INVITATIONS TO DIALOGUE: THE READING AND WRITING PROJECT

by

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(Under the Direction of JoBeth Allen)

ABSTRACT

The Reading and Writing Project, an action research study, focused on the importance of engaging in dialogue to establish respectful, collaborative home-school connections. The study was designed to offer numerous opportunities for parent and teacher to engage in dialogue. These opportunities included a series of eight night meetings; occasions for students, parents, and teacher to author books; and invitations to parents to have conversations with the reading teacher about their own schooling and that of their children. Critical theory provided the theoretical framework for examining issues of power as they relate to the parent-teacher relationship.

Data collection included books written by students, parents, and teacher; field notes; emails and notes written by parents; informal conversations; and transcribed interviews. The participants of the study included kindergarten and first grade students taught by the reading specialist during the 2005-06 school year, their parents, and a few self-selected teachers. The kindergarten students had all been retained in kindergarten. The first grade students had been identified as struggling with reading and were being served by me in a pull-out reading program. Data were analyzed through constant comparison.

Two major themes were 1) that parents explained parental involvement differently from the ways schools often define it, and 2) parents' fears and frustrations were often underlying emotions in the home-school connection.

INDEX WORDS: Critical theory, Action research, Co-authored books, Parental involvement, Dialogue, Constant comparison

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# DEDICATION

In memory of my father, Barney Allen Duncan, who taught me to always work hard and who made sacrifices for his family and his country; Kenneth Julian Lewis and Elizabeth Drinnon Lewis, who encouraged me and loved me as a daughter; and Kathie Farrell, who was an integral part of the Reading and Writing Project.

To my mother, Cammie Davis Duncan, who inspired my love of children and of the written word and who taught me the importance of family.

To my husband Gary and to my children, Josh and Megan, who supported me each step of the way.

To the parents and students of Hillside Elementary who taught me about the importance of engaging in dialogue and of building respectful, trusting, and collaborative relationships.

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# INTRODUCTION

*My experience…did not prepare me for the depth and emotion I felt—the subtle institutional barriers that made me feel strangely unwelcome in my children's school—as if I were trespassing on foreign ground—even when the stated policies promoted welcome and openness…the terror I experienced anticipating my meeting with teachers, the uncertainty and awkwardness that kept me off balance during the conference, and the inevitable inadequacy and guilt I felt afterward.…It did not prepare me for the ways in which these tiny scenes of parent-teacher dialogue seemed to play out the larger social and cultural issues in our society.*

Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. xviii

## Purpose of the Study

Some parents may identify with the uncertainty, awkwardness, guilt, and inadequacies Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) felt when meeting with her children's teachers. Minority and poor parents especially may not feel comfortable or welcome in the White and middle-class world of many public schools. As an educator, the classroom was a familiar environment for Lawrence-Lightfoot. As a parent, the classroom sometimes became an unwelcoming, threatening territory. To complicate matters, Lawrence-Lightfoot found some teachers were also terrified of home-school interactions. She explained, "Lacking the conceptual framework, the valuing of parental perspectives, and the practical tools for productively engaging them, teachers feel ill prepared to face what many consider the 'most vulnerable' part of their work—building relationships with

parents" (p. 8). Unfortunately, these feelings sometimes result in teacher-parent relationships that are "suspicious…competitive and adversarial rather than collaborative and empathic" (p. xxi).

Many doctoral students begin their program unsure what direction their research will take. I always knew my research would include the home-school connection. I often wondered about the relationship. As a parent, I sometimes felt powerless to help my own children. When my daughter received a zero on the mechanics of an English paper because the reference page had more than a one-inch margin at the top, she begged me not to call the teacher because it would only make it more difficult for her in that class. For my son, I wanted a teacher who looked beyond the surface and saw a child who was capable and sensitive but sometimes lacked self-confidence.

At the same time, as a classroom teacher, I often struggled building the kind of relationship with the parents of my students that I wanted with my children's teachers. I was cordial and warm but kept parents at a safe distance. In hindsight, I realize that I often viewed parents from a deficit model. I became frustrated with parents who did not do enough, in my opinion, to support their children academically. I sometimes resented "the nervous Nelly" parents who seemed too involved. I encouraged parental involvement as long as it was on my terms. I was happiest when parents responded to my requests, helped with homework, reinforced my decisions, and read to their children (Lareau, 2003). Anything more or less was undesirable.

Several years ago, I began teaching in a mostly White and middle class school. Having taught in schools with diverse student populations, I had certain stereotypical expectations for a White and middle class school. I was dismayed to learn that soccer practice sometimes took precedence over homework and that parents who were actively involved in the school sometimes expected preferential treatment for their children. One parent, for instance, complained to the

assistant principal when her son got a “B” in math. She was especially irate because she had tie-dyed a shirt for every child in his room for field day and she was serving as PTA president. She seemed to think her involvement entitled her son to an “A.” Because many of my parents were college educated, they seemed to hold little reverence for teachers and to assume that their children would be successful in school with little help at home.

A few years ago, I became a reading teacher. I believe the pull-out program my school uses has helped many students become confident readers, but I always thought one component—the home-school connection—was missing. It was rare but possible for me to work with a student and never meet his/her parents. I occasionally called a parent, usually about a missing book, or a parent would sometimes call me with questions or concerns about reading. Sometimes I met parents for the first time at an SST (Student Support Team) meeting.

The first year I became the reading specialist my initial contact with parents was by letter. Some parents were shocked to learn their children needed help. I received many phone calls and notes. One parent refused services. I became defensive. Did these parents not realize I was trying to help their children?

The next year I decided to be proactive. Along with the formal school notification, I sent a letter introducing myself and explaining the program. I checked with each child’s teacher to make sure he or she had talked to the parent about concerns. I asked the teachers to either call the parent before sending the letter home, just to let them know it was coming, or to jot a note on the letter saying they were part of this decision and supported it. I also invited parents to come to a meeting at night to meet me and learn about the program.

Partly because of my efforts and partly because it is now expected that most children will learn to read in kindergarten, parents are not only receptive to, but eager for, their children to

receive extra help in reading. Even though there is a process we go through to determine which children qualify, at least one parent will contact me at the beginning of the school year to request services.

I suppose I could have stopped there, content with the results of my communicative efforts. Parents were appreciative. They typically gave me more than my fair share of credit when their children improved in reading. I no longer had to defend my program. All was well. But through the process of learning to communicate more effectively with parents, I realized my attitude toward parents had changed. I no longer viewed families from a deficit view. I wondered how I could continue the process of strengthening the connection between parents and myself.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) asserted that teachers almost always begin conversations about the home-school connection by evoking "ghosts in the classroom" (p. 4), their "emotion-packed reflections on their own childhood experiences" (p. 5). They often see their relations with parents as an opportunity to "undo early traumas in their lives or replay and enhance good memories that made them strong" (p. 5). I began my study by examining my own ghosts in the classroom, my own experiences as a student, teacher, and parent.

## Background of the Problem

### *A Student's Perspective*

I began first grade when I was five years old, although with my November birthday, my parents had the option of keeping me home another year. With three older children already in public school and two younger children at home to keep her busy, my mother decided to send me on to first grade. There was no public kindergarten in those days. Other than Sunday school class at our small, rural church, I had rarely been away from my parents.

My first grade teacher was very different from my mother. I never remember her smiling, offering a word of encouragement, or hugging me. In my class picture, she looked stern. I remember getting in trouble once. It had rained during the night and she told us not to get on the muddy bank during recess. I would never have deliberately disobeyed her. However, I learned too late there was a puddle at the bottom of the slide. When I lined up with my muddy socks, she assumed I had been on the bank and punished me. If she had asked, I would have told her the mud was from the slide. She did not ask, and I did not feel comfortable challenging her assumption. In my young mind, telling her that her assumption was wrong was the same as telling her she was wrong. My parents expected me to be a "good" student who obeyed the teacher and their expectations did not include questioning her authority. I did not mention the incident to my mother. I was embarrassed about getting in trouble at school, and I thought she would be disappointed in me.

I am fairly certain I knew nothing about letters, sounds, words, or sentences when I began school. My mother did not buy workbooks or engage in school-like activities with me. Reading and writing were natural occurrences in my home. My earliest memories of books were the Bible stories my mother read each morning before sending my older siblings off to school. These stories were not used to teach sight words, predictions, or inferences; they were meant to serve as moral guideposts. My mother had a knack for reading aloud. I marveled at young David, not only standing up to Goliath, but slaying him. I was relieved when the baby in the bulrushes was found. I pictured Joseph's brightly colored coat in my imagination, and I could understand why his older siblings were jealous of the special attention he received from his father. Later, as an adult, I thought about the relationships and issues of power in these stories. As a child, I simply enjoyed the drama and intrigue and the time spent with my mother.

My parents rarely entered the school building. The only time I remember my dad attending a school event was when my brother played at a piano recital or one of us graduated from high school. My mother occasionally attended PTA meetings, but only if one of us were part of the program. She always made a point of speaking to each one of our teachers. When she returned home, we would gather around her for a verbatim report of each conversation.

Family has always been important to my mother. Her closest friends were her sisters. I grew up surrounded by cousins. There was always someone my age to play with at my grandmother's on Sunday afternoons after church. When we visited other families, it was usually one of my aunts. Because my mother did not know the parents of my school friends, she was reluctant to let me spend the night at their homes or to hang around with them outside of school.

My parents worked hard most of their lives. Their expectations for us were modest. They assumed we would work hard, but they hoped our lives would be more comfortable than theirs had been. They did not expect us to become doctors or lawyers or school teachers (although three of us are teachers and one is a principal). My mother wanted me to have an office job and not work in a factory as she had. Even though I graduated second in a very small senior class, neither parent encouraged me to consider college. They needed me to become self-supporting. My dad saw few benefits to a college education. He did not finish high school and had made a good living, although money was usually tight with eight children to feed.

I never saw my dad read much. He could usually figure out how to assemble something without resorting to the directions. He had little time for pleasure reading. He kept up with world events by reading the newspaper and watching the nightly news. He left for work early in the morning and returned late at night. He worked many weekends. He enjoyed sports and coached at least one of my brothers in baseball. If homework involved building something, he might help.

I never remember him reading to me or helping me study for a test. It was our responsibility to work hard (as he did). He was proud of us when we made the honor roll, but he never pressured us to bring home good grades. He just expected that we would do our best.

Although his sisters attended business college, my dad dropped out of school. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he enlisted in the infantry. He was wounded in the second invasion of Normandy and spent nine months in a prisoner-of-war camp. We considered him a hero. Soon after the war, he lost two siblings, one to tuberculosis and one to cancer. I never knew my dad's mother. She died when he was thirteen. My dad passed away just a couple of years after retirement. Life had never been easy for him.

At school, I was taught to read with basals. The two-child, middle-class family did not match my own, and the story lines were dull compared to the Bible stories my mother read. I remember the pride of finishing the first preprimer and being allowed to take it home to read to my parents. I also remember the accompanying lecture (e.g., Make sure you wash your hands before handling the book. Don't let younger brothers or sisters get their hands on it.) I guess the teacher assumed there were few books in homes, especially in homes like mine: working class, lots of children, a parent who did not finish high school. She might have been surprised to learn that my mother was an avid reader and that she enjoyed writing poetry and short stories. In addition, she was an incredible storyteller who mesmerized us with stories of her childhood.

My mother had a tremendous respect bordering on reverence for teachers. She believed it was the teacher's job to teach. She supported the teacher by making sure we were at school every day on time, that we behaved and tried our best. I am sure my mother did not feel competent or comfortable teaching us; in her view, the teacher was the expert. For her part, the teacher did not expect or encourage parents to help with literacy activities at home.

On the few occasions she met one of our teachers, my mother always admonished her to make us behave, although she would have been very surprised and disappointed if we were not model students. My mother never questioned the teacher's decisions. If she wrote a note to the teacher, it was on the rare occasion one of us missed a day of school. School was so important that she would scrape together change to pay a taxi if that was the only way to get us there. If she didn't have money for the return trip, we walked home.

I remember only one instance when my parents doubted their belief that teachers always did what was best for children. My younger brother who played on the high school baseball team was hit in the eye during pre-game practice. The coach/high school principal neither took Rick to the doctor nor called my parents. When Rick came home after the game with his eye swollen shut, my parents rushed him to the doctor. Fortunately, there was no permanent damage. The next morning my mother let us sleep in. About 10:00 she dropped us off at school with instructions to tell the secretary that we were late because our parents had been at the eye doctor with Rick the night before. While it must have taken a lot of courage for her to send us to school two hours tardy, I doubt the principal even noticed her act of defiance.

I sometimes wonder if teachers talked about my family and, if they did, what did they say? Did they understand my parents trusted them to always do what was best for their children? Did they recognize the sacrifices my parents made for us? Did they appreciate the respect my parents gave teachers? Did they understand how difficult it was for my mother to enter the school building in her one Sunday dress? Did they wonder about the literacy activities that occurred in my home? Did they question my parents' involvement in my education? Did they hold stereotypical views of a large, working class family? Did they understand how proud we were of our parents and our family? Did they speak of us in condescending or derogatory terms?

Edwards (1999) asserted that teachers "hold strong and usually negative views about the attitudes of poor, minority, and immigrant parents toward schooling and the school" (p. 3). These negative attitudes, often unrecognized and unexamined, may influence how teachers interact with students and parents (Valdes, 1996). Teachers, for instance, may assume parents do not care about their child's education. In reality, the parent may feel different and uncomfortable around teachers, may not understand the school's expectations for parents, and may not know how to help their child with school (Swap, 1993).

During my doctoral program, I participated in a discussion about *The Color of Water: A Black Man's Tribute to His White Mother* (McBride, 1997). I listened as students and professor alike talked, from their White and Black middle class perspectives, about the number of children in the family. The assumption seemed to be that the "poor, ignorant" (my words) mother either could not afford birth control or was too lazy or inept to obtain it. As a child from a large family, I offered a different perspective: Maybe the mother actually wanted a large family. Maybe she felt blessed and not burdened. Maybe the children, though lacking material possessions, were not deprived. Maybe we could be less inclined to judge families by our own preconceived notions of the ideal family unit.

As a teacher, I have heard conversations about families similar to my own, and the comments have sometimes been insensitive. A few years ago, I taught in the same school two of my young relatives attended. They were being raised by their grandmother. I admired her for taking them in. She was elderly and in poor health. She had raised her own children but loved and cared for these two girls. They were always at school, clean and neatly dressed. Both children struggled in school, and their grandmother often did not know how to help them. The grandmother died during the school year; I went by the first grader's classroom to tell the teacher

that I would be taking the child home with me that afternoon. The teacher who did not know I was related to the child said, “You know her ‘grandmother slash mother’ died today.” Her tone and choice of words conveyed disapproval and condescension. I was offended, but I wondered if it were only because I knew the situation personally and was related to the family. I searched my memory for times I had expressed similar sentiments. How could I develop a sensitivity and respect for all families?

I do not believe the grandmother failed those two little girls. I believe she provided the best home life she could. I doubt they lacked anything that really mattered. I do not believe my own parents failed me. My mom, for instance, taught me something more important than the alphabet or how to sound out letters. She taught me that reading and writing can be enjoyable. I watched as she read her Bible and studied the adult Sunday school lessons she taught each week. My parents taught me, through example, that reading and writing are important in everyday life. I remember my parents sitting at the kitchen table on several occasions as they drafted letters to my dad’s employer, spelling out all the reasons why my dad deserved a raise. I was never surprised when he received the raise. After all, he deserved it and the letter was written in a convincing manner.

Despite my young age, my parents’ “lack of involvement” in my education, and minimal concepts about print learned in a “deprived” early childhood, I learned to read—and read well—in first grade. After a rocky start (initially, I was not adept at worksheets), I caught up academically and passed most of my classmates. I love to read; I cannot imagine my life without books. However, if I began kindergarten this fall under similar conditions, I am certain I would be recommended for extra help in reading. I would be labeled a struggling reader, “at risk,” and my parents would be expected to provide intensive help. They might be blamed for my perceived

shortcomings. I doubt that anyone would recognize or appreciate the rich literacy activities I had experienced at home.

*A Teacher's Perspective*

My first teaching position was in a junior high. My contact with parents was minimal. A few parents dropped by my room at our first PTA meeting. I remember getting one note from a parent about a missing social studies book. As a new teacher, I was relieved to be left alone. After a hiatus from teaching, I returned to public schools and taught hearing impaired students in high school and, later, in elementary school. Because I taught fewer students, I had closer contact with their parents. I found them to be advocates for their children and enjoyed a good working relationship with them.

When I returned to the regular classroom, however, I found that relationships with parents could be stressful. I remember a few parents in particular. The mother of one of my sixth graders called one morning and asked for a meeting that afternoon. After I explained I had scheduled a study hall after school and asked to schedule the meeting for another afternoon, her husband called the principal and insisted that the meeting be held that day. The principal got someone to cover my study hall. He also asked my teammates to sit in on the meeting. Both parents came for the conference. They seemed to be upset with me personally because their son was not finishing his schoolwork. I managed to keep my composure during the meeting but cried on the way home. The principal came by my room the next day to assure me that I had done nothing wrong and that the parents were being unreasonable.

As I thought back over this incident, I realized there were two main issues at play, power and dialogue. Because I refused to give in to the mother's request to meet, she called her husband. (It has been my experience that moms usually assume responsibility for anything

school related—unless there is a problem they feel they cannot handle. The problem then is often referred to the dad, the male.) The husband, rather than talking to me, called the principal. My principal who was also male then told me that I would meet with the parents that afternoon. I had no say so in the matter. Knowing that the parents were upset, the principal then called in reinforcements, my teammates. As a young teacher, I felt betrayed by my principal. Surely the meeting could have been scheduled for the next day, giving the parents a chance to cool down and a chance for me to collect my thoughts. I have to admit that I was a little resentful at being overruled and at being told what to do. Rather than feeling supported by having other teachers present, I was even more embarrassed and humiliated. The child was not finishing his work in other subjects. As the youngest teacher on the team, I believe I took the brunt of the "attack" because they thought I was the most vulnerable.

The other issue was lack of dialogue between the parents and me. If we had established a positive relationship at the beginning of the school year, I believe we would have been able to sit down and discuss the parents' concerns in a more respectful manner. At the least, we could have negotiated a time to meet. I understood the parents' concerns. I knew they wanted what was best for their child. At the same time, I felt I was the scapegoat for all their frustrations.

The other parent I remember from that year had a son who was constantly in trouble. The school required the teacher to call the parent if a child received "three strikes" in one week. When I called the dad, he said, "I don't have time to come to school and run your class for you." He then yelled for the child to "bring me a belt" and hung up the phone. For the rest of the year, I made sure the student never received a third strike from me again. I suppose I took the coward's way out, but I did not want to have another "conversation" with the dad, and I did not want the child to get a whipping at home. In hindsight, I think I played into the dad's hands. He was no

longer bothered with phone calls from the school. The dad's obvious attempt to intimidate me worked and because I had not been proactive in establishing communication lines, I was unable to help the child.

In my long career, there have been many positive parents, but the ones I tend to remember are the ones whom I considered antagonistic. Usually, once I sat down with parents, we established a good working relationship. The exception that always stands out in my mind was the mother of a first grader. Her son enrolled in our school a couple of weeks before school was out the year before. In the fall, the mother came by the school to look at the posted class lists and did not see her son's name. She was livid. The whole purpose of moving him to our school at the end of kindergarten, she told the principal, was so that he would not get "stuck with any old teacher." The principal assured her I was an experienced teacher, but she ended up walking out of the principal's office in a huff and came down to my room. I greeted her warmly, but I could tell she was upset. I was clueless about her hostility at the time and, for the rest of the school year, I remained clueless about how to develop a positive relationship with her. Nothing I did that year seemed to meet with her approval. It was little comfort to know that she had run-ins with the counselor, the cafeteria manager, the clinic worker, the receptionist, and, in subsequent years, with other teachers.

I wonder if many of our ghosts are from the first few years we teach when we are probably the most vulnerable. However, when I taught the first grader, I was no longer a young, inexperienced teacher. I had worked hard, through the years, to involve parents. Several years earlier, before there were early release conferences, I began meeting individually with the parents of my students. I was the first at my school to begin a class newsletter. Although it was one-way communication, I used it as an opportunity to showcase students' writings and

achievements. It was more than a calendar of upcoming events. I provided a log for two-way communication. I called parents. I invited them to volunteer in the classroom. I looked for informal encounters. Still, I was unable to establish a positive relationship with this parent. Obviously, there were ghosts in the classroom the first grader's mom brought with her every time we met. Finally, I had to accept the fact that she and I would not be able to forge a positive relationship.

For years when a parent asked for a conference, I thought of the sixth grader. Why did the parent want to meet and would I be attacked? If students misbehaved, I avoided calling parents. Would the parent overreact? After my experiences with the first grader's mom, I became defensive. I assumed that every decision I made would be second-guessed and that nothing I did would ever be enough or be appreciated. As long as I teach, I imagine these ghosts will be with me.

*A Parent's Perspective*

From a parent's perspective, I know what it is like to trust the social, emotional, and academic welfare of my child, "the most important person in [my life], the one who arouses [my] deepest passions and greatest vulnerabilities, the one who inspires [my] fiercest advocacy and protection" to someone "whose role as teacher gives her access to the most intimate territory, the deepest emotional places" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. xxi).

