

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILIES THROUGH DIALOGUE JOURNALS

by

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(Under the Direction of JoBeth Allen)

ABSTRACT

A disconnect often exists between the worlds of school and home particularly with lower income children and their families. Part of this disconnect is evident in the missed understanding of what counts as parent involvement within the educational system and the importance of teachers developing meaningful relationships with families. I posit that the use of tools, such as dialogue journals, is evidence of parent involvement and there is a need for these less traditional types of involvement to be recognized, valued, and encouraged.

The purpose of this critical action research study was to explore the relationships that developed, or failed to develop, when I used dialogue journals to communicate with the diverse families in my classroom and to examine what I learned about culture through using the journals. My research was informed and guided by the work of Freire (1970, 1992, 1998) as he discussed the importance of dialogue *with* people, in this case families, not just *at* them; the concept of funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) which recognizes and places emphasis on the students' and families' culture as something to be incorporated into classroom practices and relationships; and numerous scholars whose work is related to working with diverse populations and children of color (Allen, 2007; Delpit, 1995; Heath, 1983; Jones, 2006; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1999, 2002; Paley, 1979/1989).

In the Third Space (Gutiérrez, 2008) of our journals, some of the families and I engaged in sustained, two-way communication which resulted in the development of trust-based relationships. The student was our primary focus and we discussed academic and behavioral achievements and concerns of the child, as well as our lives and experiences outside of school. We were able to talk with and listen to each other in the safe, co-created space in our journal.

“Communication becomes effective when teachers listen with respect, so that the stories and wisdom of families can be heard, acknowledged, responded to, and valued” (Kay, Neher, & Lush, 2010, p. 417). The dialogue journals gave me the opportunity to listen in this way and allowed families and me to speak with each other.

INDEX WORDS: Dialogue journals; Culturally relevant teaching; Third Space; Parent relationships; Parent involvement; Communication with parents; Teacher as learner

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to all of the families and children who allowed me into their lives and who let me learn with and from them.

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I have been transformed as a person, as a professional, as a teacher, as a learner because of my experiences teaching in the classroom. I have no doubt that I am a better person now than I was when I first entered into teaching and continue to grow and develop in understanding and accepting others. Many helped me along this journey—Marsha, who was my cultural coach/liaison, as well as an outstanding assistant teacher and friend; principals and co-workers who gave me the respectful courtesy of allowing me to do things “my way” even when they weren’t exactly sure what that was; my husband, Jon, who supported me throughout this endeavor and who listened to countless retellings of events in the classroom and always knew that “bless her heart” was the beginning of a really good story; my family (by birth and marriage) who always, consistently reminded me of their belief in me at just the right times; my writing group—Sharon, Sterg, Christine, Amy, Melanie, Tara, and Steve—who read, critiqued, and challenged me in my work while always assuring me it could be done; my doctoral committee, JoBeth Allen, Betty Shockley Bisplinghoff, and Martha Alleksaht-Snider, who provided insightful feedback, persistent encouragement, and immeasurable support; and, finally, the students and their families who were my teachers even as I stood in the classroom as “teacher.” The reciprocity of their time, their respect, their communication, and their openness was the foundation not only for our learning, but also our relationships.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION	1
Background of the Problem	1
Theoretical Framework.....	8
Structure of Dissertation	18
2 LITERATURE REVIEW	20
Parent Involvement.....	20
Culturally Relevant Teaching.....	38
Purpose of this Study	51
Significance of this Study	51
Limitations of this study	52
Statement of the Problem.....	54
Research Questions.....	55
Methodology.....	56
3 WRITING A RELATIONSHIP: HOME-SCHOOL JOURNALS	68
Using Journals to Speak with Families: Amy’s Process.....	70
New Version of Home-School Communication: Andrea’s Process	75
Teacher as Listener: Lindsey’s Process	80

	What We've Learned and Questions that Remain	85
	References	90
4	DIALOGUE JOURNALS: CREATION OF A THIRD SPACE	92
	The Researcher and the Research	95
	Third Space and Dialogue	97
	Methodology	100
	Communication is Key	126
	References	130
5	TEACHER AS CULTURAL LEARNER: CONVERSATIONS WITH A PAKISTANI, MUSLIM FAMILY THROUGH DIALOGUE JOURNALS	133
	Review of Literature	136
	Methodology	149
	Findings	155
	Discussion: Teacher as Cultural Learner	165
	References	170
6	CONCLUSION	173
	What I Learned	173
	Implications for My Teaching and Advising Graduate Students	176
	Future Research	178
	REFERENCES	182

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background of Problem

“We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don’t even know they exist?” (Delpit, 1995, p. xiv).

Children and parents come into school settings with a myriad of experiences, values, attitudes and beliefs. When these experiences and beliefs coincide with the culture of the school setting most children transition between the worlds of home and school without trauma. Lareau (2003) noted that “There are signs that middle-class children benefit, in ways that are invisible to them and to their parents, from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and those standards adopted by institutions” (p. 237). Unfortunately, for a large number of children, the culture of school is vastly different than what they encounter in their homes. Included in the school culture are various individuals/actors—classroom teachers, counselors, administrators, and board of education members—who frequently do not share the experiences of the families being served and, without intentional effort, are not able to develop meaningful relationships.

Beginning teaching experience

I felt prepared to teach as I entered the public school building, into *my classroom*, to begin my first year as a teacher. I was a recent graduate of the university located in the same southeastern town as the school and had some experience in the elementary schools in the area. I

readied the room, set up the furniture, attempted pronunciations of the unfamiliar names on the class roster, and waited in anticipation of the students. The feelings of confidence and excitement were quickly replaced with questions and doubt as the first week of school came to an end.

I sensed the disconnect between the home and school cultures of my students and struggled with how I, a young, White, middle class female, could be an effective teacher for students whose home culture was so different from my own. The actions of the students in the classroom seemed chaotic and uncontrollable. My verbal request and directives typically went unheeded, such as when I told Tay and D'metrius to stop hitting each other. Their physical attack continued and worsened until I and the paraprofessional physically separated them. In another situation, Shontay yelled out "Damn it to hell!" and I explained that those were not words we used at school, she looked at me and said, "Well, I can say 'em anywhere I want!" How could I possibly reach these students? What hope was there to be an effective teacher for them? However, in this uncomfortable space filled with questions of doubt, I became curious rather than defeated, open-minded rather than shut down. I realized that I needed to not only be teacher, but also learner—learning about my students, their families, where they were coming from, where they were going, what was important. I needed to develop relationships.

Teacher as Learner

During my second year in the public school system and continuing through my fifth year, I had the opportunity to teach in the community center building located in one of the public housing areas in our town. During this time, I slowly developed more of an awareness and an ability to interact, teach, learn from, and appreciate the students and their families. As Paley (1979/1989) explained in her book *White Teacher*, I learned to listen to myself within my own

classroom. Equally as important, I also practiced listening to and learning from others, including the students, their parents, and Moriah, a young, Black, female paraprofessional with limited formal university training. She facilitated what I consider to be my most critical period of growth as a teacher of African American students. My own praxis (Freire, 1970) under the guidance of a culturally experienced “other” changed my perception of a culture not my own and significantly affected my teaching and interaction with members of this culture.

After five years of teaching Pre-Kindergarten, I began teaching Kindergarten at a local elementary school. During the next five years, I taught in two demographically similar elementary schools. Both were identified as Title One, having more than 85% of their population of students receiving free or reduced lunch, and the majority of the students in both schools were African American or Hispanic.

I realized how critical it was for parents and families to be a part of their child’s school experience and that the worlds of home and school are not separated, as I felt at the beginning of my first year teaching, nor should they be treated as if they are. Moriah related a personal experience to me involving her own child. Apparently, her son had been struggling academically and exhibiting negative behavior at school. Moriah first heard about this during the parent-teacher conference two months into the school year. When she asked the teacher how long there had been issues with the behavior and concerns about the academics, the teacher told her “pretty much from the beginning of the year.” I saw a mother’s helplessness and anger when she said, “Hell, Kay—how am I supposed to help my boy when they won’t even tell me what’s going on? It’s like those White teachers are scared of me or think I don’t care! I can’t do nothing if I don’t know!” From this conversation, I realized that how teachers and other representatives of school perceive parents directly affects how parents are invited (or not) to be involved in their child’s

school experience. As I moved into the elementary school setting, I observed how these perceptions also affected the types of opportunities offered for parents to be involved and what counted as parent involvement.

Parent involvement, its meaning and purpose, is a challenge that percolates in the disconnect between the cultures of school and family. There is a distance that exists specifically between the primary actors—the teacher, the children and their families. Oft accepted definitions of parent involvement include the adults in a child’s life being physically present within the walls of the school by attending special performances, participating in parent meetings, and showing up for scheduled parent-teacher conferences (Belden, 2003; Rothstein, 2004). Questions have been raised regarding the actual benefit to the child or positive effect these types of involvement may foster (Jones, 2001; Cook, 2005; Allen, 2007). For parents to see their child in a choreographed musical may be enjoyable, but often has no actual impact on the child’s learning. The administrators or other staff members of the school, with little input from the parents of their actual needs, often determine the topics of parent meetings. Frequently, parents are told the day and time of their child’s conference with little regard for the work schedule or other demands on a parents’ time. Across these encounters the parents are too often relegated to being passive participants in matters that purportedly directly involve their child and when they are not able or choose not to be physically present in schools, assumptions are made that they don’t care. Assumptions about parents lack of caring become even more evident with working-class and poor parents (Lareau, 2003). These assumptions can be particularly detrimental to teachers’ perceptions of parents and can completely stymie the possibility of meaningful, trust-based relationships being developed between parents and teachers.

It is complex—schools, teachers, and administrators often say they welcome parents, but when they perceive parents as not responding, some make assumptions. Many assumptions made by teachers and administrators are incorrect and harmful in promoting an atmosphere conducive to parents being involved. Feurenstein (2000) explained that, “Because school plays an important role in children’s development, parents and guardians typically are extremely interested in what occurs there” (p.31) contrary to the inaccurate assumption of parents not caring; however, according to Swap (1993) parents “often do not know what is expected of them or how they might contribute to their child’s schooling” (p.25). Not only are parents left with uncertainties regarding school expectations, but also administrators and many teachers (like me) have little preservice preparation or in-service guidance on developing relationships with parents.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) noted that the majority of teacher education programs do not adequately train or prepare teachers on the importance and means of developing relationships with parents. As I reflected on my undergraduate training in a prominent teacher education program, there was no recollection of significant attention given to the importance of developing relationships with parents, no single course that held families as the primary focus. The National PTA has also recognized this need as evidenced in their resolution on teacher preparation for parent/family involvement. In noting that “undergraduate teacher training for effectively involving and including parents/families in education is not widely offered by colleges and universities throughout the country” and “state teacher certification agencies do not require such training for the issuance [or renewal] of a teaching certificate,” the National PTA recommends

that state constituents “work with their state’s universities and colleges of education to develop and require specific training to effectively involve and include parents/families in the educational process of their children” and that this training be required for initial teaching certificates and recertification (http://www.pta.org/topic_pta_resolution_on_teacher-preparation_for_parent_family_involvement.asp, retrieved 2/15/10).

It is not that the importance of developing relationships with families is completely overlooked or never mentioned in teacher education programs. I can attest to the inclusion of this topic by my own planning and discussion in the courses I teach with pre-service teachers and to my colleagues’ intentionality in including this information in their courses. In discussing a graduate course on family-school-community interactions, Allexaht-Snider and Schwartz (2001) noted that through the use of theoretical and conceptual frameworks focused on developing relationships with families, preservice and experienced teachers were able to “expand their understandings of and respect for families different from their own, as well as to conceive of new ways of collaborating with families and incorporating knowledge of communities into their teaching” (p. 221). The experienced teacher was also able to incorporate this learning into her own efforts in developing partnerships with parents. However, a wide spread, systemic value with related focus and action for working with families has not been incorporated and sustained across all pre-service teachers’ training.

In my Master’s level studies, I began to gain more in-depth understanding about specific practices that could facilitate relationships between schools and families. It was here that I took

a course that focused solely on “Families, Schools, and Communities.” It was also during this time that a teacher introduced me to the idea of dialogue journals, an idea that caught my attention and stayed with me as being something I wanted to implement in my future classrooms and whose implementation often placed me in the position of learner.

Using dialogue journals

As I prepared for my first teaching position, I recalled an idea about dialogue journals that had stayed with me. I had mentally committed to using the journals when I had my own classroom and retrieved Shockley, Michalove, & Allen’s (1995) *Engaging families: Connecting home and school literacy communities* from my bookshelf. I found the introductory statement for the home reading journal that had been used by Michalove. “Dear Parents, It’s always exciting to start a new school year with a new group of students. I look forward to working with your child. Please take a few moments to tell me about your child. Thanks, Barbara Michalove” (p. 19). I used a similar introduction in the journals I readied for the parents that year and every year that followed in my ten-year teaching career. Barbara Michalove and Betty Shockley, the other classroom teacher in their research study, used their journals to focus on children’s reading and writing. In my haste, I did not read beyond the introductory statement, and the use of journals and their evolution followed a less focused path.

When I initiated the use of the dialogue journals, I established a system of reading specific students’ journals on given days. I planned to read and respond to five students’ journals per day, thus responding in all twenty of the journals by the end of each week. Within the first few days of using the journals, I was already off schedule because some of the parents’ responses warranted an immediate response, such as when a parent asked how his/her child was in school that day, while other journals contained no written response from parents. The

interactive dialogue and time-sensitive inquiries quickly became the determinant of whose journal I would write in and whose could wait a few days before going home again.

I continued to be guided by the inquiries and dialogue throughout a decade of using the journals without guidelines or an established intended purpose of the journals. They were simply (and complexly) a space for some of the families and me to engage in a sustained conversation. The desire to get to know the students in my classroom better by engaging with their families became the impetus for the continued use of the journals.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical lens through which I view my time in the classroom and which guides my research and analysis is critical sociocultural theory. I agree with Freire (1998) when he claimed: “I like being a human person because even though I know that the material, social, political, cultural, and ideological conditions in which we find ourselves almost always generate divisions that make difficult the construction of our ideals of change and transformation, I know also that the obstacles are not eternal” (p. 55). Even when cultural obstacles such as race and class seem so firmly imbedded, I know that there are things that can be done to make a difference, to make things better. “In other words, though I know that things can get worse, I also know that I am able to intervene to improve them” (Freire, 1998, p. 53).

Before I begin a discussion of critical sociocultural theory, I want to identify the definition of culture that guided this study. Nieto (2002) stated that “culture includes not only language, ethnicity, and race, but other crucial dimensions such as social class and gender” (p. 53). This definition provides a framework for defining culture and includes identifiable indicators such as race, class, and gender. While these indicators are helpful when collectively identifying groups of people based on shared interests, experiences, or characteristics, there are

also individual variances within any group that are part of culture. “*Culture* refers to a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives as well as the lives of others. Even without our being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn, affect how we teach and learn” (Gay, 2000, p. 8-9, italics in original). Therefore, I think of culture as it affects every part of who we are and guides the decisions, beliefs, and actions we take. As Nieto (1999) further noted, “Culture is what we do every day. Cultures change as a result of the decisions that we . . . make about our traditions, attitudes, behaviors, and values” (p. 56). As a teacher, I worked to learn about the cultures of my students and their families, both the larger framework and individual components, in order to construct bridges and make connections with families.

Critical Sociocultural Theory

In entering into the classroom and into relationships, the critical researcher brings an ever-present curiosity and openness coupled with humility and questioning. Freire (1987) stated that “the critical attitude is characterized by one who is always questioning one’s own experience, as well as the reasoning behind this experience” (p. 68). This questioning of experience and reasoning often results in an acknowledgement of difference and an extended curiosity to better understand and respect that which appears different. This can become challenging by virtue of general human nature and becomes particularly problematic when the exploration of difference occurs within the institutionalized school setting.

We can see that respecting differences and, obviously, those who are different from us always requires of us a large dose of humility that would alert us to the risks of overvaluing our identity, which could on the one hand, turn into a form of arrogance and, on the other, promote the devaluation of other human beings (Freire, 1998, p. 107).

Freire (1998) argued that “the school cannot abstract itself from the socio-cultural and economic conditions of its students, their families, and their communities” but the unfortunate reality is that the American public school system frequently does. “These powerful structural and societal forces surround schools and deeply touch the lives of teachers and children” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978, p. 5). The societal forces surrounding schools include the home cultures—experiences, language, beliefs—the students bring with them into the classroom. Unfortunately, “rather than focusing on the knowledge these students bring to school and using it as a foundation for learning, the emphasis has been on what these students lack in terms of the forms of language and knowledge sanctioned by the schools” (González, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendón, Gonzales & Amanti, 1995, in González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 90). According to González et al (2005), this concept, referred to as *funds of knowledge*, “is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (p. ix-v). These are not fixed, static pieces of information, but rather are fluid and developing based on experience. As experiences change, so do the funds of knowledge. “Equally important is for teachers to gain an understanding of funds of knowledge as a “fluid” concept, and that its content and meaning are negotiated through discussions among participants” (González et al, 2005, p.19).

I sought to enter into my students' home life and communities, not as someone trying to convey educational information, but with a goal of developing trust-based relationships with the parents and families so they might feel comfortable sharing with me about their lives and experiences. As Allext-Snyder and Schwartz (2001) noted, "Family-teacher relationships are portrayed as dynamically constructed, with teachers and parents drawing on unique bodies of cultural knowledge about family-school collaboration as they build relationships with each other centered on the individual concerns of the child" (p. 218). What can occur is that as the teacher gains more information from the parent around issues of cultural knowledge, the parent gains more information from the teacher regarding school-related knowledge, and they develop a better understanding of each other and the child as the focal point of their relationship.

In acknowledging that the parent, as "the teacher in these home-based contexts of learning will know the child as a whole person," there is an awareness of these parent-child relationships being "thick" and "multistranded" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992) which is vastly different than the "single-stranded" manner in which many teacher-student relationships are developed and maintained. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978) described the contrast in these relationships as being "the *primary relationships* of parents and children and the *secondary relationships* of teachers and children" (italics in original, p. 22). González et al (2005) spoke of *confianza* as a cultural construct indicated by an interest and willingness for individuals to participate in reciprocity of sharing information and experiences. "When there is sincere interest in both learning about and learning from a household, relationships and *confianza* can flourish" (González et al, 2005, p. 6). Sincerity cannot be fabricated or imitated for relationships and *confianza* to grow. As with any relationship, there is little to no room in parent-teacher relationships for false interest, placating conversations, or leading questions. A key premise and

justification for using the dialogue journals was that “reciprocal practices establish serious obligations based on the assumption of *confianza* (mutual trust), which is reestablished or confirmed with each exchange and leads to the development of long-term relationships” (Moll et al, 1992, in González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 74).

Through the dialogue journal exchanges, I was able to learn more about my students’ lives outside of school and better acknowledge the funds of knowledge brought into the classroom, via the students, on a daily basis. In identifying an underlying rationale for their work, González et al (2005) asserted, “the educational process can be greatly enhanced when teachers learn about their students’ everyday lives” (p. 6). I operated from the same assumption and used it as the underlying rationale for my work and my actions.

According to Giroux (as cited in Freire & Macedo, 1987), one of the criteria that must exist for critical pedagogy in the learning environment is that “radical teachers must develop pedagogical conditions in their classrooms that allow different student voices to be heard and legitimated . . . this means replacing the authoritative discourse of imposition and recitation with a voice capable of speaking in one’s own terms, a voice capable of listening, retelling, and challenging the very grounds of knowledge and power” (p. 20). In developing conditions for this voice to exist, the authoritative voice is replaced with acts of capable listening, retelling, and responding. This sharing of power and development of different voices, specifically with parents, does not equate to ceding all power to parents. As Freire (1992) explained about the presence of others in the educational setting, this “does not mean denying the indispensable need for specialists. It only means not leaving them as the exclusive “proprietors” of a basic component of educational practice” (p. 94). The teachers, as educated specialists, are crucial to the relationship, but they are not the sole determinants of the relationship or its purpose. Just as

“dialogue between teachers and students does not place them on the same footing professionally” (p. 101) dialogue between teachers and parents does not enable either to act in place of the other, having teacher acting as parent, or parent acting as teacher, in the formally-trained academic definition. What can occur though is that the teacher can gain more understanding of the parental perspectives, the parent can gain more understanding of the teacher’s perspective, and they each can have a better understanding of the other and the child as the focal point of their relationship.

Freire (1992) went further to explain that “dialogue does not *level* them, does not “even them out,” reduce them to each other. Dialogue is not a favor done by one for the others, a kind of grace accorded. On the contrary, it implies a sincere, fundamental respect on the part of the subjects engaged in it” (p. 101) and through continued engagement in dialogue, there is an opportunity for respect to grow, understanding to deepen, and trust-based relationships to form. “Dialogue must require an ever-present curiosity about the object of knowledge. Thus, the dialogue is never an end in itself but a means to develop a better comprehension about the object of knowledge” (Freire, 1970, p. 18). In developing better comprehension, the act of dialogue can serve to validate experiences of students and their families. “The validation of the experiences of students and the lived practices of households is an important aspect of critical pedagogy” (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p.41).

González, et al (2005) questioned “how practitioners, within the limits of very real structural constraints, can realistically carry out emancipatory and liberatory pedagogies when they themselves are victims of disempowerment and their circumstances preclude full professional development” (p. 3). While it may be challenging, and not possible in totality, teachers can hope for, implement, and participate in acts that are emancipatory and liberatory for

themselves, as well as others, including parents, with whom they work. To not participate in these acts would evidence accepting and being manipulated by the structural constraints.

According to Freire and Macedo (1987), “the opposite of manipulation, in brief, is people’s critical and creative participation in the process of reinventing their society” (p.65). Reinventing a society, or any societal component, requires that the participants be given the opportunity to act, speak, and respond in ways that are outside the realm of *the usual*.

Cathy Amanti created this opportunity for parents and herself as a teacher by planning home visits with the families of her students and facilitating meaningful relationships. Amanti confidently declared, “These relationships stand as symbols of opposition to all the rules and regulations and bureaucratic practices that try to confine and define the student, the teacher, and the parent roles within educational institutions” (in González et al, 2005, p.139). She also noted that this experience afforded teachers the opportunity to “become more a part of the socially dense contexts within which our students are growing up” (p.139-140).

Messing (2005) argued that “personalizing the institutional relationship is key to educational change” because “this type of exchange between teachers and families begins to break down the traditional hierarchical relationships, in which students and families are subordinate to teachers, who in turn are too often considered subordinate to their administrators and the researchers they may work with” (in González et al, 2005, p. 192). One such example of hierarchical relationships is evident in the traditional definition, perception, and expectation of parent involvement.

Although parental involvement is the mantra of every educational reform program, it is often categorically and narrowly defined as parents (usually the mothers) entering the classroom to facilitate the teacher. This is the barometer of parental interest and support.

Yet, if educational institutions are serious about creating partnerships with the community, the relationship cannot be an asymmetrical alliance, with one component defining and limiting the role of its counterpart (González et al, 2005, p. 42).

To clarify this further, I discuss Giles' (2005) identification of three types of narratives underlying parent-educator relationships in the literature review in Chapter 2.

I turn now to the theoretical concept of Third Space and the possibility of the development of less hierarchical relationships between teachers and families being established in this co-created, shared space.

Third Space

Educators use the concept of a Third Space to identify areas in which teachers and students together create an interactional space that draws on the students' out of school experiences and knowledge (first space) as well as the academic world of school (second space). In some instances, this space has been identified in relation to content area literacy (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carillo, & Collazo, 2004) and sociocritical literacy practices (Gutiérrez, 2008) as related to the home and school worlds of students.

...we call this integration of knowledges and Discourses drawn from different spaces the construction of "third space" that merges the "first space" of people's home, community, and peer networks with the "second space" of the Discourses they encounter in more formalized institutions such as work, school, or church. Although we have chosen to align the concept of first space with that of the everyday world that is close to or common to people, the naming of what counts as first or second space is arbitrary; one could easily reverse these labels to suggest that first space is often that space which is privileged or dominant in social interaction, whereas second space is that which is marginalized. What

is critical to our position is the sense that these spaces can be reconstructed to form a third, different or alternative, space of knowledges and Discourses (Moje et al, 2004, p. 41).

Gutiérrez (2008) described this as a “transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened” (p. 152). While Gutiérrez and others refer to Third Space learning primarily related to literacy, I have come to see Third Space as a potentially transformative place where families and I can interact with each other through dialogue and construct an alternative space of knowledge. I am defining the first and second spaces as home and school, respectively. Additional binaries can be identified and used as characteristics of the first and second spaces of home and school when considering the demographic information of the majority of my students’ families in relation to my own. Descriptors of the majority of these families would include African American or Hispanic, working-class or poor, with experiential and cultural knowledge and little formal education. I identify as a European American, middle class woman with different experiential and cultural knowledge and on-going formal education.

I position individuals that reside in each world—the parents/caregivers in the home, myself as teacher in the school—as the occupants of the first and second spaces. I designed the dialogue journals as an intentional activity that could potentially disrupt the traditional roles of parents/caregivers and teachers within the educational setting. Seldom did the schools in which I taught ask parents to share knowledge from their home space, or what González et al. refer to as family “funds of knowledge.”

Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, and George (2004) identified the home/community space as “those spaces where parents may interact with others about the concerns of schooling, such as in church-based groups, parent networks, and community organizations” (p. 5). The home/community spaces, as well as school-based academic spaces, and school based non-academic spaces, were discussed in relation to parents authoring and positioning of their own spaces in schools. Barton et al focused on parents creating alternative spaces, previously non-existent, through their participation in dialogue with their child’s teacher, their presence in the school, and specific actions that were taken, such as intentionally getting to know his/her child’s teacher at the beginning of each school year. Actions such as these engage parents in their children’s school experience and, according to Barton et al (2004), “are both about how parents *activate* the resources available to them in a given space in order to *author* a place of their own in schools and about how they use or *express* that place to *position* themselves differently” (italics in original, p. 8). Parents creating, or authoring a space, is a fairly new concept to education and significantly shifts the role parents have in schools.

For the purposes of my study, I will expand on this concept and posit that the journals created a co-authored, Third Space for the participants (the family members and myself) to learn about each other and challenge the established norms of communication between home and school. In the introduction of Freire’s *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), Aronowitz explained “Education takes place when there are two learners who occupy somewhat different spaces in an ongoing dialogue (p. 8). Within our first and second spaces, the parents/caregivers and myself occupied different physical, societal, socioeconomic, and cultural spaces; but, the Third Space of the journals provided the potential for an ongoing dialogue, a space where we might learn about each other and about the child. At times, this Third Space provided a space for a comfortable,

effective means of dialogue. As one parent noted “Sometimes you can say more in words than face to face and not only that, this takes more time and effort, so it makes you want to know a person more and want to help in any way possible” (Journal, 6-3-04). At other times, the Third Space was less comfortable, even contentious. I was interested in trying to better understand how parents and I together attempted to construct a Third Space through sustained journal dialogues.

Valuing this dialogue with families and identifying the families’ participation as a form of involvement falls outside the boundary of traditional definitions of parent involvement. In the next chapter, I review the literature related to a traditional definition of parent involvement and then offer an expanded definition of parent involvement within which this research study is based.

Structure of Dissertation

Chapter 2 begins with a review of literature on parent involvement, culturally relevant teaching, and Third Space. I then give the purpose, significance and limitations of my study, a statement of the problem, the research questions that guided my study and analysis, and a description of my methodology. The following chapters (chapters 3-5) are the manuscripts written for publication. A description of each follows.

The first article (Chapter 3) was co-authored with two other educators who have used home-school journals. In this analysis, I used purposeful sampling to show evidence of relationships between the teachers and families and how the use of the journals evidenced students’ learning. This article has been published in *Language Arts*.

For the second article (Chapter 4), all of the journals across the full data set were analyzed—those for which I had signed consent as well as the journals for which there was no parental consent given. However, no identifying information or direct quotations were used from the journals for which I had no consent. The journals were identified as a Third Space, co-created by the families and me, as a place for dialogic interaction. Additional in-depth analysis reduced the number of participants as the research focus became more narrowed. This narrowing is discussed in more detail in the analysis section of chapter 4. This manuscript will be submitted to *Teachers College Record*.

The third article (Chapter 5) focuses on how I learned and what I learned about the culture of a Pakistani, Muslim family by engaging in dialogue through the parent-teacher journals. This is a case study of the family whose children I taught during the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years. This article includes a focus on religion, history, home practices, and family dynamics including gender roles. This manuscript will be submitted to the *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*.

