Parent involvement in education? A Foucauldian discourse analysis of school newsletters

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Abstract
The Ontario Ministry of Education (2010) puts forth parent involvement as a solution for under-achievement and as a resource for building better schools. A Foucauldian discourse analysis of school newsletters reveals that efforts to engage parents also function as a neoliberal strategy designed to govern parents. Using Foucault’s theory of governmentality, I show how the newsletters compel parents to invest in their children’s schooling and judge their value as parents in relation to their ability to produce good neoliberal citizens. I discuss how the newsletters depict ‘good’ parents as those who: (1) do not offer input into schooling; (2) make education a parenting priority and (3) raise good neoliberal citizens. The newsletters represent a strategy for cultivating neoliberal parents who do not ask more from schools and instead demand more of themselves in terms of preparing their children for school and for life. Problems with this approach are that: it asks parents to take up their children’s schooling in ways that push out other family priorities and it shuts down potential collaborations between parents and schools that could challenge neoliberal subjecthood. I call for reformulating discourses of ‘good’ involvement in ways that allow for more equal parent–school partnerships.

Keywords
Parent involvement, neoliberal governmentality, school newsletters, education, partnership

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Managing the participation of parents in schools is not a new issue, but it was not until the 1990s that policy in Ontario, Canada, began to specifically target parent involvement as a crucial factor in student success. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2016: n.p.) advises that being involved in your child’s education gives them ‘an important head start in school and in life’, citing such benefits as ‘more positive attitudes about school’, ‘fewer behavioural problems’ and ‘more success with homework’. This orientation to parent engagement is described as ‘involvement for achievement’ and suggests that our school system’s shortcomings can be resolved by mobilizing the appropriate participation of parents (Antony-Newman, 2019: 146). Involvement for achievement is often posed as a way of improving the success of disadvantaged youth and closing the achievement gap (Hamlin and Flessa, 2018, 2019; Ministry of Education, 2010). The Ministry’s current policy on parent involvement emphasizes the importance of parents partnering with schools to improve the success of their children and their schools (Ministry of Education, 2010). My article focuses on how this partnership plays out in the monthly newsletters at my children’s school, Highland Heights Public School (HHPS), a small elementary school located in a predominantly working-class neighbourhood in Peterborough, Ontario, Canada.

After years of struggling to offer input into my children’s schooling, it became clear that not all forms of participation are included in the Ministry’s promise of partnership, which actually refers to particular types of involvement to the exclusion of others (Antony-Newman, 2019; see also Crozier, 1998; Dahlstedt, 2009). From my perspective, parent engagement feels more like receiving instruction than participating, and while I continue to attempt to engage with the school, I have come to understand that parent involvement is imbued with what Michel Foucault (1977) calls disciplinary power, or circulating forms of discipline that teach parents their role and place in their children’s education. My analysis addresses my ‘disaffiliation’ from the school community (see Whitson, 2017: 300) and the accompanying disconnect between who I want to be as a parent and who the school says I can/should be (see Hemmings, 2012). In this article, I use newsletters to flesh out the ways in which parent involvement is described, implemented and managed through technologies of the self or internalized systems of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1988). I employ a Foucauldian discourse analysis as a reflexive methodology in that my paper aims to challenge institutional notions of ‘good’ involvement in order to disrupt limited prescriptions for who parents can be as subjects, including for myself as a parent–researcher. I ask the following questions: Which types of involvement are promoted in the newsletters? And what kind of parents do the newsletters aim to produce?

I explore parent involvement as a practice that shapes and is shaped by relations of power between parents, schools and young people. Employing Foucault’s theory of governmentality, I use school newsletters to uncover the ways that schools steer parents towards particular forms of involvement. Governmentality describes ‘deliberate attempts to shape conduct in certain ways in relation to certain objectives’ (Rose, 1999: 3), and in the case of parent involvement, schools take efforts to channel parents’ participation into useful forms consistent with the goals of schooling (Crozier, 1998; Jezierski and Wall, 2019; Paniagua-Rodriguez and Beremenyi, 2019; Stooke, 2014). While there are certainly benefits to parent engagement, this article critiques discourses of involvement as a strategy for governing parents. Neoliberalism is a ‘political rationality that tries to render the social domain economic and link a reduction in (welfare) state services and security systems to the increasing call for “personal responsibility” and “self care”’ (Lemke, 2001: 203). I argue that
schooling, and thus efforts to involve parents in it, aim to shape students into ‘good’ neo-
liberal subjects (Crozier, 1998; Dahlstedt, 2009; Jezierski and Wall, 2019).

