

Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale

Volume 33

Issue 1 *Educational Restructuring in the Era of Globalization*

Article 4

June 2017

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Recommended Citation

Dehli, Kari (2017) "Parental involvement and neoliberal government: Critical analyses of contemporary education reform," *Comparative and International Education / Éducation Comparée et Internationale*: Vol. 33 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol33/iss1/4>

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Parental involvement and neo-liberal government: Critical analyses of contemporary education reforms¹

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Abstract

In the past decade, globalizing forces have generated intensified pressures on national governments to 'reform' school curricula and restructure education systems. How are we to understand connections between policies that call for greater parental involvement and community responsibility, on the one hand, and more general changes in the organization of contemporary economic, cultural and political relations, on the other? How did 'involvement' come to be viewed as a solution to contemporary educational problems? This paper discusses three critical approaches that education researchers have used to examine these questions. The first argues that involvement is one of several strategic, though often contradictory, policy responses by nation-states to a globalizing and neo-liberal 'agenda.' The second views involvement in terms of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideological struggles over the organization, form, content and values of education, while the third 'approach' considers involvement and participation policies as examples of more uneven, incomplete and emergent forms of neo-liberal governmentality. Influenced by Michel Foucault's work, some of the contributors to this last approach suggest that what is perhaps most crucial about the present moment in education reform is a transformation in the modes of power and knowledge through which education and its subjects are governed. The paper argues for a version of this last view, modified by drawing on concepts and insights from feminist and critical race theory, to suggest that as a form of neo-liberal governmentality, involvement at school is both constraining and enabling, although differently so for differently situated children and their families.

Positioned on the margins of state schooling for more than a century, parents have recently been identified as 'key stakeholders' in education policy documents in a number of countries. While parents were often blamed when children did not learn or did not behave as schools expected, while they were chastised for being either too intrusive or too passive, and while they were viewed as a welcome source of voluntary labour in many schools, their roles as 'stakeholders,' 'partners' and 'consumers' acting on behalf of children are of recent vintage. Today, parents are variously urged to become more 'involved' in the governance of schools so as to make them more accountable and efficient, invited to take an active role in choosing a school in the emerging marketplace of education, and admonished to assume greater responsibility for pedagogical tasks at home, such as reading, writing and basic math. In 1997, Joyce Epstein, a U.S. researcher who has devoted her career to the promotion of parental involvement in education, could write with confidence that: "There is no topic in education on which there is greater agreement than the need for 'parental involvement'." Yet, even as she claimed that a consensus has been achieved, Epstein and her team of researchers acknowledge their doubts about how to transform the need for involvement into practical and effective programs. Thus, they lamented: "Everyone wants it, but most do not know how to develop productive programs of school-family-community partnerships" (Epstein et al., 1997, xi). Versions of this 'agreement' and the lament that accompany them, have been repeated often in policy-documents in North America, in texts that organize relations between families and local schools, in school board deliberations and political discussions, and in media reports about education. Over the past ten to fifteen years, and especially in late August and early September when a new school year begins, I have collected in such sources dozens of statements along the lines of "It takes a village to educate a child" or "As a parent, you are your child's first and most important teacher."

In this paper, I look for analytic approaches to make sense of some of these policy shifts. While the province of Ontario, Canada, is the primary site of my own empirical and historical research into education policy reform over several years (Dehli, 1994, 1996; Dehli & Fumia forthcoming), here I will also consider critical analyses of education reform in the UK, Australia, New Zealand and the USA. Thus, some of the issues and questions I raise are drawn from observations of and participation in local education policy-making, while many of the arguments, concepts and analyses are drawn from reading of critical

studies of education reform across several jurisdictions, as well as reading of feminist political theory and governmentality studies.

In a paper written almost ten years ago, I examined how calls that were then emerging to involve parents, families or communities in schooling appeared to 'travel' across nation-state boundaries (Dehli, 1996). While globalizing forces were clearly at work in moving such policies around, local conditions were important in shaping how they were worked out and understood in particular places. I argued that researchers could not assume any easy correspondence between globalizing imperatives and local policies or practices (see also Levin, 2001; Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998), nor could we assume, in a more critical perspective, that 'the local' and 'the global' would line up neatly in a binary divide between the good local on one side and the bad global, on the other. With others, therefore, I argued that it is important to conduct situated and specific research on how local histories and political institutions transform and inform 'travelling policy tales,' while at the same time we examine how "locally interpreted narratives" shape globalizing frames and imperatives (Anderson-Levitt, 2003; Dale, 2002).

In the past ten years, the influences of globalizing forces and international policy-making bodies in education have intensified and processes of restructuring and devolution have proceeded apace. The effects of these changes are complex, generating new techniques and sites of governance that enlist the participation of individuals, families and local communities in their own regulation in new ways, while at the same time securing strong centralized controls of curriculum, standards and money. One question that emerges now is how critical policy researchers in education make sense of these more recent shifts? How are we to understand connections between policies that call for greater parental involvement and responsibility, on the one hand, and more general changes in the organization of contemporary economic, cultural and political relations, on the other? How are we to understand the coexistence of quite different policies and practices that promote and regulate involvement, from ones that situate the parent as a stakeholder in governance, ones that privilege the parent as consumer, or ones that elaborate injunctions about the pedagogical roles parents ought to play? Do they emerge from a similar set of policy-incentives and do they amount to the same thing in the daily experience of teachers, students and their families?

