows some things and does not know others, in which all seek, together, to know more (Freire, 1971, p.61).

In cultural circles, the content is shaped from the "fabric and texture" of the parents (Kaber Katz & Watson, 1991, p.17). In the context of early childhood, parents join cultural circles with a wealth of knowledge regarding child rearing, child development, discipline, health and safety, communicating with children, problem solving, stories and story telling, play, parental roles, etc. Parental knowledge regarding different aspects of early childhood, together with their personal stories and experiences that reflect the parents' understanding of the world, will determine the bulk of the content on which dialogue in cultural circles is based. As *directive liberating educators*, cultural workers cannot sit back and celebrate uncritically parental knowledge and their perceptions of the world. Using Gramscian terms, cultural workers should challenge "common sense" knowledge and help parents to transform it into "good sense". Furthermore, as *transformative intellectuals*, Cultural workers should seek every opportunity to make "the pedagogical more political and the political more pedagogical. Making the pedagogical more political means inserting [parental involvement programme] directly into the political sphere by arguing that [parental involvement programmes] represent both a struggle to define meaning and struggle over power relations. Within this perspective, critical reflection and action become part of a fundamental social project to help [parents] develop a deep and abiding faith in the struggle to

overcome economic, political and social injustices (Giroux, 1988, p. 127).

There is a history of scholastic failure informing the attitude of subordinate groups towards participation. Often, parents from these groups feel that they lack the requisite cultural capital to participate effectively in the educational process leading to personal and social emancipation. (Lareau, 1992). As a result, they delegate the responsibility on to 'professionals' who, in many cases, are organic to the exclusionary and reproductive process that characterizes most educational institutions. This lack of participation on the part of subordinate groups leaves the door wide open for dominant groups to lobby for their agenda. Equipped with the cultural capital legitimized by the dominant discourse in education, "middle classes are very vocal and deeply involved in the educational system. In the United States they dominate Parent Teacher Associations" (Western Hemisphere Seminar, 1986, p.23).

While cultural circles constitute an important forum for parents to read the world, articulate their needs and acquire the skills for real participation, parents and cultural workers cannot stop short of reflection. The language of critique has to be transformed into a project of possibility that, as I see it, will reach an important emancipatory stage when schools are reclaimed as sites of struggle for personal and social empowerment for economic and political emancipation. To my mind, this important stage can be reached through a process whereby society disowns the concept of schools as spheres of teaching in a hierarchical framework, controlled by an impersonal and centralized bureaucracy, ultimately reshaping them into zones of community development with a wider spectrum of stake holders. The traditional scenario of parents leaving their children at the school's door step and called in when needed will become obsolete in an equation that views teachers, parents and other stake holders as community workers. Solidarity, an important feature of the foregoing project will be expressed not only at community level but also in an intercommunity movement that struggles for democracy at a national level.

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