In what follows, I explore school newsletters as a form of disciplinary power that
attempts to produce the neoliberal parent who is committed to partnering with schools to
cultivate ‘ideal future neoliberal citizens’ (Jezierski and Wall, 2019: 13). I show how the
newsletters produce obligations for parents to invest in their children’s school success and to
disregard their personal values as parents in terms of their ability to produce ‘good’ students who will
grow up to be self-sufficient. After giving an overview of my post-structural framework by
exploring Foucault’s concept of neoliberal governmentality (Lemke, 2001), I detail my
methodological approach of Foucauldian discourse analysis using school newsletters
(Cheek, 2008). Next, I examine three key discourses on ‘good’ parent involvement and
show how ‘good’ parents are depicted in the newsletters as those who: (1) do not offer
input into schooling; (2) make education a parenting priority and (3) raise ‘good’ neoliberal
citizens. I conclude that the newsletters attempt to cultivate the neoliberal parent who does
not ask more from schools and instead demands more of themselves and their parenting in
terms of preparing their children for school and for life. I argue that a problem with this
approach is that it shuts down types of involvement that could potentially challenge neo-
liberal subjecthood.

The neoliberal parent: Getting involved in your children’s education

Research and policy on parent involvement focus primarily on the involvement for achieve-
ment approach, which tries to identify the most beneficial types of participation for improv-
ing children’s performance in school (Antony-Newman, 2019; Hamlin and Flessa, 2018).
Involvement for achievement is not about encouraging parents to input into the adminis-
tration of schooling, the content of the curriculum or pedagogical practice and instead
centres on how parental participation can be used as a ‘as a tool to improve achievement to
meet the needs of governmental authorities in terms of teachers’ accountability and com-
petition between schools’ (Antony-Newman, 2019: 147). While a number of studies point
out that involvement for achievement fails to acknowledge middle-class biases in schooling
that exclude marginalized parents and reproduce social inequality (Antony-Newman, 2019;
Lareau, 2002), this article belongs to a smaller body of research aimed at critiquing the
discursive construction of parent involvement as a neoliberal strategy designed to govern
parents (Crozier, 1998; Jezierski and Wall, 2019). Efforts to channel parental participation
into forms useful for improving achievement can be understood as an exercise in what
Michel Foucault (1991) terms governmentality, which describes a form of power aimed at
enrolling subjects into the project of governing themselves. It is the process through which
people are trained to become self-governing subjects. A substantial body of research and
policy is dedicated to alleviating barriers to involvement, such as those faced by many single-
parent households (Chia et al., 2011), racialized families (Turney and Kao, 2009) and those
with limited financial resources (Crozier, 1998). However, by primarily focusing on how
involvement for achievement unduly privileges certain kinds of parents over others, this type
of orientation presumes that equity is the only problem with schools’ approach to parental
participation. In contrast, the goal of this paper is to interrogate the value of parent involve-
ment as a desired outcome for all parents and one that they should all strive for.

According to Lemke (2001: 201; see also, Foucault, 2008), ‘the neoliberal forms of gov-
ernment feature not only direct intervention by means of empowered and specialized state
apparatuses, but also characteristically develop indirect techniques for leading and controlling individuals without at the same time being responsible for them’. Neoliberalism shifts responsibility ‘for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty, etc., and for life in society into the domain for which the individual is responsible and transforming it into a problem of “self-care”’ (Lemke, 2001: 201). I argue that efforts to improve and increase parents’ involvement are an attempt to make parents responsible for their children’s success or failure in school (Thomas et al., 2015).

Several studies point out that the proliferation of parent involvement policies in the 1980s and 1990s, especially those focusing on partnership, represent a strategy for making parents responsible for their children’s education and aligning their parenting with the neoliberal functions of schools (Crozier, 1998; Jezierski and Wall, 2019; Paniagua-Rodriguez and Beremenyi, 2019; Stooke, 2014; Thomas et al., 2019). For example, in a series of interviews with parents and high school teachers, Crozier (1998) shows how partnership is rarely applied evenly and that parents must earn the right to participate by meeting the schools’ expectations and by offering unequivocal support in all matters from curriculum to disciplinary measures. For Crozier (1998: 125; see also, Wilkins, 2018), partnership ‘is an essential part of the marketization of education’ because it makes parents responsible for ‘investing’ in their children’s education in ways that will pay off later when their children grow into successful adults.

