

## Abstract

Title of dissertation: PERSPECTIVES ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT: HOW ELEMENTARY TEACHERS USE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS TO IMPROVE THEIR PRACTICE

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One of the most important areas of research in education is the role of parents in student achievement. Studies indicate that parents working as volunteers, homework helpers, and participants in school activities influence student success, but we do not know exactly how that happens or how teachers perceive of their relationships with parents. Although researchers state that the parent teacher relationship is important, they have not systematically unpacked how parent involvement is related to the instructional decision making of teachers. This study uses in depth interview data from 21 elementary school teachers who teach grades one through four. The study also includes participant observation in one private school. My findings suggest that teachers, in a variety of kinds of schools, use information about students' home lives and outside interests to make their teaching more effective. They report doing this by being able to motivate students, by being sensitive to a student's mood and by being able to make changes to their curriculum based on student needs. Much of what a teacher, especially in the elementary grades knows about his/her students is gleaned from the students' parents. It is this information that affects teacher practice in the classroom. This leads to teachers not treating all forms of parent involvement equally; they value communication and they

use what they learn from communications with parents to customize their curricula for individual students. The literature to date has not examined communication patterns between parents and teachers fully. When examined closely, it seems that teachers try to manage and negotiate their relationships with parents through setting boundaries and through their communication patterns. It has been reported that teachers do not learn about parent involvement in their teacher education courses. This study affirms that assertion and increases our understanding of what teachers are influenced by: their mentor teachers, their colleagues, the school administration and their own parents. This study will add to the parent involvement research by examining teachers' views on their relationships with parents and will help educators and policy makers better understand how parents contribute to classroom instruction.

PERSPECTIVES ON PARENT INVOLVEMENT:  
HOW ELEMENTARY TEACHERS USE RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS TO  
IMPROVE THEIR PRACTICE

by  
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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2008

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## Acknowledgements

This dissertation represents the stories of many teachers and parents who welcomed me into their homes and classrooms. They trusted me with their personal experiences and spent countless hours talking with me honestly. I am grateful for their time and their openness. Through the time I spent with these teachers and parents, it was clear to me that they care deeply about the children in their lives. I hope that I reflected their experiences accurately and have been able to show the love that they have put into raising and teaching their children and students.

My assistantships over the years at the University of Maryland, first in the Graduate Student Government office, and then in the College of Education Dean's office, provided me with the needed funding to complete my coursework and research. For that I am grateful.

I came to the University of Maryland because of the quality of the professors and the program. Neither disappointed. I have been lucky to learn from outstanding professionals in the field of education and I have had the opportunity to broaden my knowledge of the different aspects of education. This dissertation and my work as a researcher would not be the same without the guidance I had from so many wonderful scholars. My esteemed committee members, Jennifer Rice and Joyce Epstein have provided sound guidance and have helped me define my research to make it most relevant. In particular, Janet Coffey and Sylvia Rosenfield carefully read chapters of this dissertation and have always shown me the way to find valuable insights. I also thank Jackie Cossentino and Meredith Honig who began this journey with me and helped me discover what it was I wanted to study.

Within this cohort of leading academics is Annette Lareau, who has served as my advisor and mentor. Annette gave sound advice, analytical without ever sounding critical. The way she was able to provide feedback is the mark of an excellent teacher. While balancing many other priorities, Annette has prioritized my work and made it stronger. I thank her for her time and dedication to this project, as well as the many cups of tea and coffee, both in her office and at her home.

I want to thank my family and friends who have always supported me in all my endeavors, no matter how long or crazy they have seemed. Many friends have provided emotional support in the form of conversations and advice about writing a dissertation in general, as well as discussions about my research in particular. As always, friends have supported and motivated me through study dates and long days working in coffee shops. I am also grateful to Shelley Klein and Elizabeth Mayers who took time out of their busy schedules of work and a newborn baby to read complete drafts of this document. They used a keen eye to make catch mistakes and make the work better than it was before their reading.

Finally, I thank my husband, Matt Mayers. Matt has supported me financially and emotionally these past four years. I am sure he had no idea what he was getting into when he signed on to marry a PhD student. Despite that, he has been understanding when I needed to work at all hours of all days and nights. Matt has helped out at home by taking on additional chores and has been a rock of support especially when times were stressful. Matt has read my work with a critical but sympathetic eye and has taught me about simplifying both my sentences and my life.

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*Chapter One*  
*Statement of the Problem*

Over the past twenty years, parent involvement has become a topic of concern for policy makers, educators and researchers (Booth and Dunn 1996; Chavkin 1993; Coleman 1997; Epstein 1982, 1995, 2001; Henderson 2002; Lopez 2001; Maynard 1997; Sanders 1998; Smrekar 2001; Weiss 1998). These studies contend that parent involvement impacts student achievement. What is not clear however, is how parent involvement impacts teacher practice. These studies investigate parents as volunteers, homework helpers, and participants in school activities, but this body of literature does not examine what kinds of involvement teachers perceive as useful. Different forms of involvement may produce different results for teachers, students, and/or parents. Some forms of involvement may impact classroom teaching, while others might not. There has not been sufficient development of the implications of different types of parent involvement for teachers. Unless we know teachers' perceptions of the utility of parent involvement, our picture is incomplete. Some of this literature is quantitative and much is in the form of "how to" guides which are not sufficiently conceptual or empirical. There has not yet been a study of how teachers report understanding and using their relationships with parents to improve their teaching.

The Existing Literature

It is important to study parent teacher relationships because schools cannot be studied in isolation. Parents influence schools and schools influence parents. As a result, they should be studied together. Urie Bronfenbrenner, the developmental psychologist and his theory of "spheres of development" have become widely used in

studies of the parent-teacher relationship. Bronfenbrenner claims that human development occurs in many settings. While the family is the “principal context in which human development takes place, it is but one of several settings in which developmental processes can and do occur” (Bronfenbrenner 1986, p.723). In this model, processes operating in different settings affect each other, giving an ecological nature to his theory. Each embedded part of the model illustrates how different contexts and environments interact to promote development.

There are three components to Bronfenbrenner’s theory: home life, other developmental contexts such as the school, and the links between them. Bronfenbrenner argues that in the home, parents provide the basic needs that children require in order to develop. At its most basic, the family provides food, clothing and sustenance that form the basis for children being able to develop (Bronfenbrenner 1979). The primary developmental context, the family, is one in which the child can “observe and engage in ongoing patterns of progressively more complex activity jointly with or under the guidance of persons who possess knowledge and skill not yet acquired by the child and with whom the child had developed a positive emotional relationship” (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.60).

A secondary developmental context is one in which “the child is given opportunity, resources, and encouragement to engage in the activities he or she has learned in primary developmental contexts, but now without the active involvement or direct guidance of another person possessing knowledge and skill beyond the levels acquired by the child” (Bronfenbrenner 1979, p.60). The second developmental context is often the school.

In addition to Bronfenbrenner, historian of education Lawrence Cremin was writing as early as 1976, about the interconnectedness of school and home. Cremin argued that our ideas of education needed to be “broadened to include the variety of institutions that provide educational services or contribute to the effectiveness of education” (Gordon 2005, p.19). His list of educational institutions included families, and he saw schools as one of the many institutions of learning and thought it was a “mistake for professional educators to neglect these extra-school experiences and resources” (Gordon 2005, p.19).

Much of the parent involvement literature uses Bronfenbrenner as a conceptual frame from which to study parents and teachers. The existing studies mostly focus on the experience of parents though. Parents *and* teachers are an essential aspect of education. We need to move beyond only studying parents and students and look more closely at teachers’ perceptions of parent-school relationships. When we begin to do that, we begin to think about how we conceptualize and understand the nature of the teacher-parent relationship. Bronfenbrenner (1986, 1992) Comer (1984, 1987, 1993) and Epstein (2001) suggest that the parent-teacher relationship is one of partnership and collaboration. Others, including Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978, 1981) and Parsons (1959), suggest conflict. Others, Grady (2008), Johnson and Birkland (2003), Talbert and McLaughlin (1994), Shulman (2005), and Addi-Racah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) suggest that teachers act as professionals while parents act as clients. It is important to recognize what each of these views offers in building our understanding of parent-teacher relationships. From there we can move on to what we still need to learn.

### *Parent-Teacher Relationship as Partnership*

Much of what we know about the different kinds of parent involvement is based on research by Joyce Epstein who contends that “schools, families, and communities must work collaboratively to ensure the academic success and socio-emotional well-being of all students” (Epstein 1992). Epstein (1994) has conducted research and worked with elementary, middle, and high schools, districts, and state departments of education for many years to help educators build more effective programs of school, family, and community partnerships. In a 1994 article, Epstein uses Bronfenbrenner’s theory of overlapping contexts and creates her own theoretical model where “overlapping spheres of influence” include family, school, community, and peer group with the student as the center of the overlapping spheres. This model is similar to Bronfenbrenner’s in that Epstein sees child development occurring in different, overlapping contexts. She notes also, like Bronfenbrenner, that two of the developmental contexts are family and school. Epstein, however, broadens the theory and adds community and peer group to the developmental contexts. Epstein comes to a related conclusion as Bronfenbrenner’s, that communication between the different contexts could help students. She sees the parent-school partnership as one that helps students “increase their academic skills, self-esteem, positive attitudes towards learning, independence, other achievements, accomplishments and other desired behaviors that are characteristic of successful students” (Epstein 1994, p.42). Epstein contends that the family and the school “share” the children. All the years the children attend school, they attend home (Epstein 1994). The two are interconnected.

Epstein explores six types of parent involvement; parenting at home, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community (Epstein 1986, 1996). Epstein, and others, focus their work on what parents do in schools and at home that can fit into the goals of the school. This work focuses especially on parent involvement through the ways that parents participate in “school sanctioned ways” (Calabrese Barton et al 2004). These ways are typically activities such as the school parent-teacher conference, the PTA, school assemblies and celebrations as well as when teachers invite parents into the classroom. Though Epstein (2001) provides a chart explaining how certain forms of involvement lead to certain results, she does not differentiate between the quality or usefulness of each type of involvement from the perspective of the teacher. Rather, Epstein says that each form of involvement is expected to result in different skills for students and parents. For example, communication should lead to “awareness of [a student’s] own progress and of actions needed to maintain or improve grades, understanding of school policies on behavior, attendance and other areas of school conduct...” and for parents, communication should result in “understanding school programs and policies, monitoring and awareness of child’s progress, responding effectively to students’ problems...” (2001, p.414). Epstein though does not show how the parent involvement actions have results for teachers nor does she give value to any of the results. This results chart implies that all forms of parent involvement are equally valuable to teachers. Some forms of involvement may be more helpful to teachers than others.

Another scholar who has studied the parent teacher relationship as a partnership is James Comer. Comer has pioneered work on developing schools in New Haven. These schools emphasize strong connections to families and the community. Comer's philosophy is also built upon the theoretical insights of Bronfenbrenner. In a 1991 article, Comer stated that "Bronfenbrenner argued strongly that parent participation was critical to good education" (Comer 1991, p.271). Comer found in his work that the relationships between the school and families are crucial to child development. Learning and development take place not only in schools, but at home and in the community as well (Comer 1984), as Comer posits, "we premise our view on the notion that families *and* schools constitute important sources of influence on the psycho-educational development of children and that the best results are achieved only when these two institutions work together" (Comer 1991, p.276, emphasis in original). Comer adds that in addition to the basics, families can provide support, attachments and identification that enable the child to go through the "intellectual, speech and language, social, moral, emotional, psychological, and academic levels of development" (Comer 1984, p.324).

Comer argues that teachers should not see students in isolation from the rest of their world. Doing this "reduces the effectiveness of these educators" (Comer 1993, p.171). He claims that the rest of the student's world is quite important to the student's development, as is school itself. In fact, Comer believes that the student must be understood within contexts in order to be able to effectively teach that student (Comer 1993). "The people involved in the educational process, particularly professional educators, should understand the impact of the psychosocial climate or

environmental factors- in and out of school- on education so that they can actively manage and create optimal learning environments” (Comer 1984, p.323). Families and schools must learn to “talk openly about the multiple contexts of children’s lives...if they are to understand and increase children’s opportunities for success” (Weiss 1998, p.10). Crucial to this is the involvement of parents. There must be recognition that parents bring a “community perspective” that is useful to the school and to teachers (Comer 1993).

The scholars and research described above treats relationships between parents and teachers as “partnerships.” According to the American Heritage Dictionary (2006), a partnership is “a relationship between individuals or groups that is characterized by mutual cooperation and responsibility, as for the achievement of a specified goal.” Often, though, parents and teachers do not share mutual cooperation or responsibility and do not work together equally. This parent involvement literature however implies that parents and teachers work together equally, as true partners. The literature stops short of unpacking how the relationships are, or are not, deep, meaningful partnerships.

#### *Parent-Teacher Relationship as Conflicting*

As early as 1932, Willard Waller was writing about relationships between parents and teachers. Waller noted that parents and teachers “have much in common...they both wish things to occur for the best interests of the child” (Waller 1932). But Waller wrote that actually, “teachers and parents usually live in a condition of mutual distrust and enmity...and are natural enemies” (p.68). Waller describes the role of parent and that of teacher as naturally at odds. The teacher must

work in the social network of the school where there are other teachers, administrators and other children in the classroom. The parent however, works only for the benefits of his or her own child. These roles make for conflict between parents and teachers. This is a case of the universalistic versus individualistic viewpoints that often cause conflict between parents and teachers (Parsons 1959).

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978; 1981; 2003) uses Bronfenbrenner and Waller as a basis for her work exploring the conflicts, resolutions, and conversations between families and schools. “Bronfenbrenner’s notion of the ecological environments surrounding the developing person has provided an important theoretical framework for thinking about the dynamic interactions among the social and cultural spheres that shape and are shaped by the child” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1981, p.98). Bronfenbrenner’s theory of overlapping spheres of development permeate Lawrence-Lightfoot’s work and provide a basis for her assumption that “productive relationships between families and schools will increase the likelihood of the growth and development of young children” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1978, p.209).

In her first work, *Worlds Apart*, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1978) studied the classroom. She did not define the classroom as a closed world, but one that functioned in the midst of school norms and culture, as well as one which functioned within a community. Through her work, Lawrence-Lightfoot found that “from the teachers’ perspectives, the family was the other critical institution, beyond the school that shaped the world of the child and defined the primary process of socialization and acculturation. Whether teachers viewed the child’s parents in collaborative or competitive terms, they viewed them as central to the child’s development and often



critical to the child's successful career in school" (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1978, p.8). In this study, Lawrence-Lightfoot found that if teachers and parents are able to look beyond the barriers that each brings to the classroom, they can have a "productive relationship" through effective communication. The teachers in Lightfoot's study felt that parents had information about their children and their home environment that helped the teacher see the child more holistically and could increase the development of the child (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1978). Mrs. Powell, a teacher in the study, learned as much as possible about her students' environments outside of school because she felt parents were "important informants in this process of learning about the unique nature of a child" (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1978, p.216). Mrs. Powell emphasized the family-school relationship and tried to integrate "these two spheres of socialization" (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1978, p.216). In this work, Lawrence-Lightfoot characterized the parent teacher relationship as one of conflict, yet some of her respondents valued what parents had to offer teachers. Even amidst the potential conflict, there is reason to try to build a productive relationship.

In her 1981 study, Lawrence-Lightfoot examined the relationship between families and schools to explore one of the principal interactions between developmental contexts. Through this study, Lawrence-Lightfoot found that there are many reasons that the school-home relationship is not usually a collaborative partnership. Both schools and parents can create or maintain barriers to that relationship. She asserts that boundaries between school and home (teachers and parents) are not clearly defined. School and home are "overlapping worlds" (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1981, p.98) that create anxiety between parents and teachers.

Both parents and teachers grapple with the question of who should be in charge of the student's life in school. Parents tend to assert authority and teachers seem to only have complete control within the closed door of their classroom. Both teachers and parents come to the table with negative stereotypes of one another which fosters a distrust that usually remains unstated (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1981).

Lawrence-Lightfoot continued by describing the opportunities that are traditionally available for parent-teacher interaction. She described these interactions as “symbolic,” “contrived,” and “public” which leaves parents dissatisfied and do not allow for authentic relationships. Lawrence-Lightfoot proposed that positive individual interactions are necessary in order to break the cycle of negativity and frustration (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1981).

Lawrence-Lightfoot's 2003 work, *The Essential Conversation*, is based on her own experiences both looking back on how her parents dealt with her teachers and on her experiences as a parent with school aged children. This study describes what parents and teachers can learn from each other by looking at “intimate” encounters between teachers and parents (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, p.xxv). In talking with and observing teachers, Lawrence-Lightfoot found that teachers want to know more about the children they teach and think that parents have some of that information. One teacher in her study, Andrea said that teachers and parents can become “allies and collaborators” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, p.55). Andrea wanted to work with parents to “unravel the problem together” and her questions to parents are “usually grounded in the daily habits and rituals of the child's family life (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, p.55). In describing her communication with parents, Andrea said that she asks

parents to describe an ordinary day and asks them to tell her about who prepares dinner, who comforts the child in the night, and who the child sleeps with. In answering these questions, the teacher and parent can often discover the roots of the problem (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003). The teachers in this study reported that parents had knowledge to offer teachers and implied that they used that knowledge in their teaching. However, this study did not examine ways that teachers did use, or reported to use, the information they gained from conversations with parents.

Despite the barriers to effective home-school relationships that Lawrence-Lightfoot describes, there are teachers who make a concerted effort to communicate with parents. In her 2003 study, Lawrence-Lightfoot described a teacher named Molly who scheduled a conference with each parent at the beginning of school to “get to know you” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, p.62). During this conference, the parents told the teacher about the child’s “personality, interests, strengths, and challenges” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, p.62). Molly saw the parents as experts and listened to what they had to say about their own child. Another teacher, Sophie, claimed that teachers “see only the narrowest slice of a child’s capabilities and temperament, and that it is critical that teachers seek parents’ insights and guidance” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, p.68). Sophie recognized that parents have a much “fuller, more complex, and intimate view of their children than she does and that any glimpse of their lives outside of school will enhance her work in the classroom” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, p.69). These teachers reported that “close observation of the child at home and at school and a sharing of information that allows parents and teachers to gain a holistic view of the child” could promote more successful teaching and

learning (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, p.80). The teachers in this study recognized that parents are “a great resource and recognize that they have a different point of view. They understand that parents know their children far better than they ever will, and they count on them to offer their perspective and wisdom” (Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003, p.80). Lawrence-Lightfoot found that teachers in her study reported that knowing where a child comes from and knowing their “biographic histories” can support healthy child development. When a child walks into the classroom, his/her family comes along also. The families are present in the child’s head and concretely such as the child’s sibling relations, food and nourishment, and the families are present in the teacher’s mind as well as the teacher sees the child as the parents’ child (Lawrence-Lightfoot 1978, p.9-10).

The parent-teacher relationship has also been conceptualized through the lens of social class. Annette Lareau’s work shows how families’ social class has an impact on the kind of involvement that they pursue. This sometimes leads to differences in compliance between what a teacher wants and what parents are able to offer.