In a review of critical accounts of neo-liberalism, Wendy Larner (2000) has argued that the descriptions and explanations we provide matter for how we might grasp what is significant and new about contemporary forms of government, and for the kinds of strategies and alternatives we might imagine to create more just and equitable institutions. Through a very helpful discussion, she organizes her review into three broad groupings, distinguished by seeing neo-liberalism as either policy, ideology or governmentality. Yet, while they are useful to sort among different contributions, she cautions that it is neither helpful nor necessary to assert such distinctions dogmatically. Rather, when considering particular sites or forms of government, it may be necessary to select and combine elements from each. In addition to focusing on key features of neo-liberal government, Larner argues that critical race and feminist theory and research provide crucially important concepts and strategies for analyzing the contents, targets and unequal effects of contemporary government discourses and practices.

In this paper I draw from Larner's recommendations to consider the 'parental turn' and calls for 'involvement' in contemporary education policy. Some of the questions that have engaged critical researchers of contemporary reforms of school governance and parental involvement include: How and why is it that the participation of *parents*² in schooling has moved to such a central place on the contemporary education policy agenda? Where and how is the parent being invoked and called upon to involve him/herself in the work and relationships of the school, and if this is new, why is it occurring now? What conditions, material and discursive, made these changes possible, reasonable and necessary? How do men and women respond to and 'take up' calls to become more active and involved in institutions such as the school? What is being accomplished in and through the circulation of the apparently gender-neutral, class-less and deracialized, though strongly heteronormative, category parent? What are the effects of involvement for those who engage in it, or those who are excluded, in terms of schooling experiences and achievement of students, in terms of teachers' work, and in terms of equity and social justice?

At the risk of simplifying what are quite complex arguments and debates, I will organize my discussion with aid of Larner's three-part distinction to suggest that critical research accounts describe and explain parental involvement's 'place' in education policy reform in the following ways. The first approach can be summarized as one where involvement is viewed as one of several strategic, though often

contradictory, policy responses by nation-states to a globalizing and neo-liberal 'agenda.' The focus here is on policy strategies and their impact, tracking the ways that 'devolution,' market relations and consumer choice replace more centralized forms of state provision and client relationships. In these accounts, the role of the state shifts from direct provider of education to one of enabling and promoting 'active citizenship' through consumer choice. While policy agendas may assert that their aims are to promote empowerment and equity, critical researchers in a number of countries argue that the opposite is occurring: devolved and market-driven reforms have deepened inequalities in education provision, experience and outcomes (among several, see Baker et al., 2004; Robertson, 2000; Burbules & Torres, 2000).

A second line of argument views involvement policies in terms of neo-liberal and neo-conservative ideological struggles over the organization, form, content and values of education. Here researchers analyze how entrepreneurial and consumerist ideas overlap or clash with a defence of 'traditional' forms of family and authority, and how parents are invited to assert consumerist, religious and (some) cultural values through the school. In this perspective, most eloquently developed by Michael Apple (2001; 2003), there is a focus on education as a site of complex struggles among social interests over representation, recognition and resources. One of the merits of this approach is that it attempts to unpack the powerful ways in which individuals and groups become attached to conflicting ideas about education.

A third 'approach' views involvement and participation policies as examples of more uneven, incomplete and emergent forms of neo-liberal government. In these studies, researchers consider the 'rationalities' and 'technologies' by which individuals, families and local communities are enlisted to become active, 'empowered' and responsible citizens, not only in the school but in a wide range of public and social arenas. While the emphasis in Apple's work (above) is on the ideological content and interests that drive and benefit from politics of representation, the focus here is more on the apparently neutral means, terms and practices whereby educational 'problems' are framed and acted upon. Influenced by Michel Foucault's work, some of the contributors to this last approach suggest that what is perhaps most crucial about the present moment in education reform is that we are witnessing a transformation in the modes of power and knowledge through which education and its subjects are governed. In a number of

books and papers, Tom Popkewitz and his colleagues (1998; 2000a and b; 2003; Bloch, Holmlund, Moqvist & Popkewitz, 2003) have developed these sorts of arguments to draw attention to a number of features by which contemporary educational modes of government might be specified, such as their productive and enabling aspects, their often indirect modalities, and their generation and proliferation of active, reflexive and self-governing subjects: the enterprising individual, the consumer-citizen, and the involved parent. In this view, the question is not so much about how an already known and existing population of parents come to be differently represented in, or excluded from, education resources and decisions, but rather how such a population, and the individuals who comprise it, come to be constituted and known in the first place. Using a phrasing from Nikolas Rose (1996), an inquiry of parental involvement as a mode of government might ask, first, how 'parents' come to be known and acted upon through practices of specifying, normalizing and differentiating parents-as-a-population, and second, how individuals come to know and act upon themselves through such categories of specification, normalization and differentiation provided in involvement discourses

Working from such approaches and concepts, critical education researchers look for ways to connect local practices, aims and experiences to broader (national and/or inter/trans-national) changes and trends in education reform and social change. Most aim to do so without reducing local actors to mere pawns of extra-local social and educational transformations, and without presuming in advance the direction and effects of change. They also, in addition to the kinds of questions I have summarized above, ask about how social relations of class, race, gender and (less often) sexuality underpin education policy agendas, struggles over ideology, representation and resources, and/or regimes of 'governmentality.' Thus, some are concerned to trace the unequal effects and increasing polarization between educational 'haves' and have-nots,' some examine the social, economic and cultural interests that 'drive' moves towards commodified education, testing and markets, while others focus on how terms of education governance and curriculum imply norms that position large numbers of students as deviant, abnormal and other. Most critical researchers are not satisfied with a merely descriptive or diagnostic approach and want their work to contribute to a broadly defined political practice toward social and educational justice. They may differ, however, in their perceptions of how critical practices can be enacted, where such practices may be inserted and what roles academic researchers might play in them.³

