PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN EDUCATION:
A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS IN BC

by

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Abstract

Parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling (PI) has become an established norm in Western society. However, because of the way parents are pressured and positioned within the school system with traditional (TPI) and formalized (FPI) models of involvement, some proponents argue for different and deeper relationships between parents and schools with collaborative (CPI) models. In British Columbia, the current government has proposed through the introduction in 2011 of the BC Education Plan (BCED Plan), that parents in the province could in the future be working in “partnership” with teachers through individualized learning for students. Through the lens of phenomenology, the lived-experiences and beliefs about education and PI of a diverse selection of participants is explored in order to better understand what parents themselves want for their children and what they are trying to achieve through connections to teachers and schools. Conclusions and recommendations about the nature of PI discourse and the future of BCED Plan are offered.
Preface

This thesis is an original, unpublished, independent work of the author, L. Herrera. The fieldwork reported in the third, fourth and fifth chapters was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H13-01587.
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<tr>
<td>BCED Plan</td>
<td>British Columbia Education Plan</td>
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<td>CPI</td>
<td>Collaborative Parental Involvement</td>
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<td>FPI</td>
<td>Formalized Parental Involvement</td>
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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my deep appreciation to Dr. Gerald Fallon for his ongoing openness, guidance, and support throughout my process of research, analysis and reporting of findings for this thesis. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. David Coulter who helped me discover the difference between education and schooling, and inspired me to ask what parents and professional educators are trying to achieve for students, and why.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Dan, a professional math teacher, and to my children, Joshua and Austin, whose educational journeys have provided me with insight and impetus to suggest change, for their patience with my long hours of studying, researching and writing.
Introduction

The Rise of Parental Involvement (PI)

Over the past century, parents’ involvement in their children’s schooling has become an established norm in Western society, and a practice that is promoted by both parent organizations and educators (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Sanders & Epstein, 2005; Smit, Driessen, Sleegers & Teelken, 2008). In recent years, parental involvement (PI) has even become formalized, with governments around the world legislating, for example, parents’ right to choose their children’s schools or to sit on school decision-making bodies (Sanders & Epstein, 2005; Smit et al., 2008).

Given current global economic conditions, competitiveness and international mobility, the focus on PI for both public school systems and parents is perhaps not surprising. Today’s young people compete for university entrance and careers on a much larger and fiercer scale than ever before, making concerned parents feel the need to do more than previous generations to ready their children for independence (Guppy & Davies, 1999; Stelmach & von Wolff, 2010). Governments are also pressured, to sustain global economic advantage as well as by constituents, to address academically underperforming schools and particularly the low achievement of historically disadvantaged youth (Phadraig, 2005; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Sanders & Epstein, 2005; Smit et al., 2008). Since decades of research have affirmed, for the most part, that parental involvement positively affects children’s academic outcomes and may even be necessary to help children succeed, increased PI has become one of the evident remedies for improving student performance (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Walker, Shenker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2010). The result is that PI is regarded as both a practical intervention for low performing students and an obligation for “good” parents to ensure their children have access to the educational resources needed to make them successful and
competitive (Crozier, 1998 and 1999; Davies, 2000; Doucet, 2011; Plunkett, 1997), even to the post-secondary level (Stelmach & von Wolff, 2010). For governments, then, supporting PI achieves several outcomes: it is one contribution to raising the academic success levels of the future workforce, with a particular focus on marginalized populations; it pushes publicly-funded schools to provide measurable and ever higher results by making them more accountable to the parent representatives sitting on school decision-making committees; and it potentially satisfies the desires of the parent voters who want more input into what they feel are the high stakes outcomes of their children’s schooling (Goldring & Bauch, 1994; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Smit et al., 2008).

**But What is Parental Involvement?**

Yet the proliferation of PI activity is not without issue for parents and schools struggling to ensure that diverse students have all the support available to help them succeed. In part this is because, despite the frequent reference to parental involvement in literature and school systems as if it were a term with a singular and widely agreed-upon meaning, the parameters of PI activity are actually unclear. Rather, PI – sometimes also called parent participation or parent engagement – refers to a broad range of school-based and home-based activities that parents perform at or for schools, such as accompanying classes on field trips or reading with children at home, or have been otherwise linked to academic outcomes for students, such as the manner in which parents support or pressure children with homework, or parents’ expectations and aspirations for their children’s attendance at post-secondary institutions. For some parents, this blanket of presumed parental responsibilities toward schooling, encompassing actions and even attitudes, can lead to pressure and conflict, particularly for those who perhaps feel unable to contribute or who have differing beliefs about their roles in schooling (Crozier, 1999; Doucet, 2011; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). For schools, the wide and abstruse spectrum of PI means not
only spending resources of time and energy on parents, but also sometimes results in mismatches of expectations, and negative feelings, between school personnel and parents (Lasky, 2000; Vickers & Minke, 1995). In short, the multiplicity of understandings of PI among stakeholders fostered by the many and varied descriptions and practices of PI can potentially lead to a lack of connection and even empathy among them.

Adding to the lexicon, as well as to the tumult of expectations, parent “partnerships” is another very popular term to refer to parents’ activities with schools (Crozier, 1998; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Phadraig, 2005; Price-Mitchell, 2009) especially for governments when referring to parents’ legislated roles in helping their children succeed in school. For example, in England, a Parent’s Charter was introduced by the Department for Education in 1993 which encouraged parents to be “an active partner with the school and its teachers” (England’s Department for Education, 1994, in Crozier, 1998). In the United States, the 2010 Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act lent support to “families, communities, and schools working in partnership to deliver services” (US Department of Education, 2010). Closer to home, “partnership” is used in the British Columbia Education Plan which was released by the BC Ministry of Education (BC MoE) in October, 2011 to begin a transformation process to more individualized learning in public schooling in BC: “in partnership with their children’s teacher and their child, parents will play an important role in supporting their child’s learning” (BC MoE, 2011b). Considering the use of the term by governments, then – and particularly, for this study, by the BC government – it seems important to further explore the implications of parent “partnerships” with schools.

Is Parental Involvement the Same as a Parent-School “Partnership”?

For example, while “partnership” is often interchanged with “participation” and “involvement” in educational discourse to indicate parents working with and for schools toward
their children’s academic success, for many, the idea of “partnership” implies a more deeply reciprocal relationship between associates than either of the other two terms, with equal input and decision making ability for the school and parent partners (Phadraig, 2005; Stelmach, 2004; Todd & Higgins, 1998). This implication has led some authors to explore what is needed from parents, teachers, students and communities to move from what may be considered “traditional” involvement activities towards a more collaborative partnership model between families and schools, in particular to address criticisms leveled at traditional PI that it privileges the white, middle and upper-class over more ethnically and economically diverse families (Crozier, 1998 & 1999; Doucet, 2011; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lareau, 1987; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Todd & Higgins, 1998). The distinguishing between “involvement” and “partnership” also leads to an intriguing question: if there is a difference in more than just semantics, does the difference factor into government usage? If it does, what does a government which promotes “partnership” intend for its education system in terms of the relationships envisioned between parents and school personnel, and the fostering of conditions to enable partnerships to flourish?

Do Parents Want a Partnership with Schools?

In BC, for example, where individualized learning for students is presented as a new direction for public education, one possible outcome of parents working in “partnership” with schools is that current, accepted, traditional roles for parents and teachers could be changing in some yet-to-be outlined manner. If this is true, the most immediate question that leapt to mind for me as a parent with children in public school was “What will this look like?” In other words, what adjustments will parents and teachers need to make to their current practices in order to enact a partnership? What additional responsibilities might a partnership involve?

However, I would argue that deeper than these important and practical questions lies another line of inquiry that should actually be addressed first, before going further down the path
of changes to the schooling system. This primary question was prompted by both a review of parent involvement literature examining the desired and even expected roles of parents in schooling, and by my own status as a parent with children in public school. The question is this: What is the point of view of parents on their involvement in education and schooling? To be precise, what is the meaning of the term involvement to parents, and what do they expect or hope to achieve for their children with involvement? Even more fundamentally, do most parents want to be partners or otherwise involved in schooling? I came to these questions because, while the review of PI literature provided much insight into parents’ possible motivations for, as well as barriers to, performing traditional involvement activities, there was much less information that could be gleaned about parents’ own perspective on the concept of involvement. As well, reflecting on my own experience as a parent who was considered by my peers as highly involved in schools (more on this in the chapter on Research Design and Methodology), I know that these were questions in fifteen active years that I was never asked and never actually analyzed myself: Why am I so involved? What do I expect my involvement to do for my children? Further, as a parent leader as I have been, what do my expectations – consciously or unconsciously – then lead me to want or expect from other parents?

I believe the point of view of parents on involvement is worth examining, not just for my own personal benefit, but also for educational administrators. If it is true that the cooperation of parents is crucial for schools to achieve their outcomes for students (Fan & Chen, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and if it is also the case that parents such as those in BC might possibly be asked to increased their involvement through parent-school partnerships, then those who would engage with parents through schools should be aware of their perspectives. For one, understanding parents’ point of view on involvement might shed light on some of the barriers already identified in the literature, or even uncover additional avenues for researchers to explore.
For another, increased understanding of parents’ views and what they themselves may be trying to achieve for their children has the potential to help educational leaders, including parent leaders such as I have been, to act with more mindfulness and empathy toward parents, which could only be beneficial for future interactions and problem solving in the school system.

Given the potential for greater understanding of a major educational stakeholder, then, as well as the awareness of the continuing – if muted – advancement of the BCED Plan and possible parent-school partnerships in BC, I decided to focus my research on parental involvement, not from the perspective of schools but from the perspective of parents.

The Research Problem: What Do Parents Want from Involvement?

As might be imagined, in trying to approach the examination of parents’ views on involvement for my research, I immediately encountered two issues. The first issue emerged indirectly from another confusion of terms in the PI literature, and that was whether to explore parents’ perspectives on involvement only in schooling, or in the larger endeavor of education. Though these two terms are often, as I discovered, used interchangeably, they are not synonymous (Levin & Young, 2000). Education, broadly defined, refers to the sum of a person’s intellectual, moral and social development, whereas schooling more narrowly refers to the learning that occurs within the context of formal education systems (ibid). From this perspective, parents are involved with their children’s education from the moment their children are born; they also provide a continuity of guidance, values, and physical and psychological support over a child’s entire developmental period from birth through to adulthood. Even through the dozens years or so when a child is in grade school, “the class teacher is in loco parentis for less than a third of the child’s waking life over the course of just one year” (Todd & Higgins, 1998, p.228): this means that the majority of a child’s time is spent outside of school and potentially, at least in the younger years, directed by or influenced by parental choices.
Considering the position of parents to their children’s development, then, and my objective to better understand parents’ own perspectives of what they are doing for their children with involvement, and since the literature covered parents’ involvement in schooling quite thoroughly, I decided my research needed to focus on the broader concept of parental involvement in education, or in the overall educational development of their children. Keeping in mind this difference between education and schooling, the central focus of my enquiry was thus framed as to better understand how parents see their roles in the relation to the education of their children, and how they therefore want to engage with the people who are schooling their children in order to support their children’s education. In other words, how does connecting with schools through traditional involvement or other means contribute to parents’ own goals for their children? What do parents hope to derive from involvement?

The three leading research questions for my study continued with the education versus schooling distinctions:

1. What do parents believe constitutes education for their children?
2. How do parents’ beliefs about education influence or impact how they interact with the people and institutions involved with schooling their children?
3. How would parents ideally like to be involved in or connected to the school system to support their children’s education?

The first research question takes the position that before one can understand how parents see their roles in their children’s education, one first needs to understand how parents describe or define education itself. Are there, for example, specific factors that contribute to education for parents? How does schooling fit in to parents’ beliefs? Understanding parents’ beliefs about education is important to understanding if the school system is generally working in harmony
with one of its largest stakeholders, particularly a stakeholder that is needed and expected to contribute resources through involvement to keep it sustained.

The second research question follows from the first: from what parents specifically believe constitutes education for their children, how do they then act with regard to the people who deliver facets of education through the school system: teachers and administrators? For example, do their beliefs cause them to seek out more or less connections with schools? What do those connections, if they exist, look like? This is important for my research focusing on the BC school system because if it is found that parents’ beliefs impact, positively or negatively, what they do with schools, then logically their beliefs may similarly impact the BC government’s plans for individualized learning and parent-school partnerships.

Finally, the third research question tries to directly address the apparent gap in the PI literature by exploring the kinds of connections parents themselves want with schools to support their own goals for their own children. Specifically, do the connections parents want more resemble traditional involvement activities or what has been described in the literature as a deeper partnership model? Taken together, these three leading research questions were examined to provide some idea of what parents themselves, based on the parent participants in my study, may want from involvement, and also to suggest conditions in schools that might be necessary to enable parents’ needs to be met.

The second issue I encountered when approaching my research was the plurality of parents themselves. Though comprising an educational stakeholder group both in literature and by virtue of having children in a school system in common with others, parents are, of course, individuals, each with unique backgrounds, which suggests a wide variety of factors likely inform their decisions and goals with respect to their children. Given that this stakeholder group by its definition represents thousands of different people, I considered that its plurality
constitutes one of its key features and needed to be preserved rather than reduced. For my research, I thus needed to find a way to discover and explore what might be common in the wants and needs expressed by diverse parents, if there were any commonalities, without resorting to simple generalities which might not capture and resonate with the richness of parents’ ways of knowing and being. This led me to adopt a phenomenological approach for my research on parent involvement.

**A Phenomenological Approach to Research**

Phenomenology is the study of unique lived experiences of individuals in order to uncover and describe the essential structures that underlie a shared phenomenon. Because phenomenology starts from the position that each person has a different experience even when it comes to shared phenomena, it was ideal for research that intentionally sought to include diverse participants and honor their voices, as the research methodology included identifying each participant’s core beliefs about education and involvement before considering common themes from among the participants and how each voice contributed to the analysis.

In the case of my research, the “shared phenomenon” for parents is their involvement in their children’s education, whatever form that involvement takes whether recognized in literature or not. Phenomenology holds that studying the unique experiences of individuals connected to a phenomenon has the potential to reveal an “essence” to the phenomenon, meaning facets or characteristics of the phenomenon “without which it would no longer be what it is” (van Manen, 1997, p. xv). To give a simple, concrete example, my own reading of a poem will likely resonate differently with me than how it resonates with another person reading the same poem. But we both can acknowledge that what we have read is a poem, not a magazine article or short story. How we both understand that what we have read is a poem speaks to the essence of a poem – it is what sets “poem” apart from other texts we might read, not by definition or classification, but
by knowing built on lived experience. For my study, I was seeking to discover the essence of parent involvement from the point of view of parents: characteristics that would reveal how involvement can be recognized not externally by the school system, but rather known internally to the parent group. How does a parent understand involvement in order to say he or she is involved or not? What are the essential structures of involvement to parents?

From the perspective of phenomenology, if essential structures are uncovered, the challenge then becomes relaying that information in a description that preserves the knowing. In this way, those receiving the description gain a better understanding of what the experience or shared phenomenon is like for the individuals living it. Understanding in this way contributes to thoughtfulness or mindfulness when interacting with the individuals who share the phenomenon, in this case parents in the school system. Max van Manen in his book *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (1997), which became my key reference on phenomenology, described it this way:

> The end of human science research for educators is a critical pedagogical competence: knowing how to act tactfully in pedagogic situations on the basis of a carefully edified thoughtfulness. (p.8)

For my research, I sought through a phenomenological approach to first of all discover from my participants their own meaning of parent involvement. I then sought to capture this meaning in a way that resonated as “true” for the participants, and also provided an inside view of the phenomenon for others. With this deepened and more empathetic understanding of PI from the point of view of parents as a foundation, I then reviewed my research questions. I provide a deeper description of phenomenology as it relates to my research in the beginning of my chapter on Research Design and Methodology. I will now briefly outline the key features of my research design.
Key Features of the Research Design

Bracketing of the researcher’s experiences  Because I adopted a phenomenological approach to research, one of the first steps I took when crafting my research proposal was to bracket myself as a researcher. In any research, questions about the objectivity and subjectivity of the researcher must be addressed. In phenomenological research, elucidating and then bracketing or setting aside of one’s own experience and assumptions allows for the researcher to “engage the experience without preconceived notions about what will be found in the investigation” (Laverty, 2004, p. 17). Bracketing is not a denial of the researcher’s own subjectivity. Rather it is an attitude of approaching a participant’s experiences with complete openness and attentiveness to his or her story, and trying to withhold or reduce any interpretation while interacting as much as possible. From my point of view, bracketing is a respectful way of acknowledging that the meanings I take from my own lived experiences may be completely different from the meanings another person takes from his or her lived experiences and that not only are those meanings equally important to my own, but may provide insight to enrich the understanding of the phenomenon under study, insight which might be missed without bracketing. Before I began my data collection, I tried to ensure I bracketed my own lived experience of PI in order to be completely open to the experiences of my participants. In order to situate myself as a researcher for readers, I will share my own lived experience of PI following the description of phenomenology in the chapter on Research Design and Methodology.

Honoring the plurality of experience  As mentioned earlier, one of the features of “parents” as a stakeholder group simply because of their large membership, is diversity. For this reason, it was important for my research to try to recruit diverse participants: this meant seeking immigrant, Aboriginal and mainstream parents covering a range of socio-economic statuses. To do this, I reached out to a local immigrant serving organization as well as an Aboriginal
friendship centre, and also posted recruitment posters in community centres and neighborhood houses. Attracting parent participants proved difficult through these methods however, possibly due to the personal nature of the topic. I encountered more success when disseminating the recruitment posters through my own parent network which from fifteen years of activity was rather wide. In the end, I was able to recruit ten parents who fortunately represented a spectrum of backgrounds as originally hoped. I will describe the make-up of the parent participant group in more depth in my chapter on my Research Design and Methodology.

**Seeking experiential descriptions**  In phenomenology, the manner of conducting research with participants is important to achieving understanding of the phenomenon “from the inside.” Rather than directly asking for beliefs about education or views of parent involvement, the semi-structured interviews I conducted asked participants to describe their experiences as parents educating their children and connecting with the school system. For example, parents were asked to describe their child’s first day in the school system, characteristics of their relationships with people in the school system (mostly teachers), and activities for learning they themselves participated in with their children. These and other questions allowed participants to reflect on and then share their experiences around the phenomenon of parental involvement rather than only providing a rationalized statement of their principles which may or may not conform to their actions.

**Analyzing for meaning**  In order to ensure I followed a methodology appropriate to phenomenology as well as to understand the data to answer my research questions, my process of analyzing the parent participants’ lived experience descriptions was twofold. First and foremost, I sought to capture what each participant had to say individually about the phenomenon of parental involvement: the key understanding each participant held about his or her role in the education of his or her children and how he or she therefore wished to engage with schools in
support of his or her children. Only after rendering the individual perspectives did I search for themes that overlapped and pointed to the possible essence or essential structures of parents’ view of parental involvement. What I discovered from this phenomenological analysis, and subsequently captured as a lived-experience narrative, was that the parent participants in my study actually viewed parental involvement differently than is commonly referred to in the literature and by governments and school systems. I elaborate more on the views of the parents in my study on PI, as well as the resulting narrative, in the chapter on my Research Findings. I also discuss there the second part of my analysis of my research data which offers responses to my original research questions.

Overview of the Thesis

As noted above, my research direction was prompted by awareness of the current global climate in public education and specifically the BC context in which the BCED Plan suggests that BC parents could one day be working in partnership with teachers to support individualized learning for their children. I therefore begin my thesis with a review of Parent Involvement literature. The literature review aims first, to clarify what is most commonly understood when referring to parental involvement by defining PI as traditionally practiced by parents and as formalized by governments; and second, to uncover some aspects of collaborative partnerships as distinguished from the common models of PI in order to develop an understanding of factors that might be necessary for collaborative partnerships to succeed in BC, if that is what is intended by the BCED Plan. The clarification of PI will also examine parents’ motivations for engaging or not engaging in PI activities, consider the positive and negative implications of PI on student achievement and on schools, and explore the impact of PI on teachers and parent-teacher interactions.
Following the literature review, I discuss my research design and methodology in more depth, beginning with a description of the key phenomenological concepts of life worlds and lived experiences and how these relate to my parental involvement study. In this chapter I also share my own lived experience of PI as an involved parent in BC public schools in order to situate myself for the reader as well to demonstrate the bracketing of these experiences for myself as a researcher. This chapter also provides more details of the diverse parent participant group in my study, the research methods I followed in data collection and analysis, and the limitations of this study.

The chapter on Research Design and Methodology is followed by a chapter on my Research Findings, including what I learned from my data analysis as well as the lived experience narrative of PI I created to make parents’ views of PI more accessible to educators and others working with parents in the school system. Finally, I close my thesis by offering my conclusions about parental involvement based on my research, as well as recommendations for going forward, including suggestions for future research on the subject.
A Literature Review of Parental Involvement in Schools

Defining Parental Involvement

The basic notion of “parental involvement” in schooling is not recent. According to a review of parent-teacher relationships in the nineteenth century, in 1854, the Montgomery County Institute in the United States proclaimed that the “cooperation of parents with teachers in the performance of their duties is essential to the prosperity of schools” (New York Teacher, 1854, in Meyer, 1962). Parents sat on committees to select teachers, and parent meetings were held on such topics as encouraging school attendance, the supervision of homework, and teacher-parent friendliness in communication about children’s needs (Meyer, 1962). In the twentieth century, the parental involvement focus expanded to the teaching of parents about practices that help children succeed in schools, in particular to help immigrants and families in low socio-economic brackets learn and follow the norms of middle-class society (Gordon, 1977, in Price-Mitchell, 2009).

The most widely known and accepted outlining of PI activities to support schools was established in 1995 by Dr. Joyce Epstein, the founder and currently Director of the National Network of Partnership Schools at John Hopkins University, Maryland. Based on a theory that home, school and community have overlapping spheres of influence in a child’s social and intellectual growth, she described six types of parental involvement to support children’s development and increase their success in school: parenting practices to support the healthy development of children and adolescents and their work as students; communicating between home and school and understanding school requirements and documents; volunteering in schools or to help schools; learning at home, which includes helping with homework, study skills and curriculum-related decisions; sitting on formal school decision-making boards and committees and acting as an advisor or advocate; and collaborating with the community in support of schools
and families (Epstein, 1995; Epstein & Voorhis, 2010). Numerous studies have used the Epstein model as a basis when validating or investigating ways to increase the involvement of parents in schooling (Catsambis, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002, Mapp, 2002; Sanders and Epstein, 2005; Smit et al., 2008); many formal parent involvement programs, including the US National Parent-Teacher Association’s Family-School Partnership program, also referenced Epstein’s work to form their activities, or actually implemented Epstein’s Action Team model of PI (Mapp, 2002; National Parent Teacher Association [PTA], 2009; Stelmach, 2004 & 2005; Warner, 1991).

Epstein’s six types of PI cover a comprehensive range of activities that describe what parents do in support of the schooling of their children: they parent (teach, guide and direct children), communicate with schools, volunteer, manage the home environment, participate in committees, and interact in the larger community in support of children and schools. Three of the types of involvement involve direct contact with schools: communicating, volunteering, and participating in committees; these are school-based activities, and are what most studies mean when they speak of parent “participation.” Two of the remaining types of involvement – parenting and managing the home environment – are home-based activities. While home-based activities, represented by both conscious decisions or inadvertent results of non-decisions (for example, setting a bedtime as opposed to letting children go to bed whenever they feel tired), do not directly connect with schools, children coming to school are strongly impacted by conditions in the home. The last type of involvement – interacting in the larger community in support of children and schools – refers to finding and referring families to resources that help children (for example, health services) or engaging community members and businesses to support schools (through donating, providing enrichment in the form of guest speaker or field trip activities, offering volunteer opportunities for students, etc.); interacting with the community is listed as a type of involvement with the assumption that families may need help to find community resources.
resources (an extension of parenting) and that schools need support from more than just parents (an extension of volunteering).

Having established that the most accepted notion of parental involvement (Epstein’s) describes what parents actually do at school, home or in the community, it is next important to recognize that what is common to all six types of involvement is that each of them, whether directly or indirectly, support the school culture and curriculum that has been established by the school system. (Sitting on “decision-making” committees has the potential to go beyond the level of simply providing support; I will explore this notion later in this literature review.) Parental involvement, then, by Epstein’s measure, could be described as activities that parents do in support of the school.

Epstein’s notion of PI seems a natural extension of the 19th century parent activities described by Meyer at the beginning of this section, and as such, is often labelled “traditional”. It should not be surprising, then, that much of the research on PI that has not directly used Epstein’s model has employed or used as a starting point a description of PI that is considered traditional; that is, they referenced home-based or school-based activities similar to Epstein’s descriptions, with the common thread again being that the activities support the school culture and curriculum (Elias, Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2007; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Rogers, Theule, Ryan, Adams & Keating, 2009; Smit et al., 2008).

With the focus of literature typically on the need to increase PI, it was also not surprising to find a large body of research striving to better understand the two aspects of the traditional PI equation – parent actions and school support. For example, some of the studies departed from simply examining what parents do in support of schools and delved more deeply into psychological or environmental factors that affect whether or not parents become involved in
traditional school support activities, and why or why not (for example, Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lareau, 1987). Other studies drilled past support for schools as the purpose for parent involvement and considered more broadly what schools are supposed to deliver, such as results for individual students in the form of standardized test scores, grades in individual subjects (ie. English or Science) or skill areas (ie. Math or reading), grade point averages (GPA), entering advanced track or college track courses, graduation rates, and going on to post-secondary education (as seen in Catsambis, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Some studies looked at these two drilled-down factors together, trying to determine the contributing factors for parents to support positive, high achievement results for their children (for example, Raty et al., 2002; Zhan, 2006). Finally, some studies tried to determine the mediating factors, particularly those presented by the children themselves, between parent actions/motivations and student/school results (as in Murray, 2009; Rogers et al., 2009). The following graphic provides a visual summary of factors studied under the umbrella of examining parental involvement:

Figure 1 Factors Referred to in Parental Involvement Studies
Despite the many different aspects of parental involvement being studied and the different terms accompanying them, there did appear to be an essential core of PI that was consistently referred to in the literature, allowing for a fairly simple definition to emerge which later can be contrasted with collaborative partnership: traditional PI is parental actions (explained or not by motivations) to support the school in providing results (generally achievement) for students.

Although this Epstein-based notion of PI is pervasive and frequently endorsed by schools themselves, it must be acknowledged that the mostly one-directional model (with support flowing from home to school) is not without its detractors. Several researchers noted the narrow range of acceptable activities being promoted, which by their nature, limited the types of parents who would have the knowledge, skill, time and energy to implement them. For example, Fabienne Doucet suggested there are three root paradigms – three “elemental, recognizable standards for operating in a given culture” (Turner, 1979 in Doucet, 2011, p. 406) – at play in commonly referenced images of PI which work to privilege some parents and marginalize others: “a cult of domesticity,” because participation in school during the day has meant it has been mostly middle and upper-class white mothers who did not have to work outside the home who could be involved; “a cult(ure) of capital,” in which “good” parents are expected to activate all the resources at their disposal to position their children for success; and “a cult of pedantocracy,” because parent participation is generally predicated on what the school deems acceptable. Canadian researchers Pushor and Murphy, as both educators and parents themselves, provided a strong critique of parent education programs in general and Epstein’s model in particular, detailing how their own embodiment of the six types of involvement left them feeling “positioned in subservient and relatively unimportant ways with regards to teaching and learning” (2004, p. 224). Price-Mitchell also challenged the traditional notion of PI as
“mechanistic and linear” and unsuited for “the challenges and complexities of education in the 21st century” (2009, p. 14). Several other studies highlighted the parent-deficit attitude that has been evidenced in some educators when parents cannot be involved in traditionally sanctioned ways due to their life circumstances, or when ethnically and economically diverse families see their roles in the education of their children differently than the dominant culture (Crozier, 1998 & 1999; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lareau, 1987; Mapp, 2002; Todd & Higgins, 1998). As noted in the introduction, it is exactly these criticisms that have led these and other authors to offer suggestions for more reciprocal models of PI in order to account for the diversity of families in today’s schools, models which I shall explore towards the end of this literature review.

The Formalization of Parental Involvement

Lack of pluralistic appeal notwithstanding, in recent years, several social factors have influenced a drive by governments to entrench the rights of parents to be involved with their children’s schooling in many of the traditional ways outlined above. The formalization of PI can be traced at least in part to the 1983 release of the report into the status of American education, A Nation at Risk, which led to a focus on public school reform. Examining factors that contribute to effective schools (Plunkett 1997; Stelmach, 2004), PI was identified as one of the common threads (Goldring & Bauch, 1994; Plunkett, 1997). Subsequently, the No Child Left Behind Act (Section 1118) passed in 2001 in the US entrenched parental involvement in schooling as one of the canons of increasing academic performance of students (Price-Mitchell, 2009, p. 10; US Department of Education, 2002).

