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Involvement to Engagement: Community Education Practices in a Suburban Elementary School and an Inner-City Community School

by
Ted Amendt

This report is a summary of a master's thesis by Ted Amendt, University of Saskatchewan. Included in the report are:

- ✓ A summary of the literature on community engagement
- ✓ Processes two school staffs used to facilitate community engagement by utilizing community education practices, and
- ✓ Examples and recommendations for effective practices

Research Report #09-03

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Executive Summary

Involvement to Engagement: Community Education Practices in a Suburban Elementary School and an Inner-City Community School

*A summary of a master's thesis by Ted Amendt –
University of Saskatchewan*

A growing body of research demonstrates the links between parental involvement and students' outcomes. The purpose of the research was to explore the processes two school staffs used to facilitate community engagement by utilizing community education practices and, within each individual site, compare to any increase in community engagement at the school.

You are invited to join the stories of two schools in their journey towards increased community engagement. As you read their stories, you will see that school staff can do much to engage community in new ways by creating new practices based on community education principles.

Part I provides a review of the current literature.

Part II describes the stories from each school.

Part III addresses the research findings as well as themes, conditions for community engagement, and promising community education practices.

Over the 2006-2007 school year, the researcher spent time connecting with staff members and parents at two schools – a suburban elementary school, and an inner-city community school. Through observation, interviews with administrators, focus groups with parents, and focus groups with staff members, the researcher obtained information regarding staff members' growth in community engagement, development of community education practices, and the impact of those practices on community engagement in the school.

Introduction

A growing body of research demonstrates the links between parental involvement and students' outcomes. Some benefits of this involvement include improved academic achievement, higher grades, increased attendance, and better social skills (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996; Dryfoos & Knauer, 2004; Coalition for Community Schools, 2003). Despite these benefits, many educators report challenges in engaging parents and community members within the school. The purpose of the research was to explore the processes two school staffs used to facilitate community engagement by utilizing community education practices and, within each individual site, compare to any increase in community engagement at the school.

Over the 2006-2007 school year, the researcher spent time connecting with staff members and parents at two schools – a suburban elementary school, and an inner-city community school. Through observation, interviews with administrators, focus groups with parents, and focus groups with staff members, the researcher obtained information regarding staff members' growth in community engagement, development of community education practices, and the impact of those practices on community engagement in the school. Through analysis of the data, the researcher identified themes, conditions for community engagement, and promising community education practices.

Data from observation, focus groups, and interviews demonstrated the importance of leadership, developing relationships with parents, creating a welcoming school environment, focusing staff development on community education, and creating opportunities for staff members and community members to come together, for community engagement to be successful. The research captured the importance of making beliefs and assumptions explicit, and identified how these beliefs can be helpful or harmful in engaging youth, families, and community members. The research study demonstrated that as staff members at Eagle Point School and Sunrise Community School increased their level of understanding of community education and created community education practices, they experienced greater community engagement in their respective schools.

*There is a link
between parental
involvement and
students' outcomes.*

PART I

Community Engagement: A Review of the Literature

Many schools are like little islands set apart from the mainland of life by a deep moat of convention and tradition. Across the moat there is a drawbridge, which is lowered at certain periods during the day in order that the part-time inhabitants may cross over to the island in the morning and back to the mainland at night. Why do these young people go out to the island? They go there in order to learn how to live on the mainland. After the last inhabitant of the island has left in the early afternoon, the drawbridge is raised. Janitors clean up the island, and the lights go out. Such, in brief, is the relation of many American schools to many an American community. (Carr, in Minzey & LeTarte, 1994, p. 63)

Community Engagement

The story above demonstrates how education is delivered in many schools across the United States and Canada. Research continues to affirm the importance of engaging family and community within schools (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), particularly its correlation to student academic success (Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996). However, many schools and educators find community engagement difficult to achieve.

The Saskatchewan Ministry of Education describes community education as a philosophy based on community engagement and life-long learning. It is a belief that learning occurs in many settings, not just school. Schools alone cannot do all that is needed to help children and youth achieve success in their lives. The collaboration and engagement of families, community members, organizations, teachers, and students to build a learning community is the cornerstone of community education. Together, all are involved in the identification of community strengths and needs, and together decide upon courses of action. These processes lead to a more meaningful and successful learning experience for all. Community education has proven to be successful in addressing the needs of students, families and communities in an increasingly complex society. (Saskatchewan Learning, n.d.)

To demonstrate the difference between involvement and engagement, in Figure 1, the writer (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005, p. 14) has created a diagram to demonstrate the deepening of relationships and responsibility through the progression of *informing*, *involving* and *engaging* community members into the life of the school and community to the point where they take on leadership roles. Engaging community in this way facilitates leadership opportunities at each stage of this progression.

There is a difference between involvement and engagement – a continuance of informing, involving and engaging.

Community Engagement

—————→

Informing Involving Engaging Leading

Increasing degree of collaboration and partnership

Figure 1. Progression of community engagement.

For the purpose of this diagram, the researcher has defined *informing* as: students, parents, and community members are informed of decisions made by school staff. This may be through a newsletter, letter, or personal contact. *Involving* is defined as: students, parents, and community members are invited to participate in the school. At this stage, the invitation is extended based on the needs and ideas of the school staff. It is unidirectional and the agenda is determined by the school staff. A limited amount of trust exists between staff members and community members, and decisions are made by a few individuals. Involvement may include activities such as having parents organize family dances, arranging fundraising activities, or inviting parents to support classroom field trips. *Engaging* is defined as: students, parents, and community members are actively engaged in the life of the school and community. Together the school staff, students, parents, and community members create the agenda, make decisions, and take actions that affect many aspects of the school community. A high degree of trust is developed among school staff, students, parents, and community members, and there is reciprocity in the engagement (Kliminski & Smith (2003, p. 7). As a result of the trust relationships created, there is freedom to collaborate and an openness and willingness to engage others in making decisions together. Engagement may include activities such as parents and staff members developing learning improvement plans, developing shared values and beliefs, and jointly deciding on programs for the school. There is reciprocity in the relationship as both school staff and community benefit from the mutual relationship. *Leading* is defined as: staff members, students, parents, and community members have created a norm of community engagement. The practice of community engagement results in staff members, students, parents, and community members naturally assuming leadership roles within the school and community as they work together towards a shared vision. This practice may result in parents and community members taking on leadership roles within the context of the school-community such as participating in school planning, facilitating professional development opportunities for the learning community, and taking a lead role in the school/community work-plan. In this context, the leadership is shared and based on a relationship of trust created through the engagement processes utilized within the school.

Community engagement results in members naturally assuming leadership roles within the school and community as they work together towards a shared vision.

Community Education

Saskatchewan Ministry of Education policy.

Saskatchewan has been a leader in community education for many years. In 1980, Saskatchewan Education first designated Community Schools in the province (Saskatchewan Education, 1980). Eleven Community Schools were designated in the core neighbourhoods of Regina, Saskatoon, and Prince Albert to address issues of urban Aboriginal poverty. In 1996, a new policy direction for Community Schools was released entitled *Building Communities of Hope* (Saskatchewan Education, 1996). The number of designated Community Schools in the province grew to 26.

In 1999, Saskatchewan Learning released a document entitled *Parent and Community Partnerships in Education* (Saskatchewan Education, 1999). This document was a compilation of the research which soundly endorsed family and community engagement in schools. This document provided the policy framework for schools to engage family and community within schools. The research cited throughout the policy framework suggests that parent and community engagement in schools improves student success and wellbeing. The research was organized around themes which demonstrated links to student benefits, parent benefits, teacher benefits, school benefits, and community benefits (pp. 6-7).

In 2001, Dr. Michael Tymchak, Chair of the Role of the School Task Force, released his final report to the Minister of Education (Tymchak, 2001). The report described how the role of schools has changed, and listed a number of recommendations for the Minister to respond to. The number one recommendation was for all schools to adopt community education philosophy and practices. In 2002, the provincial government responded to the report (Government of Saskatchewan, 2002) and endorsed the recommendation for all schools to adopt community education philosophy and practices.

In 2004, a revised Community Schools' policy and conceptual framework was released and the number of designated Community Schools in Saskatchewan grew to 98, representing 12% of provincial schools. This revised policy document discussed community engagement throughout and provided direction for schools to engage youth, family, and community within all aspects of the school, including the learning program (Saskatchewan Learning, 2004). Further direction to high schools came from Saskatchewan Learning through the release of a new high schools policy document in 2005 (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). This document laid out effective practices for high schools around themes: strategies to engage all youth within high schools, rethinking teaching and learning, enhancing the culture and climate of high schools, reaching out to families and community, creating learning communities, and improving educational outcomes by sharing results. Youth, family, and community engagement is described as the key ingredient to each of the themes laid out in the document.

All schools should adopt community education philosophy and practices.

In preparation for the creation of School Community Councils, Saskatchewan Learning provided policy direction to school divisions and schools to identify the purpose for the Councils (Saskatchewan Learning, 2005). The province described the key role for School Community Councils as engaging the community within learning. The policy directs that school staff and Councils will work together on creating school learning plans that focus on continuous improvement.

Community engagement to create a learning community.

Community education is not new, nor is it solely localized. Community education has been advocated for many years as a means to engage the broader community into the life of the school. Paulo Freire is widely recognized for his contribution to community education as a vehicle to respond to social issues (Freire, 1970, 1973). In 1960, Paulo Freire, then a young educator from Brazil, advocated that education had a dynamic link to social issues such as adult literacy, poverty, health and political exclusion. He argued against the “banking model of education” (1970, p. 58) and challenged others to alter their approaches to education, and to support community development, social empowerment and self-determination in their communities and schools. He believed that “revolutionary leaders cannot think *without* the people, nor for the people, but only *with* the people” (p. 126).

Successful creation of a learning community requires shared vision, values, a sense of belonging and commitment to the idea that “we are better together.”

Furman (2002) describes the terrain of school community literature. Furman argues that the literature tends to focus on two camps: school-community connections, and school-as community. Supporters of school-community connections are concerned with the relationship between the school and surrounding community. Shared governance, coordinated services, and Community Schools fall in this category. School-as community tends to focus on the school as a community unto itself. Professional learning communities, democratic community – social justice, and students’ sense of community in schools fall in this category. Furman proposes a more “ecological model” which incorporates aspects of both categories. The ecological model proposes that the relationship between school and community is so organically intertwined and reciprocal that it is impossible to discuss without considering these linkages.

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) identify a learning community as inclusive of teachers, staff members, administrators, students, and parents. The successful creation of a learning community requires shared vision, values, a sense of belonging and commitment to the idea that “*we are better together.*” Learning communities are built on the principles of community education as school staff members engage the assets of the broader community.

