ETHNIC MINORITY PARENTAL PARTICIPATION IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL:
LOOKING FOR DEMOCRATIC, EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

by

ANITA PARHAR

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M.Ed., University of Victoria, 1994

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Abstract

For over three decades, much of the research literature examining the involvement of ethnic minority parents in their children’s school and education has promoted a school-centred approach to parent involvement. This approach considers parents as being involved if they, for example, read to their children at home, supervise homework activities, volunteer in the school, attend parent advisory council meetings, supervise class fieldtrips, attend parent-teacher conferences, and attend the annual school open house. I contend that such an approach actually contributes to the reproduction, rather than reduction, of inequalities in schooling for ethnic minority children.

Using Jurgen Habermas’ conceptualization of democracy and the theory of communicative action, this study critiques efforts to involve ethnic minority parents in their children’s schooling. Part of this critique is based on historical research and part on empirical research. Through historical research, I examine the involvement of Aboriginal, Chinese-Canadian, Japanese-Canadian, and Indo-Canadian parents both in their children’s education and in British Columbia schools. I further examine school policies and practices of parental involvement.

A qualitative case study design and ethnographic techniques of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observation, are used to explore teaching staff conceptualizations and practices of ethnic minority parental involvement in education in one public, multi-ethnically populated, elementary school in greater Vancouver, British Columbia. Through empirical research I describe the actions of ethnic minority parents as being strategically coordinated by many of the teaching staff through their daily practices and
adherence to provincial, district, and school policies. While my research shows how parents and their concerns are systematically absorbed into the norms and structures of schooling. I also indicate that this might be remedied with outbreaks of democracy. As such, my empirical research affirms the usefulness of Habermas’ theory of communicative action for democratic education. It further points to the legitimacy of Young’s critique of Habermas.

The findings have particular implications for administrators, teachers, and support staff as they illustrate the need for school-based educators to combat dominant school-centred practices of parental involvement and challenge the instrumental rationality underpinning the Ministry of Education’s administrative and economic support of parent involvement.
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Dedication

In loving memory of Babaji,
Atma Singh Dodd
(1903 - 1989)
Chapter One

Introduction

For over three decades educational research literature on parental involvement in education has suggested that there is a strong link between parental involvement in school and children’s improved academic achievement, social behaviour, attendance, and attitude towards school (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997; Chavkin, 1993; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). This research has had a significant impact on many current understandings and practices as many public school administrators and teachers maintain that the more parents are involved, the greater the chance children will do well in school, and stay in school to continue their education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Hence, teachers often call for greater parental involvement in school related activities such as reading with children, supervising homework activities, volunteering as a classroom/school helper, and attending parent-teacher conferences. Some schools districts in British Columbia even encourage parents to be involved in specific types of activities such as parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Delta School District, 2005).

In the literature, Epstein’s (1997) framework of six types of parental involvement – parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community – is one that many scholars suggest school educators use to design parent

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1 “Parent” refers to parents, guardians, aunts, uncles, grandparents, or any other adults who might carry the primary responsibility for the financial and emotional care and support of children.
involvement programs that would help parents to become actively involved in their children’s education. Epstein asserts that schools can support parent involvement as “parenting” by taking an active role in assisting parents with child-rearing practices and with creating home environments that will support children’s learning. Supporting “communication,” schools can design effective forms of school-to-home and home-to-school communication about school programs and children’s progress. To support “volunteering” schools can organize help with school programs and classroom activities. Supporting “learning at home,” requires schools to provide information and ideas to families about how to help children at home with curriculum-related activities. To support “decision making” schools can include parents in school and district related decisions. By “collaborating with the community” schools can integrate services and resources from the community to enhance school programs.

Although Epstein’s six types of involvement and other similar frameworks such as Cervone and O’Leary’s (1982) five types of parent involvement, Williams and Chavkin’s (1989) six parent roles, and Hester’s (1989) five types have been popularized in the research literature, they are problematic because they assume that all parents value the suggested involvement types, and that all parents are willing and able to participate. Critics argue that ethnic minority parents do not equally value these involvement types and that parents are not equally able to participate (Li, 2006). They also argue that the different types are based upon narrowly defined white, middle class teacher definitions of involvement (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, &

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2 The term ‘ethnic,’ rather than ‘race’ is used in this dissertation. It is used to refer to parents who consider themselves sharing characteristics on the common basis of language, religion, customs, historical origin, or identity. This term is different than that of ‘race’ which is often associated with phenotypical differences. ‘Ethnic’ is also used as I acknowledge the fluidity in its definition; that is new ethnic groups are continually being formed and shaped as populations move between countries (Marshall, 1994).
Goldenberg, 1995). Epstein’s framework is further problematic as it supports a school-centered approach to parental involvement (Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman, 2005) where it is the school that decides when parents are permitted to be involved and controls their involvement through the structuring of time, space, and activities (Nakagawa, 2000). As a result, parents’ own educational practices, knowledge, voices, and judgements of what they deem as worthwhile participation in educational activities and processes, which may be formulated through alternative epistemological and ontological frameworks, are marginalized. As such, when ethnic minority parents, especially low-income, language minority parents do not participate in school related activities as expected, teachers often label them as having little interest in or care about their children’s education (Chavkin, 1989). Many teachers fail to consider the non-involvement of ethnic minority parents in schooling activities as one of structural exclusion (Crozier, 2001).

In their examination of ethnic minority parental participation, Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, and Goldenberg (1995) find that ethnic minority parents are indeed involved in their children’s education, but in ways that school educators do not recognize as legitimate parental involvement. Reese et al. (1995) and Scribner, Young, and Pedroza (1999) find that unlike school educators who call for parental involvement in school-related activities, ethnic minority parents speak of participation in their children’s education. While many ethnic minority parents believe that supporting children with their schooling, such as helping children with their homework, reading to children, and reinforcing concepts learned at school is important, so too is participation in their children’s education; that is, to “guiding their children along the good path” (Reese et al., 1995, p.73) and helping children develop into good persons.
Similarly, Nieto (1996), Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2000), Lopez (2001), Kim (2002), and Mitchell (2001) find that ethnic minority parental participation in their children’s education, such as vocalizing high expectations, instilling a work ethic and pride, emphasizing family values, listening to children, and demonstrating enthusiasm for their children’s school experiences, is not recognized by school educators as “parental involvement.” Even scholars, such as Hidalgo, Sau-Fong, Bright, Swap, and Epstein (1995), call the involvement practices of minority parents – instilling traditional values, sharing family dreams and aspirations, teaching cultural norms, and emphasizing involvement in community organizations – as simply family resources and strengths for involvement in school activities. Nieto (1996), Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2000), and Lopez (2001) insist that school educators need to expand their notion of parental involvement if their understandings and school practices of parental involvement are to be genuinely inclusive of ethnic minority parents, and if home-school relations are to improve. In fact, Auerbach (2007) recently called for a re-conceptualized notion of parental involvement that moves beyond seeing it as a narrow range of traditional practices associated with white, middle-class parents and one that moves from “merely aiding in the quest for higher test scores to serving diverse families in fulfilling a variety of educational aspirations for their children” (p. 278).

While I agree with scholarly critiques that inclusive notions and practices of parental involvement are needed, I contend that it is the legitimization of parental involvement, both in mainstream literature and in public school practices, as participation in children’s schooling that contributes to the reproduction, rather than reduction, of inequalities in schooling for ethnic minority children. I submit that rather than construct ethnic minority parental participation as
alternative types, such as Edwards & Alldred (2000) and Auerbach (2007) have done, it is vital that school educators begin to attain an understanding of what ethnic minority parental participation in their children’s education looks like, and that teaching staff support ethnic minority parental involvement by actually fostering parental participation in education in school.

Philosophers Hare & Portelli (1996) note that at a general level education is “concerned with learning that which is considered valuable; but beyond this definitional point lies great controversy which ultimately involves our views on what constitutes a good person and a worthwhile life” (p. 81). Varying and often conflicting conceptions of education are shaped and influenced by the views held and the “values, attitudes, and beliefs we wish to see fostered in children and about the kind of society in which we wish to live” (p. 182). Similarly, Peters (1973) states that education consists essentially in the initiation of people into a worthwhile and good form of life; it entails the learning of values, virtues, norms, skills, knowledge, and rules needed to live together with others in a common world. Following Peters, it can be said that ethnic minority parents have always had particular notions of education; ones that were consistent with their own ideas of who they were as peoples, what virtues they wanted their children to acquire, and generally of what they themselves considered to be a worthwhile life (Ashworth, 1979). Historically, though, matters of educational concern – of ethical and moral concern – such as what knowledge is considered worthwhile, whose history is to be taught in school, whose perspectives are presented, whose interests are being served, and whose values and beliefs are to be institutionalized – failed to be decided through deliberation with minority peoples or in any other manner that has been genuinely inclusive of their concerns. For
instance, prior to European contact Aboriginal parents, family, and community members guided children to learn how to live a good life through an organic approach to education (Ashworth, 1979). Aboriginal peoples had their own distinctive bodies of indigenous knowledge supported by social practices to preserve and transmit core beliefs, and values. With European settlement and the development of public schooling, however, Aboriginal children were forced by the state to attend residential schools where their knowledge and social practices failed to be legitimized in school because residential schooling was oriented “primarily to the replacement of indigenous lifestyles and knowledge with European concepts of morality and consciousness” (Wotherspoon, 2004, p. 56).

Other ethnic minority children such as those from Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian cultures were not forced to attend residential schools but they did attend common or public schools where many minority parents found that education as they knew it, which in part involved the teaching and learning of norms, values, and knowledge they deemed significant, again was not what public schools legitimized. Instead, schools reinforced a curriculum oriented to assimilating minority peoples into Euro-Canadian culture (Henry, Tator, Mattis and Rees, 2005). School-teachers facilitated the assimilation of children by discouraging the involvement of minority parents in schools and school-related activities because many teachers were of the opinion that low status and cultural parental influences were a hindrance to the development of ethnic minority children as useful citizens (Banks & Banks, 2001). In so doing, public schools reinforced the values of a privileged culture that was based in Western humanist and Christian traditions (Boman, 2006). Thus, from the onset of public schooling minority parents’ concerns and notions of education – of what is good, meaningful, and worthwhile for
their children – failed to be legitimized through school structures, policies, and practices.

Today, Pushor and Murphy (2004) argue that ethnic minority parents’ notions of education are still missing from the school landscape.

In this dissertation, I explore how school educators could begin to foster ethnic minority parental participation in education in school. In fulfilling this purpose, I draw on Jurgen Habermas’ concept of democracy and theory of communicative action (1984, 1987, 1996) to conceptualize ethnic minority parental involvement in a way that focuses on teaching staff and ethnic minority parents developing democratic, communicative relationships with one another. For Habermas, democracy is about all people engaging in the freest, least restrictive communication possible for the purpose of coming to mutual understanding on matters of common concern, such as education. This notion of democracy is unlike our contemporary notion that considers it a political method requiring a minimal level of participation by people (Macpherson, 1977), or formal politics involving political parties, elections, and voting (Levin, 1998). Following Habermas, the idea of democratic minority parental participation requires ethnic minority parents, school personnel, and concerned others to cooperatively discuss and deliberate issues of education and decide on questions of rightness and goodness. This conceptualization of participation is unique because it suggests that all concerned ethnic minority parents, not just bureaucrats, teachers, and representatives, have equal and effective opportunity and condition to participate in the process of collective judgment on matters of ethical and moral concern and guide administrative systems to support discursively formed public opinion or agreed upon goals.
From a Habermasian perspective, then, discussions about education and of what should and can be done, and how (Levin, 1998), are matters of ethical and moral concern not system concerns. In schools today, however, as Fine (1993) states, the question of what is good and right is “constructed through a discourse of efficiency, privileging the interests of capital and the state rather than the needs, passions, desires, strengths, and worries of parents and their children” (p. 684). I argue that parental participation, as it is often framed in the research literature, and as it is commonly encouraged in public schools, reflects an instrumental view of parental participation: parents are treated as means to given ends rather than be treated as people who are concerned about their children’s education and with whom mutual understanding about common concerns about education and schooling can be developed. Habermas theorizes that social coordination is related to speech and communicative action; conflicts about education, schooling, and what is best for children need to be resolved through open, undistorted discourse and moral reasoning with parents and school personnel. Through communication differences can be discussed, meaning and common understandings on questions of the good and the right are formulated, and collaborative relationships fostered to support children’s learning.

In brief, Habermas sees modern society as both system and lifeworld. As system, society is a “realm of formal-bureaucratic structures, institutions and processes that utilize the media of money and power” (Crossley & Roberts, 2004, p. 40). Organizational and institutional structures function towards the attainment of particular goals through rational purposive action. As lifeworld, he sees society encompassing the dynamics by which culture, social order, and individual identity are, in part, secured through the function of action oriented towards
mutual understanding, communicative action. Through the lifeworld people communicate with one another in a non-instrumentalist manner. Ethnic minority parents’ educational concerns of guiding children along the good path (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995) and supporting their total well-being (Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999), then, require parents and teaching staff to deliberate on questions of what is good, right, and proper, develop mutual understanding, and communicatively coordinate educational practices. Of particular importance is that lifeworld serves to guide activities related to administrative and economic system; system thus grows out of lifeworld. In other words, bureaucratic structures, institutions and processes are to support teacher and parent mutually agreed upon plans of action.

Education depends upon creating and sustaining communicative relationships in which action oriented towards mutual understanding is essential between teaching staff and ethnic minority parents. Rather than support education, I argue that many current teaching staff and school practices colonise, minority parental participation in education. Colonisation occurs when the steering media – money and administrative power – characteristic of the administrative and economic system encroach on lifeworld eroding the bases for social action coordinated through reaching understanding in discourse. That is, the coordination mechanism oriented to success (strategic action) enters into the domain of lifeworld that should be secured through communicative action oriented to mutual understanding. Conceptualizing ethnic

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3 I do not associate colonisation with colonialism: a “process by which a foreign power dominates and exploits an indigenous group by appropriating its land and extracting the wealth from it while using the group as cheap labour” (Henry, Tator, Mattis and Rees, 2005, p. 348). Instead, I use the term colonisation (as per Habermas) when referring to the encroachment of the system upon the lifeworld thus displacing or destroying it.
minority parental participation from a Habermasian democratic perspective (1984, 1987, 1996) enables me to focus on education and on how parents and teaching staff can work together on addressing educational – ethical and moral – concerns through democratic means: through dialogue and deliberation, under particular idealized conditions.

This conceptualization and approach to ethnic minority parental involvement in school is valuable and contributes to the literature on critical multicultural and an anti-racism approaches to school and education. Critical multicultural and anti-racism approaches challenge the institutional arrangements in a capitalist system and problematize relations of domination and subordination in the social construction of difference along race, ethnicity, and class (Kailin, 2002; May, 1999). An anti-racism educational approach problematizes the marginalization of ethnic minority voices and the delegitimation of their knowledge and experience in schools. It challenges school educators to create spaces for marginal voices to be heard, and challenges teachers and parents to work collaboratively to ensure that school is responsive to the needs and concerns of subordinated groups (Dei, 1996). A Habermasian perspective frames ethnic minority parents’ lifeworlds as being colonised by systems. That is, the instrumental action of the capitalist economy and administrative system intrude into the lifeworld where people make meaning and absorb the function of lifeworld. In so doing, instrumental action erodes the ability of teachers and parents to communicate meaningfully, to share understandings about education, and to collectively decide on what is good and right for children and how their learning and development can be supported. What should be communicative interaction between teacher and parent is replaced, for example, with a classroom teacher following the rules of the system without questioning the value of the ends.
that she serves, and strategically coordinating parent actions to meet pre-given school goals. While discriminatory school structures and practices indeed hinder ethnic minority parental involvement in school, and the need to create spaces for ethnic minority parent voices to be heard is necessary, from a Habermasian perspective, the “power” for change comes with the generation of public opinion that can influence decision-making. Furthermore, what Habermas calls communicative power can counterbalance further bureaucratization and expansion of instrumental rationality. The central challenge for schools, from a Habermasian perspective, is creating conditions for communicative action.

In investigating how school policies, programs, and practices colonise ethnic minority parental participation in education, and in examining how elementary school staff can begin to foster democratic, educational minority parental participation in school, I use a qualitative case study design. I use ethnographic techniques of document analysis, semi-structured interviews, and participant observations, to explore teaching staff conceptualizations and practices of ethnic minority parental involvement in education in one public, multi-ethnic, elementary school in greater Vancouver, British Columbia. Following Habermas, I propose that sustained democratic ethnic minority parental participation in education could generate public opinion and broaden the public sphere for the purposes of informing the schooling system and creating a force for school change.
Research Questions

Two primary questions guide this investigation: (1) How is ethnic minority parental involvement being coordinated in school? (2) What form does democratic, educational minority parental participation take in an elementary school?

Overview of Chapters

I begin in Chapter 2 by presenting an overview of how ethnic minority parental involvement in schooling and education are conceptualized in the contemporary, North American, research literature. In doing so, I contend there is a problem with the manner in which ethnic minority parental involvement in school is being conceptualized and coordinated. Countering the technical claim that ethnic minority parents can help increase their children’s school achievement by involving themselves in the process of schooling, I claim rather, that school practices, policies, and programs need to become educational and democratic by supporting minority parents in deliberation about ethical concerns.

Supporting my claim, I outline the theoretical framework of my study in Chapter 3. I present Habermas’ conceptualization of participation and communicative action and explore how ethnic minority parental participation in schooling can be conceptualized and coordinated as democratic and educational.

In Chapter 4, I apply my theoretical framework to complete an historical review of ethnic minority parental involvement in British Columbia. Presented as four cases, I document how ethnic minority parental involvement was coordinated by school policies and practices since the development of public schooling.
Chapter 5 outlines the empirical research design and methodology I employ in gaining insight into the nature of their participation in one public, multi-ethnically populated elementary school in greater Vancouver, British Columbia.

In Chapter 6, I begin examining how ethnic minority parental involvement is being coordinated through school policies and staff member practices in Atma Elementary School.

In Chapter 7, I continue to explore how ethnic minority parental involvement is being coordinated in school, but do so by looking at what form democratic, educational minority parental participation takes in Atma Elementary. I discover that a democratic, educational approach to minority parental involvement in education is useful in informing school practices in new and significant ways.

In Chapter 8, I discuss the research findings in relation to my research questions and further highlight implications for practice and policy. I also suggest direction for future research.

Significance of the Study

My research study is of particular significance and is a substantial contribution to the current research on ethnic minority parental involvement for several reasons. First, I conceptualize school-parent relations and ethnic minority parental participation in a manner that differs from that in the current literature on parental participation/involvement/engagement in schooling (LeBlanc, 1992; Potter, 1989; Pushor & Ruitenber, 2005): education and democracy are entwined as they both “have to do with a common interest in a particular moral view of human life and agency” (Levine, 1998, p. 62).
Education and democracy also rest on a “vision of society in which reflection, dialogue, critical thinking, and mutual care are central” (Levine, 1998, p. 73). Second, my research focuses on a form of communicative interaction in which non-institutionalized opinion and will formation can develop and potentially interact with institutionalized decision making processes to affect change. The notion of participation I propose directly challenges relations of power in schools as democratic participation calls upon ethnic minority parents to deliberate on questions of schooling and education with school personnel rather than be acted upon by them. Third, my research demonstrates how minority parental participation in education has become, and today continues to be, colonised by the schooling system. Additionally, it suggests ways that ethnic minority parents can resist this colonisation and suggests how public schools themselves can begin to foster ethnic minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice.
Chapter Two

A Review of the Literature on Ethnic Minority Parental Involvement

In gaining an understanding of why ethnic minority parental participation in education in school is important and how it can be fostered, it is necessary to first examine how ethnic minority parental involvement is conceptualized and presented in the research literature. Within much of the literature on ethnic minority parental involvement three dominant themes emerge: the importance of ethnic minority parental involvement in school, reasons as to why ethnic minority parents fail to be involved in school, and approaches that school staff can employ to increase the participation of ethnic minority parents in school. In this chapter I present the literature on each theme and critically examine the conceptualizations of ethnic minority parental involvement from a democratic, participatory perspective.

The Importance of Ethnic Minority Parental Involvement in School

Two major strands emerge in the research literature on the importance of ethnic minority parental involvement in school. One strand of the literature emphasizes an instrumental view: ethnic minority parents are considered as means to achieve pre-determined school ends. Literature emphasizes the idea that parent involvement in school is necessary for school improvement and increased school effectiveness. Henderson (1988), for example, writes some of the “major benefits of parental involvement include higher grades and test scores, better long-term academic achievement ... more successful programs, and more effective schools” (p. 149) Effective schools are valued as they are considered essential to producing students able to
compete in the national and international labour market (Norris, 1999; Torrance, 1997). Low-income, ethnic minority parents are specifically targeted as parents who need to be involved because they are seen as failing to participate in their children’s schools in numbers comparable to white, middle-class parents (Blackledge, 2000) thus, impeding school improvement and effectiveness.

The other strand of research literature emphasizes ethnic minority parental participation in school as being essential to educational equality and student success. From this perspective, the organization of school is criticized for reflecting the structural inequalities of the broader social, political, and economic spheres, and reproducing race- and class-based inequities. Leistyna (2002) writes, schools “reflect and produce social turmoil by maintaining dominant beliefs, values, and interests through particular teaching practices and bodies of knowledge that are legitimized, circulated, and consumed (or resisted)” (p. 15) in the school. Traditional practices of parent involvement in schools reproduce educational inequality as social inequities as institutional barriers prevent ethnic minority parents from adequately representing their children’s interests. In particular, many school practices exclude ethnic minority parents from discussions about education and from decision making processes on school policy, curriculum, pedagogy, and hiring (Soloman and Levine-Rasky, 2003).

The “Failure” of Ethnic Minority Parental Involvement in School

The second dominant theme that emerges in the literature addresses the question of why ethnic minority parents fail to be involved in public elementary schools in numbers that school staff consider important. Although no one factor can explain the lack of ethnic minority
parental involvement in schools – particularly that of low-income, language minority parents – a distinct separation between the roles, responsibilities, and relationships of teachers, administrators, and families is a significant contributing factor. Bauch and Goldring (1998) and McCaleb (1994) explain that since the development of public schooling parents have not been considered equal partners in their children’s education; inequitable power relations were produced as the traditional hierarchical and bureaucratic organization of school, through the structure of roles and responsibilities, emphasized a teacher-as-expert notion. That is, school was considered the authority and power resided with professionals who did not consider ethnic minority parents as people who have something meaningful to say about education (Henry, 1996).

Today, a separation between the roles and responsibilities of school educators and parents, and poor home-school relations, still hinder ethnic minority parental participation in education in school. Many factors contribute to this separation. Wolfendale (1992) finds that some teachers fear that parent views will clash with their views and that parental involvement in the school and classroom will undermine teacher professionalism. Similarly, Dei, James, Karumanchery, Wilson, and Zine (2000) find that teachers often hold a “protection perspective.” Teachers believe that their work “must be protected against unwarranted intrusions from parents, community workers, and social activists” (p. 5). As a result, teachers fail to encourage ethnic minority parental participation because teachers view themselves and schools as having the primary responsibility for educating children. Ethnic minority parents’ perception of their own role and responsibility in their children’s education is also a
contributing factor as some parents believe it is the school’s responsibility to teach their children.

From another perspective, Trueba and Bartolome (2000) find that many teachers interpret the failure of parental involvement as being situated with culturally and linguistically deficient parents. Such deficit conceptions held by teachers affect their efforts to communicate with ethnic minority parents, especially those parents who speak little or no English (Dyson, 2001; Kim, 2002). Instead of seeing the school as failing to support minority parents with language support services, minority parents are blamed for the problem. Christenson and Sheridan (2001) explain that many teachers are often quick to stereotype and label parents for “what” they are, or what they fail to do as defined by the school agenda rather than see “who” parents are and what they do to support their children. By labelling low-income minority parents as culturally and linguistically deficient – as not having the necessary cognitive or linguistic skills to help their children succeed in school – teachers reproduce inequitable relations (Nakagawa, 2000; Schneider & Lee, 1990).