There is much in these studies to suggest that the local working out of education reforms that invite greater local and parental involvement and choice is far messier and more contingent than a simple imposition of "world culture policy" (Anderson-Levitt, 2003) or of straightforward implementation of 'neo-liberal' policy would allow. Yet, there is considerable consistency, too, and much repetition of policy-themes and concepts. For example, it is striking how adults who care for children are consistently addressed as subjects who ought to be well informed about education, who should exercise choice, and who ought to demonstrate 'responsible parenting' by being solicitous and supportive of teachers. As well, across policy texts, education PR materials, research and media, there is a mantra-like repetition of the claim that 'involved' parents do improve children's school achievement. With respect to representation, even in multicultural settings, policy-documents frequently address 'the parent' in ways that presume heterosexual, two-parent families and middle-class conditions and aspirations as the norm (Deem, Brehony & Heath, 1995; Fine, 1993; Dehli, 2003). Often lamented as a problem of representation – whether in terms of exclusion, discrimination or omission, or in terms of deficit, ignorance or inability – the absence of racial and cultural 'minority' parents or of poor families in school governance is noted as a special challenge and problem for the generation and management of involvement. Particular programs are therefore devised by school authorities to recruit and include 'other' parents, and to 'build local capacities' for their participation (Epstein, 1998; Leithwood, Fullan & Watson, 2003; for critiques, see Vincent, 2003; Lareau, 1989).

My purpose here is not to disprove the oft-repeated claim that parental involvement improves school achievement, nor to argue that those who promote it have sinister intentions. Rather, I want to think about how to critically examine such practices, and the formal and informal 'talk' in which they are repeated and reworked, operate as forms of government. That is, instead of seeing them as mere common sense or as what good and well-meaning teachers and parents should do, I want to consider them as 'sites' where power is circulated and exercised, and as 'moments' when the conduct, decisions and dispositions (Popkewitz, 1998) of individuals and groups are organized. In such a view, one 'moment' to be examined, is when educators' observations of involvement – or more often its absence – become justifications of poor performances and unhappy school experiences. The very repetition and circulation of claims in public policy, education research, media, and every-day school talk about what good and sensible families should do, have obvious 'truth-effects' (Foucault,

1994). They are not merely claims about pedagogical truths, they also have moral weight, and they address themselves to individuals as 'parents' in quite particular and normative ways. These claims are 'governmental' in that they seek to shape the behaviour and dispositions of individuals – to govern their conduct (Foucault, 1991; Rose, 1996) – and they are 'pedagogical' in that they seek to 'improve' individuals' knowledge and skills in order to align the relations of families to those of schools (Popkewitz, 2003). Viewed through the lens of governmentality, this is not simply about another way for external domination to work its way into familial and educational relations (although it is about that, too!), rather, it is about the production of a range of possible choices, decisions and actions that provide subjects with resources to reflect upon, calculate and make judgements about how to act (Rose, 1995). In this sense, involvement as a form of government is both constraining and enabling, although it is differently so for differently situated children and their families.

How do critical education researchers attempt to disentangle the webs surrounding involvement policies, webs of obviousness, individual good intentions, managerial strategies, consumerist moves and shifts from public provision to private responsibility in education? And how do the local and the global become intertwined? A number of researchers have focused their questions on transnational trends in and influences on education reform (Levin, 2003; Lingard et al., 1993; and Whitty et al., 1998), while others focus on particular national contexts, asking about relations between state policies and programmes and the practices and experiences of local actors in schools (Bloch et al., 2003; Anderson-Levitt, 2003). A number of studies examine how parents negotiate their new roles as 'consumers' in local education markets or as 'managers' of schools (Ball, 2003; Crozier, 1999; 2000; Deem et al., 1995; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Dehli, 1996; 2003a), while others apply feminist perspectives to analyze the ways that schools' expectations of involvement shape, and often increase, the labour and dispositions of mothers (David, West & Ribbens, 1994; Griffith & Smith, 1990; Smith, 1998). Others ask about the differential effects of, and responses to, these types of reform in terms of class, ethnicity and/or race (Ball, 2003; Crozier, 2000; Vincent, 2000; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000; Apple, 2003; Fine, 1993).

One concern of these researchers concerns the ways in which policies that promote greater local participation, often in the name of inclusion, access and equity, in fact result in deepening educational inequalities and political polarization (Apple, 2001; 2003). At the same

time, and more insidiously, the parental and local 'turn' in education enables the fixing of responsibility for inequality on students, families and local communities themselves (see also Gillborn & Youdell, 2000). Individuals who are involved enough to be granted 'stake-holder'⁴ status, be they policy-makers, school administrators or 'active' parents, may not consciously intend to generate exclusion and educational inequalities. Indeed, they may work very hard to be welcoming and inclusive.⁵ Yet, from the grammar of education reform discourses to everyday talk and interactions, calls for parents to involve themselves at school have as one of their key effects to affirm forms of conduct and subjectivity that are linked to middle-class and 'white' cultural repertoires. The sorts of reasonable and active forms of agency, the calculating, resourceful and agreeable ways of interacting presumed in the many policy texts and how-to manuals, depend on knowledge, networks, time and resources. As Lareau's (1989) careful study of social class and parental involvement in two U.S. schools suggests, the forms of participation that are noticed and approved of by teachers rely on what she calls the 'cultural capital' of white and middle class families. These families were 'insiders' to the educational know-how that organizes teachers' understanding of children and families. From a position as outsider to these networks and know-how, it was far more difficult, she argued, for the working-class parents in her study to have their efforts recognized as positive and important by teachers. Researchers in England, such as Crozier (2000) and Ball (2003), came to strikingly similar conclusions.