Authentically engaging youth, family, and community involves identifying the assets (McKnight & Kretzman, 1993) of a family and community and mobilizing them to improve outcomes. Engaging community in this way is not simply about needs identification, nor is it about rescuing families.

It is about honouring and including youth, family, and community assets – their strengths, resources, knowledge, beliefs, values, traditions and cultures. A learning community is formed by working with families in this non-judgmental way. Kliminski & Smith (2003) build on this concept of assets through the term *social capital*. They describe community education as more than a *feel-good* program, but rather as something “that has primary relevance to the success of K-12 education and to the building of healthy, vibrant communities” (p. 5). “When educators gain the trust of the community, the community will respond in kind with a greater willingness to support the goals of education. Building social capital needs to be recognized by all educators as a priority that has a direct benefit to the bottom line of school operation” (p. 7).

Community education and student outcomes.

Henderson & Mapp (2002) analyzed research studies from across the United States of America which measured the impact of community engagement on student outcomes. In their analysis they found that:

students with involved parents, no matter what their income or background, were more likely to earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs; be promoted, pass their classes and earn credits; attend school regularly; have better social skills, show improved behaviour and adapt well to school; and graduate and go on to postsecondary education. (p. 7)

Sui-Chu & Willms (1996) also looked at parental involvement as an important aspect of a school’s success. In their study (1996) they found that, on average, schools with high levels of parental involvement have higher levels of achievement and shallower gradients, even after controlling for the effects of students’ family backgrounds.

Joy Dryfoos is a well-known writer and researcher in the United States of America, who advocates for community education and Community Schools. In mid-2000, Joy Dryfoos surveyed the field and collected 49 published and unpublished research documents that fit into the broadest definition of Full Service Community Schools. In her report (Dryfoos & Knauer, 2004) she documents the following in relation to the benefits of community education:

Achievement. Thirty-six of 49 programs reported academic gains. These gains generally included improvements in reading and math test scores, looked at over a two-or three-year period. **Attendance.** 19 programs reported improvements in school attendance. Several reported lower dropout rates. Several mentioned higher teacher attendance rates, suggesting higher levels of satisfaction. **High-risk behaviours.** 11 programs reported reductions in rates of substance abuse, teen pregnancy, disruptive behaviour in classroom, or improvement in behaviour in general. **Parent involvement.** At least 12 of the programs reported increases in parent involvement. **Family functioning.** In many programs with a strong family focus, improved

family functioning was reported. **Access to services.** Better access to health care, lower hospitalization rates, higher immunization rates, or access to dental care were reported at least once. After-school programs cited access to childcare as a significant outcome. **Neighbourhood.** Six programs reported lower violence rates and safer streets in their communities. (Dryfoos & Knauer, 2004, pp. 6-8)

The Coalition for Community Schools is an alliance of more than 160 national, state, and local organizations in the United States of America which advocates for community development as well as provides a national network for Community Schools in the United States. In 2003, they released a research report (Coalition for Community Schools, 2003) which analyzed the impact of 20 Community School initiatives across the United States, focusing in particular on outcomes that directly affect student learning. The executive summary of their findings described Community Schools as making a difference for students in four important ways:

- 1. Community Schools improve student learning.** Fifteen of the 20 initiatives in this study reported improvement in student academic achievement, as measured by improved grades in school courses and scores in proficiency testing. In addition, more than half of the evaluations looked for and found evidence of positive development as measured by a variety of indicators, including improved attendance, reduced behaviour or discipline problems, greater compliance with school assignments and rules, increased access to physical and mental health services, greater contact with supportive adults, and improvements in personal and family situations.
- 2. Community Schools promote family engagement with students and schools.** More than half of the evaluations measured and reported specific benefits to families, such as improvements in communication with schools and teachers, family stability and ability to provide for children's basic needs, parents' ability to meet workplace obligations, confidence in their ability to teach their children, and attendance at school meetings.
- 3. Community Schools help schools function more effectively.** Almost three-quarters of the evaluations examined the school's overall environment, identifying improved outcomes in many areas. For example, principals and staff members affirmed the importance of on-site services; more parents participated in their children's learning; there was nonpartisan support for public education and access to resources through community partnerships; and services were well-integrated into the daily operation of schools. In the classroom, evaluators found increased emphasis on creative, project-based learning and more innovations in teaching and curriculum. School environments were more cheerful and were more likely to be perceived as safe.

4. Community Schools add vitality to communities. Eleven evaluations that looked at this aspect suggest that Community Schools play a powerful role in community building. Evaluators noted a variety of improved outcomes, including improved community knowledge of, and perception of, the Community School initiative; increased use of school buildings; awareness of community agencies and access to facilities previously unknown or unaffordable; improved security and safety in the surrounding area; and strengthened community pride and engagement in the school. (Coalition for Community Schools, 2003, pp. 1-2)

Sheldon & Van Voorhis (2004) examined data from over 300 U.S. schools in their efforts to develop high-quality programs of school, family, and community connections, which they speak of in terms of partnerships. They found that higher quality partnership programs were associated with wider implementation of parent-child interactive homework, higher levels of parent volunteering, and more parents on decision-making committees. The study also found that partnership programs translate into higher levels of family involvement in students' learning.

In her study, Caron (2006) examined the ways teachers and schools create opportunities for First Nations and Métis parental involvement. Through interviews with teachers and parents, she identified barriers to First Nations and Métis parents' involvement, as well as highlighted effective practices to involve First Nations and Métis parents. Her findings speak to the importance for educators to "make the effort to build relationships with parents prior to requesting their involvement in the school setting" (p. 92). She also identified the need for effective two-way communication channels between the home and school, and the importance of paying attention to cultures and perspectives to increase parental involvement of First Nations and Métis parents.

Authentic community engagement can occur in an inner-city school with a mostly First Nations population.

Saskatchewan example of community engagement.

A research project took place at Princess Alexandra Community School in Saskatoon to study parent engagement. The study, a narrative inquiry, provided researchers an opportunity to learn alongside a school staff and community as they enacted parent and community engagement. The research report (Pushor & Ruitenbergh, 2005) highlighted the importance of relationships and building a school culture that was open, welcoming, and affirming of parents and community. The report documented high-level engagement of parents in school decision-making processes. It also examined staff members' practices in deconstructing the "taken-for-grantedness" (p. 32) of so many school practices, to recreate meaningful opportunities for community engagement. The study demonstrated that authentic community engagement can occur in an inner-city school with a mostly First Nations population.

Creating a culturally-affirming learning community was further described in a research report (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006) which studied Princess

Alexandra Community School. The report highlighted the importance of understanding a school community, particularly with a mainly First Nations population. The study foregrounded the crucial significance of developing meaningful relationships, and how staff development through critical reflection can focus on community education to transform teaching practices. The report described the actions taken by the school staff to engage First Nations and Métis families and Elders within the school, and how a community of learners was created.

In their report, *Sharing our Success*, The Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education (2004) documented case studies of 10 schools across four Western provinces and the Yukon for insights into promising practices in creating academic success for Aboriginal students. The report offered a detailed case study of each school, analysis of common practices, and a set of recommendations for policy and practice. Princess Alexandra Community School was selected as one of the schools whose achievements were to be studied. The report identifies that in 1999, using the Canadian Achievement Test Two, most of the students scored at the 7th percentile. In 2002, the majority of the students tested at the 55th percentile. The overall attendance average for the school increased to 83% from an average of 70% over a period of five years. Princess Alexandra recorded a decrease in vandalism and also recorded the least sick time leave for teachers for the 2002-2003 school year when compared to the school division as a whole. School staff attributed this decrease to a change in the school environment which became more welcoming and inclusive for staff members, students, families, and community members. Children being sent to the principal's office had declined from an average of 35 students a day, to one or two students a day. Referrals to the school counsellor reduced from 20 per month, to four per month (Society for the Advancement of Excellence in Education, 2004, pp. 244-245).

Community education practices often go against many of the norms in education.

Staff Development

Transformative learning through critical reflection.

Mezirow (1990) describes the process of using critical reflection as a means of transformative learning. He identifies how beliefs and assumptions may need to be challenged and how reflection allows this to occur. Adoption of community education practices requires transformative learning, as the practices often go against many of the norms in education. A process of critical reflection can be used for staff development to better understand community education philosophy and begin to adopt community education practices. "We may also look to make sure that our actions have been consistent with our values, to see how well we are doing in relation to our goals" (Mezirow, 1990, p. 7). Before beginning a process of critical reflection, it will be important to create an environment that allows open and honest dialogue. Grundy (1982) focuses on the relationships which must be developed if critical reflection is to occur. She argues that there

must be a structure which allows equitable power relationships between group members if the freedom to choose is to be a valid one.

Freire (1970) also described critical reflection as a way to transform practices in education. The dialogue that occurs through critical reflection is necessary “so that the people’s empirical knowledge of reality, nourished by the leaders’ critical knowledge, gradually becomes transformed into knowledge of the causes of reality” (p. 129). This dialogue is what leads to perspective transformation. Collins (1998) identifies the importance of dialogue for transforming practices in schools. “For educators and social service workers committed to a vision of a more just society this means fostering a critical dialogue, incorporating fellow workers, students, and clients, aimed at transforming their own practices and the institutions where they work” (p. 170). Amendt & Bousquet (2006) found that, as school staff began to critically reflect on their practices through dialogue, new practices were created to engage community in new ways. One such example was moving from having school **staff meetings** to holding **school meetings** where staff members and community made decisions together. “The outcomes of reflection may include a new way of doing something, the clarification of an issue, the development of a skill, or the resolution of a problem” (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985, p. 34). If you want to change people’s beliefs and behaviour “you need to create a community around them, where these new beliefs could be practical, expressed and nurtured” (Gladwell, 2000, p. 173).

All families can help improve their children’s performance in school and influence other key outcomes that affect achievement

Critical reflection is a practice that “involves an intense process of negotiation and professional conversation. It involves setting goals and aspirations through discourse among teachers, administrators, students, parents, and other interested parties. It means providing the conditions that will make the learning healthy and effective” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, p. 10). Mitchell & Sackney describe critical reflection as a key process in creating a learning community, which leads to profound improvement in schools.

Critical reflection to challenge beliefs and assumptions.

Transformative learning through critical reflection includes challenging some negatively held assumptions of community engagement in order to create new assumptions. Henderson & Mapp (2002) challenge educators to “always proceed on this assumption: All families can help improve their children’s performance in school and influence other key outcomes that affect achievement (p. 61).” Minzey and LeTarte (1994) describe these assumptions which are helpful in authentically adopting community education practices. Assume that: (a) communities are capable of positive change, (b) social problems have solutions, (c) one of the strongest forces for making change is community power, and (d) community members are desirous of improving their communities and are willing to contribute their energies toward such ends (p. 93).