One of my own children struggled with reading in first grade. I had never taught lower than sixth grade at the time and knew little about reading expectations in first grade. He was my first child so I had no reference point. Twenty years ago, no books came home. There was nothing to indicate in conferences or on his report card that there was any problem until his last report card of the year when the teacher wrote "is having trouble decoding." As I read her

comment, I went through the same emotions I imagine the parents of some of my students experience. *I was confused.* What exactly did she mean? Was this her way of telling me my child could not read as well as other students his age? *I felt guilty*. Where did I go wrong? I must be a terrible parent. How could I not know my son was struggling? *I felt embarrassed and defensive*. How could this happen? We have books in our home. His dad and I read all the time. We are both college graduates. I am a school teacher. We have read to him his entire life. *I panicked*. Why did the teacher wait to now to tell me? Why didn't the kindergarten teacher let me know there were problems? Is he going to struggle all the way through school? Will he need special education classes?

Fortunately for my son, there were no after school remedial classes, no private tutors I knew of, and no school stores nearby that sold workbooks. Instead, he and I read every day in the summer. When he began school in the fall, he was no longer behind in reading. His second grade teacher sent home books for students to read at night. It was an optional program and we took full advantage of it. He never struggled with reading again. As a reading specialist, I sometimes share my son's struggles with the parents of my students. I want them to know that I understand some of the emotions they may be feeling and that, in many cases, learning to read is a matter of practice, time, and enjoyment. I believe it is powerful for parents to hear stories like my son's, to know that teachers' children are not always perfect students. Recently, I sat in on a conference with a classroom teacher and the parents of one of my struggling readers. I cringed when the teacher said, "Even my son who was a good student hit a brick wall in second grade." In my mind, I finished the thought, "So there is no doubt that your son who is not as bright as mine will find it unbelievably difficult."

I will always be appreciative of my son's second grade teacher. Not all my encounters with my son's teachers, however, were positive. I would often debate whether I should contact one of his teachers. Would she resent my interference and would that make it more difficult for my child? When I questioned some of the practices of his third grade teacher, she called me in for a conference and, in a round-about way, told me to back off. She had received numerous teaching awards, but I found her unresponsive to my son's needs. Her "universalistic…more distant and dispassionate" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 43) approach left me yearning for a teacher who really cared about my son, for someone who had made the effort to really get to know him. Even I was surprised at the end of the school year, however, when I happened to encounter her in the teacher workroom and she said, "I want to thank you for being a good parent and staying the hell out of my way!" Because of her reputation as an outstanding teacher, the principal had apparently honored many parent requests to have their children in her room. She told me she felt as though she had taught in a fishbowl that year and she appreciated me leaving her alone. In spite of her assertion, however, I did not consider myself a "good" parent. I considered myself a parent who became invisible at the teacher's request. I backed off because I felt intimidated by a teacher who had been at the school longer than I had and who had a reputation for being an innovative teacher, because I did not want my son to suffer any negative consequences, and because I had to work with her. In my mind, I had let my son down.

Calling parents in for conferences can sometimes be intimidating for parents. There are other ways to intimidate parents. When my son was in middle school, I asked for a conference with his teacher. I thought I had been open and friendly. Later, however, when I asked for another conference, I arrived at the school and was directed to the principal's office where I met

with the teacher and the principal. As a courtesy, I wished the teacher had told me we would be meeting with the principal. I never asked for another conference.

My daughter always worked hard and made good grades in school. Sometimes her teachers would not schedule conferences with me because “you know she’s doing fine” and it was one less conference for the teacher. I wanted to meet with the teacher and hear about my daughter’s strengths, but I also knew there were probably areas she could improve. I wanted to hear about those too. I did not want special treatment. I just wanted the same opportunities other parents received.

## Summary

As I examined my own ghosts in the classroom, I realized that all of them involved issues of power. There were many times I felt helpless—as a student who felt powerless to correct a teacher’s assumption, as a parent unsure of how to support her own children, and as a teacher confronted by “unreasonable” parents. I should point out that each of these stories has been told from my perspective and that in each case I chose my response. When treated as a child by my principal, I accepted the role. When I thought I was being bullied, I retreated. And it is important to note that, just because I felt powerless, does not mean that others involved in my stories felt less so. I believe that the ghosts I have examined help me identify with students, parents, and other teachers. They help me see the other person’s perspective. They make me more aware of the power and privilege I am accorded as White and middle class. They remind me that there is a responsibility that comes along with this power.

As I thought about my ghosts, I also realized that dialogue was missing in every instance. Over the years, I became better at communicating with parents, but I never really developed the close relationships necessary for dialogue. Schools are extraordinarily adept at communicating.

We inundate parents with fliers, newsletters, and notes (usually in English). We call parents in for brief conferences and we hold Curriculum Nights. Some of our methods are even two-way. Teachers give out their email addresses and telephone parents. What seem to be missing, however, are the face-to-face prolonged meetings that allow us to develop relationships that permit dialogue.

## Research Questions

My own ghosts in the classroom—my experiences as a student, teacher, and parent—caused me to wonder about the home-school connection. How can teachers develop an understanding and appreciation for differences in the ways families involve themselves in their children's education? How can we cross the barriers that seem to exist between home and school? What part does dialogue play? How can schools and homes learn to work together to support children's literacy efforts?

## Conclusion

Initially, my interest in parent involvement revolved around how I, as the teacher, could create "better" parents. I held a narrow view of parental involvement; mostly I wanted parents to support my efforts at school. As my view began to shift from a deficit model to a difference model, however, I began to think about reaching out to the parents of my students, offering opportunities for us to learn about and from each other. As a reading teacher, I was particularly interested in using literacy activities as a means of opening the door to dialogue. My goals for this study were to spend time with parents; to learn about their efforts at home to support their children; to give parents an opportunity to learn about me as I learned about them; and, during the process, to hopefully develop collaborative, trusting, and respectful relationships.

# CHAPTER II

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In preparation for my study, I reviewed the literature regarding critical theory, the home-school connection, and family literacy projects. I was particularly interested in how issues of power and dialogue influence the home-school relationship.

## Critical Theory

Critical theory is concerned with "issues of power and justice and the ways that the economy, matters of race, class and gender, ideologies, discourses, education, religion and other social institutions and cultural dynamics interact to construct a social system" (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000, p. 281). Critical theory is not a new phenomenon. History is replete with social critics who emphasized language, not guns, as a means of revolution (Crotty, 1998). Critical theorists reject the status quo and seek to bring about change by "interrogating commonly held values and assumptions, challenging, conventional social structures, and engaging in social action" (p. 157). One of the most influential critical theorists was Paulo Freire (1970/2002). He did not believe that oppressor and oppressed should exchange roles, rather they should share the burden of knowledge. Freire believed this balance of power could be accomplished through dialogue. He rejected the notion of the banking concept of education where teachers "deposit" knowledge into students who accept the gift without questioning it.

The culture of power described by Freire typically resides in the middle class and often thrives in schools where middle class values are considered the standard for all students. Because the culture of education is rarely neutral, Heath (1983/1999) suggested the goal of schools is to

not only teach skills and knowledge, but to change people's values. As one of the major institutions of culture, schools "have a direct influence upon cultural continuity and change. In selecting what to teach and how it is to be taught and evaluated, schools reaffirm what the culture values as knowledge" (Roth, 1984, p. 303).

*The School as a Culture of Power: Social Class and Race*

Delpit (1995) referred to the school as a culture of power and argued that middle class "ways of thinking, ways of writing, ways of dressing, and ways of interacting" often prevail. Valdes (1996) suggested that middle class children do well in school because:

> [Middle class] parents have power (social and occupational status), competence (knowledge about schools and school learning), education, income and material resources, a vision of the interconnectedness of home and work, and the networks of individuals who have information about schools and school practices. (p. 39)

Lareau (2000) found that middle class parents usually know how to "work the system," usually to the benefit of their children. As one parent volunteer candidly told me when I thanked her for helping in my classroom, "I'm not doing this for you. I believe it helps my son." Lareau suggested that the actions teachers take to help children are directly related to their perceptions of parental involvement, i.e., the more involved the parent seems to be, the more responsive the teacher is.

Unfortunately, middle class teachers sometimes have difficulty understanding families whose cultures are different from their own (Smith & Elish-Piper, 2002). As a result, they may not "understand the realities with which [some] parents must contend and why they do what they do" (Delpit, 1995, p. 175). For example, when a parent brings a small child to a conference, the teacher may view the parent as inconsiderate. The parent, however, may not have relatives living

nearby who can babysit, may not be able to afford a babysitter, or may find the idea of leaving a small baby behind as distasteful (Valdes, 1996).

When a parent does not attend a conference or asks for an early or late time, teachers may not consider that some parents do not have flexible work hours or paid leave (Bracey, 2001). The parent of one of my students had to quit a second job so that she could pick her son up from a remedial, after-school program recommended by the classroom teacher. When her employer balked at letting her leave early, she told him, "My children have to come first," even if it meant losing the extra income. In addition, middle class teachers, accustomed to paying for piano, dance, or swimming lessons for their own children, may not realize the financial burden of asking parents to pay tuition for remedial classes. As one irate dad remarked, "For that much money, I could have stayed off from work and helped her myself."

There is a price to pay for this kind of insensitivity to family circumstances. Delpit (1995) suggested that attempts at educational reform will be fruitless "until we can see the world as others see it" (p. 134). Whitaker and Fiore (2001) found that parents "become even less supportive than they would have been if…school personnel had shown some signs of understanding their plight" (p. 20).

In addition to social class (Valdes, 1996; Lareau, 2000), teacher perceptions may also be based on stereotypical views on race (Delpit, 1995), such as the belief that Black families are do not value education (McCarthey, 2000). We could, however, learn much about positive home-school relationships from the historical view of segregated communities provided by researchers such as Edwards (2004). According to her, parent-teacher relationships in segregated schools were "collaborative and trusting and mutual respect between home and school existed" (p. 131). Parents and teachers believed in "shared responsibility [and] strong community bonds" (p. 132).

Although segregation was a horrible practice, the home-school connections in Black schools were often strong and positive. Edwards explained,

> Before school desegregation, African-American parents had a place in the school. They felt comfortable coming and going to the school at their leisure. The faces of teachers and administrators were familiar to them because, in many instances, the teachers and administrators were their friends, neighbors, and fellow church members. Parents could voice their concerns, opinions, and fears about their children's educational achievement, and teachers and administrators listened and responded. (p. 3)

Stereotypical beliefs sometimes extend to some immigrant families who are also viewed as not valuing education. Gallimore and Goldenberg (1996), however, found immigrant Mexican families "value schooling, are available to the children, and are interested in and capable of providing literacy-enhancing experiences, particularly when children are younger" (p. 18).

*Issues of Power*

In order to examine issues of power, Shor (1992) suggested several questions educators might ask themselves. The first question might be: Whose story is being told in schools? When I became the reading teacher at my school, the books used for pull-out reading were almost exclusively about White and middle class children. When we read a book about a Black girl, Keisha was thrilled. She said it was her favorite book, and she asked me to help her look for other books by the same author. I was distressed to think that, as a fifth grader, this may have been the first book she had read about a girl who was similar to her.

Another question educators might ask is: Whose voice is being heard? As Shor (1992) noted, most of the talk in schools is teacher-talk. Conferences usually follow the teacher's agenda and are devoted to covering as much information in as little amount of time as possible.

Spaced 15-20 minutes apart, conferences are not designed to encourage dialogue (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). In some cases, I believe this is a defense mechanism. Teachers may be afraid of the questions parents might ask. A few years ago, a parent of one of my students was unhappy with me. She is one of the ghosts in the classroom I carry with me in every meeting with parents. When she came in for a conference, I asked her, as I asked all my parents, "Before I get started, is there anything you would like to discuss?" My paraprofessional later confessed to being astonished that I would open the door for the parent's questions and criticisms. I was just as amazed that she believed I would not give the parent a chance to help guide our discussion.

In addition, some teachers may be fearful they won't have the "right" answer or that a parent will challenge their authority in front of other parents. When my daughter was in fifth grade, I attended curriculum night. One of the fathers questioned the teacher at length about the new spelling program and expressed his opposition to it. My daughter's teacher accepted his criticism of the program and moved along with the agenda. For a younger, less experienced teacher the situation could have felt threatening. I heard one teacher remark before curriculum night, "If I time it just right, there won't be an opportunity for parents to ask questions."

Teacher talk becomes an issue of power if the teacher believes the classroom "belongs" to her and her opinion is the only one that matters. For a couple of years, I taught Jahmel. During a conference, the classroom teacher, the assistant principal, and I pronounced his name Juhmel. Finally, the speech teacher asked his mom, "Isn't his name pronounced Jahmel?" We were embarrassed about our mistake and apologized to the mother. The next year, when I picked him up from his new classroom, I mentioned to the teacher that his name should be pronounced Jahmel. She replied, "Not in *my* classroom. In here he's called Juhmel."

A third question is: “Who controls the resources?” (Shor, 1992). Miller and Goodnow (1995) wrote, “When power and status are asymmetrically distributed, as in teacher-pupil and parent-child relationships, the less powerful party’s access to resources—definition of tasks, rights to talk, control of conceptual tools—is limited” (p. 7). I would also include teacher-parent relationships, administrator-teacher relationships, and material resources in this category. In my school district, administrators make solo decisions on how local resources are used. One year, a point earned for the pull-out program was used to hire a regular classroom teacher. When more points were released in October, a pull-out teacher was added. In the meantime, struggling students were not receiving the extra support they needed in reading and math. And because of the delay, the school ended up hiring a less qualified teacher who had to be replaced the next year.

Finally, we should ask ourselves: Who controls what is taught in schools? (Shor, 1992). It sometimes appears the major testing companies decide what will be taught by what is tested, especially with the current reliance on test scores to determine promotion. If, as Shor argued, the tests are biased against minorities and females, an over-reliance on test sores can be catastrophic for students such as ten-year-old Keisha. When I mentioned to the assistant principal Keisha’s desire to become a school teacher, she replied, “With her test scores, Keisha might want to set her sights a little lower. College isn’t for everyone.”

*An Empowering Education*

Freire (1970/2002) argued against a banking concept of education where the teacher is seen as omniscient and carries the burden of having all the answers while students or parents often become powerless and simply receptacles to be filled. One danger in the banking concept is that parents and students may come to equate themselves with the peasants Freire quoted as

saying, “Excuse us. We ought to keep quiet and let you talk. You are the one who knows; we don’t know anything” (p. 63). When students and parents are denied their voices, they may become apathetic or resistant. The “cooperativeness, curiosity, humor, hope, responsibility, respect, attentiveness, openness, and concern about society” (Shor, 1992, p. 24) of the empowered, democratic school are then missing.

In place of a banking education, Shor (1992) argued for an empowering education, “a critical-democratic pedagogy for self and social change” (p.15). He described an empowering pedagogy as “participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, desocializing, democratic, researching, interdisciplinary, [and] activitist” (p. 17). As I planned my study, I kept Shor’s description in mind. I hoped to design a project that would relieve me of becoming the “narrating Subject” and my students and parents from becoming the “patient, listening objects” (Freire, 1970/2002, p. 71). I wanted to encourage participation and open the door to dialogue with families.

## Dialogue

*Our single voices may seem to be lost in the bitter wind.*

*But if we listen hard enough we can hear hundreds of other voices trying to sing like us.*

*Voices who have never dared sing before....There is no song unless we sing together.*

Heard, 1995, p. xi

One way to counteract the banking concept of education is through dialogue, the “democratic, directed, and critical discourse” Shor (1992, p. 87) advocated. Dialogue may be “one of the most overlooked and undervalued educational tools we have at our disposal” (Ada & Campoy, 2004, p. 41). Freire (1970/2002) believed dialogue to be essential if a pedagogy is to be “forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed” (p. 48). Gitlin and Russell (1994) found several advantages

when teachers engage in dialogue. Teachers felt less isolated, more trusting of each other, and more empowered. I believe those same advantages can be gained when teachers, parents, and students engage in dialogue.

Dialogue occurs when there is face-to-face interaction, when the researcher is willing to "enter into the situation of those with whom one is solidary" (Freire, 1970/2002, p. 49). Freire was not interested in presenting the gift of knowledge to the oppressed. He called this concept "false generosity" (p. 44). Rather, he wanted to work alongside the poor in solidarity. Many social and educational programs have failed, according to Freire, because those in power never took the time to dialogue with the "beneficiaries" of their well-intentioned projects. In education, "those with the most to gain or lose by its outcome" (Delpit, 1995, p. 6)—students, parents, and teachers—are sometimes excluded from dialogue. Teachers' schedules, even in elementary school, are frequently made for them. The rigidity of the schedule provides little time for dialogue between teacher and student or among students. The school may even encroach on the time parents are able to dialogue with their children at home. For parents who work late, the nightly drill of getting supper on the table, making sure children are bathed, and helping with homework may leave little time for conversing with their children.

Rather than including parents in dialogue, schools sometimes "run things by" a small group of parents for their rubber stamp of approval. One school recently rewrote their vision and mission statements and included a section on parent involvement. The section was written by a committee of teachers, approved by the entire faculty, and then given to a select group of parents to read before being disseminated to all parents who were asked to abide by the "rules" without first having an opportunity to give their suggestions.

It is no wonder that efforts to reach out to parents are sometimes met with resentment and resistance. A few years ago, I served on the administrative council of my church. At one meeting, I blurted out in frustration, “Why do we spend so much time and effort planning activities that church members obviously do not want to be part of?” I have felt that same frustration many times about parent workshops offered at my school. Teachers spend time preparing, and only a few parents show up. Obviously, parents are not interested in our well-intentioned efforts to bestow knowledge upon them. I have heard teachers at other schools say parents only come to their workshops if they bribe them with food. If it were not so discouraging for those involved, it would be amusing to learn that at one school some parents dropped by, picked up enough boxed dinners for their family members, and left without staying for the workshops.

Teachers, too, are often left out of the dialogue. They are required to attend staff development sessions they had no voice in selecting. At one staff development session, I watched as a paraprofessional, as part of a planned activity to engage participants, designed a car vanity plate including a trashcan and a clock. When I asked her what the pictures symbolized, she said, “This staff development is a waste of time!” Teachers are sometimes required to teach in a manner dictated by someone else in a method they philosophically disagree with. Teachers who question directives are encouraged to look for jobs elsewhere. Well-intentioned programs sometimes fall by the wayside, sabotaged by teachers who were forced to implement them.

Dialogue, in many cases, is rare among teachers. Planning time is usually spent grading papers, telephoning parents, making lesson plans, or attending meetings. There is little time built in during the school day for “folks to voice fears, to talk about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why” (hooks, 1994, p. 38). Even though common planning time has gained

prominence in recent years, the time is rarely spent in examining beliefs, norms, and values. Teachers, accustomed to covering materials and marking items off a to-do list, may believe time spent in dialogue is wasted.

Through dialogue, however, we can begin to recognize the valuable knowledge others have and we encourage them to share their knowledge with us so that we too can learn (Freire, 1970/2002). We are no longer student and teacher or parent and teacher but "co-investigators" (p. 80) engaged in critical thinking. By its nature, dialogue is inclusive and based on the belief that humans are always in "the process of becoming" (p. 84) and that our quest for knowledge and transformation is never ending. Ideally, dialogue leads to better understanding. In reality, however, the oppressor may feel threatened when dialogue results in critical social and political awareness in the oppressed. This imagined threat may be why administrators are reluctant to engage in dialogue with teachers or with parents and why teachers avoid dialoguing with parents. Llorens (1994) warned us that "unless teachers [and parents, I would add] believe that others will listen to them, that what they have to say is worth hearing, they will remain silent" (p. 8). Unfortunately, some administrators may prefer the silence rather than "a place where comfortable assumptions are questioned" (Carson, 1990, p. 171).

While hooks (1994) described dialogue as "one of the simplest ways…to cross the barriers that may or may not be erected by race, gender, class, professional standing" (p. 130), Freire (1970/2002) called it a "committed involvement" (p. 69). We cannot assume that, if we put people in the same room, dialogue will automatically occur. The stage needs to be set. Freire wrote that dialogue begins with "a profound love for the world and for people" (p. 89). Basing dialogue on love may sound strange and cause us to feel uncomfortable. We like, admire, respect, tolerate (at times), or even hate others, but we tend to draw the line at love. I believe that

our reluctance has to do with issues of power. I think we are afraid of crossing lines that separate oppressor and oppressed. We fear that love might make us vulnerable and strip us of power. After all, when we love someone, we tend to deny ourselves and put the other person's interests about our own. The kind of love Freire intended might be described as "not proud…not self-seeking….It always protects, always hopes, always perseveres" (1 Cor. 13: 4-7, New International Version).

There are other prerequisites for dialogue. Crotty (1998) included humility, mutual trust, and an "intense faith in humankind" (p. 149). Humility is seldom considered a virtue in education or in society in general. Admitting that we do not have all the answers is sometimes difficult. The preponderance of rules and regulations in education are evidence of the lack of trust and faith. One way to build trust may be through our willingness to take risks. We can risk the act of love, as Freire (1970/2002) suggested, and we can take the same risks we ask students to take. hooks (1994), for example, advocated that professors "bring narratives of their experiences into classroom discussions [to] eliminate the possibility that we can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators. It is often productive if professors take the first risk" (p. 21).

As I planned my study, I looked at programs that had been successful in building collaborative, respectful, and trusting relationships with parents. I considered how they addressed issues of power and how they provided opportunities for dialogue.