In the concluding chapter (Chapter 6), I discuss what I learned during this research process, the implications of this study in relation to my own teaching, and my future research plans.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Parent Involvement

Through her work as a school counselor, Giles (2005) gave considerable thought to patterns in the relationships and roles between parents and educators in urban schools. She identified three types of narratives—deficit, *in loco parentis*, and relational—underlying these relationships. I will use these narrative types in the discussion on views and definitions of parent involvement.

In the *deficit narrative*, lower income parents and their children are typically considered to be deprived or “at risk.” According to Giles (2005), “Educators view the perceived pathologies and problems of families as undermining their ability as educators to successfully teach their children” (p. 230). Though potentially well intentioned, the tactics and implied message from the school and/or educator to the parents is, “We are the experts. Come to us, we can help you, we know what’s best for your child” with little regard or acknowledgement given to the parent for their contributions or interests.

For the *in loco parentis narrative*, educators believe it is their responsibility to provide academic, as well as social and emotional, education in place of the students’ parents. What makes this different from the deficit narrative is the educator’s belief that s/he can compensate for the parents’ deficit. While not as hopeless or helpless for students as the deficit narrative, *in loco parentis* is equally as debilitating and disempowering for parents because their needs and situations are not given consideration. Giles (2005) explained “educators have high expectations

for students, but limited or low expectations for their parents” (p. 231). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) shared how Carol, a high school teacher of adolescents who have not been successful in traditional school settings, moved beyond the role of teacher into one more closely akin to a mother, essentially operating within an *in loco parentis* narrative. However, Carol’s awareness of her students’ home life, conversations with parents, awareness of their needs and the needs of her students moved her actions beyond the debilitating narrative of *in loco parentis* and into the realm of a responsive educator. Recent reform initiatives that have a component of parent involvement that is imposed upon, rather than developed with, parents are evidence of the *in loco parentis* narrative, as well as recommendations that in order for students to be successful they must adopt more middle class values, including ways of speaking, acting, and thinking even though these are not their cultural values.

In direct contrast to the deficit and *in loco parentis* narratives is the *relational narrative*. In this narrative, educators work *with* parents, rather than *for* them; talk *with* them, rather than *at* them; stand *beside* them, rather than *over* them. There is a much more balanced and reciprocal feel to the relationship between parent and teacher with the belief and expectation being that parents bring and share their knowledge and strengths and teachers value and respect the parents’ knowledge. Strong, trusting relationships are built within the relational narrative, which is important because “Having a foundation of trust and understanding can also simply reduce stress—for the parent and the teacher” (Davis & Yang, 2005, p. 163). “Just as importantly, a relationship of trust and cooperation between the parent and teacher can reduce stress for the child” (p. 164). Teachers and parents co-create foundations of respect, curiosity, and communication, often through dialogue, shared experiences, and conversations. These teachers are in unique positions to create meaningful relationships with parents based on communication

and a genuine interest in learning about and with the students and families represented in their classrooms. A more expansive, inclusive definition of parent involvement resides in the relational narrative as there is space, interest, and value for the parents' and the families' voice.

Many teachers and researchers (Cook, 2005; Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995) have espoused the belief that the parent is the child's first teacher, the expert on their child, and the person who knows the child better than any other. However, Cook (2005) described that during many parent-teacher encounters "parents listen to the teacher's advice, politely nod in agreement, and walk away feeling empty" (p. 420). Somewhere in these interactions, parents lose their power as the expert on their child and teachers are established as the authority figure. Whether it is a choice made or a place forced into, parents may appear to relinquish their authority by retreating into silence; yet, schools have claimed that parents and parent involvement are inherently needed.

In their position statement on parent involvement, the National PTA recognized parents as the primary influence in their children's lives and identified needed contributions by the families and schools in developing comprehensive programs of parent involvement. Across these contributions, the value of the parents' participation at school and *at home* were acknowledged—"create a home environment that encourages learning; communicate high, yet reasonable, expectations for their children's achievement; develop knowledge of how the child functions in the school environment by becoming involved in their children's education at school and in the community"

(http://www.pta.org/topic_pta_position_statement_on_parent_involvement.asp, retrieved 2/15/10). Schools were called to develop partnerships and design strategies to build these partnerships that bring all of the stakeholders (schools, families, communities) together.

According to the Education Commission of the States (2002), a parental component is included in the literacy programs of twenty-nine states. Many schools have included goals for parent involvement alongside those for math and literacy as ways to improve students' achievement. Even the No Child Left Behind (2001) legislation included a parent involvement component, so there has been an active acknowledgement of the value of parents, even at the federal government level. Additionally, numerous researchers (Edwards, 1999; King & Goodwin, 2002; Moore & Barbarin, 2003) have identified parent involvement as essential to students' success. The importance of parent involvement has been identified by schools, yet there have been discrepancies in defining what counts as an act of involvement.

Narrow, school-defined definitions of parental involvement

Although there are many critiques of traditional and narrow definitions of parent involvement, many schools continue to rely on narrow, school-defined models. For this reason, I have chosen to include a brief discussion of the traditional definitions of parent involvement, including the problems these present, before moving to definitions that expand beyond the walls of the school into the homes of the families.

The *deficit narrative* (Giles, 2005) undergirds most traditional definitions of parent involvement. Parents are viewed as in need of information, education, and repair and schools attempt to fill this perceived gap in the parents' knowledge and understanding, typically within the school walls. "Deficit models for understanding parents and education position parents as subjects to be manipulated or without power to position themselves in ways they see fit" (Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, & George, 2004, p. 4). In this model, the school and its actors are the keepers of the knowledge they identify the parents need.

Belden (2003) claimed that the 1999 study conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, National Center of Education Statistics (NCES) showed “at every level of education, parents with more education and higher income levels participated more often and in a greater variety of activities” (p. 26). However, these findings were constrained by a limited perception of how parents can be involved in their children’s education. All of the activities listed as forms of parent involvement took place at school, including attending back to school night, open house, parent-teacher conference, or a school event, or serving as a volunteer or committee member. What was particularly problematic about Belden’s (2003) position was that she defined parent involvement in a “top down, school to home, deficit view of parents” manner, while also acknowledging the need for meaningful, collaborative relationships among teachers, families, and the community. While collaborative relationships were called for, none of the actions supported the development of these relationships.

When the only recognized means of parent involvement is being physically present in the school building, many parents are viewed as being uninvolved. King and Goodwin (2002) explained, “the parents who are involved are those who feel the most comfortable in schools—typically White, English-speaking, and/or middle class” (p. 7). This narrow definition has led to grossly inaccurate perceptions of minority parents and misguided condemnation of the parents’ values and interests in their children’s education.

When planning activities for minority and predominantly low SES parents, “often, schools and teachers take a ‘father-knows-best’ approach; essentially parenting the parent” (Edwards, 1999, p. xx). Delgado-Gaitan (2004) identified this traditional form of parent involvement as “rendering parents passive” (p. 19). Parents are framed as simple recipients of whatever the school plans for them, whatever the school deems as necessary for them to become

better parents. As Delgado-Gaitan (2004) pointed out, traditional activities have been easier for schools to implement because the activities have become somewhat automatic—parent-teacher conferences in the fall and spring; “Meet your teacher” on the last day of pre-planning; open house the third Thursday after school begins. Rather than considering parents’ needs, schedules, and interests, the implication is that it is the parents’ responsibility to attend the opportunities provided when the schools open their doors. Additionally, Moore and Barbarin (2003) reported that low-income African American parents felt offended and alienated when “traditional capacity-building programs attempted to transplant aspirations and ideals into their lives as if to fill a void” (p. 158). These feelings occurred when schools acted from a perspective of building the capability of the parent to be a better parent evidencing the existence of the *deficit narrative* (Giles, 2005) underlying these relationships and communication. By operating from this position, schools overtly insinuate deficits or deficiencies that exist in the parents and their abilities. Amanti (2005) regarded this view of families as operating within a culture deficit model. “For far too long, the homes of working class and minoritized students have been constructed as deficient and lacking in sufficient stimulation for academic success. It is time to rethink this construction” (p. 138).

In discussing the black-white achievement gap, Rothstein (2004) placed the weight of school success on the shoulders of class. The actions of middle class families were identified as beneficial to students’ school experience while lower class families were depicted in need of repair, education, and assistance. Rothstein (2004) asserted that “if [lower class] parents get more involved they can help raise their children’s expectations of themselves,” and that “parental involvement in schools is one way of counteracting the dissonance that children perceive between their parents’ professed support for academic achievement and their parents’ actions,

which often send the opposite message” (p. 31). Rothstein (2004) positioned lower class parents as having contradictory behavior and words regarding support for school, which necessitated the parents having to get “involved” so their children could see the value in school. However, the way parents showed involvement was based on the traditional definition supporting the need for the parents to be physically present in the school and, as even Rothstein (2004) himself noted, “while these forms of parental involvement may help a little, they can’t do much to narrow the class-based achievement gap” (p. 32).

Expanded definitions of parental involvement

As Jones (2001) warned, “the cookie-baking/word-processing/candy-selling/paper-shuffling/showing-up activities traditionally associated with parent involvement are not likely to have much impact on student achievement” (p. 19). Schools can readily count the physical presence of parents at PTO meetings, parent-teacher conferences, and special events, but these are not the forms of involvement that significantly affect student achievement. There is a need for schools to include and acknowledge other facets as indicators of parents’ involvement in their children’s education, not just those that can be seen and measured so easily. Feuerstein (2000) acknowledged that, “Developing a clear definition of such a multifaceted concept is not easy. Parent involvement encompasses a broad range of parenting behavior, ranging from discussion with children about homework to attendance at parent-teacher organization (PTO) meetings” (p.29). In his definition, it is suggested that parent involvement extends beyond being physically present at the school into areas typically associated with home, such as discussions that take place between students and the adults in their homes.

Valuing the conversations that occur at home, viewing parents as partners in their child(ren)'s educational experience, and intentionally working toward developing meaningful relationships with families are components of parent involvement within the *relational narrative* (Giles, 2005). Also key to this narrative is an appreciation and respect for the family's knowledge. Teachers focused on relationships invite family voices and encourage parents to be a part of on-going dialogue; welcome, listen to, and respond to their opinions and perspectives; and support family commitment to their child(ren).

Henderson and Mapp (2002) noted that when schools act from this perspective and "build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement" (p. 8). Henderson and Mapp (2002) analyzed 51 parental involvement studies representing a range of ages (early childhood through high school); various areas of the country; diverse populations; community, parent, and family involvement; quantitative and qualitative methods; and different sources of data. "Every one sheds some light on the relationship between parent involvement and, in some cases community involvement and improved student achievement" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 21). Across all of the studies, they found a "positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement" (p. 24).

However, Henderson and Mapp (2002) did give suggestion as to how these relationships might be supported when they found that family involvement related to learning was most directly related to the student's academic performance. In the following section, I summarize the four key findings most relevant for the current study, providing more detail about what effective family involvement looked like across these studies.

The first key finding was that working with parents to help their children at home was a critical component of effective programs. “Programs and interventions that engage families in supporting their children’s learning at home are linked to higher student achievement” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 25). Children of all income levels and family backgrounds made academic gains and “in some cases the children having the most difficulty in school made the greatest gains” (p. 29). Henderson and Mapp noted the importance of teacher’s outreach to parents in a study of 71 Title I elementary schools. “In schools where teachers reported high levels of outreach to parents, test scores grew at a rate 40 percent higher than in schools where teachers reported low levels of outreach” (p. 28). In this study, researchers measured outreach as teachers communicating with parents through face to face meetings, telephoning home on a regular basis, as well as when the child was having problems, and providing materials to parents on how they could help their child at home. Through these actions, teachers demonstrated an interest in establishing respectful, bi-directional, informative communication with parents and developing meaningful relationships with families.

In the second key finding, Henderson and Mapp (2002) noted that “the more families support their children’s learning and educational process, the more their children tend to do well in school and continue their education” (p. 30). While parents’ involvement at school declined over time, their involvement at home remained steady. Families demonstrated support by acknowledging their children’s efforts in school, talking about school, checking homework, as well as attending events and volunteering at school. This was important, but not enough in and of itself to have maximum effect. Gutman and Midgley (2000) found that the combination of

home and school support had the most significant impact. “If children don’t feel connected to school, parent involvement alone will not make a significant contribution to student achievement. Students must also feel that they belong at school and that their teachers support them” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 32). It is important to note that the teachers’ attitudes towards families can consequently affect the students’ sense of belonging.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) addressed the impact families have on their children’s learning in their third key finding. “Families of all cultural backgrounds, education, and income levels encourage their children, talk with them about school, help them plan for higher education, and keep them focused on learning and homework. All families can, and often do, have a positive influence on their children’s learning” (p. 34). Henderson and Mapp (2002) also identified a direct correlation between the amount of time spent engaged in these types of activities and the achievement level of children. Parents’ expectations for their children’s educational performance and advancement factored significantly into students’ grades, test scores, and passing rates. One difference the authors noted was in the demonstration of parent involvement. “Families of all income and social levels are involved at home, but families with higher income and social class tend to be more involved at school” (p. 37). This finding supports the need for parent involvement to be defined as what occurs beyond, as well as within, the school walls.

In the fourth key finding, Henderson and Mapp (2002) recognized that “Parent and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement” (p. 38). Programs that worked directly with parents on specific topics were found to be the most effective in positively impacting students’ grades. Providing information to parents about what their children were learning and how they could

best help them at home resulted in greater gains in academic achievement. Teachers' outreach to parents also had a significant impact. "Students made greater and more consistent gains when teachers were 'especially active' in outreach to parents" (p. 39) and the parents' desire to be involved in their children's educational development was enhanced "when school staff engage[d] in caring and trusting relationships with parents that recognize parents as partners" (p. 45).

Numerous researchers, as noted in Henderson and Mapp's (2002) report, have documented the benefit of parents' involvement in their children's education. "The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children's achievement in school and through life" (p. 7). Overwhelmingly, parents' interactions and involvement with their children at home had a more significant affect on student achievement and attitudes toward school than activities planned for parents within the schools.

Workman & Gage (1997) noted, "if early childhood professionals were to define parent involvement in a different, broader context, focusing on issues of partnership rather than participation or attendance, their view would be altered significantly" (p. 10). The main difference in adopting a broader definition of parent involvement is that it allows for and takes into account activities that occur outside of school. A parent reading with her child or responding in a parent-teacher journal would be participating in an act of parent involvement, just as the parent who comes to the PTO meeting or attends the parent-teacher conference. This is not an either/or in defining parent involvement, rather an incorporation of what parents do with their children both in the home and those acts they participate in at school.

In expanded views of parent involvement, parents are recognized as valuable participants in identifying their areas of interests and needs, rather than the school determining this for parents. Delgado-Gaitan (2004) referred to these types of activities as nontraditional because

they are “more apt to be co-designed by parents and teachers and involve parents as active participants” (p. 19). Parents are co-constructors of identifying areas of interests and needs. Delgado-Gaitan (2004) explained how parents attended and led bilingual workshops on strengthening the parental role in their child’s education. Similarly, if parents identified a desire to learn more about available health care or facilitating their child’s academic progress, the school could then facilitate a workshop designed to meet this identified need and gather information to share with the parents. “Parents teaching parents. Parents teaching teachers. Teachers teaching parents what they want to know. Dialogue that is based on mutual respect. These are powerful settings for the kind of parent involvement that makes a genuine difference in a child’s life as a learner” (Allen, 2007, p. 105).

Home-school journals.

According to Allen (2007), “Dialogue is one of the most difficult things in the world to achieve. Yet it is central to our very humanity” (p. 71) and in relation to schools, “dialogue is the foundation of creating welcoming schools and family—child-teacher partnerships, especially when teachers and families do not share the same culture” (p. 79). Open, honest, respectful dialogue is at the foundation of almost any relationship and the relationship developed between home and school, parent/caregiver and teacher is no exception. When cultural boundaries exist, dialogue becomes even more critical. “The key to building this trusting, positive relationship between people in different setting (i.e., family members and educators) is two-way communication” (Allen, 2007, p. 8). One tool used to establish and maintain two-way communication has been home-school journals.

Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995) documented their use of home reading journals as a connection between students in the classroom and parents. These journals supported the

child's literacy development as well as provided a "link" between home and school. Children chose a classroom library book to take home with them, along with the home reading journals (spiral bound notebooks) two-three days a week. The teachers explained the use of the journals to the parents at the beginning of the school year as a place where parents and students would record their conversations about books and experiences around books. It was obvious in the initial entry of the journal that the teachers valued and respected the parents as partners in their child's education as the teachers requested that the parents share some written information about their child. From that initial response and throughout the school year, these journals served as a space for on-going dialogue between Barbara Michalove (2nd grade) and Betty Shockley (1st grade) and the parents in their respective classrooms. Parents, and eventually students as they became more confident writers, wrote about the conversations that students and their parents had around books.

Parents made observations about their children as readers, made suggestions, and responded to the suggestions the teachers wrote in response. The teachers intentionally "did not provide initial models of how to respond . . . as [they] wanted each family to construct a functional format and ways of dialoguing that were personally meaningful" (p. 21). They intentionally "tried to match their response style to those initiated by the families, consciously accepting and supporting the family's form and content" (p. 42). The teacher's daily responses offered parents guidance and specific suggestions to help their children's literacy development while also encouraging additional dialogue around the literacy experiences occurring at home. The teachers acknowledged this dialogic interaction, where they and parents shared information and observations, as a partnership and referenced the benefits of such a relationship.

As a result of our partnership, nobody was alone anymore. The teachers no longer felt the sole responsibility for educating the children. The families had concrete ways to participate that were meaningful and generated trust. The children knew their school and homes were united with purpose and position, and they developed trust in the compatibility of learnings (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 7).

The parents of these students were clearly involved in their child's education but were allowed to do so within the walls of their own home, rather than the school. All participants—the teachers and families—were able to participate in an expanded version of parental involvement with the parents and teachers creating partnerships in the students' education.

According to Davis and Yang (2005), “When we build bridges to families of various cultures, we increase the chances that their children, not just the children of mainstream cultures, will do well in school” (p.11). The strategies they give to build these bridges are practical, two-directional, and flexible, such as the use of Weekend Journals. The importance of these school-home dialogue journals is that the focus is to “get information to parents [and] also about how teachers can hear *from* parents about their hopes and concerns, receiving *from* them their insights and wisdom” (p. 6). In these journals, the students wrote an inquiring message to their families related to something they learned in school that week. The parents then responded to the inquiry, often with a personal story or information related to their own experiences. The teacher also participated in the dialogue and wrote responses to both student and family member in the journals as well.

When first grade teacher Andrea Neher began using Weekend Journals, she was excited by the parents' response to their children's inquiry and felt the journals provided her with a glimpse into her students' unique relationships with their families. In the first letter home in Weekend Journals, one child wrote about what he had been learning in school.

I learned about snakes, Play-Do, and music. I learned a whole bunch of stuff. What was your favorite activity in first grade?

His mother responded:

Wow the first grade! Although it was such a long time ago thoughts of the first grade still brings a smile to my face. . . . I remember learning about and planting beautiful flowers for our butterfly garden. At the time I did not realize that this would lead to my very first paying job in my life (Kay, Neher, & Hall, 2010, p. 420).

Neher explained that what made this dialogue especially meaningful is that this student did not live with his mother. While she visited him frequently, his legal guardians were his great aunt and uncle. Neher glimpsed the mother-son relationship and wrote that "these notes provide one example of the love of schooling both mother and son share" (Kay, Neher, & Hall, 2010, p. 420).

Davis and Yang (2005) explained how this process connected the worlds of home and school, while also emphasizing the critical need for altered perceptions. "How we view families from cultures different than our own deeply affects how we work with them" (p. 13) and inviting parents to respond and share about their cultures allows teachers to challenge and expand their own views.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) recommended that teachers and others “recognize that all parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, are involved in their children’s learning and want their children to do well in school” (p. 61). This has been challenging at times as evidenced in Henderson and Mapp’s (2002) fourth recommendation that school staff be given more support in developing ways to reach out to families and to make use of resources available to them in the community. “Few teacher preparation programs include instruction on how to partner with parents and community” (p. 65). Partnering with parents is a first step toward learning from their families and altering inaccurate perceptions of their culture.

Similar to Davis and Yang’s Weekend Journals, Wollman-Bonilla used Family Message Journals to create a connection between home and school in specific curriculum areas. However, for the Family Message Journals, students did not select their own messages or topics and the messages were not about outside-of-school experiences, such as weekend events, nor was the teacher involved in the written correspondence in the journal. Writing was used as a means for students to communicate with their families about school events, an upcoming field trip, or what they learned that day in school. The purpose for these journals was two-fold: creating the written connection between home and school while also promoting the students’ writing skills and development as writers. According to Wollman-Bonilla (2000), “Family Message Journals ask families to be crucial partners in school learning—families hold up one end of the correspondence *and* they teach through their messages” (p. 21).

This use of Family Message Journals may partially meet the identified purpose of promoting students’ writing skills, but the teacher’s participation would strengthen their use. When the communication is exclusively between student and parent, one of the key partners—the teacher—is omitted from the creation of a home-school connection. Henderson and Mapp

(2002) found that the school's outreach and communication with parents was a critical factor in affecting students' learning and academic achievement. The teacher needs to be an active participant in the use of journals to positively affect students' learning and to actively establish meaningful relationships between home and school.

Teachers who have used journals with students and their families often question whether specific conversations would have occurred or if information would have been shared without the written space the journals allowed. Keyser (2006) shared one toddler teacher's experiences and a subsequent action taken through the use of their daily journal.

Yesenia's mom, Dora, wrote excitedly in the journal one day that she had gotten some number blocks for Yesenia to use at home. The next day she suggested that we should get some at the school, so that we could work with Yesenia on her numbers here also. I thanked her for her suggestion and wrote back describing a few of the number activities we already do with children in our program. Then, on the weekend, I saw some nice wooden number blocks at a garage sale and brought them in on Monday morning. Dora was so excited. When I showed them to other families that morning, I told them that Dora, Yesenia's mom, had suggested I get them. Dora is pretty quiet sometimes during our daily check-ins. I'm not sure she would have mentioned the blocks to me if we didn't have our written journal (Keyser, 2006, p. 41).

For this parent, the journal gave her a comfortable space for making a suggestion to her child's teacher, a suggestion that may otherwise have gone unspoken.

Teacher action in parent involvement

In redefining parent involvement with a new vision and different actions, teachers are called to work with and relate to the families as well as the children. Edwards (1999) affirmed teachers as professionals who are capable of forming these meaningful relationships. However, she noted that “there are few guidelines or standards for teachers as they attempt to involve the whole family in a child’s education” (p. xvi). The teachers Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) studied “all lament[ed] the absence of a curriculum that explicitly and deeply prepared them for this important part of their professional role” (p. 229). To collaborate with parents and have productive, constructive conversations with them, teachers have to first “believe that these kinds of conversations are possible,” then “mentally prepare [themselves] by acknowledging [their] fears and hesitations about talking with parents,” and finally “recognize [their] fears—but continue on *despite these fears*” (Edwards, 1999, p. 24, italics in original). According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), these fears include a sense of vulnerability and exposure.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) found that “parent involvement programs that are effective in engaging diverse families recognize, respect, and address cultural and class differences” (p. 48). In their analysis of over 50 studies they identified a need for school staff to be supported and trained in how to reach out to diverse families. Awareness of cultural diversity, exposure to different cultures, and an openness to learn are necessary for teachers to relate to the diverse families of the children they teach. Ladson-Billings (1994) defines learning from and considering students’ home environments as part of “culturally relevant teaching” (p. 52), which we will explore in the next section.

Culturally Relevant Teaching

One of the overriding beliefs of culturally relevant teaching is that “students come to school with knowledge and that knowledge must be explored and utilized in order for students to become achievers” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 52). The students do not simply enter into the classroom as empty vessels patiently waiting and seeking to be ‘filled’ by the all-knowing White teacher (Freire, 1970). Students bring with them a background of culture, experiences, and language specific to them and “the teachers make the students’ culture a point of affirmation and celebration” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 117). The students’ sense of self is supported and encouraged by a teacher who values and respects them as individuals and the knowledge they possess. Often there is a significant disconnect between the worlds of the teacher and his/her students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 1995) and there is also the difference in what counts as knowledge in the formal school setting. As Nieto (2002) noted, “there seems to be a curious refusal on the part of many educators to accept as valid the *kinds* of knowledge and experiences with which some students come to school” (p. 8, italics in original).

Manke (1997) connected “what counts as knowledge [as] a determining factor in what students actually learn” (p. 92). The culturally responsive teacher views the students’ language, actions, experiences, and culture as valuable knowledge to be appreciated, acknowledged, and utilized. Ladson-Billings (1994) addressed this issue when she wrote that “a hallmark of the culturally relevant notion of knowledge is that it is something that each student brings to the classroom” (p. 87) and “teachers who practice culturally relevant methods can be identified by the way they see themselves and others” (p. 25) as well as how they listen to others. By acknowledging the importance of cultural relevance, teachers broaden their lenses of respect and

are able to see students as individuals who are intelligent, capable, unique, and co-creators of knowledge in the classroom. This broadened view also expands the teacher's beliefs to include the students' families as well.

Even with an intentional awareness on broadening lenses of respect, there are still external factors that can negatively affect perceptions of individuals and their families. Cultural boundaries such as race, religion, and socioeconomic status can permeate relationships and relegate participants to positions of opposite, other, or different. As Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978) recognized, "the teacher's social and political ideologies were woven into the very substance and form of her interactions with children and evolved into a reflective microcosm of her *perceptions* of the wider society" (p. 5, italics in original). These ideologies coupled with limited encounters with the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the uncomfortable often result in negative emotional reactions including fear, prejudice, stereotyping, and judgment. Teachers are humans and, as such, are not exempt from this reality, but the reality carries a heavier weight where children are involved. Delpit (1995) described the reality of what currently exists in many of our public school systems when she wrote, "It is a deadly fog formed when the cold mist of bias and ignorance meets the warm vital reality of children of color in many of our schools" (p. xiii).

Freire (1992) recognized that "race and class discrimination is an aggressive, ostentatious discrimination, at times. At times, it is covert, instead. But wicked it always is" (p. 163). This "wicked" discrimination directly affects students when schools or any of its representatives fail to value families. It happens when teachers are looking at cultural practices different than what they know, comparing it to what they have established as the "norm" and determining something to be inferior, "less than," deficit, and in need of repair. Such discrimination can only be

dispelled by conscious confrontation, acknowledgment, and deliberate action. Dismantling prejudices requires knowledge, intentional work and consistent monitoring of perceptions. Developing relationships with others is a critical component of this work.

Teachers have a responsibility to be acutely aware of their perceptions of children and their families, and to continuously challenge these perceptions against judgment-laden negativities and deficit views. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) extended this responsibility to parents. “Teachers and parents must not fall prey to cultural stereotypes that assume that whole groups of children—identified on the basis of the disadvantages of poverty and race and family background—will inevitably turn out losers” (p. 150). Cultural stereotypes and inaccurate assumptions frequently show themselves as uncertainty similar to what Freire (1987) referred to as a fear of ghosts and noises in the night—a fear of what cannot be seen or necessarily explained. However, he explained that his terrors diminished as he became familiar with his world and as he “perceived and understood it better by *reading* it” (p. 32, italics in original). I am not certain that I ever used the word “terror” to describe what I felt in my classroom or with my families, but there were definitely fears and uncertainties. These began to diminish as I, literally, read the word and world of my students and their families. It was a fear of the unknown that could only be resolved through altering my perception and understanding, and I needed help. Moriah was my guide through the initiation of my journey toward culturally relevant teaching and toward diminishing this fear of the unknown.

As a member of the poor and working class, African American cultural community of our students, Moriah had lived experiences and insight that, as an outsider, I was lacking. I have likened her to a tour guide and my experience to that of traveling in a foreign country. One means of gathering information about an unknown area and its inhabitants is from someone who

is familiar with the terrain, who speaks the language, and who, by virtue of their membership, can be a mentor and liaison to the visitor. Delpit (1995) wrote that “no individual can be expected to understand the intricacies of every culture without the assistance of members from those cultures” (p. 123). Under Moriah’s guidance, I began to develop an awareness and appreciation for the values of the families and some of the intricacies of their culture. She showed me various ways families expressed their desire for their children to be successful in school. She assured me that one mother’s mistrust of me did not really reflect on me at all; rather it was a cultural expectation that any White woman in their community was looking for them to be doing something wrong (a reference to DFACS workers typically being White females). She assured me that if I would just be honest and upfront with the parents, they would respect me. She looked me in the eyes and reminded me, “All they want to know is you care about their kid. I know you do; you just gotta prove it to them.” As our relationship developed, no question was too much to ask, no topic off limits, and I relied on her as my cultural mentor. As I learned from her, my ability to learn from families was enhanced.