The emphasis on increasing the involvement of parents in their children’s schooling has become prevalent not just in the US, but internationally. In 2004, a study was commissioned by the Dutch Education Council to investigate international research into parent and community
involvement in education. The researchers conducted a literature review as well as an email survey with experts from the European Research Network About Parents in Education (ERNAPE) and the (mostly American) International Network of Scholars (INET), and compared specific results from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, England, France, Sweden and the United States. A key finding from the point of view of the formalization of PI was that “over the past 20 years, in the United States and nearly all European countries, education acts have been revised to include sections on school-parent relations” (Smit et al., 2008, p. 73); specifically, it has become desirable to include parents and community “in the governance, management and policies of schools” (ibid, p.74). Some other international developments reported in the literature were: a trend toward wider parental choice in schools (Sanders & Epstein, 2005; Smit et al., 2008); more “home-school contracts” between parents and schools, particularly in England where contracts are required to meet certain government criteria (Smit et al., 2008); the increasing reference to parents as “consumers” or as “investors” protecting their investment (Avvisati, Besbas & Guyon, 2010; Goldring & Bauch, 1994; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Sanders & Epstein, 2005; Smit et al., 2008; Stelmach & von Wolff, 2010) and an increase in the involvement of community agencies in schools (Sanders & Epstein, 2005).

In Canada, Guppy and Davies reported in the late 1990s that this country had “not yet seen the same thoroughgoing reform and restructuring of schooling that has occurred in New Zealand, Great Britain and the United States” (Davies & Guppy, 1997, in Guppy & Davies, 1999) but that Canadians’ confidence in public schools was on the decline, a possible precursor to restructuring policies. Their prediction seemed to have been borne out: in 2002, Young and Levin reported that “with the exception of Saskatchewan, Canadian provinces and Territories have formalized the voice of parents through legislation” (in Stelmach, 2004, p. 2 of 10). As an example of a parental involvement program in Canada, in Alberta, the Alberta Initiative for
School Improvement (AISI) was launched in 1999. AISI aimed to improve student learning by “encouraging teachers, parents and the community to work collaboratively to identify local areas where improvements are needed” (Alberta Learning, 2003, in Stelmach, 2005, p170): projects developed under this directive required active parent involvement. Similarly, in BC, the province’s School Act was amended in 2002 to include the establishment of School Planning Councils in which parents, teachers, students and the school principal were mandated to work together to devise a school plan to improve student achievement, and as well as to consult over school decisions such as the allocation of staff, resources, educational services and programs in the school (Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, 2002).

This section in the BC School Act remains in force today, along with a provision to guarantee parents’ right to volunteer in schools. Similarly, in the United States, in 2010 the government released a blueprint for changes to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that demonstrated that family involvement remained a priority for improving student achievement. For example, funds were either set aside or grants would be given priority for carrying out effective family engagement strategies (such as family literacy, full-service community school models, and partnerships with non-profit organizations for in-school or out-of-school strategies) and to provide better information to students and their families (to help them evaluate and improve their children’s schools, and identify, evaluate, and access high-quality educational options such as magnet schools). In addition, new teacher and principal evaluation strategies were to be developed “in collaboration with teachers, principals, and other education stakeholders” (US Department of Education, 2010, p. 15).

In summary, the focus on the improvement of public education and increasing students’ academic performance has led to formal PI mandates being put in place by governments in many nations around the world. In general, these directives have been marked by a positioning of
parents on school decision-making bodies and an increase in parents’ ability to place their children in schools of their choice; there has also been an increased reference to parents as consumers or investors, framing education as a marketable commodity rather than a social service, with the accompanying requirement for schools to become more accountable for their activities in terms of the quality of instruction offered and the achievement of students returned. This last development is significant in the context of any possible parent-school collaborative partnerships, as it suggests a shifting in power away from schools toward parents rather than a move toward equality of relationships that the term “partnership” might imply. It also raises the question of how parents actually see themselves in relation to their children’s schooling, and if formalized PI or even traditional PI activities are what they want or expect in their relationships with schools.

Parents’ Motivations and Expectations for Parental Involvement

While, as seen above, there has been a proliferation of initiatives to increase PI among families, some parents spontaneously or on their own become involved with their children’s schooling, traditionally and formally, without external encouragement; to understand why, and, by extension, what parents’ motivations and expectations might mean for possible collaborative partnerships, both societal and individual factors must be considered.

To begin, the last half century has seen an unparalleled rise in technology and globalization which has made information both more accessible and overwhelming than ever before and left education systems and parents struggling to keep up. “The world’s growing complexity creates greater levels of uncertainty, resulting in people’s taking more and more time to plan, especially to reduce risk …. for parents, a principal way to enhance the security of their children’s futures is to encourage educational development.” (Guppy & Davies, 1999, p.277) This tactic is not drawn from thin air: “labour market statistics show that education is an
increasingly powerful determinant of wages and employment” (ibid, p.278) which means that ensuring a child is well educated is a realistic way to prepare him or her for the highly competitive future which is also resulting from globalization (Stelmach & von Wolff, 2010 p.64). In fact, in general, today’s parents themselves have, as Guppy and Davies pointed out, more schooling than any time in the past, making them more cynical and less deferential towards public institutions; better able to locate (especially with the internet), understand and articulate information to challenge exerts and professionals; and possessing, therefore, both “a greater ability to get involved with school issues and … raised expectations for schooling” (1999, p. 278). Highly credentialed parents often expect or at least desire that their children will attain high levels of schooling, for example, at least the level of schooling that they have themselves (Avvisati et al., 2010; Raty, Leionen & Snellman, 2002; Zhan, 2005). From this perspective, parents becoming more involved in schooling is a natural extension of a pragmatic strategy to increase children’s skills and abilities: one part of the strategy requires funnelling more time, energy and money into educationally enriching extracurricular activities such as private tutoring and skills camps, while the other requires ensuring the main use of children’s time, spent in schools, contributes as much as possible toward accomplishing the criteria needed to have their children become credentialed and successful. School support efforts such as volunteering and fundraising contribute to the latter part of the strategy.

Along with the thrust towards assuring children attain more education is a growing awareness, exacerbated by the explosive growth and constant accessibility of news reports and statistics, of the impacts of the old taken-for-granted challenges (such as peer relationships) and new dangers (such as cell phone use) faced by today’s children as they transition through adolescence to adulthood in modern society. As noted in part by Elias, Patrikakou and Weisberg in 2007, today’s youth navigate hazards such as exposure to adult material and enticements
through the internet; bullying, including cyber-bullying; sexual exploration and exploitation; alcohol and drugs; and recruitment to violent criminal gangs, along with more subtle menaces such as more digital relationships and less in-person socializing, and more saturation by media of advertising to be thin, attractive and rich. The consequences to parents and other caring adults not supporting teens’ transitions are real and not trivial: “alienation, disillusionment, loss of direction and motivation, and giving over to motivations of anger and revenge” (Elias et al., 2007, p. 546): suicide is the second highest leading cause of death in teenagers in Canada (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2005). It should cause little wonder then, when parents perceive or are directly told of more threatening health, social and economic conditions for their children, that parenting habits have changed to compensate, becoming, as Stelmach and von Wolff described, “characterized by aggressive protection and “concerted cultivation” (in Lareau, 2002) of children’s skills and talents” (2010, p. 64). Stelmach and von Wolff further suggested that evidence of the new parenting style has already been reflected in census data from 1971 to 2001, which shows that young adults are taking longer to cross the five traditional bridges to adulthood: leaving school, leaving home, securing full-time work, conjugal union, and parenting: in fact, “pushing young adults out of the proverbial nest seems to have become a ritual of the past” (2010, p.61). Parental involvement, in this context, represents a protective desire to be closer to children to ensure they are not harmed (ibid, p. 64).

These two modern parenting focuses - increasing educational activities and protecting children from harm - form some of the societal environmental factors that explain parents’ spontaneous motivations to contribute to activities at home and to be present at activities at school, and, in the context of collaborative partnerships, might lead them to seek more reciprocal relationships with schools. In terms of individual parent factors, much research has gone into uncovering parents’ personal environmental as well as psychological motivations to engage in PI
(with the hope that PI programs could use the information to create or alter conditions to influence other, uninvolved parents to take on traditional or formal activities); this research also provided valuable insight into what parents want and expect from schools which might lead them to seek deeper connections than are currently available.

An often cited model to understand parents’ motivations was first put forward by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler in 1997, and updated in 2010 by Walker, Shenker & Hoover-Dempsey. Based on traditional notions of PI, Walker et al. have suggested that parents make decisions about being involved due to internal beliefs as well as external factors. Internal beliefs that influence parents include: their understanding of their parental role or what they are supposed to do as parents and how they are supposed to parent; and their sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school such as whether they have the knowledge and skills to help (which might be based on their own level of education) and whether time spent in this endeavor will result in their children doing better. External factors that influence parents include their perceptions of invitations from their children and the school to be involved, as well as their perceptions of their own time and energy to be involved (which might be impacted by health, a job, or other caregiving responsibilities). Hornby and Lafaele used the earlier (1997) version of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model in constructing their own, expanded, framework of factors that impact PI. Based on Epstein’s theory about overlapping spheres of influence in children’s development and presented as barriers to home-based and school-based activities, Hornby and Lafaele identified: individual parent and family factors, such as beliefs about involvement as well as parents’ class, ethnicity and gender; child factors, such as children’s ages and learning abilities; parent-teacher factors, such as differing goals between parents and teachers for education and differing attitudes; and societal factors, such as historical and current
political and economic conditions like the ones explained at the beginning of this section (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011).

Both the Hoover-Dempsey et al. and the Hornby and Lafael models, being inclusive of a number of elements, provided insight into the individual psychological and environmental factors that influence parents to be spontaneously involved, and also demonstrated how parents who are consciously or unconsciously attuned to the dominant culture (through, for example, embracing current attachment trends of parenting and/or having the time and skills to be involved due to education and professional status) might be increasingly inclined to seek more connection to children’s education. By contrast, as mentioned briefly above in the criticisms of traditional PI models, one of the key findings of research into parent motivations and expectations for PI has been that parents who are not part of the dominant culture such as working class, Aboriginal and immigrant parents, have noticeably lower levels of spontaneous school-based involvement. Unfortunately this lack of buy-in appears to produce in many educators and some parents who interact with these marginalized social groups, a tendency to believe that those who are not involved in school-based activities simply don’t care about the education of their children or even that they don’t care about the children themselves (see Crozier, 1998 & 1999; Doucet, 2011; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lareau, 1987; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Todd & Higgins, 1998). In an effort to better understand and validate the motivations and expectations of non-mainstream parents, some studies have attempted to capture and synthesize their voices. From this research has emerged a recognition that many parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic groups actually view their parental roles and the role of the school in education differently than white, middle and upper-class parents; they also often have a lower sense of efficacy for helping their children with school, and life circumstances that prohibit or make it difficult for them to engage in traditional PI activities.
For example, two studies out of England in 1998 directly interviewed parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds. In one of the studies, working-class parents clearly felt that teachers had expert knowledge and a job to do that parents were not equipped to help with, while parents themselves had equally important roles in raising children that they would not expect the school to impinge upon; in terms of communicating with teachers and the school, working class parents indicated a sense of powerlessness in getting their needs met by teachers, whose decisions they felt were immutable: “they always seem to go back the way that they want to do it anyway … if they weren’t interested, they weren’t interested” (Crozier, 1999, p.322). This sense of powerless about being heard was echoed in the other study from England by the mother of a special needs child trying to obtain the best assessment for her son, and the working-class parents interviewed who wanted to have a parent room in the school in which to gather and smoke, which they were denied (Todd & Higgins, 1998).

Similarly, a Canadian study that examined the ways of being, knowing and doing of Aboriginal mothers with regard to schools found that “public schools do not encourage Aboriginal core values of sharing, of being other-centered, of harmony with nature, of non-interference, of patience, of circular time, of nonconfrontation, or of a broad view of family” (Coggins, Williams & Radin, 1997, in Pushor & Murphy, 2004): from this perspective, it is perhaps not surprising that Aboriginal parents might not make efforts to provide support to a system in which they don’t find value in what is taught. However, when Native parents do not attend parent-teacher conferences or school events, or parent in ways that are not in keeping with white, middle and upper-class expectations, rather than their beliefs being explored and perhaps taken into account or incorporated, they are “blamed and shamed” (Gorman, 2000, in Pushor & Murphy, 2004). Not recognized by schools is that Aboriginal participation requires “a true willingness on the part of decision makers to listen and act on what has been said” (Friedel, 1999
in Pushor & Murphy, 2004); this was demonstrated by the story of a Mi’kmaq mother’s willingness to dialogue with her daughter’s teacher only after several home visits in which the teacher validated the mother’s knowledge and insight.

Finally, an American study of immigrant parents from Haiti highlighted some of the ways that diverse cultural or ethnic groups might view the home-school relationship that are different from mainstream norms. For example, several studies have noted that when it comes to traditional involvement, it is usually mothers who interact with schools (Doucet, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lareau, 1987; Lasky, 2000; Meyer, 1962); Haitian culture, however, in general dictates that mainly fathers speak for the family, especially in areas of disciplining children, which had the potential to make these families feel excluded because of both culture and gender. Also, where traditional involvement assumes that families will support children’s school work at home, parents in this study felt that the school should find qualified people to perform this role as they themselves were not equipped: “They have … a number for kids to call for homework help … you might not speak English or be able to understand the homework” (Doucet, 2011, p.413). By extension, families in this study clearly felt that home and school had separate, non-overlapping roles in children’s development and were puzzled why schools were even asking for their input or assistance. One of the largest differences was in the area of school discipline, which Haitian families felt should be strict, even physical if necessary, to make children behave; this belief was clearly in opposition to current North American school policies and practices.

As from the various studies cited, there are a number of factors that affect PI for parents, I have created a visual (below) to help with understanding. In the visual, parents’ beliefs about parenting derive from their past experiences and any learning they have gained about preferred parenting practices; parents’ hopes and fears for their child include their desires for their child’s
safety and enrichment, as well as for the amount of education they expect their child to achieve and how much competition they expect their child to face in becoming self-sufficient. Parents’ beliefs about schooling are more complex and include parents’ own past experiences with schooling and any learning they have gained on preferred schooling practice, as well as parents’ awareness and desires for the various forms of PI: traditional, formalized and collaborative. I include these three broad categories under the umbrella of parents’ beliefs about education for their children, with the understanding here that education encompasses schooling. I will discuss the distinction between education and schooling in more depth later in this thesis.

Figure 2 Factors Affecting Parents' Involvement in Their Children's Schooling

As can be further seen in the visual, parents’ beliefs about education are then filtered through their concrete positions: their ethnicities, their family statuses and support from family
members, their own education levels and jobs, and finally their resulting socioeconomic statuses. Emerging from the filter of parents’ concrete positions are parents’ perceptions of their ability to help in schools, their expectations for their help to be welcomed, and their own availability. These perceptions contribute directly to parents’ decisions and actions with regard to PI.

It should be noted that, along with these examinations of the beliefs and circumstances of some marginalized parents, have also come cautions about drawing rigid conclusions about any particular groups of parents. For example, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler pointed out that evidence showed family status variables did not fully account for parents’ decisions to become involved: socioeconomic status defined resources and impacted some attitudes and approaches to schooling and child-rearing, but did not control parents’ choice to be involved or not; it did not, for instance, determine the value parents put on education (1997, p. 8). Other studies noted that some parents with low socioeconomic status do spontaneously get involved in schools in traditional ways (Doucet, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lareau, 1987). For example, one study by Karen Mapp in 2002 examined an elementary school in Boston, Massachusetts where the community of racially diverse families, sixty-seven percent of whom were low income and twenty-five percent of whom were special needs, had “a reputation of having a strong family partnership initiative” (p. 2) and found that it was changes to the school environment to make it more welcoming, respectful and open to parents that caused previously labelled “hard to reach” families to make and sustain connections to the school rather than any changes made by the parents themselves. A key recommendation in this study was for educators to be aware that “all parents – regardless of income, education, or cultural background – are involved in their children’s learning and want their children to do well” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 8).
If it is true that all groups of parents, despite their diversity, value education, what would seem from the research on marginalized families to make the pivotal difference for individual parents in terms of functional relationships with schools, then, is whether they and the school share the same or different beliefs of a parent’s role in a child’s life. For parents deciding whether to become involved in traditional, formalized or other ways, this manifests as evaluating whether what the school is working toward for students is similar to what they are working toward for their children.

Exploring this idea further, and of course recognizing from the different cultural and socioeconomic examples highlighted in the literature that “parents” clearly cannot be said to a homogenous group, it is worthwhile noting that the research on parents’ motivations and perspectives has suggested that, regardless of their individual backgrounds, it is possible there could be some desires and expectations to what all parents actually want, both from the public school system for their children and from schools themselves, to encourage them to connect, which has implications for both traditional involvement and more reciprocal partnerships. A caution that as the information was somewhat incidental to the main objectives of the studies in which they were contained, the examples are very broad, even abstract. Yet they do provide a glimpse of the parents’ point of view of what schools should be striving for outside of purely academic outcomes. Specifically, two studies, one of which was a survey of research from twenty countries including the US and the other a three-year study of parents’ relations with their children’s secondary school in England, reported that parents were concerned about the happiness and welfare of their children in schools and wanted the school to educate the whole child, not just provide for their academic ability (Sanders and Epstein, 2005; Crozier, 1999). Similarly, other studies have found that, whether professionals or unskilled labour themselves, parents valued a good education equally with a steady job (Kinloch, 1998) and wanted their
children to get some kind of qualification that would help them later in life (Crozier, 1999). In terms of involvement with schools, three studies, one of which reviewed fifty-one other studies from the US between 1993 and 2002, reported that parents wanted schools to be open, welcoming places that understand and respect their diversity and efforts to help their children (Henderson and Mapp, 2002; Sanders and Epstein, 2005; Mapp, 2002); finally, regardless of social class, parents wanted information from schools about their children’s progress (Crozier, 1999). Again, these examples are broad strokes only of what “parents” as a classification may want from the schooling system to entice them to be more involved in traditional, formalized or collaborative ways. But they do suggest an avenue of research in PI that could be beneficial to explore.

To summarize, the literature has suggested that, in raising children toward adulthood and independence, the majority of parents recognize the valuable role of schooling in their children’s ability to lead productive, fulfilled lives. However, the spontaneous activities individual parents perform to support schools differ based on their personal internal beliefs and external circumstances, some of which are attributable to social class and culture and others to whether parents feel the school is welcoming and respectful. The key to encouraging PI or partnership, if that is what is needed for student success, may turn on what parents want from the school system in general and from schools in particular, and whether their goals are in agreement with the goals of the institution.

**Potential Issues with Parental Involvement**

**Self-focused parents** Before leaving the topic of parents’ motivations, it must be noted that some researchers have postulated that the deepest impulses for parents to become involved with their children’s schooling may have less to do with benefits for their child than personal benefits for themselves. For example, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler recognized that mothers
“derive information about their own success as parents” (1997, p. 6) from being involved; likewise, Avvisati et al. suggested that some stakeholders see involvement as “benefitting … mostly parents themselves” by increasing their consumer satisfaction in schools (2010, p. 761; see also Hornby & Lafaele, 2011, p. 37 and Vickers & Minke, 1995, p. 134).

From this perspective it could be considered that, unconsciously, some involved parents feel that, having worked themselves to maximize the effects of the time and money which they have put into their children, they should therefore see some personal results: “parents investing effort to get involved in their child’s education derive utility … through the effect of their investment on the child’s success;” in other words, parents use their children’s success to define their self-image (Avvisati et al. p. 765). As explained by Honoré (2008) in Stelmach & von Wolff (2010, p. 64): “children are parents’ projects and ‘status symbols’;” parents pursue a “trophy child” to make themselves look good. Such favoring of the parents own needs may even lead to blindness to the needs and abilities of the child and unrealistic expectations by families, such as when academically educated parents felt their children could continue on to academic studies even when their children did not demonstrate academic qualities (Raty et al., 2002). Heavily involved parents might even unintentionally hinder their children’s development by providing too much help and intervention (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005, p. 107) or pressure for results, which, in some cases, can cause stress and demotivation in children. For example, Grolnick (2003, in Rogers et al. 2009) noted that “the use of parental pressure and control as it relates to academics can decrease children’s intrinsic motivation and will undermine the learning process and children’s sense of personal value and responsibility” (p. 47).

**Powerful parents** Not surprisingly, pressure from parents can also cause stress on teachers and the school system. As alluded to in the section on parents’ motivations and expectations, most parents connect with schools to help their own child be successful. One
economically focused study summed up the egocentric relationship between PI activities and student achievement with a simple formula: “direct effort, provided by the parent, in order to increase educational outcomes of their children” (Avvisati et al., 2010). A negative consequence of this targeted focus can be that some parents may seek to direct resources to their own child, regardless if this means resources are directed away from other children (Doucet, 2011; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Sil, 2007). Taken farther, powerful groups of parents can also block innovations or restructuring at schools that might put their own children on a lesser, though more even, footing with other children, in order to keep advantages for their own children (Doucet, p. 405; Sil, 2007). For example, one study noted how the attempt by a California school to de-track students in order to make college preparatory information more accessible for all students was fought by a powerful group of parents whose children were favoured by tracking (Oakes, 1985, and Oakes, Wells, Jones & Datnow, 1997, in Sil, 2007).

While it is important to acknowledge these potential issues with PI, and to proactively consider preventative measures such as promoting awareness in parents of the need to advocate for all children (Sil, 2007), it is also important to keep the potential issues in perspective. Parents are no different than non-parents when it comes to operating unconsciously or in their own best interests over the good of the group. Over-involvement or unrealistic pressure by some parents certainly has the potential to cause outward conflict with which teachers and other school personnel such as counsellors might have to deal, but the literature has not highlighted that this is a significant problem that currently affects most families’ relationships with schools. Having said that, if PI increases or parent-school relationships do become deeper, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the adverse possibilities of PI could multiply along with the beneficial, and become more critical to consider in the future. Before exploring more reciprocal models of partnership, then, it seems important to establish whether PI as it is currently and traditionally
manifested in schools does in fact have produce gains for students, as it is their education and development, after all, which is the reason for PI actions. It is also important to acknowledge the perspectives of teachers on PI, as they are the school personnel who would most likely be the main recipients of parents’ efforts to connect more deeply with their children’s schooling.

**Impacts of Parental Involvement on Student Achievement**

As noted by many authors, actual research results into the link between PI and student academic outcomes have been somewhat mixed as to whether any academic impact can be directly attributed to parental involvement, and if there is an academic impact, whether it produces gains or losses for students (Fan & Chen, 2001, p.4). Reasons for this uncertainty include the lack of standardization of the variables measured for “parental involvement” and “student academic achievement” in the many studies (Catsambis, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Rogers et al., 2009), the limited number of empirical studies available for review (Fan & Chen, 2001) and the reliance on “correlational and nonexperimental methods” in the majority of studies (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Avvisati, Besbas & Guyan, 2010), and the difficulty in knowing if negative correlations between involvement and academic scores represent negative impacts or merely an indication that parents were more involved because children were already struggling (Catsambis, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001). Fan and Chen’s 2001 study provided a perfect example of the difficulty in establishing the link: of the two thousand studies that purported to examine PI and student academic achievement, only twenty-five met their criteria of reporting their own empirical findings and having a Pearson correlation (linear dependence between two variables) between any PI indicators and any achievement outcomes.

Despite the discrepancies in measures and methodologies between studies, the general consensus of the research seemed to be that PI does have beneficial impacts on children’s educational outcomes, producing gains rather than losses (Catsambis, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001;
Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Rogers et al., 2009; Sil, 2007). A snapshot of some often cited studies provided details. For example, the Fan and Chen 2001 study referenced above was able to conclude that, of the accepted studies, when the many PI indicators were averaged and then compared to the averaged student achievement indicators, the linear relationship between the two revealed a meaningful, medium-sized effect ($r = .30$), which translated as PI “increasing the success rate of academic achievement by 30%” (p.17). Catsambis’ 2001 examination of US National Educational Longitudinal Study (1988) data, which did not use averages, revealed that while PI could not be shown to directly impact test scores, it did have strongly positive implications for students’ academic preparations for college. Henderson and Mapp’s 2002 analysis of fifty-one PI studies found that children of involved parents had higher attendance in school, better social skills, higher grades and test scores, more enrollments in advanced programs, and higher incidences of passing classes, earning credits, graduating and continuing on to post-secondary education. Finally, a Canadian study by Rogers, Theule, Ryan, Adams and Keating that surveyed parents of fifth and sixth grade children and compared their involvement to reports from their children’s teachers and report card grades found that numerous PI variables were associated with academic competence, which, by extension, demonstrated an indirect influence on student achievement (2009, p. 47).

For comparison, two studies demonstrated detrimental effects between PI and student achievement. First, a study using data from the US National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (1979 cohort) comparing parental monetary assets, expectations, levels of involvement and their children’s scores on standardized math and reading tests, demonstrated that PI at school did not impact children’s test scores, and that parents’ involvement at home was related to reading scores but not math scores; the strongest positive influence on test scores found in this study was produced by mothers’ high expectations (Zhan, 2005). Second, a review of PI literature that
applied economic criteria to the variables and analysis of a small number of economically acceptable studies found that while PI can be raised by programs, it was unclear if this made a difference to pupil achievement (Avvisati et al., 2010).

Utilitarian studies such as these are important to consider alongside the less rigidly analyzed studies that do demonstrate beneficial outcomes for children from PI as part of a dialogue around student achievement. It is interesting to note that while PI has been recognized as a comprehensive range of activities that have impacts on children, student achievement has not been similarly codified, despite the various outcomes pointed to in different studies besides academic achievement such the development of teens’ social and emotional skills (Elias et al., 2007, Henderson & Mapp, 2002), the fostering of children’s positive self-perceptions (Rogers et al., 2009) or the reduction in student discipline problems (Hornby, 2011). Those trying to justify dollars spent on public education often fix on the single measure that appears the most objective while at the same time being the easiest to collect and understand: scores on standardized tests. While it is easy to argue that measures of math or reading ability, for example, are highly important to children’s overall academic achievement and thus are essential skills that should be a prime focus of schooling, it must also be recognized that standardized tests provide only a one-time snapshot of a narrow academic ability while completely ignoring, for instance, a child’s social and emotional development, development which also has implications for costs to society. For example, the economically-focussed review above which reduced “parental involvement” and “student achievement” to inputs and outputs of an “education production function” in order to consider a “cost-benefit analysis” (Avvisati et al., 2010), cited two studies that examined PI as adult supervision after school and found no impact on test scores, only a decrease in risky or antisocial behaviours. Yet, in terms of costs and benefits, Avvisati et al. failed to then consider
the savings that decreased risky and antisocial behaviour might represent to public health and juvenile detention programs.

In any case, moving forward with the standards of achievement currently being considered, it seems clear from the research that the influence of parents does have a beneficial impact on children’s broader educational outcomes (social and emotional as well as academic), though not necessarily on children’s standardized test scores, a finding that, given most parents’ focus on developing the whole child not just their academic ability established in the section on parents’ motivations and expectations, is likely more important to governments and schools than to parents. It would seem, then, that PI and collaborative partnership studies might benefit from more research into the range of possible outcomes that children derive from education.

**The Impact of Parental Involvement on Teacher-Identity and Parent-Teacher Interactions**

Any explorations of PI models must lead into questions about the perspectives of teachers regarding their interactions with parents, as they are the school system personnel who consistently have the most direct and frequent contact with parents, particularly at the elementary level, and stand to be the most affected by any move by schools to foster more deeply reciprocal relationships with parents. With this in mind, several PI studies have examined teachers’ attitudes or feelings about parents and how parent-teacher interactions impact what teachers perceive to be their work (Crozier, 1998 and 1999, Goldring & Bauch, 1994; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lasky, 2000; Phadraig, 2005; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Stelmach, 2004; Todd & Higgins, 1998, Vickers & Minke, 1995).

Somewhat discouragingly, Vickers and Minke noted that “beginning teachers identify relationships with parents as among their most significant difficulties while veteran teachers cite problems with parents as major source of job dissatisfaction” (1995, p. 133). One potential source of conflict between teachers and parents is disagreement over views of teacher
professionalism: the attitude and skills teachers bring to their jobs. A dominant view of the teacher’s position toward their work was summed up by Goldring & Bauch: “teachers have viewed themselves historically as possessing a body of knowledge about the professional practice of teaching and possessing a level of individual autonomy regarding classroom decision-making” (1994, p.6). In other words, teachers view themselves as experts in educating children (Crozier, 1998 & 1999; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lareau, 1987; Lasky, 2000; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Stelmach, 2004; Todd & Higgins, 1998), a position which they will defend if challenged. In Hargreaves and Lasky’s interviews of fifty-three elementary and secondary school teachers, teachers who were confronted by parents “rarely entertained doubts about whether their own judgements might have been flawed or incorrect” (2004, p. 111). In fact, the authors suggested that the questioning of teaching approach or curriculum content “strikes at the core of teachers’ work, at the foundations of their purposes and their claims to professional status and judgement” (ibid, p. 110). Thus teachers’ traditional professional stance has led to them being resistant to efforts from non-teachers, including parents, to give input into teaching and learning (Lasky, 2000). The difficulty with this attitude is that, recalling the Guppy & Davies study referred to earlier in this literature review, parents today are more educated than ever before (1999); having spent many years in schools, they feel familiar with what happens there (Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004), and, especially for highly credentialed parents, they also likely regard their subject knowledge to be on an equal level with teachers. Thus they feel entitled to challenge teachers on a professional level (Guppy & Davies, 1999) and expect to be dealt with as professional equals; this is opposite to how teachers feel that parents should act or that teachers should be regarded when it comes to the technical issues of schooling (Crozier, 1998 & 1999; Goldring & Bauch, 1994; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lareau, 1987; Todd & Higgins, 1998).
Recent moves to increase PI, especially by governments, have sometimes led teachers to take steps to defend their professionalism, a response that does not bode well for possible deeper models of parent connections. For example, several researchers have noted how teachers “monitor” parents through involvement activities: by encouraging parents to provide support in traditional, one-directional ways, and by working with them on school projects or in committees, they can act to limit parents’ power and bring them in line with the middle-class values that work in teachers’ favour (Crozier, 1998; Lasky 2000, p.853). Stelmach provided an example of teacher monitoring when she highlighted how teachers working with parents and administrators on an Action Team for school improvement in Alberta directed initiatives away from the technical core of teaching and learning, such as implementing family interactive homework activities in which parents were interested: “the operating assumption was that the Action Team was not to interfere with classroom operations or impose expectations on teachers” (Stelmach, 2004, p. 3 of 10). Instead, the Action Team focused on non-technical school improvement strategies that supported teachers’ work and the school, such as collecting book donations for the school library and finding community members and parents to act as guest speakers on different careers (ibid).