Further, many public school teachers are found to judge minority parents’ degree of engagement with the school according to white, middle-class standards and practices that assume parents have specific and similar outlooks, resources, and times available to help with schoolwork (Leistyna, 2002; McCollum, 1996). Ellis (1999) and Corson (1993) argue that teachers who privilege dominant group experiences and ways of doing things inevitably reinforce school practices of exclusion. Other literature suggests that condescending attitudes and poor behaviour of teachers towards ethnic minority parents negatively affect teachers’
efforts to involve parents thereby further contributing to the marginalization of parents (Epstein, Coates, Salinas, Sanders, & Simon, 1997; Taylor & Whittaker, 2003).

Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and Coleman, Lareau and Horvat (1999) explain that many low-income, ethnic minority parents participate in schools less often than white, middle class parents because many low-income, ethnic minority parents do not possess the cultural and social capital – class position, income, material resources, behaviour styles, language, knowledge of school, and social networks – needed to advance their children’s interests and school success. Further, unlike white, middle-class parents, many low-income, ethnic minority parents who have few schooling experiences themselves, are not connected to schools in ways that allow them to assert their concerns.

Other research finds that structured mechanisms that “give” parents the opportunity to voice concerns and “have” input into decision-making, such as parent advisory councils, can actually exclude the participation of ethnic minority parents (Valdes, 1996). Hanafin and Lynch (2002) state that parent representative bodies, such as parent councils, are “raced” and “classed” to advantage the knowledge and voices of white, middle-class parents. They find that even though parents have been “given the power” through legislation, it has not changed the underlying discriminatory practices of some teachers, nor has it increased or equalized opportunities for greater ethnic minority parental participation. Similarly, Delgado-Gaitan (1991) finds that conventional activities such as holding annual open houses and bi-annual teacher-parent conferences require parents to have specific, majority culturally-based knowledge about the operation of a school and the school system to participate. Delgado-Gaitan states that the actual activities that have been institutionalized to involve parents “in
limited ways tend to relegate all the power to the institution and have usually ignored the needs of groups, particularly those with a different language who are unfamiliar with the school’s expectations” (p. 42). For example, agendas and opportunities to speak at open houses and parent-teacher conferences are controlled by teachers and professional knowledge is privileged over parent knowledge. Furthermore, few school personnel speak a language other than English and schools rarely provide interpreters.

Hamby (1992) contends that a lack of pre-service and in-service teacher training about how to involve parents in schools and teacher insecurity in involving parents both hinder the participation of minority parents in schools. Chavkin and Williams (1987) state that few teacher training institutions offer course work on teacher-parent and home-school relations. Similarly, Graue (2005) argues that teacher preparation programs rarely address the complexity and importance of home-school relations. In an examination of one elementary and secondary teacher preparation program, Graue (2005) finds prospective teachers’ conceptions of interactions with parents as instrumentally oriented: as a means to an end (a way to show parents something). Pre-service teachers articulated that they value teacher knowledge over parental knowledge, and considered professional opinions more objective, valid, and equitable than those of parents. They believed that being a professional was the key to their authority and maintaining unequal relationships was as a way to affirm their identity, “an identity that had professional authority over parents that allowed them to take charge of the home-school relationship” (Graue, 2005, p. 177).

Other factors that explain the lack of ethnic minority parental involvement in school include lack of transportation, child care, and availability due to work demands. In some cases
minority parents are not involved in school activities because of their own feelings of discomfort and apprehension and dissatisfaction with the school. In other cases parents feel intimidated by teachers and school processes while others feel alienated because they themselves have had negative experiences at school (Banks & Banks, 2001). Differences in the way ethnic minority parents relate to the school are also found to contribute to a lack of involvement. Chavkin and Williams (1987) suggest that some ethnic minority parents are hesitant to be involved because they believe that teachers are responsible for involving parents in the school. Other parents see a sharp distinction between the role of the school and that of home and feel that by being involved they are encroaching on the school’s territory.

**Increasing or Improving Ethnic Minority Parental Involvement in School**

From an instrumental view, ethnic minority parental involvement activities and programs directed by the school are thought to yield the greatest results in increasing or improving ethnic minority parental involvement (Berger, 1991; Comer and Haynes, 1991; Dye, 1989; Edelman, 1987; Epstein, 1986, 1984; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Moles, 1982; Swap, 1987; Walberg, 1984; Wells, 1990). It is thought that the greater school-directed parental involvement, the greater the chance that student achievement will increase, and the greater the possibility that schools will be effective (de Marris & LeCompte, 1995). Similarly, school improvement literature suggests that effective schools adopt successful school involvement programs (Henry, 1996) such as one outlined by Epstein (2001).

Epstein (2001) suggests that schools can develop partnership with families by adopting six types of parent involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home,
decision-making, and collaborating with community. She describes “parenting” as the requirement that parents establish home environments that support their child as a student. “Communicating” requires the school to exchange information with parents about school programs and children’s progress. “Volunteering” requires parents to assist and support certain school and classroom programs. As “learning at home,” parents receive information from teachers about how they can help their child at home with “homework and curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning” (Epstein, 2001, p. 8). As “decision makers,” parent leaders and representatives take on decision-making roles in school. “Collaborating with community,” means that the school integrates community resources and services to strengthen its programs and influence family practices. In adopting this program, it is believed that successful students will be “produced.” There is a difficulty with Epstein’s framework for building successful partnerships for student success though it assumes that all parents are the same. It does not take into consideration challenges that will occur as a result of the disparities in social power and in cultural, social, and material resources when ethnic minority parents become involved (Crozier & Reay, 2005).

From a deficit perspective, educational responses typically take the form of compensatory programs where knowledge is transmitted from professional educators to parents. For example, teachers often encourage minority parents to enrol in English language classes to increase their language proficiency, and attend parenting programs that would teach them the necessary skills so that they could work successfully with their children (McCaleb, 1994). From a human relations approach (Sleeter, 1991), positive relations between parents and teachers can be developed by encouraging tolerance and sensitivity to cultural differences. The
approach suggests that teachers will be more likely to communicate effectively with parents when teachers have acquired knowledge about minority parents’ languages, religions, histories, and social class. For example, in learning about others’ cultural practices, Fleras and Elliot (1992) suggest that teachers become more tolerant, understanding, and sensitive to culturally and ethnically different parents. Research also suggests that as teachers develop greater cultural sensitivity, they will be more likely to alter their practices of not involving parents in the classroom. For instance, Epstein (2001) asserts that culturally informed teachers might be less likely to apply stereotypes that discourage parental involvement in schools.

A mainstream multicultural approach encourages school practices that affirm cultural pluralism and stress the importance of cultural diversity (Leistyna, 2002). Teachers invite ethnic minority parents into the classroom to share with children stories about their heritage and “show & tell” cultural artefacts (Banks, 1995; Graue, 2005). Although this approach affirms diversity, it is criticized for failing to pay enough attention to structural inequalities and parent agency. A mainstream multicultural approach, Leistyna (2002) states, “through its superficial pedagogy of inclusion, often becomes a romanticization and celebration of differences, without any interrogation of the power differential that give rise to exclusive practices, distorted representations of otherness, and social strife” (p. 25).

A critical multicultural perspective criticizes a deficit and human relations approach for ignoring how difference is constructed within unequal relations of power and for failing to recognize systematic inequalities that reproduce the status quo (May, 1999). Rather than attributing success or failure to individual efforts critics suggest a more comprehensive approach to improve parental participation is needed. In their view, the colonial model of
schooling, based on concepts of domination and subordination, which shape teacher
behaviours and practices and perpetuate inequality must be interrogated (Solomon & Levine-
Rasky, 2003). Nieto (1996) theorizes that a school-wide reform from moncultural to
multicultural education could result in a more democratic model of parental involvement
because a multicultural approach considers parents’ culture, languages, and concerns for their
children as being central to education. Similarly, from his study of an elementary school in
Auckland, New Zealand, May (1994) suggests that schools can implement a school-wide critical
approach to multicultural education to improve the involvement of ethnic minority parents in
school. Dei (1996) and Kailin (2002), however, advance an anti-racist approach that analyzes
the institutional arrangements of a capitalist system and the economic roots of racism and class
exploitation in the differential treatment of ethnic minority parents in schools.

Dei et al. (2000) further advocate an inclusive schooling approach to increase minority
parental involvement. In part, the approach requires that “parents, community members,
youth from diverse racial, ethnocultural, and class backgrounds jointly be involved in both the
decision-making and delivery of education” (p. 22). They further suggest that minority parents
need to be involved in school governance: in making policy decisions, hiring staff, and
determining curriculum. One difficulty with Dei et al.’s approach, though, is that it encourages
ethnic minority parental involvement within the existing hierarchical structures that marginalize
minority parents in the first place. It does not challenge the notion of what actually counts or
could count as ethnic minority parental involvement, nor does it consider the impeding
processes and conditions to joint involvement. Does equality of opportunity and condition to
engage in discourse and to influence the decision-making process exist for minority parents?
Without respect for other parents’ insights, ideas, and concerns about their children and the educational process, without an equal opportunity to speak and be heard, and without equal opportunity and condition to generate public opinion, joint involvement will be based on unequal relations of power. As Fine (1993) states, parents “cannot simply be added to the mix of decision making unless the structures and practices of bureaucracy are radically decentralized and democratic” (p. 697).

In addition to the changes being called to teacher practices and school structures, research indicates that other approaches can improve the involvement of minority parents in school. These include broadening the term parental involvement, building partnership/collaborative relations, and taking political action. Nieto (1996) argues that the term minority parental involvement needs to be re-conceptualized to include the “intangible” ways that parents are involved. By acknowledging that people are involved in their children’s education in non school-directed ways – “consistent communication, high expectations, pride, understanding and enthusiasm for their children’s school experiences” (p. 340) – minority parents would finally be given recognition for their involvement. Similarly, Lopez (2001) concurs, adding that schools should be focusing on identifying some of the unique ways that many ethnic minority parents are already involved in their children’s education and recognize ways school themselves could benefit from such parental participation. Christenson & Sheridan (2001) believe that teachers actually fail as educators when they do not consider the important way that families already support their children’s education.

In examining ethnic minority parental participation in the education of their children, Delgado-Gaitan (1994) and Mitchell (2001) find that many parents talk to their children about
their values, traditions, and their position in society; parents also “imbue their children with a sense of confidence that they are important enough to receive their parents’ attention” (Delgado-Gaitan, 1994, p. 146). Nieto (1996) contends that many ethnic minority parents are involved in their children’s education through consistent communication, vocalising high expectations, instilling pride, fostering understanding, and demonstrating enthusiasm for their children’s school experiences. She reports that many parents support their children’s education using their native language and family cultural values. Similarly, Lopez (2001) finds that ethnic minority parents constantly talk to their children about their high expectations and focus on instilling their work ethic to their children by emphasizing the importance of hard work. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2000) assert that ethnic minority parents impress upon their children the importance of maintaining their own cultural “attitudes toward authority, discipline, homework, peer relations, and dating” (p. 19). Additionally, ethnic minority parents supervise their children’s activities, emphasize high expectations, and continually talk and listen to their children.

Another approach to improve minority parental participation in school recommends that school-parent partnerships or collaborative relations be built (Cotton & Wikelund, 1989; Hidalgo et al., 1995; Hidalgo, Siu, & Epstein, 2004). This means that school staff must critically take into account the hierarchical relations that exist between schools and parents and redefine their roles (McCaleb, 1994). Cummins (1986) contends that real changes in schools can begin to take place only when the relationships of power become less hierarchical and when parents move out of a position of subordination. Similarly, Riley (1994) suggests that the nature of leadership in schools must be reconsidered; teaching staff can no longer assume the position of
power over” parents. Instead, he argues that collaboration must become a central feature of the culture of the school and of leadership. Ethnic minority parents must be treated with respect and dignity, and their voice and knowledge of teaching and learning must be placed alongside that of the teaching staff. Cairney (2000) articulates, “What is needed is a more equal sharing of agendas, open dialogue between parents and teachers, and concerted efforts to value and encourage genuine collaboration and partnership” (p. 167). Few schools, Cairney (2000) states, have developed genuine reciprocal partnerships between home and school. The relationship between home and school remains centered on getting parents and community members to support school agendas rather than collaboratively generating a shared one. Robinson-Zanartu and Majel-Dixon (1996), though, add that collaborative or partnership practices must be supported by school policy if actual change in parent-school relations is to occur.

Parekh (1987), however, contends that minority peoples cannot wait for internal structural change as is suggested by critical multicultural and anti-racism education theorists because many scholars assume that with greater representation of minority parents in school governance, that is, with the “mere presence of different people, [comes] presence of mind or that with color coordination [comes] ideological diversity” (Leistyna, 2002, p. 31). Phillips (1993) states that increasing the representation of ethnic minority groups that were previously excluded does not at all guarantee that the needs and concerns of ethnic minorities will be articulated or taken into account. Further, greater representation may not result in equality of participation. Instead of relying on greater ethnic minority parental representation in school governance, Parekh (1987) suggests that through organized, direct community action, or what
Vincent (2000) calls parental collective action, school practices can be “pushed” to change. Parekh (1987) contends that sustained external pressure can produce social and institutional change; no reform can be secured without powerful and constant pressure. Political action, according to Parekh (1987), must take place both inside and outside the institution.

From another perspective, in his research on educational change, Leistyna (2002) argues that ethnic minority peoples already have voice, ones often critical; the challenge he states, actually rests with whether teachers and administrators are willing to create dialogical spaces where all lived experiences and world-views of parents can be genuinely addressed. Miretzky (2004) concurs. Her study examining parent-teacher relationships in three Chicago elementary and secondary schools concludes that no intervention is more significant in breaking down barriers and in strengthening parent-teacher relationships than creating space for parents and teachers to talk face-to-face.

In a comprehensive review of the research literature on parent involvement and home-school relations, Christenson and Sheridan (2001), professors of educational, school, and child psychology, find that research literature offers many ideas and recommendations for family involvement activities – the what – and few for – the how – processes to enhance home-school relations. They state that historically, “emphasis has been on what we do to involve families (i.e. activities) rather than how we think of the family-school relationship (i.e. attitudes) as a means for socializing and supporting students as learners” (p.18). Christenson and Sheridan’s (2001) work is directed at increasing the limited research literature on “the how.” They describe a process to guide school psychologists to develop productive family-school relationships to enhance students’ academic and social growth. They suggest that a genuine
family-school-community partnership that emphasizes relationships over roles is essential to addressing ethnic minority parents’ concerns about their children’s learning and education. Emphasizing relationships over roles, they state, maintains a focus on communication, collaboration, and coordination, and encourages partners to think about how they act. They also suggest that research needs to focus on how school policies, practices, and programs can support ethnic minority parents to promote the development of children and adolescents, rather than focus on how to get ethnic minority parents involved in schools.

Following Christenson and Sheridan (2001), my research contributes to the literature on “the how.” Specifically, how school-based and teaching staff practices can foster and school structures can support ethnic minority parental participation in education. Thus, it focuses on enabling processes and structures. My framework for understanding how ethnic minority parental participation in education in school can be fostered differs from that of family-school-community partnerships but many of the underlying assumptions of a partnership/collaborative approach are similar. A Habermasian democratic, educational approach like a collaborative/partnership approach recognizes the centrality of “equality – the willingness to listen, respect, and learn from one another, and parity – the blending of knowledge, skill, and ideas to enhance both the relationship and outcomes for children” (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 97). A home-school approach, Christenson and Sheridan (2001) state, “endorses collegial, interdependent, and coequal styles of interaction between families and educators, who work together jointly to achieve common goals” (p. 95). A democratic, educational approach recognizes that parents, like teaching staff, make decisions about the education of their children on a daily basis. “Parents want legitimate opportunities to think with the
educators about what they want for their children,” states Wasley (1993, p. 725). A central idea to the participation of ethnic minority parental involvement in education in school is that ethnic minority parents and teaching staff contribute to children’s education through deliberation on educational questions, the development of mutual understanding, and cooperative coordination of educational practices. Of particular importance is the idea that in promoting communicative engagement and reasoning in the lifeworld, ethnic minority parents and teaching staff can resist bureaucratization. I discuss this further in the following chapter where I present the theoretical framework.
Chapter Three

Theoretical Framework

In multicultural societies there is a plurality of individual conceptions of the good life, of what is right, and of what is worthwhile, as well as multiple ideas about what the best means are to achieve our goals. School is one place where divergent understandings of education converge on a daily basis, thus, it seems reasonable to think that schools would be places where differing aims, values, norms, ideas, opinions, and concerns would be collectively discussed and worked out to a solution resulting in understanding or compromise such that the needs of people would be met. Unfortunately this has not always been the case. Many public schools have not been places where educational questions – those of ethical and moral concern – posed by ethnic minority parents have been settled by democratic means: through dialogue with parents and others associated with schools. Instead, schools have often treated ethical and moral questions (those concerned with what should be done) as though they were technical ones (questions concerned with how something can be done) (Levin, 1998). I contend that in working towards making schools democratic and educational, questions of ethical and moral concern must be recognized and treated as such. Jurgen Habermas’ (1987, 1996) idea of participation and theory of communicative action – the coordination of social action through mutual understanding – serve as useful theoretical tools to apply in examining how school practices of minority parental involvement can become educational and democratic.

Habermas theorizes that people coordinate actions with others using speech to reach understanding or bring about consensus with others about matters of shared concern that form
the basis for subsequent positive actions. Communicatively coordinating actions (as opposed to strategically coordinating actions through manipulation or intimidation) with others in a non-coercive manner requires democratic participation on the part of all individuals. In brief, Habermas’ conceptualization of participation requires all concerned people to decide on what is true, good, and right by developing a common understanding of facts and norms through the giving of reasons for their differing perspectives. This conceptualization of participation is particularly relevant in thinking about minority parental involvement because it suggests that minority parents in dialogue with others, such as teachers and other parents, could determine what counts as public education and what the legitimate means are to facilitate this end. Bureaucrats in ministries of education, school administrators, and teachers would have no special warrant to decide what counts as education. Indeed, deciding what counts as education in Habermas’ view actually requires the participation of minority parents, teaching staff, and concerned others to collectively deliberate and decide on questions of ethical and moral concern.

For such deliberation to be legitimate, Habermas envisions dual conceptions of power – administrative and communicative – that together might lessen the dominance of majority groups and foster democratic education. He sees what he calls administrative power and communicative power both as mechanisms used to structure relations between people. He uses administrative power to describe “power over” others. Often such power is employed without being connected to a source of legitimacy (Habermas calls this colonisation).

In this chapter I amplify all of the above: I present Habermas’ conceptualization of democratic participation and communicative action, and describe how he links administrative
and communicative power to legitimately guide human action. I also acknowledge some of the criticisms that scholars have made about the theory of communicative action in relation to its application.

**Lifeworld, Communicative Action and Discourse**

Particularly relevant to looking at ethnic minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice is Habermas’ conceptualization of participation as communicative action. Habermas contends that communicative action is the foundation of all sociocultural life. The “human species maintains itself through the socially coordinated activities of its members and ... this coordination is established through communicative action” (Habermas, 1984, p. xi). Communicative actions include social interactions that are coordinated through speech acts – in which participants draw upon “common knowledge of facts norms, or subjective experiences” (Sitton, 2003, p. 52) – specifically aimed at reaching mutual understanding and unforced consensus (Habermas, 1987). Habermas states that individuals act communicatively and rationally by engaging in dialogue and in coming to mutual understanding with others so as to coordinate actions to pursue dialogically determined plans or collective goals. Habermas’ idea of rationality differs from an instrumental conception of rationality in that he distinguishes reason in its communicative form, as a positive force, from rational domination as a negative social condition. Democracy is grounded in a communicative conception of reason focused upon dialogue and discourse (argument and the exchange of reasons for action) that is tied to the everyday world or lifeworld we share with others.
Habermas theorizes that as human beings living in a common world, each person is situated in lifeworld, that is, the assumptions and commonsense understandings that frame how a person understands and perceives the world, and that shapes a person’s identity. Lifeworld is Habermas’ name for the unmarketized domains of social life. It differs from another concept used to envision modern society: system, which refers to the “sedimented structures and established patterns of instrumental action” (Finlayson, 2005, p. 53). Habermas argues that as part of the lifeworld, people use language to communicate with one another and give meaning to their world. People discuss differences, engage in debate, formulate opinions, reach understandings, and coordinate actions to achieve agreed upon ends without violence, coercion, or manipulation. Thus, lifeworld provides individuals the context for social action, that is, for interpreting their situation and harmonizing their plans. Habermas (1984) explains,

Subjects acting communicatively always come to an understanding in the horizon of a lifeworld. Their lifeworld is formed from more or less diffuse, always unproblematic, background convictions. This lifeworld background serves as a source of situation definitions that are presupposed by participants as unproblematic ... [and] also stores the interpretive work of preceding generations (p. 70).

People’s lifeworld is always being put to the test in their interactions with others; in discussions, individuals may realize that their lifeworld assumptions and understandings are not as accurate and dependable as they thought (Brookfield, 2005), thus a slight shift in lifeworld might result. Through communicative agreements, the lifeworld is symbolically reproduced, and cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization occur.

Lifeworld, then, is the site for dialogue and discourse. In dialogue people enter into certain commitments to justify their actions (or words) on the basis of good reasons. Habermas calls these commitments validity claims. When a speaker makes a speech act, three often
implicit validity claims are made: a claim to the truth of the utterance or proposition, to its
ingrightness, and to the speaker’s sincerity. A hearer can accept or challenge each claim. If a
hearer accepts the speech act consensus is achieved making for a successful communicative
action. If a validity claim is challenged the speaker and hearer are propelled into a discourse
situation where the speaker must make good the validity claim by proving reasons for it.
Habermas theorizes that validity claims must be discussed, disagreements settled, and
agreement or consensus achieved through rational argumentation – through reason giving and
on the convincing power of the better argument – not through intimidation or deception.
Participants in discourse must presuppose that all motives other than the cooperative search
for truth have been excluded.

The ideal of public reasoning is central to Habermas’ work for he argues that a rational
society is founded upon the intersubjective dialogue between participants not on the subjective
intentions of individuals. Rational argumentation, or discourse differs from communicative
action in that discourse involves a rationally motivating exchange of reasons; participants must
justify or defend their reasons, supported by the best available evidence (including experiences
and beliefs), for or against claims being given and assessed. The validity of normative claims is
judged against the availability of reasons; the absence of any reason invalidates the validity
claim.

As a standard for the impartial justification of norms in rational discourse, Habermas
outlines particular idealized conditions that would prevent social status, material interests, and

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4 Discourse is a special form of dialogue that can serve as the mechanism to renew or repair a failed consensus. It is
described as a reflective form of speech or an argumentative encounter between a number of individuals in which
claims to validity of an utterance are disputed and the force of better argumentation is used to settle the dispute
(Blaug, 1999).
cultural attachments from predetermining the result of the decision-making process, or as Benhabib (2002) states, prevent forms of agreement that may be based on “power and violence, tradition and custom, ruses of egoistic self-interest as well as moral indifference” (p. 37). These procedures and communicative presuppositions of democratic dialogue are especially relevant to conceptualizing ethnic minority parental participation because the conditions account for inequalities that exist in the procedures and conditions of dialogue not just in the inequality of opportunity to speak. The recognition of these moral conditions as being essential to cooperative or democratic dialogue and public opinion and will formation is missing in the multicultural literature on minority parental involvement that often suggests that schools need to provide minority parents greater or equal opportunity to voice their opinions.

Habermas’ (1990) idealized rules state,

(3.1) Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.

(3.2) a. Everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever.
    b. Everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse.
    c. Everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.

(3.3) No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (3.1) and (3.2) (p. 89).

In asserting these conditions Habermas suggests that participants must act as if the conditions of symmetry and reciprocity exist or that the conditions are satisfied to a sufficient degree (Habermas, 1993). The ideal speech condition of symmetry demands that each person have an “equal chance to initiate and to continue communication” and that each person have an “equal chance to make assertions, recommendations, and explanations, and to challenge justifications” (Blaug, 1999, p. 11). The speech condition of reciprocity refers to existing action.
contexts. For example, each person has an equal chance to express his/her wishes, feelings, and intentions and participants “must act as if in contexts of action there is an equal distribution of chances ‘to order and resist orders, to promise and refuse, to be accountable for one's conduct and to demand accountability from others’” (Blaug, 1999, p. 11).