Dispelling stereotypes by learning from families

By developing relationships and getting to know low-income, African American families, Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) found that “the images of the families that have been generated through ethnographic descriptions and interpretive explanations do not match the finding of the more traditional, large-scale studies reported in the social science literature” (p. 191). According to Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988), “One of television’s most blatant and disturbing examples of the re-creation and perpetuation of these harmful images was aired on January 25, 1986, when CBS broadcast ‘The Vanishing Family—Crisis in Black America,’” (p. 192). This documentary, also known as “The Moyers Report,” was filled with negative,

depressing statistics and gave the stereotypical portrayal of inner city life as being filled with noise, chaos, overcrowding, and danger. The images created and perpetuated in this documentary did not correspond with what Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines found when they walked the streets of the inner city and talked with the individuals and families that lived there. The stereotypical images of low-income African American families faded and “new sensitivities replace[d] old stereotypes” (p. 195). Studying the families led to self-reflections as well, “for in trying to understand the families we were also trying to understand ourselves, true and false, personal perceptions and deceptions, the ethnocentrism of our own mental baggage” (p. 202).

Societal stereotypes, such as those portrayed in the Moyers Report, are powerful in determining how members of one class or group view members of other groups. Stereotyping and the resulting discrimination result from historical events or lived experiences, such as when countless Japanese-Americans were unjustly placed in interment camps following the bombing of Pearl Harbor or, more recently, the increase in suspicion and accusation toward individuals of the Muslim faith after the September 11th terrorist attacks. By challenging these stereotypes and being willing to relegate overgeneralizations and stereotypical depictions to the periphery, a more accurate understanding can be achieved.

According to Delpit (1995), “If we are to successfully educate all of our children, we must work to remove the blinders built of stereotypes, monocultural instructional methodologies, ignorance, social distance, biased research, and racism. We must work to destroy those blinders so that it is possible to really see, to really know the students we must teach” (p. 182).

Developing a more culturally relevant and responsive means of teaching can be beneficial because, through a constant and deliberate process of reflection and questioning, the baggage of societal stereotypes can be lessened and a more accurate understanding can develop.

“Challenging stereotypes and learning about (and from) individual children and families is an imperative piece of any education practice grounded in social justice (Jones, 2006, p. 155) and Taylor and Dorsey-Gaines (1988) claimed that “when researchers work with families, stereotypic images fade” (p. 194). The same can be true when *teachers* work with families. Culturally relevant teaching is connected to issues of social justice, and as such, requires nothing less than learning from others to challenge stereotypes.

The stereotypic perception of low-income families not caring about their children’s education is not supported by research. Studies of parental involvement demonstrate that “all parents, regardless of income, education level, or cultural background, are involved in their children’s learning and want their children to do well in school” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 61). This is a foundational belief in culturally relevant teaching because it is imperative that educators respect parents across cultural boundaries and sincerely believe in the parents’ interest in and commitment to their child’s educational experience and academic success.

Heath (1983) accomplished this in her study of different cultures of students from a working class white community, Roadville, and a working class black community, Trackton, in the Piedmont Carolinas. She delved into the lives of those from other cultures and learned from their inhabitants. Heath’s analysis of the use of language and literacy in these two communities indicated there was not a deficit, but a difference between the home and school use of language and literacy. By learning from the families and sharing this information with the teachers, change began to take place because “teachers’ knowledge of children’s ways with words enabled them to bring these ways into their classrooms” (Heath, 1983, p. 343) which encouraged and

enabled students to see learning as relevant to their lives beyond school. The challenge is for teachers to educate themselves on the cultural ‘ways with words’ and ways of being. Heath showed that when teachers accept this challenge and take action, they and their students can benefit from the gained knowledge.

Heath shared what she learned with teachers in the two communities she studied. Common areas of discussion between preschool and elementary teachers focused on discipline, general classroom management, students’ response in group discussion, and their response when directly confronted by school personnel. She guided the teachers in their development of becoming more culturally aware and culturally responsive in their practices.

As I was able to share with teachers more and more knowledge about the ways language was used in Trackton and Roadville, they recognized the differences between their own uses of questions and those of Trackton and Roadville parents. Some teachers began to come up with ideas of how to alter their teaching methods and materials to accommodate these ways with the mainstream, school-oriented ways of approaching tasks (Heath, 1983, p. 284).

Rather than view narratives as disconnected and rambling, teachers gave time and space to story-telling sessions that “gave children opportunities to contribute long stretches of speech, or extended discourse, in the classroom” (Heath, 1983, p. 305); students were given the opportunity to contrast their communities’ ways of speaking with the textbooks’ and teachers’ use of language; teachers changed passive, indirect request to active directives when stating expectations or giving students’ directions, such as “Put the toys away” rather than, “Are you ready to clean up?” Teachers consciously altered their interactions, methods, and practices based on Heath’s observations and explanations of her analysis.

Teachers also reached out and invited members of the community to come into the classrooms to talk about skills that were needed in their professions. Henderson and Mapp (2002) noted, “Effective programs to engage families and community embrace a philosophy of partnership. The responsibility for children’s educational development is a collaborative enterprise among parents, school staff, and community members” (p. 51). As in any partnership, the relationship between its individuals establishes the possibility of success or failure. The same was true in learning from and developing relationships with my students’ families.

Developing relationships

My first year teaching brought so many questions to mind, particularly around issues of my identity as a White, middle class, female. During that first year, Vivian Gussin Paley’s *White Teacher* resonated within me and I vowed to read it before the beginning of every school year as a way to “check in” with myself.

Paley focused on and wrote about the Black children within her classroom in the midst of a predominantly White, middle class school. Her actions and interactions were intentional in addressing prejudices and challenging the societal values she saw reflected in her classroom. She viewed the diversity represented by her students as an opportunity to foster respect for difference by responding to these differences through her actions and words. However, not only did she acknowledge the prejudicial attitudes of society, she also challenged her own stereotypical biases. I connected with Paley in her desire to understand herself and culturally different people better.

It was comforting to read of another White woman’s experiences, struggles, and reactions to African American children. I felt encouraged, uplifted, and prepared to be more responsive to the children in my classroom. During my first year teaching, some of the dialogue journals were

a tangible, concrete space for me to talk with and listen to parents. I asked questions, they responded, asked their own questions back of me, and our conversation continued. With these parents, there was an odd comfort in using the pages of the journals to communicate. While the benefit of observing body language and facial expression was removed, the parents and I were afforded an opportunity to listen to each other without distraction and to talk without visibly seeing difference. However, this written dialogue was never meant to replace face-to-face meetings or conversations and I made certain I shared this with the parents during our first meeting. It is important to note that not all of the parents chose to use the journals and some possible explanations are provided in Chapter 4. Even without 100% participation, I continued to use the journals, to invite parents into relationships through dialogue, throughout that first year and with every class that followed.

A few years later, my thinking and perspective were challenged further when I encountered Lisa Delpit's (1995) *Other People's Children*. She identified and called out the culture I was a member of—the 'culture of power' and I felt ashamed as I read, "Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence" (p. 26). Having it brought to my attention and acknowledging its existence, I felt extremely uncomfortable in my own skin as I read how this power is enacted and replicated in classrooms. I wondered how I participated in this recreation of power through my unspoken perceptions and expectations and through my actions and words. Delpit offered explicit strategies and guidance for a white teacher, such as myself, to consciously participate in not perpetuating this

disequilibrium. She demanded that Black children be given access to this “culture of power” through language and respectful instruction; and clearly explained the importance of children not being asked or required to abandon all that is familiar to them from their home culture in exchange for this access.

My attitudes, beliefs, and actions were catapulted into a new realm of awareness and more questions followed. One of the questions that became a particular mantra (as evidenced by its use as the introduction to my dissertation): “We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don’t even know they exists? (Delpit, 1995, p. xiv); and her question “What are we really doing to better educate poor children and children of color?” (p. xiv) became a reverberating inquiry which lead to reflection, a call to action, and a challenge to do things differently. At this time, my use of the journals became more focused and intentional as I became more aware of learning about the worlds of my children and their families and how the journals could be used to gather and share this information through the relationships the parents and I developed. When I wrote in a student’s journal about her unusual behavior on one particular day, her mother wrote:

Our family has been traumatized. We lose a nephew (20 years old) Sunday morning—I’m not sure (she) comprehend it all right now. The older children are busy but are voicing hurt/pain. More involved. Funeral schedule for Friday. We will be going to candle light vision tonight and “wait.” I’m wordless. I will explain more later. We are ok.

This explanation of a family tragedy helped me to better understand the uncharacteristic, challenging behavior of this five-year old student which allowed me to be more understanding and responsive to her needs. In talking with the older siblings’ teachers, I realized that this

information had not been shared with them. According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), “What is most important is creating a ‘safe space’ and a ‘trusting relationship’ where the adults, who each care deeply . . . about the child . . . can speak the truth” (p. 46). Our journal seemed to have created this safe space.

A couple of years beyond first encountering Delpit (1995), Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) assured me that I could be a successful teacher of African American children in *The Dreamkeepers* and helped me identify what I was doing as culturally relevant teaching. In her research, Ladson-Billings focused on teachers who were successful in reaching and teaching students in a low-income school district comprised mainly of African American families. She found consistencies across these teachers’ beliefs about what counts and is valued as knowledge, the structure of social interactions within their classrooms, and conceptions of themselves and the profession of teaching. All three of these characteristics of culturally relevant teachers resonated within me. I considered my belief about knowledge extending well beyond what is contained within the school’s walls while also being brought into the classroom by each student; I reflected on the cooperative learning, classroom community, respectful interactions, and helping children develop problem solving skills which were all foundational components of my classroom; and I pondered my chosen profession and the pride I had always felt in being able to say, “I am a teacher.” According to Ladson-Billings (1994), “Teachers who practice culturally relevant methods can be identified by the way they see themselves and others” (p. 25). How you see others also affects how you listen to others.

The “listening to” component is critical in developing trusting, respect-based relationships. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) discussed what occurs in parent-teacher conferences.

If one comes prepared to ‘really listen,’ if one is ‘truly curious’ about the other’s perspective, then one becomes open to hearing something new and useful. The stance of generous receptivity goes a long way toward creating the conditions of mutuality that allow for a meaningful exchange (p. 67).

In *The Essential Conversation*, Sophie likened conversation that occurs “when parents and teachers begin to trust each other and recognize the mutuality of their concern for the child” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003, p. 71) to “close neighbors chatting over the back fence” (p. 71). These types of meaningful exchanges and comfortable conversations occur within trusting relationships.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) reported on the importance of building trusting relationships and the effect this had on connections with the school. “When programs and initiatives focus on building respectful and trusting relationships among school staff, families, and community members, they are effective in creating and sustaining family and community connections with schools” (p. 43). Evidence of building respectful and trusting relationships can be seen in school staff who reach out to families and their communities “Programs that successfully connect with families and community invite involvement, are welcoming, and address specific parent and community needs” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 43). So, what does this look like? How can families and communities be invited in ways that create and sustain connections with schools?

Culturally relevant practices in my teaching

I invited parents and family members to participate in dialogue. I tried to welcome their responses, guidance, and suggestions while I also addressed specific needs. At the beginning of each school year, I offered up the journals as a way to learn about the children and families with whom I sought to form a relationship. I acknowledged that each student and his/her family brought a unique home culture into our classroom and possessed knowledge, insight, and values related to this culture. At the time, I did not reflect critically or systematically on the dialogue taking place in the journals because my purpose for using them was to maintain communication with the family and continue my development as a more culturally relevant teacher. However, after I left the classroom I began to reflect more intentionally on the experience of using the journals and questions came to mind. I reread and thought critically about what transpired in these written dialogues. This reflection led to the current study.

Freire (1998) stated “When I enter a classroom I should be someone who is open to new ideas, open to questions, and open to the curiosities of the students” (p. 49). I used a critical socio-cultural theoretical framework to analyze the dialogue and places where dialogue failed in these journals to better understand my interactions with my students’ families. How did I respond to challenges, written or implied? Did I open myself to the curiosities and suggestions of the students and their families, and if so, what did I do differently as a result? In what ways did I become more culturally conscious, and where are there instances of cultural insensitivity? “Critical reflection on practice is a requirement of the relationship between theory and practice” (Freire, 1998, p. 30). This study is my critical reflection on the practice of dialoguing with parents in journals.

Purpose of this study

The purpose of this study was to explore the relationships that developed, or failed to develop, when I used dialogue journals to communicate with the diverse families in my classroom and to examine what I learned about culture through using the journals. I hope to contribute to a growing body of research on “how to create and sustain connections with families between families and school staff from diverse cultural and class backgrounds” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p.42). Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) described how the “bridge between home and school begins to get constructed” when a teacher sincerely “listens *to* them [families]—rather than talking *at* them [families]” (p. 64, italics in original). In this study, I have documented and analyzed how parents and I talked with each other, rather than me talking at them. I have explored how families and I constructed these bridges between home and school, what they looked like, what purposes they served, and where the bridges were solid and strong as well as where they were more fragile.

Significance of this study

This study can be significant for teachers, teacher educators, and parents because it explores how one teacher and family members of the students she taught strived to operate within a relational narrative (Giles, 2005) through dialogue journals. In a relational narrative, teachers view parents as partners and intentionally work to develop meaningful relationship with families. The dialogue journals are one tool that may help facilitate these relationships. LeShan (1990) argued that “aside from husbands and wives and parents and children, *there is no more important relationship than the one that exists between the school and the home*” (italics in original, p. 141).

Henderson and Mapp (2002) also noted the importance of the relationship between home and school and gave examples of how teachers communicated with parents to facilitate these relationships. Their examples included home visits; phone calls to share positive information about the student, not just to discuss challenging behavior; and face-to-face interactions. While these are important and facilitate relationships between teachers and families, the types of interactions in these examples are sporadic, rather than sustained. Home visits, phone calls, and face-to-face interactions often occur within a defined time and space, with a beginning and end. None of the studies synthesized by Henderson and Mapp looked at sustained dialogic interactions between teachers and families. My study will extend the investigation of home-school interactions to examine my attempts to sustain dialogue with families through journals.

Allen (2007) posed the questions, “How do we as educators come to understand and develop empathy for children and families whose cultural influences are different from our own? How do we as parents and teachers share our home cultures?” (p. 42). How do we get outside of our own realm of cultural understanding so affected and determined by our upbringing to consider other, different ways of doing things as respectable and something to be learned from, rather than something to be ignored, destroyed or changed? It was this intent and focus that guided my use of journals and it is this focus that has defined my research interest.

Limitations of this study

Significant debate has occurred around the topic of researchers studying and writing across cultural boundaries. Many researchers (Freire, 1970; Paley, 1979/1989; Heath, 1983; Lareau, 2003) have argued that it is possible for outsiders to research others and encourage doing

so because of the limited view someone within the culture may possess. To do so requires a willingness to see beyond what is known through personal experience and to be curious about the unknown.

In my small, rural, racially divided town, I had no opportunity to meaningfully interact with individuals of a different race or socioeconomic background than my own as I was growing up. I remember being afraid and uncertain of those who looked and sounded different than me. Though I am still unable to recall any specific experiences that made me fearful, there was an ever-present feeling of discomfort and a silence about difference. Our family never discussed why Willie Jones, Roger Harris, and the other African American men who worked for my dad came to our back door. The reality of the White children going to the country club pool in the summer and the Black children going to the public park was “just the way it is.” The messages of racism were primarily unspoken, but known and acted upon throughout the community: we live over here, they live over there (divided literally by railroad tracks); the Black children go to the public school, the White children go to the private school; this is just how things had always been. I challenged these fears and uncertainties as I matured and continue to consciously monitor and challenge my own racial ignorance. I have consistently found that the most effective tool against racial ignorance has been seeing people as the individuals they are, rather than as a group by which they can be classified. Seeing people as individuals can occur by building relationships and coming to know individual perspectives, beliefs, and opinions. As a more aware adult, I realize that any fears and reactions were not rational and not based on experience, but rather lack of experience, lack of knowledge, and lack of knowing.

This developing awareness and an intense desire to get to know my students and their families guided my learning about them and my efforts to see beyond my own experiences. While this awareness and commitment to learning about others are part of my conscious thoughts and actions, my own race and social class, as well as age and gender, are still potential limitations in my view and interpretation of relationships.

Another potential limitation of this study is my subjectivity as this research is based on my individual perspective of a singular strategy of developing relationships with families. Because this is an isolated study within my own classroom, I make no claims that the results would apply across all schools or all families. Like Jones (2006), I do not want to sound as though I am offering some clear-cut answer or prescribed method that will guarantee results of meaningful relationships with parents.

An additional potential limitation is the passage of time that occurred between the collection of the data (2001-2005) and the complete analysis and writing of this study. I relied on re-engaging with the journals years after their actual use, rather than writing about this first-hand, in-the-moment. However, I also consider the possibility that the passage of time and the opportunity to thoughtfully reflect on the journals without being challenged by the daily urgency of their use may have offered me a greater opportunity to re-see the data and enter into a different dialogue with the data than I would have previously been able to do.

Statement of the Problem

A disconnect often exists between the worlds of school and home particularly with lower income children and their families. Part of this disconnect is evident in the missed understanding of what counts as meaningful parent involvement within the educational system and the importance of teachers developing meaningful relationships with families. While the reality of

this disconnect has been widely acknowledged (Heath, 1983; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 1995; Nieto, 2002) and the importance of teachers developing relationships and learning from families has been noted (Shockley, Michalove & Allen, 1995; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Giles, 2005; González, et al, 2005; Kay, Neher, & Lush, 2010), there is a limited amount of research that offers specific strategies for how to create and sustain relationships among teachers and parents. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) claimed that “almost every study of school achievement has included at least a rhetorical bow to the importance of positive relationships between families and schools, even though there has been little suggestion of how these alliances might be supported and sustained” (p. xxiv); and Henderson & Mapp (2002) recommended that efforts be focused on engaging families in developing respectful and trusting relationships by “adopt[ing] simple but effective practices of teacher outreach to families” (p. 67).

In this study, I have investigated how relationships with some parents were created and sustained through using our dialogue journal and how the cultural distance between these families and me was lessened. I give a more focused examination of how I became the pupil and learned about one families’ culture that was, literally, foreign to me. I have also intentionally questioned the instances where relationships were not created and attempted to decipher why this may have been, though these reasons are mostly speculative.

Research Questions

The over-arching question that has guided my research and analysis is the following: What happens when a teacher and parents/caregivers of differing cultures use journals to communicate with each other? Additional questions included:

1. How did the parents/grandparents and I make use of the journals to author spaces for building parent-teacher relationships? How did we discuss our concerns?

2. What evidence is there in the journals of the creation of a Third Space?
 - a. How did parents/grandparents challenge my teaching authority, decisions, or actions, directly or through silence?
 - b. How did I challenge their parenting authority?
 - c. How did the traditional teacher-parent hierarchy change?
3. What did I learn about family culture through the dialogue journal? How did this learning affect my own cultural assumptions and relationship with the family?

Methodology

This is a critical action research study. However, the emphasis has shifted over time from critical action (research) to critical (action) research.

While in the classroom, I engaged in critical action (research). Though I had identified the journals a focus of my research interest, I did not possess the knowledge, skills, or experience at that time to adequately research the action I was taking. As I developed professionally and went further in my education, Freire, Delpit, Ladson-Billings, Allen, and others gave me the language to describe what I was doing and additional layers of reflection to more closely analyze my actions and the journals. I continued the action of using the journals and focused my critical lens, but did little in the way of researching my practice beyond collecting the journals and informed consent forms.

I am now engaged in critical (action) research. I have polished the critical lens and moved the research component to the forefront as I related theories, analysis, and methodologies to the practice of using the dialogue journals. The action is less direct now; however, I incorporated what I learned from the critical analysis in my work both as a teacher educator and the director of an early childhood educational center.

Site of Research and Entrée

I found it more complicated and time consuming to gain entrée into my field site, although it was my own classroom, than I had originally anticipated. The school district had a separate proposal process that took an additional five weeks to go through. Beyond this initial approval, there was no additional entrée to be gained because my research topic focused on the use of parent-teacher journals within my own classroom, a practice that was already in place with the parents of my kindergarten students.

I taught kindergarten in the same school district throughout the data collection process, but in two different elementary schools. During the 2001-2002 school year, I taught at Johnson Street Elementary which was made up of 515 students—85% African American, 10% Hispanic, and 5% White. Ninety-seven percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. From 2002-2005, I taught at J. Howell Elementary. In 2002-2003, the student population was 476 students—77% African American, 11% Hispanic, 9% White, 2% Asian, and 1% Multi-racial. Eighty-four percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. There was a slight increase in the number of students for the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years but other demographic information remained primarily unchanged.

Participant Selection

All participants were family members or caregivers of students who were in my kindergarten classrooms between 2001-2005 and whose journals I retained or copied. There are sixty-four families represented in the sixty-six journals in this data set. The difference of two is due to the use of the journals across two years with two of the families. For one family, the child was in my class for two consecutive years; for the other, I taught two brothers in separate school years. The ethnicities of the parents were 48 African American, ten Hispanic, three White, one

Korean, one Pakistani, and one Indian. A variety of family types were evident across many of the journals. These included single and dual parent households, cross-generational adults living together, and extended family members residing in the home. At least one biological parent was the primary correspondent in 97% of the journals.

Methods of Data Collection

From the initial year of using parent-teacher journals (1995-1996) and continuing through 2001, I copied responses that merited documentation and retention of information. These included a parent's written response to the report made to the Department of Family and Children Services, parents' acknowledgement and appreciation of my efforts and defining the use of the journal as evidence of care and concern, and my request and the parent's response to inquiry into a fight the child reported had occurred at home between the mother and her boyfriend. I copied and filed in a "parent folder responses" folder only what I thought particularly interesting or necessary for legal or liability purposes.

In fall 2001, I obtained IRB and school district approval to study the use of the dialogue journals as an official research project. At this time my methods of data collection became more intentional as I started looking at them more closely through a researcher perspective.

For the first year, I selected four parents and one grandparent who regularly used our journal as a means of communication. I sent consent forms home in their journals with no other explanation given and awaited their return. One of the five families returned the consent form. I conducted two interviews with this parent—one in early November, the other in late May. I photocopied the journal in its entirety and maintained possession of the original journal as well. While I have ten original journals from the 2002-2003 school year, I only have a signed parent consent form for the one mentioned above.

For the final two years of data collection, I made parent consent forms available in Spanish and English and I shared the parent consent forms at the first parent-teacher conference, rather than blindly sending them home with no explanation. I discussed my research focus, intentions of study, and requested parent participation. I received signed consent forms from all parents. I also wrote an addendum onto the original consent form which stated that the “journals will also be copied throughout the year and kept by the researcher at the end of the school year” after one parent agreed to participate but only if she were able to keep the journal at the end of the year. From this parent’s request came my decision to photocopy all of the journals and return the originals to the parents/caregivers at the end of the year.

I also copied portions of journals throughout the year when an entry seemed particularly momentous or was an outlier in regards to what my intended purpose was in using the journals, such as when a mother wrote “I’m not trying to be mean but I have three kids. I don’t have time to answer your question. I work full time and a full time mother so if it’s important or something I need to know I will write back” (Journal, 9-1-04)

Additionally, parent questionnaires were sent to parents in April of the 2003-2004 school year with the following questions:

- How do you use the parent-teacher journals?
- What about the journals do you particularly like?
- What about the journals would you like to see done differently?
- How do you feel the use of these journals has made a difference for your child?
- How do you define “parent involvement” in regards to your child’s education?

Seven parents returned completed questionnaires. For the 2004-2005 school year, I incorporated these questions in the journals rather than as a separate questionnaire.

Data

The three sources of data for this study are original or photocopies of parent-teacher journals, transcripts from the parent interviews, and parent questionnaires. The total data set is 66 journals (out of a possible 89) in original or photocopied format, seven questionnaires completed by parents, and two interview transcripts.

In the first article I analyzed year-long journal dialogues with two African American parents, one from 2001-2002, the other from 2004-2005. In this article my co-authors and I documented evidence of relationship building through the journals and student learning occurring within the home. I selected the journal from the 2001-2002 year because, through the analysis of the journal and interview transcript, I identified significant evidence of two-way dialogue focused on the student's literacy practices. Our sustained dialogue resulted in my learning more about the literacy practices the mother was incorporating in interactions with her daughter at home and my acknowledgment of and interest in these authentic, meaningful activities. There was also evidence that when I shared literacy practices from school, the mother incorporated these into home activities. I selected the journal from the 2004-2005 school year after reading across multiple journals. The dialogue in several of the journals supported the claim of trust-based relationships being developed between home and school and I identified instances where parents shared personal, sensitive information. This journal was also included as an exemplar of evidence of relationship building when I realized that this information had not been shared with my student's siblings' teachers.

For the second article, I read the entire data set being guided by the second research question—What evidence is there in the journals of the creation of a Third Space? The 65 children represented within this set included 27 African American females, 21 African American males, five Hispanic females, five Hispanic males, two White males, two Pakistani males, one White female, one Indian male, and one Korean male.

The third article is a case study of the journals used by the Pakistani family of the two brothers I taught in consecutive years. These journals were selected based on the amount of information and evidence of my learning about cultural practices. The Pakistani, Muslim culture was truly foreign to me which made this learning particularly enlightening.

Data Analysis Strategies

As I re-engaged with the journals and voices of multiple children and their families, it was with an intentional focus of learning from them—again. My original intent while in the classroom was to create relationships with family members through sustained dialogic interactions in our journal based on the belief that this would help me know their child better and, ultimately, be a better teacher for him/her. “The educational process can be greatly enhanced when teachers learn about their students’ everyday lives” (González et al, 2005, p. 6). I now turned to the journals with a different perspective and re-focused critical lens, looking more broadly across multiple years of journals and seeing a collective whole while also retaining the view of the individuals represented.

Article 1 (Chapter 3)

In this article, the purpose of our writing was to share experiences of using home-school journals with teachers and teacher educators. I, and the co-authors, focused on where there was evidence that the journals facilitated relationship building with families and how using the journals contributed to student learning.

I analyzed the journals from the 2004-2005 year looking for dialogic exchanges where parents were sharing personal, sensitive information. I interpreted this type of information as evidence of an established trust-based relationship because I was being given entrée into the families' lives by being told what they were experiencing outside of school. These conversations focused on the academic or behavioral development of the student, as well as experiences of the child and his/her family outside of school. I identified topics of personal dialogue including: change in parents' employment status; parent's pursuit of academic learning, including ESOL classes and attending technical college; retelling of weekend events in which the family participated; and information related to family events such as weddings and funerals.

To support the assertion that using the journals contributed to student learning, I used data that gave detailed description of literacy practices at home and the dialogue that occurred in the parent-teacher journal around these practices. I read multiple journals looking for evidence of the parents and I engaged in dialogue related to the child's academic learning. This evidence included conversations focused on academic-related practices at home, suggestions I gave for activities that were then enacted by the parent with the child, and discussion of the child's attitude toward learning. While I identified several journals that contained dialogue within these conversational categories, the journal I selected to include in the third article had the most significant amount of sustained dialogue related to the student's literacy development.

Article 2 (Chapter 4)

The analysis of journals for the second article cast the broadest net. I began the initial analysis with a deductive analysis approach based on Chrispeel's conceptual framework of parent-school-community partnerships that she developed in 1992 and 1994. This framework included five types of interactive relationships: two-way communication; support of child, family and school (including meeting child's basic needs); learning about each other and how to work together; sharing teaching responsibilities; and collaborating in decision making and advocacy. Five different colors of post-it tabs, one for each of the types of interactive relationships, littered the edges of the first 24 journals I read. There were numerous pinks, indicating two-way communication as any journal that was regularly used by a parent was evidence of this, very few orange tabs, representing collaboration in decision making and advocacy, and an equal scattering of green, yellow, and hot pink representing the other three areas. Through this analysis, it became visually evident that journals were either heavily tabbed or essentially empty.