In their analysis of the popular Canadian magazine, ‘Today’s Parent’, Jezierski and Wall (2019) describe a shift in how parents, especially mothers, are expected to get involved in their children’s schooling. While prescriptions for involvement during the mid-1990s emphasize direct instruction and helping with homework, articles appearing 20 years later feature advice about the importance of ‘instilling educational values, motivating and monitoring children and teaching time management and organizational skills’ (Jezierski and Wall, 2019: 823). Jezierski and Wall argue that today’s parents are tasked with ‘creating self-motivating and self-responsible children who will possess the skills and tools they need for success on their own, [where] the end goal, it seems, is the shaping of ideal future neoliberal citizens’ (2019: 823). Similarly, in her action research project with English parents, Lyon (2018: 195) points out that when parent involvement is put forth as a solution for achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students, parent engagement is reduced to ‘an exercise in creating “good” pupils and successful economic beings’. For Lyon (2018), neoliberal education systems limit parents’ agency and remove opportunities for democratic engagement.

Especially relevant to the Ontario context are Antony-Newman’s (2019) criticisms of the Ministry’s current policy document, ‘Parents in Partnership’ (2010), where he argues that notions of partnership and support are used to align parents’ participation with school-based objectives, such as their child’s improved attendance, academic achievement and more positive attitudes towards school. My analysis centres on how the discourse of partnership, the organizing principle for Ontario’s current policy on parent involvement, plays out at the level of school newsletters.

Although schools are afforded considerable control over the day-to-day lives of young people, they have little authority over students after hours and off-school property. Parent involvement offers one avenue for schools to extend their authority beyond the school and into the home. According to Schouten (2019: 352), ‘schooling coerces children into learning certain things and becoming certain sorts of people’, and although it can serve important ends, ‘schooling is coercive education’. Schools are disciplinary institutions aimed at
training docile and useful subjects (Foucault, 1977). Efforts to bolster parent involvement in education are not separate from schools’ primary function of training and preparing young people for responsible adulthood; rather, they represent a different approach to the same goal – that is what is at the heart of ‘involvement for achievement’ approaches like that taken by Ontario’s Ministry of Education (2010). I argue that parent involvement strategies attempt to mobilize parenting for the purposes of producing what Bradbury (2019: 310) calls ‘little neoliberals’ or ‘self-regulating and self-improving learners’. Parent involvement enlists parents in a system of ‘hierarchical observation’, where schools train parents how to train their children as students and as neoliberal citizens (Foucault, 1977: 170; see also Crozier, 1998; Dahlstedt, 2009; Jezierski and Wall, 2019).

Efforts to get parents to more heavily invest in their children’s school performance presuppose that academic success is essential for child development and that parents have a responsibility to incorporate school mandates into their parenting or run the risk of raising children who are unprepared for adult life. Making school success one of the primary goals of development legitimizes schools’ authority over parenting in the name of properly raising the next generation – parents are free to raise their children in their own way only if they first ensure that their children are meeting the schools’ expectations. This assumption therefore subjects parents to the evaluation of schools where they are judged in terms of how well they support their children’s education (Paniagua-Rodriguez and Beremenyi, 2019). Schools can thus offload responsibility onto the parents’ shoulders by provoking panic around their children’s potential lack of success (Thomas et al., 2019). Parent involvement strategies subtly shape parents’ subjectivities by cultivating certain types of ‘good’ neoliberal parents, while suggesting that other types of parenting are ‘bad’ (Crozier, 1998; Jezierski and Wall, 2019; St. Pierre, 2000). ‘Good’ neoliberal parents take responsibility for their children’s education by supporting the school in whatever ways they can. Calls for parents to take increasing levels of responsibility for their children’s education tend to overshadow other parenting priorities, thereby narrowing definitions of ‘good’ parenting to those that serve schools’ goals (Antony-Newman, 2019; Dahlstedt, 2009; Jezierski and Wall, 2019). In this paper, I explore school newsletters as a window into the types of parent involvement that schools promote and the kinds of parents they aim to produce.