According to Lareau (2000), working class parents attend parent teacher conferences less than their middle class counterparts. Middle class parents also typically take a more active role in their children’s education through talking to the teacher more and asking for a more “customized curriculum” for their children. Lareau characterizes relations between working class families and schools as one of “separation” (p.8). Middle class relations with schools are characterized by Lareau as

“interconnected” (p.8). Because many teachers report wanting increased parent involvement, these class differences may cause tension and conflict.

Despite the potential conflicts that Lareau wrote about, she also found that teachers were receptive to parent involvement. Though not the major finding of her work, Annette Lareau (2000) found that teachers having more knowledge about what happens at home can have an effect on classroom dynamics, as one teacher in her study said, that if a child went to bed late on a school night, it “could and did affect the teacher’s life” (Lareau 2000, p.32). Knowledge of home life makes it easier to attribute behavior to something concrete and then know how to respond. Lareau found that teachers and some parents viewed school and home as “interconnected” (Lareau 2000, p. 75).

In a different study, Lareau interviewed over 40 teachers from 20 schools in Northern California. These teachers worked in five schools districts, both urban and suburban and taught in elementary, middle and high schools. Lareau found that the teachers “view their educational activities as embedded in a larger context” (Lareau 1989, p. 253) and that in order for classroom work to be effective, it must be supported by parental involvement in the home. Parents can help support educational growth (Lareau 1989). Lareau used studies by Epstein (1982; 1987) and other teacher surveys as a basis for her claim that teachers want more parent involvement in schooling and that parent involvement can increase student learning. The teachers interviewed in this study reported that there are different ways for parents to help with the education of their children. Many teachers reported that proper socialization of their children happens at home and that parents’ nurturing and communication with

children helps to prepare them for classroom learning (Lareau 1989). These teachers wanted to “share the responsibility” of schooling with parents (Lareau 1989, p.248). Lareau (2000) also found that teachers saw “an interdependency between home and school, not a separation” (p.35) and teachers reported that they felt education should be viewed as “living,” not only limited to the hours that the child is in school (Lareau 2000, p.46). The earlier study also found that teachers want parents to initiate contact and to be notified if something different is going on at home (Lareau 1989).

Though the literature has described the parent-teacher relationship as potentially conflicting, and the literature has described the parent-teacher conference in depth (Parsons 1959; Waller 1932; Lawrence-Lightfoot 1981, 2000), it has not explored how teachers use any information that parents relay to teachers. The literature mostly describes communication between parents and teachers as one way, from the teacher to the parent. This kind of one way communication often happens at the parent-teacher conference where the teacher is responsible for giving information about the student to the parent. This information is primarily about student achievement, behavior, test scores and grades. Epstein mentions that communication should be two way and she recommends that schools “create two way communication channels from school to home and from home to school, so that families can easily keep in touch with teachers, administrators, counselors, and other families” (Epstein 2004, p. 21). Epstein is referring to communication about “school programs and student progress” but not exactly about parents passing on information to teachers. The literature pays scant attention to when or how this kind of communication, from parent to teacher might happen.

The way that parents and teachers communicate offers insight into the way the partnership plays out in practice. The literature on parent involvement misses a crucial aspect of the parent teacher interaction that explains how the relationship is not a true partnership. One recent study by McGrath (2007) found that among 13 mothers of two year olds whose children attended a child-care facility, the trust generated was a “forced trust.” McGrath gathered personal, in-depth perceptions from mothers based on interviews, observations and informal interactions. Mothers trusted teachers because there was an immediate need for them to obtain information from the teachers. The teachers in this study reported lack of trust of the mothers because they would sometimes contact the school director directly, going over the heads of the teachers. The mothers also frequently allowed teachers to “dominate interactions since the mothers needed the information the teachers had about their children” (McGrath 2007). Teachers in this study also reported that they resented mothers’ questions about the school curriculum; teachers did not want mothers involved in “classroom pedagogical issues,” (McGrath 2007) that was territory that belonged to teachers as professionals. Though more researchers are paying attention to parent involvement, they are not addressing how communication occurs nor does it unpack the type of “partnership” that really exists between parents and teachers. The existent literature does not sufficiently explore how teachers set the terms for relationships with parents or what affect that has on the relationships between parents and teachers. We need to study the parent-teacher relationship as a two way process with recognition that teachers have power in key ways such as how and when communication occurs.

### *Parent Focused Studies<sup>1</sup>*

In trying to unpack some of the many aspects of parent involvement, one way scholars have studied parent involvement is from the perspective of the parent.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995) asked “how does parent involvement make a difference? That is, what goes on in the process of parental involvement that makes it likely to create a positive difference in children’s school outcomes?” (p.312).

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler’s work however, focused primarily on the parents and how their actions impacted student achievement. Their study found three ways that parents can influence children’s educational outcomes: modeling school related behaviors, reinforcing aspects of school related learning, and through providing direct instruction to their children. Activities that parents could do include asking questions of their children, helping with homework, and using a trip to the grocery store to reinforce math facts. Though these actions taken by parents enhance a child’s education, Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler found that they are not enough to “create educational success.” Epstein (1995) also reports that when schools and parents form partnerships, schools become more “family-like” and homes become more “school-like.” This mutual reinforcement might also affect educational outcomes for children.

Parent involvement researchers have also examined parents’ motivations and reasons for becoming involved in their children’s education (Anderson 2007; Hoover-

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<sup>1</sup> There is also much work on “funds of knowledge” that addresses the issue of parental knowledge. Luis Moll (1992) and others (Gonzalez et al 1993; Lopez 2001; Valdes 1996; Velez-Ibanez 1992) found that families of English language learners contain “funds of knowledge” and began to study these “funds” and provide us studies examining the use of parent knowledge to inform classroom teaching. The goal of this research was to “explore teacher-researcher collaborations in conducting household research and in using this information to develop classroom practice” (Moll, 1992, P.135). These studies look at situations where there were cultural differences between families and teachers, though it may be able to inform all schools and teachers who are trying to better understand families.



Dempsey 1995, 1997, 2005; Reed 2000; Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel 2001). This body of research is based on Hoover-Dempsey's model of family decision making.

Hoover-Dempsey conducted a study of parents of 250 elementary school students in urban schools using surveys that were sent home to parents. This study found that parents' motivations for becoming involved in their children's school was based on three factors: parental role construction, what parents believe they are supposed to do; parents sense of self efficacy, how effective parents believe they can be; and parents' perceptions of invitations and demands from the school with regard to parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey 1995, 1997, 2005; Reed et al 2000).

Another aspect of studies focusing on parents is analyzing which parts of parents' actions affect student achievement. One study showed how parents' aspirations for their children have an affect on achievement. Fan and Chen (1999) analyzed 25 research studies and found that parents' expressing expectations for achievement is especially significant. A 1996 study by Ho Sui-Chu found that parents discussing school with their children led to increased student achievement. These studies help clarify which parts of parent involvement may impact student achievement, but they study home and school separately and do not illustrate the interconnectedness of the two.

Studies of parents also show that parents' level of interaction with teachers declines as children get older. In a study which followed over 1,000 children in kindergarten, first and second grade through four consecutive years, Eccles and Harold (1996), found that parents help their children with homework more in second and third grade than they do in fifth grade. Through questionnaires to children,

parents, and teachers, the researchers also found that participation by parents in school activities such as volunteering also declined as children got older. This study then examined what parent characteristics predicted levels of involvement and found that a mother's "intellectual confidence" and "achievement motivation" (Eccles and Harold 1996) were correlated to how much parents were involved in reading and math education. Intellectual confidence refers to how much the mother felt she knew about the subject. Achievement motivation refers to how much she liked intellectual challenges and could stick with hard problems. The more confident the mother was, the more involved she was. Only the parents' intellectual confidence was correlated to the parents' involvement at school. This study however, did not however examine teachers' perspectives on involvement.

#### *Parent Involvement at Home*

Part of parent involvement is how parents interact with their children at home. Parents can help with homework, they can talk to their children in ways that encourage them to ask and answer questions, they can read to their children, and they can encourage them to do well in school. Accordingly, there is research about ways that parents are involved with their children at home, such as helping with homework. In a 1998 study of students in sixth grade, Balli, Demo and Wedman found that there were no significant differences in posttest scores after parents had helped with math homework. This study examined 74 students, 20 of whom were given homework assignments that specifically asked for a parent's help (group 1), 20 were given no prompts to parents (group 2), and 20 students were given prompts to ask parents for help and the parent was asked to help by the teacher (group 3). The study found that

though there was no difference in achievement, groups 1 and 3 did have more parent involvement than group 2. This however, is a small sample and does not explore if the parents were or became more involved in other aspects of the school.

Reginald Clark (1993) also studied homework-focused parenting practices. His study was based on a sample of 1,141 third grade students in Los Angeles. Parents responded to a survey about their own practices of involvement in homework. Clark found that parents reported that they “talk to their children about homework, read to their children, and make sure they do assignments.” Clark also found that there was no difference between parents of high achievers and low achievers. However, parents of high achievers were more likely to report that their children spent more time on homework, were more likely to have a dictionary and were more involved in “learning activities” at home. This study however is based on data that is self reported by parents and was not verified by additional research.

Since one of the ways that parents are most involved in their children’s education is by helping their children with homework, teachers often create special homework that involves parents. A study by Epstein, Simon and Salinas (1997) explores involving parents in homework in the middle grades<sup>2</sup>. In the TIPS (Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork) program, student homework is created to be interactive. This study analyzed writing samples for 683 students over one year. They also surveyed 413 students and 218 parents about their experiences. The study found that parents were aware of and involved in the homework on a “regular basis.” Students’ writing scores and grades improved when they used the TIPS program.

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<sup>2</sup> There are other studies using the TIPS homework program such as Van Voorhis (2001) that I will not discuss here.

This study however, does not examine teachers' perspectives of the program, nor does it explore further aspects of parent involvement and if it affected other aspects of the students' school experience. It also did not explore if parent participation in this program led to other forms of involvement.

Though this body of literature has examined why and how parents might become involved in school, it does not examine other factors for involvement. Parent involvement might also be based on other factors; the parents' needs, the teachers' needs, students' needs or because of a school or administrative philosophy. The existing literature does not sufficiently address these issues. The literature (Epstein 2001; Hoover-Dempsey 1987; Lareau 2000) has suggested that the school philosophy, principal leadership, parental social class, parents' sense of themselves and other factors help us understand how and why parents become involved in schools and how teachers interact with parents. This literature does not sufficiently examine teachers' perceptions and actions.

#### *Teacher Focused Studies*

Though the majority of studies seem to focus on parents and on the different forms of involvement, there have been some contributions to the field that focus on teachers. One of the topics most studied by researchers is the preparation of teachers. There is research (Ammon 1999; Hartmann-Winkelman 1999; Hiatt-Michael 2001; Katz 1999; Kochar-Bryant 2002) that has determined that teachers are not prepared in their pre-service courses for working with parents. Studies show that teacher education does not influence teachers' perspectives on parent involvement.

A national study found that “one-fifth of teacher education institutions offered no parent involvement preparation, a few colleges include some parent involvement content in five or more courses, and 79.1 % of teacher education programs offer one or more courses that include content dealing with parent involvement” (Katz, 1999, p.3).

Pre-service teachers, as well as practicing teachers feel that they have both personal and professional barriers to engaging in, or enhancing their work with parents (Ammon, 1999). Although classroom teachers assert that working with families is important and can increase student achievement, “they receive little formal training and, thus, possess minimal knowledge and skills to work with parents” (Hiatt-Michael, 2001, p. 4).

Another issue in the preparation of teachers that the literature has focused on is teachers’ personal barriers to the field. According to D’Emidio-Caston (1999), teachers have personal stories, biases, and experiences that shape their attitudes and beliefs about working with parents. D’Emidio-Caston asserts that teacher education programs must begin with making pre-service teachers aware of differences between themselves and the students they teach. Beyond being aware, D’Emidio-Caston writes that teacher education students must learn how to “bridge different cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (D’Emidio-Caston, 1999, p.38). In her program, D’Emidio-Caston has pre-service teachers examine how their own culture has shaped them, and has them “plunge” into the school neighborhood where these teachers will be working. D’Emidio-Caston found that teachers’ preconceived notions were preventing them from being able to form collaborative working relationships with

parents. Among other strategies, the above activities are designed to help teachers appreciate diversity so that they will be “equipped to work effectively with all families” (D’Emidio-Caston, 1999, p.54).

In addition to cultural biases, past experiences, both personal and second hand, affect pre-service teachers’ abilities to work effectively with parents. Education students are apprehensive about family involvement in education. Peg Hartmann-Winkelman’s (1999) research has shown that perspective teachers have either had negative experiences with parents in the classroom or have heard about them. In either case, the teachers’ resolve to work with families was shaken. In many cases, Hartmann-Winkelman shows that teachers are nervous about being able to stand up for their curricular decisions, teaching strategies, and behavior plans. Hartmann-Winkelman categorized pre-service teachers’ concerns into four general categories: “How do I defend my curriculum and teaching practices? How can I involve *all* families in the education of their children?, How much family participation do I really want in my classroom? And How do I communicate with parents about children’s problems and weaknesses?” (Hartmann-Winkelman, 1999, p.85). In her work with new teachers, Hartmann-Winkelman found that teacher’s fears of involving parents came from being nervous about questions parents might ask them. Teachers worry that their methods will be unfamiliar to parents and that parents will “be critical without trying to explore or understand a teacher’s goals” (Hartmann-Winkelman 1999, p. 86). These new teachers assumed that parents would not trust them and would question their rationale about their decisions. Student teachers’ concerns can be a barrier to parent involvement. This literature explores the

barriers that teachers must overcome in order to work effectively with parents, but it does not examine what influences their practice and their attitudes towards working with parents.

In another study that focused on teachers' perspectives, Dornbusch and Glasgow (1996) contended that much of parent involvement was related to how a school was organized. Dornbusch and Glasgow surveyed 252 teachers and asked for teacher opinions on parent involvement in their schools. This study tried to understand why parent involvement decreased as children got older. The researchers found that organizational structures such as the number of teachers a child has (more once a child is in middle school), the tracking of the student and socio-economic/ethnic factors all affect parents' levels of involvement. This study however, was conducted only by anonymous survey and no qualitative or follow up data was collected.

Becker and Epstein (1982) conducted a large survey of teachers asking them about how they practice parent involvement. There were 3,698 elementary teacher respondents from 600 schools in Maryland. The study found that "virtually all teachers report that they talk with children's parents, send notices home, and interact with parents on open-school nights." In addition, most teachers reported that parents check and sign students' homework. There are differences however among teachers regarding how they communicate with parents. Teachers in this study were asked to rate fourteen techniques to involve parents. Many of the techniques related to how teachers help parents work with their children at home. The most frequently used technique was encouraging parents to read to their children at home. There were vast

differences among teachers with regard to how many of them had parents volunteer at school, in their classrooms. This study is a first step in engaging teachers in conversation about their own perceptions of parent involvement. This study however is quantitative, and much more detailed information is needed on how teachers think about their relationships with parents.

Previous research (Epstein 2001; Epstein and Jacobsen 1994; Lee 1994) has also found that teachers and parents communicate more around problem children or children with “issues.” A 1994 dissertation by Lee reports that teacher and parent contact (phone calls, conferences) is linked with students’ academic problems and bad behavior (Epstein 2001). According to Epstein, “these results could be interpreted to mean that home school communications produce academic and behavior problems, or that, presently, schools and families make contact more often when students run into difficulties, to try to solve these problems” (Epstein 2001 p.54). Teachers also may make more requests of parents with low achieving students concerning homework, according to Epstein (2001). Data from 82 teachers were gathered by Epstein and she found that homework and behavior issues are addressed through communication between teacher and parent and that teachers talk directly to parents about homework activities if students are “identified as having homework problems and talk directly with parents about school behavior if students are identified as having discipline problems” (Epstein 2001 p.248). Parents in Epstein’s study also report that they receive more frequent requests and more direct communication from teachers when their students are low in reading and math. This



research states that teachers may reach out to parents as one source of extra help or as a resource to help students who are having academic or behavior problems.

In a 1987 study focusing on parent involvement and school performance, Baker and Stevenson found that “parents may disengage from school activities once the child is on the right track” (p. 1356). This implies that parents are more involved in their children’s education if something is not going well. This study used data from a nationally representative sample and examined 179 parents, students and teachers and investigated three hypotheses “(1) the higher the educational status of the mother the greater the degree of parental involvement in school activities, (2) the younger the age of the child the greater the degree of parental involvement, and (3) children of parents who are more involved in school activities do better in school than children with parents who are less involved.” Though Baker and Stevenson began to discuss how and when parents interact with their children’s teachers, they did not focus on this aspect of their findings. The data set they used also was not created explicitly to explore parent involvement and thus the findings are somewhat limited.

#### *The Current Study*

It is clear from the research that schools and families are overlapping spheres and should be studied together. One affects the other. Many scholars have taken that perspective and have examined parent involvement in depth. Some studies show that parent involvement impacts student achievement, but it is unclear which forms of parent involvement impact teacher practice. Some studies show that the parent teacher relationship is a partnership, while others show that the relationship is conflicting. We need to know more about this relationship. Still others have

examined parent involvement through the parent teacher conference while others have studied how parents are involved at home with homework. But it is still not clear if teachers perceive of all these forms of involvement as equally valuable.

This dissertation builds on the work of Epstein, and others, and makes a friendly amendment to increase our understanding of how teachers report understanding and using their relationships with parents to improve their teaching. It will explore more in depth how teachers perceive different forms of involvement and if they are equally valuable, how teachers report using parent knowledge in their classroom teaching to customize their curricula, how relationships between parents and teachers may or may not be true equal partnerships, how we understand what influences teachers thinking and behavior as related to parent-teacher relationships and how teachers may perceive parents differently, even while working in the same school.

Since researchers have found that parent involvement increases student achievement, it is necessary to further this work to determine how this might happen. When we look at the home and the school as “overlapping spheres of influence,” we see that we cannot study school and home separately. More work is needed in order to understand how parents and teachers act as partners or in conflict. Understanding this might be able to inform teacher practice and the way that parents and teachers can better relate to one another.

In order to further the important research already completed on parent involvement, my research will tackle several topics that have not been sufficiently reported in the existing literature. The research in this dissertation was gathered

through in depth interviews of 21 teachers and 12 parents, as well as through participant observation of three teachers in a case study. There will be a complete discussion of my methods in chapter two.

In chapter three, the first data chapter, I will focus on how teachers perceive the differences between types of parent involvement. The current literature does a good job of describing ways that parents become involved in schools. These ways include being active on the PTA, volunteering in classrooms and helping their children with homework. It is not clear from the existing literature which forms of involvement are more valuable to teachers. An in depth look is necessary to see that some forms of parent involvement provide teachers with information, and some do not. This will help us unpack the different kinds of parent involvement. Learning about teachers' perspectives on different aspects of parent involvement might help clarify which of these aspects has an impact on teacher practice.