While deductively analyzing, I also wrote analytic notes on regular post-its added directly to the journal pages. These contained questions that arose, thoughts about what I read, comments on the dialogue, indications of conversations taking place outside of the journal, and inquiries about my own practice. I noted instances of breakdowns in communication, silences in parent's responses, challenges/questions that were raised by parents, and situations where the journals were not effective in establishing relationships or as communication tools. While Chrispeel's framework seemed to serve the need of arguing for the purpose and usefulness of the

journals, I realized there was a significant amount of data that would be pushed aside if this deductive analysis continued. With this awareness, I chose to forego the deductive analysis for the remaining data (42 journals) and continue to write my notes, questions, comments, and wonderings leading me to an inductive analysis of the journals.

My focus throughout the initial reading of the journals was guided and informed by the concept of *funds of knowledge* (González et al, 2005) that students and their families possess, the importance of dialogue in establishing relationships and disrupting hierarchical roles (Freire, 1992), and the idea of Third Space being a co-created space where learning through dialogue occurs (Gutiérrez, 2008). Especially intriguing were the instances in which hierarchical roles were never dismantled, regardless of journal use or teacher efforts. Additionally, aspects of language, particularly with families for whom English was a second language, raised questions for me: Did our language differences impede communication? or Did the Third Space of our journals allow for more dialogue than would have occurred face to face?

Inductive analysis.

As I analyzed the journals for evidence of the development of relationship between the parent/caregivers and myself, I identified a continuum moving from journals that evidenced strong relationships to those in which the relationships seemed to fail or were non-existent. In the middle of this continuum were the journals that, though used regularly for communication, seemed to maintain a more formal, polite verbal exchange with little evidence of extended conversation or relationship building.

This process of inductive analysis was the first step on the journey of hearing and attempting to create an understanding about the full data set. This was productive in that it allowed me the ability to focus on the relationship aspect of the journals and acknowledge the instances where relationships were not formed or did not seem to mature beyond the performed roles of “teacher” and “parent.”

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) state the obvious, but often intimidating reality: “Many investigators have difficulty describing what they do when they are theorizing, but the intellectual tasks are similar to everyday cognitive activities. Formally, the tasks of theorizing are perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, ordering, establishing linkages and relationships, and speculating” (p. 239-40). All of these components were part of my initial reading of the journals and continued to develop my understanding as analysis continued.

Coding.

This process of identifying categories and beginning to code data offers a way to organize data. “Coding is the heart and soul of *whole-text analysis*. Coding forces the researcher to make judgments about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text” (Ryan & Bernard, 2000, p.780, italics in original). What begins as a nation of words, actions, and thoughts is divided into states of meaning, but through this division, the unity and wholeness remain. This was one of the challenges I faced in analyzing the full data set—making judgments on contiguous blocks of texts from multiple voices and accurately portraying the experience of using journals with parents.

As I read each journal and determined where it fell on the continuum given above, I asked several questions.

- How did parents/caregivers challenge my teaching authority, decisions, or actions, directly or through silence?
- How did I challenge their parenting authority?
- How did the traditional teacher-parent/caregiver hierarchy change?
- When was the hierarchy maintained?
- What else happened within the Third Space of our journals?

Based on these questions, I went back into the journals and coded to capture “what [I saw] in the data in categories that simultaneously describe[d] and dissect[ed] the data” (Charmaz, 2002, p.684). I engaged in this analysis with an intentional awareness and commitment to hearing all of the voices—silenced and written—within the pages of the journals. I intentionally looked for the evidence of the strength of the journals and unique opportunities and information presented through them as well as the instances of discord, missed understandings, and times when they failed as a viable means of communication.

Article 3 (Chapter 5)

The data for the third article began as the full data set. I used inductive analysis with the lens of identifying aspects of my own cultural learning that resulted from use of the journals. After completing a focused reading of the full data set and writing an initial manuscript, I realized that I could not adequately and effectively include the case study as a part of this larger writing. My narrative analysis of the full data set led to the case study of one family guided by the following questions: What did I learn about family culture through the dialogue journal? How did this learning affect my own cultural assumptions and relationship with the family?

Case study analysis.

The analysis of these two journals was guided by qualitative case study inquiry, defined by Dyson and Genishi (2005) as being able “to see what phenomenon means as it is socially enacted within a particular case” (p. 10) rather than about determining a relationship between identified variables. Similar to Hankins (2005), “my study does not look at macro norms but at the one-on-one relationships I establish[ed]” with the family represented here. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) noted “cases are constructed, not found, as researchers make decisions about how to angle their vision on places overflowing with potential stories of human experience” (p.2). I constructed the case study of Tahir and Tanvir around my decisions to focus on their culture that was, literally, foreign to me. The stories that emerged overflowed with and were under girded by the human experiences of their family in this country as well as my learning about these experiences and their culture.

Through inductive analysis of the two journals, I identified the following categories related to what I was learning about their culture: Pakistani history, religion, Pakistani food, and family dynamics including gender roles.

CHAPTER 3

WRITING A RELATIONSHIP: HOME-SCHOOL JOURNALS¹

¹ Kay, A.M., A. Neher, and L.H. Lush. 2010. *Language Arts*. 87(6):417-426.

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“We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don’t even know they exist?”

(Delpit, 1995, p. xiv).

What appears to exist in many schools today is the attitude of “come to us, we’ll tell you what you need to know, and if you listen and learn, then you can be successful in helping your child.” Counter to this belief, Freire (1992) posited that “Unless educators expose themselves to the popular culture across the board, their discourse will hardly be heard by anyone but themselves” (p. 91). If teachers speak and are the only ones listening, what need is there for us to speak? Communication becomes effective when teachers listen with respect so that the stories and wisdom of families can be heard, acknowledged, responded to, and valued. Listen

Allen (2007) noted the importance of understanding family perspective through dialogue when she wrote about personal encounters with her children’s teachers and recounted the stories of other parents who yearned for and benefited from increased dialogue with the school. According to Allen, “Dialogue is the foundation of creating welcoming schools and family-child-teacher partnerships, especially when teachers and families do not share the same culture” (p. 79).

In the following accounts, three teachers—Amy, Andrea, and Lindsey—describe their experiences as they engaged in active listening with the families of children in their classrooms by using home-school journals. Through their use, each teacher realized how these journals began to build bridges and relationships between the worlds of home and school. Amy taught for ten years in a public school system in a southeastern University town. Her first five years were in a PreKindergarten classroom, the following five years in Kindergarten. All of her teaching occurred in schools with 80-85% of the school’s population receiving free or reduced

lunch and a majority African-American and Latino students. Andrea currently teaches first grade in a Title 1 urban elementary school in the same southeastern University town. All of her students receive either free or reduced lunch, and her class is comprised of Latino (of Mexican, El Salvadorian and Costa Rican heritage) and African-American students. Lindsey is a 5th year teacher in a rural school district near the same University town with students who are Latino, African-American, European American, and Laotian.

Using Journals to Speak with Families: Amy's Process

As I entered into my first year of teaching, I recalled an idea from a book on family involvement. Prior to the first day of school, I located Shockley, Michalove, & Allen's (1995) *Engaging families: Connecting home and school literacy communities*, and opened it to the page with the introductory statement for a home reading journal. "Dear Parents, It's always exciting to start a new school year with a new group of students. I look forward to working with your child. Please take a few moments to tell me about your child. Thanks, Barbara Michalove" (p. 19). I readied the journals by adding a printed page with a similar invitation and a few sheets of notebook paper to a 3-prong folder. I did adopt the "Dear Parent(s)" greeting and recall giving intentional thought to use of the (s) as I was fairly certain some of my students would be in one-parent households and wanted to be respectful of this. What I came to realize upon using the dialogue journals was that there were often other family members, not just parents, who were a part of the children's lives and these other adults became active participants in the use of the journals. In reflecting on this choice of greeting, and were I to enter into a classroom again, I would adopt a more inclusive invitation such as "Dear Families" rather than "Dear Parent(s)" or simply omit the two-word greeting altogether.

As they were, with the adapted “Dear Parent(s)” introduction, I gave the journals out at our Open House and briefly explained to the parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other caregiver that “This is a journal for us to use throughout the year. It does not serve as a replacement for any conversations, phone calls, or conferences, but rather as another space where we can talk with each other.” For anyone who was unable to attend Open House, I sent the journal home with the student on the first day of school. I continued to invite families to dialogue through these home-school journals across a 10-year teaching career.

The two-way dialogue of the home-school journals served as a tool for speaking *with* the families, rather than just *to* them. As Freire (1992) noted, “Even when one must speak *to* the people, one must convert the ‘to’ to a ‘with’ the people. And this implies respect for the ‘knowledge of living experience’ ” (p. 19). The dialogue within the journals helped establish relationships between the families and me as we communicated with each other and respected each other’s experiences, opinions, and contributions to the conversation.

Similar to Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995), I intentionally “did not provide initial models of how to respond . . . as [I] wanted each family to construct a functional format and ways of dialoguing that were personally meaningful” (p. 21). I also wanted what I wrote to be in response to issues the families raised, and a preformed model would not have encouraged this responsive dialogue. This dialogic interaction was acknowledged as a partnership in which all participated:

As a result of our partnership, nobody was alone anymore. The teachers no longer felt the sole responsibility for educating the children. The families had concrete ways to

participate that were meaningful and generated trust. The children knew their school and homes were united with purpose and position, and they developed trust in the compatibility of learnings (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 7).

The initial invitation to the families to share some written information about their child demonstrated that they were valued and respected as partners in their child's education as well as appreciated for their home knowledge. From that initial response and throughout the school year, these journals served as a space for on-going dialogue and provided a link between home and school.

Evidence of relationships: Given entry into families' lives

The journals helped me build relationships with families that supported open communication and allowed me entry into parts of their lives. Most of the journal writing at the beginning of the school year held the child as the focal point. This was understandable, as the child was the initial connection between the family and me. However, as the year progressed and relationships developed, the dialogue within the journals broadened to include more personal information shared by the families. One mother wrote, "The packet of items that he is selling has not been sold. We having hard time. Our wedding planning has been constant and time consuming." This brief written explanation of why fundraising items were not being sold provided personal information that allowed me to bring this child's home life into the classroom setting through conversation with him about the upcoming wedding. The journals also gave entry into painful instances within some families' lives. When I wrote in a student's journal about her unusual behavior on one particular day, her mother wrote:

Our family has been traumatized. We lose a nephew (20 years 10 months) Sunday morning—I'm not sure (she) comprehend it all right now. The older children are busy but are voicing hurt/pain. More involved. Funeral schedule for Friday. We will be going to candle light vision tonight and "wait." I'm wordless. I will explain more later. We are ok.

This explanation of a family tragedy helped me to better understand the uncharacteristic, challenging behavior of this five-year old student, which allowed me to be more understanding and responsive to her needs. In talking with the older siblings' teachers, I realized that this information had not been shared with them. The journal and the relationship that had been created through its use resulted in this mother feeling that she could comfortably share this information with me and honestly respond to my inquiry.

Events such as funerals, weddings, and other experiences are significant parts of children's lives outside of school, and as such have a significant impact on what is brought into the classroom. By developing trust- and respect-based relationships, I was given entry into the families' lives and these events.

Evidence of learning: Literacy at home

Often, conversations in the journals were academically related, focusing on student thinking, achievement, and learning, as evidenced in this Kindergartner's journal.

Amy (teacher): Did she share her library book with you? Get her to go through and find all the words she can read and point them out to you. Have fun!

Mother: The true story of the 3 little pigs. Well that's a spin off, tonight she will read to the family. I am looking forward to the reading of the library book.

A few days later . . .

Mother: (She) ran home from the bus and began reading as soon as she stepped into the door. Now she is trying to read anything she can get her hands on.

Amy: Yea! This is great. I want to jump with excitement. I am so happy she's this into reading. She is doing incredibly well in our reading group and with her attitude and excitement I just know she'll keep going up. What do you do to encourage her to read?

Mother: Our favorite hobby is collecting movies. So whatever family title she can read, sometimes with some help, she can watch before bedtime. Now we rent more subtitle movies, and she tries to keep up with each dialogue. I also ask her about hair products. Reading the labels are becoming more common now than just grabbing a familiar bottle. (She) also has a 30 minute study time during the day—15 minutes of us reviewing her school day and 15 minutes on the phonics pad.

It is not possible to say absolutely that this conversation would not have occurred without the journal, but I sincerely doubt that it would have been as extensive or as informative.

In the excerpt that follows, I had asked another parent how she felt about using the journal. She wrote:

I like the journal I am able to express my cares and concerns with you and not worry about if he will lose the note because it's in his binder in his bookbag. And with your normal procedure of reading it daily, I know you will be able to react to any issue I need resolved. It works for me and I like it. Because reading and writing are fundamental tools of life.

What is particularly interesting about this response is that in her acknowledgment regarding the benefits of using the journal for her personal use and correspondence, she also speaks to the importance of the literacy basis and learning that is occurring for her child "because

reading and writing are fundamental tools of life.” I find myself wondering, “Without our journal, our relationship, how would I have been aware of the specific value of literacy in this home? While I did not assume that literacy was not important or valued, the mother’s response and my self-questioning of an awareness of these values caused me to become more cognizant of the benefit of our journal.

New Version of Home-School Communication: Andrea’s Process

As a white, middle-class woman, I continuously reflect on how my language, class and culture impact my classroom and pedagogy. I have tried to infuse the mandated curriculum with critical perspectives that focus on equity and social justice, examining multiple perspectives, questioning which voices are represented or absent. I look for multiple perspectives in children’s literature, field trips, and guest speakers, but have come to realize that, until recently, I rarely considered the viewpoints of my students’ parents and families.

During my first five years teaching, I thought I had been doing an adequate job communicating with the parents and family members of my students. I faithfully wrote short notes in each student’s agenda that went home Monday through Thursday. These notes served as reminders about students’ homework, returning a permission slip, and sometimes would even include information about what a child had done in our classroom, such as writing a particularly thoughtful story. I had this agenda-writing routine down to a science and was able to complete this task every day during my lunch period--which meant that approximately 45 seconds was spent on each of my 15 students’ agendas.

Recently, I began to reflect on my daily “parent communication” with a group of teachers interested in school-family partnerships. I read about Weekend Journals in *Parents and Teachers Working Together* (Davis & Yang, 2005) and decided to adapt this idea for use with my students

and their families. I purchased fifteen sewn composition books to serve as our Weekend Journals. I wrote a letter explaining the journals, including my vision for our journal routine, and glued a copy into the inside front cover of each journal. I had the Family Engagement Specialist for our school translate the letter into Spanish because, for more than half of my students' families, this was their home language. I asked families to respond to what their child wrote to them, return the journal on Monday so the children could share their families' letters with the class, and use print rather than cursive so the children could easily read their writing.

Evidence of learning: Purposeful writing

When I introduced the Weekend Journals, the children were very excited. Naturally, they had lots of questions. I explained that on each Friday, our Writers Workshop would be devoted to writing letters that would contain at least one question for families to respond to in the Weekend Journal. During the first few weeks, the letters were crafted through shared writing, so support would be in place for all writers to successfully participate. We began by discussing what we had learned during the week and what information we wanted to include. I listed key words and ideas from our week and, with the students' guidance, crafted our letter. Students could choose whether or not to use the shared writing for their journal, which almost every student did during the first few weeks. On Mondays, the children would share the families' responses during our Morning Meeting. Then, during the week, I would write a response to both the student's and family's letters, and the cycle would begin again on the next Friday.

One benefit of using the Weekend Journals was the opportunity for students to learn more about each other, as well as to become teachers for one another. One student consistently wrote to her parents in Spanish and became a valuable resource to her classmates because she helped

other students write their messages in Spanish. Other Latino students chose to write in their Weekend Journals in English and asked the Family Engagement Specialist to translate. The Weekend Journals became a fabulous language teaching resource by giving us multiple opportunities to explore English and Spanish together as we wrote and shared about our lives.

Evidence of relationships: Bringing families and school together

The Weekend Journals provided me with a glimpse into my students' unique relationships with their families. In the first letter home in Weekend Journals, one child wrote about what he had been learning in school.

I learned about snakes, Play-Do, and music. I learned a whole bunch of stuff. What was your favorite activity in first grade?

His mother responded:

Wow the first grade! Although it was such a long time ago thoughts of the first grade still brings a smile to my face. . . . I remember learning about and planting beautiful flowers for our butterfly garden. At the time I did not realize that this would lead to my very first paying job in my life.

What makes this exchange especially meaningful is this student does not live with his mother. She was very young when she gave birth to him, so his guardians are his great-aunt and uncle. His mother visits him frequently, and these notes provide one example of the love of schooling both mother and son share. In February, when he wrote about his nervousness in preparing for our upcoming standardized tests, his mother wrote:

Anywho fella, no matter how you feel about the CRCT [Georgia's state standardized curriculum test] I want you to do your absolute best. If you plan on becoming the President of The United States of America doing great on this test is the best start for reaching your dreams.

It became clear during the first few weeks of our Weekend Journals, that the children wanted to learn about their parents' school experiences in order to make connections with their own. Each week their letters ended with a wondering question and invitation to respond, such as, "Did you ever do anything like this in school?"

In many instances, the Weekend Journals served as a means through which families learned about their child's inside-school lives. However, there are just as many examples of Weekend Journals helping me understand students' outside-school lives. During my second year using Weekend Journals, William wrote to his father about our social studies unit on maps and location. He asked his father about important places and locations in his life. On Monday morning, this was written in his Weekend Journal:

Nosotros nacimos en Guatemala nuesta cultura es muy bonita pero en nuestro paiz es muy violento nosotros emigramos hacia aqui porque no podimos vivir en nuestro paiz y no querianos que William ni my esposa les pasara nada malo mi nino apesarde sucorta edad precensio un crimen de su tio questan solo tenia 9 anos el y William eran como hermanos el nombre del nino era Tomas mi nino de tan solo 4 anos cuidaba a William como su hermano mayor y para nostotros era nuestra hijo por eso mi nino William tenia mucho mi de vivir en Guatemala y nos venimos paraca yo le comente un dia a Wiolliam si queria regresar pero el me contesta y me dijo que no porque le damitdo y a nosotros tambien Gracias

(English translation) We were born in Guatemala. Our culture is very beautiful, but our country is very violent. We migrated here because we could not live in our country and I didn't want anything to happen to William or my wife. Even though my son is very young he was aware of a crime that occurred against his uncle that was only nine years old. The name of the child was Thomas; my son of only four years always took care of William like his older brother. For us he was our son, and for that reason William was very scared of living in Guatemala and we came here. I asked William if he ever wanted to return but he answered no because he is scared and so are we. Thank you.

This information helped me better understand William. His extreme quietness and resistance to extensive activity or verbal interchange seemed more logical, and I was able to respond more compassionately to his withdrawn nature. His father gave me insight into their lives in a way that I do not believe would have occurred through a parent-teacher conference or a face-to-face conversation utilizing an interpreter. As a teacher, this level of understanding about the lives of my students guides me toward being more critically reflective and responsive to my students and their families.

I believe the Weekend Journals have given my students and their families a conversation space that allows them to make connections between past and present experiences. The children have been able to learn about their parents' childhoods and school experiences and the shared literacy experience of telling and writing stories together has become part of these families' lives. I am reminded of this every Monday morning when the children enthusiastically race into the classroom, clutching their Weekend Journals, ready to share with the class.

Another way the Weekend Journals have helped build and enrich relationships is by facilitating an ongoing dialogue between the families and me. I was unsure how Spanish-speaking parents would view the journals, but my uncertainty quickly disappeared when I saw how much they were writing in the journals. Each message written in Spanish became a learning opportunity for me and my students. We would read the note aloud in Spanish and then translate it together.

During Latino Heritage Month, students invited their parents to our class to share their cultural heritage. We were thrilled to have parents from Costa Rica, Mexico, and Colombia teach us about their countries. One mother from Mexico taught us how to make tamales. I had never eaten tamales before, so I was full of questions about them as well as other traditional Mexican foods. The next few letters in this student's Weekend Journal were related to food and special family recipes. These notes between the mother and me not only deepened our relationship, but also revealed the strong relationships of the family. She wrote:

All the Mexican foods are special for me, especially when we eat in a family. And maybe one day you can come to our house and make enchiladas with us. Although I have had the privilege of dining with many of my students' families over the years, this invitation stood out to me because it stemmed from a positive experience that a parent had in sharing her culture and knowledge with our class, connecting the home and school lives of us all.

Teacher as Listener: Lindsey's Process

Davis and Yang (2005) describe how the first conference can be used to open the door to parents. In this first conference, referred to as a "listening conference" (p. 35), the teacher turns to the families as experts on the child and, as its name implies, the teacher listens to learn about the child and his/her family. The teacher's questions of the family include request for

information on who the child is socially, emotionally and intellectually. This conference is also a time for teachers to ask the family member(s) in these children's lives to share goals for their child in the upcoming year.

The first conference of the year for my new fifth graders took place during the first-quarter midterm; it provided a powerful opportunity to open the door to family involvement early in the year. A short letter confirming the time and place requested for the conference also included some guiding questions to consider prior to the conference, such as: What play/activities does your child enjoy? How does s/he cope with frustration? What do you think is the most important thing for your child to learn this year?

I met with the mothers, fathers, grandparents and guardians of the students in my class. Of these families, three were Latino and bilingual, two were African American, seven were European American and one was Laotian. 100% of my students' parents attended this first conference session—this was not achieved by chance! I began to communicate with my students' families long before this first conference. I initiated contact by mailing personal postcards to each student, and I made at least one phone call per child to check in with parents and make a positive initial connection. I also sent home a newsletter of what was happening in our classroom, including questions for the children. My intent through these actions was to communicate clearly that families are critical to children's success and that I valued their role in their child's education.

After conducting this first "listening conference," I wanted to communicate to each parent and family that their voice was important to me and was a resource I hoped to utilize throughout the year. The home-school journal seemed to be an excellent avenue for continuing this dialogue. At the close of each conference, I presented each family with the new journal. I

had chosen half sized, colorful composition notebooks, hoping these would elicit a more positive response due to the non-threatening length of the pages. (Several office supply stores will cut full-size composition notebooks in half for a small fee.) Initially, I was concerned with giving the students yet another notebook because we already had a writer's journal and a reader's response journal in our classroom. I wanted to make clear that this journal was more casual and personal than the others.

Evidence of relationship: Patience and understanding in building trust

My class of sixteen fifth graders had been created as an Early Intervention Program (EIP). All of my students had failed the CRCT, the statewide standardized test, in previous years and were identified as "at risk" of failing again. The class was organized using a reduced class-size model based on research that indicates this strategy offers better opportunities for positive academic achievement. My students did not have a history of positive academic gains, and many had experienced repeated failures. Most students and their families entered the classroom essentially terrified and understandably distrustful of the educational system. Beginning fifth grade meant two things to them: CRCT tests in math and reading; they knew they must pass in order to graduate. The primary goal of the students and their families was to achieve this objective, but I knew that to do this, our focus had to extend beyond just filling in the correct bubbles on the test. When I heard about the idea of home-school journals, I realized this could be an opportunity to expand the students' and families' foci, as well as my own.

When I presented the journal to the families at the conclusion of our first conference, I explained that it would serve as a link between school and home. Anyone could put entries into the journal. We would all contribute to the written dialogue in the journals without a prescribed

manner dictating how they were to be used. I did not initially establish a required journal time, but suggested that it be used whenever convenient for families.

Journals usually passed between the students and me, but occasionally another adult from the students' home would interject. From casual meetings and phone conversations, it seemed that various family members were eager to write in journals, but were often rebuffed by their adolescence-approaching children. When they could get their hands on the journal, their voices expressed the constant care and concern they had for their children.

During the first few weeks, journals received from home reflected careful thought toward the challenges the children were experiencing in school. School-related topics such as academic struggles, school attendance, homework and class work issues were often brought to my attention through the journal entries. My initial thoughts were that I had perhaps misrepresented my purpose or that the idea behind the journal had been misunderstood, as this was not what I had envisioned. *Didn't the families want me to get to know them? Didn't they want me to learn more about their child on a personal level? Why all this talk about reading and math? Didn't they realize I was working on all these things all day, every day at school?*

Taking into consideration the makeup of my class, I realized that the responses I was receiving were much more significant than I was giving them credit for initially. This could be the first time these families were feeling like participants in the child's school experience, rather than just receivers of information. After repeated experiences of being told by a teacher or administrator what was wrong with their child, what needed improvement, what they should be doing, I realized that the opportunity to tell *me*, the teacher, what *they*, the families, were doing right and telling me what they would like to see me doing could be quite empowering.

I believe that the combined efforts of the listening conferences, phone calls and notes home, and the existence of the journal built the trust between the families and me. They knew I was ready to listen and willing to take their advice seriously. In other words, I realized that the purpose of the journal was, in fact, to support parent voice. Perhaps school-related issues would have gone unsupported or even unnoticed by me without the accessibility provided by the journal. I realized I was witnessing and participating in increased dialogue and developing partnership between home and school.

Over time the relationships continued to build, and the information shared in the journals began to relate to personal issues experienced by the families. Several entries addressed job struggles and family support systems during times of hardship. As one parent shared:

It has been an emotional week – my husband left his job of 12 years Friday. But he already has a job lined up, we are so blessed.

Evidence of learning: Continuing conversations

The following year, I left my fifth-grade classroom to teach an academically diverse group of third graders. As I began the new school year and reflected on the use of the journals during the previous year, I was constantly reminded of how my students' families had spoken with such confidence by the end of the year. They were active participants in their child's educational experience and knew they were valued and respected as such. I began the school year in the same manner, capitalizing on the first conference as an opportunity to speak a little and listen a lot. I wrote down each expressed goal and concern on a quarterly grid. Later, I made a copy that was sent home for parents to keep. I introduced the home-school journal, each with

its own personal message to each student. I felt like the personal message would make a more powerful initial contact than the form letter I had typed and posted to the inside of the journal the previous year.

Students, families, and I wrote back and forth, with journals coming back once every week or so. Based on my struggles the previous year to get children to allow their parents/families access to the journals, I made an effort to increase the journal suggestions for children. For instance, when we wrote about our names in class, I suggested students ask someone at home where their names came from. When I wrote to students, I included families in the greeting, asking questions to encourage discussion.

Even as I wrote to my young third graders, reveling in the different types of responses in comparison to my fifth graders, I reflectively acknowledged how special the conversations were that had occurred in the previous year when anxiety, pressure and fear about mandated academic requirements dominated much of my conversation with the families. How long did we have to work for trust before those parents and families felt safe enough to voice their concerns and suggestions to me, or to openly ask for help? How much time was lost in the process?

Today, I look at my current third graders and their families and hope that by opening that door with conversations now, I can help establish a trust for teachers that will last through the challenging years ahead. However, I also realize that part of that responsibility will also lie with these students' future teachers, who I hope will extend similar invitations to families.

What We've Learned and Questions that Remain

According to Freire (1970), "Dialogue must require an ever-present curiosity about the object of knowledge. Thus, the dialogue is never an end in itself but a means to develop a better comprehension about the object of knowledge" (p. 18). The home-school journals have begun a

dialogue between students, their families, and teachers leading to a better understanding about each other. As Allen (2007) noted “the journals became places for expressing family values, beliefs, and practices” (p. 110). In these dialogic spaces, home and school were able to connect and respectfully learn from and with each other.

Amy used the parent-teacher journals with every classroom of students across ten years of teaching. Andrea and Lindsey were using the journals for the first time in these accounts and have continued their use. We all agree that the journals allowed relationships to develop with families and students that would not have existed within the typical school-coordinated events, such as Open House, holiday programs, and twice-a-year parent-teacher conferences. Numerous studies have spoken to the importance and benefits of communication and family involvement in children’s education experiences. After analyzing 51 studies, Henderson and Mapp (2002) noted “The evidence is consistent, positive, and convincing: families have a major influence on their children’s achievement in school and through life” (p. 7). Other studies (Delgado-Gaitan, 2004; Edwards, 1999; LeFevre & Senechal, 1999; Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995; Swap, 1993) have reached similar conclusions. In our experience, the home-school journals provide the opportunity for meaningful family involvement resulting in trust- and respect-based relationships.

By using the home-school journals, our perspectives about the out-of-school lives and relationships of our students has been changed. We share Allen’s (2007) realization that, “A serendipitous result of the . . . written dialogue was the tremendous support teachers and parents provided for each other” (p. 111). An additional benefit that Henderson and Mapp (2002) speak to is based in the connection between family involvement and student learning and achievement. “When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning” as is

demonstrated through the use of home-school journals, “children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more” (p. 7). While we do not have the longitudinal data to quantitatively support this claim, we collectively believe that the connection established between school (teacher) and home (families) resulted in a more positive educational experience for our students.