Viewed as a policy 'agenda' of neo-liberal reforms, we might consider involvement policies as a matter of shifting what had previously been public provision to private and familial responsibility, and therefore an example of contemporary 'thinning' of the social rights of citizenship, equity and justice (Sears, 2003). There is a difference, however, between showing that involvement policies have such effects, and arguing that they, therefore, constitute a coherent agenda or that they represent particular, ideological interests. Considered as a process or outcome of ideological and cultural struggle, on the other hand, such a scenario is suggestive of how schools have become a key site of tension and struggle over resources, meaning and identity in contemporary society (Apple, 2001; 2003). In this perspective there is not just one agenda that is being imposed on schools, but rather a matter of social classes, groups and alliances seeking to assert cultural and political hegemony in education, where schools have become a key site of struggle. While they are not always – perhaps only rarely – articulated or intended by those who inhabit

schools in these ways, there are versions of liberalism, neo-liberalism or neo-conservatism at work that vie for allegiance as principles that frame teaching and learning, different grammars or principles whereby good teaching and learning are understood and evaluated.

One consequence of viewing contemporary education government through concepts drawn from governmentality literature, is to shift – or better, to expand – our focus from discerning the coherence of policy agendas or discovering the social interests served by them, to an examination of the formation and circulation of knowledge forms or “rules of reason” (Popkewitz, 1998) through which problems, strategies and targets of government in/of education are “thought into being in programmatic form” (O’Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997). One of the key insights in this approach is to suggest that activities of ‘government’ are not limited to the state, nor do all governing forms and practices originate there. Indeed, there is an argument in much of the governmentality literature that other critical traditions, and Marxism in particular, have paid too much attention to the state and the shifting and competing principles and interests that organize state power. While important in some contexts, Rose (1996), for example, argues that a preoccupation with the state in such terms cannot tell us about the range of forms that contemporary power takes, nor about the novelty or heterogeneity of its targets, instruments and effects. What Rose and others recommend is a shift in attention and assumptions, whereby the focus is on the ‘how’ of modern ‘government’ – liberal, neo-liberal or advanced liberal – on the ways in which the problems of government are expressed in ‘mentalities of rule’ and ‘technologies of government’ (see the collection edited by Barry, Osborne & Rose, 1996). ‘Government’ in this argument cannot be reduced to ‘the Government,’ or to structural properties inherent in the state. Rather, it is argued here that contemporary modes of power, or governmentality, operate throughout the social body, indirectly and at a distance, to organize and enable the regulation of people and territories in terms of categories such as population, people, individual, consumer, citizen and parent (Foucault, 1991; Lewis, 2000). Such forms of power, Rose argues, rely on expert knowledge that is no longer directly attached to the state, but instead located “within a market governed by the rationalities of competition, accountability and consumer.” He goes on to claim that “advanced liberal government” (his preferred term) “does not seek to govern through “society,” but through the regulated choices and aspirations to self-actualization and self-fulfilment.” Moreover, Rose continues:

Individuals are to be governed through their freedom, but neither as isolated atoms of classical political economy, nor as citizens of society, but as members of heterogeneous communities of allegiance, as “community” emerges as a new way of conceptualizing and administering moral relations among persons. (Rose, 1996, p. 41).

The term governmentality, then, suggests a diverse ‘approach’ to studies of contemporary forms of power that attends to the linking together of techniques of governing and rationalities – especially expert knowledge – that make government thinkable and do-able. Yet, ‘government’ in this perspective is not a coherent agenda or ideology that consistently serves particular social interests, and it works its way into the very detail of social and ‘personal’ life. Indeed, ‘governmental’ power, as conduct and self-conduct, is integral to, and constitutive of, the ways we are known and identified by others, and the ways we come to know and identify ourselves, as particular kinds of individuals with memberships in, and affiliations to, particular groups, be they families, communities, religions, or nations.

What I want to draw out from this admittedly sketchy summary of a varied literature, are the ways in which parental or community involvement at school can be viewed as a form of ‘governmentality’ in these terms. As a form of governmentality, we can notice that parental involvement operates more by way of invitation and incitement, rather than by coercion and discipline. As practices that are organized through schools, as well as through the market – think of pedagogical child-rearing books, web-sites or television programmes addressed to parents, for example – ‘involvement’ mobilizes and regulates the conduct of parents by inviting them to monitor and assess, to reflect and calculate, and to act responsibly and ethically in relation to children (Popkewitz, 2003). If it is viewed to encompass such a range of practices, within and beyond the state, ‘involvement’ refers to an incomplete and multi-directional set of activities, some of them formal and categorical, some as more mundane and pleasant, some oriented to short term behaviour of children while others anticipate their future. Seen this way, ‘involvement’ operates in a number of quite different and not always consistent ways across the sites of the school, the community, the family and the individual. At the same time, such an open perspective can allow us to see how parents encounter ‘incitements’ to active participation in a number of sites; as well, to notice that while some of these take the form of ‘empowerment’ and

calls to citizenship, many more entail forms of consumption or of discipline. They are as likely to engender feelings of guilt, insecurity and inadequacy as they are of inducing pleasure and competence.

In addition to using Rose's account of 'advanced liberal' government, we need conceptual tools to analyze the often explicitly moralizing and normalizing dimensions and effects in calls for parents to become more active and involved in their children's learning and schooling. Moreover, these concepts must account for how the discourses that frame involvement and participation, and the practices they entail, organize exclusion as well as inclusion (Popkewitz, 2003). From texts directed to Ontario parents as part of the provincial government's *Early Reading Strategy* (2001), to the contracts that many schools make parents or guardians sign as a condition of enrolling their children, and to the homework and projects that children carry home, parents are positioned so as to not only take responsibility for children, but to do so in rather prescriptive ways. Yet, there are many who do not, and cannot, comply with these 'invitations.' Consequences for them and their children can be quite punitive and severe, unless they have the resources to protect themselves and children from public scrutiny through the public school. I am thinking here of direct sanctions against families whose children are found to be truant or in breach of so-called 'zero-tolerance' policies, for example, and the indirect sanctions of blame and correction when children do not perform according to pervading norms at school. So along with the 'productive' power of encouragement of self-government and invitation to involvement, we must account for the coercive forms of limitation and sanction. As Valverde (1996, p. 357) has argued, the coexistence of contradictory – liberal and illiberal – modes of government is integral to government, "a feature of governance generally."