Another potential source of conflict between teachers and parents moving toward a collaborative partnership model may lie in the types of interactions that parents want to have with schools (as noted in the parents’ motivations and expectations section above), and the connections with families that teachers prefer. Essentially, teachers want distant, respectful support rather than closer relationships with parents (Crozier, 1998; Goldring & Bauch, 1994; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lareau, 1987; Todd & Higgins, 1998). For example, teachers would like parents to help children with homework, encourage positive attitudes toward school and support school discipline; at school, they would like parents to be “an extra pair of hands” in the
classroom (Crozier, 1998, p.128) and attend parent-teacher events. In part, this focus on distant support is due to teachers’ heavy workloads, since support activities by parents such as ensuring that children complete homework assignments might ease some of the teacher’s burden, especially with low achieving students (Lareau, 1987). But also, teachers’ workloads do not leave a great deal of extra time for additional duties of working more closely with parents (Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Todd & Higgins, 1998). As one teacher put it, “my priority is my class,” (Todd & Higgins, 1998, p. 231). By contrast, many parents would like schools to be more open and welcoming to them, even designating a physical space for them within the school to validate their presence and belonging (Mapp, 2002; Todd & Higgins, 1998), but such measures would likely encourage more informal and familiar contact with teachers, the opposite to the type of interaction many teachers appear to want.

In explaining teachers’ feelings about parents, several authors have noted the sense of disappointment teachers feel when parents don’t appear to support teachers’ work or aren’t involved in traditional support ways such as attending parent-teacher conferences: teachers regard themselves as caring for their students and having a moral purpose to help them, and often express that parents who are not visibly helping their children to do well in school simply do not care for their own children (Lasky, 2000; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). For example, in Lasky’s study of teacher’s emotions, some teachers spoke of parents being neglectful: “there is very little time left over for emotionally feeding that child … those kind of activities that good parenting involves. Because of that these children are very apathetic about learning …;” “I find the most frustrating experience when you phone home and you can tell by the tone of parent that they just don’t care;” “when I feel disappointment it’s because I love their child. I care about the child and I give the assistance, help trying to make them love their child …” (2000, p. 850-851).
From these examples, it appears that teachers’ feelings about parents may arise from their deep focus on caring for and helping children in the arena of schooling, and where their feelings are negative, is when they don’t see parents caring in the same ways, or when they don’t recognize what parents do as caring. As explored in the parents’ motivations and expectations section above, as it is most often parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds and ethnic groups who are not involved in schools in traditional ways, this has led several researchers to identify a parent-deficit view of non-mainstream parents held by many teachers (Crozier, 1999; Doucet, 2011; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Lasky, 2000; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Mapp, 2002; Todd & Higgins, 1998). However, it is possible that, rather than a blanket, non-mainstream parent-deficit belief, teachers’ negative feelings about parent interaction stem instead from a fundamental lack of understanding of parents’ perspectives: a teacher’s school/subject-based lens for viewing parents can be a narrow one.

Following this line of reasoning, it is significant that Lasky’s study further identified that when teachers only interact with parents in brief, sporadic ways rather than develop relationships with them, their views tend to be one dimensional and stereotypical. Elementary teachers have at least some informal opportunities (such as when children are dropped off and picked up or parents volunteer in class and during field trips, etc) to dialogue with parents and build an understanding of who they are as people and what they believe and value, especially as they are a child’s only teacher for at least a year, but secondary teachers often only see parents under brief, ritualized conditions such as meet-the-teacher night or at school ceremonies; often they only have prolonged contact “when there’s been a crisis” (Lasky, 2000, p. 847). Thus it seems that teachers and parents, especially in secondary school, have very little chance of building relationships (characterized by Lasky as developing over time and based on shared values). Instead, the majority of contact between parents and teachers is better classified as interaction
which is, as Lasky described, sporadic and with the sole purpose of transmitting information from teacher to parent.

Accepting Lasky’s distinction between parent-teacher relationships and parent-teacher interactions, it must again be acknowledged that sporadic interactions are more in line with the frequency and depth of connections that teachers prefer to have with parents. Teachers do not constantly want to be put in situations where the expectation is that “they learn as much from parents as parents do from them; where communication, learning and power run in two directions” (Vincent & Tomlinson, 1997, in Hargreaves and Lasky, 2004). Rather, teachers believe relationships with parents should be “professionally distant” (Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lasky, 2000, p. 847; Smit et al., 2008, p. 70). Clearly, any move to deepen relationships between parents and schools will need to focus on how to encourage the acceptance of such relationships by teachers.

Fortunately, two studies in the literature provided some insight into situations in which parents and teachers were able to have positive interactions. In one case study, Karen Mapp reported on a low achieving school whose students’ test scores in math reading rose 30% and 40% respectfully over five years after a PI program was implemented. In that case, teachers themselves had identified raising PI as a measure to help struggling students and they actively participated in developing and supporting the involvement measures such as the creation of a Family Outreach Team and the opening of a family center in the school library, creating positive reactions in parents: “I chose the O’Hearn School because it was clearly the only public school available to me where parents got any respect and counted, and where teachers and parents and kids really worked together in a genuine way” (Mapp, 2002, p. 10).

Another situation where teachers and parents seemed to work well together was in the Catholic schools studied by Goldring and Bauch (1994). The authors noted that historically in
Catholic schools, parents have been viewed as “the primary educators of their children with the schools playing a supporting role” (p.37) leading Catholic schools to work more collaboratively with parents; Catholic schools also have “clearly defined goals” (ibid) of which both parents and teachers are deeply aware. However, while Catholic schools in this study had high levels of PI, teachers in the schools also had high levels of empowerment, in part due to the greater autonomy in the schools’ organizational structuring compared to public schools. Thus, in Catholic schools, both parents and teachers had a strong sense of their roles in educating children and a shared agreement on the goals of the school.

In analyzing what made the difference between negative and positive parental interactions for teachers from an emotional standpoint, Hargreaves and Lasky (2004) identified five forms of distance (or closeness) that characterized teachers’ relationships with parents: sociocultural distance, such as when parents displayed a difference in beliefs or expected actions which created a sense of “otherness” that teachers couldn’t understand; professional distance, as in teachers being regarded as experts in education; moral distance, as when teachers and parents did not see the same purpose for teaching; political distance, in terms of teachers having power in the relationship with parents; and physical distance, which is exacerbated by non-face-to-face communication such as phone or email.

From the examples explored above, several factors seemed to impact whether parental involvement was regarded as positive and acceptable by teachers, or negative and to be avoided. First of all, despite teachers’ outward preferences on the types and frequency of exchanges with parents desired, there needed to be contact that allowed relationships to build, meaning contact that was more than just sporadic, ritualized interactions designed to transmit information from school to home. Secondly, there needed to be agreement between parents and teachers as to the roles each of them would play in providing education to children. Lastly, there needed to be
understanding that both teacher and parent care for the child, in order to build respect for each other and allow support of each other’s jobs. Thus, in considering conditions for collaborative partnerships, it should be remembered that positive parent-teacher connections must be “grounded in long term relationships; strong, mutual understanding; and a shared commitment to an idea of what is best for the child” (Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004, p. 104); given the findings suggested by the literature, the challenge will be to create conditions whereby teachers will have the time, skills and desire to be willing participants in such an endeavor.

**Reciprocal Models of Parental Involvement: Collaborative Partnerships**

Having established the most common understandings around traditional and formalized parental involvement, including parents’ and teachers’ perspectives and the impacts on student achievement and schools, I now turn to how this information compares and contrasts to collaborative partnership models for families and schools which have been suggested by some authors, in order to highlight factors that might be necessary for collaborative partnerships to succeed in BC, if that is what is intended by the BC MoE.

First of all, the term “partnership,” like “parental involvement” itself, has not been clearly defined by educators or researchers, and the spectrum of ways it has been invoked spans from meaning simply working together (Davies, 2000; Epstein & Voorhis, 2010; Plunkett, 1997; Sanders & Epstein, 2005), which is the technical meaning of partnership, to a deeply reciprocal relationship between school and family to bring about a mutually agreed upon result (Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Phadraig, 2005; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Smit et al., 2008) which evoke visions of parent-school interactions very different from current practice.

For example, one use of the partnership term, as mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, is often by governments in reference to school reform or when legislatating parents’ rights to participate in the governance and management of schools (Smit, et al. 2008). Goldring and
Bauch summed up this “parent empowerment” model of partnership when they examined parents and teachers interacting in such governance structures: “In this model, parents are actively involved in their child’s school either as parent advocates and activists or as members of elected school councils. This model conceptualizes parents as consumers who are actively engaged in influencing school processes and outcomes … Parents engage in oversight or “checking” activities making sure their child’s needs are being met” (1994, p. 16). However, despite the potential embodied by sitting on school decision-making bodies alluded to in the analysis of Epstein’s PI model in the section of this literature review on defining PI above, merely legislating parents onto school councils does not make a partnership, either in the simple form of working together or in any more complex, collaborative form. An example of why these kinds of “partnerships” often fail to change traditional parent-teacher interactions was provided by Stelmach’s (2004) case study of parents working with school personnel on a school improvement Action Team to, supposedly, collaboratively identify where improvements were needed and develop solutions. The Action Team was based on Epstein’s traditional involvement model which, Stelmach noted, “presupposes parent empowerment” (p. 179). By contrast, parents interviewed about their experience on this decision-making team felt powerless to effect any real change, noting nothing could be implemented without the support of teachers or school administration, who acted as buffers against additional work being taken on by the school. As observed by the author, “parents detect when schools pay lip service to partnership, especially when it comes to decision making” (ibid, p. 179).

Another caution against the casual use of the term partnership is that any organizational idea that is spoken of often without clear definition runs the danger of becoming a “buzzword,” allowing “each constituency (to) assume their own interpretation” (Phadraig, 2005, p. 94) for their maximum benefit. For example, Todd and Higgins noted that some educators were using
the idea of partnership as “a tool to maintain professional control in the face of powerless and frustration” (1998, p. 235) due to mandated and increased parental contact. Crozier (1998) appeared to agree with this analysis, noting that as government put more pressure on parents to become involved to watch over the education system, teachers were co-opting parents’ presence in a form of “surveillance,” watching and guiding parents to make sure they came in line with doing what the school wanted: “as parents gain more confidence in utilizing their “rights,” it will become increasingly important for schools to harness their power” (p. 135) as opposed to letting parents become more powerful than school personnel.

Clearly, then, to explore any possible benefits to the school system that a term like “partnership” might imply and also to avoid casual use or misuse, there needs to be an examination of the range of partnership described in the literature, and an explication of both the simple “working together” models and the more complex “collaborative partnership” models at the other end of the spectrum.

Interestingly, any such exploration returns directly to Joyce Epstein and her 1995 seminal work which was actually framed by the need to create school-family partnerships. “Partners recognize their shared interests in and responsibilities for children, and they work together to create better programs and opportunities for students …. the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life” (Epstein, 1995, p. 701). Epstein envisioned school-family partnerships transforming schools by creating family-like schools in which students felt cared for and secure, and overlapping environments in which students received common messages from all the adults they encountered. Her six types of family involvement model was thus designed to have educators and parents working collaboratively for the benefit of the development of all of a child’s competencies, not just focused on academics. However, perhaps because the model was developed in a time of school
reform with a focus on raising the success rates of underperforming students from marginalized families, or perhaps because there was an assumption that parents share the school-generated objectives for their children (i.e. Epstein’s promotion of “school-like families” [1995, p. 702], the collaborative aspect of the model was eventually overshadowed by guiding families to change their (perceived as) uninvolved practices in order to support students’ achievements on standardized tests and their ability to get to college. For example, Sanders and Epstein’s international review of literature in 2005 spoke of the “importance of family and community involvement for school effectiveness and student outcomes” (p. 202); similarly, in 2010 Epstein and Voorhis focused on “strengthening teamwork for partnerships” (p. 1) by providing recommendations for school counsellors to set up conditions and programs for more involvement at schools, rather than any discussion of collaboration. Epstein’s model of partnership, then, represents the “working together” end of the spectrum; with traditional PI models such as Epstein’s being so ubiquitous, the “working together” meaning of partnership is therefore nearly synonymous with traditional PI (as demonstrated in Davies, 2000; Plunkett, 1997; Sil, 2007; Warner, 1991).

As discussed at the end of the section in this literature review on defining PI, one of the main criticisms of the traditional model, apart from its focus on mainstream values, emerges out its one-directionality, as it depicts support flowing from home to school to reinforce school-determined notions of appropriate student behaviour and success. On the surface, the directionality of PI is perfectly logical: public schools have been charged by society with particular tasks - schooling children - and so should be supported in being able to achieve these tasks, particularly by those who benefit personally from the outcomes (such as parents who benefit indirectly through their children). Beneath this assumption of the schools’ right to receive support, however, lies an essential conflict: schooling produces both a public good for
society and private good for individuals. As well, as uncovered in the sections above on parents’ and teachers’ perspectives, how “educating children” is defined and achieved can differ between the “universalistic concerns of teachers” (Lareau, 1987, p.82) and the “particularistic agenda of parents” (ibid). From the parents’ perspective,

the parent has a much greater stake in the partnership than the professional. They have a longer term commitment to the child than the professional who, in case of the class teacher, is in loco parentis for less than a third of the child’s waking life over the course of just one year. Parents have a much greater affective involvement in their love and aspirations for their children (Todd & Higgins, 1998, p.228).

In other words, the problem with one-directionality from the point of view of PI can partly be explained by the struggle between the public and private spheres.

As established in the section on parents’ motivations, for parents to support schools, they need to be in agreement with the broader outcomes of schooling in order to be reassured those outcomes will lead to what they consider success for their individual children. Public schools are funded by public money and thus, not unreasonably, have agendas that support the public good (Smit et al., 2008): governments who manage the public good want schools to produce good citizens and good workers who are able to get jobs and contribute to the economy, and by extension, not detract from the economy or public life by being unemployed or delinquent. This is evident by such documents as the US Department of Education’s *Blueprint for Reform: The Reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in which education is touted as “the key to securing a more equal, fair, and just society” (2010, p. 1), and the province of British Columbia’s *Mandate for the School System* which states that “the purpose of the British Columbia school system is to enable learners to develop their individual potential and to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to contribute to a healthy society and a prosperous and sustainable economy” (BC MoE, 2011a). Some of what governments and individual families want from schooling may be mutual, such as providing a credential to children, but
other objectives may not be as compatible, such as governments’ need for “addressing cultural
disadvantage and inequality” (Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). There was a time when the public did
not question the purposes of their institutions, but as Guppy & Davies noted, today there is
“greater public cynicism about core institutions” including schools (1999, p. 277); these days the
public, including parents, is not so content to leave increasingly crucial decisions to elected or
appointed officials, and are more inclined to speak up for their “rights” (Hornby & Lafaele,
2011).

As further established in the section on teachers’ perspectives, for parents to support
schools and not challenge teachers, they need to be in agreement around some of the components
that comprise the teacher’s task - such as what children are learning and how they are being
taught - to know that their individual children’s needs are being met. The modern age is much
different than the industrial age in which public school systems were birthed. Yet, with
exception of online courses, schools are still mostly organized and run like the factory
production lines from that earlier era (Henderson and Berla, 1994, in Hornby and Lafaele, 2011),
with curriculum set by the factory owners (the government or schools) and a methodology
designed to generate the mechanical reproduction of identical products, complete with rigid
timetables and inflexible notions of the operations of the factory. In the modern age, the
information and skills that society possesses which could possibly be transmitted to youth are
exponentially larger than in the century in which public schools were formed; the children in
modern school communities not only come from socioeconomically diverse families but also
different ethnicities and cultures; and what young people might want to do with their education
and their lives has never been more wide open. The old “universalistic” way of schooling may
still work in some measure for the state or school system to meet its targets, but no longer meets
the expectations of today’s diverse children and families for whom education is “increasingly crucial for individual … well-being” (Guppy & Davies, 1999, p. 277).

This conflict between the public and private spheres – between government’s and individual families’ possible differing purposes for schooling, and a universalistic versus individualized method of producing educated children – is exacerbated by the one-directionality of traditional PI which requires parents to agree with and unquestioningly support the school’s agenda. This recognition sets the stage for an examination of the more reciprocal relationship between parents and schools that some authors have proposed, and the establishment of a definition of partnership which falls at the other end of the spectrum from one-directional, traditional involvement models. After describing each model individually, I will summarize the key findings about collaborative partnerships.

To begin, a model proposed by Elias, Patrikakou and Weissberg in 2007 did not directly define collaborative partnership but instead offered a description that demonstrated differences from traditional involvement in several ways. Aimed specifically at secondary schools and the challenges young people face as they mature and transition to young adults, the authors suggested that formal education, rather than just focusing on academic skills, needs to be considered part of overall child socialization. The goal of their model was to help adolescents with “problem solving skills; emerging sexuality; healthy, drug and violence-free lifestyles, and civic responsibility” (Elias et al., 1997, in Elias et al., 2007, p. 543). In this model, schools and parents had different roles, with the parents’ role not being an extension of the school as in traditional involvement, but rather to help their child “find and develop her competencies,” and to become confident and not get overwhelmed (ibid, p. 547). Schools were to help teenagers connect to their parents and to real life through systematically having students seek out information and knowledge from their parents to complete meaningful homework assignments.
such as analyzing media and examining liberty; staff, parents and students were also to participate together in skills workshops. The keys to success for this model were developing clear parameters – in this case, the social development of adolescents – around which to build a partnership, and having parents, youth, school personnel and community work together in specific projects to achieve the mutual goals.

A more defined model that used some familiar PI tools was found in Phadraig’s 2005 partnership model. Acknowledging the vagueness of the partnership term, Phadraig’s model sought to first more clearly define partnership before applying it to the context of parent-teacher conferences and school reports. The author established three features of educational partnerships: that parents and teachers must have a shared sense of purpose through “a common perception of the aims and functions of education and their respective roles within the system” (Phadraig, 2005, p. 95); they must also have a sense of respect for each other characterized by being understanding and sensitive toward each other – teachers needing to regard parents as competent people who have “valuable insights into their children’s lives” (ibid) was highlighted; and, finally, parents and teachers must have “a willingness to negotiate” which involves “sharing of knowledge and an element of joint decision-making” (ibid). Of these three components, the sharing of knowledge, distinguished from the mere sharing of information that usually characterizes parent-teacher interactions, and joint decision-making were considered key: without these two components, using the term “partnership” was considered “window dressing on the part of the professional” (ibid, p. 96). Phadraig then suggested that, after parents and teachers have made a paradigm shift in thinking about involvement, parent-teacher meetings and report cards, if they were modified to contain teacher and student assessments and goal-setting, and a space for parents to send comments back to the teacher, could be turned into a venue for two-way knowledge sharing. Similar to the Elias et al. model, parents and teachers were seen to
have different but complementary roles. Key to the success of this model was the dialogue between parents and teachers and the ability of each side to say “no” to requests from the other and be respected.

Price-Mitchell’s 2009 model, by contrast to the first two examined, looked specifically at how to actually reframe parent-school partnerships: “instead of fragmented areas or ways parents help children learn, emphasis focuses on the relationships that transform adult learning into action that benefits outcomes for children” (p.15). This was to be accomplished by leadership that allows relationships between parents and schools to evolve from the bottom up, rather than being dictated from the top down, and further encourages learning to take place in all partners. Price-Mitchell began by acknowledging there are boundaries between school personnel and parents but that “teachers, principals, counselors, parents and many others in the peripheral community share a common practice of educating the whole child” (ibid, p.19). In this model, teachers and parents must “know, trust and respect one another” and “initiate contact with the other when needed to help the child” (ibid, p.18); in terms of problem solving for children, parents and educators must work together to find solutions that are reasonable and appropriate to their overlapping contexts. To develop relationships, transfer knowledge across boundaries, and generate new ideas, human networks were said to be needed: “social networks between parents, parents and schools, and schools and communities” (ibid, p.19) as well as “communities of practice that emphasize the learning people do together” (ibid, p. 20) rather than focusing on individual specialities or roles of parents versus school personnel. The key to this model was leadership that can allow “trial-and-error learning and non-linear thinking” (ibid, p.22) and dialogue, including storytelling between parents and teachers, that builds trusting relationships.

The need to embrace storytelling and building deep relationships was echoed in the Pushor and Murphy model which examined partnership principles used by one educator that
proved successful for Aboriginal families. Key to the model was the educator’s willingness to visit Aboriginal families in their homes in order to build trust and respect their valuing of relationships. The authors told the story of how one visit to the home of a Mi’kmaq girl where the educator truly listened to her mother and incorporated what he learned about the student into how he dealt with her at school encouraged the girl’s attitude and effort to significantly improve. From this story, the authors determined that although a significant purpose of schooling is to improve student (academic) achievement, this needs to be done “in contextual and relational ways that reflect and build from knowledge and practice of communities, cultures and families that comprise the school” (p. 233). Five principles to guide family-school partnerships, all drawn from Cairney and Munsie, 1992, were suggested in this model:

1. teachers and parents must accept that “each has much to learn from each other;”
2. the overarching purpose of partnership is to bring about “positive … benefits for children;”
3. “all strategies must consider the needs of the parents;”
4. “all strategies should lead parents to assume greater involvement in their children’s learning;” and finally,
5. “whenever possible, parents expertise and knowledge should be used” (in Pushor and Murphy, 2004, p. 233-234).

The key learning from this model was that “through sharing what they knew and understood, they (parent and teacher) arrived at solutions that neither could have determined alone” (ibid, p. 233).

Finally, Hargreaves and Lasky (2004) offered recommendations for parent-school partnerships that focused directly on parent-teacher interactions. For example, the authors noted that for partnerships to work, teachers need to have “reciprocal relationships with parents where
communication, learning and criticism run in both directions” (Vincent and Tomlinson, 1997, in Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004, p. 119). They further suggested that partnerships cannot develop if teachers and parents are professionally and physically distant because of formal and infrequent contact; partnerships require emotional understanding between participants. Parents and teachers needed to listen and engage with each other in order to reconcile the “different purposes that parents and teachers have for children’s education” (ibid, p. 119). Key to the authors’ insights were that without shared purposes between parents and teachers, more PI would likely only create more negative interactions and more conflict.

It is notable that several components for collaborative partnerships are repeated in the various models described: I have highlighted these overlapping elements in the table below.

**Table 1**  
**The Necessary Components of Collaborative Partnerships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Necessary Components of Collaborative Partnerships</th>
<th>Citation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Parents and teachers must have a shared sense of purpose: considering all elements of development – intellectual, social and moral – in order to educate the whole child | Elias et al., 2007  
Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004  
Phadraig, 2005  
Price-Mitchell, 2009  
Pushor & Murphy, 2004 |
| Deep rather than transactional relationships between parents and teachers, characterized by mutual respect and recognizing what the other has to offer, are key | Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004  
Phadraig, 2005  
Price-Mitchell, 2009  
Pushor & Murphy, 2004 |
| Parents and teachers must share knowledge about the child and make decisions jointly | Phadraig, 2005  
Price-Mitchell, 2009  
Pushor & Murphy, 2004 |
| Parents and teachers must be willing to learn from each other (insights about the child, ways to address challenges, etc.) | Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004  
Price-Mitchell, 2009  
Pushor & Murphy, 2004 |
| Parents and teachers have different but complementary roles | Elias et al., 2007  
Phadraig, 2005 |
| Parents, teachers and students should work together in shared projects to build understanding about each other and their roles and demonstrate collaboration in the endeavor of educating the child | Elias et al., 2007  
Price-Mitchell, 2009 |
From the analysis of PI studies as well as more reciprocal parent-school partnership models, it seems clear that the key distinction between traditional and formalized PI and collaborative partnerships is that traditional PI is about what parents do to support schools in bringing about academic success for their children, whereas partnerships are about relationships between families and schools for the broader development of children. To further illustrate the differences between traditional and formalized PI and family-school collaborative partnerships, I have created another table:

**Table 2**

**Traditional and Formalized PI Models versus Collaborative PI Models**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activities performed by parents</th>
<th>Traditional Parental Involvement (TPI) – An Activity-Based Model</th>
<th>Formalized Parental Involvement (FPI) – An Influence and Oversight Model</th>
<th>Collaborative Parental Involvement (CPI) – A Relationship-Based Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parents perform home, school and community based activities to support schoolwork</td>
<td>Parent representatives sit on legislated school-based councils to provide input and oversight to school decisions</td>
<td>Parents take part in activities that connect home and school such as homework that makes teens interact with parents or in-school activities that highlight parents’ strengths</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directionality of activities</td>
<td>One directional: Parents provide support from home to school</td>
<td>One directional: Parents provide input to schools</td>
<td>Multi-directional: Activities build relationships between parent and child, parent and teacher, child with larger community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home-school connection</td>
<td>Sporadic, transactional interactions to transmit information from school to home such as Meet the Teacher Night, parent-teacher interviews, report cards sent home</td>
<td>Reports are made to the general parent body on council decisions</td>
<td>Deep relationships between home and school are developed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Mutual understanding of caring
- Agreement on aims of education and school goals
- Agreement on the roles of parent and teacher
### Position of participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Parental Involvement (TPI) – An Activity-Based Model</th>
<th>Formalized Parental Involvement (FPI) – An Influence and Oversight Model</th>
<th>Collaborative Parental Involvement (CPI) – A Relationship-Based Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher is the expert professional, parent is a passive helper</td>
<td>Parent is an empowered consumer, teacher is an accountable employee</td>
<td>Parents and teachers are equals in an educational endeavor for the child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Inclusivity of diverse families

| Inclusivity of diverse families | Recognizes and reinforces white, middle class values | Parents must have knowledge and skills to participate | Able to incorporate diverse families through negotiation |

### Determiners of student outcomes

| Determiners of student outcomes | School-determined outcomes for student behaviour and success: Academic focus on grades, test scores, advanced track/ college track placement | School-determined outcomes for student behaviour and success, ostensibly, some input from parents | Parent and teacher collaboratively-determined outcomes for student behaviour and success: Whole child development, academic and social success |

### Anticipated outcomes: individual and societal

| Anticipated outcomes: individual and societal | University/training/good jobs (individual) Good citizenship/support economy (societal) |

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### Summary and Conclusions of the Literature Review

In BC, parental involvement in schooling appears to take two main forms. The first is traditional PI through home and school based activities, including membership in various Parent Advisory Councils (school-based PACs, district PACs, and the provincial body BC Confederation of PACs [BCCPAC]) and volunteer opportunities in schools. In fact, the School Act for BC, most recently revised on June 16, 2014, guarantees the right of parents to provide volunteer services at or for a school, as well as to establish a parent advisory council (PAC) to “advise the board and the principal and staff of the school or the Provincial school respecting any matter relating to the school or the Provincial school” (2014b, p.C-21). A survey of volunteer opportunities on various schools parents’ pages suggested that most parents appear to connect with schools through direct volunteering such services as support in classrooms or school events, and fundraising. In Vancouver, for example, parents are encouraged to engage in TPI through
both parent organizations (see volunteer opportunities on various Vancouver schools’ PAC pages) and the school board itself (Vancouver School Board, nd).

The second form of parental involvement in BC is formal PI in the form of government legislated School Planning Councils. The BC School Act establishes formal School Planning Councils (SPCs) for each elementary and secondary school and guarantees parents the right to sit on them. The school board of a district must by legislation consult with the SPC of a school over such items as the allocation of staff and resources in the school, and educational services and educational programs in the school. In return, each SPC must submit to its board a School Plan consisting of a plan to improve student achievement at the school. Membership of SPCs are ostensibly made up of the school principal, three elected parents (one of whom must be an executive member of the school’s PAC), a student appointed by the principal, and a teacher.

Separate to these PI opportunities, as mentioned in the Introduction to this thesis, the current Liberal government is also seeking input on schooling from parents since the release of its BCED Plan in October 2011. Parents have been invited to speak out on various aspects of the BCED Plan through the website engage.bcedplan.ca and through events arranged by organizers of the website such as the BCED Plan Twitter Town Hall (held on January 17, 2013). Through the BCED Plan, it is suggested that BC parents could one day be working in partnership with schools to receive more information about the progress and achievement of their children (BC MoE, 2011b) as a step in developing individualized learning.

Through this literature review on parental involvement, I have established several competing concepts of parental involvement. The most common, even taken-for-granted concept, traditional parental involvement or TPI, can be defined as parental actions, filtered by a myriad of beliefs and concrete personal factors, to support schools in providing results (generally achievement) for students. The second concept, formalized parent involvement or FPI, has come
into play more recently as a result of a global focus on raising academic achievement in students to make countries more competitive, and is characterized by the inclusion of parents and community representatives “in the governance, management and policies of schools” (Smit et al., 2008, p.74) through the legislation.