“Critical reflection on practice is one strategy for exploring this unknown territory. It begins with a simple description of existing practices, moves through an analysis and evaluation of the practices, and leads to a deconstruction of the professional assumptions, beliefs, values, and practices that are embedded in the professional narrative” (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000, p. 20). If staff members are to engage community in new ways, it is first necessary for the school staff to critically reflect through group dialogue to deconstruct the traditional ways in which community has been engaged. Mezirow (1990) advocates for critical reflection to critique assumptions on which personal and collective beliefs have been built. These beliefs can be a school’s greatest asset or its largest stumbling block. Making these beliefs explicit opens up the dialogue as to whether these beliefs are helpful or harmful in engaging youth, family, and community in new ways.

Transformative staff development.

Staff development activity can only result in better practices if it “allows instructors access to special knowledge, provides instructors the time to focus on the requirements of a new task, and provides time to experiment” (Kutner, Sherman, Tibbetts & Condelli, 1997, p. 6). Transfer of staff development learning into actual practice is dependent upon

“1) the level and complexity of new knowledge and skills to be acquired 2) teachers’ perceptions of how new learning fits into existing instructional practices 3) the support structures within the program that allow teachers to solve implementation problems with other staff, including peers and administrators 4) opportunities for the essential practice to develop new skills.” (p. 14)

To determine the transformative nature of staff development, it is critical to identify “how much of the new learning finds its way into [the] instructor’s practice, and whether the learning persists” (p. 14). “An appropriate framework for evaluating professional development is one which regards professional development as a change process....which means that professional development’s most immediate impact is on instructors - their reactions to professional development opportunities, the skills and knowledge they obtain, and the resulting changes on their instructional behaviour” (p. 21).

PART II

Research Stories

The researcher worked alongside the school staffs and families over the period of one school year, and observed community engagement in action, as described in the stories of both Eagle Point School and Sunrise Community School.

Sunrise Community School

Sunrise Community School has worked hard over the past years to develop meaningful relationships with community. Staff members ensure parents are welcomed as they come into the school. The school staff hosts events that bring parents to the school, and communicate clear messages to families of the importance of the role of community in the school. In addition, the school staff has invited families into decision-making around school beliefs and selecting school Elders. The school is well known as a welcoming place, and both staff members and parents proudly make it so. As you walk through the front doors, you will be greeted warmly by a student, an Elder, a staff member, or a parent, who takes time to ensure you're welcomed and offers to help take you where you want to go. The school administrator sets the tone and expectations for the school climate. She often is the first person you see as you enter the school. She greets you with a warm smile, and handshake, and her presence puts you at ease in this school. During staff meetings, she clearly communicates the expectation for all staff members to develop relationships with families and maintain regular communication with the home. As a result of her commitment to community engagement, the school plan includes community engagement as a priority. Through these respectful relationships with families and school staff, and through her leadership, the school administrator signals the importance of community engagement at Sunrise Community School.

The school administrator sets the tone and expectations for the school climate.

Staff development.

The staff members at Sunrise Community School began the 2006-2007 school year with community engagement established as a school priority for the year. To ensure that it remained a priority, the school principal made certain that staff development focused on community engagement. A commitment of time was made so that opportunities for focused dialogue and reflection were created during school staff meetings. Specifically, dialogue and reflection included asking critical questions about how community members were currently engaged; sharing of effective community engagement practices between staff members; and brainstorming new opportunities to engage families within the school. In addition, professional development was scheduled for staff members to increase their understanding of community engagement.

The “hook” for parents to become engaged is built on relationships.

The first meeting occurred on a scheduled professional development day in September, and included all staff members and two resident Elders. The meeting was held in the morning and school staff gathered in the school library. The researcher provided an overview of community education and information about community engagement progression (see Figure 1). Staff members were invited to reflect on where they felt they could place themselves in that progression. Definitions and examples of community involvement and community engagement were given by the researcher to explain the difference to staff members. The researcher shared the work of McKnight & Kretzman (1993) about community gifts and assets. To seek out community gifts and talents is a different approach to building relationships with families. Particularly given the First Nations and Métis population at Sunrise Community School who may not have experienced positive relationships with schools, it is necessary for school staff to reach out in new ways. The “hook” for parents to become engaged is built on relationships. Through small group work and large group debriefing, the discussion moved to practices which can build relationships with families, and further reflection occurred as staff members examined the messages, and beliefs behind the messages, that are conveyed to parents. As one example, the school staff examined the communication of messages that were sent home to parents on any given day. When the bulk of these messages tend to be negative in nature (e.g. your child’s homework is not complete or, your child is disrupting the class), parents will not want to engage with the school. School staff began to discuss ways to ensure that positive messages were also being sent to parents each day. One example discussed was to ensure that three of the four home visits conducted by the School Liaison Worker each day would be to convey positive, welcoming and inviting messages to families. These positive messages help convey shared beliefs that parents are welcome at Sunrise Community School, and staff members value the knowledge that parents have to share.

The presentation concluded after one and a half hours, and staff members were left with a variety of articles on community education that they could collect to read. A commitment was made for a follow-up learning circle one month later. The meeting was held at the end of the school day in the school library. Approximately 15 staff members took part in the learning circle. Over the one and a half hours of the learning circle, a dialogue occurred that invited reflection on current practices occurring at the school. Staff members shared with each other highlights of the articles they read, and described the importance of building relationships with families and community. A staff member shared how he had personally connected with nearly all of the parents of students in his classroom. The visits were done at the beginning of the school year and set a positive tone for relationships. He visited parents at their home and communicated that parents were always welcome to his classroom. He also asked parents about their gifts and talents, and if they would be willing to share those gifts with students in the classroom. Staff members shared their stories of a parent volunteering to work in the library and a parent offering to teach organ and choir lessons.

As the staff members shared it became apparent to all that much effort had gone into creating a welcoming environment at Sunrise Community School, where parents could be included. The principal stressed the importance of staff members' responsibility to follow through when parents express a willingness and desire to be included. The learning circle provided needed opportunity for critical reflection and sharing of promising practices. A commitment was made to come back in a few weeks to discuss these ideas with all staff members at a school staff meeting.

At a follow-up school staff meeting in November, half an hour was set aside to share ideas from the learning circle and discuss potential for community engagement. At the meeting a few staff members raised challenges to parent involvement which, from their perspectives, included difficulties in securing commitment from parents, getting parents to volunteer in the school, getting parents to be involved in the school, and getting parents to attend school events. Other staff members shared successful events, like a recent traditional feast, that were positive and very well attended by families. Staff members also responded that they had achieved tremendous success in community engagement during the selection of school Elders in a previous year. As these opportunities do not occur by chance, staff members were encouraged to consider what conditions had to be in place in order to achieve the success they previously experienced. The staff members identified some conditions for success as: a meaningful purpose for a gathering; the chosen time of gathering; offering food and refreshments; giving personal invites in advance; offering childcare at meetings, etc. It was determined that building off a past success was a good starting place.

As the discussion progressed, some suggestions from staff members inferred that building relationships was the key to authentic community engagement and that time during the school year should solely focus on this. Staff members were challenged to think beyond building relationships, and to consider the past successes that have occurred at Sunrise Community School to engage community in a meaningful way. The researcher stressed the importance of *doing something* by truly engaging with community over the course of the school year. Transformation occurs as a result of new learning, critical reflection, and creating a new practice. The researcher asserts that if reflection and dialogue does not result in something new, then it is not transformational, and one hears things like "we're already doing that." Staff members discussed the idea for a Community Engagement Evening to be held in the school year, where staff members and parents would work together to create a meaningful dialogue to discuss the strengths of the school, ideas for community engagement, and to hear from parents about their gifts and talents and how to include them in the learning program. A commitment was made to form a community engagement subcommittee that would plan an event.

At the same time as staff members were discussing community engagement, the parents were invited into the same process through the community council. The community council meets once per month at the school library,

Consider what conditions had to be in place in order to achieve the success they previously experienced.

over the lunch hour. A core group of four to five parents attend, as well as five to six staff members. At the September community council meeting, the researcher, staff members and the community council members sat down to discuss the opportunity to engage more meaningfully with community. Community council members were very enthusiastic about the opportunity. The principal invited comments from parents as to what the school could do to improve community engagement. Parents identified communication as an issue, as some parents felt the school newsletter was not the most effective method of communication. Parents identified that at times they heard about events after they had taken place. At the second meeting of the community council, the researcher discussed the idea of community gifts and talents that could be shared within the learning program. During the discussion, parents began to openly share their expertise and their willingness to share these gifts with the school. The expertise the parents were willing to share included the teaching of sewing, beading, and organ lessons to students.

Planning for community engagement.

To plan the Community Engagement Evening, staff members formed a subcommittee assigned to plan the event. At the initial meeting of this group at the end of November, nine staff members attended the meeting over the lunch hour. The school principal opened up the discussion to the staff members to brainstorm ideas for a community engagement activity or event. Staff members described a number of potential events that bring parents into the school. The researcher shared some successful community engagement events and activities carried out at other schools. Staff members liked the concept of a dialogue with community that would bring parents and educators together to discuss a variety of things related to learning. After much discussion, the committee settled on the Community Engagement Evening and a focus on parents and educators getting to know each other. A decision was made to approach parents to join this subcommittee so the event would be co-planned and co-lead with parents. A follow-up meeting was scheduled for January, 2007.

The committee settled on the Community Engagement Evening and a focus on parents and educators getting to know each other.

At the January meeting, nine staff members, five parents, and two students attended to continue planning. The school principal ensured that parents and students were asked their expectations for the purpose of the event. Parents indicated a need to network and get to know other parents. The importance of creating a sense of belonging for all community members was determined to be crucial. Parents also liked the notion of hearing what gifts and talents parents and community members had, and felt the event could include time to solicit that input. The committee built off of the success from the previous Elders' selection and planned for childcare, transportation, personal invitations, meaningful opportunities for dialogue, food and refreshments, youth activities, and Elder involvement. To facilitate planning, a tentative plan of tasks to be handled was shared with the subcommittee by the principal and researcher. The subcommittee met again in February, and at a final meeting in March, five days in advance of the event. These meetings were held to finalize tasks and ensure logistics

such as childcare, transportation, food, and youth sessions were all being handled.

The community engagement committee paid attention to the importance of cultural responsiveness. To ensure the evening was conducted in a manner respectful of First Nations and Métis ways, Elders were invited, and the evening included sharing circles in small groups so parents would feel more comfortable sharing their ideas. Parents felt that the small groups were critical to ensure that the voice of all parents would be heard. To facilitate parents' engagement in the dialogue, staff members volunteered to take notes for each small group, to allow parents and community members to be free to dialogue in the groups. A final meeting was held at the school two days prior to the event with the staff members who would be facilitators. At this meeting, the researcher shared the protocols of the sharing circle, as understood by him through teachings from Elders. The committee felt it was very important for the facilitators to be respectful of the process and honour the participants through their role in the circle.

