

Parent Engagement: Creating a Shared World

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Introduction

A metaphor of a “protectorate” has been used to describe the typical way in which schooling has been, and often continues to be, lived out (Pushor, 2001; Pushor & Murphy, in revision). Memmi (1965) puts forth the concept of a protectorate as a colonialist structure in which those with strength (the colonizers) take charge in order to protect those without strength (the colonized). Translating this concept in a school context, Pushor draws parallels. Educators, as holders of expert knowledge of teaching and learning, enter a community, claim the ground which is labeled ‘school,’ and design and enact policies, procedures, programs, schedules and routines for the children of the community. They often do this in isolation of parents and community members, using their “badge of difference” (p. 46), their professional education, knowledge and experience, as a rationale for their claimed position as decision-makers in the school. Educators assume this claimed position with the best of intentions – intentions to enhance student achievement and other educational outcomes, intentions to provide a safe and caring place for children, intentions to prepare children for their roles as citizens in a broader society. It is these good intentions that enable educators to act as protectors within the structure of a protectorate.

This scripted story of school is an historical one and is perpetuated by the complicitness of both educators and parents in how it is lived out. By accepting the taken-for-grantedness of their positions as protectors and protected in this structure, educators and parents reinforce, and are constrained and shaped by, the conditions imposed upon them. Yet, as they awaken to this taken-for-grantedness, they begin to imagine how to work against these constraints. Educators, recognizing the complexity of their mission and the challenges they face in realizing their intended student outcomes, seek ways to bring parents into this work. Parents, feeling marginalized by the professional boundaries drawn around the school, seek ways to establish a voice and a place for themselves on the school landscape.

Parent Involvement

Parent involvement is a common vehicle for bringing teachers and parents together in schools. Parent involvement programs “tend to be directed by the school and attempt to involve parents in school activities and/or teach parents specific skills and strategies for teaching and reinforcing school tasks at home” (Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez & Bloom, 1993, p. 85). Typically, parents are asked to serve in roles as “audience, spectators, fund raisers, aides and organizers” (McGilp & Michael, 1994, p. 2). Epstein’s well-known and comprehensive parent involvement framework (1995) reflects the roles McGilp and Michael identify as well as the parenting focus emphasized by Kellaghan et al. The six types of parental involvement she outlines in her framework include parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community. So, how does parent involvement change the scripted story of school – or does it? How does parent involvement move parents out of their position as “protected” – or does it?

Benson (1999) notes that [the word] “involvement comes from the Latin, ‘involvere,’ which means ‘to roll into’ and by extension implies wrapping up or enveloping parents somehow into the system” (p. 48). Beare (1993) adds that “the implication in the word is that the person ‘involved’ is co-opted, brought into the act by another party” (p. 207, as cited in Benson, 1999, p. 48). Parents who are “involved” serve the school’s agenda by doing the things educators ask or expect them to do – volunteering at school, parenting in

positive ways, and supporting and assisting their children at home with their schoolwork – while knowledge, voice and decision-making continue to rest with the educators (Pushor, 2001). (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, p. 12)

With parent involvement, the scripted story of school as protectorate does not change. Because the school is still setting the agenda and determining what roles parents are to play within that agenda, the hierarchical structure of educators as experts, acting in the best interests of the less-knowing parents, is maintained. With parent involvement, the focus is placed on what parents can do to help the school realize its intentioned outcomes for children, not on what the parents' hopes, dreams or intentions for their children may be or on what the school can do to help parents realize their personal or family agendas. The viewpoint seems to be one of “seek[ing] to determine what parents can do for teachers, rather than what schools can do for families” (Cairney & Munsie, 1992, p. 5).

Parent Engagement

Parent engagement, different from parent involvement, is an alternative way to bring teachers and parents together in schools, an alternative possibility for changing the scripted story of school.