Both of these concepts of PI focus on parents as a resource – ostensibly for students, but more truly for schools and government. In TPI, teachers and schools seek parents help to fill gaps either of personnel, such as through supervision on fieldtrips, or of resources, such as fundraising for books or enrichment opportunities. Considering how the PI literature reported that teachers wish to connect with parents, TPI may represent an ideal for teachers – parents show support and perhaps by extension respect for teachers by helping them do their jobs, but are not involved in what the teacher considers to be their professional domain. However, the subservient positioning of parents within TPI, as well as the increased pressure to perform activities and the differing views about parenting responsibilities held by some parents, suggests TPI may not be the ideal model of involvement for all parents. In FPI situations, where parents sit on school-based councils to give input into school decisions, the literature reported that teachers and schools feel threatened in their professional spheres, responding by either buffering parents from participating in actual decision-making, or by managing parents to attain the outcome they desire. In BC, this rejection of government oversight mechanisms is even more overt as, since their Annual General Meeting of 2006, the teacher’s union of BC (the BC Teachers’ Federation [BCTF]) has directed its members not to sit on school SPCs (BC Teachers’ Federation, 2007). Thus, while a very few parents might gain more voice within a school or school system and feel satisfied by having the venue to be heard, FPI does not seem to be a model that likely provides real input for parents in general, and may even provoke alienation between parents and schools. In addition, in both TPI and FPI, the cooperation or participation
of parents is assumed – parents are not asked if they wish to play these parts, but rather expected and encouraged to help as part of their parenting role. Parents who do not engage in TPI and sometimes FPI are then judged accordingly.

The last concept of parental involvement reviewed, collaborative parental involvement or CPI, is thus different from TPI and FPI in a striking way. By suggesting in this model that parents and teachers need to understand what each is trying to achieve and work together as equal partners to educate the whole child in all his or her elements of development, it reframes parents in the school system from being simply a resource for schools and government, to being an agent for their children. In other words, CPI raises the possibility that, rather than viewing schooling as a societal obligation in which they play a peripheral part for their children, that parents may independently have educational goals for their children, and perhaps view schooling as a part of achieving those goals, requiring negotiation and even flexibility on the part of schools. In CPI models, parents are still needed, even expected, to participate, but there is a sense that participation is less a reflection of efficacy as a parent, than an intentional parenting strategy. Encouraging participation then becomes a commitment by teachers and schools to meeting parents as equals, to share what the school is trying to achieve but also to discover and respect what parents are trying to achieve, so that both parties can work toward common goals.

As noted earlier in this literature review, what is alluded to but not deeply articulated by any of the PI models reviewed is a suggestion of what parents’ goals for their children are specifically, and what part schooling might play for parents in achieving those goals. Considering the current climate for parents in BC with regards to the public school system, it seems timely to explore BC parent voices to learn how they view themselves in relation to the school system, what goals they might express for their children, and what interactions they would like to have with teachers and schools in support of their goals.
Research Design and Methodology

In the Introduction to this thesis, I provided a brief overview to the phenomenological approach I chose to guide my research into what parents themselves want from involvement with schools. As previously stated, phenomenology is the study of unique lived experiences of individuals in order to uncover and describe the essential structures that underlie a shared phenomenon. In the case of this study, the phenomenon shared by the parent participants is involvement in their children’s educations. In phenomenology, studying the individual experiences of people connected to a phenomenon can potentially reveal the phenomenon’s essence or the properties and qualities that are so integral to the phenomenon that it simply would not be recognized as such without them.

This research approach was a good fit for my study as I wanted to try to find what might be common in the individual experiences of a diverse set of parents, in order to build a definition of PI that was not from an external point of view, such as the school system or PI researchers, but rather from the point of view of those who actually enact the activity: parents themselves. In this chapter, I provide some more detail on phenomenology as it relates to my study, particularly the concept of lived experiences. I then describe my own lived experience of PI before outlining the features of my research study: the recruitment process, the participant group details, the data collection and analysis, and finally, the limitations of this study.

Researching Lived Experiences

To understand the approach of phenomenology, two important concepts must be explained. The first is that each individual person has a lifeworld, which is “understood as what we experience pre-reflectively, without resorting to categorization or conceptualization, and quite often includes what is taken for granted or those things that are common sense” (from Husserl, 1970, in Laverty, 2003, p. 4). It is called a lifeworld because it is the world of everyday
life: in other words, it is the ever-present background through which a person makes decisions, acts and takes meaning from his or her life as they navigate the minutes, hours and days of existence. And while each person’s lifeworld is built from distinctive experiences and subjective understandings, each is also “inextricably linked with social, cultural and political contexts” by virtue of interacting with others and the environment (Leonard, 1999, in Flood, 2010, p. 9). As such, while each lifeworld is unique, each also draws on shared experiences and understandings, and sometimes shared phenomena.

To provide a concrete example somewhat related to this study, a group of diverse people might have nothing in common with each other, but they all have an idea of the phenomenon of “being a parent,” in part because they themselves had parents but also in part because society has notions of what “being a parent” means. The lifeworlds of each of these people are unique, but they share an understanding, at least in a broad sense. If this same group of people were to have children, they then potentially would share the phenomenon of “being a parent.” I say potentially because the essence of “being a parent” may be more than just the physical act of birthing or fathering a child: having a child may not be synonymous with “being a parent.”

This brings me to the second important notion of phenomenology, and that is of a person’s lived experiences. Lived experiences are inextricably tied up with a person’s lifeworld. Specifically, the making of decisions, acting and taking meaning while interacting with people, situations and things constitute a person’s lived experiences, and a person’s lived experiences further contribute to creation of the person’s lifeworld. Lived experience is thus the researcher’s window into understanding phenomena. Asking research participants to describe their lived experiences “aims at letting something show itself” (van Manen, 1997, p. 26) – from the descriptions, especially descriptions that encompass the senses, the attentive researcher can see the parts that make up the phenomenon for the individual, of which he or she might not even be
conscious. Studying a person’s lived experience thus brings one closer to understanding the experience from that person’s point of view, and in a shared phenomenon, to the “grasping of what it is that renders this or that particular experience its special significance” (ibid, p. 32).

To continue the previous example of diverse people having children, they will each likely not experience or feel the phenomenon in the same way, or even have experiences or activities related to the phenomenon that are the same. But as they each describe their lived experiences of the phenomenon, that which contributes to “being a parent” and also what is non-essential and can be left out, the essence of “being a parent,” becomes clearer. Similarly, my research sought to gather the lived experiences of parents sharing the phenomenon of “being involved in their children’s education” in order to find what essential structures that phenomenon may contain.

The outcome of phenomenological research is a deeper understanding of the phenomenon itself as well as of the people who experience it. And on this note, one final point to make about a phenomenological approach is a caution against thinking about it as a natural science concerned with facts and generalizations. The essence of any phenomenon is not a fixed, unmovable point like the law of gravity or a quadratic formula, and uncovering an essence is not a solution to a problem. Rather it provides knowledge to inform actions; in the field of education, it can help with understanding the impact of policy and programs, or even suggest directions that better address stakeholders’ positions or needs. As van Manen states:

Phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world. (1997, p.9)

My Position as a Researcher

As noted in the first chapter of this thesis, an important part of the methodology of phenomenology is being fully open to receiving a person’s lived experience and not rushing to interpret or categorize their story, which can happen especially when the researcher already has
some knowledge or experience of the phenomenon being examined. One of the ways to ensure openness is for the researcher to bracket his or her experiences, meaning making them explicit and then setting them aside. This is not to suggest that the researcher somehow becomes objective and impartial towards the participant’s story. Rather that his or her own experiences are held back during the interaction with research participants so as not interrupt the flowing and gathering of their lived experiences.

In my case, as alluded to in the first chapter of this thesis, while I am a student researcher conducting a study of PI, I am also a parent who, during the collection and analysis of my research data, was highly involved in a public school system. Before I began my research, I thus made certain to reflect on and write about my own lived experience of PI, in order to make these experiences explicit to myself, as this allowed me to set them aside during my data collection and analysis and be more fully open to hearing and prompting the stories of my participants without directing or making assumptions about them. To situate myself to my readers, I will now share my own lived experience of PI before returning to the outline of my research methodology.

**My own lived-experience of PI** I have two sons, one of whom at this writing is in university and the other who just finished grade twelve in a public secondary school on the west side of Vancouver and is currently taking a gap year before going to college. I was involved in both their educations before they went to school, by providing a home environment that was rich in educative experiences such as creative and imaginative playtime as well as community music and sport classes, and by teaching them both how to read. My husband and I chose to enrol both our children in French Immersion in order to enrich their schooling experience and allow them to acquire a second language. I still remember both of my sons’ first days of school, walking away from the classroom after dropping them off and wondering how they were going to cope,
particularly being spoken to in another language, and how the teacher would respond to them; whether she would recognize their strengths and be gentle with their weaknesses. With my older son who was highly creative and expressive but introverted with his peers, I actually cried from anxiety. Fortunately, my younger son, who was much more social and outgoing, had the same teacher for kindergarten as my older son so I was much less worried for him; knowing the teacher, I was able to trust her kindness as well as her experience and ability to see my son as an individual and not as a collection of behaviours with which to be dealt.

When both my sons were in kindergarten and grade one, I volunteered with their classes once per week, assisting the teacher in whatever way she requested and not necessarily directly with my own children. For example, I sometimes read to small groups of children or listened to different children read to me; I interacted with various children in educational stations, and I helped to supervise the whole class during free play, recess and on field trips. Through my involvement, I developed close relationships with all my sons’ teachers in their early grades, and often consulted with them over different aspects of their academic development or their social well-being with their peers. I believe what I most enjoyed about being involved in those early years was continuing to feel I had a large part in the education of my sons even though their schooling was in the hands of others.

The elementary school we had chosen for our sons was known in the community for having a high degree of parent involvement on many levels: directly with classes, in special events and fundraising, and through the parent advisory council (PAC). I found that the kindergarten teachers in particular promoted PI, actively encouraging parents to respond to calls for parent helpers. In my first few years, my involvement was mostly classroom-based (weekly) and in shifts during school events, such as acting as a cashier during the twice yearly book sale; it probably goes without saying that I also regularly attended parent-teacher conferences and
PAC meetings. I met and became friends with many parents through my frequent involvement and was eventually recruited to write for and edit the monthly PAC newsletter for parents.

In addition to classroom-based volunteering (which lessened once my sons were in grade two and became limited to field trips and special events from grade three onward) and the PAC newsletter, I also ended up taking on the coordination of one of the PAC’s major events, a yearly Halloween celebration involving weeks of preparation every fall, dozens of parent participants and more than eight hundred attendees (students, former students and their families) on the actual night. Through this event, I became a highly visible parent leader and interacted on a regular basis with the school administration, with dozens of parents, with teachers from all grades in the school, and with local businesses supporting the school event. I held the newsletter editor position and the Halloween event coordinator position concurrently for five years and following those, toward the end of my younger son’s tenure at elementary school, I took on another highly visible parent leadership role in planning and coordinating his grade six exchange to Quebec, a responsibility that lasted for over two years.

Of course, throughout my time volunteering on the newsletter, for the Halloween event and the Quebec trip, and on field trips and other school events, I continued to maintain contact with my sons’ teachers, both formally in school-sponsored events and informally in the school hallways. While there were some unpleasant experiences with being so involved (mostly in feeling overworked as I was also working part time as an adult ESL teacher at the time), I very much enjoyed feeling that I was contributing to the enrichment of my sons’ educations through ensuring their schooling included creative and stimulating experiences, as well as to the betterment of the school as a whole, and felt myself to be a respected member of the school community. It seemed clear to me that the majority of young children, including my own, looked forward to having their parents present at school occasionally as it contributed to their
feelings of being in a safe and caring community; some young children even expressed pride in
their parents’ contributions, such as the children who would run to me in the schoolyard to make
sure I knew that their parents had signed up to help at the Halloween event.

I remember reflecting at the time that, even in a school with a strong reputation for
involvement, it was actually a very small number of parents who contributed most of the time
and effort needed to run school events, while the majority of parents participated infrequently if
at all. I remember some parents were even hostile to being asked to participate in fundraising or
other events, which had the potential to cause divisions among parent groups.

For example, at the beginning of my tenure as Quebec trip Chair, some members of the
Quebec trip parent group had drafted a volunteering contract that would have committed each
family to volunteering a particular number of hours in fundraising or organizing and would have
allowed families to “buy out” of such duties by paying several hundred dollars instead; this
contract was drafted in recognition that a significant amount of time and effort would be needed
to complete the large number of events and tasks to finance and organize the trip and that if some
families didn’t contribute, other families would have to bear more of the burden. Many parents
in the Quebec trip parent group were adamant about having such a contract to ensure
participation; some parents welcomed an opportunity to pay instead of give time; and still others
were very angry about being forced to commit in this way.

Given my role as the parent leader for the Quebec trip, I felt I had to address this
potential divide in our group. I thus made a fairly passionate speech before we were to vote on
adopting the contract. In the speech, I reminded the parent group that each of us had the same
goal: to give our children the chance to put their French Immersion schooling to real-life use by
having a chance to visit Quebec and stay with French-speaking families. I also pointed out that
no matter how much any parent volunteered, I and some of the other executive members of the
committee would be volunteering much, much more, and that therefore the amount of volunteering was going to vary no matter what contract we had in place. I then told the assembled parents that I did not know what kept each of them busy in the rest of their lives: other children or aging parents to care for, heavy work commitments or inflexibility of work scheduling, being a single parent, or being in school themselves, but that I did know that they were busy with things that mattered. And I asked our group to grant this to each other: that each of us would sincerely give as much as we were able. Finally, I suggested that, unlike a monetary contribution, even a little help would provide relief for another volunteer, and would also demonstrate to our children that we were working together as a community. Fortunately, this speech seemed to diffuse some of the tension among parents: the contract was adopted and sent to families but it was not enforced and not spoken of again after that night. At the end of the very successful fundraising and Quebec trip two years later, the volunteer coordinator’s records determined that, even though a few families had indeed only volunteered minimally, of the fifty-five families in the group, only one had not volunteered at all.

As can be seen from this example, even before completing a literature review of PI, I was aware of some of the factors that might contribute to a discrepancy in parent volunteering, such as differences in socioeconomic statuses of families (my sons’ elementary school drew from both privileged west side neighborhoods and less privileged east side neighborhoods) or being an immigrant and adult English language learner (ELL). However, I never felt that socioeconomics provided the major dividing line for parent involvement, likely because of the high level of my own involvement despite the fact that my family was operating on a strict monthly budget and not able to own our own home as many other families at the school did. Nor did it seem to me that being an immigrant necessarily prevented parents from volunteering, as our school had several ELL parents who helped whenever asked, even when they struggled to communicate
with the children and other parents. Rather, I felt at the time that engaging in PI, particularly at the level at which I was engaged, was a conscious choice of the parent – filtered, to be sure, through physical limitations – but still a choice: to find or make time and perhaps sacrifice other luxuries and personal goals. For example, my involvement meant I did not seek to work full time, which was a financial and professional hardship, but one that I knowingly chose to undertake.

Interestingly, while I did not occupy a school governance position (an executive position on the PAC or on the School Planning Council [SPC]) during my long span of volunteering in my sons’ elementary school, I did move into school governance in the Vancouver west side secondary school my sons attended, in part because this became one of the only ways to stay involved with their school. I clearly remember a school councillor telling my grade eight parent group, ostensibly in a joking manner, that our children did not want us to be at the school as it impinged upon their growing autonomy. Though my own children never expressed this to me even when I asked directly, I have heard other parents say their children had voiced this sentiment. In any case, over the years, very few of my sons’ teachers even asked for assistance on field trips (and when they did, I was often the only parent to respond).

In addition, although I found the various administrators at my sons’ secondary school to have spoken of being welcoming to parents, I was never aware of parents being officially informed of opportunities to help at the school level, and rarely received invitations to participate in any school-time events (such as assemblies or presentations) apart from the one or two information evenings per year for parents. The opportunity for direct parent-teacher interaction also dramatically reduced at secondary school: at my sons’ school, parent-teacher conferences were limited to five-minute meetings with a maximum of five of a child’s eight teachers, once or twice per year (that is, if a parent were able to secure one of the limited number of spots with his
or her child’s teacher, which I myself was not always able to do). In my particular case, outside of the school-sponsored parent-teacher events, I ventured into the school building during the day only four times in the past five years to meet with some of my younger son’s teachers, and only corresponded sporadically with a few other of his teachers by email when he had problems. Parents whose children were involved in sports or theatre seemed to have had additional opportunity to watch or even contribute to extracurricular games or productions that happen at the school, but apart from these areas, my experience of PI in secondary school was that there was very little reason outside PAC meetings – invitation, opportunity, or need – for a parent to set foot inside the school once a child was in grade eight. If I think about it now, despite the fact that in later years I grew very busy with my career and my own post-graduate schooling, I know I missed the rich connection to my sons’ schooling that was lost in secondary school, even though I still felt myself to be involved in their educations through their extracurricular activities and through talking to them about their classes, teachers, friendships and occasionally, what they were actually studying in school.

Over the time my sons were in secondary school, I was a PAC Vice Chair for three years, then PAC Chair for 3 years and finally, in my last year at the school, the past Chair. I also served three terms on the School Planning Council in this time. While those positions certainly kept me connected to the school, most of my interactions were through the principal, to liaise over details of SPC and PAC decisions and meetings. As PAC Chair, most of my activity was focused on how our PAC would spend money - money given by the government to enrich the school and money fundraised from parents - and also with trying to guess what parents wanted to learn about so our PAC could provide speakers and information sessions. Occasionally, such as when there was a teachers’ strike, I made extra effort to find out from parents what their views were on issues by calling an Extraordinary General Meeting (EGM) solely on the problematic
topic so that our PAC could try to accurately represent the larger parent body to the school board, the media and the government. However, my experience of EGMs was that, while they sometimes brought out a few new faces to the PAC, they did not, in general, attract very large numbers of parents.

In addition to meetings, our PAC did run some school support events reminiscent of elementary school: a direct donation fundraiser to fulfill teacher requests for extra funding, and two appreciation events for teachers (at Christmas and at the end of the school year). I tried volunteering at one of these teacher appreciation events but found that waiting, hidden in the kitchen of the staff room for teachers to finish eating the PAC-provided luncheon so that I could help clean up, a less than fulfilling use of my day off from work, which I was by then engaged in full-time. I believe that most parents in my son’s school were almost completely unaware of PAC activities, including knowing who represents them and what the PAC may be saying about their wants and needs; I judge this based on the fact that many parents at the school whom I knew personally who were not involved in PAC did not even know that I was the PAC Chair during my three year tenure.

In my experience, in a Vancouver west side secondary school of close to fifteen hundred students, a large turnout to a PAC meeting was about fifty parents, which typically happened once per year in September; at many meetings, especially in the spring, it was hard to achieve quorum (for our PAC, seventeen parents). My participation on the SPC was similar in its sense of impact or lack thereof: although the parent SPC members were given in-depth information about the operation of the school and the discussion with students and administration was often lively and interesting, I and the other parent members were under no illusions that the School Growth Plan, which was the SPC’s major task to create each year, had any influence at all on any aspect of the school.
Looking back over more than a decade of very active parental involvement, I know I have found myself at times really wondering about the perceptions of the many, many other parents who were rarely visible in the school or completely invisible, whom our PAC represented. For example, as I mentioned above, I knew parents personally whose children attended my son’s school whom I never saw at a school-sponsored parent evening nor a PAC meeting, but whom I believe from having conversations with them would consider themselves to be involved parents. Some of these parents, such as some single parents and others working full-time, or parents highly involved in their children’s sports activities, would sometimes tell me, guiltily, that they were too busy to attend. I have met other parents who specifically told me that they had made decisions not to be involved at the school for the benefit of their child’s autonomy. Then there were so many other parents whose reasons for not being involved I could only imagine from the research I had completed (for example, Hornby & Lafaele, 2011), without being able to know for certain what the key reasons were for their absence. Yet our PAC represented all of these parents’ views in disbursing money, liaising with administration of the school, and to the larger school system. It was partly curiosity to know what absent parents such as these truly believe and desire that motivated my personal interest in conducting my research; my understanding of my own strong and connected position as an involved parent further motivated me to ensure that I did not prejudge the parent participants.

From a social justice perspective, I have also always believed that parent representatives such as PACs should learn as much as they are able about what all parents want when representing them, as otherwise the representation may be false and resources may be directed to address concerns that are only held by a vocal minority of parents. In my experience as a parent leader, actively seeking to find out what constituents want demonstrates respect for them as well as a commitment to ethically using the power of the volunteer office, whatever it may be, in the
service of all families rather than just a few. By contrast, uninformed parents can contribute to further marginalizing other parents and, by extension, other parents’ children (Baquedano-Lopez et al., 2013, p. 161). I had hoped, therefore, and still do hope, that this research would contribute to raising awareness and a commitment to accurate representation in other parent leaders.

To summarize, as can be seen from my own lived experience of PI, before embarking upon research in this area, I had already directly experienced what I have subsequently identified through the literature as traditional and formalized PI, and even possibly a small degree of collaborative PI. In terms of TPI, I volunteered in my sons’ classes and on field trips, and organized school events which included soliciting community partners to support the school; I kept in regular communication with my sons’ teachers and participated in parent-teacher nights and other school and Parent Advisory Committee parent information nights; and I helped my sons with homework, reinforcing the lessons and directions given at the school. In terms of formalized PI, I held several elected parent advisory positions and represented parents’ views to the school through liaising with the administration, and occasionally to the school board and government when there was an issue such as seismic upgrading of the school. Interestingly, although I was aware that parent voices were not being deeply listened to when I was participating in FPI, and therefore needed a champion, I never considered myself to be in a position of oversight to the school system. Finally, I think it is possible that the deep relationships I felt I developed with my sons’ earliest teachers (particularly in Kindergarten and grade one), in which it seemed we shared a sense of purpose about my sons’ educational directions, as well as mutual respect and even some decision making, may qualify as an experience of CPI.
Overall from these experiences, however, I would say my view of PI prior to my research was probably most closely in alignment with the goals of TPI, as my perspective was both conceptualized and actualized as primarily a responsibility to connect to the school in whatever forms were offered, and as much as I was able, in order to help the school in what it was trying to accomplish. Becoming aware of this, I made certain to keep myself wide open to the stories of my parent participants in this study in order to gain an understanding uninfluenced by my own of what their lifeworlds told them about how and how much they should be involved in schools. Because of this openness, I believe what I learned through my research ultimately changed my conceptualization of PI, which I shall address later in the chapter on Conclusions and Recommendations. For now, I turn to the details of my research study: recruitment, the participant group, data collection and analysis, and limitations of the study.

**Research Study Details**

**Recruitment**  To explore the research questions outlined in the first chapter of this thesis, I conducted a case study of several parents of diverse backgrounds whose children were enrolled in grades 8 to 12 in the public school system in Vancouver, BC.

In this case study, I focused on secondary school for several reasons. The first is that, based on the current structure of secondary schooling in British Columbia where each student has seven to eight teachers, and teachers with a full teaching load have upwards of 200 students each, this period of schooling represents the time when creating deep relationships between parents and teachers is most problematic because of the time that would be needed for the teacher to interact meaningfully with each single parent. Any change to current PI models in BC schools would thus require the most structural change at a secondary level in terms of adjustments to teaching contracts. The second reason to focus on secondary school is that high school represents high stakes in terms of academic outcome for students, and thus is the level of
schooling where improvement is most sought by schools and government. Yet, my own experience as well as the literature shows that PI declines dramatically as children enter secondary school (Brannon, 2007; Gonzalez-DeHaas & Willems, 2003). Exploring the lived experiences of parents with children in secondary school thus had the greatest potential for insight for those interested in academic achievement of students due to PI. It also provided a chance for the parent participants to talk about their decline in involvement if that was the case for them, which might help with better understanding of the causes of such declines.

As noted in the introduction, given that “parents” as a demographic group in the public school system are diverse in their backgrounds and socio-economic statuses, particularly in Vancouver, I felt it was important to try to recruit a participant group that reflected this variation. I thus approached a local immigrant serving organization as well as an Aboriginal friendship centre for referrals of potential participants, and also posted recruitment posters in some local community centres, neighborhood houses and libraries hoping to find parent volunteers. However, while some participants did come from these venues, in general they did not prove to be very successful, for reasons at which I can only speculate. For example, the venues might not have been places that parents of children in these grades frequented, the recruitment posters might not have been in areas that attracted their attention, or the subject may not have seemed interesting enough for them to set aside time without the enticement of an honorarium. It is also possible that the invitation to talk about their teenager and relationships with their teenager’s schools was too personal to discuss with an unknown researcher.

What I can say for certain is that my own network of parents drawn from various interactions in schools over 15 years was much more responsive when asked to disseminate the recruitment poster: several parents immediately referred themselves. As I accepted everyone with whom I was able to make an immediate appointment for an interview, and as the questions
about each volunteer’s demographics were not asked until after the interview, I was fortunate that the parent participant group did, in the end, reflect a measure of diversity. If I were to attempt such a study again in the future, I think I would try to make personal contact with groups of parents in the different demographics, rather than put up recruitment posters to try to find participants. I say this because although I did not have a close association with any research participants who volunteered from my network, knowing who I was seemed to make a difference in their willingness to meet with me.

**The parent participant group** As mentioned, in the end, ten parent participants volunteered for this study, representing a variety of backgrounds and socio-economic factors:

![Figure 3 Demographics of Parent Participants](image-url)
As can be seen in the chart above, of the ten, eight were mothers and two were fathers. Two of the participants were Aboriginal and four were immigrants who had been in Canada between 8 and 33 years (the others who did not choose “Aboriginal” or “immigrant” as a background were simply designated as “mainstream Canadian”). The participants disclosed a range of incomes which were not assigned a monetary value, only descriptors from “low” to “above middle.” All the parents in the study had some experience with post-secondary studies, although only four had completed degrees of various levels. In the following brief demographic profiles, all identifying names have been changed to protect the participants’ privacy.

Cynthia: Cynthia is mainstream Canadian. She has two children, a boy and a girl, both attending Eastside Secondary. She has a bachelor’s degree and her income was identified as “above middle.”

Jodi: Jodi is also mainstream Canadian and has two children, both boys, both attending Westside Secondary. Her income is in the middle range. She attended three years of post-secondary (two at college and one at university) but did not complete a degree.

Maria: Maria is an immigrant from a Latin American country who has been in Canada for 10 years. She has an undergraduate degree and a middle range income. She has one girl in Central Secondary, and one boy still in elementary school.

Marshal: Marshal is an immigrant from the United States who has been in Canada 11 years. He holds a Phd in a science and rates his income as “above middle.” He has two children, a boy already graduated from high school, and a girl who just entered Westside Secondary.

Julieta: Julieta has one daughter attending Westside Secondary. She and her family are immigrants from a South American country and have been in Canada for 8 years. She holds a law degree.
Crystal: Crystal is Aboriginal Canadian and a single mom. She has one son attending Westside Secondary. She describes her education as having dropped out of school in grade 11 but then returning for a year at a post-secondary institution. She lists her income as “middle.”

Laura: Laura is another single mom with two daughters, one of whom already graduated high school and one at Westside Secondary. She considered herself to have a low income. When she interviewed, she was completing a bachelor’s degree. She is mainstream Canadian.

Didi: Didi is Aboriginal Canadian and a single mom. She has two sons, one at Westside Secondary and one still in elementary school. She has a diploma from college and felt her income to be on the border between low and middle.

Torin: Torin is mainstream Canadian. He has two sons, one attending Eastside Secondary and one at Westside Secondary. Torin did two years of university but did not complete a degree. He lists his income as “middle.”

Hiroko: Hiroko is an immigrant from Asia who has been in Canada for 33 years. She has a college diploma and a middle income. She has one daughter at King Charles Secondary.

As will be noted in the Research Findings section of this thesis, what is significant about the range of demographics of the participants is the similarity in many of their responses despite their diversity. Many of the participants shared very similar ideas about education and what they were trying to achieve for their children. Many also expressed similar frustrations with the school system and their ability to interact with it. The demographic that seemed to correlate with strongest variance in responses was the level of schooling completed, with parents with lower levels expressing more concern about their children’s schooling being related to practical life
than those with higher levels. Regardless of this difference, however, all the participants expressed an expectation that their children would attend post-secondary schooling in some manner. I will provide more information about my findings in the fourth chapter.

**Data collection and analysis** Data for this study was collected through semi-structured interviews that ranged from forty-five to ninety minutes in length depending on the participant. Participants were offered choice of where to interview for comfort and convenience, and many chose to come to my home, although a few interviews were completed at workplaces, one took place in a participant’s home, and one was conducted over the phone. Personal demographic information about participants was collected at the conclusion of each interview in order to establish the range of diversity of the participants.

When conducting the interviews, in order to keep to a phenomenological approach, I tried to follow suggestions in van Manen’s *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* text. For example, I chose some questions to try to prompt participants to provide concrete examples of their lived experiences, such as to recall and describe their child’s first day of school, and ensured after asking any question to leave space for the participant to recollect before speaking (1997, p. 66-68). Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow for a phenomenological reading of the data as described below. Each participant as well as their children, family members, and any school or school personnel whom the participants mentioned in their interviews were assigned pseudonyms.