As with any initiative or practice, there have been some challenges. We tried to meet the challenge of being monolingual by using multiple resources. Latino family liaisons or other bilingual coworkers proved to be an incredible resource, but we also built relationships by presenting ourselves as language learners to the families. The families and students themselves were ultimately the most valuable resource as they were present and available on a more regular basis.

For some families, other demands on their lives were such that they did not feel they had time to use the journals regularly, as was evidenced in the following entry, “I’m not trying to be mean but I have three kids I don’t have time to answer your question. I work full time and a full time mother so if it’s important or something I need to know I will write back.” Amy immediately expressed her appreciation for the openness and honesty in this mother’s response and realized it could possibly be the voice for many who were silent and whose journals remained unreturned. In all of the classrooms, a few of the journals went home and were never seen again, usually without any explanation. Care must be given to not rely solely on the home-school journal as a panacea for healthy home-school relationships. As each teacher represented here realized, other means were sometimes needed to connect with families for whom the journal was not a preferred means of communication. These instances were few in number, but could not be overlooked.

Detractors could take the position that involving families in such a dialogic, participatory way in their children's education could in some way cede the authoritative power of the teacher. In their case study of African-American and White parents, Lareau and Horvat (1999) found that educators wanted supportive parents, but liked parents who deferred to their authority and accepted their opinions unconditionally. Additional evidence of the expectation of these hierarchical relationships was given by Gonzalez, Moll, and Amanti (2005) when they noted that "although parental involvement is the mantra of every educational reform program, it is often categorically and narrowly defined as parents (usually the mothers) entering the classroom to facilitate the teacher. This is the barometer of parental interest and support. Yet, if educational institutions are serious about creating partnerships with the community, the relationship cannot be an asymmetrical alliance, with one component defining and limiting the role of its counterpart" (p. 42).

Freire (1992) supported this need for partnership and stated that the presence of others in the educational setting "does not mean denying the indispensable need for specialists. It only means not leaving them as the exclusive 'proprietors' of a basic component of educational practice" (p. 94). The teachers are crucial to the relationship, but they are not the sole determinants of the relationship or its purpose. Just as "dialogue between teachers and students does not place them on the same footing professionally" (p. 101), dialogue between teachers and families does not enable either to act in place of the other. Instead, a successful sharing of information takes place. Freire explained this by saying that "dialogue does not *level* them, does not 'even them out,' reduce them to each other. Dialogue is not a favor done by one for the

others, a kind of grace accorded. On the contrary, it implies a sincere, fundamental respect on the part of the subjects engaged in it” (p. 101). Through continued engagement in the home-school dialogue, respect can grow, understanding can be deepened, and trust-based relationships can be formed.

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CHAPTER 4

DIALOGUE JOURNALS: CREATION OF A THIRD SPACE²

² Kay, A. To be submitted to *Teachers College Record*.

“[Third Space] is a transformative space where the potential for an expanded form of learning and the development of new knowledge are heightened” (Gutiérrez, 2008, p. 152).

“Sometimes you can say more in words than face to face and not only that, this takes more time and effort, so it makes you want to know a person more and want to help in any way possible” (Candita, Melvin’s mom, Journal, 6-3-04).

Children and parents come into school settings with a myriad of experiences, values, attitudes and beliefs. When these experiences and beliefs coincide with the culture of the school setting, some children transition between the two worlds of home and school with minimal trauma. Lareau (2003) noted that “There are signs that middle-class children benefit, in ways that are invisible to them and to their parents, from the degree of similarity between the cultural repertoires in the home and those standards adopted by institutions” (p. 237). Unfortunately, for a large number of children, the culture of school is vastly different from home cultures. This school culture includes its representatives—classroom teachers, counselors, administrators, and board of education members—who frequently do not share the experiences of the families being served and, without intentional effort, may fail to develop meaningful relationships with them.

In entering into the classroom and into relationships, the critical researcher brings an ever-present curiosity and openness coupled with humility and questioning. Freire (1987) stated that “the critical attitude is characterized by one who is always questioning one’s own experience, as well as the reasoning behind this experience” (p. 68). This questioning of experience and reasoning often results in an acknowledgement of difference and an extended curiosity to better understand and respect that which appears different. This can be challenging. “We can see that respecting differences and, obviously, those who are different from us always requires of us a large dose of humility that would alert us to the risks of overvaluing our identity,

which could on the one hand, turn into a form of arrogance and, on the other, promote the devaluation of other human beings” (Freire, 1998, p. 107). This can become particularly problematic when the exploration of difference occurs in the borderlands of home and school settings.

Freire (1998) argued that “the school cannot abstract itself from the socio-cultural and economic conditions of its students, their families, and their communities” but the unfortunate reality is that the American public school system frequently does. “These powerful structural and societal forces surround schools and deeply touch the lives of teachers and children” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1978, p. 5). The societal forces surrounding schools include the home cultures—experiences, language, beliefs—the students bring with them into the classroom. Unfortunately, “rather than focusing on the knowledge these students bring to school and using it as a foundation for learning, the emphasis has been on what these students lack in terms of the forms of language and knowledge sanctioned by the schools” (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 90). According to Gonzalez et al. this concept, referred to as *funds of knowledge*, “is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (p. ix-v). These are not fixed, static pieces of information, but rather are fluid and developing based on experience. As experiences change, so do the funds of knowledge. “Equally important is for teachers to gain an understanding of funds of knowledge as a ‘fluid’ concept, and that its content and meaning are negotiated through discussions among participants” (Gonzalez et al, p.19) and by developing relationships through these discussions.

The importance of teachers developing relationships and learning from families has been well documented (Shockley, Michalove & Allen, 1995; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003; Giles, 2005; Gonzalez, et al, 2005), but there is a limited amount of research that offers specific strategies for

how to create and sustain relationships among teachers and parents. One such strategy that I argue can lead to the creation of meaningful relationships among teachers and parents is dialogue journals (Kay, Neher, & Lush, 2010). These journals can be a viable means of communication between educators and family members resulting in relationships that extend beyond the walls of the school or the homes into a co-created Third Space.

This article will expand on the concept of Third Space (Gutiérrez, 2008) and posit that dialogue journals used with family members can create a Third Space for participants to learn about each other and challenge the hierarchical norms of communication between home and school. Also challenged and ultimately transformed are the roles that educators and family members typically play in relation to their responsibilities and actions for supporting children's learning.

First, I will give an overview of the families with whom I communicated through the dialogue journals. Next, I will expound on the definition of Third Space and explain how I am using the term for the purposes of my research, followed by an explanation of the methodology. Then, I will present data representing conversations and relationships that did or did not evolve in the Third Space of the dialogue journals, including how traditional hierarchies of teacher-parent relationships were challenged or disrupted. In my conclusion, I will argue that educators and families consider the use of journals or other alternative means of communication in the creation of a Third Space for family-school relationships.

The Researcher and the Research

I taught Kindergarten in two elementary schools in a public school system in a southeastern, university town throughout the data collection process. I had begun as a first year teacher in 1995, so was in my 6th year of teaching when I first began collecting data from

dialogue journals with my students' parents/caregivers. During the 2001-2002 school year, I taught at Johnson Street Elementary which was made up of 515 students—85% African American, 10% Hispanic, and 5% White. Ninety-seven percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. From 2002-2005, I taught at J. Howell Elementary. The student population averaged 475 students—77% African American, 11% Hispanic, 9% White, 2% Asian, and 1% Multi-racial. Eighty-four percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch.

All 64 participants were family members or caregivers of students who were in my kindergarten classrooms between 2001-2005 and whose journals I retained or copied. Sixty-four families are represented in the sixty-six journals in my data set; two families communicated in the journals across two years. For one family, the child was in my class for two consecutive years; for the other, I taught two brothers in separate school years. The ethnicities of the parents were 48 African American, ten Hispanic, three European Americans, and one each from Korea, Pakistan, and India. A variety of family types were evident across many of the journals. These included single and dual parent households, cross-generational adults living together, and extended family members residing in the home. At least one biological parent was the primary correspondent in 97% of the journals.

Various binaries describe characteristics of the first and second spaces of home and school when considering the demographic information of the majority of my students' families in relation to my own. Descriptors of the majority of families would include African American or Hispanic, working-class or poor, with experiential and cultural knowledge and little formal education. I identify as a European American, middle class woman with different experiential and cultural knowledge than that of most of the families and on-going formal education.

I decided to communicate with families through dialogue journals after reading Shockley, Michalove, & Allen (1995). I adapted Michalove's introduction in a note to parents that read: "Dear Parent(s), The beginning of the school year is an exciting time for everyone. Please take a few minutes and tell me a little about your child." To prepare the journals, I printed this message and added a few sheets of notebook paper to a 3-prong folder. Each year, I distributed the journals during Open House and briefly explained to the parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other caregiver that the journal was a place for us to communicate throughout the year. It would not serve as a replacement for any conversations, phone calls, or conferences, but rather as another space where we could talk with each other. For anyone unable to attend Open House, I sent the journal home with the student on the first day of school. I continued to invite families to dialogue through these journals across my teaching career (Kay, Neher, & Lush, 2010).

Third Space and Dialogue

The concept of a third space has been used to identify areas in which students' out of school experiences and knowledge can be accounted for and incorporated into their learning. This space has been identified in content area literacy (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carillo, & Collazo, 2004) and sociocritical literacy practices (Gutiérrez, 2008) as related to the home and school worlds of students.

While Gutiérrez and others refer to Third Space learning primarily related to literacy, I identify Third Space as a potentially transformative place where families and I could interact with each other through dialogue and construct an alternative space of knowledge about the child we all cared for. According to Allen (2007), "Dialogue is one of the most difficult things in the world to achieve. Yet it is central to our very humanity" (p. 71). In relation to schools, "Dialogue is the foundation of creating welcoming schools and family—child-teacher

partnerships, especially when teachers and families do not share the same culture” (p. 79). Open, honest, respectful dialogue is at the foundation of almost any relationship and the relationship between home and school, parent/caregiver and teacher may be one of the most important. When cultural boundaries exist, dialogue becomes even more critical. “The key to building this trusting, positive relationship between people in different settings (i.e., family members and educators) is two-way communication” (Allen, p. 8) between the first and second spaces of home and school.

I identify individuals that reside in each world—the parents/caregivers in the home, myself as teacher in the school—as the occupants of the first and second spaces. Parents and children operate in the home space, teachers and children in the school space; however, it is rare for parents and teachers to form deep relationships that cross those boundaries. Rather, parents and teachers occasionally invite each other into our primary spaces in home visits, parent teacher conferences, and other school-sponsored events.

I designed the dialogue journals as a form of two-way communication that could potentially disrupt the traditional roles of parents/caregivers and teachers and create a third space that belonged to neither and both. Rejecting the traditional roles can result in ruptures in traditional home-school relationships, but within these ruptures is the potential for learning. “Learning is organized so that ruptures are points of negotiation rather than disruption” (Gutiérrez, Baquendano-Lopez, and Tejeda, 1999, p. 294) and “where [family] knowledge, including the use of alternative representations of meaning, become new tools for learning” (p. 295).

Along with disrupting traditional roles of parent and teacher, I also intentionally focused on and positioned myself as a learner. Learning as a teacher was my goal. Teacher as learner

was a key component in Reali and Tancredi's (2004) research on the effectiveness of teacher professional development related to school-family relationships. I sought a new way of professional learning about families in my work with home-school journals.

As part of the Harvard Family Research Project, Reali and Tancredi (2004) conducted three studies that began with each school's request to the university for help in developing strategies that would foster parents and teachers learning from each other. The teachers' participation was voluntary, which indicated some interest in family relationships and/or willingness to learn new methods of developing or improving relationships. The researchers used a constructive-collaborative model to learn about teachers' work with families, to determine what teachers thought about the students' families, and to understand what teachers did and why they did it regarding parent-teacher relations. Across the studies, teachers initially held perceptions of parents who had little investment in educational issues and were not interested in their children's school experience. The university researchers had access to the parents, learned of their interests, and shared these with the teachers. The researchers and teachers then collaboratively developed events based on the shared interests of the teachers and families. The collaboratively constructed strategies gave teachers an opportunity to learn from and with the families and provided them with information that was, at times, in contrast to their initial conceptions. Teachers changed their perceptions of parents by participating in these events and positioning themselves as learners. In discussing implications for teacher preparation in family involvement, Reali and Tancredi emphasized the need for teachers and researchers to have personal, voluntary interest and involvement in the construction of knowledge and the collaborative development of strategies for supporting families.

While Reali and Tancredi's research focused on multiple teachers within school settings, the dialogue journals were contained within my single classroom. I implemented their use though with a similar curiosity and personal interest in learning from and connecting with families. The journals created the space for this learning to occur.

Methodology

Dialogue with other professionals influenced my analysis of the full data set of 66 journals. I was advised to look at and read the words of the journals not with the expectation of seeing only the positive and successful relationships with families, but also looking for and identifying the gaps—where the journals did not seem to work so neatly to establish and strengthen relationships. I was also encouraged to ask questions of the data and of myself throughout the analysis and make analytic notes of the mental conversations I was having as I re-engaged with the dialogue. I wrote these notes on regular post-its and placed them directly on the journal pages. They contained questions and wonderings that arose, general thoughts about what I read, comments on the dialogue, indications of conversations taking place outside of the journal, and inquiries about my own practice. I noted instances of breakdowns in communication, silences in parents' responses, challenges/questions that were raised by parents, and situations where the journals were not effective in establishing relationships or as communication tools.

My focus throughout the initial reading of the journals was guided and informed by three theoretical lenses: the concept of *funds of knowledge* (González et al, 2005) that students and their families possess; the importance of dialogue in establishing relationships and disrupting

hierarchical roles (Freire, 1992); and the idea of Third Space being a co-created space where learning through dialogue occurs (Gutiérrez, 2008). Especially intriguing were the instances in which hierarchical roles were never dismantled, regardless of journal use or teacher efforts.

Inductive analysis

As I analyzed the journals for evidence of the development of relationships between the parent/caregivers and myself, I identified a continuum moving from journals that evidenced strong relationships to those in which the relationships seemed to fail or were non-existent. In the middle of this continuum were the journals that, though used regularly for communication, seemed to maintain a more formal, polite verbal exchange with little evidence of extended conversation or relationship building.

I situated each journal along this continuum based on the premise that the journal could provide the opportunity for a Third Space to be created between home and school. How family members and I used this space and what types of relationships we developed, maintained, or failed to develop was dependent on how we used the journals and my interpretation of the written correspondence. In determining where each journal fell on this continuum, I created and used the criteria that follow.

On the “development of a strong relationship” end of the continuum I identified 45 journals that contained one or more of the following criteria, based on open-ended coding: extended, sustained conversation between the participants; comments that evidenced mutual trust between parent and teacher; and stated challenges by a parent regarding my decision, action or inaction, school policy, or other school personnel.

Journals in the middle of the continuum contained few parent requests for additional information or extended development of conversation. Family members wrote more formal,

polite responses to my inquiries. There was consistent correspondence in the 11 journals I identified as being in the middle of the continuum. More traditional teacher parent hierarchies seemed to be maintained--evidenced in parents' written deference to me as the authority.

While I have the copies or originals of the final 10 journals, these contained no evidence of relationship building whatsoever and limited or no parent response. For five of the ten families, English was not their first language so lack of a common language between us could have been the primary deterrent to our building relationships through written dialogue. I suspect that literacy challenges, that is, some caregivers' lack of comfort with writing and reading in English, were also an issue. But there were some parents for whom English was their first language, who demonstrated literacy skills and yet no relationship developed. These are the journals that fascinated me and for which I still have no understanding as to why the parent/caregiver and I were not able to develop a trust-based relationship through year-long written dialogue in the journals.

LeCompte and Preissle (1993) stated the obvious, but often intimidating reality that "many investigators have difficulty describing what they do when they are theorizing, but the intellectual tasks are similar to everyday cognitive activities. Formally, the tasks of theorizing are perceiving, comparing, contrasting, aggregating, ordering, establishing linkages and relationships, and speculating" (p. 239-40). All of these components were part of my initial reading of the journals and continued to develop my understanding as analysis continued.

Coding.

One of the challenges I faced in analyzing the full data set was in making judgments on contiguous blocks of texts from multiple voices and accurately portraying the experience of

using journals with parents. My initial analysis of the journals led me to ask many questions about what transpired in the dialogic Third Space, including the following that are the focus of this paper:

- How did parents/caregivers challenge my teaching authority, decisions, or actions, directly or through silence?
- How did I challenge their parenting authority?
- How did the traditional teacher-parent/caregiver hierarchy change?
- When was the hierarchy maintained?
- What else happened within the Third Space of our journals?

Based on these questions, I went back into the journals and coded to capture “what [I saw] in the data in categories that simultaneously describe[d] and dissect[ed] the data” (Charmaz, 2002, p.684). I engaged in this analysis with a commitment to hearing all of the voices—silenced and written—within the pages of the journals. I intentionally looked for the evidence of the strength of the journals and unique opportunities and information presented through them as well as the instances of discord, missed understandings, and times when they failed as a viable means of communication.

I also analyzed the journals based on the focus of conversations. The majority of the dialogue was related to progress or concerns regarding academic or behavioral development of the child. There was evidence of academic and behavioral conversations in most of the journals, though the amount of dialogue was not always balanced between these two topics. The focus of dialogue was guided by the needs of the student and his/her family which offers a logical explanation for the amount of time spent on any particular topic. Parents and I often discussed behavioral concerns and acknowledged positive changes in behavior. Because Kindergarten is a

time of intense social growth and development, as well as academic learning, and because parents (and their children's teachers) are often concerned with their young students' social adjustments in school, it seemed understandable that there were significant portions of some journals that focused on behavior. Aliyah's mom, Monica, explained this connection between her daughter's emotional (ie behavioral) and academic development in one of the final entries of our journal.

I am happy with the good-positive changes in Aliyah. Wholistically I know Aliyah has "grown" emotionally-socially which has allowed a three hundred degree change in her ability to learn. Frankly speaking, Aliyah is able to obtain information academically or intellectually if she can continue to curve/stop acting out. (6-4-05)

Monica believed that the need for Aliyah to develop emotionally was a precursor to her being able to learn academic information. In the following discussion of where I placed journals on the previously discussed continuum, I include excerpts that reflect the behavior-related as well as the academic-focused conversations.

Strong relationships formed

In forty-five (68%) of the journals, an adult in the home and I were able to develop what I consider to be a more meaningful, trust-based relationship based on mutual respect and sustained communication. Dialogue initially focused on the child as our shared focus of interest and I found evidence that the journals provided a space for on-going, meaningful discussion to occur. Early in the school year, Ami's mother, Chimelle, was concerned about her acclimation to the new school environment and making new friends.

Chimelle (Journal, 8-4-04): Ami talks about (her previous school) a lot and does say she wants to go back to see her friends because they will miss her. We try to encourage Ami that she will make more friends at her new school and she will see her other friends again.

Amy (Journal, 8-5-04): Each day Ami seems to come into the classroom a little happier. Hopefully, this trend will continue and she'll come to feel just as comfortable here. How long was she at (her previous school)?

Chimelle (Journal, 8-5-04): About 4 ½ years. She did come home and tell me about someone in her class name Dave. She had fun playing pretend with him. . . Yes she seems to be adjusting a lot better. I know she will come to enjoy school—it just takes a little time.

Amy (Journal, 8-6-04): WOW! 4 ½ years—that's pretty much all of her life! I talked with her for just a minute during rest time about how she has so many friends from (her previous school) and about the new friends she's making here.

Through this exchange, during the first week of the school, I was able to hear the mother's concern about Ami's adjustment, as well as hear the language she was using with Ami at home when she talked about this change. I then followed up with similar conversations at school, using similar language. Chimelle and I maintained this correspondence and shared our observations of Ami's progress on a daily basis. Chimelle and I both noticed that Ami and Dave developed a steady friendship that lasted throughout the year.

Other parents quickly established the partnership by acknowledging the communicative benefit afforded through the journal and using language that identified our relationship as a partnership.

Nikka (Journal, 8-18-04): I appreciate the fact that we can communicate through this journal, if a meeting is warranted let me know. Please keep working with him and I'll do my part at home as well.

Nikka's words clearly communicated the perception that we were working together for her son, that we both played a vital role in his academic and social development, and we both had responsibilities to uphold for each other and the child.

As our dialogic-based relationships matured, some of the conversations diverted away from the child. These diversions included information that was more personal or conversational in nature and focused on a variety of topics. One mother wrote:

“Becky helped me vote today, and she got a “I’m a Georgia voter” sticker. Unfortunately, we can only count one vote between us for John Kerry!” (Journal, 11-2-04). Sometimes I initiated such conversations, as in the following exchange.

Amy (Journal, 12-15-04): What'd you think of the program last night?

Mandy (Journal, 12-15-04): Dave's Papa and Nanny (my mother and stepfather) and I enjoyed the program very much. Coming from a family of diverse religious affiliations, it was nice to see the multicultural approach you all have taken.

Amy (Journal, 12-16-04): What's your family's religious affiliations?

Mandy (Journal, 12-16-04): We range from Atheists to Jewish to many denominations of Christian. For this state, that is various, haha.

The on-going tone of the journal between Mandy and me was particularly conversational and toward the end of the school year, she wrote “I almost feel like I am writing to a friend” (Journal, 5-17-05).

The dialogue that took place, formal and informal, within the Third Space of our journals allowed some parents/caregivers and me the opportunity to develop a connection based on the solid foundation of sustained communication. Each journal reflected the uniqueness and individuality of the children and families, as was evidenced when a parent shared plans about her upcoming wedding, a mother wrote about the death of their nephew, or families shared information about their lives outside of school—a mother returning to school, an elderly grandfather coming to live with the family for end-of-life care, a family’s relocation or a change of job. The strengths and needs of the children and their families guided each conversation, making each journal a personalized third space rather than a predetermined school space (e.g., talk about this book, do this assignment, comment on this behavior problem, etc.).

Journals with some of the Spanish-speaking families were a particularly personalized Third Space. I am not fluent in reading or writing Spanish, as some of the families were not fluent in reading or writing English, but our translated journal was a space where some of the Spanish-speaking families and I could communicate regularly. (A colleague translated the original dialogue in this journal and others with Spanish-speaking families. I wrote my message in English, which my colleague then translated into Spanish. The parent wrote back in Spanish, which the translator wrote in English.) The excerpts included below are presented only in English because of space limitations.

Amy (8-27-03): What do you think of the homework Selma’s brought home? Has she practiced it and read it with you?

Lesa (8-28-03): Yes, we practiced Selma’s homework and we are happy because we learned at the same time. She did it well. She still doesn’t know the letters for memory.

As I read the response above and others throughout the year, I rejoiced in the idea of the parent and child learning English together and shared this excitement with Lesa.

Lesla (12-8-03): The books she brings from the library are sometimes English and sometimes Spanish. I have her read to me in English and even though I don't understand it all, I will learn this way little by little.

Amy (12-17-03): It is fascinating to me to consider that you could be learning English and how to read in English as Selma learns how to read. There are a few books in our school library that are in Spanish or in Spanish and English. Do you have a preference for which Selma checks out?

Lesla (1-7-04): Yes, I like the books that she brings from the school library when she brings them in Spanish. I know I read them but when she brings them in English I cannot read them. Selma reads at home the little books that she brings and it surprises me that she reads them.

I was also able to ask about home practices, language use, and share information related to the benefits of second language learners retaining, and being fluent in, their first language.

Amy (9-30-03): When working with Selma at home, does she usually use English or Spanish when practicing her homework, that doesn't involve printed text. I was just reading about the benefits for students who regularly use both. What do you think about this?

Lesla (9-30-03): Here at home we teach Selma in Spanish because we don't know how to explain things in English, but she enjoys it very much when we study things with her. We teach in Spanish, you all teach in English, so I think Selma learns much of both languages.

Lesla recognized and communicated the partnership we had created and we both openly acknowledged the benefit of what we were doing, each in our native language, to guide Selma's literacy development. The Third Space in our journal, with the help of a translator was, most likely, the only place this dialogue would have occurred.

The Third Space of our journal also afforded the opportunity for bilateral challenges. Parents at this end of the continuum sometimes used the journals to challenge my teaching authority, decisions and actions through direct questions and, at times, through silence or a sudden pause in our conversation.

Parents challenging teacher.

Across the analysis of the 45 journals I identified as building strong relationships, the majority of the potentially challenging responses from parents came in the second half of the school year. Based on when these challenges took place in relation to the school year, I believe that the development of our relationship through the Third Space of the journal resulted in a comfort and trust in each other. Gonzalez et al (2005) speak of *confianza* as a cultural construct indicated by an interest and willingness for individuals to participate in reciprocity of sharing information and experiences. "When there is sincere interest in both learning about and learning from a household, relationships and *confianza* can flourish" (Gonzalez et al, 2005, p. 6). Sincerity cannot be fabricated or imitated for relationships and *confianza* to grow. As with any relationship, there is little to no room in parent-teacher relationships for false interest, placating conversations, or leading questions. This *confianza*, or mutual respect, resulted in parents and me being able to ask questions of each other or request clarification in situations that might typically have gone unacknowledged, although the questions or uncertainty would have remained.

The existence of these challenges is even more meaningful when considering Lareau's study contrasting school interactions of poor and working-class versus middle-class families. "Working-class and poor parents often fear doing 'the wrong thing' in school-related matters . . . thus, they are deferential rather than demanding toward school personnel" and "try to maintain a separation between school and home rather than foster an interconnectedness" (Lareau, 2003, p. 198). I posit that the Third Space of our journal affected the perceptions, positionality, and power of the parents and myself in such a way that an interconnectedness between them and me, home and school, became our reality and lessened the separation.

Jones (2006) identified perspective, positioning, and power as three layers of critical literacy inquiry that are present in all texts—written, spoken, performed, and multimodal. These were certainly present in dialogue in our journals, but the journals provided at least the potential for different perspectives from traditional hierarchy of parent-teacher relationships and communication. "Always interrelated with positioning and perspective, uses of power *produce* the positions people might occupy and it is always determined and produced through *perspective*" (Jones, 2006, p. 84, italics in original). One of my intents in inviting parents into dialogue, starting with the initial request to "Tell me about your child," was to communicate to parents that I was a learner in this relationship, they were the experts on their children, and my position as teacher did not make me expert on their children's education. I learned by listening to parents, by engaging in active dialogue with them, by turning to them as a partner and an expert on their child. At times, this seemed to be welcomed and appreciated; at others, I suspect this may have been annoying, as evidenced in the conversation below.

Dre's mother and I had been discussing his challenging behavior in the classroom throughout the school year. After writing to her about another incident of Dre hurting another

child, I added “I’m feeling like we need to talk face-to-face. What do you think? I’ll stay late tomorrow if you want to come by” (Journal, 3-3-05). Charlene finally reached a breaking point of utter frustration and brutal honesty as she responded.

Charlene (Journal, 3-4-05): You know I don’t wanna sound mean or not caring, but I’m tired of talking to Dre and I’m tired of his behavior. I have to work. It’s not easy for me to get off of work. Like I said once before you need to call his father. It’s getting to the point where I’m tired of all of it all together. And after today his father might be the one writing you if he chose to because I’m fed up.

Charlene included Dre’s father’s phone numbers and added a postscript noting that she would not be signing the behavior sheet that had come home because he needed to give it to his father. Could it have been that Charlene was growing weary of my repeated requests for help, collaboration, positioning us along side each other, rather than me just taking care of things at school?

Amy (Journal, 3-4-05): Thank you for your honesty in sharing your feelings. I didn’t hear any of it as sounding mean. It just felt like you were writing what you are thinking and feeling right now and I really, really appreciate that! I’m thinking this 2 week break [spring break] is perfectly timed and we can all come back new on March 21st. I have to say that I have really liked being in touch with you regularly through our journal—I also understand how frustrating it must feel if all you’re reading about is negative. So—after the break, I’m going to do a more conscious effort of making a mental and physical note of when Dre does something good and make sure I am sharing those things with you. And should his behavior continue to be a problem, we will contact his father.

Charlene's emotional response led directly to a change in my perception of Dre and my practice of taking note of positive behavior and communicating these to her. On the first day back from Spring Break, I wrote "Dre had a good first day back. How was the break?" To which Charlene responded, "Great! Spring Break was great. Lots of rest. Hope you enjoyed yours!" Our correspondence continued throughout the remainder of the year. Through her honesty and forthright communication, Charlene had maintained and exerted her power in our relationship, which directly affected my perception of her son and our continued communication and partnership.