During each meeting, parents and staff members equally took on leadership roles by freely sharing ideas and contributing to the discussions. As well, both parents and staff members took on responsibilities related to the tasks to be completed for the event. As parents and staff members formed the subcommittee, decisions related to details of the event were always made by consensus. This consensus occurred quite naturally, as the atmosphere at these meetings was respectful and open, and the voice of both parents and staff members was valued and included. The principal ensured these meetings were conducted in this manner. Over the course of a month, the gathering was widely publicized to parents through personal invitations sent home with students, by phone calls to parents, and by providing personal invitations to parents who stopped by the school to pick up their children. Parents and staff members each took responsibility for the invitations. The stage was set for community engagement.

Community engagement evening.

The event was held on a Wednesday evening in early March, 2007. The staff members remained after the school day to prepare for the gathering. Parent council members arrived early to help with preparations. The start time was 5:00 p.m. at which time it was estimated that 60 parents, 20 staff members, and 50 students packed the gymnasium. Five Elders were seated at the head table to demonstrate respect for their position in the community, as well as to show they supported the gathering. The school principal welcomed families and invited the lead Elder to bring greetings and an invocation for the event. The Elder thanked all for attending and for their support of the school and their children's learning.

The school principal and a community council representative spoke to the audience about the purpose of the event and described the circle process that would be used that evening. Another Elder was invited to share a teaching about the importance of the circle and the protocols that were to

be observed in the circle. After these instructions, students went to small groups, preschool-aged children went to a childcare room, and parents went to small groups of their choice located in rooms and hallways throughout the school. Approximately eight circles for parents were occurring simultaneously.

At each small group circle, a pre-selected school staff facilitator welcomed the parents and again described the purpose of the sharing circle and passed a rock or talking stick to be used in accordance with the circle teachings. The facilitator invited parents to speak openly and share their ideas and informed parents that they would be taking notes to capture parents' thoughts and ideas. Four questions were asked at each small group circle to get the conversation started. The questions were:

1. What things does the school do that makes you and your child(ren) feel welcomed, connected and involved? What approaches or practices work well to engage your child in school?
2. What do you see as important for the school to do for you? What gifts and talents do you have to offer to the school?
3. What are some other ways schools and teachers can better engage young people and parents to make certain your child(ren) have a successful school experience?
4. What projects, events or opportunities have captured your interest and make you excited about having your child attend Sunrise Community School?

Facilitators were asked in advance to use these questions as a guide; not to rigidly adhere to them, but to use them as a starting place for dialogue and to create comfort in the small group. As the dialogue occurred, facilitators took notes on notepads to capture the ideas of the group.

Sunrise Community School was buzzing with conversation and dialogue. Small groups around the school were discussing teaching and learning and parents were openly sharing ideas with staff members in a respectful, yet structured format. The circle format with small groups was a key to the success of the dialogue. The circle allowed for the inclusion of the voice of all, and staff members and parents were equal partners within that circle. In the small groups, staff members demonstrated their respect for the process and parents ideas, as well as their commitment to listening to parents. Many ideas were shared that evening by parents. A small sample of ideas by parents included:

- A parent who is a seamstress offered to bring a sewing machine in to teach students.
- A parent suggested books be sent home with children so that parents could support learning at home.
- Parents who were very concerned about child safety and negative influences in the community and said they were willing to advocate more publicly about these issues to generate community support and solution.

Sunrise Community School was buzzing with conversation and dialogue.

- A parent who is a mechanic offered to bring a vehicle to the school staff parking lot and show students some basics about a motor vehicle engine's operations.
- A parent suggested that, instead of hearing of student work at only three scheduled reporting periods, every second Friday during the last half-hour of the day could be a time where parents could come in to discuss student progress with school staff and see their child's portfolio.

Over an hour had passed and small groups were still deep in conversation and dialogue. Groups were invited back to the gymnasium for the evening supper. During supper the school principal and community council representative gave closing remarks and thanked all for their support and ideas. As decided by the subcommittee during planning, a message was communicated to parents that evening that assured parents that their input would be acted upon and that the school was very interested in working more closely with parents. Parents were told this was not a one-time gathering, but rather a start of a new way of working with community.

Staff members and community council representatives were excited with the Community Engagement Evening. Staff members were elated to find so many talents that parents had and were willing to share with the school. The evening demonstrated that when the conditions are right and parents are meaningfully invited into the conversation, they will share openly and willingly (Kliminski & Smith, 2003, p.7). The parents at Sunrise Community School wanted to support the school and were willing to contribute their energies to that end (Minzey & LeTarte, 1994). The evening also demonstrated the need to set aside any negative assumptions about families and proceed on the notion that parents are interested in a learning program, and have good ideas to contribute towards a school's continual improvement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 61).

A follow-up meeting with the community council occurred at the end of March to debrief the Community Engagement Evening. Parents had an opportunity to share their perspectives on the event. Generally, comments were supportive of the event. Parents appreciated the small groups which provided a good forum for discussion. Community council representatives spoke to the significance parents place on the learning program. During the community engagement evening parents identified policies and practices around homework, ensuring students are ready for high school, and ensuring smooth transitions to high school as important considerations for the school. The community council representatives expressed an interest in keeping the momentum moving and building off of the success of the evening. The six staff members who attended the community council meeting also expressed similar commitment. The Community Engagement Evening was a highlight of the year for both the staff members and parents of Sunrise Community School.

Set aside any negative assumptions about families and proceed on the notion that parents are interested in a learning program, and have good ideas to contribute towards a school's continual improvement

Eagle Point School

Both staff members and parents of Eagle Point School indicated that over the past few years, particularly beginning in 2004, the staff members and parent council had worked collaboratively to create a new relationship. School staff reported that in years previous to this the parent council and staff members were in conflict at times, with staff members feeling as though they needed to be defensive of the school practices. In 2006-2007, staff members reported a collaborative relationship between the parent council and staff members as a result of relationships built between the school and community. This collaborative relationship is lived out through an environment of trust and respect between parents and staff members as evidenced in their interactions with each other, reflected in a warm tone, humorous exchanges, and inviting atmosphere. The researcher observed these respectful interactions particularly evidenced at parent council meetings, and in parent-teacher conversations. The staff members indicated that this relationship allows them to be able to include parents in new ways, such as including parents in establishing school priorities. In 2006-2007, parent council members also reported a significant change in their relationship with the school staff over the past few years. In previous years they were not involved in decisions, and perceived that the school administration merely informed them at meetings rather than work collaboratively. Parents indicated they now can freely share ideas with the school staff about opportunities for the school, feel valued and included, and are involved in new ways within the school, particularly in decision making about school priorities. Parents also reported that they have built relationships with school staff members which enables parents to speak freely with teachers about student learning, as well as support staff members by volunteering their time.

Parents particularly appreciated being included meaningfully in the core functions of the school.

From 2003-2007, Eagle Point School has had three different school principals, each with unique leadership styles and beliefs. To create a more authentic relationship with parents, and to facilitate parents' voice in the school planning process, the then new school administrator made personal contact with the parent council prior to school opening to invite parents to a school staff meeting at the beginning of the 2005-2006 school year to seek consensus on the school's planning document. At the meeting, the school's priorities for the year were established and supported by both parents and staff members. Both staff members and parent council members acknowledged that this step of engagement signalled a new working relationship and opened up the territory to work together in a more collegial, open fashion. Parents particularly appreciated being included meaningfully in the core functions of the school, the teaching and learning, rather than solely involved in supporting school events.

Staff development.

In the 2005-2006 school year, the school principal invited the researcher to a school staff meeting to lead a conversation about community education

and community engagement. The researcher left an article on community engagement with the staff members. The researcher had the opportunity to reconnect with the school staff in February 2006 and through an oral presentation and small group discussions, created an opportunity to reflect on school practices. The researcher asked staff members to consider areas such as professional development, assessment for learning, and establishing a school code of conduct, and explore ways within these areas to engage youth, families, and community members. The researcher left a variety of articles and research for staff members to read to further their understanding of community education. In addition, the researcher also presented at a parent council meeting in the 2005-2006 school year on the topic of community engagement and opportunities to meaningfully engage in the learning program. The parent council was particularly interested in moving in this direction in preparation for the creation of a new School Community Council which would significantly shift the role of parents in support of learning improvement plans. These activities in 2005-2006 were useful to support a focus on community engagement at Eagle Point School prior to the 2006-2007 school year.

In October 2006, the researcher attended a parent council meeting to discuss community education and community engagement. Parent council meetings were held once per month on a Wednesday evening beginning at 7:00 p.m. in the school library. At this meeting, 24 parents were in attendance along with the school administrative team. The researcher distributed an article on family engagement and highlighted the benefits of engagement for students. The researcher asked the parent council if the researcher could work with the school and community to promote community engagement over the course of the school year. Parent council expressed a willingness to support this work.

The next day, the researcher attended the scheduled school staff meeting to lead a discussion on community education. The school staff meetings were held in the school library on Thursday, beginning at 3:00 p.m. At this meeting, approximately 30 staff members attended, along with 10 parents. The researcher arranged small group discussion and activities, with both parents and staff members represented in order for the perspectives of both parents and staff members to be shared and brought forward in discussions. The researcher asked small groups to discuss the community engagement continuum (see Figure 1), and discuss potential new ways for parents, staff members, and students to work together. All present reassembled and large group debriefing and discussion occurred to share new understandings raised about community engagement as a result of their conversations. A buzz of enthusiasm and excitement occurred in the room as a result of the dialogue, and both staff members and parents reported they greatly appreciated the opportunity to work and learn together. The meeting concluded with direction from the school administrator that the school staff would build off the success experienced that day, and look to plan regular opportunities (perhaps every two months) for staff members, parents, and students to gather for a school meeting.

As in the previous year, the school administration invited parents to a meeting at the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year to establish the school's priorities and strategic plan. At that meeting, three school priorities were described. Staff members and parents discussed the priorities and a decision was made to proceed with all three priorities. Included in these priorities was a focus on citizenship. Citizenship was selected as a broad theme to capture family and community engagement, develop shared beliefs, create a sense of belonging for all students, and raise anti-bullying awareness. A citizenship committee was formed which included parents, staff members, and students to establish a plan for the activities to be undertaken in the school year to support citizenship.

Citizenship committee.