**Method: Using school newsletters to uncover discourses of ‘good’ parent involvement**

Highland Heights Public School is a small elementary school serving less than 200 students from junior kindergarten through Grade 8 and is located in Peterborough (HHPS, n.d.), a mid-size city of approximately 82,000 people in Canada’s province of Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2016). Peterborough has the second highest unemployment rate of Canada cities at 12.8 percent (The Peterborough Examiner, 5 February 2021; see also Statistics Canada, 2021). Highland Heights Public School serves a predominantly working-class catchment which includes four subsidized housing complexes (City of Peterborough, n.d.). Provincial standardized test scores place the school’s performance consistently below the provincial standard and below the average performance of schools in the Kawartha Pine Ridge School Board district, the school board to which it belongs (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2020).
I have chosen to examine the newsletters from HHPS for several reasons. Since my research questions are rooted in my personal experience of parent involvement, it seems appropriate to turn to my children’s school to find answers to those questions. This article is, in part, an effort to situate my experiences as a parent within a wider theoretical context and aims to disrupt limited definitions of parent involvement that constrain who parents can be as subjects. Parents are the intended audience for newsletters, and as such, newsletters cross the boundary between school and home and address parents directly, which means that they are not just comprised of text about parent involvement, they are also one of the ways that schools put their visions of parent involvement into action. School newsletters therefore offer a powerful window into the types of parent involvement that schools hope to foster. Unlike other tools to encourage parent involvement, newsletters are a one-way form of communication directed at all parents in the school community, thereby cutting down the number of one-to-one interactions required with parents. Newsletters provide a vehicle for disseminating information throughout the school community, which means that they can influence general attitudes about education and parents’ role in it.

I use a Foucauldian discourse analysis to uncover the ways in which school newsletters steer parents towards particular ways of parenting and getting involved in their children’s education. Foucauldian discourse analysis ‘offers the potential to challenge ways of thinking about aspects of reality that have come to be viewed as being natural or normal and therefore tend to be taken for granted’ (Cheek, 2008: 356). My analysis aims to challenge taken-for-granted notions of what constitutes ‘good’ parenting and ‘good’ involvement in order to make room for alternative ways of thinking about the role of parents in their children’s education. While this work stems from my ‘disaffiliation’ from the school community (see Whitson, 2017: 300) and a desire to resist the types of involvement my children’s school expects of me, its purpose is not to convince others that they should share my dissatisfaction nor is it to put forth a particular kind of parental involvement as superior to others. Rather, this article is oriented towards revealing how parental involvement in education can be expanded to include a more collaborative role for parents, one that involves parents being involved in conversations about what constitutes a good education.

Discourse is productive in that it creates that which it describes and is defined by Youdell (2006: 6; see also, Foucault, 1972) ‘as bodies of ideas that produce and regulate the world in their own terms, rendering some things common sense and other things nonsensical’. ‘Discourses and discursive practices form ‘truths’ and norms’ (Niesche and Gowlett, 2015: 378). These norms shape our beliefs and actions, and they underpin our understanding of reality and our place in it (St. Pierre, 2000). From a Foucauldian perspective (1972), power ‘mobilizes subjectivity and creates subject positions’ (Usher and Edwards, 2005: 399). Parents are constituted as subjects ‘in terms of available discourses’ (Barrett, 2005: 83). The knowledge produced in school newsletters therefore also attempts to produce and reproduce a set of power relations between parents, schools and young people that has implications for who parents of school-aged children can be.

Parents undoubtedly receive school newsletters in a multitude of ways, and some parents likely never read them, which calls into question their effectiveness as vehicles for directly shaping the behaviour of parents. Regardless, newsletters represent the school’s default position regarding parent involvement, and they can be understood as generating dominant discourse in that they produce, reproduce and circulate expert knowledge about the role of parents in education (Foucault, 1977). While parents can negotiate their involvement with their children’s schools, school newsletters articulate the school’s frame of reference for such
negotiations whether parents read them or not. While I acknowledge that many parents find ways to resist institutional discourse, this paper centres on the ways that school newsletters produce and reproduce dominant discourse about parenting in neoliberal contexts.

My analysis focuses on a set of 10 HHPS newsletters spanning the 2018–2019 school year. After several years of regularly reading the newsletters at HHPS, I began a more formal analysis of them, deciding to focus on one full school year’s worth of newsletters. While I chose to focus on the 2018/2019 set of newsletters available online at that time, it is important to note that the newsletters from the 2017/2018 and 2019/2020 schools are virtually identical to the 2018/2019 set, with the only notable difference being changes in dates and times. As such, they represent a fairly consistent approach to parent involvement over three school years. The content of newsletters at HHPS has since shifted to the administration of schooling during the pandemic-era and is not included in my analysis.