In terms of data analysis, after researching other methods such as the framework developed by Giorgi (1997, 2012), I found it was again suggestions in van Manen’s *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy* (1997) that provided the most thorough and accessible procedure for me to follow, as the text offered useful steps by
which to allow themes to emerge without moving too quickly to impose ideas from external sources. Specifically, (from p. 92-93) to isolate the thematic aspects of the data, I

1. Read each interview as a whole to try to capture the overall, fundamental meaning being expressed by the participant about education and involvement

2. Re-read each interview several times to find particularly revealing statements with regards to education and PI

3. Read each interview line-by-line to ask what each cluster of responses had to contribute to the parents’ experiences of educating their children and connecting with teachers and schools

Carefully following this method, I found I was able to hear each participant’s own voice clearly, while at the same time discovering qualities and elements of the parent involvement phenomenon that appeared to be similar or common to other participants in the study. While conducting this analysis, I was very aware that the purpose of adopting a phenomenological approach, as opposed to any other research approach, was to describe the PI experience of parents

in such a way that the essential aspects, the meaning structures of this experience as lived through, are brought back, as it were, and in such a way that we recognize this description as a possible experience, which means as a possible interpretation of that experience (ibid, p.41 – italics in the original).

From this I mean that it was important for me to keep in mind that I was seeking first to arrive at a description of my participant’s experiences that would capture the key features or the essence of the phenomenon as they lived through it, in order to be able to communicate this experience to others and have it resonate as something understood on a human level rather than solely on an analytical or academic level. In other words, I was first aiming to let the phenomenon show itself, rather than seeking immediately to categorize and interpret the meaning of the parents’ experiences.
To this end, following the steps of analysis outlined above, I created two descriptions of the parent participants’ experiences. The first description I created drew on a suggestion in the van Manen text for organizing and reducing the themes from the interviews to describe the key features of the PI phenomenon in point form (p. 168 to 170). This provided a largely analytic avenue to understand the essence of PI. I have included the full text of this key features description in the Research Findings section of this thesis. An example of the key features is provided below:

How does PI manifest itself?

- PI shows itself as knowledge about children
- PI shows itself as presence and availability in children’s lives
- PI shows itself as providing opportunities and resources for children’s development
- PI shows itself as children being a priority in a parent’s life
- PI shows itself as connections to support children
- PI shows itself as activities which are dictated by the needs of individual children

The second description I created was a lived-experience description, framed as a short narrative about a parent delivering her/his child to the first day of kindergarten and then in secondary school waiting for a brief, five-minute scheduled interview with her/his child’s teacher. To write this, I carefully considered the advice on writing lived experience descriptions found in the van Manen text (p. 63 to 66). To provide some measure of its validity as a description of my participants’ lived experiences, I then offered the narrative to my participants to read and comment upon, or to re-write if they chose. Eight of the ten participants responded to this offer and validated the description as one that either captured their own experiences or that they felt was true for many parents. As with the key features description, I will provide the
full lived experience description in the Research Findings section of this thesis, but offer an excerpt of the description below:

I am waiting in the high school gym with dozens of other parents to meet my child’s teachers during parent-teacher night. I am not a hovering parent by any means, but I am involved. I spend time with my child, both at home and through her many extracurricular activities. We talk. I know her friends, know, for the most part, what she does with her day. She knows I am here, available, if she needs anything, anything at all, whether help with a project, a ride somewhere, another extracurricular opportunity, or just to hear what’s up with her friends. She is a teenager, though, so I try to respect her growing autonomy, give her space to do things for herself and set her own direction.

Once satisfied that the objective of the phenomenological approach to research had been fulfilled, I then revisited the data from the study to discover what themes might be woven through the interviews. The coding of themes was based on noting similarities in what participants actually said, such as when they referred to the influence of a family member or when they named skills such as reading or math that they taught their children or felt was important. For this part of my analysis, I enlisted the help of the research analysis software Atlas.ti in order to keep the themes organized and to isolate which of them were dominant for each participant as well as for the parent participant group overall. From this analysis, I was able to discern this parent group’s views on what constitutes education for their children, as well as the kinds of connections they would like to have with their children’s schools, both elementary and secondary. I was also able to compare the themes to ideas in PI literature, as well as to posit answers to my research questions. I will discuss my findings from this second level of analysis in detail in the next chapter.

Limitations of this study The key limitation of this study was in the recruitment of truly diverse parents to interview, particularly to find parents who had no connection to traditional
involvement which I had hoped to do through recruitment posters in various venues. As I noted in my own lived-experience description of PI, as a parent leader, I have often wondered about the seemingly dozens of parents who do not seem to be connected at all to schools – at least, not through any of the avenues where they might be seen by other parents such as “meet and greet” events, volunteering at the school, or parent-teacher interviews. Yet none of the parents who volunteered for this study fully fit this category, which suggests that this is still a demographic that remains to be explored.

From this perspective, the small number of study participants could also be considered a limitation, as ten participants reflect a limit to the range of demographic diversity that could have been captured. Statistically, the results from ten participants cannot be extrapolated to the very much larger and much more diverse parent population that is likely found even just in urban locations, let alone parents in smaller or isolated communities, or from other ethnic groups or socio-economic groups that were not part of this study. The result of this case study therefore can only be applied within a narrow range of parents who exhibit similar demographics to the parents in this group. However, considering the phenomenological approach to the research I adopted, I do not consider the number of participants to be a true limitation: ten participants were more than enough to allow a deep exploration of lived experiences in order to understand and create a lived-experience description of PI from the point of view of a selection of parents.

Nonetheless, I will further address this issue of the small participant group in the Conclusions and Recommendations chapter of this thesis.

Another limitation is in the scope of the study. For example, this study focuses on collaborative parental involvement (CPI) as one of the possible manifestations of PI, particularly if parent “partnerships” are adopted as a model in BC, but was not be able to include the views of other participants important to a CPI conversation: teachers and students. Teacher views might
include, for example, more insight into the kinds of connections they are willing and able to build with parents as well as how they see CPI impacting their professional status, rather than only relying on information from other studies and literature. Student views might include providing more understanding about their reported desire for autonomy from parents in secondary school, and input into what they believe should be their personal outcomes. These are important dimensions to parent involvement discussions that should be considered which this study was not able to include.

Finally, this study questions the broader meaning of parental involvement by exploring the lived experiences of parents connecting through their children to the school system. However, the dominant discourse surrounding PI is very concerned specifically with how PI links, beneficially or detrimentally, to student achievement. From the PI literature, student achievement appears to be a term like PI in that it is comprises several distinct notions yet is referred to as singular variable. How parents specifically define student achievement would be a very useful contribution to PI discourse, but while some interesting clues did emerge from this study, this avenue of investigation could not be focused on and must be left for future research.
**Research Findings**

When considering parental involvement, the most common models - traditional, Epstein-based PI (TPI) and the more recent formalized, government-legislated PI (FPI) - refer to ways that parents can support schools or provide input about school resources. In these models, imparting any skills and knowledge is seen to be the purview of teachers, meaning that parents are neither expected to provide input nor given an avenue to discuss what or how children are taught. Looking at the structure of public schooling, this may seem reasonable: government mandates the parameters of the school credential that children must achieve, and schools deliver the schooling service within the parameters and ensure children achieve the outcomes, leaving little room for flexibility or individuality around the skills and knowledge to be taught even for teachers, let alone for parents, to debate.

Yet, considering a parent’s position in a child’s life as his or her first and most continuous teacher as well as the adult who ultimately bears most responsibility for his or her broader educational outcome (moral and spiritual as well as academic and social) (Kunzman, 2012), it is not surprising to find some alternate models of PI which try to incorporate parents’ knowledge of and agency for their children, at least as a method of raising the success rate in schooling if not for other reasons. These more collaborative models of PI – CPI - suggest that parents and the school system (as personified through teachers) can and should work together on behalf of children, sharing expertise and decision-making, towards a common goal (Elias et al., 2007; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Phadraig, 2005; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Pushor & Murphy, 2004). For these CPI models to be successful, however, it is clear that the first step is to establish that parents and teachers do have similar goals for students, or at least, that both understand and approve of what each other is trying to achieve.
It is at this point that the concept of education, or the sum of a person’s development, versus the concept of schooling, or the knowledge and skills gained through formal (and for this research), public teaching and learning systems, becomes an important factor. Most parents are not directly involved in schooling, or imparting subject-specific knowledge and skills, particularly at the secondary level, to their children. Some parents, such as some in my study, seem happy to defer to teachers for subject specific knowledge. But because of their position in their children’s lives, most parents are involved in their children’s education whether overtly or not, by endeavoring to ensure that their children develop a particular base of knowledge and skills that they feel will help them become functional adults (Kunzman, 2012). For this reason, the first of my leading research questions asked what parents in this study specifically believe constitutes education for their children. Recognizing that “parents” are not a homogenous group even though they share the characteristic of having a child in the school system, this first research question was exploring, through the themes that emerged from the data analysis, if there were any common factors that a group of parent participants might espouse about components of education for their children.

Once the views of the parent participants in my study on their children’s education as distinct from their children’s schooling were identified, my next leading research question questioned how these views of education might have influenced or impacted their interactions with people in the school system. Given the extensive research on the motivations and barriers for parents to engage in PI activities, I expected that some of the parent participants’ choices would reflect those identified factors, and they did. However, other decisions seemed to result from the parent participants’ own definition of involvement, which had not been identified in the literature. Parents’ own definition appeared to influence decisions and actions around PI for the parents in this study.
In the current public schooling climate in BC, parents have clear options to engage in TPI and FPI activities (http://www.gov.bc.ca/bced/; http://www.vsb.bc.ca/) but not necessarily to engage in CPI (meaning working collaboratively with teachers towards a common goal for their children). However, the current BC government continues to seek input from parents into the BCED Plan, released in October 2011, which is ostensibly a transformation of the education system through which parents will work in partnership with their child’s teacher in a personalized learning environment (BC MoE, 2011b). My last leading research question therefore follows from the first two and asks how parents in this study ideally would like to be connected to their children’s schooling to support their children’s education.

This last research question leads back to the original research problem that prompted my research: What do parents themselves want from involvement? Employing a phenomenological approach to research allowed me to seek the meaning of PI for parents rather than as an activity external to their own devising that they are expected by others to do. I will therefore begin the discussion of my findings with the results of my phenomenological analysis of the research data: a summary of key features of PI for the participants, and a lived-experience description of PI based on these parents’ perspectives. Following this, I will briefly discuss the second level of my analysis of the research data which identified key themes emerging from the participants’ interviews. Finally, I will address each of my leading research questions in turn.

The Lived Experiences of PI for the Parents in This Study

As noted in the chapter on Research Design and Methodology, for the first part of the phenomenological analysis of my research data, I followed the recommendations of van Manen for isolating thematic aspects of each participants’ experience (1997, p. 92-93):

1. Reading each interview as a whole to try to capture the overall, fundamental meaning being expressed by the participant about education and involvement
2. Re-reading each interview several times to find particularly revealing statements with regards to education and PI

3. Reading each interview line-by-line to ask what each cluster of responses had to contribute to the parents’ experiences of educating their children and connecting with teachers and schools

Through this method, I was able to gain insight into the main message that each participant was conveying about what they were trying to achieve for their children with their choices and actions, what they hoped would be the eventual outcome – what they believed would be “a good life” for their children, and how they defined the term “parental involvement.” As to be expected with diverse participants, none of these overall thematic statements were the same. And yet, as can be seen below from the table of thematic statements emerging from analysis, threads of similarity could be seen. For example, several participants focused on a child having choice that would enable happiness and/or fulfillment in life. Providing support and being close to the child were also refrains in several parents’ interviews. The key difference found through the analysis seemed to be the degree that each participant focused on practical/life skills versus more abstract/academic skills for his/her child, with those with higher levels of schooling seeming to be more concerned with the latter, while those with lower levels of schooling seeming to be more concerned with the former. However, this difference did not seem to make a significant impact on the overall findings.
### Table 3
Thematic Statements Emerging from Phenomenological Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Objective of parent – what the parent is trying to do for his/her child</th>
<th>Definition of “a good life” – what parent hopes will be the outcome for his/her child</th>
<th>Parent’s definition of PI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia</td>
<td>Provide support and opportunities to enable choices in life for the child.</td>
<td>Having stability and a job that allows a person to make choices and do things s/he wants to do.</td>
<td>Being involved in a child’s life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td>Jodi</td>
<td>Having necessities and being loved and cared for.</td>
<td>Being involved in a child’s life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian, post-secondary education, above middle income</td>
<td>Be present to support child and provide what is needed for him/her to be successful in life.</td>
<td>Being what one chooses and likes, and feeling happy in the long run.</td>
<td>Knowing the environment where one’s child spends his/her day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Stay bonded with child to help him/her into a career s/he will enjoy.</td>
<td>Being what one chooses and likes, and feeling happy in the long run.</td>
<td>Knowing the environment where one’s child spends his/her day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant, post-secondary education, middle income</td>
<td>Provide resources and opportunities for child to explore interests deeply and find fulfillment.</td>
<td>Having the basics as well as access to the richness of life, and finding happiness and fulfillment.</td>
<td>Being engaged in a child’s life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marshal</td>
<td>Maximize learning for child so s/he can exploit own resources and enjoy life to the fullest.</td>
<td>Accomplishing one’s own goals using one’s own resources and enjoying life to the fullest.</td>
<td>Understanding the system and how to contribute for the child’s sake.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant [US], Phd, above middle income</td>
<td>Guide child to be himself, be happy, live to the fullest and find a job s/he loves.</td>
<td>Having balance: being healthy, not struggling, and being happy with what one is doing in life.</td>
<td>Knowing what child is doing and always being available for support.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Julieta</td>
<td>Help child to understand him/herself, pursue strengths, have choices, make decisions about jobs and life, and be part of something.</td>
<td>Making connections and being part of something in the community.</td>
<td>Being welcomed into the school system with opportunities to contribute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crystal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian, some post-secondary skills training, single parent, middle income</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian, almost finished post-secondary, single parent, low income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Objective of parent – what the parent is trying to do for his/her child</td>
<td>Definition of “a good life” – what parent hopes will be the outcome for his/her child</td>
<td>Parent’s definition of PI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didi</td>
<td>Help child hold his/her own, pursue interests, go to the next level and be successful.</td>
<td>Having options and ability to do what one loves.</td>
<td>Willingness to understand the system and to contribute if needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aboriginal Canadian, college diploma, single parent, between low and middle income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torin</td>
<td>Provide opportunity to allow child to discover him/herself, find strengths, and pursue something meaningful.</td>
<td>Having resources to be comfortable, being surrounded by people one cares for, and doing something personally meaningful.</td>
<td>Developing a strong relationship with the child as a unique person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mainstream Canadian, some post-secondary study, middle income</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hiroko</td>
<td>Provide support so nothing is in the way of child gaining skills, finding him/herself, becoming fulfilled and living life to the fullest.</td>
<td>Experiencing life, good and bad, living life to the maximum and feeling fulfilled.</td>
<td>Understanding the school system in order to support and contribute.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrant, college diploma, middle income</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Re-reading each interview several times and line-by-line allowed revealing statements about each parent’s experiences and views of education and PI to emerge and be categorized. From this, and considering the many specific examples provided by the participants regarding what they do to support their children’s exploration and learning, including what they do at home and at their children’s schools, I was able to assemble a description of the key features of PI from these parents’ perspectives. The structure of the Key Features of PI description was based on a suggestion and example by van Manen for organizing the emerging themes from analysis (1997, p. 169-170). This Key Features description outlines the aspects of PI for parents, as well as how PI can be recognized when exhibited by a parent. The Key Features description also explains what parents actively do as PI, as well as what PI accomplishes or is intended to accomplish, and finally, the meaning of the parents’ perspective of PI for parents and thus for schools.
The key features of PI to parents

What are the aspects of PI?

- PI centers on children
- PI seeks to know and nurture children as unique individuals
- PI develops closeness to children
- PI builds outward from relationships with children
- PI is practical as well as emotional
- PI seeks to enable options for children in terms of careers
- PI is working toward life goals for children (success, happiness, fulfillment)
- PI is individualized to each parent-child pair
- PI forms relationships in support of children’s development
- PI recognizes children must chart their own directions for life
- School is only one aspect of PI
- PI values teachers who connect with and strengthen children

How does PI manifest itself?

- PI shows itself as knowledge about children
- PI shows itself as presence and availability in children’s lives
- PI shows itself as providing opportunities and resources for children’s development
- PI shows itself as children being a priority in a parent’s life
- PI shows itself as connections developed to support children
- PI shows itself as activities which are dictated by the needs of individual children

What does PI do?

- PI hopes for children
- PI talks to and spends time with children
- PI learns about each child as an individual
- PI actively builds on children’s interests and strengths
- PI teaches children (skills and values)
- PI finds and pays for classes and teachers which strengthen children
- PI connects with teachers, counsellors, other parents and administrators to support children
- PI prioritizes core academic skills and practical (life) skills
- PI helps with schoolwork and activities in schools when needed
- PI values post-secondary as a means to children setting direction in life

How does PI do what it does?

- PI supports children through making time for them
- PI supports children by being physically present for them
- PI supports children through learning their traits, strengths and interests
- PI supports children by paying for resources and opportunities which interest and/or develop them
- PI supports children by teaching them core academic skills and/or explicitly imparting values
- PI supports children through helping as needed to support their skills development and interests (helping with schoolwork, helping at school, helping at extracurricular events, etc.)
- PI supports children through connecting with others who are connected to them (teachers, friends, counsellors, etc.)
- PI supports children by supporting post-secondary goals

What is the significance of PI for parents and schools?
- PI centers on time with children
- PI focuses on individuality – developing the interests and strengths of the individual child, and responding to the needs of the individual child
- PI values people and programs who develop children’s capabilities
- PI connects with people and performs activities as needed to support the advancement of the individual child

While the Key Features description provides a phenomenological analysis of the research data to explain the parent participants’ perspectives of PI, it does not necessarily express parents’ understanding of PI from the inside. One of the goals of phenomenological research is to describe experience in such a way that a reader can gain some sense of how the phenomenon is experienced by those who share it, “to make the invisible visible” (Laverty, 2003, p. 15) and to create a feeling of connection and understanding with the phenomenon. Immersing in scenes and situations described by the participants, especially where emotions were expressed, I believe I was able to gain a sense of their overall lived experiences educating their children and connecting to the people involved with schooling their children. For example, I drew on stories of experiences from participants’ interviews like the following:

- The importance of core skills/ teaching core skills to children before formal schooling

  Julieta: I always loved to read. And I’ve always read to her and Jorge, too. … I read books for her and he invented stories for her. So when it was my turn, she got a book. And when it was his turn to put her in bed, it was his stories. And, uh … actually last year, I was looking something in her back pack. … and I found an essay that she had written for her English class that was somehow lost in her backpack. And it was about, they had to write about what, uh, from where each student thought that they had this pleasure or that taste for writing or for reading. And she said that she attributed that to the stories that her dad used to tell her when she was a kid. So I was … I even cried because it was very, it was beautifully written and, you know, as a parent you plant so
much, right. You want to provide everything but you never know what is being, you
know, what would flourish or what would die, I mean, you know. Which seeds will, you
know, bear fruits and which seeds will just die and, you know, and that’s, that’s life. So
when I read that I felt very, you know, it’s very comforting and rewarding feeling to see
that such an important thing has been, you know, planted in your kid.

- *The first day of school*

  Cynthia: I went back to work when he was 6 months and John was home for a year and
  a half. We had a nanny for him. I was part time. And then when he actually started
  when he was 5, Carrie was little and I was home at the time. And so I could take him to
  school every day but it was so hard for me cuz he cried. And I remember crying in grade
  1. I didn’t go to kindergarten cuz I didn’t want to but I … cried a lot. And in grade 7, he
  had the same teacher that he had in kindergarten. She remembered that about him too.
  So it was really hard for me but I knew he would be fine once I left and he always was.

  Didi: Um … he … was … I think, a little bit nervous. He didn’t, you know, didn’t really
talk that much about it. He did have a friend that was in the same class. So he was OK
with that. And then he pretty much wanted me to leave. So I think I was more attached
to the whole idea. (laughs) I had more of a difficult time not wanting to, you know -
make sure he knew what the coatroom is, make sure that the teacher listened what he
wants. You know, making sure he wasn’t left out. So that kind of thing. (laughs)

- *Parental support for core values*

  Jodi: Because we worked really hard on being positive and being a good team player.
  And I mean not being negative and. Um, you know, being a leader. … So it’s hard
  when you’re competitive to wanna be patient with kids and, you know. Marcus, even
  like in grade 6 there was an AHD child and Marcus was … he’s very gentle and kind and
  was playing with this kid and they played chess. And… it was pretty cool because he
  was so excited that the other boy won. And he let him win. But I think that was pretty
  admirable, like, nice of him. I mean, he just, everyone’s equal and he just, I thought it
  was great. … and the other boy was absolutely delighted. So I thought that was quite
  nice.

- *The difficulty of five minute parent-teacher interviews in secondary school*

  Didi: I generally find that a lot of them, I don’t really find that a lot of them really pay
  particular attention to some of the things that I was asking about directly about my son. I
  even had one teacher not know his name. I think this was grade 8 or 9. And he didn’t
  have the sheet and he was you know oh, Tristan, Tristan, uh … (laughs)… I was
  floored. And a few other teachers in a couple of years that I’ve been, um, just where I’d
  ask a question. Yeah. Like no expansion of – no, like, further explanation, no, um, sort
  of helping me understand what Tristan might be able to be focused on a little bit more.
  And I also think that some of the teachers either, um, and some can really just be
  focusing on what’s wrong. Not trying to look at the solution. And again that could be
  because of, you know, so many more stressor or lack of support for teachers. And that
kind of thing. … I don’t enjoy the whole, you know, interview by every single teacher. I never remember all the questions that I want to ask. I don’t feel welcome with all of the teachers. I think they’re tired. I’m tired. You know I’ve had a full day at work. So I think that that’s, I mean, that system does not work for me at all.

- Spending time with children/ talking to children and staying connected

Hiroko: We spent quite a bit time together. And she’s pretty open. She tells me, pretty much everything. I hope certain things, she’s hiding. But, yeah. She tells me pretty much open. Really, seriously. Who is, what’s going on. And another girl is this and that. And this boy and this girl, um…. Hard part is she said, mom, I’m trusting you, don’t tell any another parents. So, that’s we started as since she was very little, so … Yeah, we quite openly talk, pretty much everything. So that’s easy to. Now I appreciate I did that for years and years. I’m quite easy to find out what’s her interests.

Of course, these stories were not viewed in isolation but in the context of each individual interview, and as contributing to larger picture of how parents experience PI. Again following guidance from van Manen (1997, p 64-65), I then used this received understanding, influenced of course by my own experience which while bracketed could not be completely ignored, to write a lived-experience description of PI from a parent’s point of view. In order to capture a range of PI experience, the description begins on a child’s first day of Kindergarten and then skips ahead to a parent-teacher interview when the child is in high school. To try to make the description gender-inclusive, I have arbitrarily used a masculine pronoun for the child in the first section and feminine pronoun in the second.

A lived-experience description of PI from the point of view of parents

I greet the first day of kindergarten for my child with nervousness and excitement. On the one hand, I am excited that we have come to this milestone in his life. It is part of his growing up, another step on his journey to discovering who he is, who he will be, and what he will do in the world. I have enjoyed being part of and guiding his journey so far, watching and helping his talents emerge, and I am excited for what comes next.
On the other hand, I am nervous for how school will treat him. I hope his teacher will, like me, recognize and encourage his strengths, and help him to overcome his weaknesses. I want to protect him – and I am prepared to do what is necessary to ensure that he gets what he needs, whether that is volunteering my time at the school or fighting for resources. But I also want to know that my child can stand up for himself and be himself, without anyone helping him and without worrying what others think.

Until this moment, I have spent a lot of time with my child, getting to know him, his personality and interests, how he interacts with the world and learns. I have read to him, introduced him to music and science, gotten him involved in athletics, enrolled him in private lessons, and even taught him some basic reading and math skills – everything that I had or could have helped me in my life. I have provided so many opportunities for him to explore or just be exposed to things that might excite and engage him.

I am hopeful that school will continue to stimulate and nurture him, and that ultimately, he will love learning and keep on learning, go higher and farther in his education, and reach the maximum of his potential. I know grades are important, especially for getting into post-secondary study, and I want him to do well amongst his peers. But I know, too, that there is so much more to life than grades. Family. Travel. Friends. Being kind. I want him to be well rounded.

As we walk together up the steps of the school, his little hand in mine, thoughts of how far he has come and awareness of the challenges he still has before him tumbling over and over in my head and chest, I can’t help but flash ahead to his future, both in school and beyond. I have such hopes for him. That he will learn basic skills for survival and be educated, of course. But more than that. That he will know himself. That he will
be happy. That he will find a career, or at least a job, that he loves and not get stuck just working. That he will feel fulfilled and live life to the fullest.

For now, we are at the threshold, the door to the kindergarten, and I let go of his hand.

*****

I am waiting in the high school gym with dozens of other parents to meet my child’s teachers during parent-teacher night. I am not a hovering parent by any means, but I am involved. I spend time with my child, both at home and through her many extracurricular activities. We talk. I know her friends, know, for the most part, what she does with her day. She knows I am here, available, if she needs anything, anything at all, whether help with a project, a ride somewhere, another extracurricular opportunity, or just to hear what’s up with her friends. She is a teenager, though, so I try to respect her growing autonomy, give her space to do things for herself and set her own direction.

I hardly come to the school anymore for that reason. Well, that, and the school doesn’t ask for parents anymore, doesn’t seem to need me. I’m willing though, if I hear that the Parent Advisory Committee wants something, or my child’s athletic team or arts club needs volunteers. I mean, I go to all her games and performances. Still, I admit it’s nice to feel connected again, even a little bit, through this parent-teacher night – it would be nice to connect more often if it were possible, which I know it’s not. There’s only so much time in a day already packed with work and chauffeuring and cooking and homework and all the other things that need to get done. It occurs to me that I don’t even know if I could pinpoint the school principal in this crowd, if she’s here. Not that it’s necessary.
Some of my child’s friends’ parents wander by on their way to their next
appointment, and we very briefly say hi, gossip about the teachers and swap stories about
what our kids are doing. A couple of them I saw on the weekend at the extracurricular
event. But others I haven’t seen for several months. Not like elementary school, when
we saw each other practically every day as we volunteered in classes and events. It’s
funny to think about how much we contributed back then. That was a good feeling.

There are still two parents ahead of me to talk to the first teacher on my schedule.
This is the first time I will have met this teacher. I don’t know much about her, other
than the academic expectations she sent home at the beginning of the school year and
what my child tells me about her mannerisms and things that happen in her class. My
child is doing OK in this subject, not learning some things I think are important, really,
but doing fine. Truth be known, there are a lot of things the kids spend time on in school
that I don’t think are useful for their lives. Still, I’m here because I want to put a face to
my child’s stories, and let the teacher know I am around, I am one of the involved
parents. I don’t really expect to have any kind of relationship with this teacher, not like
elementary anyway, though that would be nice. But the meeting is only five minutes and I
know she has a couple hundred kids in her classes. If my child was actually having
trouble, I would make contact with the teacher or the counsellor by email. Anyway, I
could get a tutor for my child if it was really needed.

I glance at my phone for the time as it seems like the parent ahead of me is taking
longer than his share. But he has one minute left. I shuffle my feet. It’s noisy with so
many conversations going on all at once, and I already feel spent from working all day.
Parent-teacher night must be exhausting for teachers, too. It seems like there must be a
better way to do this, but I am cognisant of the limited resources in the school system. So
much is up to the parents, to feed kids’ interests, fill gaps in their learning and keep them on track. I have a bit of flexibility in my job and am committed to helping my child so I can do it, but I’m sure there are parents who don’t.

It is almost my turn. I glance at my schedule to remember which teacher I am meeting after this one and am pleased to see it is one of my child’s favourites, one of mine, too. He is just so passionate about his subject, about teaching even, it seems. He really seems to know my child, too, who she is and the work she does. He even remembers me whenever I see him, which is not necessary, of course. But it’s nice, nice that someone sees that I am here for my child. I am hopeful my child might go into his field in post-secondary since she has such strength in that subject and seems to love it so much – I really want her to find a career that makes her happy, makes her feel fulfilled in life. The momentary thought of her all grown up and successful makes me smile to myself - until a movement brings me back to reality, to the necessary hurdle of high school. My first appointment is finally ready for me, smiling rather tiredly and shuffling to the numbers she has prepared for our meeting. I only have five minutes to hear what she has to say, so I focus my attention and sit down.

According to van Manen, “a good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience – is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (1997, p.27 – italics in the original). After writing the lived-experience description of PI, I thus felt it was important to validate it with my research participants, in order to ensure that it resonated with their own individual experiences and was not only a reflection of my own. I therefore contacted each participant and offered her or him the description to read and comment upon in some manner. I suggested they could respond in any way they wished and had time for, which might include noting what parts of the description felt “true” and which did not,
rewriting parts of the description to make it resonate more personally or writing an entirely new description of their own, or just replying with their thoughts. Eight of the ten original participants replied to this offer, all of them to validate the description as either resonating with their own or being acceptable as a parent’s view of PI. For example:

Both resonated with me but the first probably more so. It took me back to taking Jimmy to school when he was little. … In both, you really captured the feeling of the experience.

I read your story and it almost seemed like you were writing about my experience with the kids going through elementary school and high school. … I think many parents have the same fears and worries about how their child is growing up and cope in school.

While I read the stories of other parents, comes to my mind my own and the experience of parenting a 4th grade boy and a 10th grade girl.

The story resonates lots in my own life w/my daughter. I would say that except for one sentence which I have commented [about job versus career], I could subscribe most of it.