## The Home-School Connection: Worlds with Fuzzy Boundaries

Historically, schools and families have been considered dichotomous. In reality, they may be "overlapping worlds with fuzzy boundaries" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978, p. 26). Because the boundaries are not always clear, schools and parents sometimes find themselves in conflict. Examples include summer vacations that appear to be getting shorter (Stepp, 2004), mandatory

school attendance, retention, and absences from school for religious reasons (Feagans, 2004). It seems that schools have the edge when boundaries are set. While schools see it as their right to "intrude" on time outside of school by assigning homework, keeping students after school, or requiring summer reading, they tend to be protective and restrictive when it comes to the school day.

Vopat (1998) contended that schools are not always parent friendly and that "most barriers to parent involvement are found within school practices" (p. 144). Parents, for instance, are usually required to sign in at the front office when entering the school. The father of one of our first graders, a young Black male, said that when he visited his daughter's last school, "People followed me around, asking me who I was. I had on this huge orange visitor's tag but they still asked me." Since the tragic events of 9/11, racial profiling has been brought to the public consciousness. The school's message, clothed in the valid issue of school safety, seemed to the dad to be, "You are not welcome here."

*Collaboration and Respect*

Positive home-school relationships are usually based on collaboration and respect. Collaboration may be defined as the "organizational and interorganizational structures where resources, power, and authority are shared and where people are brought together to achieve common goals that could not be accomplished by a single individual or organization independently" (Edwards, 2004, p. 12). Although Christenson and Sheridan (2001) included "equal status among participants and adequate leadership and support" (p. 15) as keys to collaboration, educators and parents do not always share equal status. For instance, although parents are usually invited to retention meetings, the school typically has the final say in this important decision.

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), adequate leadership and support for home-school collaboration is missing in many schools. While researching *The Essential Conversation*, Lawrence-Lightfoot interviewed dozens of teachers. She found all the teachers decried their lack of preparation in working with parents. The teachers believed their schools of education failed them in three ways: by not giving them the "conceptual framework for envisioning the crucial role of families in the successful schooling of children" (p. 7), by not addressing the necessity and difficulty of fostering positive home-school relationships, and by not giving them practical "tools and techniques" (p. 8) to work with parents. The teachers also found fault with school systems that supported them with curriculum issues but gave them little guidance when it came to working with parents. Epstein (2001) wrote that administrators "are not prepared to guide and lead their staffs to develop strong school programs and classroom practices that inform and involve all families" (p. 6). Due to this lack of preparation and support, teachers are often left to their own devices in figuring out how best to build relationships with parents. Allexsaht-Snider (1995) found that teachers sometimes rely on colleagues and informal encounters to provide information about families and how to work with them.

Establishing relationships with parents is often time-consuming, requires effort, and involves risk. Edwards (1999) wrote, "Most research on parent involvement…fails to recognize the amount of mental and emotional energy teachers invest" (p. 5). Although many teachers would like to develop collaborative relationships with parents, they find little time during the school day to do so. Many parent meetings are held at night. After working all day, teachers are not generally enthusiastic about coming back to school for meetings. Meetings that occur during the school day may not be convenient for parents. Too often, meetings become "ritualistic occasions that do not allow for real contact, negotiation, or criticism between parents and

teachers" (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978, p. 27), Rather than collaboration, these meetings establish "boundaries between insiders (teachers) and interlopers (parents) under the guise of polite conversation and mature cooperation" (p. 29). Sometimes meetings occur when there is a problem and then "frustration and hostility seem to occur more than cooperation and mutual accord" (Edwards, 1999, p. 4).

How do we go about establishing collaborative and respectful relationships between parent and teacher? We might begin by viewing collaboration as "an attitude, not merely an activity. Attitudes convey essential beliefs and principles that school personnel and families have about one another and take into account…the appropriate and effective roles, rights, and responsibilities for families and schools" (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001, p. 69). One attitude that can be changed is the manner in which teachers view families that are different from their own. Delpit (1995) argued that current teacher education programs emphasize research on "failure and socioeconomic status, failure and cultural difference, and failure and single-parent households" (p. 172). It is no wonder that new (mostly White and middle class) teachers sometimes feel that working with minority, poor, or immigrant families is futile. To counteract this perception, pre-service and in-service teachers might be asked to explore their attitudes and possible biases against minority, poor, or immigrant families (Ada & Campoy, 2004).

*Trust and Communication*

According to Christenson and Sheridan (2001), parents and teachers identified trust as crucial for positive parent and teacher relationships. Trust is "the confidence that another person will act in a way to benefit or sustain the relationship…to achieve positive outcomes for students" (pp. 113-114). Parents and teachers suggested that one way to increase trust was through communication. Unfortunately, meetings with parents are usually meant to be one-way

communication where teachers talk and parents listen. Brief conferences and group meetings do not provide teachers the opportunity to "develop and foster an ongoing personal relationship with family members…[that] allows educators to learn about family beliefs, practices, values, or preferences" (p. 114). Miscommunication sometimes occurs between parents and teachers because of "infrequent contact, emotionally charged situations, and ineffective communication" (p. 118). A major concern when teacher talk replaces dialogue is there is really no way to gauge whether the parents understand or agree with what the teacher is saying. A teacher told me about a parent who was upset because she had not realized her daughter was in special education, even though the parent had been present during the placement meeting and the IEP (Individualized Educational Plan) meeting. The parent said, "I knew she was in resource. I didn't know resource was special education." While it may be tempting to fault the parent for not asking for clarification, I found myself in a similar situation with medical doctors. Because I did not know the "right" questions to ask and because I assumed the doctor would share vital information with me, years passed before I realized just how little I knew about my own medical history.

Christenson and Sheridan (2001) suggested the following guidelines for effective communication. First, teachers can phrase their concerns positively rather than from "a deficit-based or crisis orientation" (p. 120). The teacher can emphasize that she needs the parents' knowledge about the child in order to work more effectively with the student. Second, teachers should be careful not to use an authoritarian tone, to suggest they are telling parents what to do, or to imply that they are blaming the parents. When teachers make nonthreatening suggestions rather than demands, parents feel their knowledge and opinions are respected (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995). Third, teachers should view conflict as inevitable and healthy. Swap (1993) suggested that one reason parents are excluded from schools and from receiving negative

information is that schools hope to avoid conflict. Principals and teachers tend to feel threatened and defensive when confronted by parents. To lessen these feelings, staff can be taught conflict strategies, such as using "we" to indicate shared responsibility. They can focus on what parents and teacher believe are in the best interests of the child, and they can explore several options with the parents before a final decision is made. Schools could ensure that communication is two-way, that parents feel comfortable bringing up issues.

In addition to communication, Christenson and Sheridan (2001) suggested other ways teachers can promote trust: "sharing information and resources…focusing on parents' aspirations, concerns, and needs…discussing objectives openly…preparing for meetings" (p. 116). They suggested several questions that teachers can ask themselves:

> Do I accept parents as they are, or try to change them to "fit" a predetermined parent role? Do I try to build relationships or stay aloof? When I tell parents that I will do something, do I follow through? Am I always trying to teach, inform, or instruct parents about something, or do I also try to learn from and about them? (p. 116)

## Family Literacy Projects

*Imagine you are the parent of a first grade student. During the second week of school, your child's teacher calls to tell you that your child is struggling with reading and she has recommended him for extra help. You are stunned. Everything seemed fine in kindergarten. The teacher suggests you attend a parent workshop on reading. Your husband works late so you arrange for a babysitter. When you arrive, there are a handful of parents, none of whom you recognize. You look around for your son's teacher, but you do not see her. A teacher you've never seen before introduces herself as a reading teacher and begins a powerpoint presentation. The first slide reads, "Whatever their origins, reading and writing difficulties have a learned*

*component. They limit achievement in school learning. They get worse if untreated and many pupils get further behind their classmates over time even when they receive available treatments" (Clay, 1993, p. 7). Your heart sinks as the power point presentation continues, "A kindergarten student who has not been read to could enter school with less than 60 hours of literacy nutrition. No teacher, no matter how talented can make up for those lost hours of mental nourishment." Every slide seems to add to your feelings of anguish, guilt, and helplessness.*

The scenario described above is based on a handout that was given to me at a reading specialist meeting. While the parent is fictitious, the powerpoint presentation with the quotes are not. I have no way of knowing how many of the more than 50 reading specialists took the presentation back to their schools and used it. As I looked around the room, no one seemed uncomfortable with the idea of presenting these quotes to parents. On another occasion, I listened as a different reading teacher shared a parent workshop she had used. The teacher began with, "You know, teaching would be okay—if it weren't for the parents!" I saw several heads nod in agreement as she continued. "I tell parents 'The point of this presentation is so that you can support your child's teacher.' I developed this presentation because students tell me, 'My mom said to do this.' And I say, 'But that's exactly what I don't want you to do!' " She confided that not every parent was receptive to her ideas. She said, "There was this one mom who just would not be quiet. My mom happened to be visiting me and she wanted to punch the lady."

*Criticisms of Parent Involvement Programs*

Although Valdes (1996) was writing about her experiences with Mexican-American parents, her thoughts seem relevant to these situations. "These educators—because they have neither the experience nor the information that might help them make sense of the lives of people different from themselves—feel both angry and indignant at…parents" (p. 33). It is no wonder

that Valdes criticized parent involvement programs as “attempts to find small solutions to what are extremely complex problems” (p. 31), such as “the lack of social, political, and economic support for parents in dealing with housing, health, and other social problems” (Paratore, Melzi, & Krol-Sinclair, 1999, p. 5). Valdes contended parent involvement programs are based on White and middle class values and operate from a deficit view of minority families. When a parent cannot read or write well, for example, teachers may assume the parent does not value literacy in the home and may “discount the power of home and community uses of literacy, such as storytelling, reciting and memorizing religious texts, and playing word games” (Futrell, 1999, p. 157). Valdes described parent involvement programs as “well-intentioned efforts to reform families” based on “unfair perceptions” (p. 5) of minority families. These programs, in her opinion, shift the responsibility away from schools for not meeting the needs of minority students. Parents, instead, are blamed for not having “the ‘right’ attitudes toward the value of education, or they do not prepare their children well for school, or they are not sufficiently involved in their children’s education” (p. 17). Valdes took exception, in particular, to the suggestions made in *What Works* (U. S. Department of Education, 1987). She wrote:

> There are many activities on this list…that poor and newly arrived immigrant parents do not engage in. Moreover, there are assumptions in this seemingly innocuous statement about how families should live their lives.…For various important reasons, some families do not observe routines or discuss school events, or even tell their children stories. They cannot provide books or supplies, and they do not have hobbies. Many parents do not know how to read. Many others work late. Most have little understanding about school deadlines or about how to ‘monitor’ their children’s homework. (p. 33)

*Empowerment versus Intervention*

Valdes (1996) has valid concerns about parent involvement programs, but not every parent involvement program is based on a one-way (school-to-home) model. Most programs "fall somewhere along a continuum between a prescriptive, interventionist model and a participatory, empowering one" (Auerbach, 1995, p. 26). Therefore, it is probably not necessary, as Valdes argued, to abandon all parent involvement programs. Urdanivia-English (2003) stated that the issue "is not whether to intervene or not but, rather, why and how we should intervene" (p. 75). She continued, "Shielding us from learning alienates as surely as imposing beliefs and values upon us" (p. 74).

Auerbach (1995) suggested the real issue is one of empowerment versus intervention. She cautioned,

> In challenging the deficit hypothesis…we need to be careful not to abandon the potential of family literacy. This may be done best by designing programs in which parents can use literacy acquisition as a context to address critical social problems in their lives….It may turn out that parents' aims include helping with homework or reading to children; however, when the practices are imposed as social intervention, the danger is that they will turn away the people they are designed to assist. (p. 23)

Delpit (1995) and Edwards (2004) advocated empowering parents by explicitly teaching them the rules of the culture of power. Edwards wrote, "Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle class.…For our students to be successful…we must teach them the rules that will make them successful at school and at work" (p. 109). Delpit asked, "Do we as educators simply acknowledge that an inconsistency between

home and school exists? Or should we attempt to develop programs to bridge the gap between home- and school-based literacy practices?" (p. 66).

Edwards (1992) addressed the issue of reading aloud to children at home. Although this common request may seem simple and straightforward, Edwards argued that many parents do not know what teachers mean when they tell them to read aloud to their children. Musti-Rao and Cartledge (2004) found that teachers were not clear and explicit in their directions to parents and failed to answer questions, such as "How much do I read during each session? How do I structure these readings? What should I look for when we are reading?" (p. 16). In order to provide parents with support, Edwards developed the Parents as Partners in Reading program. Eldridge-Hunter (cited in Morrow, Tracey, & Maxwell, 1995) proposed a variation. In her reciprocal model, teachers shared knowledge with parents about how to read story books, and then parents described their experiences to teachers. In this model, parents benefited from explicit suggestions, and teachers gained valuable insights from parents.

Rogers (2003), however, found that giving parents explicit help may not be enough to overcome stereotypical views about poor and minority parents. For example, Vicky's mom practiced "the rules of the school" (p. 60). Her children had a set time and place for uninterrupted homework, and she checked homework to make sure it was neat and correct. If they made mistakes, she made them re-do it. She helped them study for tests. If the children had no homework, she had them read. She secured tutors. She visited the school. She checked books out from the public library for her children to read. In spite of all these efforts, one of Vicky's teachers, in an interview with Rogers, described the mother as uninvolved in her child's education.

Unfortunately, many parents come to believe they know nothing. Freire (1970/2002) wrote, “Self-deprecation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them….In the end they become convinced of their own unfitness” (p. 49). Rogers (2003) found that Vicky and her mom engaged in literacy activities within the home, such as filling out forms for school and initiating a petition in their neighborhood, but they did not recognize their own capabilities. Instead, they identified with the “low-literate” role (p. 4) given to them by the school.

How well programs interface with families, especially poor, minority, and immigrant families, may depend upon the program and its underlying theoretical assumptions. Educators who, knowingly or not, espouse the banking concept of education will see themselves as experts and parents as objects to be filled. Just because a program claims to be based on caring does not mean that the program is an empowering one. For example, none of Epstein’s (2001) models of parent involvement appear to emphasize relationship building or recognize that families have knowledge and experiences that can benefit children and teachers. The Parenting model seems to be based on the deficit mode; and the Communicating model, although described as “school-to-home and home-to-school communication,” appears to rely solely on conferences for home-to-school communication. Epstein’s Learning at Home model also seems to be based on one-way communication. Sending home mountains of paper can be overwhelming for any parent, and unless the information is sent in the parent’s primary language, the effort may be wasted.

*The Transformation Model*

McCaleb (1994/1997) believed that many family literacy projects are ineffective because they follow the transmission model (i.e., parents are trained to engage in school-like activities with their children and are taught how to be “better” parents). The transformation model, on the

other hand, recognizes that learning is based on the experiences that students bring with them, that learning occurs within students' communities and within a social context at school, that students are motivated to learn when they have a voice in deciding what is to be learned, and that learning often results in action. McCaleb used co-authored books as the basis for her transformative family literacy project and found several benefits: Dialogue and sharing of stories and values increased within families. Participants realized their voices were being heard and that they had something worthwhile to say. Children gained in self-respect and in respect for their parents. Students were actively engaged as researchers. The teacher learned about families and the community.

Ada and Campoy (2004) also based their Authors in the Classroom project on a transformative education process. Just as McCaleb did, Ada and Campoy began their project by asking teachers to create personal books to share with parents. They found many benefits to self-published books: Parents and students saw teachers as human beings. Literacy flourished. The home-school connection was enhanced. Parents and children spent enjoyable time together. Creativity blossomed. Understanding of cultural differences increased. Parents and students began to see themselves "as protagonists rather than as secondary characters in someone else's story" (p. 39).

Moll's "funds of knowledge" (Moll & Gonzalez, 1994) is another example of participatory, empowering parent involvement based on developing relationships between home and school. Funds of knowledge are "those historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (p. 443). Moll and Gonzalez explained, "One learns not only about the extent of the knowledge found among these working-class households, but about the special importance of the social and

cultural world, and of social relations, development of this knowledge" (p. 443). The value in viewing families from this kind of perspective is that families are no longer reduced to stereotypes. Teachers begin to substitute multicultural folk celebrations with "the lived practices and knowledge of the students and their families" (p. 445). Students build on their literacies by engaging in real-life activities. The typical drill-and-kill practices for "low-literacy" students are replaced with inquiry-based approaches, resulting in more engagement and motivation to learn on the part of students.

In order to build positive home-school relationships, Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995) found "the key to success is respect and an openness to learn with and from all concerned. We must set aside preconceived notions of 'the one right way' and listen to one another" (p. 7). Shockley et al. used parallel literacy practices, based on the belief "that all children want to learn, that all families want to support that learning, and that the road to literacy can and should be an enjoyable one" (p. 5). At school, children read a book they had chosen, talked about it, and then wrote. At home, children followed the same process of reading, talking, and writing. Guidelines for using the home reading journals were purposefully vague, allowing each family to decide how to best use them. Parallel practices also included family stories and family reflections that were shared at school.

## Conclusion

*A Ritual to Read to Each Other*

*If you don't know the kind of person I am*

*And I don't know the kind of person you are*

*Then a pattern that others have made*

*Will prevail in the world.*

*And following the wrong Gods home*

*We may each miss our own star.*

William Stafford, 1960/1998

My interest in parent involvement began from a deficit view. If only parents would get involved, my job would be easier! Too often, I viewed parents as either not caring or not involved in the manner I expected. Rather than seeing my job as creating "better" parents, I began to disavow myself of the notion that parents do not care about their children's educations.

As I discovered, there are many family literacy projects that have been able to build collaborative, respectful relationships between parents and teachers. They all seemed to be based on dialogue and a recognition that a culture of power exists within schools. They addressed power issues by bringing them to the forefront. Teachers, parents, and students became co-investigators. Literacy activities were based on the family's experiences. Differences and commonalities were recognized and valued.

In the next chapter, I describe the Reading and Writing Project, invitations to dialogue, and other attempts to build positive relationships with parents. I hoped that by being willing to share my personal experiences, to listen to parents, to dialogue with them, and to include parents in decision-making, we could begin the process of learning about and from each other.

# CHAPTER III

# THEORETICAL STANCE AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this chapter I share two intersecting journeys, the first a reluctant one towards critical theory, the second an account of the evolution of this action research project.

## Resisting and Then Embracing Critical Theory

While I think it is important to recognize, value, and respect the differences in others, I am sometimes concerned at efforts to label people. For example, a few years ago, the faculty at my school took personality surveys and were labeled "blue" for caring, "orange" for being a risk taker, and "gold" for being organized. Rather than creating understanding of others, which is the usual stated goal of such surveys, they seem to create divisions and power differentials. The surveys tend to sort and label people according to simple, finite terms.

Educators, in particular, seem to have a penchant for labeling people. Children are defined as learning disabled, attention deficit, gifted, minority, or at-risk. Parents are labeled in binary terms, such as supportive or indifferent. Teachers are called structured or nurturing, developmental or academic. In our efforts to neatly categorize people, we seem to deny the complexity of individuals. Humans appear one-dimensional and non-contextual. Labels tend to define and limit. They relieve us of the responsibility, time, and effort to get to really know others.

In spite of my misgivings, I tried, a few years ago, to attach a label to my beliefs and my theoretical orientations. Although there was one label I resisted, I could see myself fitting into several other categories. I could easily see myself as constructivist. As a public school teacher, I

believe that children as well as adults learn through interaction with others. I could also see myself as an interpretivist. To gain understanding, I frequently reflect on my own teaching practices. I could see the value, in certain studies, of a positivist focus on validity, reliability, and generalizability in research. I found postmodernism somewhat nebulous but sometimes found myself deconstructing beliefs and ideas. The only framework I resisted was critical theory. As a child of the 50s and 60s, I felt uncomfortable with its talk of Marxism and Communism.

*Resisting Critical Theory*

My dad was a World War II veteran and prisoner-of-war. I grew up listening to his war stories about the Russian soldiers who liberated his prisoner-of-war camp and the cruelty he witnessed. During the Cold War, he believed that Communism was as great a threat to democracy as the Nazis had been. I was too young to be aware of the McCarthy hearings, we never had a fall-out shelter, and I vaguely remember the Cuban missile crisis. All of these things, however, were background to my childhood. During my doctoral program, just reading a chapter entitled "Critical Inquiry: the Marxist Heritage" (Crotty, 1998, p. 112) made me uncomfortable. I could not imagine labeling myself a critical theorist.

My other concern with critical theory was its call to action. Depoy, Hartman, and Haslett (1999) wrote that critical theorists "seek to understand human experience as a means of changing the world" (p. 562). They reject the status quo and seek to bring about change by "interrogating commonly held values and assumptions, challenging conventional social structures, and engaging in social action" (Crotty, 1998, p. 157). Although I grew up during an era of sex, age, and racial discrimination, I never saw myself as an activist. As a child, teenager, and young adult, my role was to obey and not to question.

*Taking a Critical Stance on My Experience*

As a young adult, I witnessed sex and age discrimination in the workplace. The personnel director at my first job (as a secretary) spoke openly of offering men higher salaries and of passing over older workers for promotions. Growing up in a small southern town, I also knew racial discrimination existed. Although the population of my hometown was only 2000, it had two high schools, one for Blacks and one for Whites.

As a teacher, I accepted the status quo. Principals, in recognition of their authority, were never called by their first names, and they were, without exception, males. After four years of college, my teacher's salary was about the same as my secretary's salary had been.

More important, I soon realized that I had little voice in school decisions. My job was to maintain order in the classroom so that students were not referred to the principal and angry parents did not call the office. I was to be a team player and not question decisions or policy. A "theme of silence" existed (Freire, 1970/2002, p. 106). I found this statement by Heard (1989) to be true: "Silence is the last thing you'll find in most schools; yet the silence that surrounds telling the truth …is pervasive" (p. xx).