“Engagement,” in comparison to involvement, comes from *en*, meaning “make,” and *gagē*, meaning “pledge” – to make a pledge (Harper, 2002), to make a moral commitment (Sykes, 1976, p. 343). The word engagement is further defined as “contact by fitting together; ... the meshing of gears” (Engagement). The implication is that the person ‘engaged’ is an integral and essential part of a process, brought into the act because of care and commitment. By extension, engagement implies enabling parents to take their place alongside educators in the schooling of their children, fitting together their knowledge of children, teaching and learning, with teachers’ knowledge. With parent engagement, possibilities are created for the structure of schooling to be flattened, power and authority to be shared by educators and parents, and the agenda being served to be mutually determined and mutually beneficial. (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, pp. 12-13)

In this changed script, there is no longer a protectorate, no longer a protector and a protected. No longer are educators entering a community to claim the ground of school. No longer are educators working alone to design and enact policies, procedures, programs, schedules and routines for the sole benefit of the children of the community. Instead, educators are entering a community to create with parents a shared world on the ground of school – a world in which “parent knowledge”¹ and teacher knowledge both inform decision-making, the determination of agendas, and the intended outcomes of their efforts for children, families, the community and the school. Both educators and parents wear badges which mark their knowing and their expertise. There is a sense of reciprocity in their mutual engagement, a sense of benefit for families and the school.

Within the Literature

While Pushor and Ruitenberg (2005) make this clear distinction between *involvement* and *engagement* and use the terms very purposefully in their writing and research, other researchers

¹ Dr. Debbie Pushor is currently engaged in a three year narrative inquiry into “parent knowledge,” funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Her research is asking the questions, What is parent knowledge? How is parent knowledge held and used?

use the terms interchangeably. While *involvement* continues to be the term predominantly used in the field, it is used to describe a wide-range of activities from communication with parents, to involvement, and at times to parental engagement in the core work of teaching and learning. It is often used as a term of comprehensive coverage which does not differentiate the type of relationship being lived out between educators and parents. The term *engagement*, while it is gaining in usage, appears still to be a less frequent descriptor. Constantino (2003) consciously adopts the word *engagement*, defining it as “the interaction between schools and families and the degree to which families are involved in the educational lives of their children” (p.5). Often though, *engagement*, like *involvement*, is used in general ways in the literature to describe activities which involve parents as well as engage them.

Further to this first differentiation, Constantino has chosen to use the word *family* in place of *parent* as “the word *family* helps to include all of those adults who play a significant role in rearing children” (p. 5). For similar reasons, Henderson and Mapp (2002) frequently use the term *family* in place of *parent*, although they use both. For Pushor and Ruitenberg, the terms are synonymous in representing primary caregivers who have responsibility and concern for children’s schooling experiences.

The result of these delineations – *involvement/engagement* and *parent/family* – is a body of literature with a multitude of sometimes undifferentiated terms: parent involvement, parent engagement, family involvement, family engagement. Determining the impact of parent engagement, in contrast to parent involvement, as a result, can be a muddy process.

What Has Been Substantiated

The body of literature on parent involvement/engagement is growing at a rapid rate. Web sites and links, online publications and yearly bibliographies abound. “There is more information on family involvement online than any one person can keep track of now” (Weiss et al, 2005, p. 1). New academic books and journal articles continue to appear. Topics in the field range from knowledge development to standards to tools to special initiatives, and cover parent involvement/engagement from preschool to secondary schooling. Annual syntheses of the research literature are being done by the National Center for Family & Community Connections with Schools, Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL), as are reviews and meta-analyses of research findings and implications (e.g. Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Jeynes, 2005) and evaluations of specific initiatives by researchers in the field (e.g. Redding et al, 2004).

The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement in school and through life. ... [T]he research continues to grow and build an ever-strengthening case. When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 7)

Specific to academics, there has been a positive link made between parent involvement/engagement and the following indicators of student achievement: higher grades and test scores (on teacher ratings, achievement, and standardized tests), enrolment in higher level programs and advanced classes, greater promotion rates, higher successful completion of classes and earned credits, lower drop-out rates, higher on-time high school graduation rates, and a greater likelihood of movement into postsecondary education (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001;

Fan & Chen, 1999; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Jeynes, 2005; Redding et al, 2004; Sui-Chu & Willms, 1996).