I read your story and it was beautiful and I am sitting here with tears running down my eyes. It fills me with so many memories and also what is happening now. Everything you said in these two pages are so true.

I completely identified with everything and actually could have read more. Its comforting to know all of the thoughts and feelings I experienced with Tristan are shared with many, many other parents. Like so many things in life, people can feel they are alone or misunderstood when it comes to parenting.

Perhaps significantly, all of the responses above came from female participants. The two male participants also responded affirmatively, but had a slightly different flavour to their replies:

I read the story and find it to be a reasonable depiction of what some parents might feel. It comes from a mother’s perspective in my opinion, so it does not particularly resonate with me, but it is not an incorrect portrayal.

This story does resonate fairly well with me … I did hang around Elementary School and met and chatted with other parents, though not quite to the extent in the story. … it does feel fairly accurate. … Ultimately, we do want our kids to be happy, successful, well-rounded people.

From these replies by the participants, I feel it is reasonable to conclude that the lived-experience description written from this research data has validity, at least with the majority of
parents who participated in this study. A broader validation would be ideal, which I will address in the final chapter of this thesis, Conclusions and Recommendations. For example, it seems notable that a reply about the relevance of this description was not received from Hiroko who, unlike the other participants, was offered and took consistent opportunities to remain highly involved in traditional ways reminiscent of elementary school (such as cooking and cleaning for multiple school events) while her daughter was in secondary school. I do not know the reason for the lack of reply, but one possibility is that the lived-experience description did not resonate with her as a parent who remained highly traditionally involved in secondary school.

In any case, with the Key Features of PI description and the Lived-Experience description having satisfied, I believe, the objectives of a phenomenological approach to research, I now continue on to discuss my next level of analysis which involved coding the transcripts of the interviews in order to, in conjunction with the phenomenologically oriented findings above, search for answers to my research questions. Following a brief description of the key themes emerging from the coding of the transcripts, I will address each of the research questions in order.

**Key Themes Emerging from Analysis**

- *Connections with teachers and the school.* Examining the many themes that emerged through coding the data, it is perhaps not surprising that the parent participants in this study spoke most frequently about their children’s teachers, including both positive and negative interactions with teachers. When talking about PI, relationships with teachers were key for these parents, for getting information and individual support for their children as well as for their own feeling of satisfaction with involvement. In fact, making connections with teachers was the primary reason for involvement for almost all of the participants, followed by making connections to the school in general. This is significant when considering that deep
relationships with teachers is considered key to the success of collaborative PI models (Elias et al., 2007; Phadraig, 2005; Pushor and Murphy, 2004), particularly if collaborative PI is being considered for BC through the BCED Plan.

- **Connections to and knowledge of children as individuals.** After connecting with teachers and schools, the next grouping of key themes, also reflected strongly in the phenomenological analysis and descriptions, revolved around parents’ connections with and knowledge about their children. Specifically the parents in this study talked about awareness of their children’s feelings, their strengths and weaknesses, and their interests and personalities. Having and gaining this knowledge through developing and maintaining strong connections with their children was regarded as a strong measure of involvement as well as a key responsibility of parents. This grouping of key themes is noteworthy when considering opportunities for PI that are traditionally offered to parents, including the differences in opportunities in elementary and secondary school.

- **Hopes for children’s learning and the influence of family.** The next groupings of themes that emerged as key in this study, and the last that I will briefly discuss before applying the results of the analysis to my research questions, involved parents’ desires for their children’s learning, and the influence of family traits and situations on decisions and actions by parents. Again as reflected strongly in the phenomenological analysis and descriptions, the parents in this study had specific outcomes that they wished for their children, such as the development of individual interests and strengths, which they supported in many ways including through traditional PI measures. Sometimes these outcomes were noted as being influenced by family traits, particularly exposure to more creative endeavors such as music or crafts but also expectations for post-secondary attendance. Support for these outcomes was also influenced by the participants’ specific family situations meaning that certain situations sometimes led
to more support (such as one participant having family who could purchase expensive items overseas for extracurricular activities) or less support (such as one single parent participant not being able to afford advanced extracurricular classes). The emergence of the hopes for children’s learning as a strong theme for participants suggests in part that the parents in this study make deliberate choices with regards to PI as opposed to simply responding to an external call to help schools. The frequent reference to family influences further suggests the personal nature of parents’ choices and actions with regards to PI to support their children.

Applying the results of the phenomenological analysis of the research data, as well as analysis of the many themes emerging from the data including the key themes noted above, I now specifically address my research questions.

**Research Question #1: What Do Parents Believe Constitutes Education for Their Children?**

From the literature on PI, three broad categories were identified which could be said to contribute to parents’ beliefs about education for their children: parents’ beliefs about parenting, parents’ hopes and fears for their child, and parents’ beliefs about schooling. These beliefs about education were potentially coloured by parents’ concrete positions: their ethnicities, their family statuses and support from family members, their own education levels and jobs, and finally, their resulting socioeconomic statuses. In addition were parents’ perceptions of their ability to help their children in schools, their expectations for their help to be welcomed, and their own availability. (Guppy & Davies, 1999; Hoover Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Raty, Leionen & Snellman, 2002; Walker, Shenker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2010; Zhan, 2005).

Looking at their concrete positions, the ten parents who participated in this study were diverse. For example, in terms of ethnicities, slightly more than half identified as Aboriginal or immigrant, while the others were mainstream Canadian. The majority selected “middle” for their
income category but two parents had less than middle income and two parents had more than middle income. Interestingly, all the parents in this study had some exposure to post-secondary, with four parents earning degrees including one doctoral degree, and two having college diplomas, but one parent reported initially dropping out of school in grade 11 before completing a year in a training institution, while the rest did some time in post-secondary without graduating. Finally in terms of their concrete positions, three of the parents were single mothers while the rest alluded to being in long-term relationships with their children’s father or mother.

Because of the complexity of education as a concept, and the potentially broad range of viewpoints from a diverse group of participants, several questions were asked during the interviews for this study to try to sift through the possible contributing layers for each parent and discern their individual beliefs about education for their children. First, parents were asked indirectly about what they themselves did or do to support their children’s interests and talents, including their academic development. Answers to these questions indicated what parents believed children should learn in general, whether connected to schooling or not, and the emphasis they put on different elements that may constitute education (such as particular subject areas, knowledge, or skills). Parents were also asked directly what they thought or hoped their children would learn in elementary and in secondary school to discover their beliefs about the schooling aspect of education. Finally, to separate out the most important elements of education to parents, study participants were asked about the ultimate purpose for education through what they felt children needed to learn to have a good life.

Amalgamating participants’ answers to these interview questions, it was clear that, despite the diversity of their concrete backgrounds, their broad beliefs about education demonstrated a fairly consistent pattern. Their responses indicated that they consider education primarily in the context of life goals for their children. In practical terms, this means they want
their children to have options for careers based on their interests and strengths, as this is seen to lead to happiness and fulfillment in life. The Lived-Experience Description of PI from the Point of View of Parents in this study reflects these beliefs in what the parent describes is hoped for the child, both when the child is beginning Kindergarten and when the child is in secondary school.

Julieta: I think that a good life it’s a life where you feel that you have accomplished your own goals. That you have been able to - and that is something that I always tell my daughter - that she would be able to exploit her own resources. Her own skills. Her own … graces. And … exploit them and … use them and enjoy them at its fullest.

Crystal: I’d also taught him that you should do a job that you love. You know. It doesn’t matter what the pay is. I mean, of course you need to survive. I mean, you can’t do stuff for free. But. It’s also nice to be able to work somewhere where you’re happy. Where you come home with a happy attitude.

Maria: That what they choose to be, um, is something that they like it, so they can … feel happy, they can feel, um, confident that they are doing because they choose to do that, because they like it. Not because they have to.

While pursuing happiness and fulfillment rather than, for example, more tangible results such as income and security might seem abstract and ideal to some, these goals were regarded as concrete and achievable by the parents in this study. Specifically, they consistently identified four components of education to be developed in their children.

**The four components of education for parents in this study**

1. Developing children’s love of learning

For the parents in this study, love of learning referred to a feeling that acquiring knowledge, or the process of learning, was enjoyable and something that the child would then seek and put effort into on his or her own. The reason for the importance of this component was that it was seen to be more effective at achieving knowledge and skills than setting requirements for study, and also that it would allow the child to go as far as he or she wished or needed to eventually work in an area of his or her interest and choosing.
Marshal: What I want them to get out of the school system in the early years is in the excitement and enthusiasm for learning. So if they’re enthusiastic about learning, then everything else will fall in place in these types of situations.

Hiroko: Of course, I think is eventually that becomes … She would enjoy learning? But is, … if first impression about school is, wow, mmm, tough, ohh. Then I don’t know how much that would make her to … learning to that’s a next level, right? Cuz if you, if you not having fun in a school, what kinda kids wanna go to school and wanna learn?

Jodi: So … making the subject interesting so that the kids will wanna learn. You know, and wanna study it. And, like, for instance, you know, like social studies, for my older one, a lot of the classes were interesting for him and that’s why I think he wanted to pursue … you know, a future job possibly in that.

While the PI studies I examined for my literature review did not refer specifically to parents seeking a love of learning for their children, two studies surveying twenty countries including the US and England (Crozier, 1999; Sanders and Epstein, 2005), did report that parents were concerned about the happiness and welfare of their children in schools, not just their academic progress. It is possible that happiness in schools included a sense of enjoying learning for these parents, although that can only be inferred.

2. Developing children’s interests and strengths

Developing children’s interests and strengths was a major component of education for the parents in this study, and one that they personally contributed time, energy and financial resources to both before their children entered preschool and throughout their children’s formal schooling years. To discover and develop their children’s interests, parents exposed their children to enrichment activities such as visits to science centres, choosing books on different subjects, and by enrolling them in music and sport classes. Once children identified interests, parents often paid for or otherwise arranged programs or private lessons, a practice which often continued right through secondary school on an extracurricular basis, in order to develop the interests into strengths. Interests were seen to provide direction for a child’s life, whereas
developing strengths contributed to choice both for post-secondary, and by extension for a career.

Torin: I hope that education programs are, um … wide ranging enough so that they can pursue their strengths. And their interests. Um. When they go into classes to support their strengths and interests. I hope the material is sound and that it is taught well. And thoroughly. Um … so that they have the information they need to go to the next level and ultimately, um … pursue in the direction that they want to go.

Didi: But that totally would be my hope. That if Tristan showed a real commitment and passion to something he would have someone behind him going, yeah! Yeah, you want something extra? Excellent, here it is. You want to, something new or you want to take this different approach? OK. Let’s try it, if that works better for you.

Laura: You can also learn that you’re not so academic and realize that you would like to do a skill. Helps you to decide and to determine where you’re best suited to … you know, go forward as an adult. And to, you know, create a career or a job or a life or a … or a business.

Interestingly, none of the PI studies reviewed, including the CPI models and articles such as the ones providing some information of parents’ wishes for schooling outcomes, seemed to refer to developing children’s individual characteristics. This could be due to the nature of schooling itself, which offers credentials based on various standards of academic and social development, not on individual measures. Nevertheless, a recent article on homeschooling that examined the difference between education and schooling did refer to a central educational interest for children as being to develop their personal autonomy (Kunzman, 2012). While the parents in my study did not specifically identify personal autonomy as a goal for their children, their focus on individuality does suggest a desire for their children to have some personal agency. Another article examining education versus schooling also referred to the need within an education paradigm to “finding a fit for all” meaning “assisting the student in finding capacities and aptitudes that put the system at their disposal rather than vice versa (Symons, 1997 in Shantz & Rideout, 2003), which seemed to align with what the parents in this study expressed.
3. **Developing core or foundational academic skills**

In keeping with parents’ educational goals for children being related to life goals, the parents in this study consistently pointed to a need to develop basic or foundational skills that would serve children in life as well as academically: specifically reading and basic math skills, and skill in an additional language. To support the development of these skills, the parents in this study reported that they encouraged a love of reading in their children, taught core skills to their children or provided workbooks for practice both before Kindergarten and during school years (Jodi, Maria, Marshal, Torin, Hiroko) and/or hired tutors (Cynthia, Jodi, Maria, Laura) for subjects such as French and math.

Marshal: Yeah, so I want them to be able to read. So they’d be able to pick up an item and read it. And have a sense of what they’re doing. They need to be able to write, enough to convey some basic information in their writing. And they need to able to work with numbers a little bit. So, you know, addition, subtraction, uh, just starting to think about multiplication about that stage. Um. But mostly that they’re aware of what the numbers are and some basic concepts. So, I don’t think it’s extreme expectations.

Maria: We say, well, you need math because we need it for every day, for anything that we do, you need to have it. You don’t have to be the master of math, right, but at least the basics when you have to do a percentage, things like that. You have to calculate things, you know. The basic things you have to know really well how, how to do it. Um. And we don’t ask them to have, to give us A plus marks. But what they learn, they really has to be using in their everyday life.

Crystal: I was hoping he was gonna learn the basics. You know. I was hoping he was gonna learn his math, his English, you know. I was hoping he was gonna learn about the world a bit. So just the basics really.

Once again, as the PI studies reviewed took the perspective of parents providing support or oversight for the school system, none referenced parents’ thoughts on specific academic content to be taught. In fact, according to the studies examining PI and teacher identity or teacher professionalism, such questions would likely tread on territory considered the exclusive realm of teachers (Crozier, 1998 & 1999; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lareau, 1987; Lasky, 2000; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Todd & Higgins, 1998). However, the
article on education versus schooling referred to earlier noted that the other central educational interest is for children to develop are basic academic skills such as basic literacy and numeracy (Kunzman, 2012) which does echo the thoughts of parents in this study.

4. Developing children’s practical or life skills

As the final component of education, parents in this study also acknowledged the need for skills beyond the academic: skills that are practical both for interacting with people, such as social skills, and for sustaining paid employment, like time management and responsibility.

Laura: Life skills … are just as important, I think, in education…. Because it, when you have those skills they’re assets. Like you have an understanding of your surroundings of where you live, and you know who you live around and hopefully you get involved and you participate and you’re, um, you know, a productive member of your community. And then you have the social skills and the, um, the connections to, have, you know, to not live an isolated life. To be a part of something. And … then getting, deciding what you want to do, post-secondary education or skill, you know. I think you have a successful life. Because you’ve confidence, you know, you tend to be happier. When you have self-esteem and confidence.

Maria: OK, you learn about this, how you can apply it? You know, in your life. How you can use it now the teacher give you this homework, uh, based on what you can learn. How you can do it. Now how you can use it beyond just the homework. Like maybe at home, things like that.

Torin: …. taking care of their basic needs. ‘Cuz people generally have to do something. Um. So they, at least equips them to a point where they can go out and … get some sort of work to take care of their basic needs.

Unlike the other components of education identified, parents’ desires for children to develop social skills and the skills to sustain employment were reflected in some of the PI studies reviewed for this research. For example, one TPI study noted that both professional and unskilled labourer parents valued a good education equally with a steady job (Kinloch, 1998), while a CPI study focused on the need for schools to work with parents on the social development of adolescents (Elias et al., 2007). Perhaps, unlike the academic nature of core skills, it may be easier for educators to acknowledge parents’ ability to have useful knowledge about work and socializing skills. Of note, in the study seeking new paradigms for the 21st
century, developing social consciousness through “wider world orientation, alternative futures, decision-making skills, and active, responsible citizenship” were also considered to be a crucial part of the education paradigm (valuing diverse attributes of students) rather than the schooling paradigm (defined by structured, limiting systems for students) (Shantz & Rideout, 2003).

To summarize to this point, what parents in this study believe constitutes education for their children clearly more reflects the broader meaning of education as the sum of a person’s development rather than the narrower meaning of education as what is learned in school. This is evident by the four components identified as composing education and also reflected in the intended results of PI seen in the Key Features of PI to Parents description (How does PI do what it does?). Despite this clear view, the parents in this study did not express that education was completely divorced from schooling. In fact, as can be seen in the chart on page 112, schooling was seen as having the ability to contribute directly toward the four components of education. For example, schooling could offer class activities that made learning interesting and fun, in order to develop children’s love of learning. To develop children’s interests and strengths, schools could offer children the opportunity to participate in a broad range of subjects and activities, including those their parents hadn’t considered (such as drama, noted by Hiroko) or couldn’t afford. Schools could concentrate more on core skills like reading, writing and basic math (as particularly noted by Marshal). Finally, schools, by their structure, provide venues for children to socialize, and also to learn about and see the value of time management.
### Figure 4: Parents' Views of Education versus Schooling

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practical Result of Education: Self-Knowledge and Direction Leading to Happiness and Fulfillment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education: Developing children’s love of learning</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides incentive to keep on learning and growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education: Developing children’s interests and strengths</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides direction for life and career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practical Result of Schooling: A Credential to Access Next Level and Enable Choices</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Schooling:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Learning can be presented as interesting and fun</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Learning can be engaging and encourage more learning</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Schooling:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provides opportunities to discover and explore different areas, allowing interests and strengths to emerge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Provide ability to concentrate and deepen strengths</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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| Parents provide engaging and fun educational opportunities                                |
| **Parents provide enrichment and extracurricular opportunities**                          |
| **Parents teach and encourage core skills (math, reading, second language) and provide tutors** |
| **Education: Developing children’s core skills**                                          |
| Provides foundation for academics and life                                                |
| **Education: Developing children’s practical and life skills**                           |
| Provides foundation for relationships, further schooling, and jobs                       |

*Figure 4 Parents' Views of Education versus Schooling*
The purpose of schooling for parents in this study  Despite the potential contributions of schooling to their children’s educations, most of the parents in this study seemed to take a very practical view of the overall purpose of formal schooling for their children. Specifically, parents equated secondary schooling with providing their children with the necessary requirements to enter post-secondary study. In other words, to these parents, while education may be about what is learned for life, schooling is about the tangible criteria needed to begin a career or a job. This echoed at least one PI study from England which found that parents wanted their children to get some kind of qualification that would help them later in life (Crozier, 1999). This finding was also reflected in the Key Features of PI to Parents in the general description of PI (What are the aspects of PI?).

Marshal: The other piece of it is, I need them to have the basic, uh, skill set that’s developing so that they can go on to university. And again I don’t think I’m extreme on what I expect.

Didi: What I want him to … to be able to, um … make a success of high school and being able to move forward to university.

Hiroko: Means education is very, very important. So to get good job, need the good university. To get good university, you have to go good high school. To go good high school means have to go good middle school. All down.

Interviewer: Will your daughter go to university, do you think?
Julieta: Oh, yeah, for sure.
Interviewer: For sure?
Julieta: Yeah.
Interviewer: Why do you say that?
Julieta: Well, because (Laughs). Well, because, first she wants. Um. Honestly for us it’s just basically no other option.
Interviewer: (Laughs)
Julieta: You have to. I mean, what are we talking about. (Laughs)

As can be seen by the last quote, the practical view of schooling held by the parents in this study should not be taken to mean that schooling was undervalued by them. On the contrary, a high value was placed on post-secondary education as providing children with the opportunity to obtain the credential needed to validate their strengths and allow them to pursue
their interests towards a career. As indicated earlier, the parents in this study clearly felt that having the ability to make choices in life, rather than being forced in a direction or having to settle for a job, was key to finding happiness and fulfillment. Post-secondary education was considered part of the equation for choice.

Further evidence of the value placed on schooling was seen in the many concerns expressed by the parents in this study about the current content of school curricula. Because of the potential for schooling to contribute to their children’s educations, as well as schooling’s contribution to post-secondary education and a career, the parents in this study were critical of curricula not being not useful for children or unconnected to life, or as not providing children with the academic preparation for post-secondary. In addition to pointing to the value of schooling to parents, these concerns provide further evidence of the four components identified by the parents in this study as being essential to education.

1. **Wanting schooling to be more useful or more connected to life**

   The parents in this study felt that some school curricula did not adequately build practical skills or wasted children’s time with unimportant content which could detract from their love of learning.

   Interviewer: Do you think he learns … anything that helps him to achieve that in school? Crystal: (Pauses) Well, I’m not too sure. I don’t think really. Nnnnot … Well, I mean. Cooking, I guess. He’s learned how to cook but I mean I taught him how to cook at home too, so I mean. Um. I don’t know per se. Maybe with Planning this year. I mean I sorta like the curriculum in the Planning. Cuz I think it gives them, uh, you know, a good outlook. On what’s gonna happen in life and stuff. So. Maybe with the Planning course, yeah. But I don’t really think with any other course.

   Didi: I think maybe everything that’s taught in history doesn’t, you know. Certain curriculums, I think, they could change. Um. To what I don’t, I couldn’t answer, um, off the top of my head. I think, you know, there’s certain things, uh, in math. … (Laughs) Whatever it is, I have no idea what this is good for. I think for some students that maybe are very challenged with that subject, it would be a deterrent for them. Um. If it were things that they just couldn’t find a use for in everyday life.
Jodi: See it’s hard because, some of the stuff that they do learn, like, you know, like, I’m thinking like, why are they learning this. For instance, math, for example. Why are they learning this for – I can’t figure out, um, what they’re doing is gonna get them in their life. Just like with science, it’s like stuff that they learn, I don’t understand why they’re learning that for life skills. It really doesn’t seem relevant to what they’re learning a lot of the stuff.

2. Schools not providing children with adequate academic preparation

Consistent with the value placed on core skills, some parents in this study also expressed that their children were not adequately prepared academically by current school curricula.

Marshal: And then on the math side, um. It sort of carries on from the elementary school and so. Um. There’s really … um, poor instruction on math at the early years. And … with that poor instruction you’re gonna spend the first year or two in high school just trying to bring these kids up to a functioning level. And so you’re still working on fractions and sorta basic concepts in grade 8. And you’d like these kids to be really moving along a little faster and being challenged ‘cuz they have the capacity to do more.

Julieta: I think that the curriculum should be more … I think, at least in those two subjects. I mean, social studies they have no clue about the world, you know. It’s just, uh, geography-wise, for example. Even historically I don’t even, I’m sure that my daughter does – and listen. She’s been a good student. She has been, most of her social studies she has all the time gotten As. So it’s not that she’s failing. And I see the textbook because I couldn’t believe it… for example, social history. The sequence, you know. First, for example, the … Renaissance then baroque, middle age, baroque. Then modern times. All that, you know, French Revolution, then Industrial Revolution. All that they don’t have that. And, and likewise with capitals of the world I was mentioning before. In English the same, no clue of grammar. You know, maybe you would think, well, that’s not important in your life. Well, depends, you know. I think it’s important as a general knowledge. As a human being you cannot be so ignorant.

Jodi: … even like in high school, he’s quite bored. He’s not challenged. A lot of stuff’s just Mickey Mouse. … I mean he’s a smart enough kid, but I think that’s part of the problem in high school for a lot of kids. They’re bored. A lot of stuff is just repetitive, and the same thing, and, you know … They’re bored.

The main significance of these findings about parents’ broad beliefs of education lie in a comparison to the beliefs about education that underlie efforts to involve parents more in schooling (PI). It seems reasonable to suggest that for parents to willingly enact PI as schools and school systems want or expect, their views of what they are trying to achieve for their
children must be in harmony with - or at least not dissimilar to - what proponents of PI are trying to achieve for children.

Yet, considering PI activities suggested in the literature and evidenced in how PI is operationalized in schools, the assumption about education by government and the school system is clearly that schooling is the dominant contributor to education. For example, as noted earlier, most interactions cited as PI in research studies are TPI interactions supporting formal schooling, such as communicating to receive information from teachers or the school, volunteering at school, helping with homework or study skills, and sitting on school committees (Catsambis, 2001; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sanders and Epstein, 2005; Smit et.al, 2008). Evidence of how PI is then usually operationalized by school systems can be found in, for example, a BC Ministry of Education publication on Parent Involvement from 2012 suggests parents can “get more involved” through activities such as “volunteer(ing) to help with field trips or special events such as concerts and school fairs,” “help(ing) with transportation or chaperon(ing) events,” or “tak(ing) part in service projects and fundraisers” (BC MoE). Similarly, the “Families” tab of Vancouver School Board website explains to parents that through parent advisory councils (PACs) they can “advise on school programs, policies, plans and activities” and “get involved with schools by exploring volunteer … opportunities” (http://www.vsb.bc.ca/). In other words, what school systems are trying to achieve with PI is to help children do better in schools, whereas the findings of this study suggest that what parents want for their children is to develop broader components of their education. This means that parents’ goals and school systems’ goals for students may not be in harmony.

This is important because, just as what schools are mandated to achieve, such as grade-to-grade transition rates (BC Ministry of Education 2014/5 – 2016/17 Service Plan, 2014a, p. 17), affects what they offer as involvement opportunities, so does what parents are trying to achieve
for their children affect what they accept as involvement activities or how they choose to connect with the people schooling their children. Put another way, schools clearly offer opportunities to parents to support children in achieving the goals set by schools (such as outcomes achieved on field trips or through school events) but parents seem to be looking for opportunities from schools to support their children in achieving goals that parents think are important, which are often more individual than schools’ goals, or more related to life goals or core skills. If the schools’ goals and the parents’ goals align, it seems likely parents will accept the schools’ opportunities to connect, as the opportunities will fulfill their own objectives. If the schools’ goals and parents’ goals are misaligned, however, parents may not accept the opportunities offered by schools: they may not volunteer for events or sit on school advisory councils as invited or expected. How parents actually interact with schools thus reflects, in part at least, their own goals for their children, as well as whether schools are meeting their goals. Examining how the parents in this study actually interacted with schools, and what this reveals about their beliefs, is the subject of the next leading research question in this study.

Research Question #2: How Do Parents’ Beliefs about Education Influence or Impact How They Interact with the People and Institutions Involved with Schooling Their Children?

Significantly, in contrast to the traditional and formalized involvement activities most cited by literature and also offered by schools (TPI and FPI), parents in this study defined involvement much more simply as being present for their children: physically (in person by being at home, through chauffeuring, or by attending extracurricular events, and through monetary or other tangible resources), emotionally (such as listening and offering advice when children were going through hard times with friends), and in spirit (by allowing children to know they were supported). Being present provided children with a stable base from which to explore and grow, and also provided parents with additional knowledge about their children so as to help
them if needed. The Lived-Experience Description of PI for the parents in this study reflects the feeling of being present in its description of what the parent has done with and for the child before Kindergarten and once the child is in high school.

Cynthia: I think it’s interesting because for me it’s not so much involved in what they’re doing at school but I am involved in their lives and what’s going on and I, as I said, I know that their peers, when they’re in high school, are more significant and important to the choices they make than their parents but ... I know that Jimmy does look to us for, you know, to help make those choices.

Jodi: (Pauses) For myself, um. I always make, like being involved with my kids, like, I’m always making sure that they have their lunches and, um. They’re actually kinda pampered. I do drive them in the morning. Just to make sure that the day starts out right for them. And I’m involved, like, just to make sure that when they get home, we check to see what the homework is and if they need some sort of supplies for projects, um. Or if they need. Um. To be involved, in fact, if they need some extra help, I’ll go out and find a tutor. Um. I think is being involved.

Torin: I think parent involvement directly with the child, uh ... means .... Um ... engaging with the child. Showing interest in the child. ... (Pauses) Basically showing an interest ... in the child, so that they see the child as a person. ... As opposed to a cookie-cutter type of, uh, parenting style sort of. Uh, just become interested in the child, find out ... what is the child, what does the child like. Um. Initiating things that the child might like, um. Being open to when the child has questions or wants to talk. Um. Wanting to be with, spend time with the child. Um. Being able to pass on information, knowledge that the child finds interesting or that the child needs. Um. (Pauses) Very much hands-on having a strong relationship with the child.

Taken together, the two sets of beliefs held by parents in this study about the nature of education and the objective of involvement point toward what might be expected to be their actions with regard to PI. From their beliefs about education, parents might be looking for opportunities to encourage and enhance the components they believe make up education for their children: love of learning, and development of their interests and strengths, core skills, and practical and life skills. From their beliefs about involvement, it is possible to surmise a reason to be involved in schooling is to be present for their children in terms of being physically close or providing resources. If these two suppositions are true, it is reasonable to expect that parents
would participate more in PI activities that enhance what they see as educational components and brings parents closer to their children, and less in activities that did not.

**How and why parents in this study connected with schools** After surveying the beliefs about education, schooling, and involvement expressed by the parents in this study, it is possible to examine how they actually did connect with schools, in order to see how their beliefs impacted their actions.

To begin, almost all of the parent participants in this study reported volunteering at their child’s school in some capacity when their children were in elementary school (Cynthia, Maria, Julieta, Crystal, Laura, Didi, Hiroko). Some of the activities brought them into direct contact with their children or allowed them to support enrichment activities, such as helping out with field trips, while others appeared to allow them to be present in the school. Such activities are thus consistent with these parents’ stated aims for education as well as their objectives for involvement.

Cynthia: …as I said, I wasn’t working when my kids were in elementary so I was really involved in the school. I was there a lot. I did a lot of things. I organized a lot of, like the French English book fairs and the chocolate sales, and the … the Easter things, lots of other things.

Maria: I, uh, volunteered for activities more than anything. Activities, like, you know, sport days. Um. And um, if they need somebody, I don’t drive, but if they need somebody for sky, you know, skytrain, bring them to the … Science World, things like that. … Field trips, yeah. I used to help with that.