By stating these rules of discourse Habermas is not making an empirical claim. He explains that symmetry and reciprocity are counterfactual constructs that might be used as criteria to judge how closely empirical dialogues approach ideal conditions. These conditions that Habermas outlines are grounded in the idea that the inequitable distribution of power within interactions must not impact individuals’ chances to deliberate on matters of ethical and moral concern. Each individual must have equal condition to listen, respond, and justify his/her position to one another without devaluing any speech style. In addition to the conditions of symmetry and reciprocity, participants “must start from the assumption that each participant has something potentially worthwhile to contribute to the discourse; that each participant deserves to have his or her claims considered” (Chambers, 1995, p. 239) and that each participant has an equal right to participate. This premise is missing in the deficit ideology held by many teachers that continue to shape ethnic minority parental involvement practices in schools. Further to these procedural conditions Habermas indicates that participants must be willing to engage in discourse. Participants must support discourse by adopting attitudes of respect and cooperation because coming to an understanding, he states, “relies on the cooperative process of interpretation” (Habermas, 1984, p. 120). Mutual understanding among participants is possible then only to the degree that participants are predisposed to one another in a cooperative fashion. In other words, acting communicatively, participants have to
want to listen and understand what others are saying in order to develop an understanding of what they mean.

While Habermas conceives of communicative action aimed at understanding others in lifeworld as a feature of legitimate participation, he also theorizes that strategic action – social actions oriented to success in economic and bureaucratic systems – is the complement to communicative action.

**Systems, Strategic Action and Steering Media**

Equally important to Habermas’ theory of communicative action being a fundamental requirement for a democratic, just, and moral society is the concept of system. Habermas submits that modern societies exist in a fragile equilibrium between system and lifeworld (Finlayson, 2005). Two sub-systems, one economic and the other political-administrative, emerge from the lifeworld. Like lifeworld, system provides mechanisms for social integration; the economic sub-system system uses the media of money and the administrative polity uses administrative power. Social actions coordinated through the non-linguistic media of money and administrative power (the exercise of power tied to positions in hierarchical organizations) are aimed at control; they aim at the “successful realization of structuring the exchange of goods and services on the basis of their value ... and efficiency of reaching binding decisions” (Deflem, 1994, p. 357). Such actions Habermas calls strategic.

Habermas (1996) contends that the economy and the state are examples of how the steering media are imposed on people without rational discussion: money is used to steer the economy and administrative power is the steering mechanism of the state. In the case of the
economy, “buyers and sellers act ‘strategically’ rather than communicatively inasmuch as they make decisions according to their own interests and external market conditions” (p. xviii).

In terms of the social institution of school, one purpose of the administrative bureaucracy is to provide school stability, for example, by supporting the efforts of teachers. The economic subsystem provides school its viability, for example, by providing for teacher salaries and school supplies (Crick & Joldersma, 2007). Problems with economic and administrative systems, however, occur when system encroaches on the domain of lifeworld such that action becomes mediated by administrative power rather than by mutual understanding and agreed upon norms. That is, problems occur when the system actually becomes an end itself rather than simply a means to an end that can be checked by the lifeworld (Edgar, 2006).

The Colonisation of Lifeworld

In advanced western, capitalist societies, Habermas argues that system has the capacity to penetrate lifeworld. When the action-coordination mechanism of language is replaced by coordination mechanisms oriented to success in those domains of lifeworld (cultural reproduction, social integration, and socialization) that can only be secured through communicative action, lifeworld becomes, what Habermas calls, colonised by systems; the lifeworld becomes steered by the mechanisms of money and administrative power.

This invasion by systems negatively impacts lifeworld in a significant way; colonisation undercuts the grounds on which individuals formulate opinions, meaning, and common understandings on questions of the good and the right. All moral matters become treated as monetary and bureaucratic ones to be solved through instrumental reasoning and strategic
action rather than through dialogue, discourse, and reflection with concerned others. Further, instead of rationally justifying reasons for action or goals with others and using steering media to support them, the goals are taken as fixed and steering media are imposed on people. Thus, rationality becomes predicated on the subjective intentions of participants’ not intersubjective dialogue as it is in communicative action. As a result, legitimate social coordination and integration based on moral reasoning becomes endangered.

The separation of language and steering media seems especially relevant to education and schooling. Conflicts about what are good lives and how to initiate children into such lives require some resolution for democratic, educational practices to be possible. The danger of establishing schooling bureaucracies is that conflicts are not resolved through debate about what educational means should be pursued by which educational means, but through contests of administrative power divorced from such dialogue. Administrative power becomes decoupled from moral purpose and becomes the medium through which conflicts are resolved and action coordinated. Administrative power can be used to: establish clear hierarchical relationships independent of the particular people in bureaucratic positions; measure the degree of administrative power of those in these positions; calculate the degree of success in achieving specifies ends; and allow for exchanges between various ranks. In one of his few references to schooling Habermas (1987) contends that

The overbureaucratization of the educational system can be explained as a ‘misuse’ of the media of money and power. Such misuses spring from the false perception of those involved that the rational management of steering problems is possible only by way of calculated operations with money and [administrative] power (p. 293).
In Habermas’ assessment of educational policy and schooling, he finds the lifeworlds of parents, teachers, and students are increasingly being invaded by public school administration. He writes,

The protection of pupils’ and parents’ rights against educational measures (such as promotion or non-promotion, examination and tests, and so forth), or from acts of the school or the department of education that restrict basic rights (disciplinary penalties), is gained at the cost of a judicialization and bureaucratization that penetrates deep into the teaching and learning process (Habermas, 1987, p. 371).

While the administrative bureaucracy and economic sub-systems do have distinct and important functions, problems occur when they affect education in adverse ways. Habermas argues that modern bureaucracies, with their elusive focus on purposive rational thinking, create a form of power that allows for the coordination of human action without recourse to dialogue: action becomes divorced from the judgements of individual human agents. The concept of colonisation is significant to understanding ethnic minority parental participation because it suggests that parental participation is problematic when the actions of parents become steered by self-interested administrative power rather than through acts of understanding. One central challenge facing schools in becoming more educational is to resist bureaucratization and commodification and the colonisation by promoting communicative engagement and reasoning in the public sphere.

*Combating Colonisation with Communicative Power in Publics*

Habermas argues that people must combat the colonisation of lifeworld by system to preserve morality and justice in the practices of everyday life. Generating communicative
power in the public sphere that is rooted in lifeworld is central in doing so. Public sphere "consists of an intermediary structure between the political system, on the one hand, and the private sectors of the lifeworld, on the other" (Habermas, 1996, p. 373). It is not a place, institution, or a single deliberative forum (Maia, 2007); rather, it is referred to as a realm of discussion, debate, and discourse on issues of common interest among people who are considered equal from moral and political standpoints. Public sphere is the "arena where collective will is processed and political decisions are justified ... and wherefrom a rationalized public opinion, as well as the public’s reciprocal enlightenment, derive" (Maia, 2007).

Habermas describes public sphere as a communication structure located in civil society. It is a network for communicating information and points of view (i.e., opinions expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesized in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinions (p. 360).

It distinguishes itself through the social space generated in communicative action (action oriented towards achieving a common understanding about what is good and true). Public sphere is not a "single and totalizing arena where a single large public ... discusses all issues concerning public life" (Maia, 2007, p. 74), rather, public sphere is fostered with the expansion of a multiplicity of overlapping and conflicting publics. This notion of the public sphere differs from one earlier presented in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere; one particularly criticized by Fraser (1992).

Fraser (1992) contributes to Habermas’ re-conceptualization of the public sphere arguing that marginalized, subordinated groups need counterpublics – "parallel discursive arenas" – to "formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (p. 123).

However, in her analysis, Maia (2007) states that the term counterpublic is "granted too vague
a meaning” (p. 76) when it used in examinations of minority groups, identity issues, and cultural discourses of self-understanding. She adds, the “public sphere is by no means limited to such issues” (p. 76). In fact, the public sphere “encompasses numerous problematic situations, such as the definition of common rules and pragmatic goals, considerations on justice, ... processes for monitoring authorities and for holding them accountable, among others” (p. 77). She suggests that it is more appropriate to use the term “critical publics.” What is important about Habermas’ re-conceptualization of the public sphere, Maia (2007) continues, is his call for the need for different publics to participate in various debate arenas in society. A “diversified space for reflexive forms of communication is a pre-requisite of public deliberation in complex societies” (p. 78).

Public sphere, though, is not separate from private as the “communication channels of the public sphere are linked to private spheres (Habermas, 1996, p. 365). Habermas (1996, p. 366) states that the “threshold separating the private sphere is not marked by a fixed set of issues or relationships but different conditions of communication and purpose.” Public and private manners can be distinguished in two respects: “accessibility and thematization, on the one hand, and the regulation of powers and responsibility, on the other” (p. 313). These conditions of communication, “do not seal off the private from the public but only channel the flow of topics from the one sphere into the other” (p. 366). Presenting Habermas’ conditions of communication more clearly, Coulter (2002, p. 32) interprets “‘accessibility’ as the degree of openness and ‘regulation’ as the degree of collectivity; discussions of public and private include both dimensions.” It is possible to be almost entirely private or public on both dimensions.
Deciding on degrees of publicity and privacy, openness and collectivity, also depends on the purposes for communication. Coulter (2002, p. 33) indicates that public and private, “can be better understood ... as necessary conditions to sustain different kinds of dialogues or discourses – pragmatic, ethical, and moral – which, in turn, have different aims.” Engaging in pragmatic dialogue, states Habermas (1993, p. xviii), participants are concerned with selecting the best means to a given desired end or selecting “appropriate strategies and techniques for satisfying our contingent desires.” Unlike pragmatic discourses that consider utility and efficiency in reaching certain ends such as a policy, ethical discourses evaluate those ends by assessing what is good for me or us. People often pose ethical questions to “gain clarity about their shared form of life and about the ideals they feel should shape their common life” (Habermas, 1998, p. 160). They ask who am I/we, who do I/we want to be, and how do I/we get there? Ethical decisions or judgements are considered conditionally valid or binding upon individuals of a community.

Moral discourses or arguments, Habermas asserts, differ in their degree of contextuality: moral norms are universalizable. Moral discourses examine policies or possible laws in terms of being equally good for all. In determining generalizable norms, the process of participation requires individuals to adopt multiple perspectives and collectively decide what is right or what is equally good for all potentially affected by a decision. This notion of participation – being involved in different modes of discourse thus different aspects of decision-making with regard to common issues of concern — significantly differs from participation in today’s schools where the clarification of shared norms through dialogue is often by-passed by administrative systems.
that funnel many teacher and parent behaviours into patterns of instrumentally rational behaviour.

While Habermas rejects the reification and dichotomization of public and private, he maintains that public can still be distinguished from private by the degree of accessibility and collectivity. This differentiation is especially important for Canadian education which aims at helping people lead good and worthwhile lives by forming their own identities in just, democratic communities. Identity and justice both involve concerns for publicity and privacy, but in different ways, in different degrees, for different people, in different contexts.

Abandoning his earlier notion of the public sphere Habermas (1998) also differentiates the public sphere into levels according to the density of communication, organizational complexity, and range – from the episodic publics found in taverns, coffee houses, or on the streets; through the occasional or “arranged” publics of particular presentations and events, such as theater performances, rock concerts, party assemblies, or church congresses; up to the abstract public sphere of isolated readers, listeners, and viewers scattered across large geographic areas, or even around the glove, and brought together only through the mass media (p. 374).

Episodic publics are based on ephemeral or short-ranged everyday encounters where people deliberate matters of shared concern. The linguistically constituted spaces encompass few viewpoints and involve few participants; argumentative exchanges are not dense. Episodic publics are more private, less open publics. Occasional publics refer to “meetings of organized presence where communication develops in accordance with certain formal procedures” (Maia, 2007, p. 80). Arranged publics are more open. Abstract publics are produced by media making “expressions, discourses, images, and events publicly available” (Maia, 2007, p. 84). Both individuals
and groups interact with mediated communication, for example, through mediated debates. At each level of the public sphere participants draw on their interests, values, and identities to rationally debate, discuss, and argue issues of common concern shaping public opinion and will; the more open the public the greater approval public opinion carries.

Habermas (1996) states that through rational discussion, the formation of opinion and common will generate influence that can be transformed into communicative power. In turn, communicative power is transformed into administrative power that is ground in the opinions, values, and interests of the people who are subject to administrative power. Communicative power differs from administrative power in a significant way: the force of shared beliefs and normative reasons generated by an agreement generates communicative power. It is a force collectively created thus exists while people participate in public dialogue; individuals can neither produce nor possess it. There is, though, a danger with communicative power if it is generated by people based on false assumptions. Thus, it is important that the conditions of symmetry and reciprocity be used as a counterfactual construct against which actual dialogues can be judged. As tools, the two conditions of idea speech can be used to expose ideology or false consciousness.

Habermas believes that converting the potential of communicative power into effective action is possible in two ways: the general norms can be directly adopted by particular lifeworlds, or they can be indirectly funneled back into lifeworlds through judicial and governmental structures. In one way, people discuss and debate issues honouring the moral conditions necessary for democratic dialogue. Participants, for example, who have similar or
different experiences, or who interpret the same experience in different ways, come together and discuss issues of common concern in a non-institutionalized dialogical space. In the dialogical process, participants discuss, clarify, adjust, refine, and reinterpret their interests and values, and take all reasons into consideration. Through discussion participants consider the best interests of those involved and agree on conditional norms to be incorporated into lifeworld. The norms achieve their social force through the solidarity that the communication creates. People then follow the norms because they agree with the normative rationale for their existence.

The other way involves actualizing communicative power in judicial and administrative structures of democratic states (which are linked to the common will) that are authorized to make binding decisions. Public opinion and criticism emerging in the public sphere exert influence. Public influence is then transformed through institutionalized procedures of democratic opinion and will formation and parliamentary debates into communicative power. In turn, ideally, communicative power is transformed into administrative power through legal programs and policies of parliamentary bodies (Habermas, 1998). Communicative power arising from rationally motivated agreement is thus actualized at the point of lawmaking. Maia (2007) however, points out that “decisions that derive from the communicative power, once transformed into administrative power, may undergo quite obscure processes, and are subject to profound changes – something that may undermine their legitimacy” (p. 91). Habermas (1990, p. 207-8) contends that at the practical level, the adoption of “any universalistic morality is dependent upon a form of life that meets it halfway. There has to be a modicum of congruence between morality and the practices of socialization and education. ... In addition,
there must be a modicum of it between morality and socio-political institutions. Not just any institution will do. Morality thrives only in an environment in which postconventional ideas about law and morality have already been institutionalized to a certain extent” (p. 207).

**Criticisms of the Application of Discourse Ethics**

While the breadth and depth of Habermas’ work is widely acclaimed by scholars, the theory of communicative action and discourse ethics is also the subject of much critique. Critiques particularly significant to the idea of democratic, ethnic minority parental participation that I propose relate to the practical application of communicative action.

Critics, like Posner (1996) state that Habermas is weak on particulars and that his “lack of concreteness makes it difficult to determine whether discourse theory has any practical significance” (p. 29). Benhabib (1996) suggests that the fundamental idea of using rational argumentation to achieve understanding about public issues is utopian; it is not possible to achieve in societies such as ours that are pluralized among lifestyles, and ethnic and religious groups. Maia (2007), however, is of the opinion that Habermas' idea of rational argumentation and the definition of ideal conditions for speech are relevant. Habermas theorizes an ideal that can be used to measure real practices, thus, his idea can be used to “distinguish between debate processes that are more deliberative, legitimate, and just, and those which are less deliberative, illegitimate or unjust” (p. 73). Furthermore, Habermas ideas of rational argumentation and ideal speech situation can be applied to identify inequality of “resources, capacities, and opportunities among participants” (p. 73) to improve deliberation.
Other scholars such as Young (1997) do recognize rational argumentation as a valuable form of communication to resolve disputes but criticize the norms of deliberation as culturally specific favouring Western standards and style of reasoning. Young (1997) contends that deliberative reasoning can further silence the voices of ethnic minority peoples who are not knowledgeable of, or comfortable with the process of rational argumentation, or who value other culturally different modes of expression and processes for resolving disputes. She proposes that greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling, are modes of communication that should supplement deliberative reasoning. Taking into consideration Young’s criticism, I find her notion of the three communicative modes useful in representing the relational dimension of deliberation and the ways in which people treat each other.

Young (1997) submits that individuals must be recognized and feel welcome to participate in rational discourse. She theorises that people can begin to develop an understanding for one another in forms of discourse she calls greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling. “Greeting,” Young explains describes a moment in which persons recognise each other in their particularity and participants feel acknowledged. It is a moment of care-taking and polite acknowledgement of others. Greetings can take linguistic form – “how are you?” and “welcome” – and non-linguistic form such as handshakes, smiles, hugs, and the giving and taking of food. Young argues that greetings, or preliminaries, are necessary to building relations of trust, respect, and care. Developing understanding by means of discourse without due attention to preliminaries fails to foster such relations. This is heightened when “parties to dialogue differ in many ways, either in their culture and values or in the interests and aims they bring to discussion, their effort to resolve conflict or come to agreement on a course of action” (Young 1997, p. 70).
Rhetoric “names the forms and styles of speaking that reflexively attend to the audience in speech” (Young, 1997, p.71). It constructs and connects the speaker, audience, and occasion by creating specific meanings and connotations. For example, something can be uttered with an emotional tone of joy, fear, or anger. In discourse, figures of speech, such as metaphor or simile can be used. The way, then, that arguments or assertions are expressed affects the meaning of a discourse (Young, 2000). Storytelling, or narrative, is another form of discourse that, like greeting, recognises the particularity of individuals. Through the telling of stories individuals share their experiences with others often demonstrating a need or entitlement. Narratives expose the particularity of experience resulting from serialized structural positioning. They also indicate sources of values, culture, and meaning, and reveal experiences from the point of view of the speaker as well as social knowledge from that social location. Ultimately, in attaining a greater understanding of who we are, of what our needs, interests, values, and assumptions are, we are better able to decide what to do.

Another concern regarding the application of rational discourse relates to those who envision it as a dispassionate, disembodied, formalistic mode of argumentation. Hicks (2002) states that with emphasis being traditionally placed on the intellectual dimension of argumentation, it is often considered the only legitimate form of expression. He argues that rational argumentation involves both intellectual and affective dimensions or as Gutmann & Thompson (2004) state, reason and passion. Goode (2005), however, states that the significance of Habermas’ rationalism is that it actually emphasizes the role of criticism within the public sphere. Not only can rightness of a claim be subject to discursive testing, so can
sincerity of an expressive or aesthetic gesture: “What does that smile, that slick turn of phrase or sartorial finesse actually conceal?” (p. 50). From another perspective, Hicks (2002) emphasizes that it is members of dominant cultures who need to develop empathy to genuinely address the needs of marginalized groups whose deeply held convictions and cultural knowledge have historically been dismissed.

I recognize these criticisms, yet consider minority parental participation in deliberation about ethical and moral concerns under idealised conditions a more inclusive notion of participation than the one dominant in the research literature. I believe Habermas’ idea of democratic participation has a lot to contribute to the literature on multiculturalism and parental involvement in terms of both the conceptualization and practice of inclusion. May (1999), an advocate for a school-wide multicultural approach to schooling, states that critical educators have been criticized for “pointing out at length the travails of a racist, undemocratic education system without offering much in the way of viable, implementable alternatives at the level of the school” (p. 54). I contend that the theory of communicative action and discourse ethics is valuable in its application to school settings because it offers not only a framework to assess current school structures and practices, it offers procedures that could be utilized in creating legitimate decisions and institutions. More specifically, Habermas provides useful ways of viewing relations between people and structures which provide a basis for challenging the current use of illegitimate power in everyday practices of schools and justify institutionalizing democratic, educational participatory practices.

In determining whether the theory of communicative action and discourse is practical in nature Blaug (1999) suggests that democracy and participation as it is encountered in the
everyday world of ordinary people must be examined. Following Blaug, in Chapters 6 and 7 I apply a Habermasian theoretical lens to explore the everyday world of school and ethnic minority parental involvement policies and practices within it. Habermas’ theory may be weak on particulars and may be too abstract to apply at the level of a nation-state, but in interpreting the social world and in providing some ways to identify and explore the distortions that exist in schools, the theory is not. By examining processes of communication and everyday school policies and practices with an interest in working towards making the practices more educational and equitable, systematically distorted forms of communication become identifiable, as do policies and practices emerging in and through communicative interaction that are genuinely oriented to reaching understanding.

I consider the idea of normative forces generated by publics influencing and guiding administrative systems as an ideal that is worthy of pursuit. An especially useful concept Habermas provides that can help is decision-making through public reasoning because people engaging in the process of reasoned argumentation must be prepared to question and to change their judgements, preferences, and views. Interests, knowledge, and values are understood as changeable. I believe that under the right conditions and the right spirit, parents and school educators can address ethical and moral concerns in dialogue or discourse. Our challenge, as Blaug (1999) notes, lies in examining democracy in the here and now, and in applying Habermas’ ideas of the ideal to the real, that is, to particular situations. I begin to take on Blaug’s challenge in the next chapter where I present a historical review on ethnic minority parental participation in education in British Columbia.
Chapter Four

Contextualizing Ethnic Minority Parental Involvement in British Columbia Schools: A Historical Review

Having reviewed the contemporary research literature on ethnic minority parental involvement in North American schooling in Chapter 2, and presented the theoretical framework for my study in Chapter 3, I now apply a Habermasian theoretical lens to four cases of ethnic minority parental involvement. I critique the historical efforts of school-based educators to involve Aboriginal, Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian parents in their children’s schooling. Through this brief history of ethnic minority parental involvement in British Columbia schools, I provide the context for the empirical research I present in Chapter 6 and 7.

Parental Involvement: Aboriginal Peoples

Prior to the assault of English missionaries’ and government officials’ practices and policies of schooling in the mid 1800s, Aboriginal Peoples had particular ideas about what the best means was to facilitate the education of their children, that is, what the best means was to prepare their children to lead a worthwhile life. Their approach was “holistic” (Archibald, 1995, p. 289) and was “entirely informal and varied from tribe to tribe or location to location” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 6).

It had one great factor going for it – it worked. Education was the responsibility of all and it was a continuous process. Parents, grandparents, and other relatives naturally played a major role, but other members of the tribe, particularly the elders, helped to shape the young people (Ashworth, 1979, p. 6). Miller (1996) adds, the various educational practices of the Aboriginal populations ... share[d] a common philosophical or spiritual orientation, as well as a similar approach. For all these peoples,
instruction was suffused with their deeply ingrained spirituality, an invariable tendency to relate the material and personal in their lives to the spirits and the unseen. Moreover, they all emphasized an approach to instruction that relied on looking, listening, and learning – ‘the three Ls’ (p. 16).

For Aboriginal peoples education was intertwined with family participation. Not only did families participate in their children’s education but also they, with their tribes, determined what constituted an educated person and what it was to lead a worthwhile life. Aboriginal peoples possessed cultural capital and a linguistic capital of their own, but it was not the form of capital that was later recognized and valued by the dominating group (Corson, 1993).

Unlike Aboriginal peoples views of education and means to facilitate it English missionaries and government officials equated education with schooling and schooling with controlling or “civilising” (Ashworth, 1979). Schooling for Aboriginal children was oriented to control. Day schools were one of the first structures institutionalized to school and “educate” children. But as day schools proved to be ineffective in schooling Aboriginal children to be “good little Christian boys and girls” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 33), residential schooling became the preferred structure (the means) for assimilation (the end). Without engaging with Aboriginal parents to gain an understanding of their lifeworld, their notion of what counted as a worthwhile life, and their means to education, missionaries and school officials strategically organised the structure of schooling for the purpose of moving “Aboriginal communities from their ‘savage’ state to that of ‘civilization’ and thus to make in Canada but one community – a non-Aboriginal one” (Milloy, 1999, p. 3).

A hierarchy of authority was one characteristic of the stratified residential school system. Aboriginal children were forcefully placed in the schools under the legal guardianship of the Department of Indian Affairs who were advised by the churches. With the purpose to
command and control, priests filled the positions of principal and they, in turn, coordinated the actions of teachers. Like principals, teachers were expected to comply with directives and meet the overall objective of assimilation. Termination of employment was the punishment for non-compliance (Ashworth, 1979).