Each newsletter is approximately six to seven pages long and is available to the public on HHPS’s website. Prefacing each newsletter is the ‘Principal’s Message’, which is followed by a number of recurring sections dedicated to reminding parents about the rules they and their children need to follow, such as ‘picking up and dropping off your child’, ‘safe arrivals and departures’ and ‘personal electronic device policy’, among others (HHPS, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d; 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d, 2019e, 2019f). Each newsletter also informs parents of upcoming school council meetings1 and features several sections dedicated to general parenting advice, learning at home and community resources. Only one short portion of the newsletters, titled ‘school activities’, is dedicated to what students are doing in school, and this section is limited to sporting activities and clubs. A prominent feature of all the newsletters are the ‘monthly attributes’, a board-wide character development program that promotes the individual traits of responsibility, initiative, optimism, perseverance, integrity, honesty, respect, courage, empathy and fairness.

After reading through the newsletters as they were released, I reread them and generated a list of the specific types of parent involvement recommended and what reasons were given for why such involvement was necessary and important. I reread the set several more times to ensure accuracy and completeness. Entries were coded according to whether they refer to home or school-based forms of participation, whether they focus on academic or non-academic activities, and whether they represent opportunities for parents to input into schooling or for schools to input into parenting. These codes were based on recent findings in the literature that suggest that the greatest gains in achievement can be attained when parents involve themselves at home instead of in the school and focus less on academic matters and more on promoting the value of education and helping their children develop good study skills, organization and self-motivation (Hill and Tyson, 2009; Jezierski and Wall, 2019). In short, involvement for achievement is considered most effective when parents play a supporting role and leave direct teaching and subject matter to the experts (Jezierski and Wall, 2019) – a position that potentially shuts down avenues for parents to input into schooling and opens up avenues for schools to input into parenting.

In what follows, I examine three key discourses on ‘good’ parent involvement that emerged from my analysis. First, I discuss how the newsletters depict ‘good’ parents as those who do not offer input into schooling. Referencing several administrative practices, I show how parental participation is partitioned away from the daily operation of schools. Next, I show how the newsletters describe the best kinds of parenting as those that include education and obligate parents to make education a parenting priority. Last, I show how ‘good’ parents are depicted as those who produce ‘good’ neoliberal citizens. I detail a
number of instances where parents are urged to raise children with the ‘right’ kinds of attitude and are assigned responsibility for sending children to school who are ready and able to learn, who show initiative and who take responsibility for their own success.

‘Good’ parents do not offer input into schools

The Ontario Ministry of Education (2010: 9) describes parent engagement as ‘grounded in a vision of parents that values their importance both as partners and active participants in their children’s education’. Partnership promises the opportunity for parents to participate. In October’s newsletter (HHPS, 2018b: 1), the principal describes the school as ‘a complex web of dedicated and caring partnerships between families, staff and students in this community’ that ‘co-create a culture of high expectations, active involvement and positive well-being’. This description of HHPS paints a picture of parents and educators working together to provide children with the best possible education, and in line with these visions, the newsletters make several invitations for parents to offer feedback, such as February’s message (HHPS, 2019b: 1), that ‘as always, if you have any comments, concerns, or questions, please don’t hesitate to be in touch’ or the one in October’s newsletter (HHPS, 2018b: 1) telling parents that they should ‘not hesitate to contact us here at the school’ – ‘our doors are always open’.

Despite these invitations, HHPS takes several concrete measures that prevent opportunities for unsolicited input and limit parents’ presence in the school. According to Foucault (1977: 141), as disciplinary institutions, schools rely on ‘enclosure’, a strategy that is as much about restricting outsider access as it is about isolating young people for the efficient administration of education. As such, the doors at HHPS are locked at 9 am (HHPS, 2018a: 2). When on school property, parents’ activity and movement is monitored and regulated using procedures, rules and surveillance similar to many of the disciplinary approaches applied to students (Leask, 2012). Parents are reminded that they are ‘to wait outside’ at pickup time (HHPS, 2018a, 2018b: 2), are subject to ‘a front door security system’ (HHPS, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c: 2), are ‘to avoid going to classrooms’ (HHPS, 2018a: 4) and are to ensure that ‘only urgent calls are made to the school’ (HHPS, 2019b: 2). While many of these measures are intended to ensure safety, they also eliminate daily opportunities for interaction (Lyon, 2018). A similar example can be found in HHPS’ pickup procedures that instruct parents ‘to make arrangements to meet your child or children at a designated spot outside the school at the end of the day’ (HHPS, 2018a: 4). Such limited opportunities for interaction between parents and educators make a mandate of partnership difficult to fulfil, a problem identified by Lyon (2018) in her action research with parents of school-aged children. The daily repetition of these divisions creates normative standards that make it seem necessary for schools to restrict parental access. According to Lyon (2018: 201), parents ‘are not expected to instigate relationships or question what is occurring within the wider running of the school’ (see also Solvason et al., 2019). The assumption is that children can only be properly schooled in isolation from their parents and other outside influences, and thus, the ‘good’ ‘parent does not question or challenge, but rather silently supports the superior knowledge of researchers, policymakers and educationalists’ (Solvason et al., 2019: 191).