Freire (1970/2002) believed that we constantly re-create and transform our worlds. I agree with his assertion. I also believe there are times when we feel our voices are not being heard, times when we feel powerless. Freire called these times "limit-situations" (p. 99) and said it is not the situation itself but our reaction to it that results in feelings of hopelessness.

In my first year as a teacher, I found myself in a limit-situation. I entered the teaching profession idealistically, but I quickly became disillusioned with the lack of respect I sensed from some students. I felt isolated, with little support from administrators or other teachers. As a junior high teacher, I seldom had contact with parents. For that, at least, I was thankful. A call or

note from a parent caused my palms to sweat and my voice to shake. I felt powerless to make a difference in the lives of my students, in my own situation, or in the teaching profession. I saw myself as incapable of re-creating or transforming my world. When my husband was transferred overseas at the end of the school year, I was relieved to know I would not return to teaching.

Four years later when I returned to public schools, I found little had changed. However, my love for teaching resurfaced, and I stuck with it. I realized there were some things I could control. I began to believe that I could make a difference in the lives of children and that parents could be allies and not enemies.

More than twenty years later, I am still a teacher and still in public schools. There have been many improvements over the years. Teachers, to some extent, are included in decision making at my school. I call my principal by *her* first name. As a veteran teacher, I feel respected by most parents, students, and administrators. With degrees and experience, my salary is competitive with other professions. The feelings of hopelessness occur less frequently.

In spite of all these changes, I find myself becoming more, not less, political. For years, I felt oppressed as a teacher and in many ways I still do. It seems odd that teachers work with children, yet their knowledge about children is rarely valued or recognized (Himley & Carini, 2000). State mandates, scripted lesson plans, and top-down management often undermine teacher expertise, professionalism, and decision-making.

*Developing a Critical Stance: Two Examples of Parental Oppression*

The oppression in schools, however, is not limited to teachers. Parents—especially poor and nonwhite parents—are often denied a voice in schools. Recently, for example, I witnessed a struggle between the school and the parents of a Black first grader. Before choosing the location of their new home, the father had researched schools on the internet. He wanted to make sure his

children would attend a “good” school. Soon after the year began, the first grader’s teacher informed the mother that the child was behind academically. The mother was not surprised or alarmed to learn that her child was struggling. She believed that, with some extra help at home, the child would improve.

In the spring, the parents were notified that the child was being considered for retention. Retention meetings are often tense. In this case, the fact that all the educators were White and the mother was Black may have added a layer of friction. I doubt anyone sitting around the table, with the possible exception of the mother, had given any thought to the relationship between Black women and White women. According to hooks (1994), “The point of contact between black women and white women was one of servant-served, a hierarchical, power-based relationship” (p. 94). She warned that, until Black women and White women can “acknowledge the negative history [dating back to slavery times] which shapes and informs our contemporary interaction” (p. 102), the relationship will be strained. Whether or not race or the fact that the child was one of six children played a part in the retention issue is impossible to say. I do know of other children in first grade, White children in the typical two-child family, who were reading at the same level but were not brought up for retention.

In spite of the parents’ efforts on behalf of their first grader, I doubt that the school would describe them as supportive. Instead of going along with the school’s wishes about retention, the parents expressed their disagreement and argued for promotion. While the assertion of Coughlin (1997) seems harsh, there may be some truth to what she wrote,

> We all have this wonderful fantasy that schools are here to help our children. The reality is that schools have very little to do with the children at all. They are a government institution that is as political and full of bureaucracy as any other government agency.

> Schools care about numbers and policies and the standards of our children comparatively. They are not about your individual child. (p. 35)

Advocating for children is not only difficult for parents. It can be difficult for teachers who sometimes find themselves in the unenviable position of choosing between what they think is best for a child and supporting a colleague. Taylor (1997) acknowledged that "teachers often stand alone when they advocate" (p. 10). In one instance, a teacher confronted me when she thought I sabotaged her efforts. At the time, I had not met Jane and had worked only briefly with her daughter Amanda. (Over the course of the next two years, I came to know Jane and Amanda well, as they became focal participants in my study.) The classroom teacher had asked for a meeting with Jane to discuss Amanda's academic difficulties. The teacher emphasized her desire that Jane do more to help Amanda at home, but when Jane mentioned that she helped Amanda by reading her nightly readers to her, the teacher quickly interjected, "*She* should be reading them to you." When Jane described how she helped Amanda with written assignments, the teacher replied, "But I want her to do one a night and not all four on Monday night." McGee (1996) addressed this issue of respect:

> Perhaps our most important discovery was that human relationships must precede academic pursuits. To earn [parents' trust], we had to accept them for who they were. At times, this mean overlooking actions we disagreed with. But [their] values were not ours to question or change, so we focused on our families' strengths. (p. 32)

During the conference, I sensed Jane's mounting frustration. She asked, "Are you telling me Amanda is going to have to repeat kindergarten again?" With Friere's voice ringing in my ears, I said, "We're not thinking about having her repeat kindergarten, are we?" Everyone in the room, except the mother, knew that retaining the child twice in kindergarten was never a

possibility. A few weeks later, the classroom teacher let me know that "Jane has completely stopped helping Amanda at home now that she knows we can't retain her." I strongly sensed her displeasure with me for informing Jane retention was not a consideration.

*Embracing Critical Theory as a Lens for Studying Relationships with Parents*

As I struggled with how to help students and parents such as the ones I have described, I began to embrace critical theory. I realized the importance of dialoguing with parents. The teachers I described are caring people who believe they are doing what is best for students. Unfortunately, when teachers come across as "experts," they alienate many parents. For instance, one parent at my school reacted negatively to a parent workshop called "Reading Success Begins at Home." She responded to the flier with a note that said, "No thank you! I already know that." She did, however, attend a meeting that invited parents to share their thoughts about how to improve the program. The difference in the parent's reaction may be attributed to the tone of the workshops. Delpit (1995) found that parents are more likely to attend workshops advertised as "Come help us improve," rather than workshops advertised as "Come and we will help you become better parents."

In this study, I looked at the home-school connection from a critical theorist's perspective. I wanted to examine the culture of power that typically resides in the upper and middle classes and often thrives in schools (hooks, 1994). In meetings and discussions with parents, I hoped to encourage dialogue, based on mutual respect, between all participants. Even though I am a private person, I was willing to take the risk of sharing my personal experiences with students and parents. My goal was that we would become co-investigators of "ways of talking, ways of writing… and ways of interacting" (Delpit, 1995, p. 25). Rather than assuming a solo leadership role, I sought to share the decision-making process with students and their parents.

I have not completely changed my mind about labels. I still believe it is impossible to define individuals by one characteristic or one context. Rather than being gold, blue, or orange, we are "whole human beings with complex lives and experiences" (hooks, 1994, p. 15). With that said, I can no longer deny the value of critical theory, i.e., not only to attempt to understand the human experience but to make a difference. Relieved of the burden of being an expert with all the answers, I can tap into the knowledge of others, especially those who traditionally have been powerless. I have an inkling of what it is like to be powerless. It has been more difficult for me to accept that, by virtue of being White and middle class, I am part of the culture of power and the privileges that go along with it. Through a gradual process, I came to embrace critical theory as more than a label. It became a way of looking at the world (DePoy, Hartman, & Haslett, 1999).

## Action Research Design

Sagor (1992) warned, "Until teachers become involved in generating the knowledge that informs their practice, they will remain cast as subordinate workers rather than dynamic professionals" (p. 4). He compared teaching to the blue-collar model of work where "the foreman always knows best, and it is the line workers' job to simply follow directions and meet his expectations" (p. 4). I am reminded of the banking concept of education. Only this time, teachers rather than students are the receptacles to be filled. Teachers, in turn, may perpetuate the banking concept of education. They may see themselves as "experts" who must deposit knowledge in students and parents.

The design for this study is action research, the antithesis of the blue-collar model Sagor (1992) described. In action research, the teacher identifies an area that concerns her and then implements a plan to address her concern. The goal is to understand and improve educational

practices (Carr & Kemmis, 1986/2002). From a critical theory perspective, action research focuses on "democracy, equity, liberation, and life enhancement" (DePoy, Hartman, & Haslett, 1999, p. 563). One way action research accomplishes this equity and liberation is by including teachers, students, and parents in the decision making process through dialogue. When dialogue is the norm, the school becomes "a place where comfortable assumptions are questioned" (p. 171) and where teachers and parents are no longer "bypassed in efforts to improve schools" (p. 167).

Another way to accomplish the goals of action research is to examine issues of power. Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) wrote, "We believe that empowerment begins with a group of educational practitioners who view themselves not merely as consumers of someone else's knowledge, but as knowledge creators in their own right" (p. 6). While I agree with this assertion, I believe we might include all stakeholders (students, parents, and administrators) in education, not just teachers.

One concern I have about action research is the emphasis that seems to be placed on problem solving. For example, Hammersley (2004) described action research as a spiraling process. The practitioner identifies an area of concern, designs and undertakes a plan of action, evaluates the plan, and adjusts the original plan or discards the plan for a different one. The process continues spiraling to a "closer and closer approximation to an ideal solution of the problem, based on genuine theoretical understanding of the processes involved" (p. 166). This focus on problem solving and an "ideal solution" may be problematic for critical theorists. Hammersley is not alone in viewing action research in this manner; many definitions of action research focus on problem solving (Patton, 2002; Anderson et al., 1994; Glesne, 1999). My concern with problem solving is that it seems to be a terminal process, a "deliberate search for

truth" (Schumck, 1997, p. 28). Once the "right" answer has been determined (the problem solved), we can move on to something else.

Rather than emphasizing problem solving, Freire (1970/2002) advocated problem posing, a "never-ending search for meaning, for self" (p. 155). In this study, I posed the problem of how to improve my relationship with parents of the children I taught. I did not expect to find "the answer," but I did hope to shed light on my own practices and to make changes in my attitude and practices. I designed invitations to parents that included a series of parent meetings (called the Reading and Writing Project), open to all my parents and students. During the project, students, their parents, and I wrote on selected topics and shared our stories. The second invitation to parents was to discuss their perspectives on schooling and their participation in their children's education.

In preparation for my study, I planned topics for the Reading and Writing Project meetings. However, I knew I could not rigidly adhere to my plans because I needed to allow space for parent and student input. The study was not mine but ours. I had to be willing to give up some control, something I typically struggle with, and be willing to share the decision-making. I wanted to create a climate of trust, collaboration, and respect so that all participants felt comfortable offering suggestions and sharing their thoughts. Appendix A shows the meetings as they evolved with parental input. I hoped the interviews which were designed as conversations would provide an opportunity for me to get to know a few parents better as I learned about their views on parental involvement and their relationships with the school.

*The Setting*

Because my study involved action research, I chose Hillside Elementary as the site for my study. (All names are pseudonyms except for Ricky. Although parents and students gave

permission for their names to be used, I chose to protect their identities. I used Ricky's name only because it was part of a story he wrote.) I have taught at Hillside for many years. Hillside is a large elementary school in the suburbs of a large city in the southeastern United States. It has a somewhat unique location. It is not in a town, but at a "corner" where several city limits converge. The community was thrilled when the school opened in 1994. They took great pride in the school. Teachers were surprised by the abundance of parent volunteers.

Initial student enrollment was about 900. To say the area has experienced phenomenal growth in the last few years would be an understatement. During the last few years, three additional elementary schools have been built in the area to relieve overcrowding. Enrollment at Hillside peaked at 1700 a few years ago. The current enrollment of 1200 is expected to climb. Strip malls have replaced chicken farms; subdivisions dot the landscape. With the growth has come some diversity in the student population. The percentage of minority students almost tripled, from 11% in 2000 to 31% in 2004. Of the 31% minority students, 22% were Black and Latino. The number of students receiving free and reduced lunches increased from 6% to 17% (Accountability Report: Results-Based Evaluation System, 2004-05 & 2005-06).

Before the school opened in 1994, much planning and thought went into developing a positive school climate. Administrators met with students and parents, requesting input on everything from the school mascot to student recognition. They consulted the faculty and arranged for a three-day staff development so that teachers could get to know each other.

Today, however, we are not the same school. Due to natural attrition, no administrators and few teachers remain from the original staff. The parents who were consulted are long gone. As a recent parent survey indicated, what worked several years ago may not be working now. For the first time ever, parents rated our school lower than the county average in several areas.

Annual staff perception surveys have declined in almost every area in the past five years, while student discipline referrals have increased markedly. Although the school still enjoys a good reputation within the school district (test scores are high), clearly there is room for self-examination and improvement.

*The Participants*

Participation in the Reading and Writing Project meetings was open to all the kindergarten and first grade students I taught during the 2005-06 school year, their parents, and their classroom teachers. I was also a participant. In addition to attending the meetings and authoring books, five parents agreed to be interviewed by me.

As a pull-out teacher, I work with students who struggle with reading. After my students for the 2005-06 school year were identified, I sent a letter home to the parents introducing myself and explaining the program. I invited them to a meeting at night. In the past, other than the one meeting, my contact with parents was limited to notes on the reading log or an occasional phone call. Occasionally, if a teacher asked, I attended teacher-parent conferences.

During the study, the majority of my students were White males. When I first became the reading specialist, many of my students were Black or Latino, even though the school population was mostly White. When teachers complained about students being pulled several times a day, the decision was made that ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) students would not be served by me. In first grade, 22% of my students were Black or Latino. Because kindergarteners are not served in ESOL, they were my most diverse group. Although our school population was 22% Black and Latino in 2004-05, more than half of kindergarten retainees were Black or Latino and were served by me.

The parents I interviewed reflected my students' ethnicity. Their children included three boys and two girls, one kindergartener and four first-graders. The interviewees along with the parents of other students I taught were invited to a series of eight meetings. Based on the interviews and my contact with parents at the meetings and in other settings (e.g., conferences and informal conversations), I chose to focus my study on three parents: Theresa, Jane, and Ann. Following is a brief description of each.

*Theresa*. Theresa has three children. Her daughter was in third grade at the time of the study. Her son, the focus of this study, was repeating kindergarten. Her third child was a toddler. Theresa was born in Mexico but has lived in the United States since she was 14. She worked as an executive manager at a hotel during the time of the study. Theresa's written and spoken English are easily understood. She seemed comfortable during the interviews and in all our encounters.

*Jane*. While I did not know the other two interviewees until the 2005-06 school year, I met Jane the year before my study when Amanda was repeating kindergarten. I worked with Amanda briefly that year and met Jane at a conference (described earlier in this chapter). Amanda had behavioral and academic issues in school and had been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Jane has two older children, a daughter in her 20s who no longer lived at home and a teenage son. At the time of the study, Jane worked in a pediatrician's office. When I asked her about literacy activities in her home when she was young, she said she had been raised in foster care and did not remember.

*Ann*. Ann was the last parent I interviewed. I tested Jack at the beginning of the year but he did not qualify for extra help. Based mainly on repeated requests by Jack's classroom teacher, I began to work with him in November. Ann was concerned because Jack was one of the

youngest in his class. He had struggled through most of kindergarten, “pulling it out at the last minute.” According to Ann, he seemed to be following the same pattern in first grade. She did not want him to struggle all the way through school. Although she and Jack’s dad wanted him retained in first grade because of his immaturity, at the end of the school year, he was performing on grade level and was promoted to second grade. I met Jack’s dad a few times. He came to the retention meeting and to one of our Reading and Writing Project meetings. I also ran into him one day when he came to eat lunch with Jack. Ann has a college degree and worked part-time. She volunteered in Jack’s classroom and was active with PTA. Ann had one other child, a daughter, who was in pre-school at the time of the study.

*Time Line*

After my reading groups were set in August, I sent parents a rather long letter introducing myself, describing the pull-out reading program, and inviting them to a night meeting. At the meeting, held in September, I talked about the extra reading help their children would receive. I mentioned that I would be inviting them to a series of night meetings beginning in October (the Reading and Writing Project) and that I would also like to interview several parents.

*Phase I: Preparation and design*. In the summer of 2005, I received permission from my school district to conduct the study which included a series of family meetings at night and interviews. For the meetings, I mapped out suggested topics, read alouds, and writing topics, although I knew my plans were subject to change once the project started (Appendix A). I wrote “pre” and “post” open-ended interview questions. (See Appendices B and C.) Due to slow approval from the Institutional Review Board, I was unable to meet with parents until October. Ideally, I would have liked to interview parents at the beginning of the school year before their children had been served in pull-out. As one mom candidly said during one parent discussion

session, “I ‘mold’ myself each year to fit teacher expectations.” I would have preferred interviewing parents before we had established a relationship, before they tried to mold themselves to my expectations.

I met individually with the classroom teachers of my students to explain the project and to invite them to the meetings. I worked with students from 15 different classrooms. Five teachers attended at least one meeting, some bringing their own children with them at my invitation. My daughter also attended one meeting. Because I had written a story about her, my students were anxious to meet her. Having her there served the added benefit of letting families see me in the role of parent as well as teacher.

*Phase II: Data collection*. The data I collected included notes, transcripts, and charts from the night meetings; transcripts from interviews; stories written by parents and students; emails, notes, and conversations with parents and teachers; and notes from conferences and other meetings. (See Appendix D.)

In October, I sent home a letter inviting parents and students to the first night meeting. I discussed the meeting with my students at school. The students were excited about being included in the meetings and eagerly anticipated the date. The day after our first meeting, I telephoned the parents who had not attended and explained the project. I sent home the consent forms for them to look over and consider signing.

At the beginning of the study, I thought that students might attend every other meeting. However, the students had a different idea and decided they would be part of every meeting. They quickly dubbed them “our meetings” and eagerly looked forward to them. “When is our next meeting?” was an almost daily refrain. As the meetings progressed, parents also began making suggestions (e.g., adding an extra meeting) and became part of the decision-making

process. As an action researcher who invited collaboration, I was pleased that students and eventually parents took ownership of these meetings.

During the Reading and Writing Project, students and parents had nine opportunities to write books. I chose to use co-authored books because I hoped that writing might be used to break down barriers that sometimes exist between home and school. I wrote on the same topics families did. If I wanted parents to share their lives with me, I had to be willing to let them get close—to see, hear, and know me as well. Ada and Campoy (2004) wrote:

> Many parents from economically or culturally marginalized groups may feel intimidated by the school. They may have lacked the opportunity to attend school themselves, or their own school experiences may have been painful. They may look on the teacher with respect, but they may also feel a great distance. By choosing to create books about themselves, their families, or their life experiences, teachers open up a different route of communication with parents. There are certain human experiences we can all relate to….At this very human level, there are no false distinctions between the teacher and the parents. (p. 33)

I also believed that writing can be a liberating and empowering act. I saw the writing activities as an opportunity to give voice to parents who may have felt as though their voices had not been heard before. Ada and Campoy (2004) wrote,

> Instead of being individuals who ignore or fear one another, we can become community members who share one another's stories, embrace one another's pain, and rejoice in one another's happiness. By sharing our stories with one another, we can start feeling powerful enough to take on the work of making our neighborhoods a better place to live and our world one of well-being and justice for all. (p. 4)

I also used interviews to collect data because they are "one of the most common and powerful ways" (Fontana and Frey, 2000, p. 645) we have to understand others. I mentioned the interviews to parents at our October meeting and asked them to let me know if they were interested. I also sent home a notice they could sign and return. Although I originally thought I would conduct four interviews before and four after the project, I had difficulty in scheduling interviews due to parents' busy schedules. One interview had to be rescheduled twice due to the parent's work conflicts. I rescheduled another parent twice before she offered to take the interview questions home to answer. After several follow-up reminders, I gave up on getting the answers from her. I scheduled an interview with a dad, but he did not show up at the appointed time. I followed up with him. He asked me to call to schedule another time, but he never returned my call. I happened to run in to him in the hall one day at school. He thanked me for helping his son with reading and apologized for never getting back to me about the interview. He said he had been traveling with his job.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour each and took place at school. For the first two interviews, I asked open-ended questions, such as, How would you describe your involvement in your child's education? (See Appendix B.) For the last three interviews, I asked questions from both sets of interview questions (Appendices B and C).

The interviews I conducted with parents were conversational. I anticipated that many of them would be a little nervous, even though I provided the questions beforehand or gave them some idea of what to expect. Although many people have an aversion to being tape recorded, all the participants readily agreed.

*Phase III: Data analysis*. Carr and Kemmis (1986/2002) postulated that educators often base their educational decisions and beliefs on tradition and habit, without questioning or

reflecting on their underlying theoretical perspectives. The habits are often based on a presumption that “the truth” is self-evident and that every rational person shares the same perspective. Carr and Kemmis encouraged educational practitioners to question their interpretations, observations, and judgments through the use of action research. From a critical theory perspective, I had already begun to interrogate commonly held beliefs and assumptions (Crotty, 1998) about issues of dialogue and power in education in general and in my own school in particular. Through the interviews and night meetings, I narrowed my focus and began to question my own interpretations, observations, and judgments as they related to the students I taught and their parents.

Through data analysis, I began to make meaning of what I had learned. I began with the interviews where I had the opportunity to talk one-on-one with individual parents for an extended time. The night meetings provided opportunities for me to observe parents working with their children, talking to other parents, or interacting with the teachers who attended. Not surprisingly, at the end of the data collection, I felt most closely connected to the parents I had interviewed, probably because I had gotten to know them more fully through the one-on-one time spent in conversation. From a critical theory perspective, the interviews were important because they provided an opportunity for dialogue. At the meetings, communication sometimes became one-way; there were times when I stood before the group and talked. It is a little difficult to avoid being seen as the expert under those circumstances. Some of the one-way communication (for example, reading stories I had written) may have allowed parents and students to know me better. The interviews, however, allowed me to learn about their families. They also provided a basis that supported further dialogue.