Colonisation of the values and norms of Aboriginal people was systematic. By marking Aboriginal children as “savages” needing to be “civilised,” government officials and missionaries entrenched their own status thereby rationalizing what they were doing. Like the children who were in a subordinate position, so too were parents. Parents objected to the colonisation (Habermas, 1982) of their lifeworld by administrative power but parents were labelled a hindrance and excluded from the system. Milloy (1999) states that government officials and missionaries held distinct views about Aboriginal parents: they were “‘sunk’ in ‘ignorance and superstitious blindness’” (p. 25). Parents were thought to be a “hindrance to the civilizing process” because children, in the natural order of things, learned from them and from other adults in their communities. Through them to the children, and on through the generations, ran, ... the ‘influence of the wigwam, ... superstition, [and] helplessness’. Children ... unswervingly ‘followed the terrible example set them by their parents’ and thus became ‘as depraved as themselves (Milloy, 1996, p. 26).

For Aboriginal parents, schooling, based on the beliefs, attitudes, and customs of Victorian England and the churches, was not education as it was not the “Indian method” (Milloy, 1999). Thus schooling was not designed to prepare children to live an Indian way of life. For Aboriginal parents education, prior to European contact, supported the transmission of particular cultural continuities, reproduced specific social relations, and socialized children in particular ways. Education was about helping children to understand the world around them,
and understand and be proud of themselves; it was about providing a setting in which children
could develop the fundamental attitudes and values of the Indian tradition and culture, and it
was about supporting the Indian identity and providing a good life (Ashworth, 1979).

Parents opposed both the means and end of the foreign “whiteman’s” system of
schooling. Parents created disruptions by contesting policies and practices and by making many
attempts to be involved in their children’s education. Some parents protested and wrote
letters of grievance to school and government officials. Many repeatedly attempted to visit
their children at school and many wrote letters to their children. Some parents even defied
federal policies by keeping their children at home (Ashworth, 1979; Barman, 1995; Miller, 1996;
Milloy, 1999). But parental dissent was suppressed and Aboriginal children were forced to
attend residential schools, some for as many as ten years (Hare & Barman, 1996). Decisions as
to what was good for Aboriginal children were being made almost “exclusively by white civil
servants and politicians” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 42) and church leaders. In effect, parents were
unable to prevent the colonisation of their method of education.

Schooling policies and practices ensured that parents were denied involvement. No
contact between parents and children was permitted. School personnel supported the policy
by turning away parents who attempted to visit their children at school and discarding letters
parents wrote to their children (Barman, 1995; Miller, 1996; Milloy, 1999). Further, children
were barred from visiting their parents during holidays even though some principals believed
them to be a “necessary evil in the recruitment of students” (Milloy, p. 30). In the words of the
Superintendent General of Indian Affairs,

Our policy is to keep pupils in these institutions until trained to make their way in the
world. Taking children in for short terms and letting them go again is regarded perhaps as
worse than useless,’ as the ‘effect of allowing children to visit their Reserves is bad (Milloy, p. 30).

While the policy of no parental contact was explicit, school personnel also found the means to eradicate the influences parents had on the lifeworld of children by forbidding them to practise cultural traditions and speak their own tongue (Ashworth, 1979). Corporal punishment was often the punishment for disobedience.

The policy and practices that prevented parental participation in residential schools had devastating effects on Aboriginal peoples. Not only did parents’ roles and lives change forever, the parent-child relationship was severed which, in turn affected children as they grew to become adults. Further, the policy and practices of eliminating parental influence was effective in damaging Aboriginal peoples – languages, cultures, and identity – lifeworld (Haig-Brown, 1988). Relationships between parents and children deteriorated as children felt neglected and learned to dislike their parents and the Aboriginal way of life.

As children became adults, many found that schooling failed to prepare them to live neither in the European nor the Indian world. In effect, the lifeworld of children had been destroyed without replacement. Adults were not prepared to live “for a more public world, for being citizens, job-holders, community members and parents” (Coulter, 2002, p. 28). One young man explains,

When an Indian comes out of these places it is like being put between two walls in a room and left hanging in the middle. On one side there are all the things he learned from his people and their way of life that was being wiped out, and on the other side are the whiteman’s ways which he could never fully understand since he never had the right amount of education and could not be part of it. There he is, hanging, in the middle of two cultures and he is not a whiteman and he is not an Indian (Miller, 1996, p. 385).
Children had not been prepared to live life as adults or prepared to “fit into” mainstream society. Assimilation failed to be achieved despite the exclusion of parental participation in their children’s education. Many were haunted by their experiences in school of sexual, physical, emotional, and verbal abuse. Adults found that they lacked parenting skills, were unable to form relationships with others, and were never taught to love (Ing, 1991).

The UNESCO report on world education summarizes the damaging effects of the colonisation of Aboriginal Peoples’ lifeworlds:

For most Canadian children, compulsory education has meant in some measure the acquisition of skills needed in a modern industrial society. For native children, it has too often resulted in a period of cruel isolation from their home communities, the acquisition of skills and attitudes irrelevant to those communities and, upon graduation or dropping out, a profound sense of alienation from their parents and the values and traditions of their home communities (Ashworth, p. 53).

Colonisation of Aboriginal education by residential schooling, then, eliminated the possibility of establishing mutual understanding between school personnel, parents, and children in the process of social integration. The devastating effects of the colonisation of Aboriginal peoples’ lifeworlds continue to affect Aboriginal peoples and current parent-school relations (Ing, 1991).

Over the past decade, Williams (2000) indicates, many public school administrative systems have begun providing support to families. The Vancouver School District, for example, has provided a number of educational services to Aboriginal students, but many institutional problems such as the exclusion of Aboriginal people from decision making regarding funding continue to prevent students and families from realizing their goal of education. The possibility of education in school and restoring legitimacy to schooling, in part, depends upon creating and
sustaining particular kinds of communicative relationships – oriented towards mutual understanding – between school staff, ethnic minority parents, and students.

Parental Involvement: Chinese-Canadians

Just as Aboriginal parents were the targets of exclusionary school policies and practices of parental involvement, so too were Chinese parents in British Columbia. But, unlike Aboriginal students who were isolated from their families and placed in residential schools, children of Chinese ancestry lived with their families and attended provincially controlled public schools. By 1901, few Chinese children attended public schools in Victoria. While Chinese parents were required to pay taxes, a federal policy prohibited them from voting in school board elections. Between 1901 and 1907 the number of Chinese children requesting admission to school grew, and with it, attempts to discourage Chinese parents from sending their children to school. The first attempt was made in 1901 by a small group of white parents who asked the Victoria School Board to put Chinese children in a separate school because they were “unclean, untidy, depraved and ill-mannered, and had a demoralizing influence on the white children” (Lai, 1987, p. 48).

In 1902, prompted by a group of majority parents, a delegation from the Labour Council too opposed integrated schools. They requested that Chinese children be placed in a separate building and playground because of “unsanitary and other conditions of their home” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 58). They were considered an unassimilable group and a threat to the “Anglo-Saxon standard of moral and ethical culture” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 58). Six months later the Labour Council made a second attempt by meeting with school trustees pressuring them to
prevent the “Mongolianization of British Columbia” (Lai, 1987, p. 49) and prevent the Chinese people from attaining equal citizenship.

Although many people did not welcome the presence of “the Chinese” in public schools, the School Act recognized the right of all children to attend school, stating that children could not be prevented from admission on the basis of “race.” Despite this policy, school trustees frequently engaged in debates, in board meetings, about whether they could remove Chinese children from school or segregate them from white children.

“Put them in a separate school,” called out Trustee Grant. … The chairman [of the Board of School Trustees for Victoria, B.C.] quickly pointed out that in his opinion the board had no legal right to initiate such action.

“Then change the law,” counterattacked Trustee Grant (Ashworth, 1979, p. 54).

With their goal – the physical separation of Chinese children from white children – already determined and with additional pressure from City Council to achieve that end, school trustees strategically passed a motion to place Chinese children in separate classrooms securing the interests of white parents, not the rights of Chinese-Canadian children. Trustees claimed that segregation was not based on “race,” but on unsanitary conditions of children’s homes. The superintendent of schools and school principals were responsible for following through with the trustees’ decision. Engaging in dialogue about education and gaining an understanding of the lifeworlds of Chinese parents was not of interest of school trustees (Ashworth, 1979), nor was supporting their lifeworld through administrative power.

In 1907 the “Chinese question” re-emerged when the chairman of the Victoria Board of School Trustees felt that the number of recently arrived older Chinese boys (aged 9 to 14) seeking admission to the public school was “so high that the situation was critical” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 64). Trustees now had to decide how they were going to keep “the Chinese” out of
school. After a series of meetings with board members only, the board again exerted its power
deciding to refuse admission to all incoming Chinese students until they could “so understand
the English language as to be amenable to the ordinary regulations and school discipline”
(Ashworth, 1979, p. 66). Language was used as an instrument of domination. Acting on this
ruling, parents arranged for private English lessons for their children. But, upon re-application,
children were again refused admission because trustees had passed another ruling that only
native-born children could attend public schools (Lai, 1987). In 1908, the school board further
discouraged parents from enrolling their children in public schools ruling that “native-born
Chinese children or children of naturalized Chinese” (Lai, 1987, p. 53) were required to pass an
English test before they were granted approval to attend school.

Throughout their children’s schooling, Chinese-Canadian parents resisted segregation.
They often wrote letters of appeal to the school board; they boycotted schools; they challenged
the Board to prove they lived in unsanitary conditions; and they hired a lawyer to speak on
their behalf in school board meetings and take legal action against the Board (Ashworth, 1979;
Stanley, 1990). Trustees, though, refused to respond to the concerns of parents.

Although parents could not challenge the truth, rightness, or sincerity of school board
claims with board members, parents did attempt to resist the colonisation of their lifeworld.
Chinese parents and community members began engaging in what Habermas calls ethical
discourse with one another. Specifically, they began discussing what it meant to be labelled
Chinese. Through their participation in discourse, in publics, and in the generation of
communicative power, parents began forming a common identity as Chinese. Stanley (1990)
states,
Although white opinion portrayed the Chinese in Canada as monolithic, they did not see themselves as such. Most of the Chinese immigrants to Canada came from Guangdong province in South China. However, they spoke several, often mutually unintelligible, dialects of Cantonese and Hakka. Their loyalties tended to be based on their country of origin, rather than any broader identification (p. 295).

Rather than inventing an oppositional interpretation to the white portrayal of Chinese, they invented it as a common identity and used it as a resource in attempts to attain their needs and interests. Discriminatory legislation, regulations, and social practices had limited Chinese peoples “sectors of economic activity [and had] sanctioned their places of residence” effectively isolating them from “meaningful interaction with white society” (Stanley, 1990, p. 288). Further, school segregation had been “primarily directed against the children of Chinese merchants” (Stanley, 1990, p. 292). The second-generation children saw segregation as an attempt to prevent them from learning English and making them “cheap labour.”

Of particular concern to parents was securing a good life. They hoped that “previously barred areas of endeavour might suddenly open up, thus providing work or new opportunities for investment” (Stanley, 1990, p. 296). Parents saw their economic well-being as dependent upon accurate information. The Chinese-language newspapers provided this kind of information. Hence, one of their central needs became the promotion of literacy in written Chinese. Because “written Chinese could be understood without reference to spoken languages, it provided a common language accessible to all the Chinese in Canada” (Stanley, 1990, p. 296). Both a Chinese identity and knowledge of written Chinese became necessary to the survival as “a Chinese” in British Columbia. The generation of communicative power and support from the community enabled the construction of the Chinese Public School. In 1907 the school began providing schooling in both Chinese and English to children who were barred
from attending public schools. The Chinese community was active in providing opportunities for children to continue their education resisting the colonisation of their lifeworld.

In the fall of 1922, the Victoria School Board again exerted administrative power without engaging with parents and supporting the lifeworld of parents and children by amending its policy on segregation and placing all Chinese children in three Chinese-only schools. Chinese-Canadian parents collectively resisted the Board’s policy by boycotting separate schools for the entire school year. During that year, parents rented rooms in Chinatown and hired teachers. In so doing, they continued to take an active part in the education of their children. A second-generation Chinese-Canadian parent explains:

It is not the 200 children now affected that we have to think of, but the whole of our future is involved in this question. We cannot afford to take any other attitude than the one we have taken. We ask ourselves this question: What can be the purpose behind this movement? Can it be the intention to prevent us securing an English education so that our children can be permanently ignorant, so that they must remain labourers to be exploited? Being ignorant of the language we will be unable to take our part by the side of other Canadians, and we will then be pointed out as those who refuse to learn the customs or social life of the country – in fact, refuse to assimilate. It will have been forgotten by then that it was not because we did not want to learn, but because certain narrow-minded autocrats have taken upon themselves the responsibility of preventing our learning (Stanley, 1990, p. 293).

In September 1923, the Board again changed its policy, this time permitting children to return to their original schools. This change in policy was a result of the Chinese-Consul General supporting the lifeworld of Chinese-Canadians by strategically coordinating the actions of trustees. Employing administrative power, the Consul-General threatened to boycott Canadian-made goods in China if the segregation policy continued (Ashworth, 1979). One segregated class in one school, however, remained open for children who failed to prove
proficiency in English (Lai, 1987). In general, the number of Chinese children attending public school classes remained low due to the effects of the Chinese Immigration Act of 1923 that prevented “the Chinese” from immigrating to Canada. With changing policies beginning in 1949 the enrolment of students of Chinese ancestry in public schools rose.

**Parental Involvement: Japanese-Canadians**

Like parents and children of Chinese ancestry, Japanese families were the subjects of exclusionary schooling policies and practices, however, their experiences in public schools differed. This, in part, was due to parents’ and community members’ having a firm sense of education and knowledge of the requisite means prior to the arrival of their children in British Columbia. The maintenance of their lifeworld was a priority. For example, one of parents’ main concerns was that their children continue with education begun in Japan; many children had “received some education in Japan (more than eight years in some instances)” (Dahlie, 1970, p. 9). For parents, education was inclusive of teachings in both English and Japanese.

The community was also able to use structures to support their children. For example, upon the arrival of Japanese families in Vancouver, parents enrolled their children in English language schools affiliated with church missions, not public schools. A few Japanese children, however, did attend high school. To the advantage of the high school students, school personnel found them to be “well advanced in the schools of Japan, their knowledge covering Algebra, Euclid, Latin, English and every branch of study incorporated in a modern curriculum for advanced pupils” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 95). School personnel also perceived children of
Japanese ancestry as well mannered and hard working. Behaviours of mothers were attributed to these positive attributes. It was noted that the Japanese mothers seemed to be particularly impressed with the importance of educating their children, and they deny themselves much to have them properly equipped for school, and it is only just to add that the Japanese children in Canadian schools, by their intelligent grasp of their studies and their courteous demeanor, do their mothers infinite credit (Ashworth, 1979, p. 95).

Japanese parents, though, like Chinese parents, were prohibited from voting in elections. In addition to sending their children to public schools, parents enrolled their children in private Japanese-language classes, thereby resisting colonisation of their lifeworld. Families soon realized that “facility in two languages became practically an economic imperative. Excluded from many lines of work and from many professions, educated Nisei [second-generation Japanese-Canadian] found most of their employment in the Japanese community” (Dahlie, 1970, p. 8).

By 1920, an increasing number of second-generation Japanese-Canadian children enrolled directly into public schools in British Columbia. With the increasing number, hostility toward the children grew, as did attempts to segregate Japanese-Canadian children from white children. Similar to claims made against Chinese students, white parents asserted that the Japanese children were a “menace and would have a demoralizing influence on the white children” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 99). Many segregation attempts were unsuccessful due to the intervention of school principals who supported Japanese children stating that the children did not have a negative influence on white children.

In 1925, one school in the Vancouver district was successful in establishing a segregated class for Japanese children. Without speaking to Japanese parents or attempting to understand their lifeworlds, the principal of the school employed decoupled administrative power declaring
the segregation policy was for educational purposes. Further, when the children “showed competence in English they would be returned to regular classes” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 100).

The Japanese community challenged the policy indicating that some top-ranked pupils had been segregated because of alleged language problems. Two public outlets were the English-language publication called “The New Canadian” and a Japanese language newspaper called the “Tairiku Nippo.” Despite their protests, school administration failed to engage with members of the Japanese community.

In response to the segregation policy, parents sought to teach their children English during the pre-school years, hoping to prepare them for attendance in non-segregated, “normal” classes. By 1927, almost all Japanese-Canadian children in Vancouver attended “private” kindergartens run by church organisations (Ashworth, 1979). Association with the churches benefited parents in many ways. Parents began participating in dialogues about education in various publics. Japanese-Canadian parents met and discussed educational concerns; churches provided the venue. Further, parents continued to challenge claims to the truth, rightness, and sincerity of school “policies” and practices, but school personnel failed to talk with the parents.

Through the late 1930s, Halford Wilson, a government official, charged “the Japanese” with many “anti-Canadian” activities. One activity he took issue with was the Japanese language schools. Even though the schools had played a role in the education of children since 1906, he was of the opinion that they were a “menace to Canadian national life, and an indication of an unwillingness to assist in the assimilation of these nationals into our citizenship” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 113). As a result, in 1940, administrative power was again
employed without being connected to any source of legitimacy: an amendment to the Public Schools Act gave the Department of Education the authority to supervise, inspect, open, and close all 59 Japanese language schools. Parents could not contest this blatant colonisation.

In mid-March of 1942 the situation became worse with the expulsion of all Japanese-Canadians from the British Columbia coast. While waiting to be sent to internment camps in the interior of British Columbia, Japanese-Canadians were held in a concentration camp in Vancouver. The Department of Education disavowed all responsibility for schooling (Dahlie, 1970). Again teaching became the responsibility of parents in the camps. Older Japanese-Canadian students also participated in teaching the younger children (Adachi, 1991). The United and Anglican churches, too, coordinated their actions. In one building on the Exhibition Grounds of Hastings Park, they opened a kindergarten in which 700 to 800 students received instruction between May and September of 1942 (Ashworth, 1979).

After relocating from Vancouver to camps in the interior, instruction and schooling of children varied. Local public schools permitted some elementary school children to attend if they paid a fee. For some of the children restricted to camps, parents were able to coordinate young university students to serve as tutors. In a few cases, Japanese-Canadian certified teachers taught students. No schooling was provided for high school students but, with the support of church organisations, they enrolled in correspondence courses supervised by Catholic, Anglican, or United Church personnel (Adachi, 1991).

During the three years spent in internment camps, many parents lodged complaints but could do nothing to alter their situation. Few teachers or principals spoke out against practices of exclusion. The employment of administrative power, disconnected from discourse with
Japanese-Canadians and from their lifeworld continued to limit children’s opportunities for schooling and education. It was not until April 1945 that the B.C. Teachers Federation protested the Departments of Education’s lack of involvement in the schooling of Japanese children (Dahlie, 1970). By the end of 1945, though, many families left the camps and moved to Eastern Canada, many returned to Japan, and others returned to the Vancouver coast. In 1949, Japanese-Canadian children were accepted in public schools throughout the province in non-segregated classes.

**Parental Involvement: Indo-Canadians**

Just as fear of the Aboriginal peoples and the Chinese and Japanese immigrants affected school policies, practices, and parent relations, South Asian immigrants too were perceived as a threat by immigrants from Europe and denied equal access to schooling. Through the deployment of administrative power, decoupled from the lifeworld of minorities, Indo-Canadians were barred from voting in federal elections, and women and children were prevented from immigrating to Canada. Restrictions on immigration were reflected in the low Indo-Canadian student population in schools. In 1941 the Vancouver School Board reported that 51 ‘Hindus’ were enrolled in the city’s schools. It was not until 1951 with changes in immigration policies did the student population in Vancouver schools begin to increase (Ashworth, 1979).

Unlike Aboriginal, Chinese, and Japanese students, Indo-Canadian students were not subject to school policies and practices of segregation but colonisation remained the source of social integration. In the view of many high school personnel, children were taking part in
school councils and sports-related activities. To them, this was an indication that “there [was] no segregation of any kind” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 188) and that children were assimilating into schools. School personnel believed Indo-Canadian children could be assimilated into Canadian society.

Many elementary school teachers, however, expressed the concern that Indo-Canadian children were making poor progress because they were culturally deficient. According to the teachers, children lacked previous educational experience, facility in English, and the ability to adapt to the Canadian way of life (Ashworth, 1979). Administration perceived a parental involvement program as the remedy to these problems. In this case ethnic minority parental involvement was considered positive, but positive only because the program was intended to absorb parents into the system. One of the programs established in Vancouver in 1971 was organised to help parents become “more familiar with the city, with its resources, and with Canadian ideas and programs” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 192). It recommended that parents, specifically mothers, should “speak English and become more involved in the life of the school” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 192). Further, it was recommended that mothers “place their young children in nursery school” and attend the “nursery school themselves part-time in order to become more familiar with the Canadian culture and to receive information on nutrition and health care” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 192). This meant that Indo-Canadian parents needed to do things the white-Canadian way if they wanted their children to be successful. This Canadian way valued English literacy and involvement in a school as directed by school personnel.

School personnel failed to recognize that many Indo-Canadian parents were already involved in their children’s education. Parents resisted colonisation by sending their children to
private Punjabi speaking and writing classes in the community, and stressing the importance of maintaining their cultural traditions. In a failure to engage in dialogue with parents, teachers did not understand that parents were wary of some school influences. Many parents saw schools as “creating a barrier between themselves and their children and their ancestral language and culture” (Ashworth, 1979, p. 202). Schools were not places that valued their lifeworld. At the same time, though, Indo-Canadian parents knew that schools could provide their children with tools they need to succeed in the dominant Canadian society. Hence, they followed a mode that Gibson (1988) reflects in her research on Punjabi parents in California as accommodation and acculturation without assimilation.

Gibson (1988) found that Indo-American parents wanted their children to accommodate to their new environment, becoming skilled in the ways of the dominant groups, but resist assimilation by maintaining strong roots with their Punjabi community. To the Indo-Americans in Gibson’s study, Americanisation did not mean assimilation. Instead it meant that children “adopt many aspects of the dominant American culture while also maintaining their Punjabi culture” (p. 25). It meant acculturation. Parents did value schooling but, while schooling was important to parents, so too was education that contributed to the reproduction of their lifeworld. Many Indo-Canadian parents defined success as “obtaining ‘good’ jobs and ‘good’ income” (p. 109) while maintaining roots with the Punjabi community.

Parents provided strong support for schools as parents associated it with future job opportunities. Their understanding of involvement, however, had little to do with direct contact with school personnel. Thus, they “rarely became involved in school affairs” (Gibson, 1988, p. 28). Instead, parents supported the school by directing their children to do as the
teachers requested, to follow classroom and school rules, to attend regularly, and not cause discipline problems. Parents expected their children to respect teachers and be courteous. They also expected their children to do well academically and insisted that homework “came ahead of housework, jobs, and especially social activities” (p. 128). Parents shared their expectations with children in the privacy of their home and in the publics of the temple and community gatherings.

Like Aboriginal families who wanted their children to maintain their identity, language and culture in the process of education, and like Chinese-Canadian and Japanese-Canadian parents, Indo-Canadian parents had high educational and occupational aspirations for their children. They saw schooling as the means for upward social mobility. Gibson (1988) finds that high expectations and an emphasis on the value of schooling “appear to have far more impact on the immigrant child’s decision to persist in school than either family background or actual school performance” (p. 175).

Summary

In conducting a brief historical review of four cases of ethnic minority parental involvement in education in British Columbia, I find that many ethnic minority parents were actively involved in their children’s education and the production of particular worldviews, value systems, and identities. However, administrative power decoupled from discourse and communicative action led to the colonisation of minority parental participation in education despite minority parents’ attempts to resist it. Resistance took many forms. Some Aboriginal families wrote letters of grievance to school officials, wrote letters to their children in school,
visited their children in school, and even kept their children at home. Chinese-Canadian families boycotted schools and challenged school trustees claims but trustees refused to engage in discourse with parents. Parents were committed to their children and supported their children’s education throughout the policy changes that aimed at making it more difficult for children to attain equal access to schooling. Japanese-Canadian parents too resisted colonisation. They were more successful in their efforts than were the Chinese-Canadian parents partly due to the Japanese-Canadian parents having the resources to create structures to support their lifeworlds. For Indo-Canadian parents, resistance was reflected in the attitudes and discourses of parents about schooling. Children were expected to retain their identity as Punjabis and maintain ties to their community while also acquiring skills necessary to obtain a “good” job.