Chapter four will focus on how teachers report they use parent knowledge in their curriculum. Since teachers may perceive different forms of parent involvement differently, and some as more valuable than others, we need to uncover more about teachers' reported use of forms of involvement. Part of what is important to teachers is communicating with parents. Once teachers have created relationships with parents, they report they are able to obtain information from parents about their children through communication. There may be some ways that teachers use that knowledge from parents to customize curricula. This can teach us about how parent involvement impacts teacher practice.

Chapter five will focus on communication between parents and teachers; how communication can illustrate how teachers negotiate the interactions between themselves and parents. Though others have explored how the parent teacher relationship can be conflicting, more research is needed to understand how parents and teachers communicate and how that impacts their relationships. Some say that teachers act as professionals while others say that there is necessarily a “forced trust” between parents and teachers. By examining how teachers perceive their communication patterns and their boundary setting, we can begin to understand the relational dynamics between parents and teachers. Teachers use of email will also be discussed in this chapter. Email has come into use and we do not yet know how it shapes parent teacher relationships. Does the use of email supplant face to face meetings? Is email preferred by teachers? By parents? My study will help fill in this gap.

Chapter six will explore what influences teachers’ practices of parent involvement. Researchers have studied how and why parents become involved in their children’s education, but there are not sufficient studies about how or why teachers involve parents in their classrooms. There is research that finds that teachers are not prepared to work with parents in their pre-service preparation, so we know that those courses do not influence teachers’ perceptions of parent involvement, but we do not know what does influence teachers.

Finally, much of the literature has focused on the frequency of interaction and the substance of interaction between parents and teachers. These are surely important. But in the final chapter of this dissertation I suggest that are important

dimensions, or textures, of parent-teacher relationships that have not been sufficiently discussed. Drawing a detailed portrait of three teachers working in the same school with a shared Montessori philosophy, I show how the quality or feel of their relationships with parents differed significantly. Some teachers report distant relationships with parents while others report close relationships with them. Though they may work in the same school with a distinct philosophy, there are differences between teachers. The literature has not paid sufficient attention to differences between teachers in one school. Understanding how teachers perceive parents and their relationships with them, we can begin to understand how to improve and develop partnerships between parents and teachers.

## *Chapter Two* *Methods*

### *Purpose of the Study:*

The purpose of this study is to examine relationships between elementary school teachers and parents. This dissertation will explore teachers' perceptions of information parents provide about their children and what impact they perceive, if any, this information has for their classroom teaching. As noted earlier, it is important to understand what kinds of information are transmitted, how it is transmitted, and how teachers report using the information in order for us to better understand what teachers perceive as useful to their teaching. This dissertation will attempt to unpack elementary school teachers' perceptions about their relationships with parents and investigate what teachers articulate as relevant, helpful, useful, or harmful to the parent teacher relationship and to teaching practice recognizing that there is variability among teachers.

In this work, I seek to respond to the following research questions:

1. How do elementary school teachers perceive the nature of interactions with parents? Is there a difference between kinds of interactions (i.e. communication or volunteering) between teachers and parents?
2. How do elementary teachers report using parent knowledge, how does it affect their teaching?
3. What is the nature of the parent teacher relationship?
4. How do we understand influences on elementary teachers?
5. How do elementary teachers perceive parents?

### *Sample and Methods:*

This study used qualitative methods, primarily in depth interviews and participant observation. The study consists of a snowballed sample of 21 first through fourth grade teachers who I interviewed (see Appendix B for teacher interview questions). In addition, this study examines 12 parents who have children in the elementary level of one Montessori school. I interviewed these parents and teachers and conducted observations in the three Montessori classrooms, but not in the others. First, I will describe the emergence of my research methods and I will then describe the methods for the 21 teacher interviews.

### *Researcher*

As the researcher, I am a white 34-year old woman who was a former fifth and ninth grade teacher in a private school. I have also worked in educational administration as a director of admissions in an elementary school and as a director of student life in a high school.

### *Emergence of Methods*

The study began as a case study of one Montessori school. In the Fall of 2006 I conducted a pilot study at Montgomery Montessori<sup>3</sup>. I chose this school because it was making a concerted effort to engage parents in highly visible ways and had made a commitment to parent involvement. During this time I began to interview and observe teachers in the elementary grade level<sup>4</sup>. Originally, my research was going to examine how teachers use knowledge they glean from parents in their classroom teaching. I had planned to observe in the three classrooms and after every

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<sup>3</sup> All names have been changed to protect privacy.

<sup>4</sup> In Montessori schools, classes are divided by developmental level, not traditional grades based on age.

observation, talk to the teacher about what I saw and to get their reflections on decisions they made and if any were based on parental information. As I carried out this plan, it became clear that I would not be able to “see” the teachers’ actions in relation to parental knowledge. I thought I would be able to understand if teachers made decisions about their teaching based on knowledge they had received from parents based on observations of the teachers. During these observations, I initially thought I would be able to recognize teacher decision-making and teacher actions and be able to talk with them after class about what influenced those decisions. After one week of observations though it became clear that the demands of the teachers’ schedule and the structure of the school day would not permit the necessary time to reflect with me in the detail I needed, after each observation. Hence, I determined that observations and teacher reflection were not the best way to get at answering my research questions. Also, once I began conducting the observations, it became clear that it was not possible to focus only on teachers’ actions; it was difficult for them to reflect on what caused them to take those actions, let alone isolate the actions that were based on parent knowledge. I then changed my research to focus on how teachers *perceive* (and self report) that they use parental knowledge in classroom instruction. I thus changed my methods to observe, write notes, and then to go back to the teachers in May for a shorter interview discussing the observations. It was at this time that I decided to add 18 additional teacher interviews from other schools to get more teacher input and perspective. I wanted to determine if the sustained communication and teacher perceptions of their relationships with parents would be the same for teachers in other non-Montessori schools. In order to examine teacher



perceptions in more varied settings, I added interviews with teachers from public, private, urban and suburban schools.

#### *Chronology of Observations and Interviews*

The first interviews were the three Montessori teachers. These initial interviews were conducted in the Fall of 2007. I interviewed those three Montessori teachers again, after I interviewed the parents in their class, so I had the benefit of speaking with them twice. The remaining teacher interviews were conducted during May, June, July and August of 2007. The interviews were semi structured and respondents were asked open-ended questions. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed in its entirety. The taping and transcription proved to be an invaluable asset, as I could go back through the transcripts as my questions or focus changed. For all respondents, teacher confidentiality was assured and IRB consent forms were signed by each interviewee. A handwritten thank you note was mailed to each respondent within three days of the interview.

#### *Interviews of Non-Montessori Teachers*

It is important to note that I chose to broaden my interviews to include non-Montessori teachers and it is these interviews which form the basis for most of the data in this dissertation. Because I was not intrinsically interested in Montessori, and I was interested in finding out more about parent involvement in other school types, I added the 18 non-Montessori teachers to my interview pool. I could have chosen to conduct the additional interviews with only Montessori teachers, but I did not want to focus on the Montessori philosophy or school. I chose to vary the settings of the additional teachers I interviewed in order to provide a broader picture of parent

involvement in different settings. By choosing teachers from a variety of school types, I was able to get a broad, though not deep, look at a cross section of the kinds of schools we encounter in the Greater Washington area. In a small case of two schools, Lareau determined that there are similarities between what teachers want from parents even in different school settings (Lareau 2000). Because of these findings, I decided not to focus on contextual differences, but to focus on teachers' experiences wherever they work.

Table of teacher respondents:

Name	Grade teach	What kind of school	Years teaching (approx)	Teach for America?
David	Elementary	Montgomery Montessori	2	no
Lucy	Elementary	Montgomery Montessori	15	no
Karen	Elementary	Montgomery Montessori	4	no
Brenda	Principal	Montgomery Montessori	n/a	no
Daisy	Secretary	Montgomery Montessori	n/a	n/a
Gabriel	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade	Low income public	10	no
Aaron	2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade	Low income public	9	no
Suzanne	2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade	Low income public	4	no
Darlene	2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade	Low income public	5	no
Helen	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	Low income public	10	no
Stacy	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	Mixed income public charter	4	yes
Eleanor	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	Mixed income public charter	4	yes
Rick	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	Mixed income rural public	5	no
Lois	3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade	Mixed income public	20	no
Shannon	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Mixed income public	5	yes
Nelly	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Mixed income public	1	no
Melanie	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Affluent public	10	no
Allison	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Affluent public	5	no
Jane	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Affluent public	6	no
Tiffany	4 <sup>th</sup> Grade	Affluent public	6	no

Jennifer	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade	Private	5	no
Lena	1 <sup>st</sup> Grade	Private	20	no
Margaret	2 <sup>nd</sup> Grade	Private	20	no

In order to gain a broad understanding of teachers from various backgrounds and who teach in various settings, I have conducted 18 teacher interviews each lasting between 90-120 minutes (see table above). Teachers participating in the interviews are from first, second, third or fourth grades. Children in these grades are similar in development and differences in parent involvement between these grades in my limited sample is not significant. I chose these grades in particular for a few reasons. First, they correspond to the grades in the elementary classes at Montgomery Montessori. Second, there is typically more parent involvement in younger grades than in older ones (Epstein 2001). Given that I wanted to examine parent-teacher communication and how teachers perceive that they use knowledge from parents in their classroom instruction, I felt that first through fourth grades would provide a setting in which I could understand those phenomena most clearly given the fact that students in those grades typically stay with one teacher throughout each day and given the opportunities for parent-teacher communication and interaction such as school events, conferences, phone calls and emails.

The 21 teachers in this study are from a total of 13 schools. Aaron and Suzanne teacher at the same low income suburban school. Tiffany, Allison, Melanie, and Jane teach at the same affluent suburban school. Stacy and Eleanor teach at the same mixed income urban charter school and Jennifer and Lena teach at the same private school. Three teachers, David, Lucy and Karen are from Montgomery Montessori. I interviewed only one teacher from eight additional schools.

To find the teachers to interview, I first contacted principals, teachers, and former teachers in the Greater Washington area that I know from my work experience as a teacher/administrator and from my University of Maryland courses, who could recommend elementary teachers to interview. I asked them to provide me with contact information for teachers they knew and they forwarded an email I had written describing my study as “examining parent-teacher relationships” and asking them if they would be willing to talk with me about their experiences for an hour and a half in person. The people who I knew passed this letter along to teachers with whom they worked, via notes in mailboxes and via school listservs. From this effort, I gained a list of approximately 19 teachers.

Once I had a list of contacts, I contacted those teachers by phone or via email to introduce myself and to set up interview appointments. Of those original 19 teachers, three proved ineligible to participate in the study due to location (they lived/taught out of town), and four were not interviewed because of scheduling difficulties. In order to increase my pool of respondents, I then used a snowball technique to use those teachers I did interview to find others. Some teachers I interviewed recommended other teachers in their school to interview, so some teachers are from the same school. While the majority of teachers I contacted from the snowball technique were willing to be interviewed, five proved difficult to schedule and two worked in schools but were specialty teachers, and therefore were not interviewed.

Nine of the teacher interviews took place at the respondent’s homes, seven took place in the schools in which they work, three in their own classrooms and four

in teachers' lounges, and the remaining two interviews took place on an outside patio of a coffee shop. I sought samples of teachers who work in low income schools, affluent schools, urban, as well as suburban schools, public and private. There is a concern that the schools are so different. Since I wanted to examine teachers' perceptions I thought a broad range of perspectives would be useful. I did not conduct participant observation at the schools, nor do I have a lot of information about each school, the focus is on the teachers and their experiences. There are five teachers from low-income public schools, six teachers from mixed income public schools, four teachers from affluent public schools and three teachers from private schools. Two of the teachers were men, the others women, and six of these teachers have been teaching for more than five years, three women are older and have been teaching their whole lives. Two of the teachers were of Asian origin, the rest were white.

*Site Selection of Montgomery Montessori<sup>5</sup>:*

The study began with a search for a school that was making a concerted effort to foster parent and teacher communication. The search led me to a Montessori school whose philosophy includes being in tuned to the whole child<sup>6</sup>, in part, through frequent communication with parents. I found that the Montessori school was indeed making an effort to involve parents in ways that traditional public schools may not. I

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<sup>5</sup> I was first alerted to this site by a University of Maryland professor who thought that this school was making a concerted effort to involve families in sustained communication with teachers. This professor works as a head of school in a different Montessori school and is very familiar with Montessori philosophy. Based on this knowledge, she thought that a Montessori school was an ideal site to examine an intense focus on parent involvement and communication.

<sup>6</sup> Based on Maria Montessori's philosophy of schooling and child development.

was, however, ambivalent and nervous about using only a Montessori school for my dissertation. I was not interested in writing a dissertation about Montessori philosophy nor did I know much about the methods and schools themselves. I also did not want to write about something that only applied in such a unique setting, I wanted to study teacher-parent communication and relationships, but not only in a Montessori setting. But, I did find that the Montessori school might be a useful example of the kinds of parent teacher relationships I wanted to see. After initial observations, I decided that a nested design using the case of the Montessori school along with additional teacher interviews from other non-Montessori schools would meet the needs of my research goals. This design provides an in depth examination of three teachers in one school along with the relationships they have with four parents in each of the classes, as well as a broader look at teachers' perceptions from other kinds of schools such as public, private, urban and suburban schools. The Montessori school provides the opportunity to look at one kind of school and the efforts it makes to involve parents. The combination of additional interviews with teachers from a variety of public and private schools with different demographics provides the opportunity to examine different kinds of schools and the efforts they make to involve parents.

Since I was examining how teachers perceive their relationships with parents and how they perceive that they use knowledge from parents in their classroom teaching, it became clear that in depth interviewing would be a particularly good method to capture teacher perceptions. Interviews gave respondents a chance to reflect on their own practice and articulate in their own words how they communicate

or interact with parents as well as how they perceive their own classroom instruction. The limitation of interviews however, is that the data is self-reported, and respondents may be telling the interviewer what they think the interviewer wants to hear.

*Montgomery Montessori*

I conducted participant observations and interviews in one school, Montgomery Montessori. I called the school principal to schedule a meeting to outline my observation techniques and my need for access to the three teachers and parents in their classes. She was willing to meet with me and seemed to want to help me succeed in obtaining a site in which to conduct my research. I met with the principal at the school where she gave me a warm reception and a tour of the building. We discussed my needs and processes for observations and interviews. The principal was receptive and let me know that she wanted to help me, but that she had to discuss this with the three elementary teachers that would be affected by the work.

Montessori classrooms are divided by age/grade groupings; primary, elementary, and intermediate (sometimes called upper elementary). The primary classroom serves ages one and a half through age six, the elementary ages six to twelve and the intermediate ages twelve and thirteen. Given my experience as a teacher and administrator in elementary school, I chose to work with elementary teachers in general and in the elementary classes at Montgomery Montessori.

Montessori classrooms focus on developmental levels, or planes<sup>7</sup>, of students, not on

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<sup>7</sup> Maria Montessori, based on her scientific observations of children, developed Four Planes of developmental growth for the child. She concluded that a child's growth has a number of critical transformations in the first six years, followed by a period of

age. I am most familiar with the developmental planes and curriculum of elementary age students. After discussion with the three teachers, the principal allowed me access to the site. I then obtained IRB approval from the University of Maryland to conduct observations and interviews.

I observed a total of twenty days, half of which I observed in the morning, and half in the afternoon in order to gain a range of views on the school day and to see both pick up and drop off of children where some interaction between teachers and parents occurs.

I observed the three elementary teachers at this school for six weeks during the months of April, May and June of 2007. I observed their classroom teaching at least once a week and attended school activities where the teachers were present, such as conferences, spring festivals, and dinner nights. During these observations, I was not a participant in the classrooms; I remained an observer and recorder. I tried not to create any stimulus for change or reaction. The teachers in these classrooms knew I was studying relationships between parents and teachers, and the students only knew that I was a doctoral student; they did not know about the content of my study. In each classroom there was an extra chair for me that I moved throughout the room during my observations, though I tried to be unobtrusive and sat against bookshelves, against structural columns, or in corners facing the room. When I first met each teacher, I offered to help out in the classroom anyway I could, and I told them to feel

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uniform growth while the mind is "being organized" in the intermediate stage of childhood, ages 6-12, and followed by another period of transformation during the ages of 12-18. Each formative Plane lays the foundation for the next successive Plane.



free to “put me to work” doing administrative tasks such as collating or copying materials, though none of them did so during my time at the school. According to Montessori philosophy and to the school policies, parents and visitors are welcome to observe in classrooms, but are not supposed to interact with the students. This could be why only during three occasions did the students interact with me, asking me questions about their work or what I was doing. During those times, I answered them with brief responses so as not to disturb the class. Students seemed comfortable with another adult in the room, possibly due to school policies. Towards the end of the year, students would say hello or goodbye to me as I came and went or they would wave; if I came or left during recess, some students would run up to me to greet me, but direct interactions with students was limited.

These observations provided me with prompts for interviews where I asked for examples of when teachers might have thought about parental information. The observations have also provided me with insights into teacher actions or teacher conversation that refer to parents or home life that the teacher is unaware of him/herself. I also attended a field trip with one of the teachers and his class.

However, the observations did not provide me with much opportunity to see parents and teachers actually interact. As a result, I changed the design of my study to include in depth interviews with additional teachers. During interviews with teachers and parents from Montgomery Montessori I found out that most interaction occurs via phone calls, during conferences or set meetings and brief encounters when children are picked up from school each day. Though parents are welcome to observe in classrooms, they must make appointments to do so and during none of my

observation sessions were other parents observing. Parents also come to school to take small groups of children on field trips, but their time in the classroom is brief.

I was able to get to know the two secretaries and the principal since I would pass their desks/offices each day as I entered and left the building. As I mentioned earlier, I could not determine from observations how teachers made decisions and I did not witness an abundance of interaction between parents and teachers in the classroom observations, though I was able to get to know the teachers, the Montessori teaching methods and how teachers use the whole child philosophy to get to know the students and their families. The teacher and parent interviews provided me with much richer data on their perceptions of their relationship and their communication.

In addition to the class observations, I interviewed these teachers once for 90-120 minutes each, privately. One interview took place in a private school office, one in a restaurant and one in the teacher's home (see Appendix B for teacher interview questions). These were the first interviews with teachers conducted, in the Fall of 2007.

In addition to the teacher interviews, I interviewed the principal of Montgomery Montessori in her office for 90 minutes and I interviewed the secretary of the school for 90 minutes, in a private office in the school. Interviewing the principal provided an opportunity to examine school leadership and vision. Since, at this school, most initial contact with schools/teachers happens through the secretary it was important to get her view about parents as well (see Appendix D for principal interview questions). The teachers at Montgomery Montessori do not have voicemail boxes and all calls go through the secretary. Also, when parents or guests arrive at

the school, the first person they see is the secretary who greets them before they go on to the classrooms.