When terms like ‘working together’ and ‘partnership’ appear in the newsletters, they typically preface a set of expectations for parents, while making no mention of parental input beyond meeting these expectations, which is an observation mirrored in Antony-
Newman’s (2019) criticisms of Ontario’s parent involvement policy. For example, September’s (HHPS, 2018a: 1) reference to ‘working together’ directs parents to ‘pay close attention to the information that your child brings home, complete and sign all forms, and promptly return them to the school’, while March’s newsletter (HHPS, 2019c: 1) tells parents that ‘we are truly partners in your child’s education, and the work you do with your children at home makes an enormous impact on their academic success’. Much like Antony-Newman’s (2019) criticisms of Ontario’s (2010) ‘Parents in Partnership’ policy, these examples depict a one-sided relationship where parents’ contributions are limited to meeting the obligations placed upon them (see also, Lyon, 2018). The neoliberal parent prioritizes and takes responsibility for their children’s performance at school. For instance, the January newsletter (HHPS, 2019a: 1) urges parents to ‘consider renewing your commitment to being as involved in your children’s education as you can’, followed by a list of suggested improvements such as, ‘have your child read a book to you each night’, ‘ask them what they’re doing in class’ and ‘familiarize yourself with the curriculum expectations’. While parents are assured that ‘together we can make it happen’, the partnership described here reads like a to-do list for parents (HHPS, 2019a: 1). The implication is that parents should always be striving to do better in terms of their involvement and that ‘good’ parents dedicate all the time that they can to their children’s school success.

The newsletters present a vision of partnership that presumes educators and parents are on the ‘same page’ and describe parents as willing recipients of instruction. For instance, the newsletters often thank parents proactively for their support before it is offered. In her analysis of letters sent home from school, Keogh (1996) argues that these types of presumed support claim knowledge about parents and their intentions. As with calls for partnership, appreciation for parents’ support generally signals an expectation for parents to support either specific or general school objectives. Statements like, ‘we thank you for your continued support in everything we do’ (HHPS, 2018b: 1) and ‘thanks for your continued support’ (HHPS, 2018c: 1) claim support from parents before it is offered as a normative standard. The strategic use of the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘us’ has similar effects, where statements such as ‘as parents, we are always looking for ways to help our children succeed in school’ assume that parents are already enrolled in the school’s project by virtue of being parents (HHPS, 2018d: 3). Statements like these are designed to shape the ways in which parents think about themselves as parents and urge them to judge their own parenting from the perspective of schools.

‘Good’ parents make education a parenting priority

Efforts to improve parent involvement presume that parents will be unable to adequately provide for their children’s learning needs without expert advice from schools (Crozier, 1998; Dahlstedt, 2009). While the newsletters have plenty of suggestions for how parents can improve their performance, there is virtually no mention of the role of teachers in improving the home-school partnership beyond that of directing parents’ participation (see also Antony-Newman, 2019; Thomas et al., 2015). The advice in the newsletters is not limited to academic matters, such as reading and math, but instead, parents are presumed to need direction in virtually every facet of ‘good’ parenting. From healthy eating to weather-appropriate clothing (HHPS, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2019f), the newsletters spell out some of the most basic requirements of parenting. For instance, in December’s newsletter
parents are provided with a list of ideas for ‘fun and learning with your family’ including ‘going to the library’, ‘playing board games’ and ‘skating’, among others. The newsletters imply that there is not only a problem with how parents engage in their children’s schooling, but also a problem with parenting.

A quick inventory of the newsletters’ expectations shows that the school’s version of the ‘good’ parent leaves room for little else in terms of either parenting or personal life, a phenomenon termed ‘intensive parenting’ and a problem that disproportionately affects mothers (Jezierski and Wall, 2019: 812). The demands of schooling require families to organize their lives around their kids’ school schedules, a reality articulated in the term ‘school nights’. Evening and morning routines require tight scheduling and planning, thereby imposing upon families what Foucault (1977: 149) describes as the ‘time table’ and ‘its three great methods – establish rhythms, impose particular occupations’ and ‘regulate the cycles of repetition’. They make parents ‘spend’ time on their children’s schooling, and for many families, especially those with busy work schedules, time can be a limited resource. These daily requirements make it virtually impossible for parents to avoid the school routine from becoming the family routine.