Data analysis of the interviews included several steps. First, I listened to the taped interviews and transcribed them. I read and reread the transcriptions. I jotted notes in the margins. I sorted the responses by the questions I asked and compared different responses. I used open coding, writing down ideas that seemed important. Charmaz (2002) describes coding as "the pivotal first analytic step that moves the researcher from description toward conceptualization of that description" (p. 38). As suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990), I focused on sentences and paragraphs and asked myself, "What is the major idea brought out in this sentence or paragraph?" (p. 120). For example, when Theresa described how her aunt would send her to buy sodas at the store, I coded the passage as fear (of getting lost and of having to ask a policeman for directions) and as motivation (to learn English). From a critical theory perspective, in particular, I looked for things that surprised, bothered, or worried me (Power, 1996). When Jane, for instance, stated, "I'm scared to death they're going to hold her back again this year," I worried that she was operating under the false assumption that Amanda would repeat both kindergarten and first grade. One of the codes I used throughout Jane's interview was feelings (i.e., anger, guilt, frustration, fear, sadness, and incompetence). Through data reduction (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), I was able to compare what each participant had to say about a particular topic. For example, under "parent background," I noted that Theresa stated her parents lacked formal education and were not able to help her much with school work, Jane said she did not have much support because she was raised in foster homes, and Ann said her mom had been "hard" on her. In this case, rather than finding a unifying theme, the data suggested ways the parents' educational experiences had been different.

The initial coding resulted in sixteen categories: parent background, siblings, learning to read, family, motivation, lack of institutional support, time, role reversal, feelings, altruism,

institutional support, homework, communication, other parents, project suggestions, and advocates. As I read through the codes and the quotes that had generated them, I asked myself questions (e.g., How did parents' experiences as students influence how they are involved in their children's education? Why do schools seem to fail to involve parents like Theresa who have so much to offer?). I also wrote memos (e.g., Ann mentioned her other child was a "good" student and would not need help with reading. Theresa's view of parenting seems to differ from the school's view. Ann seems to have more flexibility with issues of time. I find it interesting one mom said, "Parents aren't really discouraged from coming to things at school," instead of, something like, "Parents are encouraged to come to school.")

Moving from open coding to axial coding, I examined the sixteen codes to see if they were related in any way. Parent background, siblings, learning to read, family, homework, and motivation all seemed to fit under a broader category of different ways that parents can be involved in their children's education. The data related to time, role reversal, institutional support/lack of institutional support seemed to relate to emotions. I had originally classified feelings as one of the sixteen codes, but it seemed to be a theme that permeated several subcategories. As I returned to my data, some categories were discarded because they seemed to be isolated bits of information. For example, the category of role reversals and altruism were eliminated.

Another important piece of data included the stories written by students and parents. During the Reading and Writing Project meetings, I usually read a story to the group and then asked them to write something in response. For example, one night I read a children's book and asked families to write an acrostic using an adjective chart I provided. I read the stories written by families numerous times and sorted them by student, by author, and by topic. I typed

transcripts of each one and photocopied them. As I analyzed these stories, I looked for themes. I asked myself, “What can I learn about the child or family from this story?” And “What can I learn about the home-school connection?” Sometimes I asked parents to work in groups and record their responses on chart paper. For example, at one meeting I read a book about the perfect dad and asked parents to discuss and write about the perfect teacher. The books, charts, and observational notes from the meetings provided more information as I sought to gain an understanding of family beliefs and experiences. The meetings also provided an opportunity for parents and students to get to know me better as I shared stories I had written about my family and myself.

As I constantly compared the data from interviews, meetings, and books written by families, my data reached the point of theoretical saturation. No new categories were identified.

## Revisiting My Research Questions

In Chapter I, I listed several questions that I planned to address during my study. They included: How can teachers develop an understanding and appreciation for differences in the ways families involve themselves in their children’s education? How do we cross the barriers that seem to exist between home and school? What part does dialogue play? How can schools and homes learn to work together to support children’s literacy efforts?

A key component of action research is reflection. During the process, the researcher constantly questions the direction the project is taking and is able to make changes. Questions that were important at the beginning of the study may be discarded or refined. As I interacted with students and parents, I found that the focus of some of my questions had shifted. As a pull-out teacher, I am in a rather unique position when it comes to building relationships with parents. My formal and informal contacts with parents are less frequent than a classroom

teacher's encounters would be. I have no room mom or parent volunteers. I do not have the opportunity to interact with parents on field day, at class parties, or on field trips. I am not in the cafeteria on the days they drop by to eat lunch with their children. I work with more students but spend less time with them. As a reading teacher, I am primarily concerned with helping students be successful in reading, and some of my initial questions focused on improving the literacy abilities of my students. As I met with parents either at the Reading and Writing Project meetings, during interviews, or in conferences or casual encounters, the focus of my study became: How can I as a pull-out teacher develop positive relationships with parents?

## Conclusion

In the next chapters, I describe the ways Theresa, Jane, and Ann were involved in their children's education and how their views of parental involvement sometimes differed from the school's traditional view of ways parents are involved. I describe the fear and frustrations they sometimes experienced as they worked with the school.

In the final chapter, I make recommendations for teachers who are interested in improving the home-school connection. As a practitioner, I strongly believe that research, especially research such as mine that involves the parent-teacher relationship, should be accessible to other practitioners. One way to do that, I believe, is through the use of narrative. Wolcott (2001) wrote:

> If you are comfortable in the role of storyteller (and you *do* have a story to tell, if you care to regard the reporting of research that way), here is an opportunity to assume that role, inviting the reader to see, through your eyes, what you have seen. (p. 31)

Certainly, the stories I have chosen to tell have helped me understand myself and the families who participated in my study better. Although I sometimes worried that my research

was too personal and that I risked becoming self-absorbed, I did not believe I could ask parents to reveal their stories without examining my own.

Rather than generating theory, my work concludes with interpretations. Wolcott (2001) described interpretation as "our efforts at sensemaking" (p. 33) and suggested that researchers:

> Take your work as far as your able. Point the way for others.…If you have presented your descriptive account well and offered what you can by way of analysis (and interpretation), you have fulfilled the obligation to make your research accessible.…I want my work to stand on its descriptive adequacy. (p. 77, 83)

In my descriptive accounts, I hope that others are able to see, hear, and know the participants in my study and that any insights gained might be beneficial to those who are interested in developing a closer relationship with families.

# CHAPTER IV

# CONNECTING AND DISCONNECTING HOME AND SCHOOL: PARENTS DEFINING THEIR INVOLVEMENT AND EXPRESSING EMOTIONAL BARRIERS

## Differing Views of Involvement

For several years, I have been interested in the home-school connection. I believed that children would benefit and schools would improve if parents were more involved. One of the problems I found with parental involvement, however, was in defining exactly what it meant. Schools often define it by the number of parents who come to conferences or join PTA. Teachers sometimes describe it as helping with homework or volunteering in the classroom. Parents may consider themselves involved if they ask about their child's day or make sure they are rested for school. Liu (1998) suggested that parental engagement with their children at home, such as "maternal warmth, high levels of emotional involvement and interaction" (p. 214), positively influenced the academic performance of students. The difficulty, of course, is in measuring maternal warmth or emotional involvement and even in knowing, with any degree of certainty, what occurs within the home.

Parental involvement (how it is defined by both parents and teachers) often plays a major role in the kind of relationships that we build with parents. Initially, my interest in this area came from a deficit viewpoint. My frustration, especially with White and middle class parents, is evident in a paper I wrote several years ago:

> It has been my experience that parents who are the most visible at school are not necessarily the most involved in their children's education. After all it is much easier—and much more fun—to plan a class party than to consistently work at home with a child who is struggling in reading.

In a section titled "Making a Commitment," I found myself venting about the "lack of parental involvement:"

> In a recent meeting, a parent said he was willing to spend any amount of money to help his child. He did not offer to spend time helping him. Parents are often looking for a quick fix to help their children, buying programs such as Hooked on Phonics or paying tutors. One tutor told me her job was to go through the student's take-home papers with the child. I suppose the parent's job consisted of signing the folder and sending it back.
>
> Two of the students who are being served in the pull-out reading program at my school have made enough progress to be dismissed from the program. Neither set of parents, for completely different reasons, wants their child dismissed. One set of parents is extremely involved in helping their child and wants all the help they can receive. The other set of parents, however, seems to be content to let the school handle anything to do with their child's education.

My comments reveal much about my thinking at the time. I saw myself as an expert and parents as empty vessels to be filled. If parents would only listen to me and do as I said! My attitude reflected a certain amount of arrogance. With limited knowledge of what was going on in the homes or of family circumstances, I presumed to judge parents on my own standard of what was acceptable parental involvement. I assumed that all families shared my middle class

values, that all parents had the time and energy to help their children with school-like activities, and that all parents defined their involvement in the same narrow way I defined it.

I expected research to back my opinions. I knew of other teachers who felt the same way I did. They were working hard to help children succeed. If children struggled, the fault must lie somewhere. Obviously, parents were not preparing their children to enter school and were not supporting the schools' efforts once they did. As I spent time with parents in dialogue, however, my views began to change. Rather than viewing parental involvement as a dichotomy (i.e., involved parents and uninvolved parents) or as a continuum (no involvement to overly involved), I began to recognize and appreciate the many forms parental involvement can take.

My main goal in conducting the Reading and Writing Project was to provide opportunities for dialogue with parents. Through a series of meetings at night, I took the first risk, as Delpit (1995) urged, in sharing my experiences and written stories with families. In return, parents shared their thoughts and experiences with me in the books they wrote with their children, in interviews, and in informal conversations. Rather than superficial understandings of each other, our opportunities to dialogue began to lead to trusting and respectful relationships. I gained, not only new understandings, but an appreciation for the circumstances many parents of elementary-aged children have to contend with.

In this chapter, I look at the ways Theresa, Jane, and Ann were involved in their children's education and how their involvement differed. I also examine the fears and frustrations the parents described in their relationships with the school. Because Theresa's background influenced her involvement, I begin with a description of her experiences learning to read and write.

*Theresa: Sometimes It's Not Enough to Come to School*

Theresa was born in Mexico. Her parents had little formal schooling and were not able to help her much with schoolwork. She was the oldest child in the family so there were no older siblings to help her. Ricky's kindergarten teacher worried that Theresa did not understand how far behind he was academically. The teacher said, *"I made her [Theresa] promise that she would get him help in first grade next year, that she would tell his teacher he needed help."* In my conversations with Theresa, although she recognized that both children struggled in school, especially with reading and math, she did not seem alarmed. In her own experience, learning to read did not occur until third grade and she may have believed that, with time, both children would be okay academically. (Out of respect, I have not edited parent or student voices for either grammar or spelling.)

> Theresa: *Our parents come from a little village and they just finished first and second grade so they can barely read it so I didn't have help at home a lot. It was so hard especially since I was the oldest so I didn't have another to help me. My father tried to help me, but I know in third grade, it was the hard grade I can remember, because that is when you start to read and then fourth grade, I start loving books. I love to read, yeah, after I learned to read, I start reading everything, everything. My mother used to say that before third grade, before I learned how to read, I grabbed any paper, and I just pretended I was reading.*

When Theresa was 14, her father died and she moved to Texas to live with her aunt and uncle. She wanted to continue her schooling, but circumstances worked against her. First, the local school system told her she would have to go to middle school even though she had already finished ninth grade. Then, the local school refused to enroll her because she did not have a

social security number. She attended an adult learning center for three months until the teacher told her, *"I'm sorry. You're too little to be here. You [are] supposed to go to public school."*

Theresa: *I just want to learn English anyhow* [after being told she could not come back to the adult learning center]. *Some words are similar to Spanish so I was like, "This probably means this," and I just read it, like, in my head. I grab a dictionary so I look the meaning [up] so that's how I start learning by myself.*

Janet: *So you basically taught yourself English?*

Theresa: *And the kids. You know, like, I heard "please" and "thank you." Then you know the meanings. You know, if he say "thank you" when he receives something and "please" when they are asking for something. TV was everything English. No channels in Spanish. Nothing. So I was like having a hard time so I learned basically [from] the televisions that have the words under.*

Janet: *Close captioned?*

Theresa: *Yeah. I was like okay. That works with me so I started with little words, like [in] cartoons. "Play," those little words. Then I was keeping myself thinking. Little by little I learn to write a little English.*

Theresa helped her children, most nights, with homework despite a full-time job that kept her busy until 6 or 6:30 each night. Because her daughter was older, she provided less help for her. She knew that Ricky should be reading every night for his regular classroom teacher and for me. Ricky's great-grandmother watched over the children every afternoon after school. Theresa asked the children to begin their homework before she got home from work, but the children usually waited for her. Sometimes she asked Ricky's sister to help him with reading.

Theresa: *"She [daughter] don't need that many instructions because she knows how to read and he [Ricky] needs more help. "Mommy, how I'm going to do this?" And I help him. Sometimes I just ask her, "Baby, read it for him." When I'm cooking and she help him with that because I know they have to have like an hour to read. Even if I tell them to do it, their great-grandma, my husband's grandma, is at home and she doesn't do it. She's like an old lady and she forget what they're supposed to do. Everybody goes to their rooms and she doesn't know if they are reading or not. She speaks Spanish. No way that she can help. When I'm off, I try to grab a book [and] we'll read together. Sometimes he took a book from the library. He is, "Come on, Rosi, read to me, read to me." Sometimes he ask me and I say, "Ask Rosi" because I know it helps her. Sometimes she doesn't want to do it. She helps him a lot. Big books she read to him.*

Theresa discussed the importance of learning how to read and write with her children. She seemed puzzled when they struggled in school. They had resources at home (books that she purchased) and extra help at school that she did not have as a child.

Theresa: *I explain to Rosi, "If you read, you going to learn more. Everything you read, you know how to write. You're going to learn how to write, and you going to enrich your knowledge." I have a lot of books at home. I don't know why my kids they have trouble with that, both [of them]. I buy books for them. They got books, like Fisher Price books, but she [sister] is more interested but now with you, Ricky is like, "Mommy, I want to see that book." He's now like, "Read me this book." Or [I tell him],"Bring me a book so I can read it to you."*

Theresa did not work outside the home when Rosi was in kindergarten and first grade and had more time to help her. When Ricky started school and she began working full time, the

amount of time she could devote to their schoolwork decreased and she depended more on the school to help her children when they struggled.

Theresa: *It's good the school has all this programs to help our kids because I work and sometimes I get home at 6:00, 6:30, and the latest 7:00. And that's when I see the kids and it's sad because I know, with her [daughter], I try to spend [time] when I used to be at home when she was at school, kindergarten and first grade, then I tried to help her when she got out of school. I still do it with them, but I got two now. They go to bed at 8:30. I have to cook. I have to help with homework, reading if they have reading. Yeah, if I didn't have all that help here [at school], I'd be lost.*

Theresa was appreciative of the extra help her children received. She did not blame the school or herself when her children struggled. She did, however, believe Ricky was not working as hard as he could, although she was beginning to see progress.

Theresa: *I just want to thank you for help my kid. Like I told you, my daughter received a lot of help in math. I can show you she got good grades. Thanks to the math teacher, she got a B right now on her report card. She got a lot of help. I think Ricky is smart. It's not because he needs help. I think he has the help. He is just like, I don't think he's taking school too seriously. I think you're doing a great job to encourage the kids to be interested in books because I see it in him. I see it in him a big, big change because last year, he was not interested. He shows me he's interested in books.*

Many nights, however, Theresa was faced with difficult choices. After working a full-time job and then cooking dinner, she sometimes chose a reasonable bedtime for her children over reading to them.

Theresa: *Sometimes they want me to read night story but I finish everything at 9:30, and it's late for them to get in bed at that time cause they have to sleep good. If they don't sleep at 8:30, especially him, in the morning he's crying that he don't want to get up.*

Even with limited time at night, Theresa and Ricky wrote several stories for the Reading and Writing Project. She credited the Reading and Writing Project with sparking an interest in literacy activities in Ricky. She was especially proud of his artistic efforts and amused when he believed his great-grandfather lived at the time of dinosaurs.

Theresa: *Now with the books we were doing [how Ricky got his name], he was like, "What you write?" Believe it or not, he drew the faces. He draw by himself. It was amazing. My gosh! How the story goes the grandparent Ricky drew it like that time. He do it like, old, middle, and young.*

Janet: *Did he look at pictures?*

Theresa: *No, he just do it. His great-grandpa passed away. His grandpa he just saw like one or two times. He still alive but he lives in another place. It was like, "Okay!" I told my husband, "I think the teacher is going to think we did it." But I can swear I was so surprised. I was working with him. We were like, "Ricky, do this color." And he was like, "No, this is a man's color." He wants to, for some reason, to do the dinosaur there. I went, "Why did you do the dinosaur there?" He goes, "Cause it's like long time ago [when my great-grandfather lived]. He didn't know so he connected great-grandpa with dinosaurs.*

After listening to me read "I Am" (Greenfield, 1978), Ricky and his mom wrote:

*I am Ricky and I play outside with Mom, and I like my mom. I like my dad. I like my family, we saw fire works, we go to school. I like the libery, I like my teacher. I am in*

*kindergarden. I know how to wride my numbers. I like my classroom, we went to the park.*

At one meeting, I shared an acrostic I had written about my son. I gave the parents a list of adjectives (Ada & Campoy, 2004) they could use to write about their own children. Theresa wrote:

*R: I have a son his name start with R as REAL, real as a life, when he wake up on the mornings he looks Radian his Responsible with his homework. He's sister's name is Rosi.*

*I: My son has a lot of imagination he is intelligent on math. I teach him the imported that is brushing the teeth every day.*

*C: He cares for all his cousins, one thing he loves is cartoons, we make a book and I has him to colo read and he use his favorite colors.*

*K: He is the kind of kids that likes to play soccer with his sister Rosi, every night I give Ricky and Rosi a good night kiss.*

*Y: Ricky was practicing the yellow word after that he went to the back yard. Yesterday we went to the stor to buy a yarn for his grantgrandma and yogurt for him and his sister Rosi.*

The stories Ricky and his mom wrote revealed the importance of family. The stories mention his mom, dad, sister, cousins, and great-grandmother. They talk about family outings to see fireworks, visits to the park, and playing soccer in the backyard. School is also important. They visit the library and spend time practicing sight words and working on books for our project. Although Ricky's teacher worried about his math, his mom says he is good in math. His mom believes it is important for Ricky to be "real," responsible (for his homework and brushing his teeth), and caring. The day ends with a goodnight kiss from his mom.

Lareau (2000) described the 3 “Rs” teachers often expect from parents. Teachers want parents “to *read* to their children, to *reinforce* the classroom material, and to *respond* to teachers’ requests for assistance” (p. 18). Because Theresa did not always follow the 3 “Rs,” Ricky’s teacher sometimes questioned her involvement in his education. When papers were not signed or books were not returned the next day, the teacher assumed that school was not important to Theresa. The teacher once taped a note to the front of Ricky’s bookbag and commented, “Maybe she’ll see it and respond this time.”

In many ways, Theresa seemed to view her role in the manner described by Valdes (1996) who wrote, “Because [Mexican] parenting styles are product of their class, culture, and experiences, they are unlike those of the American model of the ‘standard’ family. For example, in the American model, children learn to say the alphabet, identify colors and shapes, and count before entering kindergarten” (p. 39). As I observed Ricky interacting with Rosi as I talked to his mom or sitting quietly by Theresa’s side at the Reading and Writing Project meetings, I saw evidence of Valdes’ assertion that, in Latino families, mothers usually teach their children “how to behave, how to act around others, and also what [is] good” (p. 125). They teach children not to interrupt adult conversations, to wait quietly, and to defer to older siblings who often have responsibility for younger children. They are “expected to do what they [are] told, to get along with their siblings, and not to see themselves as the focus of their mother’s existence” (p. 120).

Even though Ricky’s teacher questioned her involvement, Theresa believed she was involved and that other parents were less so. It seemed she saw a much bigger role for herself, for example, making sure her children were safe and ready for school the next day. She saw herself as a model for them of someone who had made the most of her situation, rising from a maid to a manager of a local hotel. While she might not listen to Ricky read every night, Theresa

made a point of talking to her children about their school day. She believed teachers should encourage parents to have conversations with their children.

> Theresa: *[Teachers should ask] parents to get more involved with the kids because sometimes it is not enough to come to the school. It really don't help some at home because I see this family. The kids come from school, drop the backpack and play. And, of course, they say, "Do your homework." But you know they have to…a teacher has to talk to the parents to get them more involved, like talking, "What did you do today at school? What did you read? Tell me what the book was about." Or, "What did you eat at the cafeteria?" A lot of parents just come [home] tired and they work and they don't have a conversation with the kids.*

Theresa's experiences living in Texas and not being able to speak English seemed to have created a passion in her for helping other Spanish-speaking families. For example, at her daughter's old school, Theresa saw a need and stepped in to serve as a volunteer translator for her daughter's ESOL teacher. She credited her bilingual abilities with her promotion to hotel manager. At work, Theresa encouraged the employees who worked under her supervision to learn English so they could improve their economic circumstances and help their children in school.

