

6. THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES

Antoinette Gagne: The role of the teacher varies in different cultures, in some cultures the teacher has a parental role in their students life and has the authority to guide and discipline the child just as a parent would do in the Canadian context. Newcomer parents may not know the role of their child's teacher and their expectations may differ depending on their country of origin and cultural background. It is commonly believed that in order to communicate successfully all we need is to speak the same language that is not always the case as is illustrated by this parent.

Arabic Speaking Parent: We seem to go back again to the same issue: communication. All the relationship, the give and take, the question and answer - not the language. I never had a problem with the language. I speak French. I am able to manage everywhere. But my problem is the clash of civilizations; because in my culture you don't question a teacher. You don't question it: he is like a prophet. He or she will always do what is right. And he knows more than you do, always for the best interest of your child. But here when we saw things that required us to ask, we did not ask. You just submit. Maybe that's a huge part why the parents don't often visit to ask. They submit, believing that these people know what is in the best interest of our child, for sure.

Antoinette Gagne: The role of the teacher changes in every culture. In some cultures the job of the teacher goes beyond the school walls. Teachers are one of the most important members in the community and highly respected.

Arabic Speaking Parent: In our society, the teacher holds a special place. The poet, Ahmad Shawky says "Rise to the teacher and salute him. The teacher is almost a messenger from God." The teacher in our culture is like a prophet, and a prophet is the medium through which you teach principles, whether etiquette or academic or even religious. When we arrived in Canada, we realized that this image of the teacher did not exist. Maybe it's a positive thing because the Canadian culture is different from the one we came from, but maybe it is negative in some points. This is why in order to avoid losing the future and not to go back to the period of seventeen years ago, in my opinion, if there is a meeting it could be monthly between the teachers and the parents or the guardians. Even if it were for a short time, to just focus on specific points, so that these problems do not get repeated in the future. And this way, at least, the new arrivals get to benefit from that.

Antoinette Gagne: Being such an important figure in the community places a lot of responsibility on teachers. In Somalia, when a child sets foot in the classroom the teacher becomes the child's parent.

Somali Speaking Parent: The teacher's role here is not the same as the teachers' roles in Somalia. I believe that the teacher in Somalia usually plays the parent and the teacher role at the same time. But the teachers in Canada play only the role of the teacher and that is not the same as the roles we used to expect from back home teachers. It is a very difficult situation and getting used to it is also difficult. However if you get more involved and have kids in the system you will learn more. You will realize that the teachers in Somalia and the teachers here are not the same.

Antoinette Gagne: From these parents' point of view, teachers do not only teach they also educate students in the broader students of the word. The teacher's job is to develop the child both cognitively and socially.

Arabic Speaking Parent: The teachers here are very professional. But there are differences between them and us, there's no question about that. Here, they are to teach our kids sciences, not to raise them. In our country, a teacher is a guardian in place of the parents as well as being a teacher. Here, not so, morals and values are our duties at home, not the teacher's; and the school - teachers teach them empirical facts- Sciences.

Antoinette Gagne: Some parents expect teachers to influence their child's behaviour.

Caribbean Community Parent: I think because of the ... like in Jamaica ... So I find like, probably you'll find quite a few of them changed now, but when I was there they were well disciplined.

Antoinette Gagne: So could you elaborate maybe on what you mean by well disciplined?

Caribbean Community Parent: You would never find a student talking back to a teacher. If the teacher says sit, the child sits, and if they're supposed to dress a certain way, they are. And I think it's much easier there because they know their punishments, because the teachers... it's like a second parent to the kids in Jamaica. But up here they know, all they'll do is send them home for a day or two and that's it. So I have to really, like I know if I didn't really hold on to my daughter she would get out of hand, like talking back and things like that, which I know in Jamaica they couldn't do that. First, I must make this clear though, I'm not saying all the kids in Canada are like that, but I'm saying it's easier for them to get out of hand because they know their punishment is just simple. But back home they don't want to put up with that everyday, so really they are very disciplined in school.

Antoinette Gagne: Some teachers in Canada are aware of these expectations and accept this challenge.