Along with market-discourses of individual choice, recent policies in a number of countries assert that community and local effort and participation *do* provide better solutions than state provision, often disparaged as 'bureaucratic' and rigid. Parental involvement policies operate through less formal talk and text that repeat injunctions that are both moral and economic, appealing to 'parents' in terms of their sense of a shared responsibility for children – "it takes a village to educate a child" – and to 'taxpayers' in terms of their shared responsibility to exercise fiscal constraint in the face of 'scarce resources' – "we can no longer afford..." or "now we all have to pitch in." Parents are enjoined to assume a greater share of responsibility for children's education, both as a moral obligation to their own children and as an

economic obligation to the local community and the nation. In this sense, there is nothing personal about 'involvement,' (Cruikshank, 1996; 1999), even as it mobilizes some very personal feelings and attachments between adults and children.

Around 'involvement,' terms such as choice, empowerment and local democracy, efficiency and accountability mingle with notions of love, pedagogy, parenting, care and responsibility. At a time when, and in spite of, many communities and families feeling the effects of economic decline and insecurity, it is as if some untapped potential resides there, waiting to be shaped into local capacities for identifying and addressing social problems. Thus, while government funds for urban schools have declined, a number of school improvement initiatives aim to 'tap into' the resources of urban communities, urging school principals, in particular, to become leaders in developing partnerships with local businesses, voluntary organizations, religious groups and families (Leithwood, Fullan & Watson, 2003). These local and 'micro' efforts are viewed as a key feature in strategies to respond to globalizing economic competition and the reduced public or social capacity – or political will – to pay for education. Yet, as many critics have argued, initiatives that rely on community capacity to address structural economic and social inequalities, are likely to deepen those inequalities, with the added injury of blaming 'the community' for its circumstance (People for Education, 2003; Fine, 1993). And, as Apple (1999), Popkewitz (2003) and Gillborn and Youdell (2000) among others have argued, the 'absent presence' of race in designations of educational problems as 'urban' is integral to how contemporary school reform organizes and legitimates racial inequalities.

Normative assumptions about family relations, professionalism, economy, race, language and culture, shape the ways in which individuals are invited to see themselves as participants in involvement schemes (Fine, 1993; Crozier, 1999; Deem et al., 1995; Lareau, 1989; Fuller & Elmore, 1996; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Ball, 2003; Crozier, 2000). So, while parents who are invited to help children learn to read are addressed as individuals who inhabit 'stable' families and neighbourhoods equipped with bookstores and libraries, reports on school discipline problems identify some populations and neighbourhoods as inherently problematic in their relations to schools (Leithwood, Fullan & Watson, 2003). Brought together, repeated in concert or in tension, terms of involvement become effective – enabling or disabling – in making *some* actions, ideas and interventions appear reasonable and practical, while others can hardly be imagined or

spoken (Bloch et al., 2003; Smith, 1998). While approaching a teacher to ask for suggestions about math problems to work on with children at home may be welcomed, an attempt to replace math-textbooks that only use European examples is likely to be resisted. A school council may spend months working on a home-work policy with the full support of the teaching staff, while an initiative to organize anti-racist workshops for teachers is met with suspicion and even hostility.⁶ At one level, then, the apparently innocuous site of involvement in children's education, within and beyond the school, is one where conflicting and confusing expectations, relationships and practices intersect, and where quite different desires and risks may be at stake (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989; Popkewitz, 1988). These stakes may be intensely and differently felt, though not in ways that can be 'read off' from individuals' social location, let alone from the programmatic aims of policies. Yet, they are suggestive of something that several of the writers I have cited above identify as an important feature of neo-liberalism as a form of government, namely its capacity to reach into our very subjectivities (Rose, 1996; 1999). Critical analyses of policies which seek to mobilize people's sense of care, anxiety and responsibility for children, and their success and achievement at school, could be viewed in these terms (see Popkewitz, 2003).

Parental involvement policies, in this view, are integral to, and are produced as effects of, neo-liberal forms of governance that operate through and with 'the parent' as their privileged subject, while conceiving 'parents' as population to be known and managed. Involvement in this sense need not be viewed as an inherently coherent agenda nor as an ideological representation of hegemonic interests, although governmentality perspectives do not dismiss the possibility that social groups are differently advantaged and disadvantaged. But rather than searching for coherence or interests that are presumed to be there at the outset, the governmentality perspective focuses on how 'parents' came to be simultaneously identified as a problem, target and instrument of government. 'The parent' is an effect rather than a premise of parental involvement as government. It would ask how parents were (re)constituted as objects of knowledge and (re)configured as active subjects of education in the 1980s and 1990s. By posing questions in this manner, the shape and effects of involvement are more like a heterogeneous cluster of strategies, techniques and practices, many of which are improvised and adapted in relation to quite particular conditions and problems (Rose, 1996).