In relation to other educational outcomes, parent involvement/engagement has been associated with a range of indicators of school success including: regular school attendance, better social skills, improved behavior, better adaptation to school, increased social capital, a greater sense of personal competence and efficacy for learning, greater engagement in school work, and a stronger belief in the importance of education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 2005; Keith, 1999, as cited in Rous et al, 2003; Redding et al, 2004).

A critical finding that has come out of an analysis of the research is that ... parental involvement enjoys an influence that largely transcends differences in SES, race, and other factors. This is supported in the parental involvement data for racial minorities and by gender, which is encouraging in that any group can experience the advantages of parent involvement. (Jeynes, 2005, pp. 259-260)

In a land as diverse as Canada, with a significant population of Aboriginal peoples and a vast representation of cultural groups, with rural and urban communities, with a multitude of family structures, and with a portion of our families living in poverty, this is a finding of note. It tells us that engaging families in schools has the potential to serve as one means of reducing the achievement gap between discrepant student populations.

Another significant finding comes out of the bodies of research literature on high-performing schools and effective schools. Of the nine characteristics delineated as common to high-performing schools, one of the characteristics is “high levels of community and parent involvement.” This finding is consistent with the research on effective schools, which cites “home-school relations” as one of the seven correlates necessary to make a school effective (Family Friendly Schools, n.d.). Lezotte (1991), in writing of a first and second generation of effective schools research, feels there has been a shift from schools giving parents “lip service” about their involvement to an understanding that an authentic partnership requires trust and communication between educators and parents as they work toward a common goal.

As is apparent, there is a real complexity to this field of research around parents, as there are multiple characteristics or correlates in play at any one time in a school, all influencing the levels of student achievement and the attainment of other educational outcomes. There is also a broad range of approaches to bringing the worlds of parents and the worlds of schools closer together – whether through involvement or engagement. Yet, within this complexity, research is making visible some particularities which will help to guide thinking and practice in schools. Henderson and Mapp (2002) conclude that “parent and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement” (p. 38). In terms of Pushor’s and Ruitenberg’s delineations of *involvement* and *engagement*, it is parent engagement, then, that has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. Jeynes’ (2005) meta-analysis supports this conclusion. He found it was not particular parent actions, such as attending school functions, establishing household rules, or checking student homework, which yielded the statistically significant effect sizes in the research in relation to student academic achievement. Instead, it was things which created “an educationally oriented ambiance” (p. 262) – an attitude or an atmosphere which formed for the

child a sense of standards or support – which produced the strongest results. It seems that such an ambiance may be influenced more greatly by parental engagement in the core work of teaching and learning than by parental involvement in such activities as fundraising efforts or in support tasks such as photocopying.

In attending to “an educationally oriented ambiance,” it is important to look to what happens out of school, in the world of the home and community, as well as what happens in school. “What children achieve academically is the product not only of what they learn in school, but of a wide variety of factors, including home and neighborhood influences, and social and economic conditions” (Rothstein, 2005). Knowing this, “there is much more to attend to both within and outside of the boundaries of the school’s agenda of student achievement” (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, p. 14)

– such things as the difference culturally appropriate programming makes to school attendance and participation, and to positive identity formation for both students and their parents; the influence of adult education classes on student engagement and retention and on parental success and well-being; the provision of easy and open access to computers, internet, newspapers and resources in enhancing both school and home literacies; and the provision of opportunity for voice, for sharing “personal practical knowledge,” (Clandinin, 1986; Clandinin & Connelly, 1986, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985, 1988, 1999) for influencing decisions of personal, family, and community consequence in strengthening students’ and parents’ sense of personal power and autonomy. (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, pp. 14-15)

Attending to children, in the context of their families and communities, has much greater promise for educational achievement in the broadest of senses (and contexts). While it is important to engage parents on the school landscape, it is equally important for educators to move comfortably in the worlds of families and communities, off the school landscape. It is when these boundaries between school, home, and community become permeable and multidirectional that the creation of a shared world which supports and nurtures children is realized. As PamWoodsworth, Manager of KidsFirst in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, maintains, “It takes a child to raise a village” (personal communication, May 2006).