Educator: I think a lot of it too depends on the education the parents had back home, because the more educated the parents, the more they know what to expect and they'll come in more often.

Educator: I think the parents, many, many in the Somali population as I know, I meet more mothers than I do fathers, and I'm not sure... I know that they want their kids to be successful, I know that for sure they just...

Antoinette Gagne: Parents are concerned about their children's learning, it's important to know what parents think about their child's teacher's performance. Listening to both positive and negative comments is necessary.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: However, on the other hand, there is something I don't like. In China the children are pushed too much, but here in Canada there is no push at all. If you don't like studying, it is OK as long as you are happy. I don't like this. I don't like the two extremes. Only if

we can learn from both and do something in between.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: Now they have only one teacher who is with the class all day long. The teacher is along with the class for 5 days. So she or he must be very tired and they cannot take care of the individual needs of each child. So all he or she can do is to tell you every child is perfect. Good. Great. He or she always says something good.

Russian Speaking Parent: We have gone through the Russian school where teacher activists were fighting for their students to be the greatest. I am talking about good teachers. Here teachers do a job, working conditions of which they are secured, heavily secured by the teachers' union. Their job consists precisely in making the student attain the expected level. The student passes - that's it, full stop, period. The rest doesn't interest them.

Mandarin Speaking Parent: From my observation and my contact with the teacher here, I find their teaching style here is completely different from the traditional style we had in China. Look at their young teachers. They look like they are in their twenties and have little teaching experience. They've learned something very new and modern. They are very energetic. They have a very uplifting positive influence on the children, which was not part of our education as parents in China.

Antoinette Gagne: Parents expect teachers to be role models for their children. Some parents also feel that school administrators should be role models for teachers. Administrators have a crucial role in setting the tone of their school and in how welcome parents feel at the school.

Somali Speaking Parent: Yes that changed a lot, because there was a good relationship established between parents, the principal and the community. When the teacher realized that the principal is welcoming and respecting parents, they also started to respect us. So the principal plays a key role. If the principal is a good one there will be good relationship between the teachers and parents. If the principal is a bad one who ignores the parents and does not welcome the parents, the teachers will also behave like the principal. So I believe that the principal is a key part in the triangle relationship of the teachers, parents and the school.

Antoinette Gagne: Canadian cities have a rich variety of cultures, Toronto is one of the most diverse societies in North America. Once can easily find more than 50 languages and cultures present on the school grounds, some parents expect this diversity to be reflected in the school personnel and are disappointed when this is not the case.

Somali Speaking Parent: Although in some schools the number of the Somali students is higher than the other newcomers, but still you see a couple of immigrant teachers in the schools. Although we are more in number you will not see one Somali teacher in the schools. So other immigrant students have someone who went through the system, understands the system, understands the back home culture and this culture and knows the expectations on the children and can bring all this information together. Before the parents get involved these teachers can be at least interpreters for the students and act as role models. Our children do not have role models in the schools; we are new and have many other problems. So I would suggest that the TDSB

should look where the number of the Somali children is high and hire Somali teachers. We have now some Somali teachers who have done their education here and take over, even if it is one or two these chances should be given and they can be role models for our children before parents and interpreters get involved, the teacher can solve many of the problems.

Antoinette Gagne: In some schools there might be a particular culture that's more predominant. For instance, some school may have a large population of Urdu speaking children, while others may have a large number of Somali speaking students. Parents then expect to see teachers from these cultures in their classrooms due to several reasons.

Somali Speaking Parent: The school has to hire Somali speaking staff, who know the culture and can also interpret for the school staff and administrators and the parents. They should hire Somali teachers who can be a role model for the children. If all that a child sees is always white teachers he will have a different feeling, but when he sees black teachers no matter if they are Somalis or other black teachers the student will have good feeling. So the schools have to hire black teachers so the kids can feel proud and raise their self-esteem.

Antoinette Gagne: Parents have seen great results when teachers who share their culture and language are part of the staff.