Crick and Joldersma (2007) state that although education is anchored in the lifeworld, economic and political-administrative goals have determined much of schooling policy and practice and impacted education in adverse ways. Although the economic and administrative systems are necessary to the organisation of school, it must be as free as possible from the colonising forces of the economic and administrative system if it is to carry out its purpose of education and attend to emancipatory concerns.

This historical review of ethnic minority parental participation in British Columbia schools provides the context for the subsequent empirical research presented in Chapter 6 and 7. In the next chapter I present the research design and methodology for the empirical research.
This chapter outlines the methodological choices I made in my empirical research approach, site selection, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. I also discuss the limitations of the study.

Selection of the Research Site

One aim of my investigation was to gain an understanding of how one public elementary school, with a multiethnic population, in greater Vancouver, British Columbia defined, structured, and practiced parental involvement. Hence, in selecting both the environment and the participants for the study I used purposeful sampling (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). I based this decision on the assumption that if one wants to discover, understand, and gain insight, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1994). Thus, in selecting the sample, I sought a rich source of data of interest: a multiethnically populated elementary school in the greater Vancouver regional district that had staff members who were known to be actively working towards the inclusion of minority parents in school involvement practices.

Selecting a school that was known for its practice of inclusion in greater Vancouver was an important criterion because although the composition of public schools in greater Vancouver is multiethnic, many policies and practices of parental involvement are not inclusive in terms of the participation of ethnically diverse parents. Further, the processes of parental
participation in Vancouver regional schools fail to be represented in the research literature on parental involvement. Research studies conducted in Ontario focusing on the involvement of African-Canadian parents in schools and in the United States focusing on the involvement of Mexican-American parents dominate the literature. Thus, finding a school that had a reputation for including ethnic minority parents in a non-traditional approach to participation was important for it indicated to me that schools might be structuring parental participatory practices in an attempt to make them educational and democratic.

A school that met the sample conditions was located as a potential site with the knowledge and contacts of my research committee. Dr. Coulter, arranged a meeting with the school’s principal, Ms. Joanne (a pseudonym). Dr. Coulter, Ms. Joanne and I met in February 1998, at which time I introduced myself and discussed the study. Ms. Joanne reciprocated introducing herself and the school. She expressed her interest in my project and welcomed me to “study” parental involvement on the condition that I would share my observations with the school’s accreditation team in the next school year. I agreed upon the conditions.

Atma Elementary (a pseudonym), the school to which I gained access, was an inner city school whose surrounding community had a high proportion of single parent families many of which are headed by young mothers (ages 15-19). In 1994, 41 percent of the households earned less than $30 000 a year (Raj K Regional Health Profile, 1994). In 1998, the student population of the school was 450. English was the first language of 40 % of these students. Other languages spoken by students in the school included Arabic, Bengali, Bosnian, Cambodian, Cantonese, Croatian, Czechoslovakian, Farsi, Gujarati, Hakka, Hindi, Japanese, KISwahili, Korean, Malay, Mandarin, Polish, Punjabi, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish,
Tagalog, Tamil, Tigrinya, Ukrainian, and Vietnamese (Raj K School District, 1998). The school staff consisted of a female principal, a female head teacher, 19 classroom teachers (16 female, 3 male), and 23 school support staff. Teaching experience ranged from two to more than ten years. No teacher was a visible minority but languages spoken among teachers included English, French, Italian, Spanish, Toishan, German, and Russian.

Research Approach

As one aim of my investigation was to gain an understanding of how one elementary school, defined, structured, and practiced parental involvement, a qualitative case study design using ethnographic techniques was the most suitable approach. A case study is limited to single unit, such as a person, group, institution, period of time, or event; they are also used to increase the understanding of a particular problem, issue, or concept (Merriam, 1998; Stake 2000). The focus of investigation of this study was on what Yin (1994) calls a “contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 1) or what Merriam (1998) describes as particularistic, meaning that the study focuses on one phenomenon, ethnic minority parental participation.

Case studies Merriam (1998) states, can be descriptive, interpretive, or evaluative. A descriptive case study is used to present detailed account of findings where little information is gathered about a specific topic and/or problem. An interpretive case study is used to explain some phenomena or to extend theory that is incomplete. An evaluative case study’s key feature is assessment. This study is what Merriam (1998) calls interpretive in that it offers an in-depth account of the conceptualizations and practices of parental involvement from various
school-based educators. Semi-structured interviews provided me with the best way to acquire
school-based educators’ deeper understandings of meanings and multiple realities (Bogan &
Biklen, 1982) as they related to beliefs and practices of the institutional inclusion of ethnic
minority parents’ ethical and moral concerns for their children from the perspectives of those
“responsible” for involvement: staff members.

Participant Selection

After gaining approval from Ms. Joanne, I sought approval to conduct the study from the
school district’s superintendent of schools. The superintendent directed my inquiry to the
district’s director of instruction. I discussed my research with the director of instruction, told
him about Ms. Joanne’s interest in my research, and submitted a brief description of my
methodology as well as a copy of my ethical review approval. Upon authorisation from the
director of instruction, I began “visiting” the school on a daily basis for three months. During
the three months I completed four tasks: I acquired a feel for the school, I introduced myself to
the teachers and some parents in the school, I selected participants who would volunteer to be
interviewed, and I conducted semi-structured interviews with all voluntary participants.

With the assistance of Ms. Ruth, the school’s community coordinator, I identified
potential interviewees within the school who I thought might be interested, knowledgeable,
and/or informative about the issues being studied. Although I had gained approval to conduct
my research in the school from Ms. Joanne, the principal, she directed me to Ms. Ruth who was
deemed the expert in the school’s parental involvement practices. I approached teachers and
members of the school’s support staff about their willingness to volunteer as participants in the
study. I approached a few parents as potential interviewees as I was interested in triangulating school staff responses. All requests were accompanied with an explanation of my research study. In total, 17 classroom teachers, 4 support staff members, 3 parents and the community-school coordinator agreed to an interview (see appendix A for a list of the participants).

Data Collection

Most of the data that I collected occurred during the initial three months of visiting the school, between March and May 1998. During this period I conducted in-depth interviews with the selected participants (17 classroom teachers, 4 support staff members, the community-school coordinator, and 3 parents). The teachers, support staff and parents were interviewed once and the community-school coordinator was interviewed three times. Subsequent “follow-up” interviews and informal discussions with two members of the support staff and with the community-school coordinator occurred between December 1999 and September 2000.

I used three ethnographic techniques in my data collection: participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and document review (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). The techniques were useful as information gathered from participant observations was used to challenge what Habermas calls the truth and rightness of the data gathered in interviews. Similarly, information gained in interviews could be cross-checked with school policies and newsletters. Participant observation involved observing, listening, and chatting with parents in one particular space in the school: the community room. Being an observer in the community room allowed me to gain a sense of the purpose and goings-on of the room. Of particular interest to me was noting who participated in the use of the room and why. For example, one teacher had
commented that the community room is often full of parents. I was interested in verifying the
teacher’s observation with my own. My observations of and casual conversations with parents
were recorded in the form of field notes and used in data analysis to assist with triangulation.

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain detailed information about participants’
ideas, thoughts, feelings, and interpretations of school-based parental participation practices.
Further, I hoped the interview format would provide participants the opportunity to freely
express their perceptions and notions of inclusion in a public school. In interviewing the
teachers and support staff, I asked questions about the nature of their relationship with
parents, opportunities they provided for parents to be involved in the school and in the
classroom, and how they determined what the needs were of families.

Ms. Ruth was open to my questions about her role, job requirements, and her deliberate
practices of including minority parents in the school. The three parents I interviewed provided
me with an understanding of how school practices of involvement had affected them. With my
interest in investigating what educational and democratic parental participatory practices are
and how they are structured, I also posed open-ended questions on themes such as
demographics, community, relationships, and school structural arrangements. As each
conversation progressed with a participant I pursued specific issues that arose from the
particular conversation. This enabled me to “respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging
worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1988, p. 74). For
example, when asking Ms. Devika how many children she had and in which grades they were
enrolled, she talked about schools in Sri Lanka. From her description of Sri Lankan schools, I
learned what aspects of schooling and education she perceived to be important. This led to her
comparing Sri Lankan schools to Atma Elementary. In her comparison she spoke of her and her husband’s history of involvement in schools. From there I pursued specific questions pertaining to the nature of their involvement.

The interview process allowed me to gain an in-depth understanding of many issues participants perceived as relevant. For example, Ms. Devika spoke of being perceived as a stranger, the importance of learning English, and her concerns about the amount of violence and crime appearing in television programs. The data for the study, gathered in semi-structured interviews, was audio-tape recorded and transcribed. Prior to interviewing, all participating adults signed consent forms that stressed anonymity and confidentiality. All but two interviews, one held at the School District’s Education Centre and the other at a restaurant, were conducted at the school. Interviews were conducted in English and ranged from 35-80 minutes.

During the initial three months of data collection I also collected a number of documents that assisted me in verifying information through the process of triangulation (Gay, 1996; Huberman & Miles, 1994). According to Stake (2000) triangulation has been generally considered a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify meaning. The documents included policy handbooks, guidelines for formal school procedures, and school bulletins. I used the technique of triangulation when, for instance, many teachers informed me that Community Council meetings were advertised in school bulletins. In verifying the truth of their assertions, I retrieved and examined all school bulletins that were distributed that year and the previous year. I also searched the school district policy manual to see what it stated about school-based community councils.
Data Analysis

Between 1998 and 2000, I engaged in a number of different “phases” of analysis. The first phase occurred in September 1998 when the first set of interviews, which occurred between March and May 1998, were transcribed verbatim from audio-tape by a private agency. In September 1998 I began reviewing the transcripts to re-familiarise myself with the words of the participants. I then listened to each audio-tape while reviewing the corresponding transcript for accuracy. I edited each transcript eliminating repetitive words and words like “uh” and “you know.” I then delivered to the participants copies of their transcripts and requested that these be read for accuracy. This gave them the opportunity to make changes to their responses by omitting sentences and thoughts or adding clarity to them. I returned to the school two weeks later and collected the edited versions. Only two teachers requested that changes be made.

The second phase involved a combination of using “Atlas,” a computer assisted data analysis program, and manual coding as common themes emerged from the narratives. This as Huberman & Miles (1994) call was the process of data reduction. Following this, I grouped participant responses in separate word processing files according to themes such as, community school, forms of involvement, motivation: understanding, education, and schooling.

The third phase involved transcribing the follow-up interviews. I repeated the process I engaged in during phase one and two (interviewing all participants). The fourth phase involved data verification (Huberman & Miles, 1994) where I sub-divided and cross-checked all themes with categories – such as communication, colonisation, democratic breakout, and publics – that corresponded with themes in my field notes and those arising from my document analysis.
As concepts and patterns emerged I re-read Jurgen Habermas’ theory of communicative action and discourse ethics to begin a theoretical analysis. I found many ideas within Habermas’ theory, such as colonisation and participation in ethical discourse, supported and explained what was occurring in the school. Other “evidence,” such as the conditions necessary for ethical discourse, challenged theoretical claims. I then critically examined both Habermas’ theory and common schooling practices of involvement. As a result, I found it necessary to conduct further follow-up interviews and discussions with particular participants about the process of dialogue and conditions that stood out, such as silence and safety. Data collected in all follow-up interviews and discussions was then tested against earlier analysis results and theory.

Upon completion of the data analysis, writing of this dissertation was held up due to personal reasons. In January 2008 I re-examined the data and analysis, re-reviewed the literature on parental involvement in education and schooling, and began writing the dissertation.

**Validity and Reliability**

Merriam (1988) writes that in qualitative research there are “ways to ensure for rigor in the conduct of the study” (p.24). The typical criteria for evaluating the quality of research are validity (internal and external) and reliability, however, there continues to be many debates in the literature as to how to think about validity and reliability. Lincoln and Guba (1986) describe validity as truth value. Internal validity or truth value is concerned with how adequately the
The researcher has represented a multiple set of mental constructions made by people. In ensuring internal validity of the research I used three strategies.

The first strategy was triangulation, a principal strategy to ensure for validity and reliability. Applying this technique, I validated pieces of information against other sources including other interviews, documents, and observations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ms. Ruth’s comments were often validated against teacher comments, my observations were “bounced off” Ms. Ruth and parents, and teachers’ interpretations were often validated with information gained from parents, support staff, and Ms. Ruth. School policies and newsletters were also used to authenticate observations.

The second strategy I used, that Merriam (1988) describes as the second most common strategy for ensuring validity in qualitative research, was member check. I shared transcribed conversations and interpretations with interviewees for accuracy. I also met with Ms. Ruth over a two-year period in which we reviewed and discussed the findings. The third strategy entailed clarifying my assumptions and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study. For this reason I outlined the progression of my thinking of parental participation, my assumptions, and my orientation in chapter one.

Reliability, according to Merriam (1988) refers to the extent to which findings can be replicated. Replicability, however, is problematic in qualitative research because human behaviour is dynamic and what many experience is not more reliable than what one person experiences. Further, “replication of a qualitative study will not yield the same results of any particular study” (p. 27) as there can be many interpretations of the same data. Thus, Marshall and Rossman (1995) conclude “qualitative research does not pretend to be replicable” (p. 146).
What is of particular importance to researchers is whether the results of the research are consistent with the data collected, that is, whether the results are dependable and consistent. The strategy I used to ensure dependability or reliability was triangulation.

External validity like internal validity has stimulated much debate in the literature (Merriam, 1988). Internal validity is concerned with the generalizability of the study, that is, the extent to which the findings of this study can be applied to other situations. Gay (1996) is of the opinion that generalizability or transferability is “left up to the consumers of the research and to other researchers” (p. 229). It is the reader, Gay maintains, that might believe findings have a degree of applicability to her environment. It is not possible to generalize statistically since the intent of qualitative research is to provide context-bound interpretations of phenomena rather than to generalize findings to other contexts.

I recognize there are limitations of transferability of the study as it is bound by the context of the school and the selected participants. I contend though, that the research questions can be applied to other situations, as could Habermas’ theory of communicative action as Habermas does claim to generate a normative theory. I also recognize that although I selected a case study approach to understand notions of minority parental participation in one multiethnic elementary school, the knowledge gained can be used to assess other situations (Merriam, 1988). For example, what I have learned about a breakout democracy can be transferred to examine similar situations.
Limitations of the Study

Several limitations affected this study. Time restraints restricted the exploration of ethnic minority parent involvement practices to one public elementary school and its participants. Another limitation is related to the analysis of the process of fostering publics because data about the three dialogue groups and two publics was collected from Ms. Ruth, not first-hand observations of the dialogue groups or publics. In addition, the focus of the study was on how school staff understood and practiced parental involvement. Consequently, the voices of ethnic minority parents are not presented, even though they might have provided information and insights that school-based educators did not.

Having described the research design and methods I employ in gaining an understanding of ethnic minority parental involvement in Atma Elementary School, I describe my research findings in chapters six and seven.
In my examination of the history of ethnic minority parental participation in Chapter 5, I found that parents were excluded from participating in education through colonisation by the administrative-bureaucratic system. School related personnel often strategically coordinated the action of parents through the use of coercion, not consent. In this chapter I begin to explore the nature of ethnic minority parental involvement in one public, multi-culturally populated, elementary school: Atma Elementary School.

Institutionalization of Parental Involvement through Policy

The structure of the school system and the roles and responsibilities of teachers and parents are governed by the formal rules outlined in the British Columbia School Act. In 2002 the Education Minister introduced amendments to the 1989 School Act in regards to parental involvement which, the Minister states, support the goal of improving student achievement (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002). Section 8 of the School Act legislates three ways that parents can have a role in school planning and decision-making: school planning councils (SPC), parent advisory councils (PAC), and district parent advisory councils (DPAC). The legislation vaguely defines the roles and responsibilities of school councils, and accords them advisory capacity only. A school planning council, made up of three parents, one teacher, the school principal, and one student from grade 10, 11 or 12, is mainly responsible for developing, monitoring and reviewing school plans for student achievement. To become a parent
representative on a school planning council one must be elected by secret ballot by the school’s parent advisory council. A school parent advisory council is intended to represent the collective view of parents of children in a school. The PAC can advise the school staff, principal, and board on any matter relating to the school. All parents of children in a school are entitled to attend PAC meetings and vote at general meetings. A District Parent Advisory Council represents the collective views of PACs in a school district. A DPAC advises the school board on any matter relating to education, such as policy and curricula, in the school district.

Other provisions too are made for parental involvement in the School Act. Section 2.2(7) states that parents are entitled to information about their child’s school attendance, behaviour, and progress. They are allowed access to annual reports on the general effectiveness of educational programs in the school district and they can also consult with a teacher or administrative officer about their child’s educational program. Section 7.1 states that a parent of a student may provide volunteer services at or for a school. Section 11 contains provisions for parents to appeal decisions made by school board employees that significantly affect the education, health, or safety of children.

Although the policy “creates” space for parental involvement in schooling, parental involvement manifest in these forms represents an instrumental view: parents are treated as means to improve student achievement; and principals and teachers assume particular positions of public authority while parental involvement practices are restricted to parents being “permitted” to talk with a teacher or principal about school programs, to volunteer, to attend council meetings, and appeal problematic decisions. The policy fails to recognize
minority parents as communicatively competent and as already having a significant role in the education – in determining what is good, meaningful, and worthwhile – of their children.

Following 7.1 of the School Act that states that a parent of a student may provide volunteer services at or for a school, Raj K School District too outlines its policy on parent volunteers. School District Policy 2.15 (Raj K School District Policy Statements and Administrative Regulations Handbook) states that the Board recognizes the value of volunteer programs. In the School Board’s opinion as volunteers, ethnic minority parents are not to undertake tasks which require their making programmatic or educational decisions; they are only to serve a complementary function. Again, ethnic minority parental participation as dialogue and deliberation (free and open communication), with concerned others such as teachers and other parents, in publics, on questions of education, with the aim of reaching mutual understanding to improve educational practices is excluded.

Strategically Coordinating Actions of Ethnic Minority Parents

In Atma Elementary, many teachers conceptualized ethnic minority parental involvement as purposive-rational action and strategically coordinated the actions of parents for the purpose of achieving pre-given ends: supporting teacher-directed and classroom activities. Ms. Lisa, for example, spoke about using parents as a resource to supplement a multicultural unit she taught in social studies: “We had a few keynote speakers and parents from different cultures come. Someone's grandma came in from India. A Taiwanese mom came in. She brought in food and stuff and gave different cultural talks.” Ms. Sandy was another teacher
who recalled an instance when a parent volunteer supported classroom activities. Ms. Sandy explained,

I had a parent last year come the last two months of school and help out. But she recently just came from Thailand so she had very little English but she was a music teacher back in Thailand so she helped out with my choir. She helped out in the classes with singing. She did a couple of activities with them. It was great to have, not a partnership, but having that extra person to watch for the kids and an extra body in the room just helps with behaviours, with setting the tone of the class.

We get materials from the Ministry that dictates what we should and shouldn't do and we have just a few samples of text books and types of resources but nothing is as genuine as from the actual culture itself.

Ms. Sandy’s comment is a prime example of how bureaucratic authority and purposive rationality are linked, and how parents are funnelled by administrative systems into patterns of instrumentally rational behaviour. The teachers saw themselves as professionals whose responsibilities rest with the instruction and development of students both intellectually and socially. In the teachers’ views, minority parents also had a distinct role: they were to support classroom activities, teacher expectations, and schooling. Teachers did not account for parents’ lifeworlds – shared assumptions, background knowledge, and reasons on the basis of which parents and teachers may reach consensus (Habermas, 1987; 1996) – beyond one of supplementing their teaching. Teachers did not even allude to the fact that parents might have their own notions of participation, or that parent-teacher dialogue about ethical concerns were central to education or was at all valuable in informing their own practices. Misgeld (1985) contends that as professionals, teachers are representatives of colonisation. He states that teacher practices are often based on only their so-called professional knowledge, such as Ms. Sandy’s practice in reference to the ministry of education. Teachers fail to be accountable to
the cultural groups with which they work; they fail to recognize that they need to be accountable to the “general cultural knowledge and to the interests of the cultural group whom they are advising” (p. 107). Professionals, he states, carry on as though there is no need for this basic knowledge and invade the grounds on which individuals formulate meaning and common understandings on questions of what should be done. In Ms. Sandy’s case, she delineated her role as a teacher from that of the parent. She believed that her job was to teach the official curriculum to children following provincial ministry guidelines. To do so, she decided on the method of instruction and coordinated the involvement of the Taiwanese mother such that the mother’s contribution supported Ms. Sandy’s social studies unit.

Like Ms. Sandy, Ms. Elizabeth too appreciated the “extra hands and eyes” of parental volunteers. She recalled using volunteers “as a way of providing lots of extra activities for the kids.” Ms. Elizabeth described how ethnic minority parent action was strategically coordinated:

When parents aren’t willing to come in and volunteer, I say to somebody at the door, “I really need you to stay today because we’re doing this painting thing” and they would. But that’s what it takes, really going after people. This year I did have a couple of parents who were interested in doing more education themselves so they saw the volunteer opportunity as a way of doing their hours. That worked out really well. But it’s not quite the same as having a few of the moms in the class to do a project.

Like Ms. Sandy, Ms. Elizabeth recognized that parents were the means to helping her accomplish her task and steered their involvement accordingly displaying little concern for the unique perspective of each parent.

Some of the teachers spoke about asking parents to accompany their classes on field trips. Ms. Judy stated, “With field trips I send out notices asking for help. If I don’t get a high response, I know lots of people work.” Although Ms. Carmen had not had “a great deal of parent participation,” she had parents accompany her class on field trips and outings such going
skating. Similarly Ms. Sandy, Ms. Pin, and Ms. Tess had parents assist during field trips and special events. Ms. Pin stated,

On something like an ice-skating trip or when we do a Valentines Day party parents often come in and help. They'll either help hand things out or organise the kids into groups. [Parents] do get involved but I find we do need to send home a note asking “Is there anyone who's interested?” Not often do we have parents who come in and say, “This is what I'd kind of like to do on this particular day.” If we send an invitation out we usually get some response.

Ms. Tess's comments reflected her subjective intentions:

Occasionally, I've known where to go if I need help. I've known which moms will be willing to do certain things, like helping me to get the costumes on kids before a play or helping me to translate something, or filling me in on what the information was on Diwali. I got more information out of the parents, and more accurate certainly than the stuff I got out of the kids, and more relevant to the kids because sometimes what I read in books has nothing to do with them.

Other special events in which Ms. Rosy saw parents involved included read-a-thons and chocolates sales where “parents would come and help count money or help go through the forms.” In October a school-wide potluck dinner was organized and in December a school-wide breakfast was arranged. “Moms come help out. They'll cook, or help serve, or clean up” at the breakfast. Ms. Carmen added, “We have a good group of parents who help out and organize fund raisers, but it's always the same parents.” All of these teacher practices aimed at the successful realization of parent services on the basis of an end that they had pre-determined.

The library was another place where parental involvement was coordinated without accounting for parent’s lifeworlds. Ms. Sarah stated,

Presently I have two parents working in the library. I could use as many as eight parents. So as you'll see, instead, the students are working through the lunch hour. It's very clerical. Books that circulate throughout the library in a day all have to be carded and then put back on the shelf and so forth. For the two parents that I have working right now there is never a time when they come that they don't have enough to do. When
they leave there's always still more to do. It's constant. I have never run out of jobs for volunteers to do.

A few teachers, though, were of the opinion that involving parents in school activities was not a part of their job, rather, they delegated that job to the community-school coordinator Ms. Ruth. Ms. Mida explained,

Ms. Ruth looks at things like volunteers. In our case she’s working a lot with new immigrants and fulfilling some needs that they might have through volunteering either in the kitchen or the library so that they feel like they're viable contributing members. So it's really her job, that office. I mean we support what she does and often we're the recipients of some of the stuff that she does.

To the librarian, Ms. Sarah, parental involvement had two benefits: volunteer work supported teacher determined activities and it assisted parents in the process of social integration.

Specifically, volunteering was considered as one “solution” to improving another challenge: successful communication between the parent and the school. In this way, Ms. Sarah unknowingly suggested the effects of colonisation. She stated,

I do think it's a two-sided affair. I really appreciate the help that the parents and the students give the library.... I do think with the parents that have come to help in the library, it does help with the English language. They really seem to enjoy working in the library and I think that's beneficial to them as well -- it does aid with their English a lot. With new immigrants, they like to see what is going on in the school and I don't mind them being here. They can see what is going on in school when they're in the library because all the kids use the library.