> Theresa: *I tell everybody if you really want to, you can go up. You can do better for your life. English is so important. Doesn't matter how; you have to learn English. In United States, you have to learn how to speak English. I give them [employees] days off when they have the class in English they go to. [I ask them,] How are you going to help your kids when they go to school if you don't know?*

Theresa's concern extended to another Latina who participated in the Reading and Writing Project meeting. When I asked Theresa if she were coming to the next meeting, she replied:

> Theresa: *Yeah, we're going to be here, and I'm going to ask Maria. She lives by neighborhood before me. I go like, "If you need anything, just call me. Or you need help at your school, translate or something, just ask." I want that she get involved with her kids because she looks like unsecure.*

Because Theresa did not fit the role assigned to her by the school as "involved parent," the ways she was engaged with her children were not always recognized or valued. Theresa respected the teacher's role in educating her children and trusted the school to keep her children safe. When Ricky's reading log was not signed, it was because Theresa assumed the teacher would prefer he be rested and ready to learn the next day rather than staying up past his bedtime to read or she had spent the time talking to him about his day instead of listening to him read. Although many teachers stay at school beyond the required hours, it is possible for them to get home by 4:00 and have ample time to start dinner, help their children with homework, and get them in bed at a reasonable time. Many middle class children are involved in extracurricular activities outside of school, but those activities are optional and can be curtailed if they begin to interfere with homework or needed rest. A parent who works until 6:30 or 7:00 to help support the family's financial needs often does not have the luxury of modifying her schedule. There are no extracurricular activities to drop.

Theresa used the limited resources she had to help her children. Unlike Ann, she did not have resources within her neighborhood to help her navigate the school's expectations. Theresa's contacts were mainly the Spanish-speaking co-workers she supervised. Because Theresa's

support system was limited, she relied on Rosi to help Ricky and encouraged Ricky's great-grandmother to have the children work on homework right after school. While Ann received childrearing advice from neighborhood friends, her mother-in-law, and her son's pediatrician, Theresa seemed to make decisions without much input from anyone else. Theresa helped with homework as much as she could. She dropped the children off early so they could work in the computer lab. She made arrangements for them to attend summer school. She attended school events when her work schedule allowed. She trusted the school to provide the extra academic help her children needed. She was thrilled with the programs the school had in place to help struggling students. In her view, she supported the school's efforts to educate her children by providing for their economic and emotional needs.

Theresa did not fit the stereotypical view some teachers may hold that Latino families do not value schooling. Theresa's efforts to encourage her co-workers to learn English and to translate papers for Spanish-speaking parents were unknown to the classroom teacher who seemed to want Theresa to respond to her requests and to reinforce what was being taught at school. If teachers, as Lareau (2000) suggested, define parental involvement in the narrow terms of responding, reinforcing, and reading, then the efforts of parents like Theresa may be overlooked. Lareau stated:

> There is no one best way for parents to be involved in schooling and to promote children's success. Instead, there are multiple pathways. But some pathways are more commonly trodden than others, are accorded greater legitimacy than others, and are easier to follow for some groups than for others. (p. 192)

*Jane: Anything to Keep Her from Struggling*

I met Jane at a conference when Amanda was in kindergarten for the second time. At that time, the classroom teacher was concerned that Amanda was being over-medicated for her attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Jane seemed confused about the school's position on the medication: Did they want Amanda on medication or not? During the meeting, Jane mentioned how difficult it was for her to help Amanda at home. The school seemed to turn a deaf ear to Jane's concerns. When Jane asked how she could help Amanda, the teacher sent home additional activities for Amanda and her mom to work on, rather than offering suggestions or modifying assignments. The frustration continued for Jane and Amanda in first grade. At home, Amanda would tell her mom, *"I can't do it. I can't do it."* Jane would reply, *"Yes, you can do it. You've got to start doing this. But I end up helping her more than she helps herself 'cause she gets so frustrated."*

Jane involved Amanda at home in school-like activities. She helped her with math, writing, and reading. Based on her own school experiences, she would remind Amanda to "sound out" unfamiliar words. She also read to Amanda. However, compared to Theresa's more laid-back approach, Jane reported tension-filled evenings trying to help her daughter. Although I tried to reassure Jane that helping one's own child can be emotional and stressful, I believed they were experiencing more than the usual friction. Jane believed that Amanda worked better with others, and she often wished she could afford a tutor for Amanda.

> Jane: *And I try my best to help her at home, but I can only help her for so long because she gets frustrated [and] doesn't want me to help her any more whereas a teacher, like yourself, she loves it, absolutely loves it. She doesn't like me doing it.*

Janet: *I don't think that's that unusual. I know as a parent it was very hard for me to work with my own son especially. I found I had less patience with him than I do with other people's kid because I have that emotional connection with him.*

Jane: *She loves it when I sit down and just read her a book but I want her to read to me.*

Jane, like Theresa, worked full-time and often had a difficult time balancing home life and homework. She and Amanda only had a couple of hours together at night. The time was spent preparing dinner, working on homework, and getting ready for bed.

Jane: *[She says,] "I'm tired." She's been going to bed about 8:00. Yeah, she's worn out.*

Janet: *And you've tried different times working with her and you kind of get the same results? She goes to day care right after school so your time is limited.*

Jane: *By the time I pick her up, it's like 6, 6:30. I get her home, give her a bath, we do her homework, I'm trying to keep her up before dinner. You know, "Don't go to sleep before you eat."*

Even when Amanda was motivated to work on academics at home, Jane reported how difficult it was for them.

Jane: *When she got her little packet [writing kit], she was just so excited. She's adamant about wanting to do them [the co-authored books] but now we are trying to get her to write a sentence, such a horrible time for me.*

Helping Amanda was admittedly difficult for Jane and Amanda. They were both tired. Amanda's medication for ADHD had worn off by the time they started homework. There was little flexibility in their evenings. It was dinnertime before they got home. Jane's efforts were not always appreciated by the school because they did not follow the manner prescribed by Jane's teacher who, for example, was upset when Jane had Amanda do a week's worth of worksheets in

one night. When Jane mentioned reading Amanda's nightly readers to her, the teacher quickly reminded Jane that Amanda should be reading the books. Although Jane often remarked, "I am not a teacher," the school still seemed to expect her to fill the role and gave her little discretion in deciding how to do it. In a collaborative relationship, Amanda's teacher might have shared her knowledge about Amanda's struggles at school and asked Jane to share her knowledge about Amanda's struggles at home. Then, together, teacher and parent might have explored ways to support each other. Rather than saying, "This is what I want you to do at home and this is how I expect you to do it," we might say, "This is what I see at school. What do you see at home? How can we support each other?"

In addition to helping Amanda with homework, Jane attended conferences and curriculum night. She brought cupcakes to school and ate lunch with Amanda on her birthday. Unlike Ann who volunteered on a regular basis or Theresa who helped with special events in the classroom, Jane did not volunteer in the classroom, but she was an active and enthusiastic participant in the Reading and Writing Project. When I asked Jane why she thought we had so many parents attend our meetings when typical school workshops were poorly attended, she responded, "But this helps Amanda. I'll do anything to keep her from struggling."

*Ann: I Feel Kind of Sorry for Him*

It was late fall before I began serving Jack in Eagle Reading. I tested him in August and he did not qualify. Later, his teacher asked me to listen to him read again, and I began serving him because his comprehension was a little weak. Ann's parental involvement was different in some ways from the other moms in the study. She volunteered regularly in the classroom and was active in PTA. She was the only parent who seemed to have a network of friends to help her. She had discussions with other moms about ways to help Jack.

Ann: *I actually talked to [other parents] at the bus stop, and they've mentioned you. And they said, "You should get your child in the [pull-out reading] program" and they said ever since their child got into [the program], they've flourished.*

She occasionally ran into Jack's teacher because they lived in the same neighborhood. She also discussed school matters with her friends who had children attending other schools.

Ann: *Even my friend who goes to [another, more affluent school in the cluster] and sometimes she'll be over and she'll pull Jack's folder out. "Wow, our teachers don't do this." It's like [the friend's son] hardly ever gets homework. Like [Jack's teacher] doesn't give them a major amount in first grade but they have 4-5 pages of math but they give you through the weekend to Friday and of course you have to do your WW words.*

Janet: *WW Words?*

Ann: *Word Wall Words.*

While Jane and Theresa were sometimes unsure of assignments or grade-level expectations, Ann knew some of the jargon from the classroom (e.g., word wall words). Her efforts at home were "school-like." When Jack had to write a story with his WW words for homework, she had him do a rough draft and broke it down into 2 days. He wrote half the story the first day and then finished it the next. She had him rewrite the finished draft in his best handwriting. She reminded him to use "hooks" on the ends of certain letters, although she noticed this year's teacher did not stress that as much as last year's. She reminded him to start sentences with capital letters and to add end marks.

Lareau (2000) found that many teachers do not want parents to teach new materials. When Ann, however, noticed that a student in Jack's class had written his name in cursive and Jack expressed a desire to learn how, she copied some pages off the internet for him.

Ann, unlike Jane and Theresa, only worked a couple of nights a week so Jack had some flexibility about completing homework. Ann, like the other parents, read to Jack.

Ann: *We change at different times. At first, right when he walked in the door, we started doing reading. And then, being a boy, I kind of feel sorry for him because we have him in computer class and then he has your class and he has regular class and needs to unwind…Then I started letting him play and then doing his homework and then started back to, like, after dinner.*

Janet: *Does that work better for him? To wait a little while?*

Ann: *It varies. It depends, if we have [t-ball] practice all that too. And I've had people say they don't like doing it right after dinner because they kind of lose a child because now they're full.*

Janet: *It's hard to find the perfect time, isn't it?*

Ann: *We've always read before bed. A lot of times we'll do the shower, the bath, and then do the reading.*

Like many middle class children, Jack was involved in t-ball and gymnastics outside of school. He had also asked if he could play soccer. Ann was concerned, not only with his extracurricular activities, but with the demands placed on him at school. She mentioned they had not started Successmaker, a computer program, at home because they did not want him overloaded. During the summer, he was scheduled for summer school and for a writing institute. She was considering taking him out of the writing.

Ann: *That's what I think is great about the schools now, you get the encouragement to read but even just [the reading log]. "Read this book. Tell me a little bit about it." It*

*gives them the encouragement to push them a little bit hard. It's not like you're pushing them too much.*

When her husband asked if Jack had finished his writing homework for his classroom teacher, Ann insisted that he have some time to play first. Ann's concern extended to the Reading and Writing Project meetings. *"I thought the meeting was great. It didn't seem too challenging and it wasn't too rushed because they got to relax."*

Lareau (2003) suggested that middle class parents often intervene on behalf of their children and know how to persist until they get help for them. Ann seemed to fall into that category. Ann reminded me that I had not served Jack in the fall because he did not qualify but that she continued to mention the possibility of his being served to his classroom teacher who brought his name up to me.

Ann: *And you even said that with his level that he probably didn't really even need to be in there but actually he's improved. He's enjoying reading.*

Janet: *Yeah, he was borderline. He had the skills in place, but we're fortunate here that I have the luxury that I can pick up kids that are borderline.*

According to traditional standards of involvement, Ann would probably be considered the most involved. She was active in the PTA, volunteered in the classroom, networked with neighbors and friends, and checked the school's website. However, many teachers might not consider her involvement ideal. She did not have Jack work on Successmaker even though the school recommended it. She disagreed with the school's decision to promote Jack and considered taking the issue to the superintendent's office. She taught him cursive when most second grade teachers would prefer she leave that up to them. Her conversations in the neighborhood with other parents might cause some teachers concern. For example, she had checked with other

parents to find out who the best teachers in second grade were. When she asked my opinion, I reminded her of the school policy that parents could write a letter describing the kind of teacher they felt would be best for their children, but any letters requesting a specific teacher would be returned to the parent. (Neither Theresa nor Jane wrote letters to the school. Although not an ESOL student, Ricky was placed in a classroom designated ESOL. Amanda's special education teacher selected her second grade teacher.)

## Summary

It was clear from their talk and the ways they interacted with their children that Ann, Theresa, and Jane cared deeply for their children and wanted good educations for them. The difference lay in their perceptions of their roles. Theresa encouraged Ricky to be responsible and trusted the school to educate him. She helped as much as she could. Jane helped Amanda with homework, even though it was an emotional struggle for both of them. She attended numerous conferences and all the Reading And Writing Project meetings. In many ways, Ann fit the middle class role described by Lareau (2000). She sometimes bucked the school on issues, such as retention. Ann also knew how to get extra help for her son. She solicited advice from other parents. Living in the same neighborhood and volunteering in the classroom provided openings for her to express her concerns to the classroom teacher. When Theresa and Jane attended conferences, they tended to listen carefully to what the educators had to say and asked few questions. Jane, in particular, seemed intent on understanding and then following the school's recommendations. Ann, on the other hand, felt free to express her opinions, to question, and to ask for considerations for her son. Sometimes her efforts were successful, especially at the classroom level, where she was able to get extra reading help for Jack even though he was

borderline. Her efforts at the school level (i.e., having him retained and selecting his next year's teacher) were not successful.

Over time, I began to realize the many ways Theresa, Jane, and Ann were involved in their children's education and to look for ways we could support each other. Rather than insisting parents "do it my way," I respected their decisions to look for alternate solutions. For instance, when Jane mentioned that she could not afford to pay $40 an hour for a tutor and was thinking of asking an older child in the neighborhood to listen to Amanda read, I encouraged her efforts. Although I have heard other teachers complain when parents ask siblings to listen to first graders read at home, I applauded Theresa's efforts to involve Ricky's sister.

Not only did I learn about their differing views of involvement, our discussions also revealed the fears and frustrations Theresa, Jane, and Ann experienced in their relations with the school. In the next section, I examine how those fears and frustrations impacted the home-school connection.

## Fears and Frustrations

*There is a pain we hold*

*When we remember what we are connected to*

*And the delicacy of our relations.*

*Opening to this pain*

*Becomes an act of compassion toward life,*

*The life we so often refuse to see*

*Because if we look too closely*

*Or feel too deeply,*

*There may be no end to our suffering.*

*Opening to this pain moves us*

*Beyond our suffering*

*And sets us free.*

--Terry Tempest Williams

Some teachers may not feel comfortable trying to build effective home-school connections, especially with families that differ ethnically or economically from them (Swap, 1993; Delpit, 1995). Only a few states require pre-service teachers to take coursework related to working with parents (Weiss, Kreider, Lopez, & Chatman, 2005). In my long educational career, I can only remember one in-service staff development that involved the home-school connection. It was called "How to Handle Hard-to-Handle Parents." If one can get past the title and the supposition that parents are difficult and need to be "handled," the course at least recognized the emotional tensions that sometimes exist between parents and teachers.

In my discussions with parents, emotions became a recurring theme. The emotions I identified most frequently were fear and frustration. In Chapter I, I described my own fears and frustrations as a student, parent, and teacher. The causes of the emotions I experienced and that the parents in my study experienced were not always the same. The magnitude of the feelings may have differed. Whether or not the feelings were justified, in some cases, might be debatable. The feelings, however, did exist and sometimes seemed to create a barrier between home and school that often went unacknowledged.

*Theresa: I Don't Know for What Reason I Am So Afraid*

Theresa's fears seemed to revolve around the physical safety of her children. Her feelings may have resulted from her own experiences as a teenager, coming to the United States and not

knowing how to speak the language. When her aunt, for instance, sent her to the store alone, she feared that she might get lost and have to ask a policeman how to get back to her aunt's house.

Theresa: *For me [it] was like somebody was talking Chinese when they were speaking English, especially in that little town [where] not everybody speaks Spanish. You go to the store and everything was English. I was like, "What they are saying? My gosh. Please, God, help me!"*

Theresa used her experiences to help others. She encouraged the workers she supervised to take classes, and she made accommodations in their work schedules so they could. She translated materials at her daughter's school into Spanish, in hopes of encouraging other Spanish-speaking parents to visit the school.

Theresa: *They [the old school] have nobody to speak Spanish to translate it so my sister moves with me. She stays with me a year, so both we don't see no Spanish parents in the conference. They do conference and they never appear, just her and me. We're like, "What's going on?" So the teacher who was an ESOL teacher, we talked to her and we translate all the papers and then by the end of the year, she had a group of parents there. That really helps. She do conference. We help her to translate because a lot of parents didn't know what that means in their report cards. It surprised my sister, the teacher, and me. We didn't expect a lot of people when we did the translation. It was "wow" for us because we didn't expect nobody. Sometimes parents not even come to get the conference with the teacher because they are saying, "Why am I going to go if I'm not going to understand what she's going to say to me?"*

In my experience, teachers sometimes feel uncomfortable when parents who are not fluent in English attend meetings. In our own discomfort, we may fail to recognize how the

parent must feel. Theresa felt a natural empathy toward Spanish-speaking parents, like Maria, and reached out to them.

Theresa: *I want that she [Maria] get involved with her kids because she looks like unsecure. Like she just feels like, if she comes, she will be by herself. It's what happen when they don't know, when they feel like, "Oh, I'm Hispanic and there's going to be a lot of white people there." They feel like apart.*

According to Theresa, the feelings of fear and not belonging and not understanding were so strong for some families that they moved back to Mexico.

Theresa: *You know a lot of times parents are afraid to send kids at school because they don't even know what they're going to need so sometimes the kids [are not enrolled for] pre-K or kindergarten. [I ask them,] "Are you going to send the kids?" [They say,] "Yeah, next year." I know this family and she just went to Mexico. She sent the kids to Mexico to school. "Why did you do that? You got a lot of help here." I am sorry to say this for my country, but in Mexico we don't get all this help like here. She was like, "It's so hard. I didn't really know what they need, and I didn't understand the teachers." That's sad. I know this girls, they just went like probably two years to school. The mother just stopped sending them because she lacked English. I tried to help her but sometimes it's hard.*

Recalling her own difficulty learning English, Theresa was also very sensitive about her own children's struggles in learning Spanish. When Rosi mispronounced the word for *neck* in Spanish and others laughed, she recognized the embarrassment it caused Rosi. She exhibited a patience with her own children that sometimes seems to be lacking in the formal education of children, where skills are delineated and mastery is expected at specific grade levels.

Theresa: *When Rosi was like 4 years old, she tried to speak in Spanish, but it was like us trying to speak English, not complete words and sentences and it's kind of funny when you hear. We laugh. Little by little, she was like shy and she don't want to speak any more. We would keep laughing and we didn't know we were doing something bad. She just, like, stop talking Spanish at all. She didn't say not even a word. Until now, she start saying, "Mommy, I want to learn Spanish." I go, "That was what I was waiting [for]. He [Ricky] has trouble with the r [sound]. He don't want nobody to laugh at him so he don't try. But I just give him time, just like I do with her.*

Theresa's children and their well being were clearly important to her. She described herself as a protective parent. For instance, she preferred to pick her children up from school rather than let them ride the bus because of an incident that happened when her daughter was in pre-K. She also knew that the great-grandmother who did not speak English would not be able to communicate with the school if, for some reason, the children did not get off the bus in the afternoon. In her view, she was being a protective, caring parent. The school, on the other hand, saw her as negligent because she often picked the children up late. After being confronted by an administrator several times, she began putting Rosi and Ricky on the bus because *"now I know there is nothing the school can do"* to help. She did not seem angry or upset with the school, even though she believed the children were safer waiting in the front office of the school for the extra thirty minutes it took her to get from work rather than riding the bus.

Theresa: *Like before, I used to come and drop the kids off and pick them up. I am so concerned about the safe. I don't know for what reason I am so afraid. I am so protective. And I work and I never know when I'm going to finish. Like, I use to come at 3:30, I believe. The second time, the principal said, "This can't happen again." The third time*

*[she said], "You have to look what you are going do to." I said, "I'm sorry. I work." She goes, "Yeah, but the kids are here," and [reminded me] what time they get out. I was like, "Okay." It was three times. This happen because when Rosi was in pre-K, the bus had a problem, an accident, so I was waiting at school. Like, "Where is my kid? Where is my kid?" And they didn't know, so I was like, "Oh, my gosh!" So, you think a lot of things. It was finally like 4:30. "Hey, they are switching buses because this [is] what happened."*

Janet: *So it was a scary experience.*

Theresa: *Yes, I get more afraid of the things I hear in the news.*

*Jane: It Just Devastates Me That She Blames Me*

While Theresa's fears seemed to revolve around issues of safety and of not belonging, Jane's main fears seemed to be that her relationship with Amanda had been damaged by her retention in kindergarten and that Amanda would be retained again in either kindergarten or first grade.

Jane: *We'll go places and see people or friends. [Amanda tells them,] "My mom held me back. That's her fault." I hear all the time, "<u>You</u> held me back in kindergarten. You did." I'm like, "No, I had no choice. They told me I had to." And it just devastates me that she blames me and she still does. I mean it's not the school. It's me. It's me that thinks she's stupid. I said, "I've never called you that. I don't think that about you. You are very smart." I try to pep her up that way. She has a lot of resentments. I'm scared to death they're going to hold her back again this year.*

Jane also worried about the side effects of the medication Amanda took for ADHD and that Amanda might be suspended if she did not put her back on the medication.

Jane: *Before, when she was on medication, she lost her appetite. She was so thin, night terrors, leg cramping. I just hope the medication doesn't make her lose weight because she's a little pudgy thing now; I just love it. There was a doctor on the radio yesterday and she was talking about ADHD and ADD and the difference between them and why parents get upset because they have to give the child medicine and I was looking at it that way too. My [older] daughter is totally against it. I mean, she's like, "That's just like giving them cocaine. They get used to it and then they can't stop."*

When Jane was asked to come in for a conference with someone who looked *"like a security officer, the lady who's a psychologist, her teacher, and then another teacher with short blonde hair,"* she was told that Amanda had called a little boy "brown." She said, *"I left out of there in tears that they were going to suspend her. The school psychologist was saying, 'You need to get her on medication or she will be suspended.' "* Jane was also afraid that Amanda would no longer be allowed to participate in the Reading and Writing Project if she were suspended from school. She said, *"It's just frustrating because I didn't want to have to put her back on [the medication]."*

It is somewhat ironic that the educators who were accusing Amanda of bullying another child might also be accused of a similar tactic in trying to get Jane to put Amanda back on medication. To my knowledge, no one in the meeting knew about Jane's concerns about the side effects of the medicine.