Calls for parents ‘to get as involved as they can’ (HHPS, 2019a: 1) suggest that parents should continuously strive to improve their involvement, a task that could quickly leave no time for family priorities that differ from school priorities. Solvason et al. (2019: 193) point out that ‘for some parents, a school project, cooking ingredients or a costume may be so way down their list of current priorities in managing their family as to be invisible’. Parent involvement initiatives suggest that 30 hours a week of mandatory schooling is not enough to adequately prepare students for adult life and that their home lives should also be dedicated to that task as well. They ask parents to promote their children’s school success over other family-oriented activities. ‘Good’ neoliberal parents are expected to parent in ways that have educational value and that make the job of schools easier.

The newsletters offer a prescription of how families should spend evenings, weekends and summer. For instance, each monthly instalment of the newsletter offers tips on how to ‘use every day experiences to promote literacy’ and a section promoting ‘online math fun at home’ (HHPS, 2018d: 4). January’s newsletter (HHPS, 2019a: 5) asks parents to make ‘math fun at home’, while June’s edition (HHPS, 2019f: 3) of the newsletter pushes the importance of reading over the summer. Parents are told that ‘teachers and literacy experts agree that children of all ages need to be read to or to read by themselves and to talk about books over the summer’ and that ‘during your child’s summer vacation, it is important for them to spend time reading and writing on a regular basis’ (HHPS, 2019f: 3). Parents are asked to prioritize ‘sharing books’ over ‘swimming’, ‘summer camp’, ‘barbeques’ and ‘music in the park’ (HHPS, 2019f: 3). ‘Good’ neoliberal parents make life about learning and nurture this attribute in their children. For instance, December’s newsletter (HHPS, 2018d: 4) advises parents to ‘use the time you have together to engage your child in fun, quick, and simple activities that impact learning in reading, writing, math and science’ and offers numerous suggestions for family-based learning activities such as ‘read cereal boxes, signs, and labels, advertisements, logos, and billboards’; ‘play word games such as scrabble or boggle’ and help ‘writing their favourite foods on the weekly shopping list, finding the specials and the costs’. Parents are told to: ‘Enjoy these activities over and over again. These fun activities will enhance your child’s learning, bring you closer as a parent and child, and show your child you care about his or her education!’ (HHPS, 20618d: 4).
‘Good’ parents raise ‘good’ neoliberal citizens

At the heart of all parent involvement strategies are children and the adults they will become. The neoliberal parent makes sure that their child not only gets a ‘good’ education but also that they are able to translate that education into later gains, such as financial security and opportunity (Crozier, 1998). ‘Good’ neoliberal parents are not just expected to be self-regulating and responsible citizens, they are expected to raise children with the same attributes (Jezierski and Wall, 2019; Lyon, 2018). Take for instance, December’s (HHPS, 2018d: 1) reminder that ‘through the example we set as adults, we hope that students will discover the real meaning of peace and goodwill towards others’. Jezierski and Wall (2019) point out that parents are increasingly called upon to instil a certain type of character in their children as opposed to offering direct academic support. The newsletters adopt a similar approach and emphasize the importance of raising children with the ‘right’ attitude, such as January’s (HHPS, 2019a: 1) promise that involvement will translate into ‘better long-term academic achievement; higher motivation and more positive attitudes; increased commitment to learning; fewer behavioural problems; more successful programs and ultimately more effective schools’, most of which highlight compliance more than achievement.

In a section titled ‘playground safety’, November’s (HHPS, 2018c: 3) newsletter tells parents that ‘as we strive for peace in the world, we also work daily on cultivating peace in our own school yard’ and ‘please remind your children to play safely – and never aggressively - and to always respect the rights of others’. Parents are expected to send kids to schools who are ready and able to learn and require nothing more than instruction and supervision: students who can follow direction, work on their own and get along with peers. ‘Good’ parents produce ‘good’ students and future neoliberal subjects who are responsible, self-regulating and who can succeed on their own in school, and later as adults (Jezierski and Wall, 2019: 823).