Ms. Sarah added, “being exposed to the way things are done in our country, it’s a benefit to them. I know they are helping the school but I also feel that the school is helping the parents.”

Both Ms. Sandy and Ms. Sarah commented on what they saw as, not what parents may have considered, the benefits of parental involvement. Echoing Ms. Sarah, Ms. Rosy stated,
“It’s really nice that parents who don't speak English, or speak very little English, are coming to volunteer their time and get involved and meet other people. It's really good for them I think.”

Ms. Susie, though, had a slightly different view. She explained,

We try to tell some of them, with their volunteering it helps with their English. It's your hands we want, it's your help. It doesn't matter if you can't speak the English language very well. You know the only thing is a lot of them just are afraid to. I give all these kids and the parents credit for coming to a country where they don't understand the language. You know, they're in a new country trying to learn new things.

Although for Ms. Rosy parents were asked to support school activities via “lending a hand” where linguistic communication in English was not necessary to participation, Ms. Susie stated that competency in English helped in volunteering so that parents whose first language was English could better steer parent action. Ms. Susie explained that as a chairperson of the school’s community council,

What I noticed was that for some of the ethnic groups English is a barrier for them. For kindergarten Sports Day I was helping organize it. We got lots of volunteers and one of the mothers [Mrs. Lee] went up to the teacher, cause we were doing hot dogs for the kids, and said, ‘How many hot dogs do I have to buy and give?’ Because English is a second language I guess the mother didn’t understand the teacher told her you just come and work. They’re buying everything. They want her [Mrs. Lee] to help make the food and get it ready for the kids. ... I think they’re afraid to volunteer because they’re afraid they’re going to get roped into doing something that they’re not going to understand or not know how to do.

Ms. Susie was cognizant of parents’ apprehension and the fear volunteering elicited but failed to realize the effects school-wide notions of parental involvement had on parents. She also did not see how the difficulty was not with non-English speaking minority parents. By assuming what non-English speaking parents were thinking and feeling Ms. Susie was unable to see beyond an anti-dialogical “solution.” Ms. Susie continued,
After the incident I sent out a newsletter that said please just come to our meeting. You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to, try to listen. If you don’t understand we’ll explain. If you have something to say please tell us but if you just come and try and learn what we’re doing in the school. … I’ve just tried to make them feel welcome, especially when I was a chairperson. If you want to, sit beside me so I can explain things to you.

Communication: Administrative Power Disconnected from Dialogue

Colonisation of minority parental participation in education in Atma Elementary was further accomplished using communication as an instrument of domination. Teachers’ had varying ideas of the purposes and methods of communicating with minority parents, none of which included collective deliberation. Teachers indicated that part of their work required them to keep parents informed of their children’s progress. In communicating progress to parents, teachers reinforced particular relationships. For Mr. Brian, his relationship with minority parents was clearly hierarchical and was sustained through the transmission of information to parents as he deemed necessary. Mr. Brian noted that he initiated contact with parents when a problem occurred involving a student. He stated, “If there's a problem or concern I usually try and take that to the parent right away.”

For Ms. Thelma and Ms. Margery communication about children’s progress, in part, involved transmission as information flowed in one direction: teachers to parents. Ms. Thelma explained,

I always keep [parents] informed. I send out a letter to all of them letting them know that I’m working with their child and in what area and if they want to contact me please feel free to do that. This year I started sending out notices to [parents whose children] were doing IEPs, Individual Education Plans.
We sent them a form that they could fill in. Just a short little questionnaire about how their child learns best, what they like to do, etcetera. Some of the parents did return them, about a third of them, if that.
We always send out the information letter that we’re working with their child and they can contact us if they want to. But rare is the time that I'll have them phone me or wonder about it.
Ms. Margery preferred that parents “dropped in” to check with her on how their child was progressing in her program. But for the parents who were not involved in this manner she passed on information by sending a note home. Ms. Margery explained,

What I sometimes do is develop a checklist so that every Friday I can send it home. It’s just like a grid with 4 points – participates well in class – any little comments. I can tailor it to the child; whatever the parent wants to know. I just check the boxes and that goes home every Friday.

For these teachers, communication was something they considered their responsibility but it was often conceptualized as something that teachers did “to” parents. A few teachers, though, admitted that they were often not as successful as they felt they could have been in involving ethnic minority parents in discussions and recognized the need for face-to-face contact. Ms. Thelma stated, “Sometimes I think that’s one area where I need to maybe work a little harder at – making phone calls to the parents and having them come over on an individual basis.” Ms. Thelma and Ms. Margery were not aware of whether ethnic minority parents valued the attempts at communication.

Classroom bulletins and general school newsletters were the other means of circulating information to parents about events in which the school proposed they could participate. Many of the teachers, however, commented that parental involvement was the greatest during school-wide events such as teacher-parent conferences. Ms. Margery stated, “the majority of parents don’t come in unless it’s around report cards [conferences] and there’s a special invitation.” She added,

I might have 5% that just check in weekly. They come pick up the kids and they just want to check in and find out what’s going on. And then another 5% at the other level that only come when the multicultural worker sets up an appointment. And then 90% are only around report card time when there’s a general school invitation.
In Ms. Tess’ opinion the purpose of a parent-teacher conference was pragmatic: for parents to gain an understanding of their child’s progress. Ms. Tess took advantage of the formal opportunity to communicate information to parents. She stated,

We had student led conferences – the kids sitting with their parents. I had better conversations with the parents when the kids were there and the work was all spread out in front of us and the kids were telling us all about it. Much better communication than when it's just from me to [the parents] in a standard report card interview. I really felt good that the parents went away with a really clear picture of what their child was doing, what it looked like, and what the issues were.

Although Ms. Tess spoke of the student-led conference format differing from the standard report card interview because children could present their school work to parents and parents were able to view the artefacts, she failed to recognize that communication was still only about a child’s school work.

Ms. Judy was the only classroom teacher who spoke of communication in parent-teacher conferences as dialogue. To her, dialogue was important to gaining an understanding of parents’ lifeworlds. Ms. Judy explained,

I have found parent-teacher interviews hugely valuable because, although parents may not want to talk to me out in the hall because that can be awkward, or when there’s a million kids around, when we sit down, they tell me a lot of things that are really valuable. I found, this is going to be a generalisation, but, some of the First Nations parents have helped me to understand, saying that their background with their parents was very different than what they’re trying to achieve with their children now and asking me if there’s any activity … [they] can do with their kids at home.

Like Ms. Tess, Ms. Judy set-up the conference so that parents could look at their child’s work and talk to her about it, but Ms. Judy allowed parents time to share their needs and concerns. She also found that in talking with parents about what they saw as valuable and good for their
child she gained a deeper appreciation of her relationship with all her students and of what she needed to focus on in her work.

Contributing further to the colonisation of parental involvement in education was the manner in which many teachers responded to, what teachers referred to as, the problem of or barrier to communication. Many teachers believed that discussions with parents were often difficult and at times impossible. Mr. Steve felt that when he needed to contact a parent it was “a problem when they didn’t speak a lot of English because [he] had to run around and find interpreters.” Ms. Terry expressed her view,

I have 30 kids. I would say less than half of [the parents] really are involved with me and are interested. I had student led conferences in March and I had 13 families show up out of 30. A lot of them it's because of the language. It's not that they don't want to be here, it's just they can't be here because they can't communicate with me. Unless they have their child translating or they have an older child translate or we have a translator come in or they bring their own translator.

Ms. Terry’s comment highlights the belief held by many teachers and by a few parents that minority parents were not involved in school activities because they did not speak English. Institutional barriers, such a lack of resources, and necessary conditions for communication were not seen as impediments. Neither dialogue nor discourse was considered central to the teacher-parent conference; if it had been, teachers and parents would have had access to resources, such as translators, to ensure there was equal opportunity and condition for teachers and parents to communicate with one another. Hence, fluency in English substantially affected who had the authority to speak.

One teacher shared her view about the “problem” of limited school support. Ms. Judy explained that although the Raj K District had employed five language translators – Chinese, Italian, Indo-Canadian, Korean, and Hispanic – these translators were shared among the schools
in the district. Translators were “available but they usually need quite a bit of lead time.” For her, this unfortunately meant that conversations had to be scheduled like meetings. Further, the five district translators did not represent all of the languages for which she needed a translator. Ms. Paula added, “there’s a lot of languages not represented like Bosnian-Serbo-Croatian for example, we don’t have a multicultural worker for that so we sometimes rely on other parents to interpret for us which is not always the best thing.”

Another way administrative power was employed reinforcing inequitable teacher and school parent relations related to parents who used family members as translators at conferences. Mrs. Brenda stated that only professional interpreters were legitimate because authority needed to be maintained. She stated,

When kids come to school, and they’re coming from a second language family, if they're speaking the language at home they must have an ability to comprehend [English]. If the child is explaining to the parent in Spanish or in Hindi or whatever language, the teacher doesn't understand [what the child is saying]. That child shouldn’t be telling the parent anything. In that state the child is being the parent, not the parent. You see that in a lot of families in the school and it’s unfortunate that we don't have a translator in the school that can do all of the languages.

Frustration with the lack of availability of language translators prevented dialogue within the restricted structure of the conference that itself only occurred twice a year. Interestingly, this lack of formal opportunity to talk with parents was one reason used by some teachers for their inability to build supportive relations with parents.

**Institutional Structure: Community Council**

Through its own formal policy statements, Raj K School District coordinated parental action. Following section 8 of the School Act, the school district reinforces the idea that the
Parent Advisory Council (PAC) is the institutionalized forum where parents can talk about school issues, programs, policies, and activities. Policy 2.10 of the Raj K School District Policy Statements and Administrative Regulations Handbook states, the Board, upon receipt of an application from parents of students attending a school, shall establish a parent’s advisory council. The objectives of the PAC are to “provide the means for parental involvement in the District’s educational programs, to promote understanding and communication between parents and the school with respect to the education of children,” and to “provide a means by which community values can be identified and used in the development of school policies.” At a school level, the idea underlying the purpose of the advisory council is democratically orientated in that the policy acknowledges the need for community values to guide the development of school policy.

In keeping with the guidelines of the School Act, Policy 2.10 of the Raj K School District Policy Statements and Administrative Regulations Handbook, Atma Elementary School established an advisory council, called the Community Council. The council, however, failed to engage ethnic minority parents in moral or ethical discourse to legitimately guide school policy. The opinion of many classroom teachers was that the Community Council served as a means by which parents could have input on school matters, but the teachers were unclear about what constituted input and the necessary enabling conditions to participation. Mrs. Neena stated, “I’d like the parents to get involved in the council. They do not participate and that way they can’t give their input. The opportunity is there, but [parents] haven’t developed the understanding yet.” Ms. Neena actually blamed parents for not attending stating that they did
not take advantage of the opportunity to do so. She did not perceive of any procedural or structural barriers that contributed to an inequality of opportunity for participation.

Unlike Mrs. Neena the school community coordinator, Ms. Ruth, did not view the Community Council as a means to having input into school matters because she recognized the structure and process of the Community Council as being problematic. Whereas Habermas outlines institutional requirements or preconditions for discourse, no such conditions were stipulated or followed in community council meetings. According to Ms. Ruth, minority parents did not have an equal opportunity to participate in discussions; only parents who felt welcome, comfortable, and spoke English attended the meetings. Ms. Susie, who regularly attended the community council meetings, commented on the attendance at the meetings saying “our chairperson, past chairperson, treasurer, secretary, there’s about six of us that are the core group. Sometimes the principal and the head teacher and the community coordinator would be all that would be at our meeting.”

In talking about minority parental input, Ms. Ruth noted that input at meetings was not linked to parental participation in decision-making or with opportunities to influence change. She, however, believed that with greater minority representation at meetings there would be greater opportunity for minority parents to voice their opinions and influence decisions. She stated,

The curriculum is designated from the province. What [we] need to have are people that go to the district parent meeting that then have a voice. There are not many school based curricular decisions that parents can even be involved in. Our parents aren’t being involved in the real meat of educating. If you want to know what your kids are actually doing everyday, well, you can find out but it’s a major maze to get to the place where you can actually have some input.

Ms. Paula, too expressed,
If you’re talking about educational programs, like math programs, then the decisions as to how those programs operate, it’s much more up to the teachers to make that decision. If it’s about the atmosphere of the school or activities that promote more community involvement then it’s a 50-50 decision.

In noting a distinction between the topics on which teachers had influence, matters on which parents were permitted to “have” input, and what matters were of professional concern, Ms. Paula described how the system impinged on the lifeworld of parents restricting communication.

Ms. Brenda, once a vice-chairperson of the Community Council, who regularly attended school Community Council meetings referred to parental input as decision-making. Ms. Brenda recalled once being involved in making decisions about fundraising but had never been involved in discussions about programs. Both Ms. Paula and Ms. Brenda too considered participation in decision-making to be the most important form of parent input. Mrs. Neena, a multicultural worker, was adamant that minority parental participation in both the school and district advisory council was important but she believed that minority parent involvement was hindered by not knowing what the process entailed and how participation might affect positive action. She stated,

They (district personnel) want to see different coloured faces on the committees but they are not really committed. For many years they have talked about it. When they bring parents in they never sit and tell them the purpose for coming, their role. They don’t encourage them to participate; they don’t give [parents] enough examples of how they can participate. People who come, I have seen that some of them just sit and do not really participate as I would want to see them participate in a democratic situation. People who have gone through schools here should give proper workshops to people who come from other countries. What is their role? Why are parents involved? What is the purpose? How does it make a difference? I have known people, university graduates from India, sitting on the councils but not participating fully because they don’t understand the purpose. They have to try to understand people from different countries.
and bring them in, include them. Then I will see it as real participation. Right now I don’t see it.

According to Mrs. Neena, the assumption that school district personnel made – parents would be involved in talking about or making decisions regarding matters of schooling if they simply attended the community council meetings – was distorted. Many factors hindered chances for ethnic minority parents to “give” input: a lack of communication to parents about their role in the process, no articulation of the purpose of the council, and a lack of understanding of how discourse could influence decisions, of communicative opportunities, and of inequitable conditions.

Ms. Ruth mentioned that on occasion ethnic minority parents attended the meetings but did not speak as often as those parents who were fluent in English. She recalled an incident when a parent from Sudan, Ms. Oblivawi, attended a community council meeting for the first time.

A mom came; she maybe had been in Canada for two weeks. She came because it said in the newsletter to come. She didn’t speak English and soon people were yelling at her. Oh, it was so uncomfortable. I was just mortified for her. My heart just broke for her. She didn’t understand what one mother [Mrs. Little] was saying and they were speaking slowly and louder and louder. Sometimes they forget to speak slowly. Everybody’s watching her and what the mother was trying to explain, well, it just didn’t matter. I’m sure all [the mom from Sudan] wanted to do was get out of there. She was on the hot spot.

Of course the woman’s never came back. I’ve talked to her since. She’s comfortable coming to the school now but not another meeting. She probably didn’t know what she was coming to. The newsletter said to come, so she came. Her children come to this school, right. Because they don’t know English doesn’t mean they don’t know. ... If the meeting was in their language, they would ask questions, they would add tons.”

According to Ms. Ruth, the structure of the community council meeting failed to support Ms. Oblivawi in her attempts to communicate with other parents. Although Ms. Oblivawi was clearly interested in understanding what was being said in the meeting, factors prevented her
from doing so: parents at the meeting failed to recognize each other as equal participants with
the same chances or opportunity to initiate and continue dialogue, and the informal rules of
the meeting were not commonly understood and followed. As the procedures and conditions
for dialogue were violated, mutual understanding, trust, and cooperation suffered. In
accordance with Young’s (1997) conceptualization, council members failed to engage in the first
step: that of recognizing and welcoming Ms. Oblivawi.

Incidences such as this frustrated Ms. Ruth and led her to organize an alternate council
meeting. She hoped that a greater number of ethnic minority parents would attend giving
them a chance to ask questions, to express their needs and concerns, and to be listened to in a
more comfortable and welcoming environment. Ms. Ruth explained,

We started having a council meeting during the day because I thought we could reach
some of them. But that didn’t really work because the same people that came in the day
came at night. So it sort of got monopolized by the same [majority] group.

This reinforced Ms. Ruth’s opinion that ethnic minority parents needed other publics to discuss
matters of schooling and education because they were not included or felt uncomfortable at
the community council meeting. She asserted that if parents felt welcome and comfortable
they would be more likely to speak. She stated,

We have to make sure that there are other places that [minority parents] have
voice. But we have to get them to the place where they understand that it’s OK
to question. I think they have to feel comfortable.

**Unchallenged Teacher Claims**

Many of the teachers’ understandings of ethnic minority parental involvement were
based on their own assumptions of ethnic minority parents and corresponded with ones
defined in district and school policy. Although communicative interchanges sporadically arose between parents and teachers, dialogue was often not sustained; few teachers seemed to believe that dialogue with parents was valuable. Thus, chances for discourse and communicative action failed to be noticed, taken advantage of, or encouraged. Further, with strategic methods of action coordination many teacher claims went unchallenged which contributed to the colonisation of parental participation in education in Atma Elementary.

Some of the unchallenged claims made by teachers included those that attributed the barriers of ethnic minority parental involvement to the life circumstances of ethnic minority parents without recognizing that school-wide practices and schooling structures contributed to colonisation. Ms. Rina claimed that parents failed to be involved in schools because “they're either taking ESL classes to learn English or they're trying to eke out an existence, trying to find a job to make a living and get started in this country.” She stated that the “opportunity is there if they want but, I think, they're quite intimidated by school.” Even though Ms. Rina recognized the structure of schooling hindered involvement she contradicted herself, stating that

It depends on the parents. If they're really motivated to come and if they really want to see what their kids are doing, then they will come. A lot of, I would say parents that have a middle class job, or professional parents, they're ... motivated to come because their children are probably learning and progressing really well. They want to see the positive that their kid is doing.

Ms. Thelma’s claims, too, were based on unchallenged assumptions and a lack of understanding of parents’ views of education. She stated,

I sometimes guess that they just feel uncomfortable about coming because some of the parents say, “Oh yeah, I had a trouble with that when I was a child. I was a terrible reader too.” Maybe they are looking at their life being reviewed through their child so maybe they hesitate to come be exposed to that again... . I don’t know if they just trust us or they just say, “Oh well, it's been taken care of. Maybe I don't need to worry about it.”
Ms. Elizabeth asserted, “I know with some of the people it's not work that's keeping them away from the school. It's maybe their own difficulties in school or maybe just the way their lives are going; they don't have anything to give.” Ms. Sandy claimed,

It’s basically their own will to be involved. Maybe if you're in a bad situation at home you don't feel really positive so you don't really want to take interest in things around you and maybe they don't want to become involved.

Parental involvement as a supportive function dominated teachers’ conceptualizations through their understanding of their own roles and responsibilities and through their adherence to school-wide policies and practices aimed to control parent-teacher relationships. In many of their beliefs the life circumstances of parents prevented them from participating in their children’s schooling. Many teachers failed to see how their practices contributed to the problem or suggest how they could facilitate greater involvement; many teachers did not recognize that they were the agents of the bureaucracy who unknowingly contributed to the colonisation of ethnic minority parental participation in education in school.

Generally, teachers judged the degree of ethnic minority parental involvement in the school based on the quantity of ethnic minority parental attendance in three activities: volunteering, attending parent-teacher conferences, and attending community council meetings. Participation in a manner other than that funnelled by the administrative system into patterns of instrumentally rational behaviour failed to be recognized. Minority parents who did participate in the school were quickly socialized by school personnel by being told how they could be involved and what the rules of involvement were. In not recognizing the effects of their strategically coordinated practices, teachers failed to create or take advantage of
opportunities to understand what was important to ethnic minority parents and how they were already participating in their children’s education.

Comments such as: “being ... exposed to the ways things are done in our country, it’s a benefit to them” (Ms. Sarah); “we try to tell some of them ...volunteering helps with their English” (Ms. Susie); “you don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to, try to listen” (Ms. Susie); “just come and try and learn what we’re doing in the school” (Ms. Susie); “the policy at this school has always been an open policy” (Ms. Rina); “the opportunity is there if they want to [participate]” (Ms. Rina); “if they’re motivated to come, ... they’ll come” (Ms. Rina); “if you want to volunteer you’re going to volunteer” (Ms. Brenda); and “parents that have a middle class job, or professional parents, they’re ... motivated to come because their children are probably learning and progressing really well” (Ms. Rina) suggest that teachers believed that the lack of ethnic minority parental involvement in school stemmed from the parents themselves not with what participation meant to parents or how ethnic minority parental participation could potentially mean something different. Teachers failed to recognize how restricted school practices, limited structural support, few opportunities for dialogue, and a lack of understanding of what counts as democratic participation contributed to the under representation of ethnic minority parental participation in Atma Elementary.

**Refocusing School-Parent Relations**

Ms. Ruth’s observations of and experiences with parental involvement were unlike those of classroom teachers. Most noteworthy was Ms. Ruth’s awareness of structural inequalities that limited ethnic minority parental involvement. Unlike Ms. Rina who claimed that there...
were equal opportunities for ethnic minority parents to become involved in various forms, Ms. Ruth was aware that equal opportunity did not exist. She questioned how ethnic minority parents could participate at an “equal level” with dominant group parents when the conditions for involvement favoured English-speaking parents from dominant cultures and when pre-determined forms of involvement favoured parents familiar with the Raj K District’s system of schooling.

From conversations with members of the school’s staff I found that Ms. Sarah, despite her own practices, conceived of parental involvement beyond one oriented towards control. She shared her thoughts on what parental involvement “ought to be.”

For [parents] getting involved further than a helping role, I think they should be able to feel free to discuss different things with the principal and the teachers. I think that how they could be involved should be open for discussion. I just think it should be an open situation here. I have observed it in other schools. They could request or want to have certain things taught within the curriculum and so forth. I think it would depend on your community what [the curriculum] is supposed to be, it’s supposed to be together. It is something that should be worked out together so maybe what one community wants another community doesn’t.

Ms. Sarah’s view differed for she, like Ms. Ruth, questioned what constituted involvement and recognized that the needs of communities varied. In exploring Ms. Sarah’s, and Ms. Ruth’s understandings of participation I discovered that communicative, non-institutionalized parental involvement – participation in dialogue about matters of ethical concern – did exist in Atma Elementary School, one that I describe in the next chapter.
Summary

In Atma Elementary I found ethnic minority parents’ participation in education being colonised by the system at the school, classroom, and individual level. For example, colonisation occurred through the institutionalization of parental involvement in policy, the practices of teaching staff, the use of communication as domination, the structure of community council meetings, and unchallenged teacher claims. According to the teaching staff, many factors inhibited the involvement of ethnic minority parents in the school; teachers claimed that many ethnic minority parents lacked understanding of the role of a volunteer in the school, did not trust the process of schooling, lacked confidence in speaking to teachers and other parents because they could not speak English, and lacked interest in participating. Unlike many teachers who associated barriers to involvement with parents themselves, Ms. Ruth recognized that limited opportunities for parents to engage in dialogue with staff members, teachers’ own ideas of what they believed constituted involvement, and a failure on the part of teachers to build meaningful relationships with ethnic minority parents often prevented meaningful communicative interchanges about education between members of the teaching staff and ethnic minority parents.

Many staff members failed to recognize that their practices of involvement were oriented to control not understanding. By strategically coordinating parental involvement without understanding parents’ lifeworlds and taking into account parents’ notions of education, teachers contributed to the colonisation of parental participation in education in school. Although some of the teachers managed to structure opportunities for participation, they did so by maintaining their authority in the school and control of their relationship with parents.
Teachers did not see how a lack of ethnic minority parental participation in the school may have been an act of resistance, that is, by not participating in institutionalized forms, many ethnic minority parents may have resisted the colonisation of their lifeworld. As Ms. Judy concluded, ethnic minority parents might have found participating in their children’s education more meaningful than participating in their children’s schooling.