However there are important aspects of 'involvement' that this approach does not capture well. With its focus on heterogeneous and dispersed forms or 'mentalities' of neo-liberal rule, and the 'assembling' of governing technologies and practices, it tends to ignore the unequal and impositional effects of contemporary government (O'Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997). By incorporating into governmentality approaches some of the key concepts from critical race and feminist theories, and from more sociological accounts of power, we can generate more effective analytical concepts and strategies. As well, although writers in this literature gesture to heterogeneity and incompleteness, governmentality writers tend to present a remarkably systematic diagnostic picture of 'advanced' or 'neo-liberal' government, where numerous instances of programmes of audit and practices of self-governing, entrepreneurial subjects and so on are assembled to demonstrate new forms of government at work (for critique, see O'Malley et al., 1997; O'Malley, 2000). The ways in which the formation and working out of policy are located in social relations of conflict, struggle or consensus, in real time and place, slip from view. This is because this perspective tends to privilege accounts of 'expert programmes' and 'mentalities of rule,' and to reject a more sociological and social-historical account of social relations. As O'Malley, Weir and Shearing (1997) argue, there is a tendency in this work to exclude struggle, and to relegate politics to matters of subjects responding to – adopting, refusing or ignoring – expert truths.

Larner (2000) argues that governmentality perspectives ought to be modified through feminist and critical race analyses. These are important both because they 'remember' the gendered and racialized targets and contents of neo-liberal (and liberal) power, and they pay attention to how struggles in terms of class, gender and race are integral to neo-liberal forms of power. Thus, it is not a coincidence that the feminized sites of the family and the local are figured as key sites, targets and instruments of contemporary power. Nor is it an 'accident' that a number of the problems, remedies and punishments for educational problems are described in proximity to questions of culture, race, migration and insecurity.

A number of authors insist that practices of exclusion and 'othering,' normalization and subject-formation, are inseparable from liberal and neo-liberal forms of rule (Mehta, 1997; Razack, 1998; Valverde, 1996). Feminist and critical race analyses, in particular, remind us that neo-liberalism has not displaced other, more coercive and constraining, forms of power which can now be relegated to the

past, or to 'other' places. Indeed, while neo-liberal governmentality might be ascendant, other forms of power and difference are also very much at work across contemporary social, local and individual domains, including schools, communities and families. These forms of power – exploitation, domination, violence – render communities and subjects differently able to perform, and to be recognized, as properly empowered neo-liberal subjects (Adkins & Lury, 1999; Lewis, 2000; Passavant, 2000; Isin & Semiatycky, 2002; Valverde, 1996). Finally, critical perspectives on power may also consider discursive practices, including those entailed in education policies, as contested, contingent and 'messy,' rather than as the more or less coherent results of experts who work to render 'mentalities of rule' into programmatic form (O'Malley, Weir & Shearing, 1997).

Reading education policy documents and debates from the late 1980s and early 1990s, it is striking how a number of general assertions about challenges of 'the knowledge economy,' 'global markets' and 'the information age,' were worked into rationales for massive education 'reform.' Several 'crises' were identified: in the cost of state education, the 'lack of flexibility' in bureaucracies and the 'monopolies' of (self-interested) education professionals. While they were contradicted by many education researchers, scholarly conferences and journals (who were themselves labelled as part of the 'education establishment'), such 'truths' were both resilient and mobile. They 'travelled' well (Dehli, 1996), and were used to justify changes in education governance in general and to increase the involvement and choice of parents in particular, in New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, England and Wales, the United States, and Canada. Beyond the particular ideological spin accorded them in Thatcher's England or Harris' Ontario, these truths shared a view of education (and other services such as health care and social assistance) that subordinates it to the economy (global or national) (Larner, 2000; Sears, 2003).

The 'new common sense' of 'western' capitalist democracies appears to be that active and involved citizens must not only enact their rights but also assume a greater share of responsibility for their own lives and the welfare of children, families and communities. Anthony Giddens (1999), in his role as a key public intellectual of 'New Labour' and the Blair government, is among those who view these developments in largely positive terms, arguing that while globalization presents dangers and challenges, policies ought to focus on its potential, on the freedoms, engagement, imagination and reflexivity that it encourages. To be effective in this new dynamic environment,

Giddens suggests, governments must nourish local 'capacity' and encourage individual initiative and responsibility, while 'weaning' people off their reliance on state programs. Such sentiments are not the ideological property of one political party or government, however. Rather, they are repeated as if they are accepted truths in the policy-formulation and speeches across a wide spectrum of Labour, Social Democrats, Liberals, Democrats, Republicans and Conservatives. That 'we' should become more involved in local communities, that 'we' must be 'empowered' to unleash our initiative or take greater responsibility for ourselves and our loved ones, have become a new common sense, apparently accepted across the spectrum of major political parties and governments in 'the west.'

Feminist scholars, such as Canadians Janine Brodie (1996) and Dorothy Smith (1998) are among those who question this new common sense, arguing that the divestment and devolution of state responsibility result in loss of women's employment in the state sector, and increased pressures on women to perform 'voluntary' labour in the family and local community. Smith argues that women's unpaid work constitutes the "underside" of school restructuring and reform (1998, p. 11), while Brodie shows that reforms of social welfare are frequently justified in terms of a 'return,' to traditional and moral discourses of gender relations and maternal responsibility (1996, p. 131). Critical race scholars too have argued that the calls for a 'return' to community and individual self-government are at best ambivalent in their assumptions and effects, and at worst a move that will intensify domination and exclusion (Mehta, 1997; Dhaliwal, 1996; Dua, 2003). Calls for participation and involvement may incorporate cultural claims for difference and they may extend what Taylor (1992) and Fraser (1997) have called a "politics of recognition," yet they often enact conditional and compromised terms of citizenship and constrain the spaces in which effective political and social claims can be made, adjudicated and satisfied (Isin & Semiatycki, 2002). This seems to be the case with parental involvement policies in education as well, where some aspects of inclusion and recognition are promoted some of the time – cultural and religious practices of celebration that can mark the multicultural flavour of schools on particularly designated days – while others are persistently denied or impossible to assert. Among the many illustrations of the latter would be the refusal of urban school boards in Ontario to document the racialized distribution of school exclusion orders in their 'zero tolerance' policies, or the almost complete eradication of discourses of, and resources for, anti-racism education in this province. While 'minority' parents are welcomed as

representatives of diverse cultures and religions to discuss literacy or discipline, such parents' attempts to address systemic racism or homophobia in the schools are often met with doubt, indifference or refusal.