Julieta: But in Sunshine Coast Elementary I offered, I volunteered because the first day I saw, we need volunteers for this and that. Oh well, I’ve done that. So I’m going to sign up. Well, to my surprise then (Laughs) I had to run the canteen myself! I had to buy myself the goods, bring it to the school, with a price. Everything! … And the teachers knew me because obviously I was there first thing in the morning and last thing. Cleaning up. Doing this, doing that. (Laughs)

However, when looking at secondary school which is the focus of this study, despite their high amount of direct connection with schools during their children’s elementary years, almost all the parents reported having a reduced connection with schools in their children’s secondary
school years (Cynthia, Jodi, Maria, Marshal, Julieta, Crystal, Laura, Didi, and Torin – as noted previously, the exception was Hiroko, who remained highly involved in traditional ways in secondary school because her child was in an enriched program which required a large amount of volunteering by parents for the program to operate).

Cynthia: Yeah. I have attended, I think, one PAC meeting. Which I intended to go to a lot. And then it seemed so different than the involvement in elementary school just doesn’t seem, as, you just don’t seem as needed, maybe. That was my perception and I thought, I maybe wouldn’t have an impact so I didn’t continue going which I went for, forever when my kids were in elementary school.

Interviewer: And what about volunteering in high school.
Maria: … I don’t even know if they need volunteers actually.
Interviewer: So I think Central has a Parent Advisory Committee. Do you know anything about it?
Maria: Uh, no. I have heard that they have the meetings. Unfortunate, like, I haven’t been able to, to go there. And I should, I should make an effort to go and I don’t.

Marshal: So, um, I’m … high school’s different than elementary school. So elementary school the parents starting out you have parents that are there every day. Either dropping kids off, they’re in the halls, they’re participating and the parents get to know each other. … As you get into high school the kids are really doing their – They’re going on their own to school. They are, uh, doing their own …. days there. So your engagement with the school is much more limited as a parent.

This sometimes dramatic change in direct connection with schools leads one to ask what changed for these parents. For example, was it their beliefs about education or involvement that had changed? Given that the parents in this study were relaying their beliefs about education while their children were in secondary school, and given that their physical support for the educational beliefs they espoused seemed to remain consistent between elementary and secondary school (specifically in continuing to provide extracurricular, enrichment and remedial opportunities), it seems reasonable to state that their beliefs about education did not change from elementary to secondary years. Similarly, given the actions these parents still were undertaking in their children’s secondary schooling years to be present for their children (such as regularly talking with children, helping with or being present for homework, watching extracurricular
events, etc.), it would seem their objectives for being involved also had not changed. If these parents’ beliefs about education and involvement had not changed, what, then, would cause such a change in their actions?

Consistent with findings by Hornby and Lafale about barriers to PI (2011) as well as those in the study by Walker et al. (2010) about the impact of internal and external factors such as parents’ perceptions of invitations from the school and their own time and energy for involvement, some parents felt held back by their change in circumstances, or by a perceived lack of opportunity:

Jodi: I haven’t had time.

Laura: Part of it is situation, circumstance.

Didi: It’s just not in the cards.

Torin: Mostly because it’s so far away, and mostly because I don’t wanna split my … time. My time is limited as it is.

Maria: I don’t even know if they need volunteers actually.

Julieta: I want to get involved. I like that. But again I don’t know what the proper channels … would be to do that.

However, some of these parents expressed an additional reason for being less involved, which was that involvement was not as necessary as it had been in elementary. It seems notable that the parents in this study seemed to find or make time and circumstances to support involvement when their children were younger, but did not - despite the consistency in their beliefs about education and their own objectives for involvement as established above - make the same efforts when their children were in secondary school. Recognizing that older children do require less physical care from parents (reflecting internal factors noted by Walker et al. [ibid] such as parents’ understanding of their parental role or what they are supposed to do as parents), nonetheless, this change in behaviour of the parents in this study seems to point in part to the
change in the nature of involvement in secondary school, to activities that do not meet parents’ objectives for direct connection and the opportunity to be present with their children, and also to activities that perhaps focus more on schooling and advanced academics, and less support parents’ broad goals for education.

Cynthia: It’s just, like there was a group of us and we’re all like, OK here we are, how can we help and you know, they went through the minutes and the things that were done. Maybe ‘cuz there’s not significant fundraising like there was in elementary school. And there weren’t specific events that parents were needed for. Um. (Pauses) Yeah. The role of the PAC doesn’t seem as significant in high school as it was in elementary school. … to me.

Julieta: I’m very respectful for that, that every teacher wants to have this, you know, run his show or her show. I understand that. I mean in no way I’ve interfered ever in and will never do in their role. I think it’s a unique thing that parents should not interfere but, uh … as in elementary I never stepped on the teacher’s feet or anything. But I, I felt that we were welcome you know, that they look for us. And we were there to help them, you know, to assist them. It was not that we were … you know snooping in, or … but they reached out for us and we were there. So it was nice. Uh. I would love that but, but maybe it’s unnecessary.

Interviewer: You would like that in high school as well.
Julieta: Yes, yes. But I also realize that it might not be necessary. And, uh, so if not necessary, it could be …. You know, instead of being helpful, can be complete annoyance. So, I’m fine with that.

In fact, when examining how parents in this study did connect in secondary school, most connected with teachers, counsellors and administrators - outside of perfunctory five-minute long parent-teacher conferences - mainly when something was lacking or there was a problem for their child.

Interviewer: And were you contacting because you had concerns? … did you contact teachers for instance in classes that he was doing well at?
Cynthia: No. Just the classes he was doing poorly in.

Crystal: And … well, the math teacher because I was concerned with Kenric. And his math. And then, um. Then the others, you know, I did call the socials teacher. I mean the English teacher I called ‘cuz you know Kenric wasn’t seeing eye-to-eye with him.

Marshal: So in high school you have a lot of teachers. … And then this school is eight teachers that you’re dealing with at any one time in, just in the academic classes. And then usually a couple other activities on the side - where you might have a couple more people that you’re interacting with so eight to ten people. And most of them are …
they’re just passing by. You know, your kids are in their classroom every other day. Uh, you divide it up, they’re only there a certain number of days, and it’s you know - A small block and those teachers are interacting with around seven classes of 30 kids so they’re dealing with 200 kids. (Laughs) … so realistically you’re gonna have no interactions, or very, very minimal interactions with most of them unless your kid is having particular challenges in some way.

Laura: It’s funny all the science courses that she wanted to take, her counsellor was very reluctant, uh, sign off on them every year. Because she … wasn’t an academic. Like she’s not, doesn’t, like, come off as the, you know, A or B student. Um. So I had to every single time pursue, uh, make sure that the counsellor knew that … I agreed with it too. That I knew she wanted to take these courses and she could manage them certainly.

To answer the question, then, of how parents’ beliefs about education and involvement influence or impact how they interact with the people and institutions involved with schooling their children, the findings of this study seem to suggest that when traditional involvement activities offered by schools support parents’ broad beliefs about education or their own objectives for involvement (such as opportunities to be present through field trips, sports days, science fairs or other events), the parents in this study were highly connected with schools. When, however, the involvement activities were less clearly in support of their beliefs about education or did not fulfill their own objectives for involvement (ie. by being mostly PAC/committee related and thus removed from children), the connection to schools was significantly reduced, sometimes to the point of just troubleshooting.

A final but significant point to make about how parents’ broader beliefs about education and their own objectives for involvement impact their actions, is that, consistent with those beliefs, the parents in this study still felt themselves to be involved parents even when their connection to schools was reduced. As their definition of involvement suggests, these parents are present for their children whether visible in schools or not.

Cynthia: And despite the fact that originally I thought I’m not that involved in what they’re doing at school, I know I’m involved in what’s going in their lives.

Jodi: Absolutely. I’m quite a hands-on parent to be honest. I’m very involved. I know what they’re doing, where they are. Yeah, I’m a very involved parent for them.
Maria: So those things if you’re not involved with them, you, I think you lose, you lose that bond and, you know, with your children. And if they know that you’re interested like, my other children’s having a mini meets. And maybe I cannot to go all of them. But maybe I can make the effort to go to the last one. Or something that he can see that I was there. So they can feel the support, not just to give the support at home but just be there. That’s what I think is very important for them. Yeah, I cannot be in the morning in the school, if there is activity in the evening I will try to do it. Make it up for them. Yeah.

Interviewer: Would you say yourself right now that you’re involved?
Crystal: I am. I mean, I’m a little less right now than what I’ve always been in his life? But of course that’s gonna change now ‘cuz now the slow season’s come and now I can go back to being the mom, I mean, you know, I wanna be. … You know, I really need to be there now more than anything. Because I know he’s going through a lot. And even though I might not per se be there right behind him but … be around there so he knows. I’m at home. You know, I can actually make him dinner now. You know, and be there when he comes home from school. And then if he does have anything he can, you know, he can ask. He can come to me instead of having to think that I’m at work and he can’t.

Interviewer: So. I’m curious, why are you so involved? What do you think it’ll do for your daughter?
Hiroko: I think is, uh … I don’t know in English saying, but in Japanese saying, children grow up looking at parent’s back. You know, they look at the parent’s back, what they do. So I … hard choice, but I … want to … uh, connect with my daughter or my child if I have a son, my child and I think is that’s one way, and that’s very strong, important way, is involve with what she does. So that’s a biggest part is what she spend most of the hours. At school. So involve with the same page.

In summary for this question, it would seem from the examples in this study that parents’ broad beliefs about education and involvement can have a mostly positive impact on their connections with schools in their children’s elementary years, but a somewhat negative impact on their connections with secondary schools, in large part because of the changed opportunities for involvement that secondary schools offer which no longer strongly entice parents to make time or change their circumstances, especially as their children need less physical care. The turn to more advanced academic endeavors and a focus on the mechanics of schooling, as well as involvement opportunities that are less direct and more formalized (PAC and committees) seem to contribute toward most parents reducing their connections, apart from parent-teacher nights or
other information events, to the role of troubleshooting problems with marks or relationships with teachers.

Listening to these parents describe how they are involved with secondary schools, it was clear from their choices of words and tones of voices that these were not their ideal relationships with schools to support their children’s educations in their teenage years. Yet it was also clear from the answers to this second research question that most of these parents, still wanting to be involved – to be present and support their children - desired and sought out some connection to their children’s schools even if it was only attending games, performances and parent-teacher nights. Considering these parents enduring beliefs about education uncovered in the first research question, it seems reasonable to suggest that parents in this study would connect to secondary schools through other means if they were available. How these parents want to be connected to secondary level teachers and schools is thus the focus of my final leading research question.

**Research Question #3: How Would Parents Ideally Like to Be Involved In or Connected To the School System to Support Their Children’s Education?**

To understand how parents in this study would ideally like to be present for their children through secondary schools to support their children’s education, one of the first places to look is in what they say about their experiences, both positive and negative, trying to connect to schools, as this reveals both what they appreciated and would like to continue or enhance, and what caused frustration or what they would like to change or end. Summarizing from their current experiences, the parents in this study expressed appreciation for the friendly personal connections they were able to establish with teachers and administrators, as well as the time spent in contact to solve issues or problems. Conversely, parents expressed frustration with systems that limited contact with teachers, and also with teachers who did not provide timely
information about problems or, in some cases, show respect for the parents. The parents also expressed enjoyment from opportunities to be present at schools, though mostly in elementary (except for Hiroko who remained highly involved in traditional ways in secondary school), and disappointment at the perceived lack of opportunity to be present in secondary school. Following the examples of their experiences in this section, as well their statements about school connections they wish to have in the next section, I have included a table to frame the results clearly and to compare them to notions from the literature.

**Positive experiences: For parents, practices to continue**

- **Friendly, personal contacts with teachers**

  Without exception, all the parents in this study expressed positive feelings when they felt they knew their children’s teachers and had some rapport with them. This reflects one of the key aspects of involvement uncovered in the phenomenological analysis of the research data: PI forms relationships in support of children’s development.

  Cynthia: The one that immediately comes to mind again is band. And again I think that’s because they have performances so we’re at the school three or four times a year watching the performances. Um. And we see the teacher, the conductor and he talks to us and then he, he knows me, you know. I’m for example, when they went on a band trip, he knows the parents and he talked about the fact that he didn’t have his own children but these are his 173 children. And he did have an immediate rapport with us, which he has with his students. And I think he genuinely cares about the students and about is passionate about music.

  Interviewer: Did you have relationships with your children’s teachers while in elementary school?
Laura: Yes. Every single teacher.
Interviewer: And can you describe what that was like then?
Laura: Well, I knew them personally. I knew their likes, I knew their dislikes. Um … I knew what they expected from my kids. Um. They would approach me, and knew my kid well enough to know something was up or something wasn’t happening. Or something was off today. And they could chat with me about it. It was almost like daily at the end. Every day you would get feedback. Which is so nice. So nice.
Interviewer: Would you say that you did have relationships with his teachers in elementary school?
Didi: Yes. Well, at least I felt, I felt like I could, um, if I dropped by or, if, you know, if I felt like if I wanted to write a note, I would get a response. If I wanted to, um, ask questions, it would be very – not all teachers, you know, are always real interested in … in speaking to you just whenever you want to speak to them so I tried to make sure that I was respectful of that, you know, the when and how. Um, but … yeah. I felt … a bit more of a … rapport.

• Teachers or administrators spending time to address issues

The parents in this study were quick to acknowledge how busy, even overwhelmed school staff are. They were therefore gratified when teachers or administrators took time to address their children’s individual issues.

Cynthia: I contacted both the principal and the counsellor and they were really good about meeting with me. I spent a lot of time with the counsellor and I did talk to the principal and it was a really stressful situation. And both John and I felt that the right thing to do would be to pull Jimmy out of French and put him in English. And at one point the principal said to me, and this is a principal in the school of 1600 and she was really good about taking the time to talk to me and stuff. … And so it was a really stressful, fairly negative situation but I think her experience turned it around and made it a less stressful situation. And, interestingly, he is doing better …

Jodi: I’ve found that they [teachers] are very supportive, and you know, they say they’re there in the morning, you know, to help out, at lunch and by appointment. [After making contact] at that point we just communicate back and forth through, you know, whatever term he’s struggling in and … I ask them to just please let me know, like, send me the marks so I can see where he stands. They’re pretty good.

Interviewer: And do they follow-up?

Jodi: Yeah. The ones, the ones that I’ve had to deal with, yes. They’ve been good.

Crystal: The previous years have been really amazing. I mean I even remember last year when I went for the parent-teacher conferences? … The social teacher. He actually asked me before he talked about Kenric’s marks, that he was concerned about Kenric and his best friend, because his best, one of his best friends is dying from cancer. … And he was so concerned about Kenric and he wanted to. He just talked to me for half an hour on that subject.

• Opportunities for parents to be present at school

In keeping with their own definition of involvement as being present, parents in this study reflected on the positive impact they felt from having opportunity to be at school and participate in activities their children were in or impacted by. Being at the school in these ways
mostly resulted in better relationships and more communication with teachers, although it also contributed to parents being able to be close to their children and thus learning or knowing more about their children as individuals (such as how they interacted with peers and teachers). This reflects descriptions in the Key Features of PI, particularly in the intended results of PI (How does PI do what it does?).

Cynthia: I think because I was at the school significantly more. And also because you have to pick up your children, or somebody physically has to pick up your children in high, in elementary school. And you have one-on-one parent-teacher conferences for everybody. Right. I think I had significantly … better relationships, you know. I knew them better. I knew all the teachers but again because I was at the school. I was doing the book fairs, I knew every teacher.

Interviewer: So what kind of relationship did you have with the teachers in elementary school?
Maria: Oh, we were even volunteering there. … I used to go there, when they have even in, you know, um, uh, activities too? And uh, yeah, we’re well known with, with the teachers there. Yeah.
Interviewer: OK. So you, were you volunteering a lot?
Maria: I was volunteering a lot, yeah. I, uh, volunteered for activities more than anything. Activities, like, you know, sport days. Um. And um, if they need somebody, I don’t drive, but if they need somebody for sky, you know, skytrain, bring them to the … Science World, things like that …. And the playground … And we volunteered in both the schools actually. When she was in the grade 3? In KingswayAnnex. We had to build up the playground. And after when she moved to Kingsway Elementary, we helped to build up the other playground. … Yeah, so it was an awesome time. (Laughs)

Julieta: … elementary was a whole different story.
Interviewer: In elementary you had relationships.
Julieta: Yes. Yes. Well, yes besides I was very involved in the school too, there.

... Julieta: And I think in elementary in generally speaking is more open for that. You know, parents have more opportunity, too. I love that. I really enjoy that. I think it’s fabulous.

Hiroko: And I’m, because of my involvement, when I go see teacher, they say, Hey Hiroko! And, you know, teacher know me. And, you know, right away they know my daughter, who she is. I’m not giving any gift or anything but it’s just, uh, that they know each other. They know who is my daughter is, and they know who she is.
Acknowledging parents’ roles

Finally, some parents in this study specifically mentioned being acknowledged by teachers or the school for their role or for their help as a positive experience:

Maria: Being part of … her school when I get the opportunity, like, you know. … being … involved, being a volunteer. It was awesome too, you know. When we had the volunteer recognition tea, used to see her, like, you know, smiling ‘cuz I’m gonna receive my certificate. It’s, it’s just awesome because we get, uh, is make us be more close.

Didi: I think, well, I think really positive thing about, you know, certain teachers is only ever happened, I think, once. Maybe twice in the school. When teachers know … my name? Or they know who I am in relation to my son? That’s a really positive thing ‘cuz I think that shows that they’re paying extra attention. Which isn’t obviously, means, how many parents enter the school, it would be extremely difficult for them to know that, I wouldn’t expect them to. But that’s a positive sign for me.

To summarize this section, practices to continue based on parents’ positive experiences connecting with schools seem to revolve around parents’ desires for personal friendly relationships with their children’s teachers and other school staff. Friendly personal relationships were characterized by parents feeling that they knew something about the teacher’s or administrator’s manner and beliefs, that they could approach the school staff for information about their child and be well received, and occasionally, that the parents’ roles in their child’s lives would be acknowledged. The parents in this study seemed to appreciate opportunities to be at the school because such opportunities fostered these types of relationships, as well as opportunities to be physically close to their children and learn more about them.

Negative experiences: For parents, practices to change

- Difficulty connecting with teachers

Given the previous summary of practices to continue resulting from positive experiences, it is not surprising to find a negative practice parents would like to change in secondary school is the difficulty in connecting with teachers. For example, the parents in this study clearly did not
appreciate five-minute parent-teacher conferences which left no time for friendliness or getting to know one another.

Jodi: But it definitely was a different relationship in elementary, you know, because you’d see them all the time. It’s a more friendly … social thing versus high school. It’s not that friendly and, you know, sociable [in high school]. It’s just business.

Maria: Those you know, the meetings that they do, the conferences teachers is when you have the opportunity to meet them. And they have these, before the conference they have one, they call it “Meet and Greet” the teachers. And that’s when you know, there is nothing to talk about, you know, just go and introduce yourself and say, you know, if you’re a working mom, working dad, you kinda will figure out with the teachers, you know, through the agendas, keep in touch with something. With high school you don’t have that. Not at all.

Interviewer: So … along that line, what, what are your relationships with your child’s teachers. Like what kind of relationship do you have with them?
Julieta: Well, very minimal. Again, because it’s not, apparently it’s not something that we are supposed to … deepen.
Interviewer: You feel that you’re not supposed to deepen it. … And why do you say that?
Julieta: (Pauses) I don’t know. … It’s just a feeling.

Didi: I don’t enjoy the whole, you know, interview by every single teacher. I never remember all the questions that I want to ask. I don’t feel welcome with all of the teachers. I think they’re tired. I’m tired. You know I’ve had a full day at work. So I think that that’s, I mean, that system does not work for me at all. Not a bit.
Interviewer: The parent-teacher interview you’re talking about.
Didi: Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer: And are the parent-teacher meetings the same as at Westside.
Torin: Pretty much. Walk in, 5 minutes. Get a feel for it. That’s about it.

... Torin: But I mean for a relationship with someone I would think that, you know, it’s to the point where .. I ... might not even ... often not know them if I passed them on the street. Sort of thing. So I mean I’m thinking if I don’t have enough of a connection with them that I could at least recognize them when I saw them outside of that context, then I wouldn’t really characterize it so much as a relationship.

- Lack of communication/support

Flowing, most likely, from the difficulty in connecting with teachers was a feeling of a lack of communication from the teachers and the school. A lack of communication was often further linked to a lack of support for the child as an individual – this is another negative
experience that parents in this study who encountered it would like to change and a finding that is consistent with the phenomenological analysis of the research data which suggests that supporting a child’s individuality is key to parents.

Cynthia: One teacher that Jimmy was struggling in French, Madame Wong, was overall really good about letting me know if he was doing badly. And then just before she left the school last year, she didn’t let me know and he wasn’t doing well. And it was really frustrating for us. Um. Most of the other teachers, yeah, I’m usually in contact. There’s only ever been one teacher that didn’t respond to my email and apparently that’s quite typical. He’s the science teacher. I talked to the, um, I didn’t talk to the principal but the counsellor, Jimmy’s counsellor. And she told me she would let him know. And I don’t know that he ever did contact me. It was something that I didn’t follow up on. But I was frustrated, really frustrated.

Jodi: I’ve never had a teacher contact me and say I need to talk to you about your child. I always step in even with Conner, if I have an issue I would – I go to his counsellor and talk to her and you know, see what direction I can go in, but I’ve never had them contact me ...

Interviewer: And so even if your child’s struggling they never contact you. You have to initiate it.

Jodi: Yeah. And it’s me that’s more, um … stepping in like, his marks might not be as bad … as you’d think, but you can definitely tell that they’re struggling … This year I think I got, or last year, I got one interim for the older one saying that he was struggling but … it kind of sucks because you get one like nine weeks later after your child is failing a subject, it’s like - if you see something I do believe you should be sending that, you know, right away, like in a couple three weeks if they’re struggling you need to let the parent know. So just to get an interim, it’s – kinda – I’ve only gotten one which was kinda shocking … my kids tell me their marks. I’m pretty on top but. To get that was a bit shocking.

Crystal: This year I’ve emailed two teachers in particular and I mean one is really funny. It’s his cooking teacher. … So I was just curious about how she was because to him, she was really nasty. … I mean he came in late as in he changed into cooking part way through. So of course he missed the first three weeks. … he said but the teacher, like, when he came in that class ‘cuz he didn’t know any, where anything was -She was just like, well, find stuff yourself. … So I would like to know why exactly you would say that. If you know they just came in, you know they haven’t been there for three weeks. Or transferred in. Why, or why wouldn’t you even get somebody to help him and show him. Where all the utensils are. And where everything is that he needs, you know. So that was quite, yeah. But I have had no response from (the teacher).
• Not listening to/valuing parents’ input

While only a few parents in this study specifically highlighted being acknowledged for their parental or volunteer role as a positive experience, more participants noted the negative feelings that resulted for them when they felt not listened to by teachers and administrators, as if this lack of acknowledgement suggested their role as parents was not valued.

Jodi: I still have issues with some of the teachers. I don’t … still like they’re, what they have to say and everything and how they teach. A few of the teachers in that school. But … it’s far and few like, you know, that I have problems with. I mean I just don’t like their attitude and, you know, you run into a few teachers’ attitudes that they’re the almighty and you know. So that I don’t like. I mean … you can get interviews quite well. Like, um, easy, but I don’t … always like what they have to say.

Maria: Sometimes teachers they have more power than moms. My kids sometimes told me, but Mr. French told me to do this. And I say, well, yeah, Mr. French, but I’m your mom and I say you do this. I’m not saying that Mr. French is wrong but please do this and, you know, things like that. One time he brought me his first test. And before signing I told him, OK, we need to review, and you need to see where you’re making mistake. And he got so upset and he said, but my teacher didn’t say so. So you just need to sign it. (Laughs) I said, no, my son. I said, we’re gonna review so you will learn where you fail, and after I will sign it for you. And we got into pretty much in discussion about that. But that’s what his teacher said, just sign it. Tell your mom to sign it.

Marshal: So, I’ll give you a blunt statement which is that, we’re on the third principal that I’ve seen at the school. And I’ve seen three principals at the elementary level in the city. And this particular principal I find to be very disappointing. So she’s, she seems to be in my perception, very disengaged from what’s really going on, not terribly effective in her communications and style. And so I don’t get the sense from interacting with her at the level I have that there’s much there. So I’m not sure you’re gonna have much success in changing things. Just ‘cuz I don’t think she’s altogether sharply engaged in the process.

Didi: I think that I really noticed a lot of different interactions with certain teachers and probably because they have so much more, uh, so many more students. So much more to deal with I suppose … I generally find that a lot of them, I don’t really find that a lot of them really pay particular attention to some of the things that I was asking about directly about my son. I even had one teacher not know his name. I think this was grade 8 or 9. And he didn’t have the sheet and he was you know oh, Tristan, Tristan, uh … (Laughs) I was floored. And a few other teachers in a couple of years that I’ve been, um, just where I’d ask a question. Yeah. Like no expansion of – no, like, further explanation, no, sort of helping me understand what Tristan might be able to be focused on a little bit more. And I also think that some of the teachers … can really just be … focusing on
what’s wrong. Not trying to look at the solution. And again that could be because of, you know, so many more stressor or lack of support for teachers.

- **Lack of opportunity for parents to be present**

  Not surprisingly for parents who cited opportunities to be at the school as positive because of how they fostered relationships and allowed them to be near and know their children better, the lack of opportunity to be present in secondary school was a disappointment for some parents in this study, although this was tempered with acceptance that children at this age did not necessarily want their parents to be seen at the school.

  Cynthia: I offered to help with the band trip. And I told the teacher and I let ‘em know, I was like, I’m happy to do this for you. And … he never contacted me. But I know he needs help but he also has this separate band parent committee that does certain stuff. But I … got the impression that like OK, he has enough help right now he doesn’t need my help. Yeah, for example, I used to go on field trips all the time – with my kids with elementary school. I’ve never gone on one in high school. And I know they do field trips but maybe they don’t need the same numbers of parents.

  Interviewer: Have they never sent home a request for parents to volunteer?

  Cynthia: (Pauses) I don’t think so.

  Jodi: I’ll do a field trip. I try not to do too many because the kids now don’t want their mother there. So if they’re desperate and need something, I will step in. With Dave he will help out with tournaments. And they’re going to go to LA in December so he’ll help out with driving. So, you know, I’ll help out with bake sales like when there’s baked stuff they want handed in for the teachers. I’ll do all that sort of stuff. Try not to get too involved now at the high school level because kids don’t want you there.

  When taken all together, what these positive and negative experiences seem to highlight most strongly is a desire by the parents in this study to have connections with teachers, administrators and other school staff in support of their children’s educations that are friendly, personable and reciprocal, both in general and to find solutions to problems. In practical terms, this suggests that parents would like opportunities to interact with teachers or otherwise be present at school in the secondary level in ways that are more accessible and substantial than is provided for in the current system.
What parents in this study want from involvement However, when asked directly what kind of involvement they wanted to have with schools, the parents in this study seemed very realistic about the constraints of the school system, and the unlikeliness of alteration in the system, as well as their own changed circumstances and the fact that their children’s growing independence meant a need to adapt their interactions with schools. Consequently, their responses were often simple and pragmatic, centering on being able to receive information from teachers in time to help their children if needed, although the willingness to help in schools and be present did not entirely disappear.

- **More communication/feedback**

If there was one consistent response from parents in this study, it was about the importance of communication with teachers, counsellors and administrators. Participants appreciated when the channels of communication were open and were frustrated when they seemed closed. When asked directly, almost all the participants wanted more communication with teachers and the school.

Interviewer: What would you consider to be your ideal relationship with a teacher?
Cynthia: (Pauses) Certainly to have met the teacher face-to-face. Like I think email is great but. If there’s an issue I wanna know and I wanna know before I get my child’s report card. And hopefully that teacher will contact me either by phone or email or whatever, a letter, to let me know if there’s an issue and why. ‘Cuz I want the opportunity to talk to my child about it.

Jodi: Well, I think communication is very important. And I really think that … if you see a kid struggling, you really need to step up like, within the first month and communicate with the parents. I know they’re very busy, but, I think at the beginning if you nip it then, then we can do something. Like I can get him extra help, I can get him a tutor right from the start.

Crystal: Well, you know I would really like … I think it would be really good if we could communicate with the teachers a little more. You know, that’s the one thing that is, I know, um. Sometimes it’s hard, I mean I know. I know last year the math teacher was very easy to communicate with. Like I could email her and she would email me back. This year I’ve emailed a few teachers and I’ve gotten no response. Which is very bizarre.
Because last year seemed a lot different. You know what I mean, the teachers were really good.

Laura: I would like … you know, more feedback. And, um, … parent-teacher interviews, it would be so great if they just worked better, if there was more time. You know to have … that feedback directly from a teacher. About your kid. But, uh. (Pauses) Yeah, you just don’t get that.

Interviewer: What would be great for you?
Didi: To be able to … have a little bit more of a response, or feedback or, rapport with individual teachers. And if I do send a question in a note or leave a message or have … a concern that I’d be able to stop in, like after school or if knew when a good time would be for something one-on-one.

Torin: I would think if … knowing that I could contact the teacher when I needed to or wanted to. And that I would have a response in a timely manner. … Have access to the curriculum in that course. So that I know the material that’s being taught. … Have regular sessions of feedback … well, between report cards and push like that, and actually having face-to-face kind of thing is fine. … Also knowing if there was a problem coming up. Also feeling confident that if there was a problem coming up, say interaction with another student like having a conflict with another student or…you know, whatever, if there is a problem occurring in the class that’s significant that the teacher would initiate. Initiate contacting us to let us know about that.