The first meeting of the citizenship committee occurred at the end of November 2006, immediately following a Thursday afternoon school staff meeting. In attendance were 11 staff members, four students, and three parents. The school vice-principal chaired the citizenship committee. The vice-principal shared with the committee that within the past month both she and a parent had attended professional development opportunities that focused on citizenship. Both the vice-principal and parent shared articles and information about the professional development opportunities so that all committee members had that same information. After the information learned from the professional development opportunities was presented, the vice-principal opened the meeting up to a brainstorming session to develop ideas for proceeding with a citizenship focus for the 2006-2007 school year. A variety of ideas were suggested with parents and staff members contributing equally to the discussion. Ideas included surveying parents about values and beliefs, hosting a school-wide assembly to discuss bullying, and working with students in every classroom to define values. After much discussion over the hour, the group decided to proceed on all fronts—from within the classroom and getting input from families on values and beliefs and then sharing these beliefs through a school-wide event. The goal of the citizenship committee was to raise awareness and develop shared beliefs for the school community.

At the December 2006 parent council meeting, the school vice-principal shared an update on the citizenship committee. The parent council was given details of the citizenship focus and the process used to identify values, both in classrooms with students and through opportunities to solicit expressed values from parents. In addition, the parent council was asked for their advice on proceeding with a citizenship event to pull together what students and parents shared as it relates to values. The parent council fully supported the idea.

In March 2007, the citizenship committee was pulled together for a noon meeting to continue planning processes. Five staff members, four students, and four parents attended. The vice-principal shared the activities then underway within each classroom that were designed to get students discussing values and identifying shared values. Parents were supportive

of bringing forward the students' work on values by hosting a citizenship evening. The purpose would be to inform the community, educate parents on bullying issues, and to create opportunities for dialogue. Committee members discussed the format for the evening including who the guest speakers would be, and set April 26, 2007 as the date for the event.

The structure of the citizenship evening was planned to allow time for collaboration both as families and as separate groups created through breakout sessions for youth and parents. Parents identified the importance of offering childcare at the event so all parents could attend. A follow-up meeting was planned for April, 2007 to ensure there was attention to all details planned for the citizenship evening.

At the April meeting, both staff members and parents expressed a desire to change the planned citizenship evening to an event at the end of April, 2007 which would be used to focus on all three priorities of the school. It was decided that the citizenship committee would set up a classroom to share student work and articles related to bullying awareness, as well as have parents identify values they felt important to be included in the school. Parents and staff members thought that hosting one event for the school community which would highlight work underway in support of all three priorities was a desirable way to proceed. In addition, the citizenship committee felt the event would sustain momentum, and create further dialogue and direction for the 2007-2008 school year. This decision to host one event was made by consensus of the citizenship committee. The citizenship committee then discussed what would need to be done in preparation for the event to be held at the end of the month. Both staff members and parents equally volunteered in support of the tasks that would need to be accomplished for the citizenship component of the event.

Celebrating school priorities event.

The event was held at Eagle Point School on the evening of April 26, 2007. Upon entering the school, families were met with paper *footprints* on the floor. These footprints had values written on them that previously had been identified by students. The footprints lead to the classroom where citizenship was featured. In the room, further student work from across all grades and classrooms was displayed on the walls. A power-point presentation was continually played which identified values and bullying awareness, as learned by the citizenship committee through the professional development opportunities attended by both staff members and parents. Refreshments prepared by parents on the citizenship committee were offered. The school vice-principal greeted visitors to the classroom to highlight the work underway over the school year in support of this priority. A ballot box was placed in the classroom for the submission of ideas. This provided parents the opportunity to share important identified personal and family values that they wished to have included in the creation of school and community shared values. The event lasted for two hours, and both staff members and parents reported a steady flow of families who dropped by throughout the entire evening.

Parent council math presentation.

During the 2006-2007 school year, the researcher noted another significant example of community engagement. At one of the parent council meetings, some parents expressed an interest in getting more information from the school principal about a new math resource being used at the school. The principal acknowledged that a new resource was being introduced and suggested that, at the next parent council meeting, a teacher could be invited to walk through the resource and provide a sample math lesson for parents. Parents chuckled about being “put through” a math lesson, and agreed to the idea.

Parents were asking how they could support math at home.

At a parent council meeting in the spring, two teachers came to provide an overview of the new resource. The teachers were skilled in their presentation and provided a history and context for a move to a new resource. It was pointed out to parents that math is taught differently than when parents went to school. Some students had gone home saying that *they don't do math*, when in fact they do math everyday. The teacher demonstrated a math lesson with parents to show the difference in how math is now taught. Through an interactive and fun activity, the teacher presented a lesson in math. The concepts were well explained and the teacher was able to model effective teaching. The teacher was able to show the new math resource and explained to parents that this resource supports the provincial math curriculum, however other math resources could continue to be used.

The lesson opened up much dialogue with parents. What was to be a 15 minute agenda item turned into an hour long discussion. Parents were asking how they could support math at home. The staff members responded about teaching mathematics while cooking (measuring, counting, problem-solving, etc.). The teachers also showed some useful websites to support learning math at home. During the presentation parents were busy asking questions and taking notes. One parent who expressed dissatisfaction with the new resource, at the end of the presentation was able to see its usefulness in teaching mathematics in a new way.

In May and June of 2007, the researcher returned to Eagle Point School and Sunrise Community School to conduct interviews with school administrators, hold a focus group with staff members, and, as well, hold a focus group with parents. The researcher conducted an individual interview with each of the two school administrators at each school to get their perspectives on any changes in community engagement they perceived over the course of the school year. In addition, the researcher structured two separate focus groups, one for staff members and one for parents, in which individuals participated voluntarily. The researcher wanted separate focus groups to hear independently from parents and staff members as to perceived changes over the course of the year, and to have each group reflect on school practices. The findings from these focus groups and interviews are synthesized and discussed next.

PART III

Research Findings

Through analysis of observations and information garnered from interviews and focus groups, the researcher identified five themes that emerged from Sunrise Community School data that illustrate specific impact on community engagement. These themes are: (a) communication, (b) relationships, (c) leadership, (d) the need to “do something” and (e) cultural responsiveness. At Eagle Point School, these same themes occurred, with the exception of cultural responsiveness, and the addition of reciprocity. As identified in the synthesis, the themes often interconnect with each other, and they do not unfold in a linear fashion.

Communication.

Communication, as referred to here, includes both the verbal and non-verbal messages that are conveyed between the school and home/community. It includes the process, how messages are conveyed (newsletters, personal contact, tone of delivery) and the content (positive or negative messages as expressed in the process). Good communication is critical to community engagement. Weiss, Kreider, Lopez & Chatman (2005) state the importance for educators to “establish and utilize effective systems of communication between home and school” (p. 49). For any relationship, open, two-way communication is effective in building the relationship, and parent and community engagement in schools requires no less. Caron (2006) speaks to the need for “creating two-way communication channels between home and school, and communicating with families about school programs and student progress” (pp. 65-66). Communication is much more than verbal, and is expressed in verbal and non-verbal messages that are created within a school environment.

As experienced by the researcher over the 2006-2007 school year, Sunrise Community School is a very welcoming place. Staff members and parents speak clearly of the openness that exists in the building, and the welcoming tone that you feel when you arrive at the school. Parents state that everyone is so friendly and they always feel they are welcomed in a classroom. The messages conveyed, both verbal (a friendly greeting, staff members and students offering to help you find your way around the school) and non-verbal (warm smiles, the school mission statement proudly displayed at front entrance), result in a clear signal that Sunrise Community School welcomes you, values you, and respects all who become part of the school community. Staff members feel open to freely communicate with parents and describe phoning parents to invite them to events, or phoning and personally meeting with parents in the hallways to invite them to pancake breakfasts and three-way conferences. One staff member, who personally visited each of his student’s homes, reported that 13 of 20 of his students’ parents attended the first three-way conference reporting session. Also, staff members

The researcher identified five themes that illustrate specific impact on community engagement.

create opportunities for parents to connect with staff members through school/class events such as community feasts, Kindergarten teas, and invitations to read with students in classrooms. Staff members have initiated personal communication through home visits, phone calls, and by meeting parents in the hallways. In addition, the school has attempted a variety of communication measures which include a bi-weekly school newsletter and using the *word of mouth* tactic to invite parents to events, such as the community engagement evening, as parents dropped off or picked up their children at the school. Also, the school surveyed parents at the beginning of the 2006-2007 school year to find out when and what time of day parent meetings would be best held to meet the schedules of most parents. These communication measures have worked to varying degrees of success, however, as the school staff members note, they see value in continuing their efforts to invite parents and develop relationships to achieve effective communication with all parents.

Parents indicate that they feel free to discuss issues of concern (e.g. such as their child experiencing verbal put-downs by other students) with staff members as they arise, and identify that teachers demonstrate their willingness to communicate by stopping to hear the concern and discuss solutions. Parents indicate that as a result of good communication with staff members, communicating their concerns has resulted in immediate responses to resolve issues. Parents state that they always have encountered teachers at Sunrise Community School who are very willing to communicate. The researcher observed some parents communicating freely with staff members and volunteering their energies and talents to the school, such as offering to teach organ lessons or help out in the nutrition room. This occurred particularly during community council meetings, and in conversations between parents and staff members after meetings. In addition, parents speak to the community engagement evening as a vehicle for parent voice, and an opportunity to engage new parents within the school community. However, parents identify communication as a continued barrier. Parents express some frustration regarding hearing about events that have already occurred, particularly in regards to not receiving the school newsletter on time, or at all. The open communication experienced at Sunrise Community School is coupled with the challenge to maintain the consistency in communication required for authentic community engagement.

Relationships.

In hand with effective communication lies the need to develop meaningful relationships within the school community (Caron, 2006, p. 92; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). Meaningful relationships require an authentic, reciprocal relationship between staff members and the community (Freire, 1970, 1973; Furman, 2002; Kliminski & Smith, 2003). Kliminski & Smith (2003) describe an example of reciprocity where a parent may offer to chair a committee, and “trusts the school principal to make good on the promise to re-do the lunchroom schedule so students have adequate time to eat”

(p. 6). Without this reciprocity engagement does not occur, and schools do not move past **informing** or **involving** parents and community. These relationships between the school staff and the community are built on trust, open communication, shared leadership and decision-making, creating a new relationship between schools and communities.

At Sunrise Community School, the administrator modeled the way for engagement in the school community through consistent messages and warm, welcoming actions which conveyed a clear message that relationships between school staff and families/community were the norm at Sunrise. The staff members at Sunrise Community School were committed to developing relationships with parents and community members. The staff members created a welcoming environment which was apparent to community as described by parents to the researcher during the focus group. Staff members were open to engage with community in new ways as evidenced in the community engagement planning, and were open to new practices to build relationships with parents as particularly evidenced by one staff member's approach to personally connecting with every parent in his classroom.