Practical Implications of the Research

The most significant implication of the research on parent involvement/engagement is that educators have to interrupt the scripted story of schools as protectorates and start looking inward at themselves – at what they do and why they do it. “Rarely has the education community stepped forward and pointed to itself and its inherent culture, as the possible nucleus of the problem” (Constantino, 2006). Instead of looking outward at families or communities as reasons for low parental engagement or unsatisfactory student outcomes, schools have a responsibility to look inward at their own assumptions and beliefs, and how these are lived out in their practices, as a starting place for changing the school landscape. “[T]his moving inward is often multiple, overlapping, and simultaneous: staff move inward as individuals, they move inward together as a school team, and they move inward as a broad school community” (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, p. 29). As individuals, they look at themselves, their attitudes, and where their own hearts are at in regard to the respect they have for parents and community members. As a school team, they look at their collectively-held beliefs. They ask themselves, “Why do we

do what we do? What assumptions underlie our practices? Is there a match between what we say we believe and what we do?” (p. 30). As a broad school community, parents, community members, and educators work to create a shared vision which represents both parent and teacher knowledge, which articulates the hopes and dreams that together they hold for their children, and which establishes schooling as a collaborative endeavor.

Creating a counter-story to the story of protectorate requires a re-thinking of the concept of a welcoming school. Henderson & Mapp (2002) note that “families of all income and social levels are involved at home; but families with higher income and social class tend to be more involved at school” (p. 37). What does this say to educators about who sees themselves as welcome in the buildings and in the activities being lived out there – and who does not? What does this say about the social and cultural capital currently required by parents if they are to find a place for themselves on the school landscape? In creating a counter-story of hospitality, it is not about teachers and administrators who invite people to their place, but about creating a place that is owned as much by students, parents, and other community members as it is by staff and administrators.

Lambros Kamperidis (1990) writes that “only when we know how to behave as guests will we have the honor to acts as hosts” (pp. 10-11). More importantly, perhaps, teachers, teacher associates, administrators, and non-teaching staff members understand that they are not the owners of the school community. On the contrary: they, themselves, are guests. They have been received into a community with relationships, culture, and history that began long before they, as “school workers,” arrived at the school, and that will continue long after they leave. So ... “hospitality” ... mean[s] the open door and outstretched hand extended by hosts who realize that they, themselves, are guests. (Pushor & Ruitenberg, 2005, p. 37)

In practical terms, this could mean taking down the many signs which abound on a school landscape – staff parking only, no food or drinks in the auditorium, visitors please report to the office – signs which prohibit, admonish, or regulate; signs which send a message to parents and community members that they are, at best, inconvenient guests and, at worst, trespassers or interlopers. It could mean putting up new signs and displays with welcoming and culturally-representative messages, in the language(s) of the community. It could mean offering a parent a cup of coffee and a place to sit. It could mean being at the door or in the hallways to greet parents as they enter. It could mean taking time to talk with parents, to ask them to tell their stories, and to really listen. “Hospitality and invitation remain empty gestures until they are made with the genuine intention to open up the school space and agenda” (p. 43), to co-create it with parents and other caregivers as well as with students.

Creating a counter-story to the story of protectorate also requires the building of trust and relationships with parents and community members. This is a theme that is repeated over and over again in studies of parent engagement. “Educators tend to believe that they have a level of efficacy to legislate the trust of families when in fact trust is an earned privilege” (Constantino, 2006). Trust is built only through consistent and intentional efforts to build quality relationships (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Solomon & Rhodes, 2001) – through time and contact.

In practical terms, this could mean just talking and just listening. It could mean asking parents to share what they know about their child, their family, their neighborhood. It could mean the sharing of selves, as human beings as well as parents or educators. It could mean getting to know the community well enough that the relationship-building is done contextually and situationally, not in general kinds of ways. It could mean establishing multiple connecting points for relationship-building – around children, and around the parents themselves. It could mean establishing multiple connecting places for relationship-building – in the school, in homes through home visits (Pushor & Murphy, 2004), or in significant community locations. While the gestures, in and of themselves, are informal and personal, there is a real sense of multiplicity to them. They are lived out with different people, in different ways, in different places, and at different times of day. Because of the trust and relationships they build, these gestures offer parents the possibility on the school landscape to share their knowledge and voice, to contribute and make decisions, and to exercise power and responsibility.