I interviewed four parents from each of the three classes (a total of 12 parents) to try to gain insight into their perceptions of interactions between themselves and teachers. Eight of these interviews took place in the parents' homes, two took place in a private office at the school, and the remaining two took place at the parents' place of employment in private offices. The principal wanted to identify parents from each class for me to contact about participating. After consultation with the three teachers, the principal emailed me a list of four or five parents from each class with phone numbers who might be willing to talk with me.<sup>8</sup>

In general, the vast majority of parents I interviewed were happy with the school and involvement was variable, though only three parents described themselves as not as involved as others. I contacted the parents by phone to set up the interviews for a date, place and time convenient for them. I began the call by introducing myself as a graduate student who had done some observations in the elementary classes at Montgomery Montessori and who wanted to interview them about their experience as a Montgomery Montessori parent and I noted that the interview would take between 60-90 minutes. Once the parents heard that I had received their name from the teacher or principal and that I had been working with Montgomery Montessori, they were receptive to hear about my work and what I was requesting of them. In total, I

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<sup>8</sup> It is not clear what impact the fact that the teacher/principal identified the parents for me to interview (did they identify only involved and content parents and not disgruntled unhappy ones?).

contacted 15 parents. Three parents were not interviewed due to scheduling conflicts or lack of response (return phone calls) from them.

Initially I was willing to interview either a mother or a father from each family. After initial discussions with each family, it was clear to me that the mothers preferred (due to time/availability) to participate in the interviews. Given that information, I limited my interviews to include only mothers, so all 12 parent interviews were conducted with the mothers in each family (see Appendix C for parent interview questions).

During interviews and observations, I tried to focus my attention on the relationship between parents and teachers. The most useful part of observation was seeing how teachers interacted with their students during class meetings and during lessons. It was also useful to see how parents and teachers communicated in car pool and when they visited the school. Teachers and parents reported on their communication patterns, teachers reported on their perceptions of what they learn from parents and how they use that information in their classroom instruction, parents reported how well they felt the teachers know their children, and teachers reported how they felt connected to their students. We also talked about what information parents choose to share with teachers and why they thought it was relevant to the teacher. During both parent and teacher interviews, we discussed how information was received and teachers and parents reported on how they perceived teachers used parent knowledge in their classroom teaching. The interviews and observations led to the themes listed above (means of communication, what is the content of the communication, how do teachers perceive they use parent knowledge in their

classroom teaching) which provided a framework for exploring what is useful to teachers and what kind of communication parents and teachers prefer. The themes will be analyzed and discussed in the data chapters.<sup>9</sup>

After I completed the interviews with the parents, I again interviewed the three Montessori teachers in the summer of 2008 to try to gain information about specific interactions between the teacher and the specific parent I interviewed. This was done without the teacher knowing which parents I interviewed. The teachers, along with the principal, had provided me a list of parents to interview, though I randomly chose four parents from the list; each list had more than four parents on it. These interviews focused on specific students in order to affirm data from the parent interviews as well as provide an opportunity to reexamine some of the major themes such as communication. It was difficult for the teachers to elaborate on specific students and on specific events that the parents mentioned. This was difficult for two reasons; one was that teachers were reluctant to discuss specific children for privacy reasons and two, it was difficult for me as the interviewer, to ask questions about specific students without identifying which parents I had spoken with.

*Data Analysis:*

During participant observation, brief notes were taken using a notebook and pen and immediately upon leaving the school, lengthier notes were written. Later that same day or evening, I typed up more extensive notes on the observation. I also took

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<sup>9</sup> Initially I intended to obtain copies of emails sent between teachers and parents. Parents were reluctant to provide this information and as the researcher, I did not want to have a negative impact on the parent teacher relationship by asking for privileged information that would affect either party so I did not pursue this.

breaks between interviews for two weeks between the end of May and the middle of June and again at the end of June until the middle of July to focus the study more clearly. The breaks allowed me to review the interviews and refine my interview technique for subsequent interviews.

I conducted all interviews in-person and digitally tape recorded each interview. I transcribed them verbatim, and an analytic memo was written to summarize ideas about each interview (Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland 2006; Miles and Huberman 1994). It took approximately four to five hours to transcribe each 90 minute interview, longer for lengthier interviews. I tried, and was mostly successful, in transcribing interviews or writing up field notes before going back for more observations or interviews. Doing this provided me with a clearer memory of observations and interviews and allowed me to stay on schedule doing three observations and two to three interviews per week.

Interviews were coded to draw out themes (Lofland et al. 2006) such as types of information transmitted, places that it is transmitted, and opinions on what is helpful (or not helpful) information given by parents to teachers. Each instance of a theme was noted and coded. Additionally, after every five interviews, quotes were pulled out and organized by theme and data matrices on paper and on poster board were used to examine trends (Miles and Huberman 1994) and to check for disconfirming evidence (Linn and Erickson 1990). The poster boards were divided by theme and then by respondent with quotes from each respondent taped onto the boards.

Because I conducted and transcribed each interview myself, I decided not to use statistical software. I found that it was possible to conduct data analysis without using software. Later, when beginning to write data chapters, I often looked back at the interview transcriptions to obtain context for quotes, or to review and copy the quote more exactly. During these looks back, I often saw quotes that I missed the first or second time around, and I added them to my data matrices and chapters.

### *Limitations*

There are of course limitations to my study. The first limitation is in regard to the site of Montgomery Montessori. Because it is a private school, the cost of tuition may prevent some families from seeking out this school, leading to a more homogenous group of middle and upper middle class students. The school is also located in a wealthy suburban Maryland neighborhood; it is difficult to get to from farther away, thus leaving the wealthy families who can afford to live in the neighborhood as the only school clients. This school is based on a fairly strict interpretation of Montessori philosophy. This could point to two limitations of this site. First, the reasons for the intensive parent-teacher relationships may be attributable to Montessori philosophy and thus may be considered a flawed example of this relationship. Second, the population of the school may be heavily influenced by the fact that it is a Montessori school and that population is highly self-selected. The Montessori philosophy and schooling is quite different from other private schools and from public schools; only parents in agreement with this philosophy would choose this school. It is also self-selected since families at Montgomery Montessori pay tuition to send their children there. Though these are limitations, the visibility of

the highly personal interactions between parents and teachers seen at this school far out weigh these limitations.

There are also limitations to the study in general. First, the study sample size is small; only twenty-one teachers and twelve parents. This limits the generalizability of the results. Although it provides an in depth study of these teachers, it does not reflect a wide number of participant responses. Second, my study does not examine the differences between grade levels or contexts of each teacher. There may be differences in the parent teacher relationship between grade levels or between contexts. Third, the data from both the teachers and the parents were self-reported. Teachers may have been telling me what they thought I wanted to hear; there may be an aspect of social desirability in the responses. Fourth, I have not extensively observed interactions between the parents and teachers, nor have I observed the majority of the teachers actually teaching. Also, as mentioned earlier, the parents I interviewed were identified by the teachers and principal, and that may have an effect on their perceptions of the teachers and the school. It was very difficult for teachers to articulate in interviews how they use parental knowledge in their teaching. Although most teachers were able to identify some ways they do so, these may not be the only ways parental information informs their teaching. The themes identified through the interview data may be the most common or easiest ways they use that information.



### *Chapter Three*

*Means of teacher-parent interaction: Not all forms of parent involvement are equally valuable to teachers. Some forms of parent involvement provide teachers with information, and some do not. What is important to them is communication and what influences their curriculum.*

According to some research (Coleman 1987; Epstein 1987, 1988, 1995, 2001; Henderson and Mapp 2002; Hoover-Dempsey 1987), parent involvement is linked to student achievement. In many of these studies, parent involvement is described as a combination of activities such as volunteering in classrooms, being involved in the PTA, communicating with teachers, helping children with homework, volunteering in the school office and being on school decision making boards (Epstein 2001). It is not clear however if all forms of involvement are equally valuable to teachers. Some forms of parent involvement provide teachers with information while some do not. Which forms of involvement do teachers most value? Discovering what forms of involvement are helpful to teachers and in what ways requires an examination of each form of involvement. This chapter will explore how teachers perceive differences between parent volunteering and parent-teacher communication.

Teachers in my study report that communication between parents and teachers yields an information exchange that influences teachers' curricula (for a discussion of this see chapter four). There are signs that information that influences teachers' curricula is more valuable to them than other forms of involvement. Because some parents are unable to volunteer during the school day, the only way they become involved is through communication with their child's teacher. Understanding how

communication is different from volunteering clarifies how certain forms of involvement are more helpful to teachers.

Most of the parent involvement literature focuses on parents volunteering in the classroom. However, this literature does not address how parent volunteering affects teachers' classroom practice. One of Epstein's (1995) six types of involvement is classroom or school volunteering. Epstein (2001) makes clear that there are different benefits that result from each form of involvement, but this literature does not explore how teachers perceive each form. For example, Epstein writes that the results for students who are in classrooms where parents volunteer include "skills in communicating with adults, increased learning of skills that receive tutoring or targeted attention from volunteers, and the awareness of many skills, talents, occupations, and contributions of parents and other volunteers" (p 414). These are specific benefits for students, but they do not relate to teacher practice or to teacher perception.

In her book, *Home Advantage* (2000), Lareau describes families who volunteer in classrooms, attend PTA meetings, as well as some who help with lessons at home and who request additional work or certain teachers for their children. She treats all of these forms of involvement as equally beneficial to the teachers. Though she does differentiate between how parents influence teachers to obtain either generic or customized curricula for their children, Lareau does not show how volunteering or being involved in the PTA provides parent knowledge to help classroom teachers. There are signs though that differences exist between various kinds of involvement and in terms of how they inform classroom teaching, but the literature does not make

this distinction. Because a large part of the parent involvement literature, as well as a large part of the parent experience, is based on parent volunteering, it is useful to understand how teachers perceive the value of volunteering and the value of communication with parents.

My chapter makes three key points. First, I will describe the kinds of volunteer activities parents typically do in schools. Second, in contrast to the existent literature, teachers in my study suggest that communication typically does *not* occur while parents are in the classroom or in the school volunteering. Third, teachers seem to value communication with parents more than they value parent volunteers. Though they report that parent volunteers are a “nice bonus,” what they use most in their classroom teaching is knowledge that is imparted to them by parents through set communication.

Volunteering can sometimes become a context for communication. When parents come into schools or classrooms to volunteer, they may have the opportunity to communicate with teachers as they see them in the hallways, in the school office, or even in their classrooms. Though this may happen, teachers did not report that, though parents did. There seems to be a bit of a difference of opinion in what parents find useful and what teachers find useful. It is important to note that volunteering and communication may each be useful, though for different purposes or for different times.

### *Parent Volunteering*

Many schools offer ample opportunities for parents to come into the school to volunteer. Parents often bring snacks to their children’s class for a birthday or special

occasion, parents sometimes do administrative work for teachers or other school staff to help lighten their workload, parents are involved in decision making boards such as school improvement teams, and parents can join the PTA to run programs such as fundraising sales, fairs and festivals. Some schools even make parent volunteering a requirement.

At Montgomery Montessori, parents are required to volunteer in the school at least 15 hours per school year. Volunteer opportunities there include organizing a fall festival, a winter showcase, and a dinner night for parents, students and school staff. During my observations, I saw preparations for a parent-run school auction. Two parents were using the development office at the back of the school to collect supplies, make posters announcing the event, and to produce and distribute fliers for the event. The two volunteers were stay at home mothers who came to the school for “a couple of hours” each week for a month in order to get the school auction ready. The volunteers came to the school in casual clothes (jeans and t-shirts), had use of school materials such as markers and posters. They were also able to use the school copy machine to print fliers and were able to use the phone in the development office to call vendors to ensure that they were set and ready for the event.

Montgomery Montessori also had a parent run book sale to raise funds for the school. During two days of my observations, I walked into the school building to see a long table covered with colorful children’s books in the school lobby opposite the secretary’s desk. Behind the long table sat a mother who was volunteering “just today for two hours in the morning” to sell the books to parents who came into the school as they were dropping off their children.

Also at Montgomery Montessori, parents are expected to volunteer to chaperone “going outs” which are small field trips organized by individual or small groups of students in a particular class. For a “going out,” a parent must come to the school, pick up the children, take them to the activity (such as the library or a museum), and bring them back to the school. In order to do this, parents are given rules at the beginning of the year that they must follow. For example, parents have a meeting with teachers so teachers can explain that their role is as chaperones, not as teachers, and are given written guidelines for safety.

According to teachers I interviewed for this study as well as from an examination of school websites, at public schools, as well as other kinds of private schools, parent volunteering is also often encouraged. At one urban public school, parents are assigned days on which they come in to bring snacks for the whole class. At another, parents volunteer by helping teachers cut out construction paper words for their “word wall” or come in to help with teachers’ copying. At still another, parents are encouraged to assist in classrooms or give a lesson to students about their work or their ethnic heritage. Families are also often involved in holiday celebrations by contributing food or lessons on a specific holiday ritual. One school boasts 40 committees that parents can join to contribute to a range of activities from arts education, school communication, and community outreach, to instructional support, facilities and grounds maintenance, and fundraising.

Tiffany, a fourth grade teacher at an affluent public school in a suburban neighborhood often has many parents who want to volunteer to chaperone field trips such as trips to museums. She reported:

There might be 12 people who want to chaperone and you only need four, so I just have to put names in a jar and pull them out, people get angry and say 'that person chaperoned last year' and I have to deal with that.

While Tiffany thinks it is nice that she has involved parents who want to come to school to be with their children, it sometimes creates more work or more problems than parents realize. Tiffany said sometimes she feels:

The volunteering in school, like chaperoning is more important to the kids, more important to the parents, than to me. I mean, they are helpful, but it is more important to them.

Tiffany recognizes that having volunteers is helpful, but she does not see them as an important part of her teaching.

Amanda, a fourth grade teacher who teaches at the same school as Tiffany reported that she has parents doing different activities:

We have parent volunteers that copy for us twice a week which is really helpful 'cuz you can waste a ton of time in line at the copy machine. I like parent volunteers when we go to the computer lab...and for science, the experiments are a lot of work setting up and keeping the kids on task and organized, so I like to use them for that.

Though Amanda likes to have volunteers she also reported some of the difficulty with having volunteers:

I like to have parent volunteers in the class for certain things but sometimes it is hard to coordinate because sometimes their schedule

changes. I would hate for parents to come in and not have something for them to do, like the computer lab sometimes closes and if a parent were here, I would feel bad.

Amanda appreciates that volunteers that save her time doing administrative tasks and for projects that require a lot of work; she also wants to be respectful of the parents' time and would not want them to feel that they came to volunteer and had a bad experience or were not needed.

Jane also a fourth grade teacher who works in the same school as Amanda and Tiffany reported that parents do volunteer for a variety of tasks:

We set up a copy schedule where we have parents come in to copy and do transparencies and stuff so the parents are doing work for us...I had parents come in when I wanted to do reading inventories and I have had a lot of parents who are substitute teachers who have taught in the past they are willing to come in [to substitute for me].

As some of the other teachers reported, Jane has parents helping with administrative tasks, but she also has asked parents to act as substitute teachers when she is out sick. Jane recognizes that some parents might have more to offer in terms of academic help than others.

Aaron a second grade teacher at a low income public school reported that parents in his class are not very involved, but that the parents who do volunteer mostly do things at home and bring them in. He reported that there were certain things parents could do for him:

I want volunteers to put my words on the wall, make sure my bulletin board looks nice and neat, I want them to do my laminating... I sent words for the wall with strips of paper home to a parent and she sent it back all nicely done and that worked well. It saved me a lot of time.

Aaron specified that he wanted parent volunteers to do things that he did not enjoy doing or was not good at doing. Though parents of students in his class were unable to come to school to volunteer during school hours, they were able to help with things at home.

In Gabriel's first grade class at a low income public school, he has parents come in during certain times of the day, or for certain subjects:

I always have them try to come at math time, it is easy to set up the math for them to do, there is more for them to do, it is more direct, more projects or centers.

Because there is more for the parents to do, Gabriel has parents come in to help with direct teaching of students when they are broken up into groups doing projects or at individual teaching centers. Gabriel uses parent volunteers to help him, but he also is aware of what the parents might find most rewarding.

Jennifer teaches first grade in a private school and she reported that she has many volunteers in her classroom:

This year I would say I had 60% of the parents come in to do something, whether it was to teach a yoga lesson, read a book or make a snack. There are also regular volunteer times like Shabbat



lunch [Friday Sabbath meal] and student of the week, when that student's parents come to the class...Parents come in to do art projects and parents bring in pictures of trips they have taken to the rainforest if we are doing a lesson on rainforests.

Jennifer reported having parents do a variety of activities in her classroom, some for special occasions connected to certain lessons, but she also reported having weekly activities where parents would be in the classroom.

Melanie, a fourth grade teacher at an affluent suburban public school also reported have weekly volunteer activities for parents:

I do this thing called mystery reader where the parents surprise their kids and read a story to the class one day a week. We just did this whole big colonial fair, we studied the settlements and we did colonial crafts so I had a bunch of parents come in that week to help with the crafts, and to help at the fair with the games.

For Melanie, her volunteers help directly with the students. In some cases they read to students, and in other cases, they help Melanie by helping her manage special activities that require more hands on deck.

Stacy, a third grade teacher at a mixed income public charter school reported that snacks are a way that parents become involved in the classrooms in her school:

I have parents sign up for a week to bring snack, they will come in in the morning and drop it off, and sometimes a parent will want to come in and bring cupcakes or something for a kid's birthday.

Each day, at the same time, the whole school eats a snack together. Each class is responsible for obtaining their own snacks. Stacy sends home a sign in sheet for parents to sign up to bring the snacks for a week at a time. Though parents do not spend a lot of time in the school or the classroom when they drop off the snack, it is a volunteer activity that all parents are required to do for the school. In addition, Stacy reported that sometimes parents want to come to the classroom to bring an extra birthday snack for the class. Again, though not too much time is spent in the classroom, it is a time for parents to volunteer and be visible to the teacher and students.

Suzanne, a second grade teacher in a mixed income public school reported that she tries to involve parents in her classroom a couple of times a month:

I have publishing parties for my reading classes where parents come in and the kids read their poems or stories out loud to the parents, like they are publishing their work. Doing this in front of parents really helps the kids' self esteem.

Though Suzanne mentions that publishing parties are beneficial to the students, they are also a way for parents to become involved in the classroom and to be able to see student's work in action.

In addition to parents volunteering at home for their student's classroom teacher, or in the classroom or on a field trip, there are often school-wide events that require parent volunteers. Lena, a first grade teacher in a private school reported:

Parents are very involved, there will be a used book sale or a fundraiser, there is an annual event which is a holiday ball and auction, there are so many aspects that they can be involved in.

Lena reported that she doesn't use parents as volunteers in her classroom very much, but that there are others ways for them to volunteer their time and be involved in the school.

Because volunteering seems to be such a large part of how parents are involved in schools, I wanted to find out more about how teachers perceived that volunteering. Many teachers reported communicating with parents and having parent volunteers as the most common ways that they have contact with parents. I wondered if teachers perceived the two activities differently.