All of the parents I talked with mentioned homework as one arena where they were involved with their children's education. Jane was very clear about the frustration she and Amanda faced each night when it came to homework.

Jane: *And I try my best to help her at home, but I can only help her for so long because she gets frustrated [and] doesn't want me to help her any more. She doesn't like me doing it [homework with her].*

Jane stated that some of the frustration alleviated when Amanda began getting extra help in reading.

Jane: *Ever since she started this class, she's not felt that way [frustrated about reading]. Before, she refused to read. She didn't even want to try. Then when she started coming here, I saw her little world open up so much. The little books you send home, she loves them. Before, she didn't have the patience to read. When she gets home at night, the first thing she wants to do is read those books you send home. I mean, before, she wouldn't even pick up a book, she was so frustrated. I would say, "You need to sound it out." [She would reply,] "I don't know how to do that."*

While the reading homework for Amanda seemed to be easier, the writing assignments were still a time of frustration. When I asked Jane if anything about the Reading and Writing Project had been challenging or frustrating for her or Amanda, she mentioned the writing assignments.

Jane: *When she got her little packet [writing kit], she was just so excited. The writing she does need to work on too, so I loved that [the fact she was excited about the writing kit]. She's adamant about wanting to do them [the co-authored books], but now we are trying to get her to write a sentence, such a horrible time for me. [Amanda says,] "I can't do it. I can't do it." [I tell her,] "Yes, you can do it. You've got to start doing this, you know." [But she just says,] "I can't do it." You know, it's like, "We're going to do it." But I end*

*up helping her more than she helps herself 'cause she gets so frustrated. She gets mad at me. She gets mad at me for every little thing.*

Some of the frustration Jane and Amanda experienced may have resulted from the fact there was little flexibility in their time to do homework. They were both tired, Amanda from being at school and daycare and Jane from working all day. *"[Amanda's] tired. She's been going to bed at 8:00. She's worn out."* Another part of Jane's frustration seemed to be that she did not know how to help Amanda. Instead of saying Amanda was struggling in math, she said, *"Math I'm having a hard time with. I can't get her to. I mean, I don't really know how to teach a child."*

Jane worried that Amanda's frustration was causing health problems. She was hospitalized for a few days during the school year, and Jane thought it might be stress related.

Jane: *They did a [test] on her last Friday. I've got to call her doctor's office to see what the next step is, if they want to do anything or just wait. But it's like, "What was the reason she did that?" Could it be stress? Could it be stress-related? I don't know.*

During the interview, I asked Jane how Amanda was doing. She responded that Amanda's health problems and problems getting along with other children were, in her opinion, related to her academic struggles and frustrations.

Jane: *She says her stomach hurts every now and then, but I just [say,] "You go to school. Try not to think about it."*

Janet: *Is that when she says it, early in the morning, when it's time to go to school? That her stomach hurts?*

Jane: *Oh, yeah. She'll tell me sometimes at night but she tries to find every excuse [not to go to school]. Like, she called me the other day from the clinic, "Mom, my head feels like*

*a big balloon. It's really hurting." I said, "Why don't you just try going back to the classroom and see how you feel and you can call me later," because, you know, I'm not going to run up if she doesn't have a fever. She was fine.*

Janet: *When she got home, she was okay?*

Jane: *Yeah, yeah. She played at day care. What I think it is for her is she can't grasp it. She sees the other children grasping it, and she's lost. It's heartbreaking. I mean, knowing that she is embarrassed coming to school. She does lash out at other children because she's frustrated. And I try my best to help her at home, but I can only help her for so long because she gets frustrated, doesn't want me to help her any more.*

Janet: *You've talked about how you help Amanda at home, listening to her read, trying to help her write.*

Jane: *I do but she just gets so frustrated after 10 minutes, maybe, and then it's like fighting with her. She's yelling at me and I'm like, "Don't yell at your mother." And then I get aggravated with her and she gets aggravated with me. Oh, my gosh, it's a nightmare! I almost dread trying to.*

Some of Jane's frustration extended to lack of communication from the school. When Jane was asked to come in for a meeting, she was surprised to learn that it was about Amanda's behavior.

Jane: *I was never told. I mean, she aggravated a child one day or, you know, she did whatever, but she'd been getting excellent, even [her teacher] wrote me a note yesterday, [saying,] "Amanda was excellent today." You know, she's been getting all smiley faces, but a couple of times I got that she wasn't being good and I got on to her. I said, "You cannot be that way at school. You've got to learn." And I go into that meeting and there's*

*all these people. It's just that I wasn't told anything. I didn't know about this. All this and I'm just so overwhelmed that I just left crying. I didn't know any of this. And she is sorry for her actions. She really is. And she will cry about it but she, at that time, was so frustrated she lashes out because she is angry that she is not getting it and that's how she deals with it.*

Janet: *So you think it all comes back to the academics? The reading, the writing, and the math?*

Jane: *Oh, yeah, oh, yeah. I mean reading, yeah, she has improved so much with you, and I think she does better with, like, three kids in the classroom. It's hard for her to focus when there is all these other kids.*

Amanda's academic and behavioral struggles at school greatly impacted her home life, her relationship with her mother, and her physical well-being. Some of Jane and Amanda's fears and frustrations might have been alleviated if those who were making decisions about Amanda had listened to the valuable information Jane had to share and had recognized the emotions that Jane and Amber were experiencing.

*Ann: Breaking the Cycle*

Ann's fears, although maybe not as traumatic as Jane's, were real to her. Her fears seemed to relate to Jack being over-scheduled at home or at school. She worried about the demands made on his time (e.g., computer lab before school, summer school, summer writing institute). Initially, she declined to have him do Successmaker before school because, *"At the time, we thought he might have done better just in class."* She wanted him to have time to play and be a little boy.

Ann: *My husband keeps saying, "Did you do your homework?" And I say, "Honey, he's got to have some down time, especially when he walks in the door. He just wants to play. That's all." At first, right when he walked in the door, we started doing reading. And then, being a boy, I kind of feel sorry for him because we have him in computer class and then he has your class and he has regular class and he needs to unwind. Then I started letting him play and then doing his homework. I thought about pulling him out [of the summer writing institute] but thought we should probably leave him. The poor guy's gonna be in school for five weeks [this summer].*

Ann was also concerned about Jack's promotion to second grade. She and her husband believed Jack was bright but that he lacked the maturity, due to his young age, to be successful in second grade. Based on his kindergarten and first grade struggles, they requested he repeat first grade. The principal refused to retain Jack, stating that students were not held back based on what might happen in the next grade level. When Ann mentioned pursuing the matter with the superintendent's office, she was told the school's decision would be upheld. Reluctantly, she and her husband dropped the matter, and Jack was promoted to second grade.

When I talked to Ann about the ghosts we bring with us, as parent and teacher, to conferences (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), Ann described her experiences with her own mother. After Ann told me about her relationship with her mother, I was better able to understand her concern that she or the school might be demanding too much of Jack.

Ann: *My mother is a great person now, but I think when I was growing up, she was very hard on me, and so I was always getting put down. I don't put my children down, and when you get mad and, of course, if you do yell, she'd always apologize. The main thing, I think, [for parents] is patience and honesty. Actually my psychology teacher in college*

*told me, told me that I'd be an awesome mother, and he said I would be the person to break the cycle because my grandmother was hard on my mom and my mom was hard on me. He said I would be the one to break the cycle. I said, "I hope so."*

## Summary

All of the parents I interviewed expressed fears and frustrations related to the home-school connection. Theresa, for example, worried about the safety of her children as they rode the bus. She was concerned about their academic struggles but believed they were getting the necessary help at school to eventually be successful. Her concerns, however, were not just for her own children but extended to other Spanish-speaking families and their experiences with the school system. She worried that many families were so fearful of the language barrier and the school's expectations that they either kept their children out of school or returned to Mexico where language was not an issue. Although Ricky's teacher implied Theresa did not value schooling, I found Theresa's passion for helping others improve their lives through education remarkable. She encouraged the workers she supervised to take English classes and provided time off from work so they could. She talked to them about the importance of school. She translated papers so that parents could understand report cards. She attended meetings and served as an unofficial translator. She worked with Rosi's teacher to increase the number of Spanish-speaking parents who attended meetings.

Ann's fears revolved around the possibility of overscheduling Jack both at home and at school. Having a mother who was "hard" on her, Ann was committed to "breaking the cycle." Ann wanted Jack to be successful in school, but she also wanted him to enjoy his childhood. She wanted him to have time to play and be involved in activities outside of school. She pushed for his retention in first grade because she believed school would always be a struggle for him.

Of all the parents I worked with during the project, Jane probably experienced the most fears and frustrations. She was afraid her relationship with Amanda had been damaged because of Amanda's retention in kindergarten. She was afraid Amanda would have to repeat first grade, be suspended, or kicked out of the Reading and Writing Project. She worried about putting her back on medication and the serious side effects. She was concerned that stress and a dislike of school were causing Amanda to be physically sick. She shared Amanda's frustration with homework. She sometimes felt incapable of helping Amanda with her first-grade math or writing. She was frustrated with the school's indecision about whether or not Amanda should be medicated and the lack of communication and the miscommunication. At times, she was frustrated with Amanda. When the frustrations over homework boiled up, they sometimes yelled at one another.

Possibly, the most disturbing part of the emotions that parents expressed to me was that no one at the school seemed to acknowledge them. Jane's fears and frustrations were just as real as Amanda's struggles with reading, writing, and math. While the school focused on a quick fix for Amanda's academic difficulties (i.e., medication and retention), Jane struggled with the long-term effects of those decisions. Jane often found herself in an unenviable situation—afraid to follow the school's recommendations and afraid not to.

During the interviews, I asked Ann about advice she would give to parents new to our school. She replied, *"If you have a question, don't be afraid to ask. If they don't know the answer, they'll find someone who knows."* The advice seems sound, but some parents, especially working class or non-White parents, may be afraid to ask or may not know the "right" questions to ask.

Sometimes, in education, we become a little callous about our students and their parents. As one teacher told me, “There’s always another group next year!” We seem to protect ourselves from feeling too deeply about others, of risking pain, by maintaining a safe distance and only worrying about the academic side of our students. When we see others from our position of privilege, we have the luxury of ignoring their suffering (Ada & Campoy, 2004). It is only when we learn about others that we are able to share in their pain and, together, look for ways to ease their fears and frustrations.

## Conclusion

In my efforts to connect with the families of my students, it soon became apparent to me that I could no longer narrowly define the ways parents are, or should be, involved in their children’s education. Through dialogue, I learned about and came to respect the varied roles each parent had assumed. I also learned about the way home and school are sometimes disconnected through the fears and frustrations parents and students sometimes experience as they navigate through the school years.

# CHAPTER V

# FOCUS ON DIALOGUE: INTERPRETATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995) believed "all children want to learn, that all families want to support that learning, and that the road to literacy can and should be an enjoyable one" (p. 5). For some parents and children, however, school becomes an experience fraught with tension and conflict, rather than a pleasurable experience. The excitement and anticipation of beginning kindergarten and learning to read often give way to the realization that the educational experience, at least for some children and their parents, can be frustrating and demoralizing.

## The Role of Dialogue

I began this study wondering how to build trusting, respectful, collaborative relationships with parents. Through various invitations to dialogue, I learned about the different ways families involved themselves in their children's education and the emotional barriers that sometimes exist between home and school. The first step in the dialogue process was to delve into my own beliefs based on my life experiences.

### *Beginning with Internal Dialogue*

My plan, as suggested by Ada and Campoy (2004), was to examine my own biases as they related to the home-school connection and my own privileged status as a White and middle class teacher and then to work with families in respectful, trusting ways. I began this self-examination by looking at the ghosts I bring with me to every encounter with parents (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003), believing that my own experiences as a child from a working class family, as a

teacher unsure of how to build collaborative relationships with parents, and as a parent often frustrated in knowing how to help my own children greatly impacted the way I viewed and worked with the parents of my students.

Through this self-examination, I found that the ghosts I carried with me almost always related to times when I felt powerless. Lareau (2000) suggested that working class parents often defer to teachers as the experts in education. My own parents rarely questioned the teacher or school. They encouraged their children to respect and accept the authority of the teacher. They believed, almost without exception, that teachers had their children's best interests at heart. However, when I became a teacher, I realized that not every parent held educators in the same esteem that my own parents had. The disconnect between what I had experienced as a child and what I experienced as a teacher sometimes left me feeling disconcerted. These feelings were complicated by my additional role as parent where I experienced the same feelings of helplessness at times.

One way I believe I dealt with these feelings was to erect barriers to "protect" myself. Rather than examining my feelings, I chose to ignore them and avoid close contact with parents. Even though as a White and middle class teacher I was part of the culture of power, I failed to recognize it (Delpit, 1995). While I believed that parents should be involved in their children's education, I gauged my own involvement with parents by the number of activities I could provide. When some parents seemed not to appreciate the time and effort I put into these activities or did not take advantage of them, I tended to see them as uninvolved or uncaring. Gradually, though, I began to believe that it was not the activities I offered but my attitude towards families that could make a difference (Christenson & Sheridan, 2001).

*Dialogue with Parents to Understand Differences in Parental Involvement*

In my research questions I asked, "How can teachers develop an understanding and appreciation for differences in the ways families involve themselves in their children's education?" In my conversations with parents of different ethnicities and social classes, I found some fundamental similarities: They wanted their children to do well in school. They wanted them to receive extra help if they struggled. They wanted the school to listen and then act upon their concerns. They wanted to be involved at home.

There were also some differences in how families saw themselves working with their children and with the school. One difference appeared to be related to social class. Valdes (1996) argued that middle class parents typically understand how schools work, have support systems in place that provide information about school practices, and have the material resources necessary to help their children do well in school. They seem comfortable in the school setting and in making their concerns know. Lareau's (2000) description of public schools as a "politics of maneuvering" (p. xiv) where "individual parents concentrate on helping their own children by activating their class-based resources" (p. xv) may be an apt assessment of what sometimes happens in schools. For example, Ann, as a middle class parent, seemed to feel comfortable actively advocating for Jack while Theresa, a working class parent, seemed to trust the school to act in a responsible and caring manner. Unfortunately, the children of parents who appear to trust the school the most may receive less consideration and support than the children of parents who tend to question the school's procedures and motives. Ann's efforts, for instance, resulted in extra reading support for Jack. To my knowledge, Theresa never asked for special considerations for Ricky, even though his kindergarten teacher "made her promise" she would get him help in first grade. When he was tested for ESOL services but did not qualify, Theresa accepted that the

school had done as much as they could for Ricky. His first grade teacher and I, however, persisted and he received ESOL modifications. When he continued to struggle in reading, we insisted that he be brought up for SST to explore other ways we could help him be successful. Someone, whether it be parent or teacher, has to advocate for children. If parents are reluctant to do so out of reverence for teachers, then teachers might repay, or earn, this respect by advocating for them. Rather than trying to change parents, we might use the knowledge we gain from more vocal parents to benefit all children. Ann's advocacy for her own child, for example, might have served as a reminder to do what is best for every child. When Ann asked the classroom teacher for extra help for Jack in reading, I might have asked the classroom teacher: Are there other children whose parents have not asked for help who might benefit from extra support in reading?

Of course, this reliance on the middle class to, in effect, speak for other parents may be somewhat problematic because some concerns are not universal. For instance, Theresa's fear of her children riding the bus was not a concern mentioned by any other parent but is typical of the concerns many minority or working class parents have (Lareau, 2000). Lareau wrote, "Because these parents believe that teachers are responsible for education, they seek little information about either the curriculum or the educational process, and their criticisms of the school center almost entirely on non-academic matters" (p. 8). The only time I remember my own working-class parents questioning the school's decision was when my brother got hurt at a baseball game.

Whether one parent asks about academic issues or another parent addresses safety issues, I can use their concerns to consider what is best for all my students. While some parents, usually White and middle class, will take the initiative in voicing their concerns, as a teacher, it is my responsibility to reach out to all parents, to let them know what their options are, and to help them advocate for their children.

*Dialogue to Understand Emotional Barriers*

I found that, when I sat down with parents face-to-face and listened, I learned about their fears and frustrations. Freire's (1970/2002) description of the oppressed was an abstract concept to me until I began to really began to listen to Jane. The powerlessness she felt as the school retained Amanda in kindergarten and strongly encouraged her to put Amanda back on ADHD medication was, at times, almost palpable. Gitlin and Russell (1994) found that teachers who engage in dialogue are more trusting of each other and feel less isolated and more empowered. I believe that Jane would have felt less isolated and more empowered if she had been included in the dialogue about Amanda.

Even though I cared deeply about Jane and Amanda, I sometimes let them down. Amanda's special education teacher often excluded me from meetings about students we shared, in spite of my repeated requests that I be notified. Knowing that the teacher might not tell me about a conference, I could have asked Jane to let me know of any meetings so that I could attend with her. After the conference when Jane was told that Amber might be suspended, she came by my room almost in tears and said, "I wish you had been there." While these words haunt me, they serve as a reminder of the powerful role teachers can play when power is used to "coerce, abuse, and dominate those without" (hooks, 1994, p. 187).

*Creating Opportunities for Dialogue*

I began this research with a question and some ideas about how schools and homes might work together to support children's literacy development. I created opportunities for dialogue in a variety of ways. One of the opportunities was a series of meetings at night. The meetings were designed to be inclusive and were open to all the students I served and their parents. The

meetings gave me an opportunity to share my family life and experiences with the families of my students and to engage parents and children in enjoyable activities.

At each meeting, students, parents, and teacher had opportunities to write. On the weeks when we did not have meetings, I sometimes had students start a story at school to finish at home or suggested a topic for families to write about. For example, one week I read an ABC book to the students, shared an ABC book I had written about myself and my family, and then asked them to write their own ABC books at home. (See Appendix A.) Students recorded their stories in special books either I provided or they made using the colored pencils, stickers, brightly colored paper, and other items provided in their writing kits. Parents and students shared the author and illustrator roles. In some cases, when parents chose not to participate in the project, students wrote or drew pictures on their own. Some parents and children wrote books even though they did not attend any meetings. The Reading and Writing Project was meant to be inclusive. Students and parents were not barred for participating because work or family obligations made it difficult for parents to attend meetings. When parents could not attend meetings, grandparents, other teachers, or neighbors sometimes brought children to the meetings.

Attendance at meetings (an average of 41) and the number of books produced (a total of 131) greatly exceeded any expectations I held prior to the beginning of the project. Through the meetings and books written by students and parents, I learned more about my students' lives away from school. I felt as though I were an invited guest in their homes, as I learned about their interests and what was important to them. Often, the books written by parents focused on how special their children were and how much they loved them. For struggling readers, this affirmation of their self-worth was powerful. They were always eager to share their books with me, students in their reading group, and students and teachers in their regular classrooms. The

books were also a means of encouraging, respecting, and acknowledging parental contributions to the literacy development of their children. McCaleb (1994/1997) suggested that books and the authors who write them are often held in high regard and that authentic writing, such as the stories students and parents were composing for the Reading and Writing Project, is powerful and can lead to a transformation of lives. Because family members were the main characters in the stories, I began to know them better and to appreciate their cultures, values, and experiences.

Unlike traditional homework assignments where students are given a certain number of math facts to practice or asked to write sentences using an unrelated list of spelling words, families in the Reading and Writing Project had few "rules" to follow in writing stories. The directions were simply to write about the topic. Occasionally a parent would ask if they were doing the story the "right" way. My response was, "There is no one right way. Just enjoy writing with your child." If books were incomplete, we read the pages that had been completed and celebrated the effort that went into the book.

The trust and respect we developed through the meetings and books provided a basis for open dialogue and shared decision making. Students and parents began to make suggestions for the meetings. High on the students' list were a pizza night and a literacy game night. Parents requested that the meetings continue and that we celebrate, as a family, when the school year was over.

There is an old adage that many high school teachers might disagree with that says, "High schools teachers teach subjects; elementary school teachers teach students." As a reading teacher, for a while at least, I believed that I could teach reading without really getting to know my students or their families. My mindset began to change when parents, mostly White and middle class, reached out to me. They stopped me in the hall to introduce themselves and to ask

about their children's progress. Unfortunately, not every parent of every student I taught was able to visit the school during the school day. Some of them, especially poor, immigrant, or minority, even if they were in the building, may not have felt comfortable searching me out. Through the Reading and Writing Project, the voices of almost all parents were heard. For some parents, their voices were heard through the meetings and books they authored with their children. For other parents, their voices were heard when I telephoned to follow-up with them about joining the project. Being careful not to pressure parents into participating, I continued to issue invitations in a low-key manner, such as jotting a note on meeting reminders. For example, "I know Austin has soccer practice on Wednesday nights, but if you can come, we'd love to have you!" My persistence in extending an open invitation to participate as family circumstances allowed paid off, as most of the families attended at least one meeting or wrote at least one story. By keeping the door open for participation in several ways and by providing numerous invitations to dialogue, I found that parents and students responded.