The parents and community members at Sunrise Community School greatly appreciated the significance that the school administrators and staff members placed on developing meaningful relationships with all parents. In the focus group, parents described a relationship of trust and respect between the parent council and the school staff, speaking proudly of the school as a place where all people can say they feel welcomed. The community council members along with staff members, identified the community engagement evening as an opportunity that provided a meaningful forum to meet and hear from parents and community, and together plan for improvements. Parents expressed appreciation for the meaningful relationships and roles they experienced in planning and co-leading with staff members while involved in the community engagement evening.

At Eagle Point School, there was agreement by staff members and parents that there had been a significant change in the relationship between the school and community, which resulted in a positive and collaborative relationship. Both staff members and parents indicated that just three years prior to 2006-2007, the relationship between staff members and parents was such that conflict often arose between them. Parents and staff members indicated that the change occurred when staff members began to engage parents in new, meaningful ways within the school community, and they cited bringing parents and staff members together to establish school priorities as the key example. Their comments affirm Smink and Schargel's (2004) belief that "[p]arents must trust school staff before positive relationships and effective communication can be established. Parents will not participate in engagement initiatives designed to support students if they distrust or feel disrespected by staff" (Smink & Schargel, 2004, p. 105).

Inviting parents to school staff meetings, to set school priorities with staff members, and to include parents on committees, were examples parents at Eagle Point School identified as meaningful engagement (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006; Furman, 2002). Staff members acknowledged their responsibility to develop relationships with parents and community, and they did this through personal conversations with parents to let parents know they care. Staff members described a friendship that exists with many parents and their comfort with asking parents for their help. In addition, staff members created a welcoming environment and drew upon the strengths of parents in the community. One example was given of a staff member who invited a parent into the classroom to help with a science (chemistry) lesson. These new relationships were changing, and continue to change, the environment at Eagle Point School, and are paving the way for community and staff members to work collaboratively in support of school priorities. Henderson & Mapp (2002) calls:

the strategies of welcoming, honouring, and connecting families the joining process. Parents state that this process creates a school culture and community where they feel like members of a family. Parents respond to this culture by participating in their children's education in ways that they themselves had never foreseen and by becoming loyal members of the school community. (p. 45)

Leadership.

Leadership is essential for authentic community engagement in schools. At Sunrise Community School, leadership for a focus on community engagement was shared by staff members and parents. The school administrator provided significant leadership in this matter by ensuring community engagement was a priority throughout the school year and created opportunities for staff members' professional development, a study circle for further reflection, and opportunities for staff members and parents to reflect. The administrator also supported the creation of a community engagement committee with both staff members and parent representatives, and through consistent messages, demonstrated clear leadership commitment to community engagement.

Leadership solely at the administrative level in a school will not sustain a priority. It requires shared leadership and commitment of all, particularly staff members (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). At Sunrise Community School, the staff members voluntarily committed their time and energy in support of community engagement. They willingly attended community council meetings at lunch. They willingly volunteered to participate in professional development, in critical reflection, and to working with parents on the community engagement planning. With a demanding workload for teachers, volunteering more time required commitment and leadership to be able to support a community engagement priority. Further, one staff member took it upon himself to personally meet each parent of students in his classroom at the student's home, an

example of effective leadership in action! This example speaks clearly to commitment, creating time, and investing in relationships with families in support of learning. All staff members throughout the year demonstrated their leadership in developing relationships with families, as evidenced by the welcoming environment and the feedback from parents.

Parents at Sunrise Community School were committed to ensuring their children would be successful in their education, and provided leadership in support of community engagement. The community council members advocated on behalf of parents in the school community and, in 2006-2007, actively supported the planning and co-leading of the community engagement evening. They understood their leadership roles on behalf of parents in the community required them to hear authentically from parents and community members, to develop relationships with new families, and to commit to follow through on the engagement evening on areas of change. The researcher observed community council members willingly volunteering their talents, gifts, and energies to support teaching and learning (Kliminski & Smith, 2003; McKnight & Kretzman, 1993). In addition, parents and community members demonstrated their commitment and leadership throughout the community engagement evening. Parents expressed sound leadership and excellent ideas in support of their children's learning, clearly articulated how they could be involved, brainstormed new practices to support teaching and learning, and offered to follow through with an investment of their time to support their ideas.

Leadership was shared and emerged from the initiatives of staff members and parents/community members at Eagle Point School. Staff members and parents gave credit to a previous school administrator for providing leadership in community engagement. Staff members acknowledged that this administrator set the tone and expectations for community engagement among staff members. Parents acknowledged that this administrator changed the relationship between the school and parent council by personally inviting parents to be included in school staff meetings, and by establishing school priorities with staff members.

The staff members at Eagle Point School provided the necessary leadership for community engagement to take hold. The school administrators committed to scheduling professional development time for staff members for community education. The staff members engaged the parent council in establishing school priorities, and invited parents to form committees comprised of school staff members, students, and parents. In addition, staff members continued to open up new territory for community engagement by their willingness to include parents in dialogue about the learning program, as evidenced by the math presentation by two staff members.

Parents at Eagle Point School were committed to the school and to working in collaborative ways with the staff members. Parents took on leadership roles in the school, with one example being the co-leadership role of a parent on the citizenship committee. The researcher observed parents in leadership roles on the committee, freely sharing what they had learned

and their ideas, and committing to follow through in support of the shared goals of the committee. The researcher observed, at Eagle Point School, how authentic community engagement is manifested when leadership is shared by a learning community of staff members, students, parents, and community members (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005).

The need to “do something”.

To “do something” in this context, is reference to a school staff’s willingness to try something new and engage with community in new ways. Nakawé knowledge keeper, Peter Nippi, from Kinistin Saulteaux Nation in Saskatchewan, describes the characteristics needed for this as the “HOW – Honesty, Open-mindedness, Willingness” (P. Nippi, lecture and personal communication, January 25, 2008). These characteristics are necessary for staff members to overcome fears of unknowns, be honest with communication, be open-minded to new practices, and be willing to explore new territory with community.

At Sunrise Community School, the researcher observed an interesting phenomena in transformational change – the need to do something; something new within the school community in support of community engagement. With reflection, a tendency to comfortable steps can occur, leading to a default statement, we’re *already doing this*. Kutner, Sherman, Tibbetts & Condelli (1997) identify the tendency to fit learning “into existing instructional practices” (p. 6). After an investment in staff members’ professional development, critical reflection on practices by the learning community, and a shared commitment by staff members to the principles of community education, there was an initial tendency by some staff members towards a comfort level to sustain current involvement practices and build relationships with families, without necessarily a new approach or need for new practices. The researcher observed a moment in the research when staff members were presented with two options. One was to sustain current involvement and continue to work on building relationships, while another was to “do something” different and engage families in a new way. At that moment, staff members reflected critically on which option to pursue. Staff members were challenged by each other, the administrator, and the researcher to pursue doing something different, which resulted in further reflection on new practices. It was at that time that the staff members committed to doing something new, and opted to join with parents to plan a community engagement evening--which the researcher notes as a moment of transformational change.

The critical elements of dialogue and reflection contributed greatly to making the community engagement evening a success (Collins, 1998; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1990; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). As observed by the researcher and clearly articulated by the administrators, staff members, and parents at Sunrise Community School, the preparation and successful completion of the community engagement evening was a highlight of the

2006-2007 school year. Not only was it a highlight, it was an event in which every aspect of planning, design, and leading was jointly created by parents and staff members. It provided an opportunity for transformational change in the school community, and was, in fact, *something different* at Sunrise Community School.

The notion of moving beyond dialogue and doing something new with community was also highlighted at Eagle Point School. It was a previous administrator who began a new practice of inviting parents to school staff meetings to set school priorities with staff members. Staff members commented on their initial hesitation with this practice, but quickly experienced the benefits of working in new ways as parents volunteered to support school priorities, as evidenced in the positive relationship and communication that began to occur between the staff members and parents (Kliminski & Smith, 2003; Sheldon & Van Voorhis, 2004). Parents indicated that this invitation signalled a new relationship with the school, and they appreciated that level of trust and respect.

Eagle Point School moved beyond that important step, to arranging parent engagement on the citizenship committee – one of three priorities for the school. Staff members and parents did not have the agenda already laid out for community engagement, but developed their shared leadership roles and shared agenda as a result of their collaboration. The momentum continued throughout the school year as the school and parents carried out their work in values identification, and the citizenship committee decided to share their findings with the school community at large. Together they planned a *priorities evening* where their findings on citizenship were shared, and they created a forum to hear from the broader community.

Cultural responsiveness.

Cultural responsiveness is based on the belief that “a student’s background and experiences are assets that, when nurtured and affirmed, will help them succeed in learning and in life” (Saskatchewan Ministry of Education, unpublished). To become culturally responsive, schools and educators build their knowledge of First Nations and Métis peoples’ cultures, worldviews, perspectives, histories, and contributions, and reflect this in a respectful, inclusive way within all aspects of the school.

Getting to know the community, and reflecting community norms and practices is an important aspect of authentic community engagement. Amendt & Bousquet (2006) speak to the importance of cultural responsiveness and, in their study, identified staff members’ practices to engage First Nations and Métis families (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006, p. 6). At Sunrise Community School, the staff members have committed to honouring and including First Nations and Métis ways of knowing. Through a community process, the school selected Elders to join the school staff and support the school community. In regards to community engagement, the planning that went into the community engagement evening honoured First Nations and Métis ways of knowing and doing. The staff members and parents

committed to holding sharing circles as a way to get community feedback, and honour the 75% of their population who identify as First Nations or Métis. During focus groups, staff members spoke to the importance of hearing from parents in the sharing circle, and parents clearly articulated their appreciation for the small circles as a way to ensure parents were comfortable and their voices were authentically heard. The researcher observed the significant role Elders played in the community engagement evening, and identified that being culturally responsive was an important factor in the success of their community engagement.

Reciprocity.

“When educators gain the trust of the community, the community will respond in kind with a greater willingness to support the goals of education” (Kliminski & Smith (2003, p. 7). Other writers also speak to the reciprocal benefits that can be experienced as a result of community engagement (Freire, 1970, 1973; Furman, 2002). A reciprocal relationship occurs between staff members and parents when both groups experience and can describe benefits that occur as a result of the relationship. The reciprocal relationship equally benefits staff members, parents, community members, and students.