Sounds of silence.

In a verbal exchange between two people, silence can be used to indicate disagreement or displeasure. I found the same to be true in the dialogue journals with some of the parents.

Aliyah had been having extreme emotional outburst from the beginning of the school year. Her mother, Monica, and I had engaged in extended correspondence within our journal, over the phone, and face-to-face. Within the first two weeks of school, Aliyah had spoken with the school counselor, an act her mother approved of and supported, but there were no long-term results and her outbursts continued. Monica and I continued to exchange ideas of how to most effectively respond to Aliyah, what could possibly be the cause, and what we could do to support each other and her in this process. Responses on this and other topics were extensive, frequently filling $\frac{3}{4}$ to a full notebook page or beyond. So, the brief "Okay" written by her father early in December spoke volumes. I initiated a conversation about seeking additional support at the school-building level in addressing Aliyah's emotional needs.

Amy (Journal, 12-3-04): I went ahead and requested a start on the SST (Student Support Team) process as a way to get input and ideas on effective ways to manage and positively influence Aliyah's behavior. You'll get some more information with more detailed explanation soon.

Leo (Journal, 12-3-04): Okay

Amy (Journal, 12-6-04): Everything ok?

Monica (Journal, 12-6-04): Thank you.

Amy (Journal, 12-8-04): I'm sensing some sort of change or uncertainty. Any questions for me or information you think would be helpful?

Monica (Journal, 12-8-04): Sensing uncertainty related to what or whom? For my uncertainty, Yes, but I'm willing to trust the process. I guess when one don't understand what's happening it is best to be silent/observed for that a raging bee may sting and die but if it just be calm it may survive!..?

Amy (Journal, 12-9-04): I think it was just in not hearing from you for a few days—that's when those feelings of uncertainty started to arise. I'm just thankful to you for writing me back. Your last statement—how you wrote about the raging bee is said so poetically. I read it several times and even read it aloud to hear how beautiful the words sound. Thank you for reminding me, in these words, of the value and benefits of remaining calm and observing. So much to be learned by doing this . . .

I was awe-struck with Monica's response. Her initial silence became poetry—words that I read, reread, and read aloud. Prior to the discussion above, Monica had consistently written expansive responses in the journal, often exceeding a page in length. For the rest of December, however, her responses were succinct and to the point, but cordial. When we returned from the

holiday break, Monica returned to her initial pattern of extensive responses, filled with details, comments, questions, and other information. I was reminded of the valuable lesson of remaining calm, observing, and respecting an individual's need for space and distance before coming back together. The silence in our Third Space and the opportunity to address this silence was instrumental in understanding Monica's uncertainty about what was happening with her child.

Parents did not always agree with my actions or decisions, and while I would be remiss in thinking that all of these instances were voiced in the journals, I do believe that many were that would have otherwise gone unspoken, unacknowledged, and unaddressed. When parents voiced their concerns or questions, at times I responded in what could be interpreted as challenging the parent.

Teacher challenging parent.

In our Third Space, there was evidence of me questioning or challenging parental authority. These instances were usually related to a practice or strategy I was implementing in the classroom that the parent either did not believe was necessary or did not believe would be effective. I tried to respond with clarity to the decisions I made and the planned actions to be taken.

I incorporated a strategy for LaShaun, a particularly active child who was still developing the ability to control his hands and body. I explained my strategy to his mother, Nikka.

Amy (Journal, 1-19-05): I found today that having him physically hold onto the edge of my sweater seemed to help keep him focused when we were walking down the hall.

Nikka (Journal, 1-19-05): Thanks so much for the update. I spoke with LaShaun yesterday about behaving in class and the hallways. He should behave without hanging onto a shirt.

Amy (Journal, 1-20-05): We're working toward "no shirt" but will use that strategy when needed. He did do better today. ☺

Nikka (Journal, 1-20-05): Good. Whatever works for you. Thank you.

While Nikka did not specifically instruct me not to allow LaShaun to use this strategy to give focus and develop self control, her response did indicate a desire for him to "behave without hanging onto a shirt." My response, reiterating my intention of continuing to use this strategy with LaShaun, could have been interpreted as challenging her parental preference and/or authority.

The parents/caregivers and I were able to have these conversations in the Third Space of our journals and, at times, disrupted the traditional parent-teacher hierarchy and formed personal relationships through dialogue. Our relationships were more similar to partnership of individuals working with and learning from each other. Giles (2005) refers to this as operating within a relational narrative in which "educators work *with* parents, rather than *for* them" and where parents and educators "hold each other mutually responsible for their parts in educating students. They build strong, trusting relationships, often across differences of race and class" (p. 232). I looked for patterns based on racial, ethnic, or socio-economic differences between families and myself, but did not identify any clear distinctions among these 45 families in this Third Space. It seemed to me that in the cases where I identified that relationships had been established through the journals (relationships that incorporated class, race, and language differences, as well as

relationships where parents/caregivers and I shared more commonalities) the parents/caregivers and I were able to communicate and develop our relationship in the co-created Third Space of the dialogue journals.

Although I tried to create this Third Space for all families, some parents/caregivers maintained a more formal, hierarchical relationship in the pages of our journal, as I explore in the next section.

Formalities maintained

In eleven (16%) of the journals, the adult in the home and I used our journal to communicate, but the parent/caregiver responded in a more succinct, less dialogic manner. These parents typically deferred to me as an authority and to the school or me as being responsible for the child's learning, maintaining a more traditional teacher-parent hierarchical position. Even though there is little evidence of the parent/caregiver and me developing a strong relationship in the journals, there is evidence to support the open lines of communication we created and sustained.

Polite conversation.

From the initial invitation on the first page of our journal, Linda responded and shared information about her son, Charlie. "Charlie is a very sweet and shy boy. He likes to play football and basketball. Sometime he has a lot of energy and wants to play. He is also very smart." She consistently responded to any question I asked whether related to school, Charlie's opinion about a particular activity, or how their weekend was. Her responses were brief and gave a specific answer to whatever question I raised without any invitation to extend the conversation.

Amy (8-10-04): What have you heard from Charlie about our class?

Linda (8-10-04): Charlie don't tell me much, but he said today he did art.

Amy (8-11-04): They do get to go to art all of this week for specials. What did he say they are doing in there?

Linda (8-11-04): Charlie says learning eyes on me, be quiet. Listen to the teacher.

I was attempting to encourage conversation at home (and a report from the parent) about what Charlie would share with her about the art activities. Instead, his focus and her written response were on the behavior guidelines that a teacher established. Throughout the year, Linda used the journal to relate directives and communicate basic information, such as when Charlie should ride the bus, what she would bring for a classroom activity, if she were planning to attend a school event or the reason she would not be able to attend. Our conversation remained at a mutually polite level, more like a conversation with a familiar acquaintance than with a friend.

Even without the development of a strong relationship, we used the dialogue journal to communicate regularly and share in celebrations of Charlie's accomplishments.

Amy (1-24-05): Charlie had an absolutely wonderful day today! He was so attentive during large group and participated in our phonics lesson about beginning sounds in words. Absolutely great! Tell him to keep it up!!!

Linda (1-24-05): I hope Charlie continue to do good. I try to stay on top of things with him. I'm proud of him.

While there was a connectedness between Linda and me as we celebrated Charlie's successful day, I did not feel we were in partnership, working together toward a common goal. Did Linda's perception of her role as a parent affect how she responded and what she wrote? Was writing in the journal uncomfortable or too time consuming? These are questions that

couldn't be answered by reading and analyzing our dialogue. Linda was respectful in her responses and consistent in writing throughout the year, but I did not feel the same kind of partnership I experienced with families in the majority of the dialogue journals.

Hierarchical positions maintained.

I saw evidence in other dialogue journals of family members maintaining hierarchical teacher-parent positions. The parent/caregiver seemed to give ultimate authority to me as their child's teacher and, at times, seemed to undervalue their own ability and influence as the parent.

Jermaine's mother, Nita, wrote, "Thank you very, very much. I really do appreciate the help you are giving me and the willingness to help Jermaine when I can't." Nita struggled with providing for her family and our journal included information about her daughter going to live with her grandmother in Florida, requests for holiday assistance in getting food, and resources available through the school and community. Nita used the journal for her own, very legitimate purposes. I did not have the benefit of developing a strong relationship with Nita due to multiple factors, but within the Third Space of our dialogue journal, I was able to learn a significant amount of information that helped me better understand Jermaine.

Likewise, the correspondence I had with Nita helped me understand Mikala and her family better. From the first response, Nita was very brief and to the point. In response to the invitation to "Tell me a little about your child," Nita listed Mikala's full name, her age, date of birth, and added "she's very easy to learn and smart. Very friendly and nice. She has 3 sisters." Nita continued to maintain brevity in her responses

Amy (8-3-04): Will Mikala be staying in after school every day? Also-what does Mikala say is her favorite thing about school so far?

Nita (8-3-04): Mikala will go to after school every day. She didn't say what was her favorite thing about school.

Amy (8-4-04): What does she say she likes to do?

Nita (8-4-04): She like to play with her friends.

These regular, but brief responses continued for the first month of school.

Amy (8-13-04): We've really been focusing on getting our guidelines in place, believed in, and followed. Hopefully that will help make for a good school year. What do you think?

Nita (8-13-04): Good. Thanks.

Then, when I asked Nita what she thought was the most important thing for Mikala to learn during the school year, Nita simply signed her name. During the first week of September, Nita shared her honest feelings about using our journal when she wrote, "I'm not trying to be mean but I have three kids. I don't have time to answer your questions. I work full time and am a full time mother so if it's important or something I need to know I will write back. Thanks, Nita." I outwardly expressed my sincere appreciation to Nita for her honesty and inwardly celebrated that a parent had taken the time to write what I suspected could be a reality for others. I continued to write in our journal throughout the year and Nita responded by initialing or signing her name or, on occasion, by writing a short message.

Amy (9-30-04): I'm thinking you are still as busy as ever, right?

Nita (9-30-04): Yes. We are trying to move.

Amy (10-4-04): Mikala told me y'all were moving—Exciting! Will you still be close by here?

Nita (10-4-04): Yes. Thanks.

As can be seen in the excerpts above, the parents and I did maintain regular correspondence in the Third Space, though not as extensive or multi-faceted as the communication evidenced in the strong relationships. However, the relationships were still based on the opportunity to communicate through our dialogue journal and work together for their child.

Across these 11 journals, the parents' perception of self, abilities, and personal circumstances seemed to directly influence the amount of communication and depth of our conversations. Parents' perceptions of themselves, of teachers, or of the institution of school could also have affected or prevented a relationship from being developed in the remaining journals. I do not have any evidence that can unequivocally support the claim that these parents were in more challenging economic or personal circumstances than other parents, though these also could have been deterrents to developing relationships.

No connections or relationships

In ten (15%) of the journals, I found no evidence that using the dialogue journals contributed to developing a relationship between me and the families. I suspect that a language barrier, literacy challenges, or a combination of both were deterrents in four of the ten journals. The other six journals contain some similarities including evidence of conversations between the parent/caregiver and me that occurred outside of the journal pages, a parent giving an initial response with nothing else written throughout the year, and a permanent shut down/silence/no response when I wrote about concerns regarding the child's behavior or academic performance.

In two of these six journals, there was evidence of communication outside the pages of the journal between the parent/caregiver and me from the brief responses written in the journal. On one of the eight pages of Jose's journal, I wrote "I am so thankful for you talking with Jose

about this and for talking with me this morning.” From this dialogue, I know that Jose’s mother had come to the school and we had conversation about an issue that I had originally written about in our journal. She chose to initiate a face-to-face conversation rather than write a response.

At the back of the remaining four pages of Tyana’s journal, I had added a note that read, “Disappointed to lose all the pages to this journal. Was told later they had gotten torn up, then thrown away. Mother had been incarcerated, so Tyana lived with her aunts; semi-regular correspondence. More shared from aunt at fall conference about Tyana’s past experiences and her mom than was ever written in journal.” I speculate that there was some uncertainty and discomfort in writing down the details of Tyana’s mom’s incarceration, so her aunt chose to discuss these things with me face-to-face or over the phone. As evidenced in the examples above, the parent/caregiver and I did develop a relationship, but the journal was not a key factor.

In two journals, a parent initially responded, but did not use the journal again to communicate in any extensive manner. I continued to try to engage these parents in written dialogue, but my attempts received no response. For one Spanish-speaking family, the parent did not respond to my initial invitation, translated into Spanish, “Estimados Padres de Familia: El comienzo del año escolar es siempre un momento muy emocionante para todos. Por favor dedique un rato y digame un poco acerca de su hijo(a). A few days later I wrote, “Escribar, por favor!” and Maria’s mother responded.

Marina (8-12-04): Maria es una nina muy estodiosa. Si porta muy bien y tiene mucha comunicacion con sus hermanitos. Yo la eunsidero una niña inteligente. Yola.

(English translation: Maria is a nice girl. She likes to study. She’s well behaved and communicates very well with her small brothers. I consider her a smart girl.)

My colleague translated my response to Marina: “Maria is a delight to have in our classroom. She shows care and compassion for others and really seems to enjoy school. What has she said about our class so far?” Marina did not respond. I continued to ask other questions periodically throughout the year. After Marina attended a program at school, I asked, “What did you think of the BRAG ceremony?” A few days later, I wrote “Will you be here Friday for PACT?” After the first day in our new school building, I said, “What an exciting day in our new school! What did Maria say about it?” Even though my questions were translated into Spanish, Marina did not respond. In March I wrote that we were trying to set up translators for our spring conference and gave two dates for Marina to indicate which would be better. Although this entry was written only in English, because the colleague who translated earlier in the year was no longer available, Marina circled one of the dates given and the conference was scheduled accordingly. When I wrote the final question of the year, “Have you found this journal at all useful?” Marina printed her name on the next page.

The difference in language is a logical explanation for why the journal was not useful in sustaining dialogue between Marina and me. I have also wondered about Marina’s ability and confidence in using written communication as a primary means of conversation. However, I cannot overlook the possibility that my “Escribar, por favor!” was heard as a demand to respond, rather than a curious invitation for Marina to help me learn more about Maria and, if so, Marina politely responded to a teacher’s demand.

I am simultaneously perplexed, intrigued, and disheartened by the final two journals. They actually seemed to dismantle trust between the parent and me. In both of the journals, the initial response and beginning of the year conversations indicated the onset of building a trust-based relationship. However, as the year progressed, the journals with these two families

actually seemed to inhibit the development of a more meaningful relationship between the parent and me. In both instances, I wrote about concerns regarding their child's academic performance or behavior and communication immediately shut down.

I had taught Tiyla's brother, Tavelle, three years prior to her being in my classroom. Their mom, Deb, and I had communicated through the journal. I had not expressed any significant areas of concern about Tavelle. I did have concerns about Tiyla, though, and used our journal to communicate with Deb about these. I felt a comfort in communicating with Deb, based on our previous parent-teacher relationship, and may have carried too many assumptions forward as I shared information about Tiyla.

Amy (9-15-04): At our meeting today, we talked about Tiyla's behavior and things I've seen in the classroom—what I've talked with you about in here and at our meeting. We came up with some strategies to try out: 1) for her to be reminded of the rules and expectations—like when she acts out or yells out, to tell her what is and is not ok; 2) when she bursts out crying, trying to get attention, she'll be moved to a private, quiet place (behind my desk)—I've already been doing this the past couple of days and it really seems to be working well. Do you have anything like this at home? (go to her room 'til she can calm down?); 3) Begin a group with the school counselor focused on developing self-control. There would probably be 3-5 students in this group. Also—while trying out these strategies, we can go ahead and complete the rating scales to see how similar her behavior at school and home is. Sounds like it's pretty close to the same. Those should be coming home soon. What are you thinking about all this so far?

Deb did not respond to this entry. When I wrote a few days later about Tiyla going to the dentist, Deb did write back, so I am certain she saw what I had written on the 15th, but chose not

to respond. Two weeks later I wrote “Everything ok? I know you are busy and all, but it’d be real helpful for me to get a glimpse of “Tiyla at home.” Can you help me out?” Again, Deb did not answer my question and request for help. The next four pages of our journal were filled with Tiyla’s drawings—happy, smiling faces with long pony-tailed hair, stars of all sizes, and a picturesque house with many windows and a high roof.

When we resumed class from our intercession break, I noted, “I see Tiyla did some work in our journal. ☺ How was the break?” Deb responded with what was to be her last entry in our journal.

Deb (11-5-04): Tiyla did great. She had a chance to go to her first intercession and she loved it. She talked about the new children she met and how they played. She said she got in trouble one time out of the whole time she was there. How’s she doing since she’s been back in the class?

Amy (11-5-04): Glad to hear Tiyla had such a wonderful experience at Intercession. What was her favorite thing she got to do? As for her behavior in our class—I KNOW Tiyla wants to do the right things and she tries really hard. I just believe there are things that, on her own, she doesn’t seem to have the ability to control. As our schedule and classroom are becoming more structured and academic focused, I am concerned that Tiyla’s behavior will interfere with her own learning and others. That is what I see as the biggest challenge right now is the overall disruption caused by Tiyla’s outbursts and behavior. One-on-one is much better, the classroom just doesn’t always allow for that. I really just want what’s best for Tiyla and for all who get to be in our class with her.

Five days later, Tiyla transferred to another school in our district.

In the journal, as with any form of written correspondence, the participants do not have the benefit of visual or auditory cues available in face-to-face interactions. There is no body language, voice intonation, or opportunity to perceive confusion or discomfort. I am left wondering: How often did my words on the page get misinterpreted or heard/read in a way different than what I intended? Did I speak too honestly, openly, bluntly too soon? What could I have done differently? I also developed an understanding that there are instances when a face-to-face or at least voice-to-voice conversation could be more effective than written dialogue. What if I had picked up the phone, or driven to Tiyla's house?

I was fascinated and encouraged by how beneficial the journals seemed to be for the majority of families. How could I explain the development of trust-based, meaningful relationships in a Third Space with some families in contrast to the seeming dismantling of relationships with others? It seemed to me that the trust-based relationships developed between the parent/caregiver and me in the journals when we both were able to perceive ourselves as learners and when we used the Third Space of our journal to engage in sustained dialogue, which I explore in the next section.

Potentially, the act of requesting parents to first "Tell me about your child" may have initiated a re-creation of our perception and positioning of each other, previously discussed in regards to the disruption of the traditional hierarchy of the parent-teacher relationship. Jones (2006) argued that "parents and teachers are not 'natural' enemies, but instead each group has been constructed as an other who is not to be completely respected or trusted" (p. 106). In a significant number of cases, the parents and I were able to develop more respect and trust of each

other through extended conversations; the dialogue in our journals appeared to serve to reinforce a different positioning, perception, and shared power than may have existed without the Third Space.

Communication is Key

In the introduction of Freire's *Pedagogy of Freedom* (1998), Aronowitz explained "Education takes place when there are two learners who occupy somewhat different spaces in an ongoing dialogue (p. 8). The parents/caregivers and I occupied different cultural, educational, and physical spaces, but, in most instances, used our on-going dialogue through the Third Space of our journal to facilitate learning. The education that took place focused not only on the child, but also on personal practice, beliefs, and opinions. Through our exchanges and inquiry, we explored these ideas with each other.

Dialogue journals have the potential to open a Third Space where teachers and parents/caregivers can create and sustain family-school relationships. For the majority of families (85%) in this study, our dialogue journals were effective in creating and/or sustaining on-going dialogue. There is no formula for teachers to follow, only that they view and value parents as having funds of knowledge and as teachers of their children, and that the teacher takes an open, inquiry approach as a learner. This mindset of respect and reciprocity, along with a sustained commitment to dialogue, enabled me to develop partnership with most (not all) of my students' families that went far beyond semi-annual parent-teacher conferences. Even so, I am not offering dialogue journals as a single pathway to partnerships. My analysis acknowledges that, for a variety of factors, that would require a different kind of study to better understand (for example, a study where parents who did not take up the opportunity for dialogue in the journals were interviewed about their perspectives), the dialogue journal is not the venue for developing

relationships with every family. What I hope is evident in these findings, however, are the potential benefits and authentic relationships for both parents/caregivers and teachers that can directly result from family-school communication.

Henderson and Mapp (2002) noted that when schools “build partnerships with families that respond to their concerns and honor their contributions, they are successful in sustaining connections that are aimed at improving student achievement” (p. 8). Henderson and Mapp (2002) analyzed 51 parental involvement studies representing a range of ages (early childhood through high school); various areas of the country; diverse populations; community, parent, and family involvement; quantitative and qualitative methods; and different sources of data. “Every one [of the studies] sheds some light on the relationship between parent involvement and, in some cases community involvement and improved student achievement” (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 21). Across all of the studies, they found a “positive and convincing relationship between family involvement and benefits for students, including improved academic achievement” (p. 24). I did not measure student learning, so I am unable to draw a direct correlation between the impact of parents using our journals and the effect this may have had on student academic achievement; however, I am able to identify my own learning as an important focus of this research. Additionally, I have provided evidence of the dialogue related to academics and learning that took place in the journals and how these conversations resulted in direct action with the students at home or school.

In this paper, I have explained my experience using dialogue journals. I have shared the actual words families and I exchanged, the success of developing relationships with some families, and the reality that this was not possible with all. I reminded myself throughout the process, particularly when trust and relationships failed to develop, that I was half of the

relationship and that the failure of a relationship to develop or thrive was as much my responsibility as the parent's. I reluctantly, but respectfully, accepted that not all parents/caregivers wanted or felt the need to be in partnership with me. Even with this acknowledgement, I felt it was my responsibility, my duty as a teacher, to always try to be in partnership with the families.

I sought to enter into my students' home life and communities, not as someone trying to convey educational information, but with a goal of developing trust-based relationships with the parents and families so they might feel comfortable sharing with me about their lives and experiences. As Allexaht-Snyder and Schwartz (2001) noted, "Family-teacher relationships are portrayed as dynamically constructed, with teachers and parents drawing on unique bodies of cultural knowledge about family-school collaboration as they build relationships with each other centered on the individual concerns of the child" (p. 218). As the teacher learns more of each family's funds of knowledge and the parent gains more information from the teacher regarding school-related knowledge, they may develop a better understanding of each other and the child.

One of the enduring tensions between school authorities and families is the persistent "us" and "them" mentality. An important first step in lessening such tensions and building genuine partnerships doesn't lie in more parent-education classes, workshops, etc. that so many districts offer, but in *dialogue*—real discussions between teachers and caretakers (Jones, 2006, p. 107, italics in original).

Understanding of each other within the primary spaces of home and school is enhanced as parents and teachers come together through dialogue in the Third Space. As Gutiérrez (2008) explained, Third Space is a space of transformation and expanded learning. The dialogue journals gave some of the parents/caregivers and myself the opportunity to communicate with

each other on our own terms, in our own space, which led to the development of new knowledge about the children I taught at school and that parents taught at home. In the majority of cases, the parent/caregiver and I engaged in sustained, meaningful communication that resulted in relationships based in trust, and partnerships focused on working together to create an optimal educational experience for their child. We met and wrote in the Third Space of our journals and, in doing so, learned more about each other and the child. All participants—educators, family members, and especially the students—can benefit from partnerships where we learn from and learn with each other and sometimes, as Candita pointed out, you can indeed “say more in words than face to face.”

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CHAPTER 5

TEACHER AS CULTURAL LEARNER: CONVERSATIONS WITH A PAKISTANI, MUSLIM FAMILY THROUGH DIALOGUE JOURNALS³

³ Kay, A. To be submitted to *Journal of Research in Childhood Education*.

“We all carry worlds in our heads, and those worlds are decidedly different. We educators set out to teach, but how can we reach the worlds of others when we don’t even know they exist?”

(Delpit, 1995, p. xiv)

Across ten years of teaching, I communicated with the families of my pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students through dialogue journals because, as Davis and Yang (2005) noted, “When we build bridges to families of various cultures, we increase the chances that their children, not just the children of mainstream cultures, will do well in school” (p.11). For some of the families, the dialogue journal helped create a bridge between the families and me that crossed cultural differences of race, income, religion, and family configuration. In this article I explore what I learned about the cultural world of a Pakistani, Muslim family and their children, Tanvir and Tahir (all names used are pseudonyms) by corresponding with them for two years through our journals.

The term *culture* is complex, contested, and multifaceted. Nieto (1999) defined culture based on commonalities a group of individuals share, such as religion, social class, a common history, or by virtue of living in the same area while also acknowledging how values, relationships, and worldviews create and transform the individual’s cultures within the larger group.

Everyone has a culture because all people participate in the world through social and political relationships informed by history as well as by race, ethnicity, language, social class, gender, sexual orientation, and other circumstances related to identity and experience (Nieto, 1999, p. 48).

Indicators such as race, class, and gender are helpful when collectively identifying groups of people based on shared interests, experiences, or characteristics; however, there are also individual variances within any group that are part of culture. Further, culture is not a static set of attributes, as Gay and others have pointed out.

Culture refers to a dynamic system of social values, cognitive codes, behavioral standards, worldviews, and beliefs used to give order and meaning to our own lives as well as the lives of others. Even without our being consciously aware of it, culture determines how we think, believe, and behave, and these, in turn, affect how we teach and learn (Gay, 2000, p. 8-9, italics in original).

Culture affects every part of who we are and guides the decisions, beliefs, and actions we take. As Nieto (1999) further noted, “Culture is what we do every day. Cultures change as a result of the decisions that we . . . make about our traditions, attitudes, behaviors, and values” (p. 56). As a teacher, I worked to learn the cultures of my students and their families in order to construct bridges between home and school and to make connections with families so we could work together to support their children in their early schooling experiences.

This case study focuses on one Pakistani, Muslim family whose sons I taught in consecutive years. This study will explore what I learned about the family’s culture by corresponding with Bazmi and Fatima, the father and mother, through dialogue journals and how this learning affected my own cultural assumptions and relationship with the family. I first review research and theoretical perspectives relevant to culturally relevant teaching, teachers as researchers, and gender roles in Pakistani, Muslim culture. Next, I present a qualitative case study, with a focus on myself as a cultural learner. In conclusion, I will discuss findings and

provide recommendations related to the use of dialogue journals as a means of developing relationships through communication with families and, thus, a means of developing cultural knowledge and understanding.

Review of the Literature

The following are critical sociocultural factors and characteristics for teaching students and working with families whose culture is different from the teacher's culture. Included are reviews of culturally relevant teaching, teachers as researchers, and positionality of women in Pakistani, Muslim culture as these are the critical components related to this study.

Culturally Relevant Teaching Based on Knowledge of Families

Culturally relevant teaching as situated within sociocultural theory provides a framework for analyzing learning from and with families. A foundational tenet of culturally relevant teaching is that "students come to school with knowledge and that knowledge must be explored and utilized in order for students to become achievers" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 52). The students do not enter the classroom as empty vessels compliantly seeking to be filled by the all-knowing teacher (Freire, 1970). Students bring with them a background of culture, experiences, and language specific to them and "the teachers make the students' culture a point of affirmation and celebration" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 117). The students' sense of self is supported and encouraged by teachers who value and respect them and their families for the knowledge they possess. Often there is a significant disconnect between the worlds of the White, middle-class teacher and his/her students (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Delpit, 1995). One key difference is what counts as knowledge in the formal school setting. As Nieto (2002) noted, "There seems to be a curious refusal on the part of many educators to accept as valid the *kinds* of knowledge and experiences with which some students come to school" (p. 8, italics in original).

In “The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children,” Ladson-Billings (1994) documented her study of eight teachers within the same community whom she identified as providing effective teaching for African American students. These teachers demonstrated an awareness of and respect for their students’ cultural backgrounds which Ladson-Billings labeled “culturally relevant teaching.” The teachers openly acknowledged the color and culture of the students in their classrooms and, rather than trying to force the students to assimilate into the culture of school, used the culture of the students to determine how school was conducted. The teachers “ma[d]e the students’ culture a point of affirmation and celebration” (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p. 117) and maintained an unwavering belief in the ability of *all* of their students to be successful. As culturally responsive teachers, they also viewed the students’ language, actions, experiences, and culture as valuable knowledge to be appreciated, acknowledged, and used to build new learning experiences upon.

Based on her research, Ladson-Billings identified a need for *better* schools for African American students and “contend[ed] that culturally relevant teaching practices would be an integral part of these schools” (p. 137). Teachers in these schools, like the teachers in her study, would value the home culture of the students, actively acknowledge this culture as a resource and source of knowledge, and incorporate aspects of culture into teaching practices.