#### *Communication while volunteering*

Surprisingly, teachers, in my small non-random sample, reported that volunteering and being in the classroom or school does not necessarily facilitate communication between parent and teacher.

Rick, a third grade teacher in a mixed income rural school, often has parents coming in to volunteer for his class making copies or cutting out construction paper words for his word wall, but he said:

Very little communication [happens then] they come in, get the box of stuff, they take it to another room sometimes, they copy it, and that was the volunteering that day. Very little communication [happens] about the student.

Teachers in interviews seem to suggest that volunteering in the classroom serves a different purpose than communication between parents and teachers. Since while they are volunteering, there does not seem to be much interaction, teachers and parents must find other ways to communicate such as during meetings, conferences, or via phone calls and email.

Eleanor said that she has volunteers in the classroom everyday:

Parents bring in snacks like carrots or muffins for the whole class each morning, but I don't really talk to parents then. Actually very rarely does communication happen at that point.

Eleanor reported that then "just isn't the time to discuss important matters" she would rather have a set time to talk, she is busy with other students, and she likes to give parents all of her attention when talking with them. Eleanor implied that there is a difference between what happens when parents volunteer and when they come in to have a conference.

In addition to volunteering in the classroom or school, many parents come to their child's school to attend assemblies, plays or other school and holiday festivals. This could be a time where parents and teachers meet and talk. According to the teachers I interviewed, however, communication does not seem to happen at that time. At Montgomery Montessori I observed parents coming in to the classroom to take a few children on a "going out" field trip. In one case, the mother came into the classroom, stood in the doorway for a minute looking reluctant to come into the room. After a minute she came into the room and approached a girl who was to be attending the "going out." The mother briefly waved and smiled at the teacher who was across

the room giving a math lesson to a small group of students. The mother and the girl gathered two other students who would be going on the trip and they quietly left the room. I was also observing in the classroom when the group returned from the trip. Again, the mother briefly came into the classroom to drop off the students and to make sure they got back to class, but she did not do more than wave and smile to the teacher at that time.

Rick, a third grade teacher works in a rural school where many parents either work or volunteer in the school. He often sees parents in the hallways during the school day and at school events. I asked Rick if he talked to parents more because he physically sees them more often:

If there was a funny incident [would talk about it in the hallway where he sees many parents] or if I thought there was a concern, I would ask them to come meet me after school one day to discuss the problem, but I wouldn't talk about academic issues in the hallway.

Rick feels that the time he sees parents in the hallway is time for a quick hello or small talk, but he would not want to begin a serious conversation at that time. Rick suggests that it is more professional to have a set meeting to discuss serious issues with parents and that the hallway is only a time for quick chats.

Darlene, a second grade teacher, works in a lower income suburban school. She too, sometimes sees parents in the school hallways. Darlene makes small talk or provides quick updates to parents in the hallways, but does not begin academic discussions at that time:

In a conference it is more academic discussion, if I see them [a parent] in the hallway, I might be like ‘oh, we read this book, or they [the student] did a great job here’ we don’t talk about concerns or anything that is going on at home.

Darlene reported that quick chats in the hallway are “nice” for updating parents or for giving them a brief idea of what they did in class, but it is not the time for academic discussions; those happen during a set conference. Teachers suggest that there is a difference between what topics are appropriate to discuss in the hallway and what are not. Though this is an example where parents and teachers have a chance for short chats while parents may be in the school for volunteering.

Shannon, a fourth grade teacher at a mixed income school sends home a newsletter each week and invites parents to many school-wide events like international day, spirit days, and celebrations. During these times, Shannon reported that there is informal conversation about the weather and asking about vacations, or maybe a parent will give an update on an issue that was already discussed, for example about progress on math flash cards, but Shannon says:

If they have some kind of problem that just came up, they won’t start a whole big conversation, they may schedule a time to talk at one of the events, but never discuss then and there.

Shannon reported that these are more social school activities where it is “not appropriate” to begin a lengthy discussion of a problem. Shannon said that she has had parents write her emails about family changes or updates, but she said that most parents will wait until conference time to give her information like a family divorce, a

move or a family member being sick. Shannon said that “most of the important stuff is done on purpose, we know there is this problem, or this area to address so we make a time to discuss.”

Teachers report wanting to set aside special time so they know they can give parents the consideration that they deserve. Teachers want to be able to fully commit their minds and their time to the issues at hand when talking to parents. Volunteering and being in the school seems to have its own separate purpose, different from having a time to communicate with teachers.

Not only do teachers report wanting to set aside time to talk to parents, they suggest that while parents are in the class or in the school volunteering, it is not an appropriate time to delve into communication with parents. This implies that there is a difference between parent volunteering and parent-teacher communication. It also seems to be the case that volunteering and communication between parents and teachers are separate, non-overlapping activities. Though as seen above, while parents are volunteering, they may have quick chats with teachers which may lead to a comfort in the relationship. How do teachers perceive the value of these activities?

#### *Value and difference between volunteering and communication*

The teachers in this study work in schools with varying degrees of parent involvement. Some teachers have many parents volunteering in classrooms, while others have very few. Some teachers in this study promote parent volunteering and some do not. Looking at these differences, it is important to begin to understand what part of parent involvement is most helpful for teachers and if all forms of involvement

are equally valuable to teachers while keeping in mind that forms may be valuable for teachers and parents in different ways and at different times.

Lena, a veteran first grade teacher in a private school, stated that she does not like to have parent volunteers in the classroom. She says that parents “are welcome to come and observe or to make special meetings” with her, but that she likes to maintain authority in what goes on in the classroom. After a long discussion of when she sees parents and when they talk, I asked Lena: “Do I understand you to mean that volunteering is not that important to you but that communicating and having a relationship with parents is important?” She responded by saying “yes, that is right, it is, it definitely is.” Though Lena is a bit different from other teachers in that she does not have parent volunteers, she makes a distinction between the kind of interactions with parents that are valuable and which are not.

Like Lena, Eleanor, a third grade teacher in a mixed income public charter school does not use volunteers very much. Eleanor expressed feeling guilty for not having more volunteers since she knows some parents like to do that. She even went so far as to say:

It is actually extra work sometimes to create structured roles where they [parents] feel important, but it isn't necessarily a help in the classroom, you could do without it.

Though she feels guilty for not doing it more, Eleanor often does not have the time to create extra work for parents who want to volunteer. Though she thinks it is “nice for parents who want to be involved in that way,” it is often more work for her, not less, as parents might imagine.



Eleanor went on to say that though she does not have many volunteers in her classroom, but that she might work on changing that:

I actually have to work on encouraging parents to volunteer more, I am a very self sufficient teacher, I like to have everything planned out and if I didn't have parent volunteers, the classroom would keep working fine...I love volunteers, but I don't really need them. I feel bad about that because I know some parents really want that...parents just want to feel part of the school life and important and that is nice.

Eleanor sees the value of volunteering from the parents' point of view, but that it does not enhance her teaching all that much. She reported that she could do her job as a teacher without volunteers.

I asked Shannon, a young fourth grade teacher in a mixed income public school, "is there a difference between communicating with parents and parents volunteering?" she said:

Yeah, absolutely. I would say the most helpful thing is getting information about the kid. I am used to doing my own Xeroxing and there are always aides who can help, but those are not the most important things, it is more about being able to have information about the student and that parent who is willing to talk out problems even if they don't have time to come into the school [to volunteer].

Shannon suggests that teaching the child should be a partnership between teacher and parents and that problems in the classroom should be tackled through a joint effort of

both the parents and the teacher working together to solve the problem. Here Shannon says specifically that what she values most is “getting information from a parent about a child.” She implies that parents have some knowledge of their child that could be helpful to her classroom teaching. She understands that having parents volunteer is helpful and sometimes lightens her administrative workload, but what she really values from parents for her teaching practice is communication and partnership in solving problems.

Eleanor spoke knowledgeably about Bronfenbrenner’s and Epstein’s spheres of influence during our interview. I asked Eleanor: “What do you think shapes your pedagogy in the classroom and what really matters to your teaching?” She responded:

I see the child as part of all these different spheres, home, school, out of school time, and I want to make sure that in my role as a teacher, I am able to connect with all those other spheres to really promote those other spheres for the child. And that is so important because if you are not aware of what is going on in those other spheres what you are doing can only reach so far and if you really have a connection between all the spheres, I think you can do more and I think that really shapes my pedagogy and shapes my teaching.

Eleanor reported an awareness that children develop in different spheres, the home and the school, and that knowing about each helps her gain a fuller picture of her students which in turn, helps her teach them more effectively. When I asked her: “Do you think there is a difference between parents who come in and volunteer or are in

the school and parents who give you information about their home life?” Eleanor replied:

If parents give me information about their kid, it is really key, according to my thinking about their different spheres, I really need that information in order to best help the child, that is crucial actually.

Eleanor does not though want to ignore the value of parents volunteering:

I am very grateful for that [the snacks and volunteering] but I don't expect it, it is kind of a blessing, I don't take it for granted. For the information piece, I don't take that for granted either, I know it is hard, but I expect that a lot more because it is so important.

Eleanor reports that the classroom runs more smoothly when those things are taken care of, and she knows that doing those things “make parents feel better,” but she does differentiate how having knowledge from parents helps her teaching.

In addition to differentiating between volunteering and communicating, some teachers differentiate between what is beneficial for some students as opposed to others. In making the distinction between volunteering in the classroom or school and giving information, Jane, a young fourth grade teacher in an affluent suburban school with a great deal of parent involvement said:

I think it is most important to have the parents who are involved in the way that their kids need them to be involved...for some kids, seeing their parents in school is really special and important and some kids are immature and maybe it isn't best for them...

With regard to Molly, a fourth grade student who had learning issues, possible learning disabilities and special needs that Jane felt her mother would not address or acknowledge, Jane felt differently:

But for other kids, like Molly, I think it would have been nicer if her mom had been more involved in communicating with her teachers because she had some severe issues.

Jane differentiates between different needs of each student. Like Molly, Jane's experience with Greg, a student with more severe learning issues. Greg needed specific instructions from Jane and often needed individual attention in order to understand assignments. Jane made it clear that the conversations and information that she received from Greg's parents was invaluable in helping her teach him. Jane said:

It was much more important for his parents to tell me what was going on because that was what was going to make his day good or bad.

In this case, the communication between teacher and parent was necessary to improve the daily interactions between teacher and student. But for some of her other students, Jane felt it would have been more helpful to have the parents in school volunteering. Jane made distinctions between what each student's needs were and wanted the best type of involvement for each one. In this case, a teacher reports, forms of involvement are not equally valuable, but the value differs based on student need.

An important distinction was made by Tracy, another fourth grade teacher who works with Jane at the affluent suburban public school. For her, as a teacher, knowing the information the parents have is most important. For the student though, it is sometimes more important that they see their parents come in and volunteer.

Tracy reported:

Sometimes there is a difference between what type of involvement might benefit the student and what type of involvement might benefit me.

The teacher must keep that in mind when deciding what to ask for from parents with limited time or limited interest in being involved in the school. Tracy's distinction makes the case for having parents visible in the classroom for the sake of the students, but having close communication and a sharing of knowledge for the sake of the teacher. In the end, both forms benefit the student.

Like Tracy, Jennifer, a first grade teacher in a private school, makes a distinction between what is good for the student and what is most important for her as the teacher. Jennifer said:

What is important to me is that the parent knows what is going on and is in communication [with me]. If they can't come in, that is not most important. If the parent is open and shares what needs to be shared, I don't care if they can't come on a field trip, if they can rearrange their schedule and come on one, it means they made an effort and the kid feels so good about it. But I think being able to

communicate and knowing all the information is more important than coming in four or five times to do activities with the kids.

Again, it is a fine line between what the teacher needs and what the student needs. Nevertheless, there is in each case, a differentiation between volunteering and communication. They are not necessarily equally relevant or useful for the teachers.

Though teachers report that there is a difference between communication with parents and having parents volunteer, it does not have to be a zero sum game. Some teachers reported that certain children may need their parents to be around the school more. Though communication is what provides teachers with information they can use in their teaching, there are other benefits to having volunteers. Although none of the teachers in this study mentioned it, having volunteers help with administrative tasks, or in the classroom, may sometimes free up time for teachers to communicate with parents. There may be times that parents come to classrooms to volunteer when there is opportunity for small talk, or chit chat between the parent and teacher. Some teachers reported that this chit chat occurs, but they specified that it was not about student issues, more about the weather. More teachers may not have reported that to me, as they may be unaware of these little moments or they may even discount them. Even if that is the case, however, it is reasonable to think that if it was important to teachers, they would have reported on it. They did not do so, nor did I observe it happening. Given the nature of this study though, I cannot be sure that the dichotomy between volunteering and communication is so stark.

#### *Disconfirming Evidence*

Though most teachers did make distinctions, either for what they themselves preferred or for what their students needed, some teachers reported that volunteering and communicating were similar.

I asked Darlene, a second grade teacher in a low income school: “In terms of volunteering or communication, is one more useful for you than the other?” Darlene responded:

I guess it can depend on the kind of information shared and the activity. But I think I just appreciate talking or seeing them [parents] because that is an interest so I appreciate that. So I guess not really, if they are involved either way, it is great, because we don’t have a lot of parent involvement here.

Because Darlene works in a school where there is not a lot of parent involvement of any kind, she appreciates any kind at all.

I also asked Helen, a third grade teacher in a low income urban school: “Do you think as a teacher, that volunteering or communicating with parents is more valuable than the other?” Helen responded:

No, because I think that ultimately you have to respect and appreciate whatever the family can do...if the parents are doing whatever they can do...they are equally as valuable because you need them to be there for their child most importantly, you can get people to go on field trips, they don’t have to be relatives, but you need the parent to be there for the child, that is most important thing.

Helen was very respectful of all the parents of students in her class and wanted to reach out to them and forge relationships with them no matter what that relationship looked like. Helen understood that many of the parents worked multiple jobs and could not come into the classroom to volunteer, but she reported that she just wanted to ensure that the parents were supportive of their children in whatever ways they could be.

When I asked Suzanne, a second grade teacher in a mixed income public school the same question, she differentiated between volunteering and parents helping their children at home:

I think that parent being involved at home with the child makes a big difference. I think if the parent does a lot at home with the child, but doesn't come to my class to volunteer, it doesn't make a big difference. The parents aren't always able to volunteer.

Like Helen, Suzanne recognizes that some parents are not able to come to the school to volunteer. What she appreciates most and feels makes the biggest difference in terms of learning for her students is when parents help at home.

For a few teachers in my sample, they were happy to have parents involved in any way that was convenient for the parents. These teachers did not place different values on the type of involvement. It is interesting that the teachers who were most appreciative of any kind of involvement were all from lower income schools where there was a reported low rate of involvement.

*Summary*



Communication is an important aspect of the parent-teacher relationship, one that is not necessarily fulfilled when parents volunteer in schools. No matter how or when it happens, teachers want to have relationships with parents and they want to gain information from them. They also seem to feel that parents deserve special attention and teachers want to be fully present in conversations with them. Learning from parents is one way that teachers can get to know their students better. There is a need to differentiate between generic parent involvement, such as classroom or school volunteering and targeted communication. The literature to date has failed to recognize that teachers may have different goals for their interactions with parents. As Epstein (2001) has stated, each form of involvement can produce different results. We now understand more about what teachers themselves value. According to the interviews from teachers in this study, teachers prefer and encourage communication, while still understanding the more limited benefits of encouraging volunteering. Or, the teachers might not see how volunteering might help them have time to communicate with others. There also seems to be hidden labor for teachers to make volunteering meaningful for parents. It is important to make the distinction between volunteering and communication, as much of the literature and practice combine the two very different activities under the single title of parent involvement. It seems that not all forms of parent involvement are equally valuable to teachers. What is important to them is communication and what influences their curriculum. Not all forms of involvement provide teachers with information. Communication is a form of involvement that does provide information. As we will see in the next chapter,

information that teachers obtain from parents can be used in classroom teaching to make lessons more accessible to students.

## **ADDENDUM TO CHAPTER THREE**

### *Parent Responses*

While in other chapters I have focused exclusively on teachers' perspectives, in this case, I thought it especially important to supplement the teacher responses with perspectives from parents. As I elaborated in chapter two and in chapter seven, I carried out twelve ninety minute interviews with four parents from each of the three Montessori classrooms where I had observed. In the interviews, parents seem to approach volunteering and communicating with teachers differently than the teachers did. As I will show, parents were similar to teachers in that they made distinctions between volunteering and communicating with teachers, but they also had some different perspectives. Many parents felt that volunteering was a way to become comfortable with teachers and that volunteering provided a context for communication.

For example, parents were more likely to see volunteering as facilitating communication in that it provided an opportunity for the parent to build a relationship and make contact with teachers. This theme did not emerge in teacher interviews.

Sarina, a parent with a student in Karen's class said:

It seems like the communication would be the building block for the volunteering. That first you establish that communication and then...you want to give more... So the communication and talking leads to a comfort...They are just different, I don't think one is more helpful...my goal is not to offer administrative support.

Once Sarina had established a communicative relationship with Karen, she was willing to volunteer in the class doing arts and crafts projects, something she enjoyed, the communication “leads to a comfort.” What Sarina did not want to do was volunteer with administrative tasks. Sarina reported feeling that it might be a help to the teacher to let them go home earlier if someone else was doing their copying, but that in private school or in wealthy suburban public schools, administrative help was not really what the school needed.

Candice made a comment similar comment about the link between volunteering and communication, though she described a path that ran the opposite way. She reported that once you volunteer, you are more comfortable communicating:

I think one helps the other. The more you are involved in the school...I think it is easier to communicate, rather than not seeing a parent for the whole year and I think it helps with the communication if the parents are involved and usually the parents are involved volunteering in conversations or emailing so I think that even if they are separate, they go pretty much hand in hand.

These two opinions are two sides of the same coin; both parents see volunteering and communication as valuable to them as parents and as closely connected forms of involvement.

Similarly, Dawn, a parent with a student in Lucy’s class responded that she felt that the two forms of parent involvement are different, but that one helps with the other.

I do think they are different. The giving of our time is more supportive of Lucy as an individual and communicating is more of a professional support to help her be a better teacher. I think they are both important...because of the relationship we have in place [that was created] by doing the volunteering, creating a positive relationship is easier and then we were very open to anything she had to say.

When Dawn's son had to be assessed for special needs, she felt she was more open to hearing that from Lucy because they already had established a positive relationship through communication and volunteering.

When my son had to be tested by an outside assessment firm, Lucy was very supportive. Lucy recommended the testing, and I think I was more open to hearing that because of our relationship. It is hard to hear that, but it was better coming from Lucy.

For Dawn, both kinds of involvement are important and she reported feeling comfortable with and trusting of Lucy because Dawn's volunteering had helped to create a relationship.