At Eagle Point School, reciprocity was particularly evidenced as attested to by administrators, staff members, and parents. The school administrator spoke to the reciprocity in the relationship between staff members and parents and described parents volunteering to support classroom teachers and school activities. One example he pointed to is support from parents for canoeing. The administrator described how a parent experienced in canoeing willingly offered to spend the time teaching water safety and canoeing to students, and volunteered to go on the student canoe trip. The administrator acknowledged that the canoe trip would likely not have been able to have been offered to students without the support of this parent. Staff members acknowledged the reciprocal benefit of engagement as it related to parents supporting classroom teachers, as evidenced by the parent who taught a chemistry lesson, and parents supporting the priorities celebration evening. Also staff members described the willingness of parents to support classroom teachers, due mainly to the friendships that had been created between parents and staff members. Parents also acknowledged the reciprocal relationship. They freely volunteered their time in support of the school, teachers, and student learning. Within this relationship, they appreciated the ear of staff members when they needed to discuss issues, concerns, or new ideas. Parents described a sincere appreciation of being able to contribute to establishing school priorities, and saw the benefit of their voice influencing the school’s direction and student learning. The reciprocal benefits of community engagement were experienced by parents and staff members, and created the conditions for further community engagement opportunities.

Conditions for Community Engagement

At Sunrise Community School and Eagle Point School, community engagement was enhanced by paying attention to certain conditions. Through observation and comments by staff members and parents at both schools, the researcher was able to identify these conditions as follows:

1. Creating a welcoming environment. Lunch was provided at meetings/forums for staff members and community members. Warm greetings by administrators and staff members conveyed a message of welcome to families. Staff members paid attention to their relationship with parents, they worked with parents in collegial ways, and they were consciously working from respectful beliefs and assumptions during community engagement committee meetings and community council meetings. There was a respectful and open environment created at Eagle Point School. The researcher observed a high level of respect among the staff members and parents at the school which was evidenced by the engagement of parents in school staff meetings, on the citizenship committee, and in exchanges between staff members and parent council representatives at parent council meetings.
2. Being open and honest. The school administrator set the tone for open feedback from parents and community members by consistently asking for feedback from parents during parent council meetings. When concerns and criticisms were raised, the staff members and administrators did not take them personally, and options for resolving these issues were sought collaboratively with parents.
3. Sharing leadership. Proceeding with the community engagement evening called upon the staff members to create and share leadership opportunities with parents. It required a willingness to explore unknown territory with parents, and was based on a trusting, reciprocal relationship with parents. Proceeding with the citizenship committee called upon the Eagle Point School staff to create and share leadership opportunities with parents. It required a willingness to explore unknown territory, based on a trusting, reciprocal relationship with parents. It enabled parents to bring their knowledge and perspectives to the table and created space for parents and staff members to work side by side. By sharing leadership, educators at Eagle Point School could take off the sole “expert” hat and engage the gifts, talents, experiences, and ideas of parents, which together created strong foundations, and new initiatives in support of student learning.
4. Engaging staff members’ commitment. Community engagement was enhanced with strong school staff commitment and participation. Staff members at Sunrise Community School willingly volunteered their time and energies to learn, reflect, plan with parents, and participate in the community engagement evening. As staff members committed their time to engage community, they experienced benefits of parent engagement, and support from parents for student learning. Staff

Engagement was enhanced by paying attention to certain conditions.

members also drew upon parent knowledge, ideas, and energy in support of school continuous improvement.

5. Paying attention to details. Planning for the community engagement evening took a significant commitment from staff members and parents. Carefully plotting out all the evening details, creating the small group sharing circles, being culturally responsive, and sharing responsibilities and leadership for the engagement evening were important activities to ensure the conditions were right for parents and community to openly express their voice.
6. Creating opportunities to come together. Through the forming of the citizenship committee, and extending invitations for parents to attend school staff meetings, Eagle Point School created the necessary opportunities to engage with community. These forums were valuable for staff members and parents to come together to reflect, share ideas, laugh with each other, and discuss opportunities for improvement. In addition, these forums created opportunities for leadership to be shared and decisions to be made collaboratively amongst staff members and parents (Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005).

Promising Community Education Practices

Through the researcher's observations and through staff member and parent focus groups, a number of promising community education practices were identified. A few of the staff members' community education practices at both schools are identified below.

1. Personally connecting with each parent at the beginning of the school year. During these visits, staff members asked parents about their strengths, talents, and gifts and personally invited parents to connect their gifts to the learning program. School staff members followed through on these invitations and created the connection between community gifts and the learning program.
2. Planning opportunities for dialogue and reflection. The commitment of time to professional development on community education and community engagement was important to sustain momentum in support of this priority (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). The study circle provided the opportunity to reflect on current engagement practices at the school and to determine what ways the school could expand on or add to these practices. In addition, the study circle created the necessary time to dialogue, reflect and share effective practices from staff members' experiences, and the opportunity for staff members and parents to support each other as they move towards further community engagement (Kutner, Sherman, Tibbetts & Condelli, 1997, p. 6).
3. Forming a school committee/forum where school staff members, parents, and community members come together to "do something" in

support of community engagement that they have not previously tried at the school. The community engagement committee planning forged a new relationship between staff members and parents at Sunrise Community School, and created opportunities for shared leadership and decision making (Furman, 2002).

4. Inviting parents to become involved in school strategic planning (Furman, 2002). Both staff members and parents at Eagle Point School spoke to this as the springboard for a new relationship between staff members and parents. In addition, it laid the groundwork for shared responsibility of school priorities and positioned parents as authentic partners who could contribute to student learning, beyond a supportive role.
5. Inviting parents to join school committees. As parents supported strategic planning, they joined committees in support of priorities and took on leadership roles. Through the citizenship committee, leadership emerged from both parents and staff members in support of this priority. The researcher observed that as parents and staff members worked together on the school citizenship committee, a norm in the committee became community engagement, and parents and staff members worked together side by side as partners.
6. Engaging parents and staff members in shared professional development opportunities, and creating leadership roles to share their findings and formulate a work plan. An important factor in the success of the Eagle Point citizenship committee was the beginning stages when both the staff member and the parent co-lead attended professional development and together shared their findings with the citizenship committee. This demonstrated that both the parent and staff member were equal partners, both positioned as learners and leaders.
7. Engaging parents in the classroom and connecting parent knowledge to student learning. McKnight and Kretzman (1993) identify the need to seek out the gifts of community members and connect them to support learning. The staff member at Eagle Point School who invited a parent to share a science (chemistry) lesson in the classroom indicated this was a successful engagement opportunity. In addition, providing the opportunity for parents to identify their values at the celebrating priorities evening, created inclusion of parental voice, and demonstrated that the knowledge of all parents matters. Another example of engaging parents in the classroom occurred when a parent was invited to lead the Kindergarten Information Night with a teacher. This partnership invited parents in attendance to ask another parent questions.
8. Having staff members present learning program updates at school council meetings, and soliciting parent ideas to inform the learning program. The interaction that occurred at the Eagle Point parent council meeting when the staff members presented the information on

math, indicated that parents were interested in the learning program and supported schools/educators when they are respectfully invited into the conversation (Kliminski & Smith, 2003). Engaging parents in dialogue on learning changed the conversations from peripheral activities (fundraising, or planning the family dance) to the core function of the school – teaching and learning (Collins, 1998; Freire, 1970; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000). These interactions enabled parents to be informed, to learn from educators, and to share their ideas and gifts to inform teaching. Building time into shared meeting agendas facilitated these interactions.

9. Scheduling regular times throughout the year for staff members, students, parents and community members to come together to learn, share leadership, and make decisions. When parents and community were specifically invited to such forums, they responded. It appears that when the invitation is made explicitly, or regularly, parents and community members at Eagle Point School feel welcomed to attend.
10. Ensuring regular communication with families. Some Eagle Point School staff provided an example of sending daily emails to families relating to student learning. This practice facilitated further learning at home, and created an opportunity for parents to support the success of their children. Upon further development, there may be potential for this practice to encourage parents to ask questions of teachers; provide ideas, advice and support to school staff; and inform school policies based on parent feedback.

Involvement to engagement at Sunrise Community School.

The researcher shared with staff members examples of *informing*, *involving*, and *engaging*, and asked staff members to reflect on where they felt they were on this continuum (see Figure 1). Staff members indicated they felt they were between **involving** and **engaging**, and expressed they still have a ways to go in order to achieve authentic community engagement. As evidence for this, staff members cited connecting with families in new ways, paying more attention to developing relationships through personal connections with families than in previous years, focusing attention on community education throughout the school year in meetings and professional development, and facilitating the community engagement evening which brought the school staff and community together in a meaningful way. Staff members commented that if asked two years earlier, they would have been at the **informing** to **involving** stage, as they did not devote as much time to learning about community education, and opportunities were not as frequently created to involve the community within the school. Staff members acknowledged the successes they experienced over the 2006-2007 school year, with a particular focus on the community engagement evening success. It provided an opportunity for staff members to see community engagement in action, and opened up the territory for further engagement of parents within all aspects of the

school community. Staff members had some continued concerns about the challenges to getting all parents engaged. Some staff members identified the challenge of getting parents to support student learning, particularly in attending shared-vision conferences on student progress. They identified challenges related to transitions, poverty, and the distance most families live from the school. In addition, staff members identified that they have continued work to do to align their practices with community education principles and planned to build off of the successes experienced during the 2006-2007 school year to sustain a priority on community engagement.

When asking parents to reflect on where they felt the school was on the spectrum of informing, involving, and engaging, they felt that the school was between **informing** and **involving**. Parents felt that staff members involve parents through their investment in relationships, and some parents felt like they were involved in the school as a result of the close personal relationships they had created with the school staff. Also mentioned was how parents clearly appreciated the leadership of the school administrator. Parents felt, though, that they were more often at the informed level on the spectrum. When probed further, parents identified the following examples:

1. Parents felt that they were informed of feedback, rather than meaningfully engaged in the analysis of the community engagement evening.
2. Parents expressed some concern that, while they invited staff members to community council meetings, parents were not invited to school staff meetings. Parents appreciated the community engagement committee planning. They saw the benefits of working more collaboratively with staff members, and believe a regular invitation to staff meetings would facilitate this becoming more of the norm.
3. Parents perceived that they were merely informed of student learning. They expressed some concerns that they were not engaged in dialogues about student learning, and felt their questions about student learning went unanswered. Parents felt they were involved in peripheral activities at the school, however, parents were not as yet included in the core function of the school -- teaching and learning.

Involvement to engagement at Eagle Point School.

The researcher shared with Eagle Point School staff members the examples of *informing*, *involving*, and *engaging*, and asked staff members to reflect on where they felt they were on this spectrum (see Figure 1). Staff members indicated that they were transitioning between **involving** and **engaging**, and acknowledged that while they now regularly involved parents, they have a way to go to engage parents in the learning program. They cited including parents in establishing school priorities as an example. Staff members also cited involving parents in the classroom and presenting at parent council meetings, as examples of their progression to community engagement. They commented that if asked two years earlier, they would have been at the **informing** stage, as school staff communication to parents was mostly

through newsletters, and on occasion, staff members would invite parents to become involved in events such as supporting the Christmas concert.