Ladson-Billings (1994) wrote that “a hallmark of the culturally relevant notion of knowledge is that it is something that each student brings to the classroom” (p. 87) and “teachers who practice culturally relevant methods can be identified by the way they see themselves and others” (p. 25) as well as how they listen to others. By acknowledging the importance of cultural knowledge, we as teachers broaden our lenses in order to see students and their families as intelligent, capable, unique, and co-creators of knowledge in the classroom.

Unfortunately, “rather than focusing on the knowledge these students bring to school and using it as a foundation for learning, the emphasis has been on what these students lack in terms of the forms of language and knowledge sanctioned by the schools” (González, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendón, Gonzales & Amanti, 1995, in González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 90).

According to González et al (2005), this concept, referred to as *funds of knowledge*, “is based on a simple premise: People are competent, they have knowledge, and their life experiences have given them that knowledge” (p. ix-v). The culturally responsive teacher invites families to share their funds of knowledge and actively seeks out acquiring this information. S/he then draws upon the families’ funds of knowledge as a basis for practices, conversations, and relationships that are incorporated with students and developed with families.

By visiting students’ homes and engaging in conversations with family members, Amanti (in González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) realized that a significant number of her students had experiences and background knowledge related to horses. She then collected resources and arranged for guest speakers, including her students’ parents, on the topic. Her unit covered all of the academic areas (language arts, social studies, science, and math) and Amanti noted that she was able to “go on to more abstract and critical learning within a very short time period” (Amanti, 2005, p. 137) not the type of learning typically used with working class, minoritized students such as hers. She also found that the students were more confident and engaged when the topic of learning was of relevance and interest in the students’ personal lives.

Similar to Amanti, Sandoval-Taylor (in González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), found that her second grade students were particularly engaged in their learning when she implemented a teaching module on “construction” as this was a topic that had come up frequently during the

previous year. Many of her students' families had experience in building and construction and, during home visits, she had noticed a significant amount of construction-type work in and around their homes. Although it was challenging for Sandoval-Taylor to conceptualize how all of the curriculum objectives could be incorporated into the module, she was committed to an inquiry-based experience that focused on her students' prior knowledge. After the successful implementation of teaching the construction module, Sandoval-Taylor (2005) observed, "my students were catapulted to higher levels of literacy and numeracy during this module because I had provided them with multiple access to the content" (p. 162). The initial access to the content came from the students' experiences with and knowledge of the topic. "What they brought from home surrounded and supported their learning" (Sandoval-Taylor, in González et al, 2005, p. 162-3).

Even with teachers' intent to respect and value family knowledge, cultural boundaries such as race, religion, and socioeconomic status can sometimes permeate relationships and relegate participants to positions of opposite, other, or different. These boundaries become more defined when societal perceptions of a group are based on the actions of a few of its members. This phenomenon was evident in the reaction of many people in the United States to Muslims post 9/11. Anti-Muslim sentiment ranges from planned Quran burnings, to angry opposition to building a mosque near the site of Ground Zero, to attempts to label President Obama as a Muslim, as if that were pejorative.

As people who are exposed to and influenced by mass and social media, teachers develop social and political beliefs and bring these into the classroom—consciously or not. In her study, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978) noted that "The teacher's social and political ideologies were woven into the very substance and form of her interactions with children and evolved into a reflective

microcosm of her *perceptions* of the wider society” (p. 5, italics in original). The teacher’s interactions are influenced by these perceptions as well as his/her interpretations of what is occurring in the classroom. In discussing the analysis of her classroom and narratives, Hankins (2003) claimed that “the interpretations we make are forever entangled in our social, political, economic, and ideological perspectives” (p. 8). These ideologies coupled with limited encounters with the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the uncomfortable often result in negative emotional reactions including fear, prejudice, stereotyping, and judgment. Teachers are not exempt from this reality, and the negative impact can be more harmful because it affects children. Delpit (1995) described the impact of such prejudice in schools: “It is a deadly fog formed when the cold mist of bias and ignorance meets the warm vital reality of children of color in many of our schools” (p. xiii).

Freire (1992) recognized that “race and class discrimination is an aggressive, ostentatious discrimination, at times. At times, it is covert, instead. But wicked it always is” (p. 163). This “wicked” discrimination directly affects students when schools or any of its representatives fail to value families. It happens when teachers are looking at cultural practices different than what they know, comparing it to what they have established as the “norm” and determining something to be inferior, “less than,” deficit, and in need of repair. Such discrimination can only be dispelled by conscious confrontation, acknowledgment, deliberate action, and culturally relevant teaching.

Some teachers (Hensley, 2005; Hankins, 2003; Paley, 1979/1989) have confronted such discrimination and questioned their own practices and, by doing so, engaged in critical action research. I will now focus this discussion on teachers as researchers conducting and sharing their critical action research.

Critical Teacher/Researcher

In entering into the classroom and into relationships, the critical teacher/researcher brings curiosity and openness coupled with humility and questioning. Freire (1987) stated that “the critical attitude is characterized by one who is always questioning one’s own experience, as well as the reasoning behind this experience” (p. 68). This questioning of experience and reasoning often leads critical teacher researchers to acknowledge their own lack of knowledge about students and families, and to find ways to better understand and respect cultural differences. This can become challenging. “We can see that respecting differences and, obviously, those who are different from us always requires of us a large dose of humility that would alert us to the risks of overvaluing our identity, which could on the one hand, turn into a form of arrogance and, on the other, promote the devaluation of other human beings” (Freire, 1998, p. 107). Critical teachers experience this challenge daily in diverse school settings.

Freire (1998) argued that “the school cannot abstract itself from the socio-cultural and economic conditions of its students, their families, and their communities” and critical action teacher/researchers openly acknowledge and act based on this reality. Exemplars of teachers as researchers conducting research within their own classrooms (Hensley, 2005; Hankins, 2003; Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995) evidence an intentional desire and actions by the teachers to connect with their students and families of their students as a way to be a more effective teacher, followed by an intentional act of sharing this research. Hankins argued that “it is imperative that we write and speak our teacher voices in whatever ways we can, explaining who we are and what we do, what we see and hear, what we know” (p. 178).

In “Teaching Through the Storm: A Journal of Hope,” Hankins (2003) wrote poignantly about the children in her first grade classroom one year, identified by Hankins as *The Year of El Nino*. Her use of narrative as theory, method, and analysis exemplified how teacher and researcher can coexist within the same conceptual space of the classroom. The coexistence of these two identities is based on conscious inquiry and action and, as Hankins (2003) noted, “When we open our inquiry toward ourselves, it often has the effect of opening our understanding of another” (p. 77). Hankins inquiry guided her understanding of students and their families, such as when Hankins was able to connect with Charles’ mother when she expressed concern and mistrust of a school system that had not seemed responsive to the special needs of her son. Hankins had seen this same concern and mistrust in her own mother as she tried to get schools to teach her daughter, Hankins’ younger sister, who also had special needs resulting from a trauma at birth. Learning across differences narrowed the breach for Hankins. “The irony is that the more deeply I get to know people who live differently from how I have lived, the more I am able to connect their lives and mine together (Hankins, 2003, p. 156). Through case studies of seven children, Hankins documented how a deeper understanding of their lives led to teaching decisions that had a major impact on the children, from decisions about retention to helping a child re-story his identity.

The teachers who participated in González, Moll, and Amanti’s Funds of Knowledge project used information around the knowledge and life experiences learned from parents and their students’ communities to influence and guide teaching decisions and practices in the classroom. Marla Hensley, one of the teacher participants, had conducted home visits for much of her 10 years teaching. However, she admitted that her “teacher agenda” had guided these visits prior to participating in the Funds of Knowledge Project. With a heightened awareness of

families' funds of knowledge, she entered into her students' homes with a new perspective and, in doing so, was able to hear and see things differently. Hensley (2005) explained, "the whole atmosphere chang[ed] because you let the parents do the talking" (in González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 143). As she began actively listening to parents, she learned of parents' interests and abilities and facilitated means of incorporating these into experiences for her students. On one of her home visits, she noticed a guitar and, through further discussion, found out that Jacob, her student's father, was a poet and songwriter who played guitar and keyboard. Hensley asked Jacob to create a musical for her students and invited him into the classroom to share his songs. A full choreographed musical resulted—so popular that it was performed five times for others in the school and their parents. The musical, however, was the beginning, not the end of this parent's involvement. Jacob became actively involved in the Parent Teacher Association (PTA)—a group that he was previously "turned off" to by the negative tone of the meetings. He became a parent leader, president of the PTA, and initiated a school-wide, parent supported effort to challenge the school board's policy of students being bused across town to attend school.

Hensley (2005) explained that "the barrier between the professional and the home caregiver is broken" (p. 146) when the teacher places value on the parents' knowledge. The parents feel important and equal. Jacob's perception of himself and his position within the space of school was drastically altered by Hensley's sincere interest in his abilities and invitation to bring these into the school. "If teachers include parents and families in the formula for educating children and seriously listen to and value their funds of knowledge, we will turn the key that unlocks the door to a bright future for children and their parents" (Hensley, in González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005, p. 150).

Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995) included parents in the education of their students as they documented their use of home reading journals as a connection between students in the classroom and parents in *Engaging Families: Connecting Home and School Literacy Communities*. The journals served as a space for on-going dialogue between Barbara Michalove (2nd grade) and Betty Shockley (1st grade) and the parents in their respective classrooms. The journals supported the child's literacy development as well as provided a "link" between home and school. Children chose a classroom library book to take home with them, along with the home reading journals (spiral bound notebooks) two-three days a week. The teachers explained the use of the journals to the parents at the beginning of the school year as a place where parents and students would record their conversations about books and experiences around books. It was obvious in the initial entry of the journal that the teachers valued and respected the parents as partners in their child's education as the teachers requested that the parents share some written information about their child. Parents, and eventually students as they became more confident writers, wrote about the conversations that students and their parents had around books.

Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995) explained, "Through our communication with families, we were able to draw on these funds [of knowledge], to develop long-term relationships, and to learn from (and share information with) family members concerning each child as a literacy learner and a human being" (p. 63). They learned about specific "funds of knowledge" such as knowledge of child care, carpentry, farming, and midwifery. They also learned that the parents cared passionately about their children's school experiences and that there was a strong familial commitment to education, contrary to the negative perceptions so

frequently connected to the parents of students they were teaching because of race or socioeconomic categorizations. Not only did Shockley and Michalove learn about the families and students, but also about themselves.

We learned about each other in new ways by connecting the communities of home and school. We are European American, middle-class women; our children were African American (70%) as well as European American, middle-class as well as struggling economically. We believed that what was most important about understanding our children was getting to know the individual family cultures, traditions, beliefs, and literacy experiences and standards rather than assuming a monolithic culture for all African American children, children living in poverty, and so on (Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995, p. 17).

Teachers have a unique opportunity and vantage point for understanding families and conducting research focusing on their students and their students' families and, as such, are in unique positions to share this research with others. While I did not share the experience of conducting action research while I was still in my classroom, I collected my data as a teacher and employed a critical theoretical framework, thus I identify as a critical teacher/researcher.

In this case study, I also utilized a sociocultural framework as I considered the positionality of women in Pakistani, Muslim culture. In discussing the positionality of women, I do not seek to essentialize Pakistani and/or Muslim culture and want to be careful not to reinforce stereotypes or mis-information. I attempt to give culturally relevant information that can lend understanding to the analysis of the mother involved in this study.

Positionality of Women in Pakistani, Muslim culture

There is no one definition of Muslim women in Pakistan and their roles, rather different understandings and interpretations. In discussing women of Pakistan, a majority Muslim country, and differences in the older generation and young women, Afshar, Aitken, and Franks (2006) noted, “There are very different understandings of the positionality of women, of marital rights and duties of men, of the lifestyles that the women should lead and of their demands for equality” (p. 173). Some differences in choice (whether to wear a face veil or not) are affected by personal opinion, intended purpose, and other personal and social factors that guide the actions of individuals.

There are also contradictions found in the literature regarding specific actions and expectations. Jabeen Yusufali believes it is important for Pakistani-American children to learn about their heritage, so much so that she has written juvenile literature to accomplish this goal. In *Pakistan: An Islamic Treasure*, Yusufali (1990) wrote that in poor families, “girls usually stay home [from school] to help cook, clean, and take care of younger brothers and sisters” (p. 82) while the girls in middle and upper class families typically spend their time studying or playing. However, “when a girl reaches her teenage years, she will help her mother in the kitchen. A Pakistani girl is expected to learn the art of cooking at an early age” (p. 82). Counter to this belief and due to passage of time or a different perspective, Afshar et al (2006) said that for younger women “cooking has become more and more simplified, and ‘authentic’ food is only to be found in the homes of grandmothers” (p. 171). To unquestioningly ascribe to either side of this discussion is to participate in the essentialism of this attribute of Pakistani women and Pakistani gender roles. It is important to note, however, the differences in claims and consider how they may co-exist.

A common, western misperception of Muslim women is one of subservient, silent, submissive individuals who are considered their husband's property. According to some human secularist Muslims, marriage is actually viewed more like a contract between the wife and husband, rather than a sacrament (Afshar et al., 2006) with husbands making a "down payment" of *mehre* to secure sexual services of the wife. "Islamic law recognizes the sexual aspect of the marriage as a service that is bought or rented by the husband, and considers domestic work a form of employment, which is valorized through wages" (p. 180). Other Muslims do not consider *mehre* as a down payment because services are not being bought; rather *mehre* is given by the groom to the bride as an indication of his ability to take of and provide for her (M. Sabrin, personal communication, November 16, 2010). Additionally, "marriage is based on mutual peace, love, and compassion" and the woman's "consent is a prerequisite to the validity of the marriage contract" (*Status of Women in Islam*, n.d.). While still being considered a contract, a much more intimate, emotional component is evident in this view.

In her explanation for young adults, Yusufali (1990) explained "Most women, even those educated in good schools, stay home after marriage because of family tradition. Most Pakistani husbands believe that if the mother is home, the family will receive better care" (p. 84) and she will be protected from ever-present societal dangers in Pakistan, such as harassment, abduction, and violence.

Islam gives mothers precedence over men as evidenced in the following [the (p) stands for "peace be upon him" and was included in the original work being referenced]:

A man asked the Prophet Muhammad (p): "Who is most entitled to be treated with the best companionship by me?" the Prophet (p) replied, "Your mother." The man asked, "Who is next?" The Prophet (p) said, "Your mother." Again, the man asked, "Who is

next?” The Prophet (p) repeated, “Your mother.” The man asked for a fourth time, “Who is next?” The Prophet (p) then replied, “Your father.” (*Status of Women in Islam*, n.d.).

On another occasion, when a man came to the Prophet (p) and expressed the desire to join a military expedition, the Prophet (p) asked him if he had a mother. When he replied that he had, the Prophet (p) advised him, “Stay with her, for Paradise is at her feet.” (*Status of Women in Islam*, n.d.).

These explanations of marriage and the elevated status of mothers indicate that women are valued, highly regarded, and appreciated within the marriage and the family—a much different perspective than the subservient, controlled, permissive, silent entities they are often portrayed to be.

The concept of equal, but with different responsibilities is established within Islam. “Women, the same as men, are required to participate in *all* religious duties—including the learning and teaching of the doctrine. The only major concession made for women is that they are to refrain from active prayers and fasting during menstruation or pregnancy” (Samiiian & Smith, 1995, p. 175). In regards to the sacred book of Islam, Cumming (1989) said, “The Koran treats men and women as equals, but says they have different duties to perform in society” (p. 15). From a western cultural perspective, a woman not being allowed to participate in an activity because she is menstruating or pregnant or a husband giving payment for his wife’s sexual services could be interpreted as sexist, gender-biased, or degrading. As is often the case, when cultures are juxtaposed and one judged based on another’s standards, criteria, or beliefs, individuals can develop missed understandings and misinterpretations.

This can be seen across multiple areas of our society—churches, schools, in the general public—and, at times, seems to occur with little or no conscious thought. It seems to be “just the

way people see people.” However, for the critical thinker and critical teacher/researcher, this is not seeing people because the focus is so narrow and only based on a comparison of one’s own culture and experiences against what is different. Culturally relevant teaching is an active antidote to the possibility of teachers being engaged in this type of judgment of students and their families because teachers realize the students and their families are resources of information, funds of knowledge from which they can learn and teach. The teachers who have consciously and intentionally researched their practices have guided my own research.

Methodology

This inquiry is a two-year qualitative case study, defined by Dyson and Genishi (2005) as enabling the researchers “to see what phenomenon means as it is socially enacted within a particular case” (p. 10) rather than determining a relationship between identified variables. Similar to Hankins (2005), “my study does not look at macro norms but at the one-on-one relationships I establish” with the family represented here. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) noted “cases are constructed, not found, as researchers make decisions about how to angle their vision on places overflowing with potential stories of human experience” (p.2). I constructed the case study of Tahir and Tanvir around my decisions to focus on their culture that was, literally, foreign to me. The stories that their parents, Bazmi and Fatima, shared with me overflowed with the experiences of their family in this country. They supported me as a cultural learner, and as the teacher of their sons.

This case study is an invitation into the lives of a Pakistani, Muslim family, an opportunity to get to know them better, as I did, through our sustained dialogue and interactions. One caveat—the interpretation of their culture is being made by me—a middle-aged, White, Christian woman who has lived only in the southeastern United States.

Setting

During the years of this case study, J. Howell Elementary had around 475 students each year, with roughly the same demographics: 77% African American, 11% Hispanic, 9% White, 2% Asian, and 1% Multi-racial, with 84% of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. The ethnicities of the students in my classrooms were fairly reflective of the school population. The focus students, brothers Tanvir and Tahir, were in my classroom during the 2003-2004 and 2004-2005 school years.

Our school was located on the eastern edge of the county beside a frequently traveled four-lane road. In January 2005, we moved into a new building on the same road, but closer to the apartment complex where Tanvir and Tahir's family lived. The brothers primarily rode the bus to school, but would occasionally walk to school with their mother, Fatima, after we relocated. Fatima also came to school more frequently during the last half of the second year, as the school was now accessible to her being in walking distance because she did not drive.

Participants

Bazmi had been in the United States for nearly ten years. I found this out when I asked in our journal, "What's your favorite memory?" Bazmi responded, "My favorite memory, well July 30, 1995 when I left Pakistan and came here in the USA. I will never forget that day" (6-6-05). His family moved to our area from Florida in 2000 and Tanvir and Tahir began in our elementary school in 2003. I will let Bazmi's words, written in our journal at the beginning of the 03-04 school year introduce his family.

[Tanvir] missed his two year's of school because of my auto accident. From 2002 Jan to 2003 Feb I was in lots of medical treatment and surgerys , my wife Fatima can't speak much English nor she drive and lots other family problems kept Tanvir home. . . Tanvir is

smart, outgoing and overall we can say he is a party boy loves music, always ready to go out and enjoy . . . Tanvir eats everything but pork, he loves pizza . . . Tanvir born in Pakistan in city of Karachi, one of the 7th largest city in the world population is about 20 million. His date of birth is May 25th, 1997. He came America in 1997-Oct. Tanvir is not fluent in English yet, but can understand almost everything just need some speaking power, which he will gain in the class. . . We are so happy for him and our younger son Tahir, he is in Pre-K with Ms. Vaser. May God bless on my kids and you and everyone in J. Howell Elementary. You guys doing a wonderful job, giving the best education to our generation. Thank you.

Tanvir and Tahir's father, Bazmi, was born in Pakistan and had lived there prior to his arrival in America in 1995. He was the primary correspondent in our journal across both years although his trips to Ohio during the second year changed the journal dynamics. His traveling was related to a potential job opportunity that, in the end, did not work out so his family remained in our area. During the first year, Bazmi worked as a clerk at a nearby convenient store and often wrote about working double shifts. He was very interested and active in his sons' educational experiences and often coordinated his work schedule around school events or when his sons would be at home. The impression I got from interacting with the family over two years, in person as well as in the journals, was that Bazmi made most decisions affecting the family. He regularly came to the school for special events, to check in on his sons, and as an active participant of the newly formed Parent Council.

Tanvir and Tahir's mother, Fatima, was most often soft-spoken and demure around me. She was actively involved in the school and frequently attended programs or special events, and often came at lunch time, especially with her younger son, Tahir. She would sit beside him in

the cafeteria, breaking his food into bite size pieces, and then feeding them to him. I knew from our conversations that he was a selective eater, which may have explained why she was so attentive to Tahir's needs at lunch time. On the student information sheet, Fatima's employer was listed as "housewife" which I better understood when I learned of the importance placed on mothers and how they are held in such high regard. When she came to the school with Bazmi she walked and remained physically behind him; when she came to school alone, she remained close to the son she was visiting, suggesting perhaps that she felt most comfortable being near to her husband and sons. Fatima responded in our journal when Bazmi was out of town in August and September 2004. She frequently questioned her ability to use English in writing and in verbal conversation, which did not seem as much an insecurity as an honest acknowledgement of being unfamiliar with the language. Even with the challenges of written communication in a foreign language, she maintained and initiated dialogue in our journal.

Data Sources and Interpretation

At the beginning of each school year, I invited all families to communicate with me through dialogue journals as a way to learn about the children and families with whom I sought to form a relationship. I took the idea for these journals from Shockley, Michalove, and Allen (1995) and used an invitation similar to Michalove's. "Dear Parents, It's always exciting to start a new school year with a new group of students. I look forward to working with your child. Please take a few moments to tell me about your child" (p. 19). The desire to get to know the students in my classroom better by engaging with their families became the impetus for the continued use of the journals.

I invited parents and family members to participate in sustained dialogic interactions and tried to welcome their responses, guidance, and suggestions while I also addressed specific needs. Throughout the year, some of the parents and I maintained regular dialogue through our journals. The topics of conversation were not governed by any pre-established conditions or guidelines, only driven by the desire to be in steady communication with each other discussing whatever topics arose. My actions were strongly guided by González, Moll, and Amanti's (2005) concept of *funds of knowledge* as I acknowledged that each student and his/her family brought a unique home culture into our classroom and possessed knowledge, insight, and values related to their culture. However, unlike González et al's recommendation of critical reflection on what was learned from families, this component was absent from my praxis. It was only after I had left the classroom that I engaged in systematic critical reflection. It is my hope that the information shared can inform other's teaching and encourage educators to participate in and actively reflect on learning about students and their families' cultures.

The narrative analysis of the full data set (Kay, 2010) led to the analysis that guided this qualitative case-study inquiry (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). Critical educators often note that they learn from families (Cowhey, 2006) and, in my relationship with Bazmi and Fatima, they took a very active role in teaching me about their culture. I consistently found myself in a place of not-knowing, hearing new information, and requesting additional information from the family because they were Pakistani and Muslim. Our journal provided a safe space for me as a cultural learner, and for them as cultural teachers.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Data analysis and interpretation were based on themes I identified across multiple readings of the dialogue journals for the two years I taught first Tanvir and then his brother Tahir in kindergarten. I used an inductive approach to identify categories. Dyson and Genishi (2005) noted:

The analysis of qualitative data is inductive, grounded in particular pieces of data that are sorted and interrelated in order to understand the dimensions and dynamics of some phenomenon as it is enacted by intentional social actors in some time and place. But the effort to understand others' understanding is mediated by the researcher's own professional, personal, and collective knowledge and experiences (p. 82).

However, I had little professional, personal, or collective knowledge or experiences about the country of Pakistan or the Muslim religion. Like many Americans, I had primarily been "informed" (and more likely misinformed) by the media. This lack of knowledge became an impetus for inviting the parent to share cultural information with me.

I used open-ended coding to help organize the data. As I read and reread the journals, consistently looking back to look forward, I realized the multiple layers of data related to the umbrella of Pakistani and Muslim culture for this family. Categories included food, holidays, religion, the family's life outside of school, Pakistani students in American schools, and gender roles. I focused on the instances that evidenced my own learning about some aspect of the family's culture related to their country's history, their religion, Pakistani food and family dynamics.

Everything felt a lot "neater" when I was simply writing in the journal and engaging in meaningful dialogue based on my own admitted cultural ignorance and sincere curiosity. As I

organized my data, analyzed my own learning, and crafted this case study, I realized that representing is significantly more challenging than “just living” because in just living, I was simply engaged in a conversation with little or no attention given to an analysis of our dialogue.

After I had completed my initial writing of the case study, I shared my work with a cultural informant—a fellow graduate student who was Muslim. I learned of different viewpoints and interpretations, particularly those related to women’s positions in Islam. He cautioned me not to “feed the stereotypes,” which I had unintentionally done in my initial writing, and shared information that allowed me to consider aspects of Islam not present in my initial interpretation. After our conversations, in which he challenged my perception and relationship with Fatima, I went back into the case study and introduced her in a more accurate, inclusive manner.

Findings

The findings address the research questions guiding this study: What did I learn about family culture through the dialogue journal? How did this learning affect my own cultural assumptions and relationship with the family? Relevant excerpts from our journals will be included as I discuss what I learned about the family’s culture related to Pakistani history, religion, Pakistani food, and family dynamics, as well how our relationship developed across cultural differences.

Pakistani history and Islam

During the first month of school, Bazmi wrote in our journal about a party in our state’s capital his family was planning to attend on the upcoming Sunday. The reason for the party was to celebrate Pakistan’s 56th Independence Day. I was curious about this celebration, felt

comfortable inquiring further, and immediately wrote back. “OK—I’m ready for a history lesson. I feel somewhat ignorant asking, but what are the details around Pakistan’s Independence Day?” Bazmi wrote back on the following day.

About Pakistan’s Independence well it happen on August 14th, 1947 from British and very next day India got their freedom from Britain. Dr. Iqbal saw the dream of separate state for Muslims around sub-continent. (India-Pakistan-Bangladesh now known as sub-continent). In 1940, East India Company granted the permission for Muslims and Hindus to have their own state. Mr. Jinnah completed Dr. Iqbal’s dream (8-25-03).

As I read Bazmi’s words, I realized how connected Pakistani history was to religion, another aspect of his culture that I knew very little about. Just as I was able to ask questions and learn from Bazmi about this part of Pakistan’s history, our journal also provided a space for my learning about Islam.

Bazmi initiated all of the sharing about his family’s religious practices and celebrations of specific holidays with no solicitation from me. At the end of the first month of school, he wrote about Tanvir reading their holy book and reciting nightly prayers. During the month of November, in Tanvir and Tahir’s journals, he shared information about their fasting month and explained EID.

During the first year, I was unaware of their holy month until Bazmi wrote, “Tuesday in our end of holy month and Muslims all over the world will celebrate the “EID” Just like Christmas” (11-22-03). My cultural ignorance must have been obvious when I wrote back “What does “EID” stand for? I don’t think I’m familiar with this” (11-23-03). Bazmi responded, “After the holy month ends, the very next day we call EID means happiness, fun, party all those good things. Back home we buy new clothes, sweets, candy, go to cemetery to say happy EID to

loved ones. So EID is just like Xmass, lots of fun” (11-24-03). I remember being humbled by and thankful for Bazmi’s willingness to share and to respond to my lack of knowledge in such a kind, gentle way.

During the second year, Bazmi again initiated conversation about their holy month and shared more information which led to more questions from me which extended our dialogue and my cultural learning.

Bazmi (11-3-04): This month is our fasting month, for next 15 days, we are going to MOSQUE (church) for prayer and dinner parties.

Amy (11-4-04): Is fasting for the month of November or do the months follow a different calendar? What types of festivities are at the mosque? I know you said prayer and dinner parties—are there other things?

Bazmi (11-6-04): Fasting month depends on lunar calendar. This year it starts 15th of October and will last until November 13th or 14th—all depends on the moon. Islamic calendar gets 355 days, 29 days or 30 days. In Ramadan [“name of the month” written underneath in original document] we pray some extra and listen to Holy Book “Quran,” recite by the Imam (like Father in the church) on the eve of 27th fasting, we finished listening to the whole Quran, which contains more than 800 pages.

Amy (11-8-04): Thank you so much for sharing the information with me and helping me learn more about Islam.

In addition to Ramadan and EID, Bazmi also taught me about the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. I received a separate note giving notification of Tanvir’s absence on the following day

due to attendance at an Islamic celebration. I wrote in our journal inquiring which religious celebration this was, as there had been no discussion in January of the previous year of a religious observance.