Among members of the teaching staff, Ms. Judy’s conceptualization of ethnic minority parental involvement as dialogue differed. She found that when she made a deliberate point of listening to Aboriginal parents she gained knowledge of their lifeworld thus, their notion of education, which in turn enabled both Ms. Judy and the parents involved in gaining a greater understanding of children’s learning. The next chapter explores democratic ethnic minority parental participation.
Chapter Seven

Looking at Ethnic Minority Parental Participation as Democratic, Educational Practice

Habermas (1984, 1987, 1996, 1998) theorizes that questions of how we should live and act, and of what is good and worthwhile, can only be answered in undistorted communication. Chapter 4, a brief history of ethnic minority parental participation in British Columbia schools, revealed how distorted communication and colonisation by the school system prevented ethnic minority parents from engaging in dialogue about ethical and moral questions with school personnel. Similarly, in looking for ethnic minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice, Chapter 6 uncovered that opportunities for ethnic minority parents to engage in dialogue about educational concerns with staff members in Atma Elementary School were rare. Even though many of Atma school’s practices colonised ethnic minority parental participation, I did find outbreaks of democracy; chapter 7 examines the enabling mechanisms and conditions.

Providing Institutional Support: Community-School Coordinator

Habermas (1996) contends that human actions are primarily coordinated through the use of language. Everyday speech is based on a background consensus provided through the reciprocal raising and recognition of the validity claims of truth, rightness, and sincerity or truthfulness. Intersubjective agreement on values and standards (to solve ethical and moral problems) can be reached amongst a plurality of individual agents through the process of discursive opinion and will formation according to the rules of a communicative form of rational
decision making. Over time, as people become used to having their actions guided by speech and the mutual recognition of good reasons, relatively stable patterns of social order begin to form. As part of the social fabric of society, schools are places where ethical and moral concerns arise on a daily basis. In looking for ethnic minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice in Atma Elementary, I found that ethnic minority parents often raised ethical and moral concerns with the community-school coordinator. Their engagement in the dialogical process can be compared against Habermas’ idealized process of dialogue and discourse.

One reason for the engagement of ethnic minority parents in dialogue about educational concerns specifically with the community-school coordinator, Ms. Ruth, was that they saw her as a person in the school whose job was to provide support. Her work was unlike that of classroom teachers who were responsible for teaching a provincially-based curriculum and school district approved programs. The community-school coordinator’s job included developing, coordinating, and supervising community programs and services for all age groups in a given community school area. The programs include educational, recreational, cultural, health and social concerns. Programs developed and operated are intended to be consistent with the needs and interests expressed by the community and the various social agencies working in the community and with the policies of the board (Raj K District Job Bulletin).

Creating the position of community-school coordinator was one way Raj K School District provided institutional support to the community in supporting children’s learning. Further support was provided through the hiring of a qualified individual. Lopez, Kreider, & Coffman (2005) state that “who” fills the position of a coordinator is important because school personnel who are inadequately trained to work with parents contribute to poor home-school
relations. In a recent study, Martinez-Cosio and Iannocone (2007) reported that the role and qualifications of a parent involvement coordinator/school-parent liaison or coordinator is becoming increasingly important in supporting democratic practices that help parents from underserved communities enter the public sphere to participate as equal partners. Whereas once such a role may have been filled by a cultural broker – to “model behaviour for newcomers to successfully navigate the new culture in various settings” (Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007, p. 354) or as a “bridge between the dominant culture and parents’ diverse cultures” (Martinez-Cosio & Iannacone, 2007, p. 349) – today, the role is becoming one of engaging as an advocate for change and show the ways that schools reproduce educational inequalities. Martinez-Cosio and Iannacone (2007) argue that job qualifications for the position of school-parent coordinator or liaison should include “teaching credentials, classroom experience, and leadership skills” (p. 351).

As the community-school coordinator Ms. Ruth’s repertoire of skills and knowledge was unique. She had classroom teaching experience and had knowledge about school organization that she believed was essential for anyone to have who was working with parents and children in a public school setting. Ms. Ruth explained that in Raj K School District, only a member of the College of Teachers could hold the position of community-school coordinator. She stated,

Community schools in X and Y are different than we are. In fact Raj K is the only district that we’re teachers. In other districts it’s more of a recreation focus. Community-school coordinators are recreation people. In Raj K for the past 25 years we’ve come from a teaching background. In Raj K it’s set up to be a deliberate connection between the home and the school and the community.

Ms. Ruth also stated that her personality was suited to her job. She described herself as being welcoming, open, and a good listener. Other staff members spoke of Ms. Ruth with
admiration. “We have a wonderful school coordinator. She’s very warm, just gushes, you know,” noted Ms. Lisa. Ms. Carmen described Ms. Ruth as “very approachable” and as “filling the bill. ... I think a lot of the work [she does] is done behind the scenes. Even as teachers we’re not aware of what she does,” she added. Ms. Ruth “encourages mothers and families to network,” to come into the “community room and have coffee, and to find clothing” in the clothing storage room. Similarly, Ms. Sarah felt that Ms. Ruth “really reaches out to the community and relates. She has the time to be able to talk to community members and help them in any way that they need to be helped.”

Even though Ms. Ruth considered her personality, training, and experience as qualities that contributed to her success in working with ethnic minority parents as the school community coordinator, she credited the leadership of the school’s principal. The principal believed in building a school culture that encouraged the staff to make connections with parents and the community, and build quality relationships with parents.

Re-conceptualizing Ethnic Minority Parental Participation in School

In Ms. Ruth’s opinion, the success of her job – developing, coordinating, and supervising appropriate community programs and services for the students of Atma Elementary – relied on her knowing the needs, interests, and concerns of the students. One way she determined this could be done was to encourage what she called, “authentic” ethnic minority parental involvement. In Ms. Ruth’s view, parental participation required more than the participation of parents as laborers in classroom-or school-directed activities, it required ethnic minority
parents to engage in dialogue with her about their children’s education so that she could better support their learning. Ms. Ruth believed that the parental involvement practices among many of the teachers in Atma Elementary School were not what she called “authentic.” She stated,

> At some level parent involvement is tokenism. When you’re in the library carding books, it’s token involvement. I think volunteering needs to be meaningful and there needs to be a place for it but I think we can move towards helping [parents] work things out. We can’t work it out for them. We can provide space and resources but first we have to understand what it is they are talking about.

In helping parents “work things out,” Ms. Ruth recognized that education was a cooperative effort and that talking to and sharing ideas with others was essential to gaining understanding. In this way Ms. Ruth’s conceptualization of ethnic minority parental participation is similar to that of seeing it as educational practice. She mentioned that many teachers had yet to understand that ethnic minority parents had particular notions of education, often, ones based on experiences in other countries. She believed that teachers in the school needed to be open to answering questions posed by parents and accept “that it’s okay for parents to voice an opinion and ask questions.” Ms. Ruth concluded that she needed to create a comfortable, non-intimidating space within the school where parents felt they could talk to her when they felt they need to, not just when the school staff invited parents to the school.

Nieto (1996), Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2000), Lopez (2001), and Auerbach (2007) contend that a re-conceptualized, inclusive notion of parental participation needs to guide school practices. Ms. Ruth held such a notion and through various mechanisms and processes attempted to engage ethnic minority parents in conversations to gain an understanding of their needs and organize programs accordingly.
Creating Solidarity through the Community Room

The school’s community room, located across from the office on the main floor, was the first space in the school that Ms. Ruth focused on improving. She wanted to create a welcoming, safe space that minority parents could drop in at any time during the school day and enjoy a cookie and a cup of coffee, tea, or hot chocolate, and talk to other parents. As Young (1997) suggests, people must be recognized and feel welcome as a pre-requisite of dialogue. In the community room parents could also obtain many resources.

In one area dried and canned food was stored. Parents who needed food could help themselves to one grocery bag of items. A large pocket chart provided information about community programs and Ministry services. Another chart held numerous grocery coupons that parents could take or exchange. A large poster board provided information in various languages about local children’s clothing sales, tax preparation, parenting support circles, counselling services, out-reach programs, school board courses offered in languages such as Mandarin and Cantonese, and non-English language schools. Commercial posters and school pictures decorated the walls of the community room: “Together we can eliminate racism,” “Thank you for making good things happen,” “The greatest natural resource that any country can have is its children,” and photographs of the previous year’s winter concert. Parents could also seek assistance from Ms. Ruth as her office was located in a small room within the community room.

Monthly newsletters, distributed to all families, reminded and encouraged parents to visit the community room. The Atma School Newsletter (#1, September 10, 1997) stated,
Starting Monday, September 15\textsuperscript{th}, we are going to be hosting a coffee time in the community room (located across from office). We will be doing this every Monday. Come join us for coffee/tea and goodies. Come relax and meet your neighbours (p. 3).

Subsequently, the Atma School Newsletter (#3, November 3, 1997) stated,

It’s so nice to see so many of you in the school every day, bringing your children, picking them up or dropping into our community room. Our school is becoming the hub of our community. It is a place where we can talk about issues that affect our lives and the lives of our children. So many issues and problems can be solved by talking about them when they first arise. Please don’t hesitate to approach any of us if you have a concern. We all want the same thing – success for our students. Together we can make it happen (p. 1).

Parents and many teachers repeatedly mentioned that they believed the community room was as a supportive place for ethnic minority parents to gather and discuss issues of concern with Ms. Ruth and with one another. Ms. Ruth stated,

Parents are invited to come in and to share information with one another or to just talk and just kind of be. There’s coffee and there’s a little sign posted that says we’re going to talk about this today or if you want to, drop in. It’s a very open kind of environment, rather than saying, take your ideas and buzz off because we don’t care. It’s hard to describe, it’s very soft, it’s a feeling.

Young (1997) asserts that gestures of politeness and respect, and what she calls greeting, are necessary to democratic discourse. Greeting is especially important to establishing trust to help discussions begin. In Ms. Rina’s opinion,

The community room is open to parents and groups if parents want to meet together and talk about things. [Parents] know there’s someone there if they need to talk. [Ms. Ruth’s] trying to get the parents to come out.

Ms. Devika commented that the staff in the community room are helping families who have immigrated. They know all the problems regarding clothes. We came from a tropical country and they have a separate room for clothes. They always invite us there to get anything. They give lots of dried foods and don’t tell anybody that we are giving to you. ... We feel really embarrassed because we had good
jobs in our country. ... We get help from this school. They are really good people, really polite. We have to accept that.

In addition to working at making the community room an accessible, non-intimidating place for ethnic minority parents to obtain resources, Ms. Ruth explained that it was a space where parents could discuss issues, of what Habermas (1996) calls pragmatic, ethical, and moral, concern. Ms. Ruth recalled that on several occasions parents approached her on an individual basis wanting to talk to her about moral issues. She stated:

Some of the parents’ real concerns are disciplining kids at home. Bullying is in the news. They translate their experiences to here, “You know, in my country they had more homework. The kids had to work harder.” In a lot of countries education is a lot different than it is here. It’s very hard for them when their kids come to them and say, “we don’t do that here.”

In other conversations she discovered that parents had ethical concerns. Many ethnic minority parents grappled with understanding the norms of the school and the community. Parents felt anxious not knowing what influences may be shaping their children. They felt they needed others with similar concerns with whom they could talk. Ms. Ruth added,

There are discussions around families and violence. Those are big issues. Huge. [Parents] wouldn’t discuss that as a group but the more comfortable people feel, they might come and say, “You know, I know that one of my neighbours is crying. What should I do?” Together we then have to figure out ways to support her. These are not necessarily part of the group discussion but it is a springboard for more discussion.

Ms. Ruth also spoke of a parent with a pragmatic concern. She explained:

I have a mom that is coming tomorrow concerned about her son. We need to figure out what he’s doing and what he is learning. Many parents, though, do not come to talk about their children’s progress. They don’t want anything to happen to their son or daughter because they’ve made waves. They don’t know what the result of their action will be.
Unknowingly Ms. Ruth was encouraging the creation of private-publics. She believed that supporting parents required talking with them about matters that they perceived, not solely what the staff perceived, as worthwhile and meaningful. “You get at [their concerns] by talking and listening. Relationships are key, she stated. In Ms. Ruth’s view building relationships with parents was central to her work. The community room was one space that aided in the process. Attending to the immediate needs of ethnic minority parents, such as gathering supplies and finding community resources was a part of Ms. Ruth’s daily routine, but Ms. Ruth spoke of this work as a way of supporting parents, gaining an understanding of who they are, and of building a relationship of trust. She explained,

For some people [building relationships] is what you do. I see Ms. Joanne. It’s just who she is. What I try to do, even when I’m rushing about, if I’m talking to you, I really try to talk to you so you know I’m really listening. I think it’s about respecting other people, where they are and not, and I think it’s absolutely key. … Certainly you build trusting relationships by supporting them and helping them. I believe it is key.

In addition to talking with ethnic minority parents who visited the community room Ms. Ruth found other ways to build relationships. Upon the registration of a child in the school, Ms. Ruth introduced herself, informed the family of her role in the school, and gave them a tour of the community room. In this initial interaction Ms. Ruth displayed concern for their situation. She offered various resources – food, clothing, housing information – to the family and asked them if she could provide assistance in other ways. Subsequently Ms. Ruth contacted the family by phone to “check-up” and “keep in touch.” Parents were reminded that her office was located in the community room and that they could drop-in or telephone to talk to her at any time. Ms. Ruth believed such welcoming strategies were important steps necessary in the
cumulative process of building caring relationships despite at the time how small they may seem.

Ms. Ruth recognized that her role in the school, her idea of ethnic minority parental participation, and the support from the principal, all contributed to the building of respectful relations with ethnic minority parents. In reference to teachers who she thought failed to focus on building relations Ms. Ruth stated,

I think people can certainly get better, but the desire to want to be in community and to know people, you have to want to do that. Parker Palmer writes about education. This article is about not separating, doing life together. It means that you mean what you are. So, education and learning is a lot of who you are as a person, that is, who you are, where ever you are. In education, it is just crucial that you live what you believe. If your belief is that everybody is valuable, I think it’s something that rang true with me. It’s pretty important. And it bothers me if I can’t provide help for someone, somehow. If I can’t, I'll find somebody else that can.

Despite Ms. Ruth’s attempts at welcoming parents into the school, she found that gaining understandings of their concerns was often challenging and frustrating because many conditions hindered dialogue. Ms. Ruth described an instance where she claimed she failed in following through with a communicative interaction.

Yesterday morning, I’m sure this mom was really distressed. I asked her, “Are you ok?” and she said, “Well,” and just then another mom walked right between me and interrupted. I didn’t see [the distressed] mom again. That was really unfortunate. If you’re feeling pretty fragile, you’re gone. That was my chance and that was her chance.

Ms. Ruth believed that although she demonstrated concern by asking the mother whether she was alright, communication failed because the chance to continue communication was denied. This incident reinforced Ms. Ruth’s opinion that it was not only important for her to be
respectful of parents to whom she was speaking and listening, but it was also vital that other parents showed respect by demonstrating restraint and patience.

Ms. Ruth was forthright in explaining that she exercised particular virtues in her attempts to provide support and build relationships. Ms. Ruth explained,

Speaking, listening, accepting, respecting and not judging whatever it is, it’s huge. I think people then feel free to ask and discuss. That’s what’s important. If you don’t get at the issues that are really important to people, then they’re only going to ask you what day the school is open. I mean ask about stuff that doesn’t make any difference to them. That doesn’t build confidence. If they feel comfortable and respected and that I’m not going to judge them, that’s what I think is key.

Ms. Ruth was also adamant that a greater number of successful communicative interactions were needed to both improve parent-school relations and ethnic minority parental participation in discussions about education in the school.

Ms. Ruth’s practices support Benhabib’s (1996, p. 82) assertion that greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling “have their place within the informally structured process of everyday communication.” Greeting, rhetoric, and storytelling as Young (2000) states, are important modes of communication that supplement deliberative discourse. They can be used to create solidarity, which Habermas (1995) maintains develops through ethical discourse, which in turn is necessary to discourse on questions of moral concern. Such solidarity involves equal respect and concern for the well-being of others and the community at large.

Realizing of the Need for Private

In her attempt to create a safe space for ethnic minority parents to engage in dialogue about education at the school, Ms. Ruth invited all the parents of Atma Elementary to join in
what she called a “coffee and chat session.” She stated that she aimed to “open a forum where parents could share their views” and talk about issues that they deemed important. She anticipated that in discussions parents would express some common concerns, and that she would be able to attain greater understanding about the needs and concerns of children from the parents so that she could make better decisions about coordinating programs for their children. In this way Ms. Ruth was initiating an informal conversation with the intent that a coalescence of opinion would result. She was also interested in supporting ‘what is good for us’ through administrative power (Habermas, 1987, 1996).

At this particular group gathering, Ms. Ruth took on the role of a moderator. She described parents who attended the session as, “the New Canadians (recent immigrants) and Canadians who were rough and tough – parents living in poverty.” In inviting all parents of the school to the session, Ms. Ruth assumed that parents who did come would freely share their views and that she would be able to identify common concerns. From her observations of the communicative interchanges between parents, however, Ms. Ruth found that providing an opportunity for parents to talk to one another about educational concerns was not enough; communication was distorted. She stated that the Canadian parents’ voices dominated and that parents often spoke at each other. Many Canadian parents spoke loudly, authoritatively, and more often than did the New Canadian parents who, Ms. Ruth perceived, as hesitant and “feeling anxious about their English.”

Ms. Ruth was of the opinion that Canadian parents had a greater chance to express their opinions on various aspects of education because of their fluency in English. Inequality of resources (such as a lack of interpreters) for New Canadians to participate in discussions was
not the only hindering feature; the failure of the Canadian parents to consider New Canadian parents of equal status and provide equal opportunity and condition for them to represent their interests were factors. Conditions for dialogue, such as a cooperative attitude and a desire to want to listen to and understand others, did not exist. Habermas (1998) contends that language can be used as a medium for reaching understanding or bringing about consensus with others about matters of shared concern only when participants are cooperative—want to listen and understand others—and when equality of the conditions of speaking are satisfied; participants need to be committed to the process of communication directed toward understanding.

This dialogue group indicated that struggles for equal recognition must be addressed before participants are prepared to engage in dialogue.

**Realizing the Need for Separate Privates**

Upon reflection, Ms. Ruth realized that to support dialogue about education among parents for the purpose of gaining understanding of their concerns, they needed less open conditions of communication. Thus, Ms. Ruth invited only new Canadian and Aboriginal parents to a group gathering; she believed that minority parents would feel greater comfort speaking amongst one another a minority-status group. Ms. Ruth’s idea to form a sub-group is similar to Habermas’ (1996) idea of multiple, overlapping publics. The benefit of developing publics of few participants is so that they can be insulated from the distorting effects of a broader public. Participants can acquire, strengthen, and exercise the abilities required to engage with larger discourse communities.
In observing the communicative interchanges, however, Ms. Ruth found that Aboriginal parents’ and New Canadian parents’ perspectives, interests, and concerns differed and that each group focused on having their own concerns recognized. Ms. Ruth stated that the New Canadian and the Aboriginal parents’ “worlds are completely different and [are] a mile apart.” In the discussion, Aboriginal parents expressed interest in talking about ethical issues such as residential schooling, drug abuse in the community, and their identity as Aboriginal peoples. New Canadian parents had concerns about their children learning English, homework policies, and supporting learning at home. Ms. Ruth realized that for the time being attending to each group’s concerns took priority over attaining understanding on issues of importance common to both groups. Further, gaining an understanding of the parents’ and their children’s needs and concerns could only occur through a series of conversations.

Ms. Ruth found that although parents’ histories and concerns differed they were respectful of each other’s comments. She perceived Aboriginal parents as being willing to engage in discussions but feeling unsure about the group setting. She again believed that the New Canadian parents did not feel confident speaking about many issues because of their limited ability to speak English and of their fear of being judged. She described the discussions as doing “a little bit of small talk with everybody. Nothing actually happens.”

The Need to “Structure Communication”

Rethinking the conditions for communication in the previous dialogue groups, Ms. Ruth and the First Nations Home-School Liaison, Ms. Diamond, organized a gathering that occurred once a month where Aboriginal parents could discuss issues of importance to them. Ms. Ruth
was of the opinion that Aboriginal parents would feel more comfortable if they had opportunities to speak with other parents with similar backgrounds and history. Again Ms. Ruth was encouraging the formation of a subgroup or what Habermas calls a small-scale communicative association, which over time could potentially join forces or merge into larger ones. In this case, the purpose of the group was not to promote separatism, rather, it was to provide parents support by recognizing and validating each parent.

In this dialogue group Ms. Ruth found that parents did not attend regularly. Continuity of attendance was an important factor to building a bond of trust. At the group gatherings Ms. Ruth discovered that the structure of communication differed. She stated, “There was more silence than there was speaking.” Ms. Ruth had predicted that if Aboriginal parents were given the opportunity to gather with one another, they would feel less intimidated, and more likely to express themselves. From her observations of communicative interchanges between parents, and from her conversations with Ms. Diamond, Ms. Ruth concluded that many may not have felt comfortable in such a school setting or did not feel a need to attend; the historical exclusion of Aboriginal ways of speaking and of their identities in school may have contributed to the lack of parent presence in the school. Hicks (2002) explains that systemic inequality “generates a vicious cycle of exclusion that drains the motivation for the most disadvantaged to participate” (p. 234). The legitimation of school – the sense that school was in their best interest and deserving of their support – may have been in question.

In another attempt to help parents feel comfortable Ms. Ruth and Ms. Diamond decided to organize an activity for parents in which to engage during the session. At one gathering, Ms. Ruth set up electric fry pans so that the parents could make bannock. At another gathering Ms.
Ruth and Ms. Diamond brought in large pieces of cloth, beads, and buttons so that parents could make blankets. Ms. Ruth and Ms. Diamond found that the quantity of speaking did not substantially increase, but, that parents did seem to be more at ease. Ms. Ruth believed that making bannock and beading a blanket took the immediate focus off speaking and provided parents time to be in the presence of concerned others, feel connected, listen to stories of those who did speak, and possibly prepare for speaking themselves.

The creation of the next private differed from the previous three in that it served as a sanctuary preparing parents to go public.

**Creation of Private Sanctuary to Prepare to go Public**

In another attempt to support discussions of education Ms. Ruth decided to invite only New Canadian mothers. Some of the mothers were invited via a telephone call while others were told of the opportunity to meet when they brought their children to school in the morning or took their children home after school. The group of mothers began by meeting once a month in the school’s staffroom to talk to one another and Ms. Ruth about specific subjects such as math and language arts, the curriculum, and school policies. Ms. Ruth stated that the parents who regularly attended the gatherings found the dialogue group to be so valuable to their understanding of schooling that they asked her if they could meet with her once a week. Maia (2007) comments on the importance of the frequency of dialogue asserting that “daily conversation is fundamental for the processing of personal and social problems in highly informal ways ... It is through dialogue – speaking answering questions, and considering the viewpoints of others – that people frequently give meaning to their own condition (p. 79).
Ms. Ruth stated,

It’s fabulous. It’s just the most fun. Every Thursday morning we have about twelve people that come. These mothers come from all corners of the world and have such different experiences. Now, their English is limited but as soon as we can get one person translating for the next person we’re o.k. There’s a lot happening. They come to the group and ask questions. They’re getting to a place where they really are comfortable talking because they come from places where you don’t question what the school is doing.

Ms. Ruth also stated that for all of the mothers attending the group English was not their first language. One mother attended for whom English was the fourth language that she had acquired; at the weekly group gatherings this one mother translated for parents in two different languages. In previous dialogue groups that Ms. Ruth attempted to foster, a lack of interpreters was one impediment to dialogue.

Even though the communicative abilities varied among the mothers but no one devalued the style of speech of another. They were able to communicate and understand. Communication took the form of question and answer and what Young (1997) calls narrative. Mothers told stories about their past experiences, listened to one another, asked questions, and accepted claims to rightness and truthfulness; subjective experiences were accepted as truth. Ms. Ruth found that parents exhibited feelings of concern as they shared stories. She noticed that relationships were being built among people within the group and that friendships between parents began to form. She stated, “One parent from China had a baby and the women from Sri Lanka went to visit the women from China. They’re developing friendships. That wouldn’t have happened before.”

Ms. Ruth believed that other factors besides interpretation contributed to the group’s ability to engage in dialogue: continuity of attendance of the group, solidarity, patience, and
respect. She found that the new Canadian mothers quickly felt included and accepted by other mothers even though they did not all speak the same language. She stated, “Parents came to the group ready to talk and listen.” Ms. Ruth described the process: when one parent spoke she would look to others in the group to ensure that everyone understood. If someone did not understand, the parent would try to rephrase what she had said or would turn to another mother in the group to assistance with translation. At times Ms. Ruth helped by providing analogies and explanations. Of particular significance was the ability of each mother to value the knowledge and feelings of others in the group.