If the school is one site where forms and terms of participation are changing, what might the new-found interest in the resources and citizenship capacities of parents mean for women in their role as mothers? What might it mean for more democratic and equitable education? The relatively small number of education researchers in this area who make note of the gender of the parents they study, draw attention to the fact that it is women, as mothers or care-givers, who are recruited into doing the bulk of the labour that all of this new activity of participation demands (David, Edwards, Hughes & Ribbens, 1993; Deem, Brehony & Heath, 1995; Vincent, 2000; Griffith & Smith 1990a; 1990b; and Ball, 2003). In most other studies, and in involvement policies of all kinds, the feminine en-gendering of families and parents is simply taken for granted. At the same time, there are some activities, particularly those associated with school governance and financial management, where men are deliberately recruited. In their ethnographic studies of school governors in the UK, Deem, Brehony and Heath (1995) found that there was a clearly gendered division of labour among school governors, and that men, as fathers or community representatives, were a much sought after group, although many governing bodies were unable to entice men to join. As increased levels and forms of involvement are asserted as what all 'good parents' should do, new forms of surveillance, regulation and judgement are imposed on families and communities, in which mothers, in particular, are judged to have 'failed' to act according to their 'nature' and thus neglecting their parental responsibilities, not only to their own children but to 'the community' and the nation. Involvement as such is not a 'bad thing,' nor is it necessarily experienced as oppressive or burdensome by all those who participate in it, or as annoying or guilt-inducing by those who do not. Reforms promoting local participation in schooling are not inherently empowering and rewarding for those who are hailed by them. Indeed, such policies may become both burdensome and exclusionary, even as they open up spaces for some 'new' forms of participation, voice and choice. How can we destabilize the obviousness of asserting that parents are 'naturally' inclined to help children with schoolwork, or that they are 'naturally' able and disposed to take an active interest in governing schools?

Some women, and a few men, may indeed gain important access to negotiate with teachers on their own children's behalf, while others gain confidence in their ability to act politically and publicly. At the same time, involvement policies and practices reinforce some very 'old' assumptions about, and divisions between, schools and families. Thus, invitations to participate in governing or choosing a school are intermixed with statements about what good and responsible parents are 'naturally' inclined to do, and with moral injunctions and judgements about what good parents ought to do to enhance children's enjoyment of, and achievement in, school. Moreover, the openings and spaces for action and participation that are constituted in current education reforms, at the same time entail closures and exclusions, imposing new boundaries, and practices of regulation and surveillance (Popkewitz, 2003). Finally, the subjectivities that are promoted and recognized as natural, responsible and good in the spaces of parental involvement are ones that normalize particular, and particularly situated, parental conduct and identities, structured in and through relations of gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and ability.

Governmentality studies offer an interesting critical lens on parental involvement as a form of neo-liberal or 'advanced liberal' government (Rose, 1996). In this view, involvement works as largely non-coercive, operating most effectively when individuals act in accordance with their desires and anxieties, yet pursuing courses of action that can be aligned with "aspirations of social authorities" (Rose 1996). At the same time, involvement and participation are repeatedly asserted as a social responsibility and as a crucial dimension of educational success and 'improvement.' Thus, the incitement into 'involvement' is a personal commitment, a social responsibility and a moral obligation, most immediately to one's children and the well-being of local communities and their schools, and more indirectly to the cohesion of society and the health and prosperity of the nation (Cruikshank, 1999; Hunt, 2003). In the words of one participant in a study I conducted with 'involved' parents in Toronto, Canada in 1993: "no-one forced me to do this, but I felt I had to do as much as I could for my daughter and for the school."

Parents, however they are addressed, may not be 'forced' to participate, but contemporary parental involvement policies *are* mandated by governments through legislation and policy, and made integral to a wide range of efforts to address a perceived or real deficit in education. These policies are not, for the most part, the outcome of social movements or activism by parents or groups addressing

educators in the name of parenthood, and even less the outcome of struggles by women intervening in the domain of education as women. Rather, they are embedded in contemporary education reforms that circulate internationally, often through networks of researchers, funding agencies and policy-makers, along with other government reforms that call on individuals, families and local communities to become more active in and responsible for programs and services previously provided through the welfare state. In this sense, parent involvement can be viewed as one component, among several, of neo-liberal forms of government that seek to 'restructure' relations between individuals, families, civil society and the state. As I suggested above, in so far as families and the domestic, and the labour of parenting, continue to be viewed as the responsibility of women, involvement policies make assumptions about gender and they have important and unequal gendered implications and effects.