Somali Speaking Parent: The middle school that my daughter is attending now, there is a new Somali teacher. The children are very happy about it. They say, we have a Somali teacher now and they are very happy about it. The kids are much happier this year because of the Somali teacher. It is important that the children see someone from their community working there as teachers.

Antoinette Gagne: Many teachers try to reach out to parents, they are aware of the different challenges many parents are dealing with and are careful as to how they deliver bad news.

Educator: When I phone home with the parents, especially the ones that are struggling academically I'm very sensitive to not creating lots of upset because, at home, because the child's having so much difficulty I try to tell them what their options are, what we're doing to support them. Like, I make a plan ahead of time, I present it to them, I say "this is what we're going to do to help them. Do you have any suggestions? Because they're having problems." So they're not just presented with something out of the blue. I can imagine that after all they've been through then hearing their child's not doing well at school it's just another, thing, for that family to deal with. And I don't want to put stress on a family that's already been stressed enough. I feel that pressure as a teacher, that I want to think about for a lot of families in this community, of how much stress there is because I know that the economic conditions aren't that great for a lot of families, a lot of families two bedroom apartments with 6 people, or more.

Educator: I think it's a lot lot easier when the children are in elementary school, in high school there's such a... there's often not that much communication between child and parent. Sometimes when the school calls it's a surprise or a shock even that the child has been missing classes or has gotten into fights or so on. And I think because of the large numbers, I mean high schools are huge, and that's like a huge, a large effort has to be made on the administrations part in sort of

keeping in touch and maintaining communication with the parents and so... some try to work on it but others need to do more.

Antoinette Gagne: Communication between teachers and parents should also be about sharing good news. Sharing positive aspects may be an effective way to bring proud parents into schools.

Somali Speaking Parent: There are times when we comfortable and times when we feel less comfortable. It depends on that day's situation and the problem you have. If your child is starting the school and the school welcomes you or you are positively involved, you go to the school and feel happy. If your child is having problems you will not feel comfortable going there. So it depends on that day's situation. For me I am involved in my children's school until they go to college or university.

Antoinette Gagne: Once parents are in schools, they may learn more about the Canadian school system, teacher's roles and the different ways to get assistance.

Educator: And how have you found that the way when parents volunteer in the school, like how do think it helps them, you know, in what way do you think it helps them to be in the school to be volunteering in the school?

Educator: Well I think it's important because some of them are learning the culture and things are very different. If they're newcomers things are quite different from one country to another, the expectations are quite different. For example, one parent said to me that she, she just left the child at home alone, and she thought that was quite alright because when she was in China she always left that child alone and it was quite safe, but it's not acceptable in our community. So that's, one thing they'll learn very quickly in our school, we have a lot of support and they learn where they can get the support if they need support, because we have an After 4 program for the children to bridge the time from when the children are dismissed from class and the time when the parents pick them up. So we have an After 4 program so it covers their safety as well as their... it helps the children get more exposure to English, because they're integrated with other children during play, they have play programs in the After 4 program. They learn to speak a little bit more English and do other activities.

Antoinette Gagne: Establishing effective communication between parents and educators requires an effort from both parties. Valuing perspectives is a must. In the long run, both parents and educators want the best for children.

Educator: And I think that hits on another point, ask parents what they want. We've asked our parents - what's important to you at a school? What's important? Well, you know, I want my kids to be respected, I want them to be treated with dignity, I want them to be safe and I want them to get an education. So once you know what it is that they want, then you come back and say, you have to constantly reexamine as a school, are you doing those things? Are you meeting the needs of your community by doing those things and providing the setting? And if your answer is no, then you need to get down to the business of how do you make that happen, because that's what

the kids and the parents are asking you for. And in a lot of cases, without the respect, the dignity, the safety, the trust, the education part doesn't take place.

Antoinette Gagne: Teachers and school administrators play a crucial role in their students' lives and have a significant impact on how comfortable parents are in communicating with their child's school. Newcomer families' cultural backgrounds and previous educational experiences influence how at ease they are in developing a relationship with their child's teacher. It is important that schools clarify to parents what the role of the teacher in Canada is and acknowledge that parent expectations extend beyond their child and include teachers as well as school administrators.