• More connections with teachers

While more communication and feedback about the children was seen as a basic requirement, more connection was considered ideal by some parents in this study. More connection in this case was viewed as a willingness to interact with parents beyond just providing information.

Interviewer: So you’re ideal relationship … can you sort of describe what it might look like?
Jodi: Well, I know that the teachers are very busy. I know they have lots and lots of students. I just, I mean, I really do like meeting the teachers. Scanning the face, having a chat. And, like I say, if they’re struggling I think we need to have back and forth communication by email I think works the best. I think for both I think the email is the best. And if I have to go in, I have to go in, but I think banging off a quick email I think it’s good just to touch base. It’s kind of what I, actually don’t mind doing. I mean, it’d be great to, you know, know the teachers a lot better but it’s not gonna happen in a real world. So. You know, I wish. But. It’s not gonna happen.
Didi: And I know once again, it’s not in their contract but it would be great if there were different student advisors and teachers, teachers that could be a part of that? A little bit. Directly, more directly.
Interviewer: You mean coming to meetings.
Didi: With the parents meetings and stuff. So that there was more, mmm, of a feeling about what the teachers are looking for. Why they’re doing certain things. Yeah.
Interviewer: OK. So more connection between the teachers and the parents?
Didi: Yeah.

- Opportunity for parents to be present in secondary school

Finally, while acknowledging that the role of parents needed to be different in secondary school from what parents enjoyed in elementary, several participants noted that they would appreciate the opportunity for direct involvement at the secondary school level in some way.

Interviewer: So if you found out that there was an opportunity to be involved in high school. Like to be, to volunteer in high school, would you want to do that?
Maria: I would like to. It’s good to know, how, you know, how the school is. Yeah. Because they, it allows you to see a little bit more.
Interviewer: OK. What kinds of things do you think you would wanna do in high school?
Maria: I don’t know what the opportunities can be, like you know, uh. Assisting them in the field trips. If they have field trips. Uh, if they have activities in the evening, like, you know, when they have the choir, things like that and we can volunteer as a parents. Just to get involved, right, with them.

Julieta: … in elementary I never stepped on the teacher’s feet or anything. But I felt that we were welcome, you know, that they look for us. And we were there to help them, you know, to assist them. It was not that we were … you know snooping in … but they reached out for us and we were there. So it was nice. I would love that but, but maybe it’s unnecessary.
Interviewer: You would like that in high school as well.
Julieta: Yes, yes. But I also realize that it might not be necessary.

Laura: And you know I think what works so well in elementary school was that parents were involved in the school. Right? That they could, you know, drive for field trips or you know, contribute a bunch of, you know, cupcakes for an event. So the learning was extended outside of just the classroom. And the resources of the school. And I really think that’s what Westside lacks. Because they don’t use those resources. They not enabled to use those resources, I guess too much. Well, it’s not set up to. So it’s easier not to start. (Laughs)

In summation, judging from what the parents in this study highlighted as being positive and negative experiences as well as from what they directly said they would like in terms of
connections with the schools, it appears that the results of this study support the literature on collaborative parental involvement models (CPI) which suggests that relationships with teachers, administrators and other school personnel are very important to parents to support education for their children. This makes sense for the parents in this study in particular due to their expressed beliefs about education. Through friendly, personal relationships, parents were able to make connections and provide support to encourage activities which fostered a love of learning in their children, and sometimes skills or subjects that enhanced their children’s strengths. Through timely, back-and-forth communication when there were problems, parents were able to ensure children’s core skills were developing, as well as keep them on track to post-secondary.

Considering these benefits, it made sense that parents remained open, even willing, despite their changed work-life situations, to continue to be present in secondary schools in ways that were more hands-on, as they had been in elementary school, if the opportunity was given, as this would offer a further contribution to building relationships with and for the benefit of their children.

To help compare the literature on CPI with what was learned from parents’ experiences as well as what they directly said they want regarding connections with secondary schools, I have created a table (below):
Table 4
How Parents in this Study Would Ideally Like to Be Connected to Schools to Support their Children's Educations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desired connections with schools revealed by parents’ positive and negative experiences trying to connect</th>
<th>Connections with schools asked for by parents</th>
<th>Correlation to CPI models – What is necessary for parent-school partnerships to succeed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friendly personal contacts with teachers (as opposed to the current frequent difficulty connecting with teachers)</td>
<td>More connections and relationships with teachers</td>
<td>Deep relationships between parents and teachers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers and administrators spending time to address issues (rather than the current frequent situation of lack of communication and support)</td>
<td>More and timelier communication from teachers and the school</td>
<td>Parents and teachers must share knowledge about the child and make decisions jointly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities to be present at secondary school (rather than the present reduced opportunities)</td>
<td>Opportunity to be present</td>
<td>Parents, teachers and students should work together in shared projects to build understanding and demonstrate collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being acknowledged (rather than often feeling not listened to or that parent input is not valued)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Relationships characterized by mutual respect and recognizing what the other has to offer</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The last line in this table bears some examination, as CPI models notably place more emphasis on acknowledging and honoring the knowledge parents have about their children than do TPI and FPI models. For example, in the model proposed by Phadraig, teachers need to regard parents as competent people who have “valuable insights into their children’s lives” (2005). Similarly, in the Canadian study by Pushor and Murphy, it was emphasized that schooling needs to “reflect and build from knowledge and practice of communities, cultures and families that comprise the school” (2004, p. 233). In Elias et al. (2007), it was acknowledged that the role of parents was not an extension of the school’s role, but to help their child “find and develop her competencies” and to become confident and not get overwhelmed (p. 547). This is
relevant because parents in my study seemed to be actively striving throughout their children’s lives to have knowledge of them, and to use that knowledge to maximize their children’s strengths through supporting their interests, supplying resources to further their development, and providing help to overcome their weaknesses. Though they did not openly ask to have this knowledge recognized, they were pleased when it was. Findings such as these provide possible direction for moving forward with parent involvement in the school system, though in a changed manner from the current, most common iterations that PI is found. I will provide detailed recommendations in the next and final chapter in my thesis: Conclusions and Recommendations.
Conclusions and Recommendations

Summary of Research Findings

Several findings resulted from the creation and validation of the Lived-Experience Description of PI from Parents’ Point of View, as well as from the Key Features of PI description and the further analysis of the experiences and views of parents in this study. A major finding is that these parents regard education for their children from a broad standpoint, primarily in terms of developing children toward life goals. The four components of education mentioned consistently by the research participants include developing their children’s love of learning, interests and strengths, core academic skills, and practical and life skills. Achieving education through these components was seen to provide children with direction in life, as well as the skills to survive, which would allow them to have choice about jobs or careers and ultimately, to find fulfillment and happiness. Formal schooling was seen to contribute to the four components, and also to provide a credential to allow children entry to post-secondary education or training, and was clearly valued by the research participants.

The next major finding from this study was specifically related to PI. The parents in this study expressed their perspective of involvement as being present for children, physically (in person and through resources), emotionally (listening to children’s stories and troubles), and in spirit (through ensuring children feel cared for and supported). This definition of PI from the point of view of parents is very different than the definitions generally found in literature and how PI is operationalized in schools (traditional PI and formalized PI), in which PI utilizes parents as resources to further school goals. By contrast, being present puts children and their individual development at the centre of involvement activities for parents. These two major findings about education and PI were strongly represented in the phenomenological descriptions of PI.
The last major finding from this study concerns how these two beliefs about education and PI impacted on how the participants actually connected with schools, as well as how they wanted to connect particularly in the changed circumstance of secondary school. Specifically, the parents in this study seemed to connect with schools when the activities they could participate in, such as accompanying children on field trips or helping with events such as sports days and science fairs, contributed towards either their beliefs about education or the opportunity to be present for their children, with their strongest connections mostly occurring when their children were in elementary school. Those more frequent connections also resulted in, at least from these participants’ point of view, much deeper and more satisfying relationships with teachers and other school personnel than they were able to develop during secondary schooling. A desire for deeper relationships reflects a key feature of PI identified in the phenomenological analysis of the research data: that parents develop and maintain relationships with people connected to their children in order to support their children.

In contrast, when opportunities to connect changed in secondary school, focusing more on parent advisory and other formal committees and offering less opportunity to interact with students and teachers, parents’ connections also lessened, in some cases to only a troubleshooting function. This decline in connecting with schools was contrary to what the data from this study on parents’ positive and negative experiences suggested they want, as well as what the parents themselves stated they want, from involvement: if it could be arranged, the parents in this study wanted more communication and connections with teachers in secondary school than is currently available, a finding which is in alignment with these parents’ enduring beliefs about PI and the value of schooling to their children’s educations. Some parents in this study even suggested they were willing, if opportunities were available, to volunteer in
secondary schools despite their changed work-life situations, in order to be present for their children and build connections.

Hopefully these three major findings, coupled with the Lived-Experience Description of PI from Parents’ Point of View and the Key Features of PI for Parents description, will contribute to a better understanding of some parents’ decisions and actions around connecting with schools. A deeper understanding of parents’ lifeworlds with regard to PI has the potential to make educational leaders, including administrators and parent leaders in PACs and other parent committees, more empathetic toward this major stakeholder in the education system, which can only help with finding thoughtful and respectful solutions when there are issues. A deeper understanding of parents’ lived-experience of PI might also help lessen the parent-deficit attitude that sometimes emerges around parents who aren’t involved in traditional and formalized ways and therefore aren’t visible in the school system, which is that if parents aren’t at school, it means they don’t care about their children (Crozier, 1998 & 1999; Doucet, 2011; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Lareau, 1987; Pushor & Murphy, 2004; Todd & Higgins, 1998). This is an attitude that I myself have heard from other parents as well as from teachers and administrators (although usually phrased positively as “you’re here, you’re the ones who care”), and one that I would hope through this research to change.

**Conclusions Based on the Research**

I believe the findings from this study about parents’ lived experiences of PI as well as their beliefs about education for their children and how they want to connect with schools are significant because they challenge some of the basic notions that underlie PI efforts by school systems and even parent organizations. As noted in the previous chapter, examining opportunities for involvement suggested in literature and operationalized in school systems, the basic underlying assumption of most current PI programs is that parents should be involved in

However, this study suggests that some parents, such as the participants in this study, may regard the purpose of involvement very differently – to be present for their children, rather than to ensure that school-determined goals for student outcomes are met. In addition, some parents may have broader educational goals for their children of which being successful in elementary and secondary schooling is only one part – a highly important and valued part because of its relation to post-secondary, but still only one part. Such parents may not prioritize spending time, energy and resources on being involved in schools if they perceive that they are more needed on other parts of their larger goals for their children (for example, by being involved in children’s extracurricular events, by being at home for children, etc.), or if they perceive that schooling is not being successful in contributing towards their larger goals (for example, if schools are not developing children’s core skills or individual skills enough).

From a purely status quo perspective, then, if the findings of this study are valid on a broad level, beyond the ten parents who participated in this study, they have implications for the continuance of the PI offerings currently available and dominant in school systems such as the BC school system (http://www.gov.bc.ca/bced; http://www.vsb.bc.ca/). If such school systems truly want to encourage PI for parents, they would need to approach involvement opportunities differently to better meet parents’ objectives, particularly at the secondary school level where the decline in PI is so notable (Brannon, 2007; Gonzalez-DeHaas & Willems, 2003). For example, recognizing that parents want more connection and communication with teachers in secondary school, the system would need to adapt and change in order for teachers to have time to provide this connection. This likely means reducing the number of students each secondary school teacher is responsible for and allocating more time and opportunity for parent-teacher interviews.
Considering parents’ views of what constitutes education, particularly the focus on core academic skills and practical life skills, a school system which wanted to attract more parent support might want to re-examine some of its curricula to see if its outcomes can be in more alignment with what some parents are striving to accomplish for their children with tutors and extracurricular studies.

Finally from a status quo perspective, given the emphasis placed on *being present* for their children by the parents in this study, the school system would need to consider teenager-friendly ways that parents could be more welcomed into secondary school than are currently offered. Given my own experience as a parent leader, as well as the recognition by the parent participants in this study of the already overwhelmed schedules of school personnel, welcoming and including parents would need to be a structured and supported effort by the school system and not just an additional responsibility downloaded to busy administrators and “accounted for” in a school plan. Rather, actual planning and connection time would need to be allocated to administrators to communicate to parents that their presence is, in fact, valued, and then to develop and maintain parent partnerships in the school.

**The Main Conclusion: Changing PI Discourse**

Beyond simply maintaining the status quo, however, I believe the findings of this research, if shown to be valid in a larger context, have broader implications for the institution of parental involvement in schooling. The main conclusion I draw from my findings is that discourse itself around PI needs to change. Considering the perspective of PI of parents in this study, and given parents’ enduring and responsible positions in their children’s lives, I believe that instead of regarding parents as resources to help schools, educators at all levels need to consider that, in fact, schools are better thought of as resources to help parents in achieving education for their children. For parents, PI represents parental agency for their children, which
is a view that must be carefully and completely differentiated from the “parent as consumer”
transactional view of PI that has already emerged in some arenas putting parents and teachers in
competition for power and influence (Goldring & Bauch, 1994, p.49). Rather, parental agency
puts children’s needs at the center of schooling, with both parents and educators striving together
to maximize experiences and resources for each individual child.

If this deduction is accepted, discourse around parental involvement would need to shift
from its focus on identifying and addressing barriers for parents to engage in traditional or
formalized involvement activities to help schools and to help children succeed at tasks set by
schools, to instead considering how school systems, schools and teachers might actually
participate with families in achieving their goals for their children. This, of course, would mean
not just a shift in attitude and approach to parents although that would be necessary. But more
so, changing PI discourse to speak of PI as the parents in this study speak of PI means
identifying barriers in the school system to educators actually engaging with parents, and deeply
changing structures from what are currently in place, particularly in secondary school, to better
enable schools to address the four components of education identified by parents, and to enable
educators to have, not just more communication and connection with parents, but more personal,
friendly and reciprocal relationships with parents. From the experiences related by parents in
this study, large class sizes, multiple teachers per child per year, and standardized courses for
graduation are not deeply conducive to developing a child’s love of learning, core skills,
practical and life skills, nor his or her individual interests and strengths, and certainly not
conducive to developing collaborative relationships between parents and educators. Changing PI
discourse means moving away from secondary schooling being operationalized as mainly a
means to a credential for post-secondary schooling for students, to being more of a direct
contributor and support to the outcomes parents are trying to achieve for children. Which, it must
be noted, may be less of a “new” direction for PI than a return to its deep roots in the original goal of forming school-family partnerships proposed by Joyce Epstein in 1995.

**The BC Context for Collaborative Parent-School Partnerships**

Considering the main conclusion, then, if the views of the parents in this study were more widely validated, the most significant implication of this study is for the BC Ministry of Education’s current BCED Plan to have parents working in partnership with teachers and schools on individualized learning for students. If this is not just semantics, with “partnership” substituting for either reinforcing at home what is taught in school, or providing oversight to teachers and schools on student outcomes – if, for example, the intention is to move to a collaborative PI model with significant resources to enable more connection time between educators and parents being an integral part of the Plan - then the BCED Plan for individualized learning might have some merit for working toward some of the change the parents in this study suggested they want. This suggests that more attention by parents and educators both should be given to the BCED Plan, which was launched in October 2011 but has yet to release a timeline or details for implementation, in order to discover if it is indeed a model to be championed or can at least be a starting point for change. I will address this further below.

**Recommendations**

Focusing mostly on the main conclusion of this study although also contributing to the status quo conclusions, my recommendations to educational leaders and researchers first involve addressing some of the limitations of this study identified at the end of the third chapter in order to further validate the study’s findings, and then suggest directions for change.

1. **Explore a wider demographic of parents, as well as parents’ views of student achievement.**

   This means first of all conducting another study of parents’ views and experiences connecting to the school system with a larger and wider demographic group of parents across
multiple school systems. This follow-up study would need to include smaller communities in BC, and would also need to find creative ways to attract those parents who are truly invisible in the school system. One of the goals of the follow-up study would be to further validate the Lived-Experience Description of PI for Parents, or to make adjustments to it in order to have it resonate with the larger parent participant sample. Ideally this study would be able to incorporate an exploration of the term “student achievement” from parents’ point of view, as student achievement in the PI literature often links to variables such as test scores and grades (Catsambis, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Rogers et al., 2009), which may not, given the beliefs about education held by parents in this study, be parents’ main idea of achievement. If the follow-up study on PI could not incorporate an exploration of “student achievement,” I would recommend this to be a separate study as its results would be worthwhile on their own.

2. Conduct a policy review of the parents’ role in the BCED Plan. Given the conclusion of this study around the possibilities of the BCED Plan as a CPI model supporting individualized learning for children in BC, it seems logical that the next recommendation would be to seek more information and clarification on the Plan’s proposed structures. However, while more details of the Plan would be revealing of the government’s intentions, depending on the findings (if, for example, “partnership” were only found to be a new form of parent oversight on teachers), having this information would not necessarily herald the start of the BC school system down the path toward CPI. My second recommendation, therefore, is for a more thorough exploration of the proposed parents’ role in the BCED Plan through a policy review. For example, what was the input from various stakeholders to the Plan – what beliefs about PI underpinned the use of the term “partnership?” Assuming parents were originally consulted to frame the Plan, how does that data compare to the results from this study? A policy review of the parents’ role in the BCED Plan would determine if the
proposed structures of the Plan truly meet the needs of parents in BC or if, in fact, changes to the proposed Plan are needed to achieve that goal.

3. **Move toward a collaborative model of PI for BC.** Considering the findings from this study on some parents’ negative experiences connecting or trying to connect with the school system in their children’s secondary years, it would seem that simply continuing with current PI models and maintaining the status quo for parents is not a truly viable option. Some change is clearly needed. My main recommendation resulting from this research and my now deeper understanding of parents’ views of involvement, at least the parents in this study, is therefore that the schooling system in BC should consider working toward achieving a more collaborative model of PI between parents and schools. More than the current traditional and formalized PI opportunities that are provided to BC parents, collaborative PI would seem to better address the outcomes that parents, at least in these demographics, seem to be striving to achieve for their children. Specifically from the literature (Elias et al., 2007; Hargreaves & Lasky, 2004; Phadraig, 2005; Price-Mitchell, 2009; Pushor & Murphy, 2004), CPI considers the broader education of the child rather than focusing only on the academic outcomes of schooling, while also regarding the child as an individual in terms of interests and needs; CPI acknowledges that parents have goals for children, which reframes PI as parental agency for children; and finally, CPI dictates that parents and teachers need to regard each other and work as equals on behalf of the child. Working toward CPI would thus also be completely in harmony with implementing the change in PI discourse suggested as the main conclusion of this research; the alignment of findings from this study about parents’ beliefs of PI with CPI models further demonstrates that such a change in PI discourse is key for a true parent-school partnership to emerge. As a step toward fulfilling this main recommendation, I further recommend conducting more research on the impacts of a truly
collaborative PI model, particularly on other stakeholders in the schooling system such as teachers, administrators, and students, with a view to developing strategies and structures necessary for CPI to find acceptance from all parties. Depending on the results of the suggested policy review in my second recommendation, and any actions subsequently taken to address shortcomings in meeting parents’ needs, the BCED Plan could provide a framework on which to build a collaborative PI model for BC, and should also be explored for this potential.

4. **Shift the focus of PI discourse to outcomes for students.** Given the ultimate objectives of parents in this study, my final recommendation actually centres on the beneficiaries of parental involvement: students. The parents in this study acknowledged the growing autonomy of their teenage children as they entered secondary school, and wanted to ensure they respected their children’s need for more independence and distance from their parents while at the same time *remaining present* in their lives and continuing to provide resources and guidance to help them succeed. From my own experience as a parent, and also from what I have seen and had disclosed to me as a parent leader, this is often a basic struggle for families as their children enter secondary school. After all, the goal of raising children is to enable them to be independent adults but in the modern age with its sense of increased threats to children’s safety and well-being (Elias et al., 2007; Guppy & Davies, 1999; Stelmach & von Wolff, 2010), it often seems harder to know when to step up and when to step back. The parents in this study view PI as agency for their children’s educations, but have awareness that at some point, the agency must fall more with children than with parents. I would therefore recommend research directly with students themselves to uncover their lived experiences of navigating schools and becoming educated. The point of this research would be to enable a greater understanding of how they view both their own and their parents’ roles
in their education, as well as the influence or impact of their relationships with teachers, and what their own goals for education might be. Such understanding would help parents and educators approach a collaborative partnership with better understanding of when and how to turn the agency for their education over to students, so that students are both supported and empowered. Ultimately, the parents in this study engage in PI – traditional, formalized or as they characterize it as being present – in order to support their children in finding for themselves “a good life.” It therefore only seems fitting to ensure that students themselves have a voice in PI discourse.

**Final Thoughts**

In my introduction to this thesis, I raised several personal questions that I had never been asked nor addressed on my own in fifteen years as a parent highly involved in schools in mostly traditional and formalized ways: Why am I so involved? What do I expect my involvement to do for my children? And, as a parent leader as I have been, what do my expectations – consciously or unconsciously – then lead me to want or expect from other parents? To conclude this thesis, I would like to briefly address these questions now, based on the insight and understanding I feel I have gained through my research and a changed conceptualization of PI in general.

When thinking back now on why I was so involved, I believe my motivations encompassed many of the reasons captured in literature, as well as echoing the beliefs of the parents in this study. First and foremost, I believe my involvement reflected a desire to be present for my children, for them to see and know that what they were doing in their lives was important to me, and for me to be physically near them at least occasionally in their days at school. My sons’ education was and is of utmost importance to me, and supporting them in being successful in school was a priority in order for them to have opportunities for both post-secondary education and personally fulfilling careers. Although I had not previously outlined it
the way it ended up being expressed in this study, the four components of education identified by
the parents in this study resonate strongly with me, as does the role of schooling in education.
My own definition of “a good life” for my sons is for them to find what their gift to the world is
– their strength or talent - and to do this with all of their hearts. I do also feel that some of my
heavy involvement, particularly in my sons’ elementary years, was prompted by the school
community – both a sense of need by the community, and feeling of gratification I received from
being able to contribute to that need. In other words, I believe my involvement began as being
centered on my sons, but grew outward to encompass the educations of their peers and other
children in the school.

From this I believe I can say that I expected, or hoped at least, that my involvement
would contribute both directly to my own children’s success at school, as well as to an
enrichment of the school environment for all the children. In particular, knowing my son’s
teachers and the school administration through involvement allowed me a venue to discuss issues
and suggest solutions that I felt otherwise might not have been listened to. Which is not to say
that I viewed my involvement as transactional or power-related, either from my perspective or, I
believe, from the perspectives of the educators with whom I interacted. But that I was always
aware that relationships are the basis of negotiation – with a relationship, I was more likely to be
understood as well as to understand the other’s point of view.

Because of this awareness of the importance of relationships both with my children and
with people connected to them, when my sons entered secondary school, I know I felt, as
expressed by some of the parents in this study, a real sense of disappointment at the dramatically
reduced connection opportunities available to parents. As a parent, although I was always
encouraged to attend parent information events, I definitely did not feel welcomed to be part of
my sons’ experiences in secondary school. I therefore believe my involvement in secondary
school was sustained more by a hope of contributing to the larger school environment than by my still active desire to be present for my sons. As noted by this research, this lack of opportunity for personal connections, I think helps to explain at least in part the steep decline in parental involvement in secondary schooling by so many parents (Brannon, 2007; Gonzalez-DeHaas & Willems, 2003): if their primary motivation is to be present for their children, being reduced to participating in a Parent Advisory Council or School Planning Council is unlikely to meet their needs.

In my own lived-experience description of involvement in the Research Design and Methodology section, I expressed curiosity about the whereabouts of all the parents who were not visible in school, at least through the events arranged for parents, even though I had already developed a sense of where some of them might be (validated by the research on parents motivations and barriers to involvement [Hornby & Lafaele, 2011; Walker et al., 2010]) and some empathy for their situations. However, ultimately I expected that parents should, as I had, find energy and make time for involvement for the sake of their children. As noted at the end of my lived-experience description, my previous conceptualization of parental involvement was thus mostly in line with that of TPI: PI was a strategy to help the school system achieve its goals for my children and others and was therefore a parental responsibility to support.

Following my research into parental involvement, however, I now better understand that parents likely are finding energy and making time for involvement with their children even when they aren’t visible in schools. Whereas I continued to be involved in traditional and formalized ways hoping to contribute to the overall educational environment, I know my own desires to be present for my children were not met and had to be satisfied through extracurricular and other means. I believe now that this is likely where many of the absent parents are – being present for their children at home or through extracurricular activities. In my final months in the public
school system as an involved parent, I believe this understanding did change my approach somewhat to educational leadership opportunities. For example, when receiving input from PAC and the school administration that a committee I was leading should just go ahead and make decisions based solely on the majority of the limited parent response to a survey we had launched, I instead reminded the committee that our duty was to represent all the families in the school, not just the ones with the loudest voices.

Further, understanding now that the main goal of TPI is primarily to help children do better in schools, and the goals of FPI are to provide input but mostly oversight to the school system, I would say my conceptualization of PI in general has also changed. Rather than viewing PI as a responsibility of parents and therefore a strategy more parents need to adopt as their own, I now recognize PI as promoted and operationalized in schools as mainly an external pressure to utilize parents as resources without considering their primary positions in the educations of their children, and without, therefore, a mechanism to help parents’ meet their own goals for their children (by helping them to become educated in a broader sense as a foundation to finding individualized success after secondary graduation) and with their children (by providing ongoing, age-appropriate and meaningful ways for parents to be present to support their children). I now consider that PI is part of a larger and more individualized strategy that parents adopt in supporting children toward thriving in adulthood, and conceptualize PI as a form of parental agency for children.

Taking into account this changed perception, what I would want from other parents now, particularly from parent leaders, is for them to approach being involved with a greater understanding of their own motivations as well as greater empathy for the parents who are not visible. I recognize that not every parent when faced with a reduced ability to support their own goals for their children will be interested in supporting - or able to prioritize time and energy to
support - the larger educational environment as I did. But this does not mean that these “absent” parents do not care about education or are not present for their children. In fact, I suspect they do care and are present but in ways not currently valued by the school system or even necessarily other parents.

In summary, reflecting on the journey taken through my research and what I have personally learned, I believe I would now approach the idea of education very differently than when I began. Then as now I recognize that government, teachers, administrators and parents all have goals or desired outcomes that they hope are realized for children by their actions. Broadly stated, governments want students to become productive citizens, capable of participating gainfully in society and growing the economy. Teachers want children to learn particular knowledge and skills, and to be and feel successful and empowered in their classes. Administrators also want children to be successful through completing credits and earning a credential. And the parents in my study want children to find a particular place for themselves in the world, with “particular” meaning the best possible place for them as individuals based on their interests and strengths, the place that will ultimately bring personal satisfaction and fulfillment without neglecting their physical needs to survive.

What my research has crystalized for me is that, even though PI discourse needs to change and the enduring position of parents in a child’s education needs to be better reflected and recognized, helping a child to become educated is actually not a function of only one of these actions or even the sole responsibility of any one of these actors. Rather the process of education or becoming educated is better conceptualized as a conversation amongst all the players, including the intended beneficiaries of the discussion: students.

Looking at the current landscape of education, however, at least in BC, what we have is a vast and largely mechanical system for schooling children that is engineered and run by only
some of the players noted above. It is a system that can be said to work well on some levels but not at all on others, with many of the actors striving against each other for prominence and creating, rather than conversation, a cacophony of shouted soliloquies. From the evidence in this research, the current part for parents in the BC schooling system is peripheral at best: certainly as externals, whether to provide support and resources, or as quality control. The part for students may be even more contained: that of muted receptacles, occasionally solicited for inspiring sound bites or visuals and then firmly shut back in the classroom.

However, to be perfectly clear, the point I am making is not simply that parents’ or students’ voices need to be added to the discordance over schooling (though they are missing and do need to be added, hopefully not discordantly). Nor am I suggesting that parents’ or students’ positions in the broader scheme of education or becoming educated should somehow diminish the status or nullify the goals of other players. Bringing parents and students up does not, to me, mean bringing government, teachers and administrators down. Rather the point I am making is that if the process of education or becoming educated is best regarded as a conversation then parents and students need to take their rightful places at the schooling table where the conversation should be happening - and not as occasional consultants but every day, as regular and expected participants.

The parents in this study certainly recognized that schooling plays or can play an important part of a child becoming educated in the way that they defined education: through school, children can develop a love of learning, discover interests and develop strengths, learn foundational or core academic skills, and also practical skills for life. These parents are present in their children’s lives in the hours outside of school to assist them in becoming educated, and they want opportunities to be present in schools for the same reason: they want to build relationships with teachers and administrators, to talk with them about who their children are and
what they are learning, and to work with them to ensure their children’s needs are met. In other words, these parents are striving to be part of the education conversation. Yet the set-up of the current BC schooling system not only does not enable their presence, it clearly, whether intentionally or as a result of other pressures, blocks them. (See Figure 5, The Education Conversation, next page.) Without recognition of the value of all the agents of a child’s education, including parents and students themselves, and without some fundamental changes to the schooling system to allow time and space for meaningful conversation between these agents to take place, it is hard to imagine how the education situation in BC could improve. But from my research, this is the direction in which I would want to work as an educational leader.
Figure 5 The Education Conversation
References


http://www.bcedplan.ca/assets/pdf/bc_edu_plan.pdf on February 9, 2012