Parents were also asked to reflect on where they felt they were on the spectrum of community engagement. They felt the school was well past the involving stage, but not yet totally engaged. They cited as examples, their being included with setting school priorities, being invited to school staff meetings, and joining staff members at school board meetings. A parent who was relatively new to the school community expressed, however, that not all parents in the community may share the sentiments of feeling invited and included to become engaged in the school in the same way that those parents who were already involved may feel. Parents were interested in becoming more engaged in the learning program as a result of the collaborative relationships they formed with staff members. Parents indicated they were getting to a place at the school where they could become more involved in the learning program. When asked where they were on the spectrum two years earlier, they said they were always **informed**, and at times, **involved**. Parents reported that in previous years they would have been mainly involved with field trips, classroom activities, and supporting the Christmas celebration, which is very different from their experiences over the 2006-2007 school year. Parents were proud of the strides the school had made in community engagement.

Research Questions

The purpose of the research was to explore the processes two school staffs used to facilitate community engagement by utilizing community education practices and, within each individual site, compare the utilization of the practices to any increase in community engagement at the school. The research questions and answers are identified below:

1. To what extent does focused staff development, based on a model of transformational learning, shift family/community involvement in the school to meaningful family/community engagement in the school?

Focusing on community education in staff members' professional development provided clarity and direction, challenged staff members to make community engagement a priority, and provided the forums needed for the creation of new practices (Kutner, Sherman, Tibbetts & Condelli, 1997). Staff members at Sunrise Community School indicated this focus sustained their commitment to community engagement over the course of 2006-2007. Staff members at Eagle Point School felt they could have had more structured staff development to support community engagement. It is apparent that both schools articulated growth along the spectrum between **informing**, **involving**, and **engaging**. It was also clear new experiences at each school resulted in transformational changes in both relationships and practices. The researcher appreciates the importance of staff development in this process, however acknowledges that it appears that staff development was only one support in this change. Through the stories of each school,

there is credible evidence that other variables also attributed to any transformation – namely leadership and a welcoming school environment.

2. What specific practices do staff members adopt which result in increased family/community engagement in the school?

Staff at both Eagle Point School and Sunrise Community School clearly developed community engagement practices. The stories as presented in this study demonstrate promising practices that staff members can employ in order to achieve greater community engagement in the school. Staff development activity can only result in better practices if it “allows instructors to access special knowledge, provides instructors the time to focus on the requirements of a new task, and provides time to experiment” (Kutner, Sherman, Tibbetts & Condelli, 1997, p. 6). The researcher wishes to thank the staff members at each of these schools for their willingness to “play” with community engagement ideas, and create their own effective practices.

3. As staff members embrace authentic community education principles and practices, how may a more inclusive and welcoming school environment be created? How may families and community members respond to this new environment with greater commitment to the school? How does this commitment occur? What barriers prevent engagement from happening, or limit the degree to which this occurs?

A new relationship between school staff and community at these two schools, built on trust, respect, and openness, created a more collaborative and welcoming school environment. “Parents and educators can be honoured in a composite community of practice, a community in which parents and educators are the friends of one another’s minds” (Pushor, 2001, pp. 287-88). In the case of Sunrise Community School, the staff members clearly created a welcoming environment. From that environment, staff members explored the engagement of community in new ways. In the example of Eagle Point School, the nature of the relationship between the staff members and parents changed, a welcoming and respectful environment was created, and this collaborative relationship facilitated the beginning stages of community engagement. As evidenced at both schools, the welcoming environment resulted in more parents being engaged – with the citizenship committee at Eagle Point School, and through the community engagement evening at Sunrise Community School.

Leadership, Power, and Structures

At the beginning of this manuscript, the writer introduced a drawbridge metaphor in reference to schools being set aside as islands from communities (Carr, in Minzey & LeTarte, 1994, p. 63). To begin a process of community engagement, a school community does well to reflect on their current practices of family and community engagement. It is important to identify if the school has indeed become “a little island set apart” from the community. More importantly, it is critical to examine if the “drawbridge”

is wide enough to include *all* youth, families, and community members. Through a process of critical reflection, it may become apparent that certain school practices are not “community friendly” and often require a disruption to beliefs, assumptions, and practices. Leadership, power, and structures are good places to begin deconstructing and recreating to facilitate authentic community engagement.

Schools are busy places, and Sunrise Community School and Eagle Point School are certainly no exception. A result of schools being busy places, at times it becomes a challenge to continue with a priority, such as community engagement, particularly when schools and educators are tasked with a number of priorities from the province and school division. In this environment, it is important for school staffs to begin thinking of community engagement as foundational, and as the basis for exploring how they address any current or future priorities in a manner that engages youth, families, and community members. The leadership provided at the schools was critical to ensuring community engagement remained top priority for the school year.

Through the experiences at Sunrise Community School and Eagle Point School, the researcher claims that essential to transformational change is creating a “space” where a learning community of staff members, students, families, and community members come together to (a) dialogue, (b) critically reflect on practices, and (c) create new practices (transformation).

The researcher feels it is in the coming together in this “space,” where school staff and community dialogue and discuss beliefs and assumptions, reflect on how these beliefs and assumptions play out at the school, and create new practices, that authentic community engagement occurs (Amendt & Bousquet, 2006; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985; Collins, 1998; Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1990; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000; Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005). Transformation occurs through this process. Without this process, new practices are not created, and staff members default to what they already know and do; and the result will be “tinkering around the edges” (Brown & Moffett, 1999, p. 51) with community involvement. Tinkering may include inviting parents and community members into discussions when decisions have already been made. Stelmach (2004) describes institutional constraints that impact negatively on parent and community involvement in a school improvement initiative. In her work, she describes “teachers and principals [as] gatekeepers”, who although included parents on school improvement teams, were buffering parent voice, resulting in “parents’ sensing their role [was] not to interfere” (p. 6). Such interactions result in staff members and community members’ disillusionment with an inauthentic attempt at community engagement. “Attempts to engage parents in schools may falter without consideration of the social distance between parents and teachers, and the fact that discrepant power relations inhibit authentic partnership” (Stelmach, 2004, p. 10). A similar context of gatekeeping can also occur in parent council structures, where those parents who have found their place in these structures may not create the conditions to engage *all* parents from the community. This can result in an

“inner-circle” of parents, which can not authentically reflect the voices of all members of the community.

Paying attention to the themes and conditions identified at these two schools provides a starting place for a school interested in community engagement. The onus for engagement, as experienced at Sunrise Community School and Eagle Point School, rests with school staff. Staff members are the holders of power, and they are the ones who have to share it. Grundy (1982) describes the need for structures to allow equitable power relationships. Collins (1998) speaks to the need for staff to “transform their own practices” and change institutions (p. 170). Kliminski & Smith (2003) identify the need for educators to pay attention to “social capital” as a benefit to schools (Kliminski & Smith, 2003, p. 7). These writers articulate that educators must make a conscious attempt to share leadership and power in order to engage community members in authentic ways. As staff members embrace community education, create new practices of community engagement, and create opportunities to meaningfully engage parents in respectful ways, the researcher sees how parents and communities may respond and support the school.

Of similar importance is the need to pay attention to “structures” that exist in schools. Pushor & Ruitenberg (2005) describe the “taken-for-grantedness” in the structures that exist in schools. In their study, they speak to “rethinking a number of educational structures” for community engagement to take hold (2005, p. 60). Stelmach (2004) describes “institutional constraints” that are derived from the culture of schools, and play out in structures that can serve to disengage parents. At Sunrise Community School and Eagle Point School, purposeful attempts were made to disrupt the norm and create “structures” where staff members and community members could come together in new ways. As described in the stories from each school, it was in those new structures where power was shared, leadership was shared, decision making was shared, and the creation of new practices and new opportunities for both staff members and community members could be experienced. Structures may need to be disrupted to create the conditions for authentic community engagement. If the school is working in an authentic way with community, the “island” wouldn’t exist, and there would be no need for a “drawbridge”, as the school would be connected to the community, and community members would be engaged in the school community. In this kind of a relationship between schools and communities, the agenda is shared by school staff, youth, families, and community members, and the engagement results in reciprocity of benefits for all members of the learning community.

Concluding Thoughts

After experiencing community engagement in action at Sunrise Community School and Eagle Point School, and in writing this manuscript, the researcher was able to step back, reflect, and synthesize the findings into themes, conditions, and promising practices. The researcher has attempted to capture the complexities of educational change, and the potential benefits as well as barriers to authentic community engagement. Of importance is the fact that community engagement was successful at both schools, building on the belief that community education works well in all school settings, regardless of demographics or socio-economic factors. It is clear, however, that a “one size fits all approach” does not work for community engagement (Brown & Moffett, 1999, p. 51). Beginning with community education principles is a good starting place, as “the doing or application [of community engagement] will look different in each setting, but the philosophy, the way we do things, the shared vision of community education is the common thread” (Saskatchewan Learning, 2004, p. 1). Of critical importance is making beliefs and assumptions explicit and engaging in dialogue as learning communities of staff members, parents, and community members as to whether those beliefs are helpful or harmful to engaging youth, families, or community members.

A “one size fits all approach” does not work for community engagement.

Based on the literature and experiences of the researcher, at the onset of this research study, the researcher made assertions about certain elements necessary for successful community engagement. These included staff development, critical reflection, leadership, and a welcoming environment. This study identified that paying attention to these elements is important and can result in more parents and community members being engaged within the school. Given the importance of these elements, there are implications for the provincial education system, and responsibilities for policy-makers, Universities, school division officials, school administrators, staff members, and School Community Councils. These include: school and school division policies to support community engagement, staff development to increase awareness of community education and develop community education practices, Ministry of Education policies and supports for community education, and teacher training programs to develop competencies and expectations for community engagement in schools. Upon further reflection, the researcher is left with a number of questions which may form the basis for further research into community engagement:

1. As communities and schools continue to experience changes in staff members and families, how can community engagement become “systematized” so that practices of community engagement remain the norm?
2. How can an educator’s capacity in community engagement be built to ensure community engagement practices are sustained?

3. With frequent changes in school administrators, how can leadership in community engagement be sustained and not affected by administrative changes?
4. What further opportunities can be created for shared decision-making between school staff members and communities? How can existing structures, such as school staff meetings and parent council meetings, be shifted to focus on community engagement in student learning?
5. What impact does authentic community engagement have on student achievement?
6. Does reciprocity privilege some parents over others? What can schools and School Community Councils do to engage parents and community members who remain disengaged from the school community?

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