The ‘monthly attributes’, a board-wide character development program that promotes individual traits such as responsibility, initiative and perseverance, offer another example where parents are asked to foster a particular kind of character in their child. For example, October’s (HHPS, 2018b: 2) newsletter reminds parents that ‘to demonstrate initiative, we need to be eager to do what needs to be done without being prompted by others’, and in January (HHPS, 2019a: 2) that ‘to demonstrate fairness, we need to be sensitive to the needs of individuals’. The monthly attributes centre on fostering students who take responsibility for themselves and their relationships with others, who are motivated to work hard, and who have a positive attitude. Similarly, parents are reminded that New Year’s resolutions are an opportunity for healthy goal setting, telling them that ‘we provide a positive role model for our children when we determine to do something and then go out and work hard to accomplish it’ and ‘it can be a good motivator and when we set our minds to it, it truly is amazing what we can accomplish!’ (HHPS, 2019a: 1). On the next page, parents are given the school’s ‘top 10 to help students start the New Year off on a positive note’, a list including adages like ‘time + effort = achievement’, ‘follow the golden rule’ and ‘attend school regularly and on time’ (HHPS, 2019a: 2).

The newsletters let parents know about several programs at the school designed to help parents raise children with the ‘right’ character attributes. For example, October’s (HHPS, 2018b: 6) newsletter invites families to participate in a free cooking program where ‘parents will learn tips on how to cook alongside their children; prepare easy and nutritious budget friendly meals; and discover the benefits of eating meals together without screens’. The most
notable example is the ‘Freecycle cafe’, a monthly drop-in group program designed to ‘impact intergenerational patterns of disadvantage’ and to help ‘provide the best possible foundation for learning to all students’ (HHPS, 2019c: 2). According to the newsletter, Freecycle cafe is an intervention that stresses the importance of parents ensuring that their children ‘are ready to learn’ (HHPS, 2019c: 2). What is interesting about Freecycle Cafe are the types of interventions it proposes for ‘intergenerational patterns of disadvantage’. While ‘access to free cycle clothing’ and ‘personal care items’ may be helpful, offers to ‘talk to public health and school staff about parenting, relationships and child development’ are premised on the idea that poor people are bad parents beyond their struggles with money (HHPS, 2019c: 2). Implied here is that poverty results from parental deficit, especially in terms of relationships and parenting skill. Freecycle Cafe is presented in the newsletters as a means to save children from reproducing the character deficits of their parents.

Conclusion

In research, policy and practice, parent involvement in education is put forth as a solution for underachievement and as a resource for building better schools (Antony-Newman, 2019; Hamlin and Flessa, 2018). In this article, I have examined school newsletters to reveal the types of involvement promoted by schools and kinds of parents they attempt to produce. I have shown that in steering parental participation towards specific types of school-based achievement, parent involvement strategies shut down opportunities for collaboration and limit the ways parents can get involved (Lyon, 2018). Parent involvement initiatives are aimed at making schools better by improving the contributions of parents and not the contributions of schools. The newsletters call upon parents to take on more responsibility for their children’s education as a matter of ‘good’ parenting and oblige them to prioritize their children’s schooling over other parenting considerations. ‘Good’ neoliberal parents take it upon themselves to make education a parenting priority. They cultivate ‘good’ students who grow up to be self-sufficient adults who can take care of themselves. Parent involvement is a particularly powerful form of neoliberal governance because of its far-reaching effects over time, creating a cycle of virtually continuous schooling, by training parents to train children.

Certainly, all parents want their children to do well in school and grow up to have successful lives and that explains the desire to get more involved. The problem is that parents are being asked to take up their children’s schooling in a way that pushes out other family priorities and changes the character of family life for parents and their children. I have shown how efforts to involve parents in their children’s education attempt to reduce parenting to its neoliberal value, and while parents are promised that investing in the ‘right’ ways now will pay off later, schooling increasingly fails to translate into financial security for many. Such narrow definitions of parent involvement shut down opportunities for collaboration and offer few avenues for parents’ input into how schools administer education.

According to Lyon (2018: 200), ‘the neo-liberal education system’s model of parental engagement has removed the democratic agency of parents and created a narrative in which a “good parent” makes responsible choices instead of voicing opinion, silently supports the neo-liberal consensus and has no moral capacity to parent’. My analysis of school newsletters aims to disrupt these taken-for-granted notions of ‘good’ involvement to make room for alternative ways of configuring partnership so that parents are invited into the conversation about what constitutes a good education. This article is a call to reformulate
discourses of ‘good’ parent involvement in ways that allow for more equal partnerships that approach education as ‘a joint enterprise between parents, educators and society’ (Lyon, 2018: 205, see also, Solvason et al., 2019).

Declaration of conflicting interest
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Note
1. According to regulation 612/00, s. 2(1) of the Ontario Education Act (1990), the ‘purpose’ of school councils is to ‘improve student achievement and enhance the accountability of the education system to parents’. Although outside the scope of this paper, it is important to note that meeting minutes show that HHPS’s council limits its business to fund-raising matters and school updates (HHPS, 2019–2020).

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