Movement from Private to Public to Create Communicative Power

Habermas (1996) contends that a public comes into being whenever citizens participate in a discursive search for understanding of those issues that affect them collectively. Further, publics signify equal citizens assembling and setting their own agenda through open communication. They are important to democracy because social and political issues grounded in the biographical experiences of people can be identified and deliberated over, routines of society can be challenged, and considerable influence can be exerted over the formal system through agenda-setting (Grodnick, 2005). By inviting parents to discuss issues about education that mattered to them through a non-institutionalized process, Ms. Ruth was trying to bring ethnic minority parents’ concerns to the school agenda so that they could be discussed, and so that children’s learning could be supported by systems media (Habermas, 1996). In dialogue, that which is considered private or public depends on conditions of communication.
Ms. Ruth spoke of instance: one where New Canadian mothers cooperatively coordinated their action through acts of reaching understanding in a series of conversations over time. Ms. Ruth recalled that a discussion emerged after one mother expressed of an ethical concern she had about her child’s social development. This topic was of interest to other mothers as it prompted them to begin talking about their young children. Many issues emerged over the span of three gatherings in which mothers communicated their concerns, perspectives, and shared different views. The relationships that these mothers had already built with one another over time contributed to the nature of dialogue. Dimensions of openness and collectivity appear here. In one respect, parents were open to Ms. Ruth and certain other parents. For these mothers, their concern had not been open to discussion before. They felt safe to be open to Ms. Ruth who was a public figure, but also understood the need to protect their privacy.

During the third gathering, a common concern emerged: all of the mothers expressed that they were worried their pre-school age children would not be socially prepared for kindergarten because they did not have other children of the same age with whom to interact with on a regular basis. This is an example of Habermas’ idea that social problems become visible when mirrored in personal life experiences. Through further discussions with Ms. Ruth, the mothers formed the opinion that if each of their children were able play with one another, all of their children would benefit. Habermas (1996) writes, “experiences are first assimilated ‘privately,’ that is, they are interpreted within the horizon of a life history intermeshed with other life histories in the context of shared lifeworlds” (p. 365). Maia (2007) notes that by escaping political and administrative controls, public “open up the path for the thematization of
experiences, and personal and social problems, from the viewpoints of those who have been affected by them” (p. 78). It is important to note that by connecting individual or group experiences to a more general principle, thematization of “common situations is constructed not as accidental or contingent experiences in the lives of each person, but rather as situations that derive from conditioning forces of the social structure” (p. 78).

In terms of dialogue and deliberation, the decision on ‘what is good for us’ that emerged as a result of dialogue was genuine. According to Ms. Ruth, each mother was able to initiate dialogue, continue communication, make assertions, and respond to one another; each mother also sincerely expressed her feelings and opinions on the issue of concern. The mothers were truthful and respected the rights of others to speak; the speech conditions of symmetry and reciprocity (Habermas, 1996) were more closely approximated.

Taking account of the parents’ collective opinion and in an attempt to support their concern, Ms. Ruth thought about what could be done. She looked for community programs and resources that might meet the articulated need. At a subsequent meeting, Ms. Ruth shared the information she had collected with the mothers and mentioned that she could also try to find a classroom in the school where the children could get together. Parents indicated that they indeed preferred their children to meet in the school rather than at a community centre.

The next week Ms. Ruth spoke with Ms. Joanne, the school principal. With the approval of Ms. Joanne, Ms. Ruth located a room in the school where the children and mothers could get together for 90 minutes a week to socialize and use resources, such as books and hands-on-
activities, in the room. Through the communicative coordination of parents’ actions and the support from administrative power (Habermas, 1996), a pre-school play group was created.

In much of his recent work, Habermas (1996) argues for the need for citizens to participate in an inclusive process of opinion and will formation in the political public sphere in which they, as free and equal citizens, reach an understanding on which goals and norms lie in the interests of all and generate communicative power that then influences the process of institutionalization. In examining the practices of Ms. Ruth I find that free and equal dialogue about ethical concerns with enabling communicative conditions in school is an important dimension of democratic, educational, participation. The conditions allowed for a “context of discovery” and the group a “sounding board” for the detection of concerns that needed to be addressed (Habermas, 1996). The common need that was discovered discursively generated communicative power and took shape in the decision of Ms. Ruth.

Ms. Ruth’s practice demonstrates that ethnic minority parental participation as ethical dialogue about education resulting in informally developed opinions can shape educational opportunities for children and direct administrative power. Whereas more public community council and parent advisory meetings are already institutionalized in schools as venues where parents can discuss issues and potentially make decisions that would be good for all children, there is a “coercive element in appeals to a general interest or common good that can operate to suppress diversity and difference, making it particularly difficult for those on the margins to articulate what they may acknowledge to be their own more specific concerns” (Phillips, 2005, p. 93). This is not to say that social development cannot be discussed in a PAC meeting or that
it cannot become a more public concern taking form in publics, it could given the appropriate communicative conditions. As Habermas (1996) states,

The threshold separating the private sphere from the public is not marked by a fixed set of issues or relationships but by different conditions of communication. Certainly these conditions lead to differences in the accessibility of the two spheres, safeguarding the intimacy of the one sphere and the publicity of the other. However, they do not seal off the private from the public but only channel the flow of topics from the one sphere into the other (p. 366).

In this case, the accessibility and security of private-public contributed to dialogue and opinion formation that guided administrative power. The growth of private-publics is vital to democratic, educational school practice.

**Emergence of an Outbreak of Democracy**

In Atma Elementary, the institutionalized position of community-school coordinator, a knowledgeable and skilled individual able to work cooperatively with ethnic minority parents, and support from the school’s principal for building good relationships with parents were all enabling factors in ethnic minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice. Of particular significance was that the community-school coordinator’s practices were based on the conceptualization of ethnic minority parental participation as dialogue about education with concerned others. Ms. Ruth’s practices were unique for they were unlike those of many other staff members who emphasized the strategic coordination of action disconnected from communicatively coordinated action. In particular, she was able to couple administrative power with discursively generated opinion and preference.
Many factors contributed to the emergence of an outbreak of democracy: the consistency of attendance by parents; ethnic minority parents’ interests and identities informing both their own and Ms. Ruth’s decision about what to do; a commitment to the dialogical process; respectful dialogical interchanges; a cooperative attitude; concern for one another; and equal validation of each other’s identity and experiences. However, Habermas contends that the generation of communicative power necessary to combat colonization depends on a lifeworld that meets it halfway. Indeed, this is a crucial factor. The mothers were able to generate communicative power by creating solidarity via narrative and greeting, and security via the private-public conditions of communication.

This finding reveals that encouraging ethnic minority parental opinion formation and clarification of views about education through discursive interaction is one form of democratic, educational school practice. This finding makes a contribution to the literature on critical multiculturalism, anti-racism education, and parent involvement in that it shows that ethnic minority parental involvement as democratic, educational practice in schools can take two distinct forms that can be supported by media systems. That is, ethnic minority parents, teachers, and others collectively engaging in dialogue and deliberation about education – of what is good, right, and worthwhile, and what the best means are to achieve our goals – can take two forms: generating public opinion on ‘what is good’ and on ‘what we want,’ and offering justifications for the purpose of achieving consensus to support collective decisions on a common good. Determining what form of engagement would be appropriate would depend on the purpose of the public.
I apply this finding to my criticism in Chapter 2 of critical multicultural and anti-racism approaches to parental involvement that call for greater ethnic minority representation and involvement in institutionalized processes. I stated that Dei et al. (2000) theorizes that schooling would be more inclusive of diverse racial and ethnocultural students, parents, and community members if they were jointly involved in school governance – determining curriculum, making policy decisions, and hiring staff – and in other decision-making processes. My research finding indicates that ethnic minority parents are concerned with questions of the good and right and are interested in participating in educational decision making, but participation does not need to take the form of involvement in school governance. What, then, might minority parental participation in decision-making actually entail?

Whether minority parents are to engage in dialogue and deliberation for the purposes of making decisions within private-publics in the school, in institutionalized venues, or as more open publics outside the school, two questions must be asked: what is the purpose of forming a group and which deliberative mode would be appropriate or necessary? That is, in institutionalized or non-institutionalized processes, would ethnic minority parents and concerned others engage in dialogue and deliberation about ideas and choices for the purpose of achieving a consensus about what will be done? Are ethnic minority parents to generate opinions about an issue in open communication for the purpose of contributing to a pool of ideas about what is right, good or what should be done? Or, are ethnic minority parents to engage in dialogue for both purposes? If so, does one need to be a precursor to the other? Ethnic minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice could entail ethnic minority parents and staff members generating communicative power to direct administrative
power or as part of a deliberative body authorized to make decisions, or it could entail ethnic minority parents justifying and guiding the direction of, or approving, policies and programs in accordance with democratic procedures.
In this dissertation I stated that an instrumental perspective on ethnic minority parental participation has dominated the parental involvement literature and informed school practices for over three decades. Schooling practices based on this perspective and the colonisation of ethnic minority parents’ lifeworlds has contributed to inequities in schooling for ethnic minority children. Chapter 4, the history of ethnic minority parental involvement and Chapter 6, the colonisation of ethnic minority parental participation clearly demonstrate this as schooling policies and practices failed to support ethnic minority parental participation in education. Following Habermas’ (1987, 1996) theory of communicative action, I explained that further colonisation of ethnic minority parents’ lifeworlds could be prevented through fostering democratic, educational school practices. I submit that democratic, educational practices in elementary schools requires ethnic minority parents to engage in dialogue with other parents, school staff members, and concerned others in private-publics on matters of educational concern under equal, unconstrained, free communicative conditions, for the purpose of generating opinion and channeling the use of administrative power in a direction to improve school practices, programs, and policies. Ethnic minority parental participation as democratic, educational practice does not require parents to support the school bureaucracy per se, rather, common will and opinion generated in ethical discourse or consensus achieved through dialogue and deliberation about what is good for children needs to be supported by the school system.
Coordination of Ethnic Minority Parental Involvement in Atma Elementary School

The first question that guided this study asked: How is ethnic minority parental involvement being coordinated in school? Through my historical analysis in Chapter 4, I find ethnic minority parental involvement as being strategically coordinated, in the stratified school structure, by government officials and school personnel. Assimilation oriented, and often racist policies guided their practices.

Through my empirical investigation, I find that many of the teachers in Atma Elementary conceptualized ethnic minority parental involvement as purposive-rational action and had strategically coordinated the actions of parents for the purpose of achieving pre-given ends: supporting classroom and teacher-directed activities, such as volunteering in classroom activities, driving and supervising children on fieldtrips, shelving books in the school library, volunteering at fundraising events, attending community council meetings, and attending teacher-led meetings and conferences. In doing so, teacher actions contributed to the colonisation of ethnic minority parental participation in education in school. Some of the practices were in keeping with provincial and district policies that supported teacher-parent relationships based on authority and control rather than those based on mutual understanding. These contemporary practices were consistent with many I find to be historically situated in that administrative power increasingly interfered with and distorted the communicative process of the lifeworld in which ethical understanding, pursuit of knowledge, and social integration took place among Aboriginal, Chinese-Canadian, Japanese-Canadian, and Indo-Canadian families.
Practice of Democratic, Educational Ethnic Minority Parental Participation

The second question that guided this study asked: What form does democratic, educational practice take in an elementary school? The findings indicate that ethnic minority parental participation in dialogue as a private-public, on matters of ethical concern, for the purpose of generating opinion and consensus, and channelling the use of administrative power in a direction aimed at creating equitable school practices contributes to democratic, educational school practice. While ethnic minority parents and their concerns were systematically absorbed into the norms and structures of schooling, there was an outbreak of democracy; that is, there was an instance of administrative power supporting the participation of ethnic minority parents in dialogue for mutual understanding with others about ethical concerns in the school.

Of particular significance was the movement toward a private-public. Ethnic minority parents were able to create an intersubjectively shared space, discuss matters of educational concern, collectively decide on what was good for their children, and improve school practices that increased learning experiences for their children. This is a significant finding as it demonstrates the successful formation of collective opinion through a non-institutionalized process within the space of the school. Further, it is an example of communicative power originating in a private-public and taking shape in the creation of a small pre-school class. This speaks to scholarly critiques regarding the practical application of Habermas’ theory of communicative action (Posner, 1996). While the findings of this study do not concern the use of rational argumentation as a form of communication that can resolve disputes, the findings do support the argument that the generation of communicative power necessary to combat
colonisation depends on a lifeworld that meets Habermas’ ideas halfway by creating solidarity through forms of communication such as greeting and narrative (Young, 1997), and security via needed conditions of communication, such as private-publics. As such, my empirical research affirms the usefulness of Habermas’ theory for democratic, educational parental participation and points to the legitimacy of Young’s (1997) critique of Habermas.

Multicultural and anti-racism education literature often suggests that school educators must create spaces for the voices of ethnic minority parents, that ethnic minority parents should be included in decision-making processes, and that the needs and interests articulated by ethnic minority parents should be acted on (Dei, 1993). The findings of this study support this suggestion and indicate how this can happen. That is, both equal opportunities and conditions for ethnic minority parents to engage in dialogue with other parents and staff members as private-publics must be fostered by school staff and supported by the system. The importance of building trusting relations—through greeting, narrative, and rhetoric, as Young (1997) proposes—between school staff members and ethnic minority parents, and amongst ethnic minority parents themselves must be emphasized. Similarly, collective engagement in reaching common understanding must be an on-going process.

Further, creating the conditions for communicative action is essential to fostering democratic, educational, parental participation practices. Assessing communicative interactions amongst ethnic minority parents within dialogue groups in terms of communicative action and Habermas’ idealized procedure for rational discourse, my findings indicate a common lack of experience in the practice of democratic participation. According to Habermas (1996) the ideal precondition of discourse requires equal opportunity and equality of condition,
that is, it requires participants have the same chance and resources (such as interpreters and childcare services during meetings) to employ speech acts to express attitudes, feelings, and intentions on issues, and to command, oppose, and criticize arguments. Ethnic minority parents who formed a number of groups in Atma Elementary were unable to initiate and sustain dialogue, raise issues, be understood, express themselves sincerely, and fully represent their views; communication was distorted. As a private-public, a group of ethnic minority parents were able to communicatively coordinate action and guide administrative power with the leadership of Ms. Ruth, the community school coordinator.

Comparing the conditions that hindered and supported ethnic minority parental engagement in dialogue and communicative action, it can be said that the three dialogue groups failed to meet sufficient communicative conditions of symmetry and reciprocity, and of solidarity and security. I find that ethnic minority parents’ limited dialogical experiences with one another and the individual need for recognition were significant factors that hindered communicative action. In the dialogue groups, ethnic minority parents had no prior experience discussing educational concerns with others they did not know in a group setting. Ethnic minority parents were unable to share their ideas and opinions as the requisite communicative conditions were missing. As a result, parents competed for recognition of their own specific concerns and identities. Recognition of parents’ differing concerns as being equally valid and recognized as being worthy of discussion was necessary to engaging in dialogue with Ms. Ruth and with one another about their common needs and concerns.

The communicative conditions of ethnic minority parents forming the private-public were quite different. Some of the ethnic minority parents had worked out a process of
communication that more closely approximated the communicative conditions. These ethnic minority parents were also successful at coordinating action because they had consistently been discussing educational concerns and family issues as a small group over time; they were familiar with one another, valued and respected one another’s contributions, and had built relations such that they were able to frame their immediate concerns and achieve understanding on “what is good for us.” It is important to note that in doing so, the opportunity to engage in facilitated interactions contributed significantly. In Atma Elementary, Ms. Ruth was an experienced teacher with considerable knowledge of the school system. She believed in ethnic minority parental participation as educational practice and was in a position that had resources, such as time, to develop relationships with ethnic minority parents and support parental participation as such. The practices of Ms. Ruth indicate that leadership is essential in creating the requisite conditions for parents to be involved in their children’s education. It seems that creating safe spaces for parents to talk about education and share stories of their experiences should be part of school-based educators’ responsibility.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

This study has implications for school-based educators and policy makers as it illustrates how many public school policies and school staff practices of parental involvement have contributed to the reproduction of inequalities in education for ethnic minority children. Further, it provides examples of processes by which ethnic minority parents engaged in dialogue to achieve common understandings and find ways to collectively support their children’s education.
The findings indicate that there is a need for school-based educators to recognize that ethnic minority parents always have, and continue to, contribute to their children’s education. Thus, an emphasis should be placed on collaboratively supporting children’s learning with parents rather than solely involving parents in schools. Ethnic minority parents may have different information about the process of schooling and have different knowledge, community connections, and parenting styles, however, parents, just like teachers need to be respected as persons of equal worth with valid ways of supporting children’s education. Further, school staff members need to recognize parental knowledge as complementary to that of professional knowledge and foster private-publics where differences and common goals can be respectfully discussed and mutual understandings achieved.

It is vital that school personnel are knowledgeable of the prevailing discourse on parental involvement so that they can challenge instrumentally oriented practices and policies. Change, though, is in part dependent upon the willingness of school personnel to focus on children’s learning on a communicative basis and to redefine their relationships, attitudes, and assumptions about power and parental involvement. This has implications for teacher professional development and in-service training as school districts will need to provide training, support, and opportunities for school personnel to learn new ways of engaging with parents. Similarly, there is a need for university and college teacher education programs to assess how the concepts of home-school relations and parental involvement/engagement/participation are being taught. Are pre-service teachers being taught ways that they can foster respectful, supportive relations with parents in educating
children? Are pre-service teachers being taught processes, strategies, skills, and attitudes that would encourage parental participation in education in school?

It is vital that opportunities be created and resources be provided by school principals for meaningful ethnic minority parent-school staff member interactions and small group dialogues. Support can be provided through release time, interpretation services, and child care. Providing time and space during the school day for school-based educators and parents to engage in dialogue is particularly important as it raises the status of parental engagement and legitimizes its importance. Similarly, school based educators who meet with parents before or after school hours need to be compensated for their time.

Findings indicate that need to identify, encourage, and support democratic, educational practices of community-school coordinators, and others, such as those of, home-school liaison workers, settlement workers in schools (SWIS), multicultural workers and parent leaders. Increasing school resources by hiring more educators to assume these positions is necessary. The skills of bi- and multi-lingual staff members, parent leaders, and community members too should be utilized.

In regards to policy, it is clear that the establishment of a parent advisory council does not guarantee that the council will function such that it fosters communicative engagement. Policy, however, can adopt and legitimize democratic, educational parental participation practices in schools. Since the collection of data for this study, there has been an addition to the British Columbia School Act’s policy on parent involvement. Unfortunately the change does not promote democratic, educational practice; the policy reinforces the colonisation of ethnic minority parent involvement. In 2002 the provincial government introduced legislation that
requires school boards of public schools to establish a school planning council for each school. The composition of the school planning council is exclusionary as it limits representatives to the school’s principal, one teacher, three members of the school’s parent advisory council, and if applicable, one student enrolled in grade 10, 11, or 12. The responsibility of each school planning council is to “prepare and submit to the board a school plan for the school in respect to improving student achievement and other matters contained in the board’s accountability contract relating to that school” (*School Amendment Act, 2002, 8.3(2)*). The Ministry of Education states that by establishing school planning councils it acknowledges the importance of parental involvement by formalizing the role of parents in developing plans to improve student achievement (Thorsen, 2003). In stating this, the provincial government continues to perpetuate the notion that valuable parent involvement focuses on increasing children’s achievement in areas that are often narrowly measured using standardized tests rather than focusing on supporting children’s learning through communicative action.

Additionally, the Ministry of Education considers a school planning council an advisory body whose responsibility is to consult with the school community in developing, monitoring, and reviewing schools plans for improving student achievement, but no process for consultation is stipulated. It is thus questionable whether ethnic minority parents are provided equal and effective opportunity and condition to engage in dialogue about educational concerns with the select privileged members of the school planning council. In examining a recent survey of school planning councils in British Columbia (Don Cameron Associates, 2004) I find that conditions for communication and the inclusivity of dialogue between a school planning council and minority parents are factors that have not been surveyed. I further
question whether these conditions, that affect ethnic minority parental participation, are even considered as being important to the process of consultation.

Recently, the government has taken on another initiative: The Supporting Parent Leadership Seminar Series (SPLSS). Two years ago, British Columbia’s Education Minister, Shirley Bond, acknowledged that “parents are an incredible source of skills and knowledge, and provide great support for schools” (Press Release, 2007). Since then she has allocated $600 000 toward the establishment of a parent leadership training series that will, as she states, ensure that parents “have the leadership and understanding they need to do that effectively” (Press Release, 2007). Only two parents from each of the 60 school districts in the province, however, were selected through an application process. They are being trained over two years beginning September 2007. This training, states the Minister, will help the selected parent leaders to “support parents at the local and district parent advisory councils” (Ministry of Education, 2007) improve the province’s student graduation rate.

Unfortunately, this instrumental view of parent leadership – considering parents as means’ to achieve pre-determined school ends – continues to guide the practice of parental involvement in British Columbia. I contend that parent leadership training series is yet another parent education program that reproduces school organizational practices along traditional, bureaucratic lines. Parent Advisory Councils (PACs), District Parent Advisory Councils (DPACs), and School Planning Councils (SPCs) are already three legislated venues for parents to provide input in regards to school planning and decision making. It is questionable how inclusionary PACs, DPACs, and SPCs are of representing the views, concerns, and suggestions of a diverse parent body. It is further questionable how training two more “privileged” parents in each
district to support Parent Advisory Councils and District Parent Advisory Councils will contribute to equitable parent involvement processes.

Rather than support a bureaucratic, individualistic view of parent leadership, it is important that the Ministry broadens its notion of parent leadership to recognize that parental involvement can be coordinated communicatively. Making funds available to schools for school-based initiatives that support the communicative engagement of ethnic minority parents with school-based educators is needed.

**Future Directions for Research**

By applying Habermas’ conceptualization of participation as a theoretical tool to examine ethnic minority parental involvement, I have touched upon an area of much needed research: examining ways that public schools are fostering democratic, educational participatory practices; in particular, how can parents and school based educators be further supported? What do the processes look like? In what ways can school policies, programs, and practices contribute to creating conditions for outbreaks of democracy in all schools? In exploring these questions it is important that both parents and students contribute their knowledge and experiences to research.

Another area in need of examination is the formation of private-publics, their evolution, and their effect on home-school relations, staff-parent relations, schooling structures, and educational practices over time. Conducting longitudinal studies would increase our understanding of the effects of democratic, educational parental participation practices and equitable schooling conditions and processes on student learning. Also in need of study is how
publics and communicative action contributes to positive or negative schooling experiences and outcomes for ethnic minority children.

The need for further research in this area is great for participation in education and in discussions of what should and can be done, and how, are matters of ethical and moral concern not system concerns. For too long ethnic minority parents have been absorbed into the structures of schooling through practices that have reproduced, rather than reduced, inequalities in schooling for children. Looking for democratic, educational parental participation in schools and attaining a greater understanding of how they emerge is a fundamental step in the on-going process of creating equitable school policies, programs, and practices.
References


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Appendix A

Members of the school staff and parents that were interviewed:

Ms. Susie, parent
Mrs. Devika, parent
Ms. Brenda, parent
Ms. Ruth, community-school coordinator
Ms. Joanne, principal
Ms. Mida, head teacher and kindergarten teacher
Ms. Judy, kindergarten teacher
Ms. Carmen, grade one/two teacher
Ms. Rina, the grade one/two teacher
Ms. Lisa, grade four/five teacher
Ms. Tess, grade three/four teacher
Mr. Brian, grade six teacher
Mr. Steve, grade six/seven teacher
Ms. Terry, grade six/seven teacher
Ms. Sandy, music teacher
Ms. Thelma, resource teacher
Ms. Margery, English as a second language teacher and learning assistance teacher
Ms. Pin, English as a second language teacher
Ms. Elizabeth, learning assistance teacher
Ms. Sarah, librarian

Ms. Rosy, neighbourhood worker

Ms. Louise, youth and child care worker

Ms. Paula, counsellor

Mrs. Neena, multicultural liaison.