Living a story of parent engagement, then, means living out a new story of school. A world which is co-constructed and shared with parents and community members is a world with a side-by-side structure rather than a hierarchical one. What might that actually look like? In practical terms, it might mean that parents have a place in ‘staff’ meetings and professional development sessions. It might mean that aggregate information schools receive about student achievement from district or provincial exams is shared and discussed openly with parents and teachers together. It might mean that parents play an integral role in the development of a school’s continuous improvement plan. It might mean that educators ask parents how they want to be engaged in their children’s schooling, both in school and out of school. It might mean that opportunities to share knowledge and voice or to contribute to decision-making are not provided to only a select group of parents or the membership of the school community council but broadly to the parent body. It might mean that there are a vast array of possibilities for parent engagement within a school which meet the varying needs and interests of a diverse parent population. What is important in this new story is that parents have a place and voice in the core work of the school – that of teaching and learning.

A sense of reciprocity can not be overlooked. In this new story of schooling, it is important to attend to how parents and families, as well as children, can be strengthened through parents’ engagement in their children’s schooling. As this will differ for every community, and for individual parents within a community, there needs to be a real sense of particularity and contextuality to it. In some communities, it may be about supporting families in their development of cultural and political capital: creating opportunities for families to connect with one another, with school staff, and with community groups; helping families to prepare for and participate in meetings with local officials about needed resources or programs; working with families to develop action research skills to determine solutions to an issue in the neighborhood; inviting businesses to talk with families about their services and/or employment opportunities (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 64). In other communities, it may be about creating a sense of community or a feeling of homeplace for families who lead busy lives or spend much time away from their neighborhood: opening the school for community meetings and/or events; facilitating a neighborhood study or a photo/voice project; working with families to design a community-based service learning initiative. Acting in reciprocity is acting with responsiveness. Rather

than with the mindset of charity, privilege or expert knowing, acting in reciprocity reflects a relational and caring engagement in initiatives deemed important by and for parents and families.

Creating a counter-story to the story of protectorate also requires a rethinking of teacher education – in preservice, inservice, and leadership education programs. Currently, in preservice teacher education programs in colleges and universities, there is very little attention being paid to the development of teacher candidates' knowledge, skills, or attitudes around engaging parents in their children's schooling. While the topic may be touched on briefly in some courses, it is a topic which is largely absent in the 'curriculum' of teacher education. It is not any wonder then, that new teachers surveyed by the Metlife Foundation in 2005 "report that engaging and working with parents was their greatest challenge" (Constantino, 2005). Just as it is basically absent in preservice teacher education, parent engagement in children's schooling is an equally limited focus in inservice and leadership education programs. Given the strength and history of the scripted story of school as protectorate, purposeful, sustained, and intentional educational experiences which enable educators at all levels to rethink and reconceptualize the school landscape will be necessary.

Critical to all of the practical implications outlined for engaging parents is an allocation of time and money. Parent engagement will not happen in a school, a district, a province unless it becomes the focus of a concerted effort. Like any type of school or curricular reform initiative, it requires resources to support it.

Gaps in Knowledge/Future Research

While there is a wealth of research and literature that has come available on parent involvement/engagement in recent years, there are still areas of emphases in which we have limited knowledge. A first and obvious gap is in the limited amount of research and literature situated in a Canadian context. While the predominantly American literature in the field is of great benefit, it reflects a context quite different from Canada's. To use research and literature to inform the development of policy and practice in local and provincial jurisdictions in Canada, having research more closely reflective of the children, families, schools and communities of those jurisdictions may be more useful and informative.

A second significant gap is in the lack of research that examines parent engagement through the eyes of parents, rather than through the eyes of educators. So much of the research and literature that is available gives educators' accounts and perceptions of the school landscape, and of parents' positioning in relation to it. It tends to be research *on* parents, rather than research *with* parents. What might be learned if we heard parents' stories of their children's schooling experiences and their stories of their own experiences as parents in relation to the school landscape? What might become foregrounded from this research that is currently not being attended to in the literature or in the field?