Even as they continue to be (differently) drawn into such disciplinary and sovereign forms of power, parents are now also recruited into a number of new positions and practices in the governing of schools. Some of their new rights are specified through instruments such as school choice policies, parent participation in school governance, entitlement to information and accountability and parent charters and/or contracts between families and teachers. Obligations, on the other hand, are both intertwined with and extend beyond such formal statements, just as likely to be implied in the everyday labour of following up with homework or ensuring that children get sufficient food and rest. As well, those – individuals and communities – who are deemed to lack the required 'capacity' to exercise rights and responsibilities, those who are not 'ready' for full citizenship (Lewis, 2000), are targeted through programs of training, compensation and surveillance that seek to transform their conduct and dispositions in relation to childrearing and schooling. As Fine (1993), and Gillborn and Youdell (2000) argue, schools and families are important sites for investigating such contemporary 'government,' because they encompass several different forms of power: neo-liberal freedoms and practices of citizenship, disciplinary and normalizing forms of regulation, and sovereign forms of control and punishment. One of the features of parent involvement policies is that while involvement is hailed as a good and necessary thing, indeed as something that 'the research shows' to be one of those rare uncontested truths in education, their practices and concrete effects can best be described as inconsistent and confused, if not ineffective. In a number of cases it seems clear that parental involvement policies such as those organized

around school choice, for example, have enabled groups of middle class families to increase their position in the education marketplace, at the expense of many who have seen little or no improvement, and some have experienced a marked decline. In other areas, involvement policies provide mechanisms and authorization to increase the regulation of particular populations and communities, targeting those whose participation and conduct fail to meet the new norm of active involvement.

Conclusion

In this paper I have suggested that analysis of parental involvement policies can benefit from using a lens that combines questions, insights and strategies from several approaches to studies of contemporary power and government. I have argued that parental involvement policies, too, work at the level of the local and the family to shape the conduct and dispositions of individuals. Moreover, these policies operate through several discursive registers, pedagogical, economic and moral ones among them. Women, in particular, are enlisted to see themselves as supplementary teachers reading at home and practising 'family math', as knowledgeable and efficient monitors of teachers, managers of schools, or consumers in the education marketplace, and as ethical and moral subjects who care and take responsibility for their own children and for 'the community.' Women are also enjoined to feel responsible when things do not work out at the school, or when children's conduct does not meet acceptable social standards. As Alan Hunt (2003) has argued, the ways in which individuals encounter risk and insecurity in everyday life involve both economy and morality, requiring new 'technologies' for management of one's life and oneself, and also new forms of ethics that can anticipate the dangers children may face.

What is *new* about involvement as neo-liberal governmentality is that it seems to operate 'at a distance' to shape the horizons of meaning, identification and action for individuals and communities, in such ways that the local, the community and the individual replace 'the social' as the key sites, targets and instruments of contemporary governance. In this context, 'involvement' can be seen as a form of power (or 'government') that promotes, enables and expects local and individual freedom and responsibility, a power that is effective to the extent that communities and individuals take themselves up as empowered and responsible subjects (Rose, 1999; Cruikshank, 1996; 1999). Yet, as Cruikshank argues, contemporary policies that promote

individual self-help and local 'empowerment' entail rights and duties that are both ambivalent and unevenly distributed. They constitute conditions and practices in which subjects are differently enjoined to engage in practices of freedom and regulation, including self-regulation (Cruikshank, 1996; 1999). And, they presume levels of resources that are systematically and grossly unevenly distributed.

Governmentality studies, in particular, draw attention to how contemporary 'reforms' of government, including the government of schools, operate not only to change practices and relations within and between the state and the market, but also to alter the conduct and dispositions of individuals. As Foucault, Rose, Miller, O'Malley and others have argued, contemporary neo-liberal modes of government operate indirectly and "at a distance," and they are most effective when individuals are "recruited" into what Rose (1996) calls the exercise of "regulated freedom." However, questions of power and government in education policy and practice are both messy and complex once we shift our sights from the texts and programmes of policy to the contingent and ambivalent everyday life of schools and families. To account for them we also require approaches that can analyse the systematic and agenda-like aspects of neo-liberal government, as well as its ideological dimensions. That is, an eclectic and multi-dimensional analysis may be more effective than a dogmatic adherence to one 'school of thought.'

Notes

1. My discussion in this paper is drawn from several sources, rather than from one specific research project, from discussions with colleagues and students, and from reading critical policy sociology. The sources include several studies that I have conducted over many years, some tracing archival sources; assembling and reading policy-documents, press releases, reports, management and curriculum guidelines; clipping, sorting and reading newspaper accounts; observing school community meetings; interviewing teachers, principals and parents. As many other scholars do, I have also found questions and absorbed ideas from books and articles, only some of which are directly cited here. And, I have listened to numerous students, read their papers and theses, and I have worked with them on research projects. I am no longer quite sure where the ideas of others and mine begin or end, and I feel very fortunate to be working in an environment as critical and stimulating as that of OISE/UT in Toronto. Publications from this work include

Dehli (1984; 1988; 1990; and 1998); Dehli with Januario (1994); and Dehli and Fumia (forthcoming). I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for its financial support.

2. When I use the term 'parent' I intend it to include anyone who is positioned as, or who assumes, responsibility for children's care. The invocation of 'parents' in pedagogical and governing relations of schooling is a practice that tends to homogenize multiple and complex relations between children and adults. One of their most problematic features may be that such policies are developed assuming that all children 'have' (or ought to have) parents, and that 'parents' always act reasonably on children's behalf.
3. In addition to those cited above, some authors whose work could be situated in these debates, at times incorporating a combination of concepts and frameworks, include Ball (1994 and 2003); Crozier (2000); David (1993); David, West and Ribbens (2001); Deem, Brehony and Heath (1995); Vincent (2000); and Whitty, Power and Halpin (1998); Fine (1993); de Carvalho (2001); Dehli (1996 and 2003a); Griffith and Smith (1990); Levin (2001); Lingard, Knight and Porter (1993); Seddon (2003); Taylor, Rizvi, Lingard and Henry (1997).
4. While I do not have time to discuss it here, the emergence and use of the term 'stakeholder' to organize and delimit the public space of education policy debates is a feature of neo-liberal government that is linked to 'involvement' policies, warranting a separate inquiry.
5. I appreciate comments from one of the anonymous reviewers of this paper which enabled me to clarify this distinction.
6. These are examples encountered during field work on school advisory councils in Toronto during the late 1990s.

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