Other parents felt that they got different kinds of information "out of" teachers in the different activities. For example, Nancy, who also has a child in Lucy's class, echoed Dawn in saying that volunteering and communication are different. But she had different reasons for saying this. I asked Nancy, "is there a difference between you volunteering and you communicating with the teacher?" She replied:

I think they are different. And I think it is important to have a balance of both...I mean, communicating is also for me, not only Lucy...they are different ways to participate and so you get different information out of them. And it is not mutually exclusive. I do the volunteering in class and to going outs to see my kid at school, in action, but I talk to the teacher to understand the learning.

Nancy reported that volunteering is an opportunity for her to observe her child and his friends and other students in the class. By doing that, she learns something about her child. Through communicating she also learns about her child, and she has the opportunity to help in Lucy learn about her child, but it is learning through the teacher.

Janet felt that communication with Lucy was much more important than volunteering in the classroom.

I think that the dialog interaction with the teacher is a whole lot more important than the volunteering for the teacher...the ongoing interaction with the teacher is much more important to me than volunteering. It is also much more informative and rewarding...I think the teacher derives benefit because they have an extra person or two in there lightening their load, but they don't really get they don't get to talk to me while I am volunteering.

Janet specifies that communication is more "informative and rewarding" for her; she suggests that she appreciates both being able to tell the teacher information as well as getting information from the teacher.

Eve, a parent with a student in both Lucy's class and one in Karen's class reported that there is a difference between volunteering and communicating with the teacher, but that they complement one another.

It is easier to be involved if I am at the school a lot sitting there at the book fair...it is much easier for me to feel comfortable stopping Lucy in the hall on a given day and talking to her quickly as opposed to if I am not in the school a lot I think I might feel a little bit more hesitant to just run in the morning and just stop her. So I think it helps me feel more comfortable...so that I am comfortable to then call if there is something I really need to communicate...Communication is absolutely important.

Much like some of the parents in Karen's class, Eve reported that she wanted to feel comfortable communicating with teachers and that being in the school building volunteering and becoming a familiar face helped her gain that comfort. The volunteering aided in the later communication.

Like teachers, parents differentiate between volunteering in the school and communicating with their child's teacher. Parents and teachers agree. Though some parents do not report feeling that one is better than the other, they do distinguish that they are used for different purposes. Those purposes include help for the teacher, either administratively or to allow them to better teach and help for the parent in gaining information and in feeling comfortable with the teacher and the school. Also, like teachers, parents recognize that some forms of involvement may be preferred by some parents and teachers while other forms are not viewed as helpful to all in every

circumstance and for every goal. The parent responses however do indicate that volunteering sometimes can aid in the relationship building between teachers and parents. According to some parents, volunteering can increase the comfort that they feel in their relationships with teachers.



## *Chapter Four*

### *Customizing Curriculum Based on Parental Knowledge*

As we saw in the previous chapter, not all forms of parent involvement are perceived as equally valuable to teachers. Teachers report that there is a difference between kinds of involvement such as communication and volunteering. In the previous chapter we have also seen that not all forms of parent involvement provide the teacher with information; some forms do while others do not. When involvement or interactions between parents and teachers does result in an information or knowledge exchange, how do teachers perceive that they use it?

The current parent involvement literature (Coleman 1987; Epstein 2001; Hoover-Dempsey 1987; Lareau 2000) presumes that if teachers obtain information, they use it. Yet there are signs that information varies in utility; that some forms and types of information can be more helpful than others. In addition, it is unclear how, if at all, teachers use knowledge from parents in their classroom practice. It is widely assumed that parent involvement naturally leads to student achievement but it is not clear how.

Despite the volumes of research on parent involvement, it is not clear what kinds of involvement helps teachers or how it helps them teach. Researchers say that parent involvement impacts student achievement in different ways. For example, some researchers say that parent involvement is getting children ready for school (reading at home and teaching children the alphabet) and by attending school events and completing whatever task teachers ask of them (Lareau 2000). Still others say

that parent involvement is providing a place for children to complete homework (Epstein 1987; Hoover Dempsey 1987). James Coleman has suggested that parent involvement helps students stay in school and reduces the drop out rate (Coleman 1987). Good attitudes about school and good behavior in school may be affected by the home school partnership (Epstein 2001). Some teachers suggest involving parents in learning activities at home thus increasing the educational time parents and children have together (Epstein 2001).

Additionally, many schools have different ways of involving parents (based on Joyce Epstein's six types involvement), from an active PTA and encouraging volunteering in classrooms to having workshops for parents which yield different outcomes for student achievement, attitudes or behavior. Despite studies examining parent involvement, there is still much we do not know about "which practices, how, when, for whom, and why particular practices produce positive outcomes" (Epstein 2001, p. 45). One part of the parent-teacher relationship that has not been studied is what parents and teachers talk about and how it affects teaching. Parents may have information about their own children that could be helpful to teachers. It is important to study what that information is, how teachers use it and how they perceive it helps their teaching.

More important than how they view knowledge from parents is how teachers perceive that they use that knowledge. Parents spend a lot of time with their children and often, they are their children's first teachers. Schools and homes are "overlapping spheres of influence" (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Epstein 2001). Epstein writes about "school-like families" and "family-like schools." In family-like schools,

teachers may relax standards, vary their instruction, or change their reward systems “to be more responsive to the student and to be more like a family” (Epstein 2001, p.33). These actions, taken by teachers, affect the relationships they have with students and improve student motivation and progress, according to Epstein. I wondered though how teachers decided to take those individual actions; I wondered if teachers thought that parents could offer them any information or knowledge about their own children to help them make those changes.

In my interviews with teachers I found that teachers reported that knowing about their students’ home lives and outside interests was helpful to their teaching. Teachers reported telling parents at conferences or at back to school night that they should “feel free to tell [them] what was going on at home.” When I asked teachers how they obtained information from parents, many teachers responded that they solicited that information at the beginning of the year. As Shannon, a fourth grade teacher in a mixed income public school reported: “at open house night, I ask parents to fill out a form about their children’s activities and talents, as well as what skills they have that they might want to share with the class.” Some teachers send home forms for parents to fill out about family life and student interests and activities as Jennifer, a first grade teacher in a private school reported: “I send home a form for parents to fill out with basic family information, like if the parents are divorced and how many siblings they have.” Some teachers have parents write letters about their children at the beginning of the year in which they can tell the teacher anything they want them to know. One of my respondents, Eleanor, a teacher in an urban charter school, said it best when she said “if you don’t use parental knowledge in your

teaching, I am not sure what the point would be to communicate with parents. I think teachers in my old setting would just gossip about parents, I think if you are not using that constructively, what is the purpose of knowing what is going on with the parents.” Although Eleanor was explicit in saying that she used parent information in her teaching, there was more to find out about how she used the information.

While it was very difficult for teachers to articulate, in interviews, how they use parental knowledge in their teaching, most teachers were able though to identify some ways they do so. The themes identified through interviews can be broken down into changes in routine classroom teaching and changes for special needs or occasions. Included in the routine classroom teaching are three themes.

- First, using children’s interests in providing classroom examples.
- Second, using children’s interests to provide motivation.
- Third, using information to alter assignments and homework.

In addition to the regular occasions during class or in preparation for class that teachers report using parent knowledge, there are times when specific children have a special need or a particular situation arises when a teacher might use parent knowledge. Within the category of special occasions or special needs, another four themes emerged.

- First, making changes for students’ learning styles.
- Second, individualizing instruction.
- Third, providing referrals for special education or gifted and talented programs.
- Finally, changes for different behaviors.

These are the ways that teachers perceive that parent involvement, specifically communication between parents and teachers, helps them customize their curriculum.

Despite the amount of knowledge that parents give teachers, there is some information that teachers can obtain from the students themselves. Some of this information may even be best obtained from the students instead of the parents. In some cases, though, as when children are too young, when specific details are necessary, or when a subject is sensitive, teachers appreciate acquiring information from parents. Getting information about students helps teachers motivate and engage students in the classroom, a vital part of teaching. It is beyond the scope of this study to determine if the information teachers receive is accurate, misleading or even harmful to students because of inaccuracy or bias. There is also some variation among teachers and some disconfirming evidence that some teachers report that they do not receive information from parents at all. This will be discussed at the end of this chapter, but the overall patterns are clear.

#### Routine Classroom Teaching

##### *Customizing Curriculum: Personalizing classroom examples*

A large part of teaching is creating examples for lessons. The teachers in this study find that if they are using examples in class, students' interest peaks if they are mentioned in the example or if one of their interests is mentioned. In order to increase motivation to learn, teachers in this study report incorporating students' outside interests in classroom examples. Teachers sometimes learn about students' outside interests from conversations with parents. For example, Jane, a fourth grade teacher in a suburban school in an affluent neighborhood, said:

I try to give examples that relate to things they are interested in so they are more involved and interested in what we are doing.

Motivating students to pay attention and engage in classroom lessons is a challenge in teaching. Teachers I interviewed for this study report that using this technique helps keep student interest and learning at a higher level. Teachers use this valuable information to facilitate learning.

In particular, many teachers I interviewed report using personal examples in math problems. Math is a subject in which teachers use many examples in class and for homework assignments. Incorporating student interests and activities keeps examples interesting to students. According to Schultz (2003), “it is essential, but not always enough, for classrooms to reflect students’ lives with books and materials that build on their deeply felt interests and heritage” (p.14-15). Many teachers in this study extend this theory to using students’ interests not only in books and materials, but in classroom examples as well. Some teachers report students looking forward to math problems since they can search out if their interests were used in an example. Rick, a third grade teacher in a rural school said:

I use students’ outside activities constantly in math. We might make tally charts or bar graphs that have to do with favorite activities after school.

Another example of using interests in math was reported by Tiffany, a fourth grade teacher at a wealthy suburban school :

Areas of interest are good to know, in math, I will have a quiz and say ‘Alex is going to watch his favorite baseball team’ because I

know he loves baseball and it just makes it more personal and it does affect their academics.

Tiffany mentioned that using student interests in examples “affects their academics” many teachers mentioned this using similar language. They did not, however say that using interests or using knowledge they received from parents made test scores rise or increased grade point averages. Instead, they mentioned things like increasing motivation to read or do math work and an increased interest in the subject being taught.

David, an elementary teacher at Montgomery Montessori, reported that he likes to know what his students do outside of school and what personal interests they have in order to forge an attachment to his students.

I would say to the kid, I heard you had a great soccer game, tell me about it...I like to know what is going on in their lives...maybe I would make a word problem up and say, if there are 12 members of your soccer team... maybe I would do it subconsciously. I want to forge a connection, get to know the child.

In this example, David wants to know about his student’s soccer game for two reasons. One reason is so he can be involved in his students’ lives and to make a connection with them. Having a connection between student and teacher can help teachers attend to the social and emotional development of their students and can foster relationships that aid student learning. The second reason for David to know about his student’s soccer game is so he can use that information in his classroom teaching. David reported making up a word problem about soccer. If students see

themselves and their interests reflected in class work or word problems, it can motivate them to pay attention to their work.

Karen, also an elementary teacher at Montgomery Montessori, reported wanting to know about the whole child, which included learning about her students' home life, extracurricular activities and outside interests as well as what is going on at home. She reported that she could use this information in different ways.

I might during a discussion when we are talking about Italy, [I would say] oh yeah, you went there a couple summers ago with your dad and mom, what was that like? I wouldn't say I make conscious effort to build a lesson around it, but if I can remember to bring up a personal experience from the child's life into a lesson I would.

Karen reported that when students feel that her lessons are connected to their lives, they pay more attention, so she used student interests in her lessons. It is interesting to note that Karen mentioned that she does not make a "conscious effort to build lessons around" students' interests, but she does use the information in more informal ways throughout a class period.

Teachers in this study say that by making examples relevant to their lives, students are more open to learning and pay more attention in class. Using personal names or interests in homework assignments or word problems keeps students interested in the work and excited to read the problems. This also makes students feel that their teachers care about them and know about them, thus increasing mutual respect for one another (Stipek 2006). Some teachers in this study report that using the students' areas of interest are what they use "most often" in terms of information



they get from parents. The data from the Montessori teachers was not different from the data reported by the teachers I interviewed from other schools. What the teachers from the non-Montessori schools reported was echoed by the Montessori teachers in the case study. Skills or knowledge that help a teacher build that successful classroom are essential tools for a teacher to possess and some of that knowledge comes from conversations with parents. This is a concrete way that all the teachers in this study perceive they use knowledge gained from parents in their everyday teaching.

*Customizing Curriculum: Students' interests providing motivation*

The vast majority of teachers that I interviewed described using their students' outside interests, hobbies and activities to motivate students in their reading and writing. This is another way in which teachers can modify the curriculum in order to meet student needs. Teachers in this study reported that parent communication about their children's interests has a direct affect on their ability to motivate students in reading and writing. A large part of the elementary school curriculum is focused on reading: students reading on their own, the teacher reading to the students, parents reading to their children at home, participating in literature circles, and students reading out loud. Teachers report that they need to find ways to motivate students to keep them on the task of reading.

Another part of the elementary school curriculum is writing. Most of the teachers I interviewed have their students write journal entries almost everyday and have writing assignments for homework. In many cases, teachers allow and even encourage students to write about their own lives. They also allow the students to

choose their writing topics. A few teachers told me that they use certain tools to teach writing. As Margaret, a second grade private school teacher reported: “One tool that I use to teach writing is personal essays or journal writing.” Many of the teachers I interviewed described their students as sometimes at a loss for what to write about. For example, Jennifer, a first grade teacher in a private school said:

I have my students write in a non-fiction journal about their lives and personal experiences. Inevitably after the first two times they don't know what to write about so that is where those things [student interests] come in handy, and you can say, ‘I know you are a big ice skater, can you tell me about something that you have done in ice skating’ and then it jogs their train of thought and they can write their journal entry.

These teachers reported that knowing their students well and knowing what they are interested in and what they do outside of school gives them the opportunity to direct their writing better. Almost all the teachers in this study related tales of how they used students' outside interests in their writing and reading assignments. They reported finding out about individual students' interests from the parents or from the students themselves. If the information can be obtained from the students themselves, it is less important to get it from the parents. However, it is not always possible to acquire the information from the students, and parent input is necessary. Shannon, a fourth grade teacher in a mixed income public school, reported:

There was one little girl who was in tears almost everyday at lunch, and I was at a total loss about what to do...I went back to the parent sheet and the mom had written that she had had a rough time over the summer with some of her friends...sure enough we sat down and talked about it and that was exactly what was going on...but if I hadn't had that note from mom, the child wouldn't talk about it, I don't know how long it would have taken me to figure out what was going on.

Children are sometimes emotional or unable to tell the teacher what they need. Though a teacher might sometimes prefer the student telling him or her, at the end of the day, the teacher needs the information. If the teachers have this information, they are better armed or prepared to help the students relate their work to their lives and provide inspiration and guidance in reading and writing as Allison, a fourth grade teacher in a public school in a wealthy neighborhood, reported:

If they [the students] are having trouble with figuring out what to write, I could say what about writing about something that they are interested in.

It is difficult for some students to think up topics on their own, but by having information, teachers are able to guide students and motivate them to enjoy writing since they are able to relate the writing to their own lives. This assists in the learning process of writing. Obtaining information about students' interests from parents helps teachers facilitate learning on an individual level.

In addition to having difficulty with subjects to write about, some students have trouble with the actual technical skills, such as holding a pencil correctly, needed for writing and reading that causes them to dislike doing it. Eleanor, a third grade teacher in an urban charter school, explained:

Choosing books for them about motorcycles, if they are interested in motorcycles, can be a way to bridge the mechanics of reading and writing and to promote reading. Writing is a challenge for some students in my class and the mechanics get in the way. If you bring something up like, your mom told me that you won first place in the swimming contest, do you want to write about that? That way you integrate skills that might be challenging for kids with something at home so they get over the mechanics of having to get it perfect or fill in a blank page.

Teachers in this study report wanting to make all parts of the reading or writing process easier for a student. This can include using student interests for motivation or to make the lesson more palatable for the student. The technique of using students' outside interests is one way that teachers do this as Helen, a teacher in a low income urban school explained:

You can take any subject matter and build in reading and writing, so if a child is interested in dinosaurs for example, you can have them count or sort dinosaurs, read books about them, describe them, spell them, or if they are older, they can look up dinosaurs in the

encyclopedia, online, go to a museum, anything can be built off interests.

Though Helen and Margaret teach in very different settings, one in a wealthy suburban school and one in an impoverished urban school, they have similar experiences of using student interests to make lessons more interesting and more relevant to students' lives which, they say, makes teaching and learning easier. Margaret, a second grade teacher in a private school reported:

Today we read a story about baseball because this family has communicated to me an interest in baseball. I am hoping the story was a little more interesting to the child than a story about something else. You try to weave it all together.

Margaret feels that when the lesson is more interesting, the students will learn more since they pay better attention and are more "captivated and engaged" by the lesson. This is one way that teachers' communication with parents affects classroom teaching on a daily basis.

Teachers in this study each believed that using the knowledge about their students' interests really enhanced learning for their students. They used students' particular interests to motivate them to complete their work and to make the work more interesting and more relevant. Some teachers also stated that their students pay more attention to the problems, assignments, examples, and texts if they think the work may relate to them or use their names. Suzanne, a second grade teacher said it best when she said, "knowing what my kids are interested in, and being able to direct their reading to things they are interested in, they will be more motivated to read

which in turn will make them more successful readers and it is really helpful to know exactly what types of books kids like to read.”

*Customizing Curriculum: Homework*

In addition to using parent knowledge in classroom examples and to motivate students in reading and writing, a final way that teachers routinely customize their curriculum and help individual students is with homework. Some teachers make accommodation as to when assignments are due. Some teachers report that they do not assign homework on certain nights. Some teachers make sure that their students know what to do in cases where their parents are not home to help with homework. Parental information is one way that teachers find out about what is going on with their students; teachers in this study report that they use that information to make changes in homework assignments. Shannon, a fourth grade teacher in a mixed income suburban school, said:

I will often excuse a child for homework outright if a family member is sick, but more often, I will make agreements with students and their parents for homework to be due on an alternative night if the child has soccer or basketball or another activity once a week.

Shannon does not mind giving homework assignments early or emailing assignments home to accommodate changes in schedules, student illness or students' outside activities. If her students do not complete their homework, Shannon will work with them during recess to complete it or send home a sheet of all the missing work to be completed for parents to see. Shannon feels it is “just not worth it to fight with students” when there can be an easy agreement reached to accomplish the same goals.

This is an example of how teachers can be flexible about policies while still maintaining student learning.

Making accommodations for students' homework needs is but one way that teachers change what they normally do when given more information. Teachers that I interviewed suggested that making accommodations for homework assignments was a small step in helping students. Most teachers reported that it is their job to help students learn. By knowing how to make homework easier for their students to complete, through accommodating after school schedules or special circumstances, teachers find that students appreciate their support (Stipek 2006). They do not have to have battles over homework assignments which can take up valuable class time, thus leaving more time for important classroom instruction. These are the ways that parent involvement, in the form of parental communication with teachers, helps teachers customize their curriculum on a regular basis.