If parents are to 'fit together' with teachers, and to be an integral part of the processes connected to teaching and learning, it is important to know what knowledge they bring to this relationship. This denotes a third gap in existing literature. While there is an extensive body of literature on teacher knowledge, there is no corresponding body of literature on parent knowledge. As a result, teachers are positioned in schools as knowing professionals while

parents are positioned as unknowing, or less knowing, about children, teaching, and learning. In creating a research agenda around parent knowledge; in learning what parent knowledge is, how parents hold knowledge, and how they use that knowledge, new possibilities will emerge to position parents alongside teachers on school landscapes. How can what parents know, given that it is different from what teachers know, enhance schooling experiences for children? How can parent knowledge, used alongside teacher knowledge, inform decisions about school policies, procedures, and routines? How can parent knowledge, used alongside teacher knowledge, inform decisions about school programs? As developing a conceptualization of what parent knowledge is will begin to answer these questions, it is an important first stage in a program of research.

A fourth gap in knowledge surrounds the benefits of parent engagement for parents. When parents are engaged in their children's schooling, there is potential for reciprocal benefit for parents, families, and communities as well as children. There has not been research done which studies what these benefits might be, how they might occur, or how parents, families, and communities may be strengthened by them. From an educational perspective alone, this knowledge could inform parent engagement practices, continuous improvement frameworks, and intersectoral initiatives.

A fifth gap links to research on the influences and conditions which affect student achievement yet which reside outside of the boundaries of the school's agenda. As schools have access to the majority of children and youth and, by extension, their families, the school system provides an opportunity for responding to urgent problems of child and youth poverty and social exclusion. Due to increasingly complex social factors, schools in their traditional ways are not able to address these challenges (Ungerleider & Burns, 2004; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). It will take a redefinition of the role of school within the community to help break patterns of poverty and social exclusion. How might the interdependent efforts of schools plus other human service departments such as health, justice, labor, social services, culture, and community services make a difference to students' academic success, engagement, and wellbeing, and to the wellbeing of families? This future research possibility may unpack how, indeed, it takes a child to raise a village.

Given the need for teacher education at preservice, inservice, and leadership levels, a sixth gap in knowledge relates to what areas of focus a 'curriculum' of parent engagement may be comprised of. Henderson & Mapp (2002) suggest there needs to be both preservice and inservice teacher education opportunities which focus on the advantages of school, family, and community connections, developing trusting relationships, sharing power with parents and community members, working with diverse families, and connecting with community resources (p. 65). Constantino (2006) argues that family engagement has to be looked at in the broader context of "systemic cultural change" if families truly are to be positioned as a meaningful component in their child's educational life. He believes, then, the information and education reaching educational leaders, specifically, must influence their actions toward systemic reform. From these two perspectives alone, it is obvious that in designing a curriculum of parent engagement for preservice teacher education programs, for inservice staff development foci, and for school system principal development programs or graduate education programs in leadership, there is much work to be done to determine what the components of these various curricula

should be. In terms of future research, there is also the corresponding need, once the programs have been implemented, to evaluate the resulting outcomes in schools of these differentiated teacher education programs, in relation to impact on students, teachers, and parents.

Closing Thoughts

Beautiful people
You live in the same world as I do
But some how
I never noticed you before today
I'm ashamed to say. (Safka, 1967)

The story of school as a protectorate is a story that has outlived its time. The literature and research on parent engagement is broad enough and rich enough to provide a good plotline for a counter story – a story of a shared world in which educators and parents lay their knowledge alongside one another in schools to support and enhance the learning outcomes of children and to strengthen parents, families, and communities.

Beautiful people
You ride the same subway as I do
Every morning
That's got to tell you something
We've got so much in common
I go the same direction you do
So if you'll take care of me
Then I'll take care of you.
Beautiful people ... (Safka, 1967)

Parents' engagement in their children's learning makes a difference – to their children and to their children's achievement and success in a wide range of educational outcomes. It can make a difference to educators and to the landscape of schools as well ... a shared world.

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