*The Importance of Dialogue*

Data suggests the meetings seemed to meet the needs of most parents. Their feedback was positive. They enjoyed the time with their children, with other parents, and with me. As Jane noted, "I wouldn't miss a meeting for nothing!" They believed their children's writing and reading were improving. They believed they had a voice in the decision-making. Based on their feedback and my own perceptions, I would strongly recommend a similar type of reading and writing project for teachers who want to improve the literacy abilities of their students, who want to offer an alternative to the kinds of homework that are typically assigned, and who want to gain an understanding of their students and their families.

However, the data that made the strongest impression on me and caused my thinking to change the most was from the face-to-face meetings with individual parents. It was from this dialogue that I realized how Theresa, Jane, and Ann viewed their involvement and how their involvement sometimes differed from the school's definition. The fears and frustrations they expressed still concern me and will, no doubt, influence my interactions with other parents.

The importance of dialogue in building trusting, respectful, and collaborative relationships with parents was most apparent in the relationship Jane and I established over the course of two years. My first encounters with Jane were mainly as an observer in conferences. From a critical theory perspective, what I saw and heard disturbed me. In my view, her voice was not being heard. The "experts" who attended conferences with Jane wanted to help Amanda, but in their well-meaning efforts, they seemed to exclude Jane, the one person could provide an inkling into what life was like for the child and parent.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) suggested that short conferences once or twice a year are inadequate for establishing a positive relationship with parents. In Jane's case, numerous conferences failed to establish the kind of relationship that allowed her fears and frustrations to be heard and addressed. When she attempted to share her concerns, no one commented on them or asked her to clarify. The implication seemed to be that any worries she had were not the school's concern, even if the school had possibly caused or contributed to them. It may be that it is not the number of times we meet with parents or even the amount of time we spend in meetings. As Christenson and Sheridan (2001) suggested, it may be that our attitudes toward parents are just as important as any actions we take. If we consider ourselves the experts and are unwilling to listen—really listen—to what parents have to say, any number of meetings will not

create the collaborative, respectful, and trusting relationships that help us enter into another's situation.

Unlike the conferences Jane and I attended, I saw the interview with her as a way for me to gain information that would help me learn from her. Although I guided the interview with Jane through the use of open-ended questions, my main purpose was to listen to what she wanted to tell me and to probe if there was something I did not understand. Rather than taking on the expert role, I encouraged Jane to share the knowledge she had about Amanda and their situation as it related to the school. The interview and Jane's attendance at the Reading and Writing Project meetings seemed to open the door to further dialogue. I learned a great deal from her about the importance of listening to parents and of developing an empathy and advocacy for them.

Because of the seriousness of Jane's fears for her daughter, as revealed in our conversations, it might be tempting to downplay the fears of other parents or to dismiss them as being overly concerned, but their fears about physical or emotional harm were just as real. For Ann, the concern was that Jack was being asked to do too much. She wanted him to continue to enjoy school and was afraid that he was not ready for second grade or the demands that were being placed on him. While Ann was able to use her middle-class status and knowledge of how schools work to help Jack at the classroom level to receive extra help in reading, her fears and frustrations were given short shrift at the school level.

Fears are sometimes compounded by frustrations. In Jane's case, the mixed messages the school sent about whether or not Amanda should be on medication was frustrating for her, as was the miscommunication about Amanda's behavior at school. The smiley faces and note about Amanda's excellent day at school were followed almost immediately by a request for a

conference where Jane was “bombarded” by teachers telling her she was hurting her daughter by not putting on her medication. After they suggested Amanda might be suspended for bullying another child, Jane left the meeting in tears. When she came by my room, she kept repeating, “I didn’t know.” When the school had communicated behavioral concerns to Jane in the past, she addressed them with Amanda. If the purpose of the meeting was to get Amanda back on medication, the educators might have approached the situation in a more sympathetic manner, rather than using an isolated incident to seemingly threaten Jane. Because the school never really took the time to engage Jane in dialogue, an empathy for her circumstances seemed to be missing.

Theresa’s involvement in education is an excellent example of expanding our definition of parental involvement. Theresa, whom many might underestimate due to her limited formal education, seemed to see her role as much broader than the one prescribed by the school. Contrary to the stereotypical view of Latinas, she valued learning for herself and for her children. She listened to Ricky read at home or had his older sister listen to him. She worked full time to help meet the economic needs of the family, she cooked dinner, and she made sure Ricky got enough sleep for school the next day. She spent time in conversation with him. She expressed her concern about his safety to school officials. She had a passion for helping other Spanish-speaking parents, encouraging them to send their children to school and to learn English.

Through dialogue, I learned about Theresa’s efforts to help her own children and other families. My admiration and respect for her as a caring, involved parent who valued education blossomed in the time we spent together.

## Questions I Continue to Ponder

I began my interest in parental involvement in 2001 convinced that parents were not doing enough to support teachers. Over the course of the last few years, my own views of parents and their involvement changed from a deficit view to a difference view. As I embraced critical theory, I began to look at my relationships with parents from a new perspective. I realized that I really had no idea of what was occurring in homes and that many of my assumptions were without foundation. Rather than solely focusing on a solution, rather than seeing children (or families) as problems to be fixed, it was important for me to spend time in dialogue to determine the ways they are already involved in their children's education and to work with them in respectful and empathetic ways.

Some questions I have asked myself and that might be of interest to others interested in building respectful relationships include the following:

- What are my subjectivities about families? Do I hold stereotypical views? Do I believe that some ethnic or socioeconomic groups value education less than others? Do I view parents from a deficit model?
- How do I define parental involvement? Do I see some parents as uninvolved and others as too involved? What are my assumptions about how parents are involved based upon? Do I ask parents about their involvement in an open-ended way that would allow me to see and know the ways of their family? Do I hold a narrow definition of involvement?
- How do I address the fears and frustrations of students and parents? How can I become aware of their concerns? What part can I play in alleviating them? Do I use fear as a tactic?

- How can I see, hear, and know my students and their parents more fully? How can I include parent voices in meetings and conferences? When parents share concerns about homework, for instance, do I see it as an opportunity to work alongside the parent to help the child, or do I brush aside their concerns? Rather than looking at children as problems to be solved, do I look at the concerns parents have and try to address them in a sensitive manner? Do I do most of the talking? Do I spend time with parents face-to-face? Do I rush to conclusions, or do I give parents time to voice their concerns and really listen?
- Do I thoughtfully consider the suggestions and recommendations I make to parents? Do recommendations come across as ultimatums? Do I consider the consequences of recommendations? Do I follow up with the parent to address any concerns that may have arisen? Have I taken the time to get to know the child and parent before making recommendations?

I hope my own self-critical reflections about my process of learning to building trusting and collaborative relationships with parents might inspire other teachers who are interested in the home-school connection to examine their beliefs about families, to create opportunities for dialogue with families, and then to support parents in bringing their voices and views into the school setting. In this study, I hope the voices, knowledge, and beliefs of parents and students have been honored. I believe it is possible for parents and teachers to work together to benefit students and that the relationship does not have to be based on fear and frustration. My viewpoint changed by first examining my own beliefs about parental involvement and then being open to learning from parents. Allowing parents to see, hear, and know me better opened the door for a reciprocal relationship whereby I was able to see, hear, know, and appreciate them more fully.

As advocated by hooks (1994), I encouraged participation by taking the first risk. I brought narratives of my experiences into the discussion to "eliminate the possibility that we [as educators] can function as all-knowing, silent interrogators" (p. 21).

## An On-Going Commitment

Working with parents in respectful and collaborative ways is an on-going commitment. It is rarely an easy task. As the 2006-07 school year began, I had completed data collection and was continuing to analyze data and write up my findings. As a full-time teacher, I was extremely busy. The thousands of books in our consolidated bookroom had been sent off for barcoding in the spring. The books were returned during the summer and my classroom was wall-to-wall boxes. The books had to be sorted, bagged, labeled, and shelved. In spite of having extra help from staff and volunteers, I felt as though I were drowning in books. For weeks, I came in early and stayed late. In the meantime, I tested and began serving students. There were additional responsibilities, such as serving as chairperson of the reading committee and facilitating staff developments on reading. Every free minute at home was spent writing up my study. In addition, there were the usual family commitments.

In the midst of all this activity, a first-grade teacher mentioned that the parents of one of the students I had just begun to serve had some concerns. Based on past experiences, I immediately assumed that the parent (White and middle class) was upset that her child was struggling in reading and needed extra help. I telephoned her. When she suggested that she and her husband meet with me, I told her that I might be able to address any concerns she had over the telephone. I explained the reading program and told her that, if she and her husband still had questions, to let me know. In passing, I mentioned that I would be at school late that night since the building would be open for first grade curriculum night. Later that evening as I worked in the

consolidated bookroom, I was called to the lobby. The parents were there and wanted to meet with me. I choked back my frustration—I thought we had settled their concerns over the telephone—and took them down to my classroom. Possibly because I was tired, I sat and listened. Their concerns were not about the reading program. They were trying to decide whether or not they should pull their child out of public school and put him in a private kindergarten for another year. They needed to make a decision right away, and they wanted my input.

While this was a painful and humbling learning experience for me, it served to reinforce the many things I had learned from the Reading and Writing Project. I had violated some of my own cardinal beliefs about the danger of making false assumptions and the importance of meeting face-to-face with parents, engaging in dialogue, and actively listening to parents' concerns.

After I listened carefully to the parents and asked a few questions, I told them I had only begun working with their son but that I could share the results of my testing with them and that might help them make their decision. The test results indicated that he had the prerequisites (letter identification, some sight words, and knowledge about books and print) for reading in place and that I thought, with a little extra help, he would be able to make grade level progress. A few days later, the parents decided to leave him in first grade. I worked with him for a couple of months and dismissed him because he no longer needed help in reading. By the end of first grade, he was reading above grade level. Another year in kindergarten would not have been in his best interests. If the parents had not persisted, however, they would have made their decision without having all the facts. While the other demands on my time were important, meeting with these parents should have been my top priority.

Amanda's situation and the one I just described underscore the great responsibility that I have as a teacher to spend time in dialogue with parents. I cannot operate under false assumptions, ignore crucial information possessed by parents, or withhold information I possess from them. The decisions I make as a teacher often have long-term consequences for children and their parents. The decisions, however, do not have to be made solely by me. By opening the door to dialogue with parents, I can tap into their knowledge and together we can share the power and responsibility for doing what is best for every child.

Of all the parents I worked with during this study, Jane and Amanda's situation touched my heart the most. Their ghosts will certainly be with me in all future interactions with parents. I conclude with the following letter that was written by me but expresses some of the concerns I heard from Jane.

*To Whom It May Concern:*

*I want my child to do well in school. I want her to learn to read. I am willing to help her at home, even though it is difficult to start homework after I pick her up from daycare. By the time we get home and make dinner, she's tired and I'm tired. Sometimes I'm not sure how to help her. Do I tell her to sound out the words? Can I just read the story to her? When she gets frustrated, it's hard to be patient. But I try. She takes her bath and goes to bed. Tomorrow we start all over again.*

*I want my child to do well in school. When the teachers—some of whom I don't even know—tell me to take her to the pediatrician, I do. I'm not sure what to tell the doctor, but when he prescribes medication, I give it to her. It will help her focus and learn, I'm told. How can she focus at school when her sleep is interrupted with nightmares? She looks so thin.*

*I want my child to do well in school. I want her to go on to first grade with her classmates, but the teacher tells me she's not ready. Another year in kindergarten and my child begins to dislike school. Why does she blame me for holding her back? A new teacher and this time I'm told my child is lethargic. She's not learning. Will she have to repeat kindergarten again? No one answers. Should I take her off the medication?*

*I want my child to do well in school. I get a note asking me to come for another conference. I dread going. I don't have the words to tell the teachers what I'm feeling and thinking. No one asks me anyway. I sit and listen. I hear about her struggles with behavior and learning. They tell me I'm hurting her by taking her off medication. At home, I talk to her about working hard in school and about doing what the teacher says and about getting along with other children. She calls me from the clinic. Her head hurts. I tell her to stay at school.*

*Every morning now before school she complains that her stomach hurts. She asks to stay home. I think it is stress related. Her doctor isn't sure. He puts her in the hospital and runs tests. He doesn't know what's wrong with her.*

*I want my child to do well in school. I buy books for her. I read to her. I would get a tutor if I could afford one. She's smart. She remembers how to get to Stevie B's Pizza when I can't recall where it is. Why doesn't she learn? After all the meetings, why can't someone tell me?*

*I want my child to be happy. I want to enjoy the time I spend with her. I want her to enjoy being a child. I want her to know that I love her and that I do the best I can. Why do I feel like such a failure?*

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APPENDIX A

PROPOSED PLAN

| Week of… | Possible Read Alouds | Teacher's Book | Class Book | Student/Parent's Book |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| October 11 | *Amazing Grace* or *The Important Thing* | *The Important Thing About Mrs. Lewis* or *I Am* | *I Am* | *The Important Thing About* _____ |
| October 17 | *Quick as a Cricket* or *Lotus Seed* | *M*<br>*R*<br>*S*<br><br>*L*<br>*E*<br>*W*<br>*I*<br>*S* | Acrostic using students' names | Acrostic using family's last name or individual family names |
| October 24 | *Chrystanthemum* | *The Story of My Name* | *My Name Is* | Write about student's name or parent's name |
| October 31 | *Animalia* | ABC or Counting Book | ABC Book | ABC or Counting Book |
| November 7 | *On the Day You Were Born* or *I Already Know I Love You* | A childhood memory book | *Our Special Memories* | *A Special Memory* |
| November 14 | *Wilma Unlimited* or *Things Mom/Dad/Teacher Can't Do* | *I Can* | *We Can* | *My _____ Can* |
| November 28 | *Uncle Jed's Barbershop* or *The Old Woman Who Named Things* | *My Mom* | *People Who Are Special to Us* | Write about someone special to parents, child, or family |
| December 5 | *Only Passing Through* or *Where I Come From* | *My Grandparents* | *Home* | Write about parent's childhood, places lived, everyday experiences |
| December 15 | Celebration! Food, sharing, project evaluation | | | |

## APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW GUIDE PRIOR TO STUDY

1. What is your name? Your child's name? What grade is your child in?

2. As you know, I am interested in creating good relationships between home and school, so that we can both help your child become a good reader and writer. It would be helpful for us to know a little about each other as we think about how we'll help _____(child's name). What can you remember about learning to read? What can you remember about learning to write? Let me share a few of my reading and writing experiences.

3. How do you feel about _____'s (child's name) school experiences so far?

4. How would you describe your involvement with your child's education especially in the area of reading and writing?

5. In what ways has the school involved you?

6. What would you say are the strengths of the school as far as involving parents, especially in literacy activities?

7. What about the school has made it hard to be involved in your child's education?

8. If you had the power to change things, what changes would you make at your child's school?

9. What are some of the ways the school could increase parental involvement?

10. Suppose I was a new parent at the school. What would you tell me about the school and parents?

11. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW GUIDE AFTER STUDY

1. Thank you for participating in the study.

2. In general, how would you describe the experience? (Show some of the books.)

   Tell me what it was like making these books. What was it like for you? For your child?

3. What was the most beneficial part of the family book project for you? For your child?

4. What parts were challenging or frustrating?

5. The goal of the study was to build stronger connections between home and school in the area of literacy. In what ways did we accomplish that goal?

6. If we did the project again, what changes would you suggest?

7. How do you see your role, as a parent, in your child's literacy activities? In what ways has your view changed as a result of the study?

8. Is there anything else you would like to tell me?

APPENDIX D
Data Collection Summary

| Data Source | Date(s) | Participant(s) | Description |
|---|---|---|---|
| Interviews | 11/9/05<br>11/10/05<br>1/25/06<br>1/26/06<br>5/9/06 | *Theresa<br>Kadisha<br>*Jane<br>Chrissie<br>*Ann | Conversation using open-ended interview guide, Appendices B and C. |
| SST Meeting | 5/16/06 | Ann | Retention meeting attended by principal, classroom teacher, counselor, Ann and her husband, myself. |
| Reading and Writing Project Meetings | 9/19/05<br>10/13/05<br>10/24/05<br>11/17/05<br>12/7/05<br>1/26/06<br>2/22/06<br>5/10/06 | All my students and their parents were invited. | Activities varied but usually included refreshments, an ice breaker, a read aloud, an opportunity for participants to write, sharing time, small group discussions. |
| Meeting Reminders | 9/17/05<br>10/11/05<br>10/22/05<br>11/15/05<br>12/5/05<br>1/24/06<br>2/20/06<br>5/8/06 | All my students and their parents. | Written friendly reminder about upcoming meeting. |
| Telephone Calls | 10/14/05 | Parents who did not attend 10/13/05 meeting. | Telephoned parents to let them know about the RWP and to ask them to consider participating. Carl's mom said they are moving. Hailey and Connor's mom said she worked late. Emmett's mom and Jarvis's mom said they would like to participate. |
| | 11/17/05 | Alana | Just picked her son up for reading. Wanted to know if she could drop him and his sister off at the RWP meeting while she attended local school council that was meeting in media center at same time. I explained RWP meetings were for parent and child but agreed her children could come. (She and her husband attended future meetings with him.) |

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| Books | 10/14/05<br>10/19/05<br>11/7/05 | All my students and their parents were asked to participate. | In addition to the books written at the project meetings, students were asked to write 3 additional times. |
| Informal conversations | 10/19/05 | Cheryl | Dropped by my room to talk about incentives for her son offered by his karate instructor for good behavior at school. Cannot come to meeting; relatives visiting. Discussed her son's frustration, at times, with reading; throws books. Feels different because of speech difficulties. |
| | 10/15/05 | Maria | Had received forms to participate in Reading and Writing Project. Even though they were in Spanish, she did not understand them. Thought she was being investigated by DFACS. Was in building to meet with Speech teacher who is bilingual. Brought her to my room to interpret. |
| | 12/8/05 | Marvin | Chance encounter in hallway. Apologized for not getting back to me about being interviewed. Had been traveling with work. |
| | 12/16/05 | Maria | Came by my room after her child's winter party to bring me some Mexican food she had prepared and to give me a gift (a tiny China tea set). |
| | 1/28/06 | Jane | Dropped by my room after meeting with classroom teacher, counselor, special education teacher, and assistant principal. Extremely upset that Amanda might be suspended. |
| | 1/19/06 | Theresa | Chance encounter; meeting Ricky for lunch. |
| Notes | 10/20/05 | Maria | Wrote me note in Spanish. I tried to figure our some key words using a Spanish-English on-line dictionary. Sounded as though she were upset with something or someone—me? After school, our only bilingual parapro |

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| | | | translated note for me. Maria was upset. A family member in Mexico was missing and feared dead. She wanted me to know she would not be at the RWP meeting because of this family crisis. |
| | 10/15/05 | Mike | Had his son return writing kit. Note said his son was already being tutored and was beginning to dislike school. Did not want to add any more activities. I called him and told him his son could keep the writing kit—no strings attached—if he wanted to. (His son did attend two future RWP meetings.) |
| Emails | 10/14-18/05 | Abby | Emailed her about being part of the RWP. They were not at last night's meeting. She responded that her son was busy with soccer and after schools skill development classes, and they could not take on anything else. She offered to return the writing kit. I emailed back that I understood and that her son was welcome to keep the kit. She said he was thrilled that he would get to keep the kit. |
| | 10/27/05 | Christina | Just picked up her son for reading support. Emailed to let her know about the RWP. She and her son want to participate. |
| | 11/15/05 | Chrissie | Cannot come to RWP meeting; wanted to know if Grandma could bring C. She also had several questions about how to help C. with reading and about how to build her self-confidence. Said she had cried and been unhappy at school this year but seems to be adjusting to a difference in teaching style from last year's KG teacher. Reported they did lots of "glue and glitter" last year and believes that is why C is a little behind in reading. Wrote her long email, making some suggestions about how to help with reading at home, thanking her for her support at home, and telling her |

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| | | | we would love to have C's grandmother come to our meeting. |
| | 12/12/05 | Abby | Emailed to let her know her son would be picked up by Reading Recovery. She responded with an email thanking me for helping him with reading and saying she had seen much improvement in reading. |
| | 2/09/06 | Christina | Had emailed her about a lost reading book. She emailed to let me know they had found the book and said her son was enjoying reading now and she was seeing much improvement. |
| | 3/3/06 | Chrissie | Just wanted me to know her child had read last night's book. She had forgotten to sign reading log. |
| | 4/12/06 | Abby | Emailed to let her know about the ice cream social we were planning. She replied that they would love to come. She had promised her son he could come to a meeting if we had another. He had been disappointed about not getting to come to other meetings. |
| | 4/10-5/10/06 | Tracie | Series of emails about our last meeting. Several parents asked about having an ice cream social. Tracie is leading this event up. She is sending a letter out to parents asking them to bring in an ice cream topping. She has also checked into getting book marks for students. When I asked how I could help, she said, "Just show up!" |
| | 5/4/06 | Tracie | Emailed to let her know K. no longer needs extra reading help and is ready to be dismissed. |
| | 5/10/06 | Chrissie | Emailed to let her know good news: her daughter no longer needs extra support in reading. She replied that when she told C. she burst into tears because she |

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| | | | wanted to continue to come. Since there are only a few days left in school, we decided to let her stay in. |
| | 5/26/06 | Tracie | Asked if I would write a letter to principal saying her child needed a 2nd grade teacher who was strong in reading and writing. She had sent similar email to classroom teacher. Discussed it with classroom teacher and we suggested to Tracie that she write a letter to principal, telling her the same thing she told us. |

*focal participants in study