#### *Changes based on special occasions or special needs*

In addition to making curricular modifications to routine assignments and curriculum, teachers in this study reported making changes for individual students. These accommodations are made by teachers on an as needed basis. Teachers I interviewed reported that gaining information from parents about special needs or special circumstances was a very important part of making their teaching successful.

#### *Customizing Curricula: Learning style*

One of the things teachers felt strongly about was being informed if a child had been tested outside of school for learning disabilities or learning issues<sup>10</sup>.

Teachers reported that they wanted to have the information so they would know what to expect from children and in order to help them tailor their instruction to students' strengths. Margaret, a veteran second grade teacher in a private school, reported:

If I learn what the child's learning styles are, if I learn that a child learns best a certain way, I can have my assistant work with him in that way. I can know how much I can expect a child to sit and absorb information. And if he cannot sit and absorb, can he absorb while moving around? And if so, I can allow movement and moving around.

Without the information from the parents, Margaret felt that her hands were somewhat tied in terms of what individuation she could do to help the child learn more effectively. Once she had the information, Margaret was more than willing to make changes in her teaching strategies or goals according to what the child needed.

Whether it involved education testing results, learning styles or special needs, most of the teachers in this study talked about wanting to know each child's idiosyncrasies. In most cases, it is a parent who would have the results of an educational test or know his or her child's special needs. If parents relay what they know about their child to the teacher, the teacher can use that information to make changes to accommodate that child. Teachers felt that being able to make accommodations or changes often helps the child learn more effectively.

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<sup>10</sup> There seems to be an assumption that this information is correct, it may not be, but the teachers in this study did not address this issue.



Teachers sometimes are able to accommodate learning styles or special needs with minor adjustments to their teaching techniques or curricular schedules. Most teachers reported having a “bag of tricks” out of which they can take tools to make learning more accessible to certain students. Tiffany, a fourth grade teacher in an affluent suburban public school, had a student who had difficulty with fine motor issues and writing. The student had trouble holding a pencil and his handwriting was illegible. Tiffany reported changing her teaching methods to accommodate him:

I would think of a way to display new lessons visually or I would get him to use the computer, and his handwriting was terrible so he typed everything.

Tiffany found a way to maintain her students’ learning with special accommodations she was willing to make. Tiffany and the student’s mother came up with the plan of having the student type everything rather than handwrite his assignments. This accommodation made learning easier for the student and made teaching easier for Tiffany. It is interesting to note that Tiffany decided to make an accommodation to change this child’s requirements instead of teaching handwriting, a basic skill. Her decision echoes what Margaret said about having the information from parents about learning styles and educational testing results that enabled her to make accommodations for an individual student. In these cases, parent-teacher collaboration led to changes in teaching strategies that the teacher felt helped the students be more successful.

Tiffany was glad she knew that movement would help one of her special needs students. She was able to incorporate carousel walks into her curriculum to

help a boy with Tourette's syndrome while not making it obvious to the other students:

I would have the students take carousel walks around the classroom to look around or getting a partner at another table so they have a chance to get up and move around.

Tiffany thinks that making those accommodations without a "big announcement" helped the student be comfortable in class and allowed him the movement he needed in order to have successful learning days. Most fourth grade students would not be able to tell Tiffany what he needed to accommodate his special needs. This student's parents talked to Tiffany about their child's needs, then the teacher was able to make changes to benefit him.

Teachers report being aware of social/inter-personal issues in their classrooms with some of the students and trying to accommodate them to facilitate learning, both for academics and social acceptability. Jane, a young woman who teaches fourth grade at the same wealthy suburban school as Tiffany had two close friends in her class, Claire and Michelle, and she would not allow them to work together. She felt that not only would they not spend enough time on task, as they would talk or play, she also felt that it was part of her job as a teacher to help the girls develop social relationships with other students:

I had one parent [Michelle's mother] write me that Claire and Michelle have been best friends their whole life and they get along great, but I never put them together. They were already friends, I

could already see the exclusivity between them, so from the beginning I didn't let them work together.

The information Jane received from Michelle's mom helped Jane make classroom decisions that affected learning and teaching. Using this information helped Jane achieve one of her classroom goals which was for her students to develop appropriate social relationships with others.

Jane had one parent tell her that two of her students had had problems with each other in previous years. Instead of trying to work out long standing issues, Jane decided it was better to separate the students:

I knew that Madison and George could not sit next to each other.

There were serious issues last year. They would fight and go home crying, instead of trying to work that out, I separated them and things got better.

Though Jane could have heard about this from the student's previous teacher, she did not report doing so. She felt that separating that students would allow for more time on task for them, and for her to spend more time teaching rather than dealing with discipline issues.

Most teachers in this study report that they feel they have limited amounts of time with which to teach the actual curriculum. Instead of taking up valuable teaching time to deal with social or behavior issues, some teachers choose to deal with it by changing seats or classroom policies, thus avoiding conflict and having more time to teach.

In addition to having social issues, George also got upset very easily and Jane had to prepare for that:

George's parents told me that he tends to get upset when he wanted to say something and I didn't call on him. So I came up with the idea of giving him his own private notebook. Whenever he didn't get a chance to say out loud what he wanted to share with me, [he could show me] at the end of the day. That was really helpful. The crying stopped. The parents and I worked together to find a solution.

Doing this for George helped Jane teach him the lesson of proper behavior in class while also allowing for a more peaceful classroom environment that would facilitate learning. Having the information from the parents in the situation with Claire and Michelle and George and Madison allowed Jane to control her classroom so every student could learn without interruption while accommodating the special needs of a few specific children. Jane felt that these accommodations provided an environment that could support student learning for everyone in the classroom. Communication with students' parents allowed teachers to know what was happening with them so they could make proper accommodations.

Teachers I interviewed reported being willing to design creative solutions to classroom problems. In order to accommodate and increase student learning, teachers sometimes change their planned curriculum or their way of teaching the curriculum for certain students. These changes are sometimes based on knowledge that teachers receive from parents about their children. The more teachers know about their students, the more they can make individual accommodations for their learning styles

or social situations. Teachers believe that being able to do so aids in student learning, more effective teaching, and more efficient classrooms.

*Customizing Curriculum: Individualized Instruction*

Most teachers reported making academic accommodations for at least some of their students throughout the school year. In order to best teach all students, teachers made changes to their regularly planned or prescribed curriculum. Not all students came to class on the same level or with the same needs. Some students were academically ahead of the class, others behind, and some came with personal or family issues or history that could affect learning. Eleanor, a third grade teacher at a mixed income public charter school, described a student who was quite advanced in math and science. She felt she wanted to allow the student to remain in the class, but to advance ahead of his classmates. Eleanor talked with the student's parents to gain insight into what was going on with the child at home so she could make changes in the classroom to help him:

I started giving him challenging texts and asking the parents what books he liked to read at home. I brought them into the library at school and gave him his own little library or book project kit. I had him write creative stories because the mom told me he liked that...he could take out his independent project.

Though not part of the regular curriculum or her regular lesson plans, Eleanor made changes to accommodate learning for one particular student based on information she had received from the student's parents. Surprisingly, teachers not only make accommodations for special needs, or for students who need extra help, they also

report making accommodations for students who need more challenging work, such as the student that Eleanor describes.

Other teachers I interviewed gave additional examples of how they might use parental knowledge to individualize instruction in their classrooms. Darlene's student, Bradley, was an overweight Latino boy who was a below grade level reader and was "ok in math" but had self esteem problems and needed a confidence boost. Darlene, a second grade teacher in a low income school, incorporated information she learned from Bradley's mom about some of his weekend activities into her class lessons:

I found out that his mom sells snacks in a snack truck at construction sites. Bradley counted the money for her and was really a whiz at it.

I was able to use money problems and his experience working on the snack truck in classroom examples. Bradley could be successful and shine. It did wonders for his self esteem as well as had him practice his math more happily.

By using his outside activities, Darlene was able to motivate Bradley to learn and at the same time helped him become successful and gain self-esteem. Teachers reported multiple positive outcomes for one child by having specific information to use.

Teachers are aware that their teaching affects not only a student's academic learning, but also their social and emotional well-being. According to examples from interviews, small changes to examples or teaching methods tailored to individual students seem to make class work more personal and more accessible to some students.

Albert, a fourth grader in Tiffany's fourth grade class at an affluent suburban public school, never thought he was as smart as his older brother and would often get discouraged and say that "he wanted to work at a gas station" because he was not smart. Tiffany had to find a way to encourage Albert to participate in class and increase his self esteem.

The boy in my class was big into making money and how people become rich so we did things with stocks and math.

Tiffany knew Albert was interested in making money, so she developed lessons based on stocks and bonds and math problems with money so that Albert would be motivated to learn, but by doing this, she also addressed some of his social and emotional issues. Again, this is an example of how teachers tailor instruction to help students be more motivated or interested in learning, or to help them learn curricular concepts in different ways as well as attend to more personal issues that particular students go through while in school.

In addition to using parental knowledge to individualize instruction by giving alternate assignments, teachers in this study reported changing expectations for their students in terms of when or how they could accomplish the class's learning goals. While the assignments and expectations of meeting learning goals remain the same for all students, in these examples, students are given certain accommodations to help them meet the goals.

Jane, a young fourth grade teacher at an affluent public school, reported many stories about customizing curriculum, changing expectations, differentiating logistics and giving individual attention to certain students in her class. For example, Jane had

a weekly writing assignment for all her students. One student, Gary, had a hard time formulating ideas for the writing prompts. Gary's parents asked Jane to give them the assignment and the writing prompt a day before the rest of the students got it so they could have the extra day to brainstorming and draft. Jane said:

Absolutely, no problem. I noticed that I had a lot of post it notes on my desk with things like, Gary and Evan need the assignment on this day or George is only doing how ever many activities instead of five for spelling. I don't mind that at all. I think that the parents know their kids best, especially at the beginning of the year, and they know what their kids can handle, and I am happy to change my teaching strategies to fit their needs.

In this case, Jane not only got the information from the parents, she also got a concrete suggestion of how to help the student. By making the change, Jane was able to accommodate a student, which helped him learn more effectively. It could be said that in this case Jane is turning over the teaching to the parents and not working with the student to increase his efficacy in this area. Nevertheless, parents are not teachers and there may be a downside to teachers relying on parents for too much. Jane said it best in her own words when she described the process of making accommodations as changing her "teaching *strategies*." This implies that the work is the same for all students, but the way to get it done changes based on what individual students need. Like Jane, other teachers in the study were happy to make these accommodations, most felt it was part of their job as a teacher to do so, whether the school they taught in was public, private, suburban, urban, affluent or low income. In addition to



changing strategies, some teachers reported modifying actual content or time for certain content based on a particular child's needs. Lena, a veteran first grade teacher in a private school, said:

I had one family that had no TV, no computer, they are very into nature, so when you have a kid who is not yet good on the computer... it helps you to know what environment they are coming from and what direction to put him in.

In this case, Lena was able to give this boy more time to work on the computer to help him catch up to the other students in the class and learn what he needed to learn. For other students in the class, Lena offered to come to school early two mornings a week for six weeks to help with beginner readers who were struggling. She saw that they just needed more one on one time that they were not getting that at home, so she supplemented their instruction with individualized attention. Again, Lena was expecting the same work of all students, but she guided them individually in different ways on the path to getting that work accomplished.

In these examples, something that teachers learned from parents allowed them to manipulate their teaching for the benefit of an individual student. Research on individualized instruction, also called differentiated instruction, shows that students learn "differently and at varying rates" (Akos et al, 2007). Differentiated instruction is based on the idea that learner readiness, interests, and learning styles contribute to students' motivation, engagement and academic success in schools (Tomlinson 2000). Teachers who individualize instruction may use different levels of difficulty in material covered in class, may align material to student interests, and/or may provide

varied methods or spaces in which learning occurs (Algozzine 2007). As Tomlinson (2000) says:

Students in the elementary grades vary greatly and if teachers want to maximize their students' individual potential, they will have to attend to the differences. There is ample evidence that students are more successful in school and find it more satisfying if they are taught in ways that are responsive to their readiness levels, interests, and learning profiles (p.3).

By individuating instruction, teachers help students achieve more and feel more engaged in school. In her study of parent involvement, Annette Lareau found that middle class parents requested individualized instruction while working class parents did not. Lareau wrote, however that, "individualized school careers appeared beneficial, for the most part" (Lareau 2000, p. 123). Having information from parents can lead to teachers knowing their students better. This allows them to customize the curriculum and give students what they each need on an individual basis. Students often need different things in terms of assignments, time to complete work, and even level of difficulty of the work. When teachers have more information from parents, they are able to accommodate these needs and teach students at the appropriate level.

The teachers in my study all felt that each child deserved the best education he or she could give, and sometimes that meant providing a different education in some ways, for some children and sometimes it meant referring them to other programs. Rick, a third grade teacher at a rural school says that he appreciates when parents tell him "how their child learns best and if they say their child learns best when they are

at the front of the classroom I will move them to the front, or if they say their child works best in groups or works best independently, I will do that.” Rick feels that in addition to getting the information from the parents, he likes to make sure that the parents know that their concerns are important to him and that they have been heard and that he will actually use the information they have given him. Rick and the other teachers reported that knowing how their students learn best, what makes them unique or special, their home life, and outside of school activities help them see the whole picture of each student. Knowing what makes their students tick gives teachers more clues on how to best help them learn. Teachers hope that this makes their students more successful academically, behaviorally and socially in their classroom. Individuating instruction is one way that teachers feel they can reach more students who have some needs that are different from the rest of the class.

*Customizing Curricula: Referrals/interventions*

Another way teachers report using parent information in terms of curricular decisions is by having information to make referrals or interventions on behalf of individual students. This can come in the form of getting students remedial help such as tutoring or recommending students for advanced placement in gifted and talented programs. Gabriel, a first grade teacher at a low income public school, reported:

Getting information from parents is especially helpful when I want to make a referral or intervention for my students for special programs.

I knew that a child was not getting reading help at home so I was able to push for reading recovery (a special remedial program) because it is one on one and I knew that child needed that... Once

Gina's mom told me about these creative stories that she would write at home, I asked her to bring them in. I had no doubt that Gina should be in the gifted and talented program, but I didn't think Gina's mom knew how to get her into it. I helped get Gina into the program, had I not seen those products [stories] from home, I would not have made that referral.

Using parental knowledge to make referrals and to provide interventions outside of the classroom is a way that teachers make accommodations. Most teachers like to know as much as they can about their students so they can make accommodations within the classroom. When that is not enough, teachers need to be prepared with information and examples in order to make referrals for special programs. Teachers often check back with parents about what behaviors they are seeing at home in order to further substantiate a claim they are making for the referral. A collaborative effort between parents and teachers is often needed in order to better understand if a child needs remedial help or should be placed in a gifted and talented program.

In one example, David, a Montgomery Montessori elementary teacher, reported that he was often on the lookout for behaviors in order to diagnose problems or to inform his teaching strategies. David reported the following incident that helped him diagnose a student and said that it had a big impact on teaching this child:

I have no connection with this child because this child moves his lips, but I can't seem to hear anything that the child says, I mean just silence, you can't even hear a whisper. I either thought the child was

intimidated by me, afraid of me, or the child was mute and needed some speech and language therapy because I never hear anything.

During a conference, David asked this child's mother about the silence and David reported that the mother couldn't believe it since the child was so loud when at home.

Because David obtained that information from the mother, he said:

Well, I know I don't have to recommend him for speech and language therapy. I know I can say, 'I know your mom told me you can talk really loud. So what is going on? The gig is up. I know you are not mute.'

The information that David received from the parent during a conference radically altered the teacher's assessment of the student. David said, in a relieved voice, that he was able to avoid making the wrong decision of sending the child to therapy and to work on the issue in the classroom on a personal level with the child. He was able to avoid a faulty diagnosis of a child in his class. Instead, upon meeting the mother of this child, David drastically changed his classroom strategy. Though in this case the outcome was a non-diagnosis of a special needs case, the information was valuable to David. Again, it seems that all teachers, regardless of school context use parental knowledge to inform their teaching and their ability to figure out the special needs or talents of their students.

Karen, also an elementary teacher at Montgomery Montessori, reported using information about her students in her teaching to help with diagnosing a problem. Much like David's example of the child who would not speak to him, Karen had a student who had major attention issues in her class. A large part of being a

Montessori teacher is observing the students and being in tune with the work they are doing and where they are developmentally and academically. Once Karen noticed this child's attention problems, she asked his parents about it. Karen requested a conference with the parents and asked if they had seen these problems before, or at home and they replied that they did. The parents then offered examples of how they had dealt with the problem before.

[The parents] were saying [in] previous years, some of the teachers have let him go outside and climb on the climbing gym for five or ten minutes or jump rope because it helps and lets him work out his major muscle energy, and that helps him refocus better. That was just a tidbit of information that will help me, because this child is brilliant off the charts, but because he has trouble focusing his attention, he has trouble getting his work done, but if that helps me help him, that is what I value, it is useful to me.

Karen reported that it might have taken her a lot longer to figure out what would work to help focus this child without the information from the parents. She was better able to understand her student and helped him work more effectively.

Lucy, the third elementary teacher at Montgomery Montessori, reported that sometimes she wanted to know firsthand what goes on in the homes of her students. One of the first stories Lucy related was of one summer afternoon when she went to a child's home to make jam with the mother. She described the experience with animation and excitement. She said: "when I walked into the family's home, I saw the mess all around...we had the children play together while I learned not only how

to make jam, but about the struggles that each of the student's parents had while they were children.”

Before I went to make jelly with this family, I thought that this particular child came from a home that had a tremendous amount of structure and actually it was much more unstructured than my viewpoint. She is a very orderly kind of child, so seeing her home clued me into that it was her own internal structure was actually very strong, she likes and needs that order.

By having an experience with the family outside of school, Lucy got to know the parents better and they talked about things that they experienced in their childhood that helped Lucy understand what kind of family the child came from. The mother talked about what family member was very slow to read or to write, and who had trouble paying attention. Lucy said:

I got a picture of what kind of learner my student was, what she has sensitivities about in one direction or another. So now when that child takes work and chooses to sit off by herself and focus intensely on that project I don't pressure her to interact in social way at different times throughout her day. I leave her to herself.

Lucy immediately saw the connection between the parents' attention issues and the mess around the house to some of the issues that the student is having in her classroom. Lucy made the effort to get to know this family so she could use the knowledge she gained from this interaction to help her diagnose better what was happening to the child while in class.

Although it is a rare situation of a teacher spending the day at a student's house, it illuminates a broader pattern that all the teachers, regardless of their school context, reported; using parental knowledge to help them determine the academic needs of their students.