Bazmi (1-20-05): Every year about 2.5 million Muslim go for pilgrimage to Macca, Saudi Arabia. It's called "THE HAJJ" and very next day all Muslims celebrate "EID" and sacrifice animals in the name of GOD. Animals means cows, goats, lambs, sheep, etc. And then they distribute meat to needy people and to friends. Since we are in America it's very hard to do that so we send some money back home and they will do that on behalf of us.

Amy (1-21-05): I remember you talking about EID last year. Since you are not able to participate in the traditional manner, what do you do in [our state's capital]?

Bazmi (1-24-05): We pray in the morning. After that breakfast, gifts to children. In the evening we had community dinner here. Sunday all the kids went to Chuck E. Cheese's for fun and again a dinner party [in a nearby town].

Bazmi not only provided information, but did so in a very 'teacherly' manner—offering additional explanations of what could be unfamiliar terms, writing key words in all capitals, and making connections between his religious celebrations and religious leaders to ones I would be familiar with.

The details of how Bazmi and his family participated in various religious celebrations were unique to their family and their being situated in this area of America. Reading about these details helped me develop a picture of their family outside of school in being told specific locations, such as Chuck E. Cheese, where the gatherings were taking place. Other information was more general and could most likely be found in a textbook or through a google search of

“Pakistan” or “Islam.” What made this learning unique for me though, is that Bazmi shared information, often unsolicited, with me and situated it within meaningful contexts and explanations to better ensure my understanding. He frequently related something from Islam to a comparison within the Christian faith, such as when he wrote “EID like XMASS” and “the Imam (like Father in the church).” Relational explanations such as these attributed to my growing understanding, not only of Islam, but of Bazmi as my teacher. I felt connected to Bazmi as a parent of one of my students, as a person with whom I regularly engaged in dialogue, and as a cultural teacher for me. Because of this connection, what he taught had more personal meaning than if it were just facts acquired by searching out information.

Pakistani food

Bazmi used the same type of explanation when he wrote about Pakistani foods and celebrations that involved eating. Our dialogue and my learning were initiated when Bazmi wrote about having a Pakistani one dish party. Out of curiosity, I asked him to explain. “Well, every family have to bring one dish to eat. We made sweet dish and shish kabobs (same like burgers but rolls style) very tasty. Why don’t we cook for u guy’s one day??? Let us know. We love to make Pakistani food for you” (2-9-03). With his explanation, I realized that the one dish party was similar to what I knew as a covered dish dinner. Bazmi and Fatima did provide us food on the following Friday but the names of the dishes prepared have been lost to time. The only mention of it in our journal was my expression of gratitude, an acknowledgement of how good it tasted, and a reference to my husband saying “I’ll eat at their restaurant” which received a culturally insightful response and dialogue about more Pakistani food.

Bazmi (2-16-04): Thanks for your compliments about the Pakistani food. Summer time you and Jon will have lots a chance to eat our food, and in fact I was in the restaurant business in Florida, but not any more.

Amy (2-18-04): So, what made you choose to get out of the restaurant business?

Bazmi (2-18-04): In 2000, we had an auto accident that changed my life. I had to rest a lot and in restaurant business, u have to be there all the time. I wasn't there, so I lost the job. Cooking is my best hobby and in summer time we cook a lot. Right now, Fatima is making a very old and famous dish called KOFTA, made with ground beef, just like meatballs, but with sauce and we eat it with rice, yummmmy. Tell us what u like—beef, poultry, or seafood. Me and Fatima make it for you guys.

Bazmi shared his interest in cooking and even identified it as his “best hobby.” This definitely dispelled the portrayal of Pakistani women being solely responsible for food preparation and meals. After Fatima brought us another Pakistani dish in June, I asked Bazmi to please remind me of the name again. His response read more like a recipe and gave more evidence to his culinary intellect.

Bazmi (6-1-04): Sounds like she made ALOO PAKORA means potatoes with lentils flour. It's very easy. Just mix flour, water, salt, little bit of red pepper, and then cut potatoes in slices; dip in flour and fry it in hot oil. If you need that lentils flour, I can bring it tomorrow. It's very economical side dish and yes very yummy too.

Throughout the year, Bazmi told of his family going to a larger city about an hour away to shop at the Pakistani grocery. These trips typically occurred on the weekends, but occasionally took place in the middle of the week. I remember thinking how inconvenient this must be. I was able to get everything I needed at a store within five minutes of my house; but

Bazmi never sounded inconvenienced by the need to travel so far. It was simply where he needed to go to get the food and ingredients he and his family wanted.

Although done with good intentions, some practices within schools essentialize culture based on food or celebrations such as culminating a study of Japan by eating rice with chopsticks, celebrating Cinco de Mayo because it is the 5th of May, or having a multicultural dinner where all of the food represents various countries. Nieto (1999) noted “culture cannot be reduced to holidays, foods, or dances, although these are, of course, elements of culture” (p. 48) and I want to be careful not to reduce my learning about Pakistani culture to a narrowed focus on food. If I initiated sharing the same information with a group of students or implied that this food was what all Pakistani families ate, it would be a reduction of culture. Bazmi’s explanation and sharing of Pakistani food taught me about this element of their culture as an extension and part of his family’s culture, rather than as a sole identifier of the culture.

Learning about Pakistani history, Islam, and traditional Pakistani dishes reflected more broad cultural knowledge and my understanding was definitely deepened through verbal and written communication with Bazmi. I also developed knowledge about particular family dynamics and gender roles within their family, some of which may be attributable to their Pakistani culture, others which may be unique to their family.

Family dynamics: Female positionality and identity

From the very first entry, Bazmi’s page and half response, (excerpts of which were included above in the description of participants), it was evident that he was not one to use words conservatively and appeared to feel very comfortable using our journal for sustained, two-way communication. During the first year, only he corresponded with me through our journal. Still, the entries taught me a great deal about gender roles in Bazmi and Fatima’s family.

Throughout the first year, Bazmi acknowledged Fatima through secondary references and identified her by roles, “Tanvir’s mom” or “my wife,” rather than by her name. From August to the end of November, Bazmi used “my wife” when speaking of Fatima. At the beginning of December, Bazmi’s identification of Fatima seemed to shift to her role as mother. Fatima had gall bladder surgery and was incapacitated for a couple of weeks. Bazmi explained, “Nowadays I am the mother and Father and I am having fun. Mom is doing much better” (12-2-03). It appears that in taking on the responsibility of “mother” he was able to view her in a different role, not solely as “my wife,” but also as “mom.” This continued as Bazmi explained, “Both my kids were asking me where is mommy, bring mom home. Thanks god that mom is home now” (12-8-03).

Later in December, I was surprised when Bazmi wrote “Have a merry XMASS and Happy new year from all of us” and added all four family member’s names. Then, quite unexpectedly, Bazmi began referring to his wife by her name in April and continued to use “Fatima” throughout the rest of the year and across the next one when talking about her. He shared information about her health and wrote, “Fatima, well she is kind of confused now days about her health. But I guess she’ll be fine.” One possible explanation in his transition to using her name could be his perception of her. Unlike the gall bladder surgery a few months earlier, this illness did not require hospitalization or him taking on the role of both parents. Being ill, not feeling well, or being confused about her health was not directly connected to her role of wife or mother so he saw and identified her as an individual.

Later in May, he wrote about the family’s weekend activities which included dinner at Olive Garden. “It was the best experience in years for me and Fatima” (5-12-04) and included her in giving an apology for Tanvir’s challenging behavior in school. “Me and Fatima are very

sorry for his action and will try to take care of this matter” (5-19-04). These two entries seemed to present Bazmi and Fatima as partners with little indication of a hierarchy based on her role in the family.

As I explained previously, early in the 2nd year, Bazmi began traveling out of town to Ohio on a regular basis. During this time, Fatima used the journal to communicate with me. In her husband’s absence, I was able to see and hear her voice in our journal.

Initially, I saw a similarity to questions her husband had written or comments he had made. The phrases had a familiarity about them, feeling more like a channeling of Bazmi through her hand. “How is Tahir in your class” (8-17-04) and “I talk to Tahir about hitting” (8-18-04). This could have been due to her unfamiliarity with English and with using the journals and/or also because of the priorities, interests, and goals Bazmi and Fatima shared for their children. However, as conversation developed and the written dialogue between Fatima and me continued, I began to see and hear Fatima’s voice as her own, not just a replication of her husband’s. She wrote and shared her opinions and her experiences. “I told Tanvir teacher he is when Ms. Kay class he have not too many complene [complaints]. He is good in Ms. Kay class” (8-18-04). She also shared her feelings about her son, “I am very proud for Tahir’s great job” (9-14-04). I began to feel that she was communicating with me as Fatima, the woman & mother, rather than only as Fatima, the wife of Bazmi.

Though Bazmi’s trips to Ohio physically removed him from the classroom and his home for days at a time, his presence and voice were never too far away. On 9-13-04, Fatima wrote, “At this moment, I am talking to Bazmi and he just say hello to you and Ms. Gailor” (our

paraprofessional) to which I responded, “Please pass on our HELLO back to Bazmi when you speak with him again.” The very next day, she wrote, “I told Bazmi about Hello and he say thank you very much” (9-14-04).

In Bazmi’s absence, and through communication with Fatima, I glimpsed their family dynamics and structure. Fatima and I were actively engaged in a dialogue focused on how Tanvir and Tahir’s behavior seemed to change so drastically when Bazmi was out of town. I asked Fatima, “What is most different with Tanvir and Tahir when Bazmi is out of town?” (9-29-04); she wrote back, “Oh, there is huge different between Tanvir and Tahir makes noise, screams, and painting all over the walls. Tanvir [the oldest son] is help to me and takes care of Tahir and me, seems like Tanvir is a man in the house, but in the end he act like Tahir” (9-29-04). While her expectation was for the oldest son to be the “man in the house” in his father’s absence, Fatima honestly shared that his behavior was more like his younger brother’s. The change in the boys’ behavior and demeanor was obvious when Bazmi returned from one of his trips. The boys seemed a bit calmer, more cooperative, and more focused. I was consistently amazed by the noticeable changes in their behavior that seemed to be directly correlated with whether or not Bazmi was in the home.

The journal was particularly helpful for me during this time because I was informed of when Bazmi was traveling and had a better understanding of changes in Tahir’s behavior in the classroom. I can also speculate that our journal was helpful for Fatima as well because she had a regular correspondent to share information with and talk to and the means to maintain communication regarding what was occurring at school. This conjecture is purely speculative and could only be confirmed or dispelled with additional correspondence with Fatima, which is currently not possible because I do not know the family’s whereabouts.

Discussion: Teacher as Cultural Learner

From Bazmi and Fatima, I learned about Pakistani food, Islamic practices, Pakistani history, and got a glimpse into family dynamics and gender roles within their family. Knowing details of a family's life and learning more about their home culture can lead to connection and a sense of responsibility to its members. Because I felt connected to former students and some of their families, I would frequently "check in" with them in the following year, had discussions with the teachers whose classrooms they moved into, and maintained some of the parent relationships.

During the second year, when Tahir was in my classroom, I maintained a careful watch of Tanvir and got to see him almost every morning when he walked Tahir into our room before going to his own. In August, I wrote "What happened with Tanvir today?" after an observation in the school hallway. Fatima wrote back "Tanvir talking in the line today and he is not study today. I think his dad is not here and he miss his dad but Tanvir teacher told me sometime he is good and sometime not. I told Tanvir teacher when he is in Ms. Kay class he not have too many complene [complaints]. He is good in Ms. Kay class" (8-18-04). I wrote back, "I'll see what I can do talking with Tanvir on this end. I'm pretty sure it's just because Dad's out of town." Even though Tanvir had moved on to first grade, I still positioned myself as an active participant in his school experience. This was not necessarily unique in comparison to how I interacted with and felt about other previous students; however, the continued dialogue with the parents was unique. In having the opportunity to teach both sons and use the journals for two years, Tahir's journal also was a space for discussion about Tanvir as his name continued to appear throughout the second year.

Informal conversation and bantering, as well as serious, focused dialogue occurred throughout the pages of the journals during the two years that I had the opportunity to interact with this family. The closeness, trust, and depth of relationship seemed most evident in one of the final writings Bazmi and I would ever share. Bazmi expressed a sadness for himself and Fatima that I would not be returning to the school the following fall. “Any time I come to school, I pictured three people Tanvir, Tahir, and you” (Journal, 6-4-05)—such powerful words, such an intimate sentiment. When I read the words then, as when I read them now, I feel the great respect and trust Bazmi, Fatima, and I developed for each other.

The intimacy of our relationship affected my perception of individuals of the Islamic faith. Now when I heard the word “Muslim”, it was not an abstraction, it was a family. I made no conscious association between them and the terrorists who shared their faith, and who were held responsible for the 9-11 attacks. Out of curiosity, I went back into the journals to see what our conversations on 9-11 focused on. On 9-11-03, just two years after the terrorist attacks, Bazmi and I were engaged in a conversation focused on his parents arriving for a three month stay with his family and how Tanvir was performing in school. September 11, 2004 fell on a weekend, so there was no written correspondence in our journal on this day. I do not believe that the omission of this topic of discussion was an oversight or avoidance tactic on either of our parts. Simply put, it was not a foundational piece of our relationship or of how we identified each other. Through face to face interactions and regular dialogue in our journal, we developed a relationship based on knowing each other as individuals, not as one of a group. I gained awareness, insight, and understanding of some aspects of Pakistani culture and the Islamic religion from Bazmi, Fatima, and their sons. This family and their culture most likely would have continued to remain foreign to me had they not been my willing teachers.

Teachers have a responsibility to be acutely aware of their perceptions of children and their families, and to continuously challenge these perceptions against judgment-laden deficit views. Cultural stereotypes and inaccurate assumptions frequently show themselves as uncertainty, similar to what Freire (1987) referred to as a fear of ghosts and noises in the night—a fear of what cannot be seen or understood. However, Freire explained that his terrors diminished as he became familiar with his world and as he “perceived and understood it better by *reading it*” (p. 32, italics in original). I never used the word “terror” to describe what I felt in my classroom or with my families, but there were definitely fears and uncertainties. These began to diminish as I, literally, read the word and world of my students and their families in our dialogue journals.

Implications for teachers

Talking with others and sincerely listening to them is one way to develop more understanding across cultures and dispel inaccurate stereotypes and misperceptions. Dialogue journals can be used to focus specifically on academic related topics (Allen, 2007; Shockley, Michalove, & Allen, 1995) or with the broader goal of creating two-way sustained communication with families (Kay, Neher & Lush, 2010). Regardless of the intent, creating and sustaining dialogue can be a means of learning about the culture of students and their families.

According to Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003), “What is most important is creating a ‘safe space’ and a ‘trusting relationship’ where the adults, who each care deeply . . . about the child . . . can speak the truth” (p. 46). In the safe space of our journal and within a trusting relationship, this family and I were able to share information that resulted in a deeper understanding of their cultural beliefs and practices.

I have shared conversation from Tanvir and Tahir’s journals to demonstrate how my cultural perceptions were influenced and to show how learning about and within these cultures took place. I would not have been aware of a significant amount of the information, information that gave details of their family and their lives, without the use of our journal. Through the journal, I learned about Pakistani history, religious celebrations, Pakistani foods, and family dynamics. I also learned about individual values, belief systems, and practices of this family—all components of their culture. The dialogue journals established the bridge for this learning to occur and I developed a meaningful relationship with the family. In discussing his own approach to writing, Freire (2005) explained, “this does not mean that after thinking or while I think I should automatically write; it does mean, however, . . . while writing I continue to think and rethink what I had already thought before (p. 2). By participating in sustained, two-way communication, I was continuously thinking and rethinking, learning and unlearning, about Bazmi and his family.

Cultural learning may occur when teachers and families have a shared space for on-going dialogue, such as is made available through a dialogue journal. In this case, I was able to learn about a culture that was truly foreign to me. Ignorance and “fear of ghosts” by American citizens post-911 led to discrimination and hateful acts. “Some tragedies are worsened and distorted by an upsurge in prejudice. Deconstructing a stereotype and developing human relationships can reverse the almost reflexive responses of fear and distrust in the face of tragedy” (Cowhey, 2006, p. 187). Putting a face to those we identify as “other,” “different,” or “foreign”; getting to know individuals and learn more about their cultures from them; being able to see beyond stereotypical descriptors and mass media portrayal of cultural groups—this is what is necessary. It is my hope

that you have gained some insight into Pakistani, Muslim culture, into the individuals who identify themselves as members of this culture, and into the children who may be in your classroom.

“Because culture is complex, ‘learning’ a culture that is not one’s native culture is an exceedingly difficult task, one accomplished only through direct, sustained, and profound involvement with it” (Nieto, 1999, p. 57). I found the journals to be the space for this profound involvement. The opportunity for and engagement in direct, sustained communication resulted in learning about a culture that was not my own and, by engaging in this conversation, I learned more about the students I was teaching. “Culture, especially ethnic and religious culture, is learned through interactions with families and communities” (Nieto, 1999, p. 57) and while it may not be possible to fully understand another’s culture, it is possible to learn from families what they think is important for us to know. It is also critical to remember that “culture, like any other social or biological organism, is multidimensional and continually changing. . . culture is influenced by a wide variety of factors, including time, setting, age, economics, and social circumstances” (Gay, 2000, p. 10). As educators, it is vitally important that we connect with families in such a way that we are more aware of their culture and the changes that occur within it. In doing so, we acknowledge the existence of their culture/their worlds, and then we are able to reach out to the individuals—our students and their families—in these worlds.

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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The three articles presented here are all based on my documented experience of using dialogue journals with the parents of many of my students. In writing these articles, I have intentionally tried to represent various aspects of the journal use including where it worked, where it failed, what reasons for both might be, while maintaining a steady mindfulness of the families whose voices were present. Through analyzing my data and writing these articles, I learned a lot about myself as a researcher, as a person, and as a teacher.

In this final chapter, I discuss what I learned during this research process and implications this study will have on my teaching and advising of graduate students and their research, as well as my own future research plans.

What I Learned

One of the most helpful things I learned in this process resulted from my committee's admonition of being too "preachy" about the benefits of the journals and my attitude and perception toward teachers. At that particular committee meeting, I spoke of the usefulness of the journals and the incredible relationships that had been developed with parents. My words and my writing had represented the journals as a "fix all" approach to relationship-building with parents and an almost guarantee of connection and JoBeth Allen, Betty Shockley Bisplinghoff, and Martha Alleksaht-Snider were direct in cautioning me on the inaccuracies of this perception. As I returned to the full data set, I carefully read through all of the journals with an open mind, the conscious thought of "these might not be **the** answer," and with JoBeth, Betty, and Martha's

voices reverberating in my head. It was then that I was able to broaden my lens and see deeper into the journals. I noted details of when relationships did develop and also saw where the journals were not so effective or, in two instances, where they actually seemed to be harmful. Reading these journals was particularly challenging and it was painful to acknowledge the potential damage I did, which is part of why I needed to include the explanation about Deb and Tiyla's relocation to another school in Chapter 4.

I accepted this reality and, rather than feel guilty or regretful, I became curious. I began looking at these journals with a "so what happened here?" inquiry and gave consideration to what, if anything, could have been done differently. In some situations, I saw where a phone call or a home visit might have been more effective in connecting with parents and developing our relationships. In others, I could not identify what action I could have taken and realize that there may have been other circumstances, situations, beliefs, or opinions of the parents that were the explanatory factors. In considering what could have been different or what prevented our relationship building, I do not place blame or shame on myself or the parents. There is the reality that relationships are unique; personalities are sometimes compatible and sometimes not; people carry relational baggage—meaning that the experiences a person has had before, by becoming part of that person, affects the experiences s/he will have in the future. All of these very real components of relationships were factors for consideration when/if the journals were helpful in connecting with parents.

The other area I needed to revisit and reflect on related to my portrayal of teachers—essentially being that those who cared would do this. Reflection on and clearer writing enabled me to remember, see, and more respectfully discuss teachers and schools for what they are rather than non-caring, complacent entities that disregarded parents. The reality is that there are many

teachers who do value parents and appreciate the home cultures of the families; there are others who would be willing to do so and need only information and guidance. By writing in a divisive manner, I was potentially shutting down those in this latter category who could possibly find what I was sharing beneficial. How something is shared, whether verbally or in writing, has a significant impact on how it can be heard.

In regards to research, I learned not to go into analysis thinking you know what you will find. When I first began re-engaging with the journals, I did so looking specifically for where there was evidence of relationship building. While this would have been a meaningful focus for some of the journals, other portions of my data would have been intentionally overlooked and omitted from this dissertation. I believe this would have resulted in an incomplete, inaccurate representation of this research.

I engaged with the journals from a researcher-as-learner perspective, similar to the teacher-as-learner stance I operated from while in the classroom. Critically and openly reflecting on the conversations, while remembering the individuals by revisiting our written dialogue, was incredibly powerful and, at times, emotional as the families and students were returned to the forefront of my head/my thinking and of my heart/my feeling. While in the classroom, I used the journals as a back-and-forth, turn-taking form of conversation, similar to a verbal exchange, with no significant time or attention given to reviewing or revisiting past conversations. I do not remember ever going backwards in a journal and rereading what was written; I do not remember ever reflecting, just continuing to write forward. I wonder now: What would have happened if I had been more reflective? What else could I have learned about the families? How would this have affected our relationship? Could the relationship with Tiyla's mom have had a different outcome and might she have stayed in our class?

Questions remain and, were I to return to an elementary classroom, I am confident that I would continue to use the dialogue journals with families. However, I would be more aware of the potential they afford.

Implications for My Teaching and Advising Graduate Students

My own teaching has already been and will continue to be affected by this study. Some of the courses I have taught, CHFD 2896 “Positive Guidance in the Classroom Setting” and CHFD 4860/6860 “Child Guidance and Parent Education,” have a component of parent involvement as part of the course objectives. Past syllabi developed by others focused on parent education as something designed for and delivered to parents, which primarily seemed to come from a deficit perspective. I have taught students, the majority being pre-service teachers, from the perspective of parents as resources and partners and stressed the importance of relationships and developing a relational narrative with parents. I have brought the journals, representing all types of relationships, into the classes and shared the stories of success and failure related to using dialogue journals with parents. My own experiences coupled with the analysis across this study constantly challenged perceptions about parents. I challenge pre-service assumptions made about parents or students in the classrooms such as, “She probably doesn’t get much attention at home” or “School may be the only place that’s stable in his life.” When I read or hear statements such as this, I immediately respond with “How do you know that?” encouraging students to go further in gaining information about families than their own opinions, possibly based on stereotypical beliefs. I have designed projects and assignments for students to challenge their negative assumptions about parents and will continue to include this component in my teaching in academia.

I am also reminded not to make predetermined judgments of individuals or groups of people based on stereotypical perceptions. The majority of pre-service teachers are White, female, 20-ish year olds who, it is often assumed, come from middle class or upper middle class families. In my teaching, I need to be mindful of the dangerous implications of “seeing” all of them as the same. My research taught me not to make negative judgments of the families of my students and that the best way to combat these judgments and stereotypes is to get to know people individually. I believe this same action can serve me well as I continue to teach college students. I need to constantly remind myself to realize the individuality of each student, not just teach them as a group; to initiate and maintain private correspondence to develop our teacher-student relationship; to consider what they are bringing to our classroom, including experiences and opinions, as being resources for our learning, not things that need to be shaped or “fixed.” I will best be able to engage with my students on a personal level by writing with them and creating means of engaging in sustained dialogue, just as I did with the parents in our journals.

The experience of using the journals transformed me as a teacher involved in respecting and learning from families. The experience of analyzing the journals has transformed me as a researcher in being able to consider data in multiple ways, value and acknowledge what is and is not seeable, and most accurately and respectfully represent the stories of others. Throughout the analysis process, I was consistently reminded of how connected I felt to most of the families. I sincerely enjoyed reading our journals, as our words seemed to transcend time and carry me back into our relationships. From this experience, I will strongly advise graduate students to carefully select their research topics and be sure that they are studying a topic that interests and intrigues

them, one that touches their hearts, not just their heads. I cannot imagine how challenging it would have been to attempt to engage in research and write this dissertation with data I was not absolutely in love with and fascinated by and I will encourage future students to seek out research that draws them in just as passionately.

Future Research

My future research plans include further analysis of this data set, as I frequently found myself on tangents of possible topics for focus in my dissertation. Currently identified areas for future writing include:

- How did the journals indicate my growth as a teacher?
- A focus on parent voice by sharing what they said in response to specific questions in the questionnaires or the journals such as: What do you think about these journals? What are the pros and cons for you as a parent? How do you define parent involvement? How did communication in the journals help you support your child?
- A focus on the topics of conversation with particular attention given to who initiated discussions related to academics? Who initiated discussions related to behavior? How were these dispersed throughout the full data set? Did establishment of relationship seem to affect what the topic of conversation was? How were these discussions relevant to the school culture or parents' beliefs?
- A more extensive analysis of power, perspective and positioning of self and parents based in Jones' (2006) work
- Analyzing the journals that were written in Spanish and English for how they were used and how language was or was not a factor

- I might do a narrative analysis of the many family stories that were told throughout the journals.

I may identify other ways to focus my analysis as I engage with the journals. I am open to any suggestions or possibilities that may evolve.

I would also like to research and document how teachers learn from/about families of their students and how they can be supported in this learning. Jones (2006) noted that when she works with teachers, future teachers, and graduate students, they “sit with wide eyes, nodding their heads up and down in agreement, getting fired up about researching a community, learning from families, building critical literacy practices out of everyday lives, and being active citizens in the thrust toward a more just society” (p. 162). However, eyes become downcast and individuals “speak in small voices” (p. 162) when they begin discussing how to implement these practices. “The common sentiment becomes impossibility: time, institutional responsibilities, curricular mandates, high-stakes testing, families’ schedules” are given as excuses of why it “*just won’t work*” (p. 162).

The Harvard Family Research Project’s Family-School-Community Partnerships: A Compilation of Professional Standards of Practice for Teachers summarized standards of practices related to family involvement from various professional organizations including the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the Association of Teacher Educators, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. A common undercurrent was evident across these organizations that focused on a respect for families, the benefits of involving families and communities, and the importance of developing relationships.

The National Parent Teacher Association has also recognized the need for pre-service and experienced teachers to be trained in involving parents and families. Their resolution related to teacher preparation for parent/family involvement includes “undergraduate teacher training for effectively involving and including parents/families in education is not widely offered by colleges and universities throughout the country” and “state teacher certification agencies do not require such training for the issuance [or renewal] of a teaching certificate,” the National PTA recommends that state constituents “work with their state’s universities and colleges of education to develop and require specific training to effectively involve and include parents/families in the educational process of their children” and that this training be required for initial teaching certificates and recertification (http://www.pta.org/topic_pta_resolution_on_teacher-preparation_for_parent_family_involvement.asp, retrieved 2/15/10). I would like to study how/if this is being implemented and, more specifically, how teachers can be/are supported in this training.

The Family Involvement Research Digest of the Harvard Family Research Project is an excellent resource for studies on teachers’ professional development focused on working with families. These studies address the needs of pre-service teachers as well as the need for on-going professional development and the benefit of extended professional development. Ginsberg and Hermann-Ginsberg (2005) documented the difference in teacher-parent interactions between a group of teachers who held the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) certification in contrast to a group of teachers who did not have this certification. (One of the core elements of the NBPTS is working collaboratively with parents.) The board certified

teachers expressed more positive attitudes and practices in working with parents and believed parent interactions were valuable, rewarding, and essential. This was far less obvious for the non-board-certified teachers.

An action-research project that could originate from the larger inquiry of how teachers are/can be supported in developing relationships with families is to work with a group of teachers who are engaged in professional development with this focus and document the specific strategies they develop and employ. The strategies would be informed by existing research and determined by the participants. Should the dialogue journals be incorporated as a strategy, I would like to research a component of using the journals absent from my study—what affect does the use of dialogue journals have on students' academic achievement? This study would also include an analysis of the effect of other strategies of being involved with parents and how students' academic achievement was impacted.

Additionally, I would relish the opportunity to research a school that embraces the relational narrative of parent involvement, where funds of knowledge fuel the classroom activities, where students are consistently treated with respect, and where teachers and administrators fully embrace a philosophy of student-centered, student-driven learning.

As documented in my dissertation, a significant amount of research has been conducted and the benefits of parents' involvement have been proven. Yet, there remains work to be done in implementing this theory and these findings into sustainable practice in the school setting. It is my hope that the work I have done and will continue to do will contribute to the growing research, but more importantly a growing practice, of what is occurring in classrooms with students and their families.

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