*Customizing Curriculum: Behavior*

Some teachers in this study also reported making accommodations for special behaviors. Teachers report that they sometimes learn that a child has a special need from their parents before the beginning of school. As a result of this information, they allow differences in the rules or in an activity just for that student. Teachers also report changing classroom policies based on what they see happening during the school year. Teachers cannot always predict what the students in their classroom are going to be like, what they will need, or what special circumstances will come up which will necessitate change in the classroom. Teachers report having to be flexible to accommodate their students and to be able to look around at what is going on and make changes based on the reality of the class, even if it is different from what they expected to do. In an unusual case, Jennifer, a first grade teacher at a private school, had a student with Asperger's in her class and often had to make changes to her lessons for him. For example, the class was learning about firemen and Billy's parents had told Jennifer that he was afraid of fire:

If you mention fire, show him pictures of fire, talk about fire, talk about firemen, he will freak out. We were about to talk about firemen and go to the firehouse, so a rather precarious situation.



Jennifer reported not knowing what to do. She was reluctant not to prepare the whole class for the field trip to the firehouse, but she did not want to cause a disruption for Billy.

I decided that I would prep the rest of the kids when Billy went out of the room for occupational therapy in the mornings. I was able to find a comfortable place for us... you have to be fair to every kid, but you have to be sensitive.

The information that Jennifer received from Billy's parents prevented a disaster in the classroom. Jennifer felt that she was able to make a compromise in her lesson plan to accommodate Billy while still teaching the rest of the class what they needed to know for the field trip. This was an unexpected glitch in her prepared lessons and curriculum, but Jennifer found a way to work around it and facilitate better learning not only for one child, but for the whole class. Jennifer was also willing to make the accommodation of allowing Billy not to attend the field trip.

In addition to changes in lessons that accommodate certain behavior needs, teachers reported wanting to teach students proper ways of behaving. Though not a part of a prescribed school curriculum, teachers, especially teachers of younger students, want to model and encourage proper social and school behavior that students can take with them to the outside world. Seeing students in different situations, such as home and school, gives teachers a window into their students. This can be very helpful in both explaining behaviors that teachers see in the classroom and in helping the teacher figure out what behavioral lessons students need

to learn. In a family situation that Jennifer described as “utter mayhem” Jennifer obtained some insight into one of her students:

I went to one *Shabbat* (ritual Friday night dinner) at [a student’s] house and the girl was trying to kiss me on the lips and the parents were there and they were like, ‘stop stop, it is so funny’ but they were not appalled. The other girl is across the table trying to get me to sing some matzo ball soup song and the other girl isn’t eating a thing and is trying to sit on my lap, it was utter mayhem. I am sitting there thinking, this poor child, no wonder she has no boundaries and she tries to sit on my lap all the time [at school]. It helps me deal with that kid...I understood that I had to explain to her in class that this is my private space and you are not allowed to be here unless I invite you. I got a different feel for what was going on and I was able to help her...so she wasn’t so clingy and close.

While at dinner, Jennifer saw implications for her work with Sally in the classroom. She realized that Sally did not know what appropriate and inappropriate boundaries were. Jennifer used the information from Sally’s home life to create a teaching moment in the classroom. Learning about Sally’s home life allowed Jennifer to be more stern about setting boundaries for her teacher-student relationship with Sally. This was a lesson that Sally needed to learn, it was not part of Jennifer’s usual curriculum, and Jennifer was able to teach it because of the information she had learned during a home visit.

Another child in Jennifer's class, Sam, would not sit still, "he would just pace the classroom." Jennifer talked about it with Sam's parents and they made an arrangement that Sam could move around during certain times of the day and in certain places so he was still listening to the lesson and learning. By talking with the parents, Jennifer was able to see if Sam did this at home and she was able to see the whole picture of Sam and make appropriate accommodations. Because she had this information, Jennifer was able to teach her whole class what they needed to learn, but to also provide individual "lessons" for students who needed something different.

Though not necessarily part of the required curriculum, teaching appropriate social behaviors is part of a teacher's daily routine. Students are in school with their teachers and peers most of the day, so it is a natural place for teachers to help guide students on the path to appropriate behavior, especially in the younger grades. Also, managing behaviors is a large part of the teacher's job in order to maintain a classroom where learning can occur. Having more information allows teachers to know more about their students and what they need, helping teachers manage the classroom better and continue teaching.

Some teachers reported that they made accommodations for certain students based on what they knew was going on in their life. Eleanor, a third grade teacher at a mixed income public charter school, sometimes changed the rules for individual students if she felt they needed a special accommodation:

If there is a rule that during a lesson on the rug, no one is allowed to leave the rug, but if I know one child is having a really hard time this week because he is moving or because his parents are splitting up, I

might quietly let that child know that if he needs a break, just to let the assistant teacher know and he can go get a drink or go sit in the special chair in the library. I might change the rules a bit, but I wouldn't do that if I didn't know what was going on.

Eleanor suggested that by making these accommodations, the students trusted her and had a better relationship with her and thus were more motivated to do what they were supposed to do in terms of learning and lessons. She reported that having the information on which to base her actions helped her be a better teacher for each individual child.

Sometimes personal preferences, family issues or personalities get in the way of teachers' being able to stay the course on their prescribed curriculum or class plans forcing them to make changes and accommodations. Stacy, a third grade teacher at an urban charter school, had a set of twins in her class who would go home and fight each night about who got to tell their parents about their day at school. Stacy said:

I tried to have them do different things so they would each get to tell this is what we did in science. I knew the mom really wanted them to have different things and to be separated as much as possible so I made sure to have them separated for specials like science or music.

Stacy reported that getting this information from the twins' mom was not only helpful to the mom at home, but also helpful for her in the classroom in terms of avoiding fights between the girls and having them motivated to do different things. This made teaching easier for Stacy and more enjoyable for the twins and the mother told Stacy that the fights at home subsided.

Teachers reported that sometimes class policies needed to be changed based on a specific class situation. Most teachers I spoke with talked about the need for flexibility in their schedules, lessons and the way they view their classrooms. Teachers suggested that being flexible and responding to the individual needs of specific students or of a particular class was an important part of being a good teacher.

For example, Margaret, a second grade private school teacher, made a change in policy for her class last year. She noticed that her students were preoccupied much of the morning with having snacks and that they were not paying attention to lessons. She found out that many of the children were rushed to get out the door to get to school on time and were not getting enough time to eat breakfast. So in order to avoid the “furtive eating, a bite of granola bar here and there, I let them eat. I started to allow snack as soon as I started calling roll, I take attendance while they are eating.” Margaret changed a classroom policy in order for her students to be better prepared to begin learning at the beginning of the day. Margaret suggested that it was a simple change that she could make that would have benefits to student learning. Margaret didn’t want her students preoccupied with simple things that could be fixed while she was trying to teach. She reported that there was just too much to learn in too little time. By making this policy change, Margaret was able to satisfy the students and at the same time manage her classroom instruction time better. Margaret would not have known the origins of the problem nor how to fix it without gaining the information from parents about the rush of getting out of the house in the morning.

David, an elementary teacher at Montgomery Montessori, confirmed that he sometimes took into consideration his students' emotional states while teaching:

If I had information that a child was going through a tough time, I might not be as strict on them. I have a child that knew [he was] going to be moved somewhere else next year, I would give them a little more slack. For a child that is a super good worker or really responsible and there is something going on and I know what it is, and they take an afternoon where they are not working as hard, I will let them. I won't push them if something is going on.

David's changing attitude towards students is showing support for the student. It is also helpful for David in terms of his relationship with his students and in terms of avoiding confrontations about class work when students cannot handle it.

One way that Karen, another elementary teacher at Montgomery Montessori reported using knowledge of students' lives outside of school in her teaching, is in helping students manage their time on task.

We have a whole bunch of guys that love football. All they want to do on Monday morning is talk about it. I have what I call my Monday morning quarterback session. They are allowed to spend the first 15 minutes of class outside the back door talking football...it is maybe a third of the guys in the class, everyone else, at a quarter past 8 they know they come in and get their work, but anybody is invited who wants to do the football chat. It is usually about 10 guys who

talk about it. They know that I will come get them and when they come in they have to be quiet about it. It works for both of us.

Before Karen instituted the “Monday morning quarterback session,” she was constantly telling the group of boys to get to work and to stop talking and playing around. Once she found out that they had all watched football or gone to a game over the weekend, and were excited to talk first thing in the morning, she was able to tailor her teaching style to accommodate the students. Karen reported finding that the students know they have time to chat about football and will get to work more effectively once they have had their chance to talk together. They do not interrupt the rest of the class and are able to do better work. Knowing about their lives outside of school helped Karen understand how her students would use their time more efficiently.

In addition to all of the above ways teachers report using parental knowledge in their classroom teaching, almost all of the teachers I interviewed said it was important for them to know about their students’ family life for other reasons. Almost all of the teachers used the example of knowing if a child’s mother or father was not in the picture due to a sensitive reason or due to a death. The teachers said they would be very sensitive on Mother’s Day or Father’s Day and would change their celebrations or activities on those days to accommodate different families. One teacher, Rick, told me that there was a “donuts for dad” day where daughters came to school with their dads, but one of his female students did not have a dad, so he went as her partner so she could experience the program. Another teacher, Jennifer, had to be “very sensitive” and have meetings with a mother because she was a single mom

of an adopted child so they could work out how they should deal with father's day in their classroom.

*Disconfirming Evidence/Variations Among Teachers*

During interviews, it seemed that it was difficult for teachers to articulate how they perceive using knowledge from parents in their teaching, though after some time, most respondents were able to give me many examples. Three teachers reported not obtaining information from parents at all, or reported that they do not solicit information from parents to help their teaching; nevertheless, all three of these teachers were able to give me some examples. For instance, Aaron, a teacher at a mixed income public school, by far the teacher who felt most negative about parents, pointed out that whatever he knows about his students' outside activities or home life comes from the child him or herself. In his case, I think Aaron is not conscious of what he finds out from parents. But in saying this, Aaron is ignoring what he himself said he learns from parents. This is suggested in a few examples of what he would like to know or does find out about children's home life. He reported that if he knows, either from a parent or from the child him or herself about "their puppy being hit by a car or how their grandma left today, you understand why the kid is having an off day. You just let things go and handle situations differently, you know what it is about if a student drops [grades] in the extreme, you want to know what that is about." Aaron said that he would rather find out the information from the child, and he usually does, but if the child cannot tell him, he thinks it is the parents' responsibility to tell him, to give him a "piece of the puzzle."



Gabriel, a first grade teacher at a low income public school, reported that most of the time, it was parents asking him for advice or how “to handle a situation or they ask if I am seeing something with their child at school that they may be seeing at home also.” In his case, though he did report examples of getting information from parents sometimes, he also said that more often, he was giving parents information.

Helen, a teacher at a low income urban public school also had a different take on asking parents for information about home life or students’ outside activities. Still she was reluctant to talk with parents about what was going on at home with regard to academic issues. When I asked her if she had a student with some reading issues if there was anything that a parent could tell her that could help her with the student’s learning, she replied, “not really, the problem is often hereditary and sometimes that could really stress families out... I would make the family aware, but I would be very careful to make it just that I was concerned...I think the last thing teachers should do is overwhelm parents because they can shut down, they have had horrible experiences themselves sometimes.” Helen works as a teacher in a low income urban school where many of the parents had gone through that school themselves. Most were not graduates and the school system had failed them. Helen was very sensitive to that fact and tried to promote positive relationships, something new for these families. Helen was very clear that she “would like more parent communication, but I am grateful for any interaction” she had with them.

### *Summary*

Through communication between parents and teachers, different types of information are exchanged and lead to changes in classroom curriculum. The

majority of teachers I interviewed could relate examples of how they use knowledge that they gained from parents or knowledge about students' home and family life, outside activities, and interests in their classroom teaching. The teachers in this study did not discuss other ways, aside from through parental communication, that they gain knowledge about their students. Teachers often form their own deep relationships with their students and gain information directly from the students themselves. Teachers also spend time listening to students and observing them, another good way teachers acquire information. Though many studies of parent involvement link parent involvement to student achievement, it is not clear how that happens. Some forms of involvement provide teachers with information and some do not. Communication between parents and teachers does provide the teacher with information and that information is sometimes used in classroom teaching. The majority of teachers find it helpful to have this information and find that using it makes their classrooms work more smoothly and they think helps them teach each child better according to his or her individual needs. Whether having information about children's interests for use in classroom examples, to provide motivation in reading, or to use as writing prompts, or by obtaining knowledge from parents to intervene in instruction and to provide referrals or for customizing curriculum by changing assignments and homework, the data show that communication, one distinct type of parent involvement, between parents and teachers can make a difference in classroom teaching. Teachers using parental knowledge in order to customize curriculum, on a routine or on a special needs basis, is one way that we can see how parent involvement might affect student achievement. Teachers use knowledge from

parents to increase student motivation and to form attachments to students. They also use what they know about students to increase their time on task, keep students focused and individualize their instruction. It also explains why teachers make the decision that some forms of involvement are more valuable than others.

## *Chapter Five*

### *Managing Boundaries*

#### *Who sets the terms for the relationships between parents and teachers?*

This chapter will examine ways in which parents and teachers communicate, what they talk about, and how teachers and parents develop relationships. Much of the literature (Epstein 1989, 2000, 2001) and school staffs, identify relationships between parents and teachers as partnerships. In reality, however, boundaries are subject to negotiation and, in some situations teachers bring additional resources to the encounter than do parents. This is a crucial aspect of the parent-teacher relationship. In many cases, teachers seek to manage their interactions with parents. In some cases though, they do not succeed in doing so, and parents push through the boundaries that teachers try to erect. Some parents may need more emotional support from teachers and might request more from them. From my interviews with teachers, there is evidence that many of them set the tone for their relationships with parents, though there are times when parents and teachers conflict. Many teachers in this study described their relationships with parents as “good” or “positive” and only reported a few negative interactions with parents. Through an examination of teachers’ reported practices of communication with parents, I will suggest in this chapter that many teachers try to set the terms for their relationships with parents, but despite these efforts, sometimes it does not work that way.

#### *Teachers Negotiating Boundaries*

Many teachers often tell parents that their “door is always open.” This implies that teachers are welcoming of parents coming into their classrooms at any time. It

also implies that teachers welcome communication with parents at any time. But in reality, if you look deeper, teachers also have strategies for managing their interactions with parents. There are indeed many times when parents and teachers collaborate. Some of these times include working together on the PTA, coordinating special events such as school plays, assemblies, seasonal festivals and fundraisers. During these times, teachers and parents work together for a common goal. Teachers and parents also interact more frequently in order to communicate about specific children. Because communication is such an important part of the parent-teacher relationship, I looked closely at how communication happens and under what circumstances it occurs. We need to look more closely at the teachers' side of these interactions and at how teachers try to structure their relationships with parents.

Lareau (2000) notes that much parent involvement is not in reality a "partnership" (p.35), but is carried out more like a professional-client relationship where the power is unevenly distributed. Beveridge (2004) also contends that "despite the principle of equality that is implicit in the idea of parent partnership, in practice the parental experience is rarely one of equal status" (p.4). My interviews suggest as well that relationships between parents and teachers are practiced in a way that teachers attempt to *set the terms*. One way teachers do this is by managing communication patterns between themselves and parents. As Epstein and Becker found in a 1982 survey of teachers' practices, "teachers control the flow of information to parents" (Becker & Epstein 1982).

One reason that teachers may try to negotiate their interactions with parents is their own consideration of themselves as professionals. Research on teacher

professionalism (Grady 2008) has shown that professionals “exercise discretion in making decisions within the scope of their expertise.” There is debate about how and if teaching is indeed a profession, and society often considers teachers to need less expertise and preparation than other professionals (Johnson and Birkland 2003; Talbert and McLaughlin 1994). Still, teachers do often consider themselves as professionals. Part of being considered a “professional,” according to Helterbran (2008) and to Shulman (2005) is having content knowledge, having societal obligation, agreed upon standards, and some degree of “regulatory autonomy.” This autonomy and knowledge of their own field is what allows teachers to feel that they can often set the terms for relationships between themselves and parents. Teachers taking responsibility for their own work is a way in which teachers assert their professionalism. Their actions are not chaotic; they are trying to act according to norms and behaviors that reflect professionalism.

On the other hand, Addi-Racah and Arviv-Elyashiv (2008) contend that when parents are empowered, as many are today, teachers’ sense of their professionalism is called into question. To maintain their professionalism, teachers may be more assertive and set the terms for their relationships with parents. Or, sometimes, they are not able to do so and parents are the ones who lead the interactions.

### *Communication*

#### *When, Where and How Does Communication Happen?*

In order to understand the dynamics of parent teacher communication, this chapter will provide a description of teachers reported use of email, and other

communication patterns and I will use that teacher reported data to show how teachers make a concerted effort to manage their relationships with parents.

#### *Teachers on the use of email*

One way that teachers try to shape or manage their interactions with parents is by setting the methods of communication. Teachers can choose to use email, phone, written notes, or face to face meetings. Most of the teachers in this study reported using email often to communicate with parents. Other teachers reported that they decided that they do not want to use email at all to communicate with parents<sup>11</sup>. Teachers can also determine for themselves how rapidly they want to respond to emails.

#### *Teachers Set the Agenda*

Teachers can use emails as a way to set the agenda for the communication. By using email, teachers do not have to discuss anything that a parent brings up, they can stick to the topic that they wanted to discuss. Shannon, a fourth grade teacher at a mixed income charter school reported that the benefit of managing the conversation by using email:

I often do email at 12 or 1 am, and I don't have to worry about calling during dinner or when the kids are in bed, I don't have to worry about calling after work...It is also much quicker, you call a parent and you have one particular issue in mind, but then they bring up all these other issues and suddenly what should have been a 3

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<sup>11</sup> For more on this, see chapter seven.

minute conversation is a 25 minute one, and email is here is what I have to say.

After they have had a long day at school, though a parent might welcome this opportunity to have the teacher's ear to discuss additional issues, teachers prefer to set limits on the interaction.

Some teachers report using email because they like to draft a note that they have taken time to think about. These teachers use email as a way to set the terms of the content of the email and thus to help manage the boundaries of the relationship. Jennifer, a first grade teacher in a private school, encourages parents to email her because she finds phone calls hard to return and "I prefer email because email allows me to formulate ideas before speaking or writing." Stacy, a third grade teacher at a mixed income public charter school mentioned something similar to what Jennifer reported when she said:

Often, parents make me nervous. I don't usually like to be caught off guard. I kind of like email best because I can think about exactly how to say stuff and if you are trying to be delicate about something academic or social, it takes me a while to find the right words. I like to run it by the counselor. Email is good, I can check it when I want to and I can send it when I want to...I kind of feel annoyed if I have a list of parents that I have to call in the evening and it weighs on me.

Shannon, a fourth grade teacher at a mixed income public charter school echoed what Stacy said:



I can do it anytime, it is quick and easy, I don't edit very well, my mouth works faster than my brain, so I like email because I can write it and then go back over it and make sure it says that right thing in the right way.

This suggests that these teachers want to be careful about what and how they say things to parents, a way that teachers try to create a boundary between themselves and parents; a way for teachers to negotiate their contact with parents. Email allows teachers to prepare ahead of time what they are going to write, they choose the content of the communication. In this example, Shannon may also be suggesting that she must tip toe and be constantly aware of what she says to parents. When she says, "make sure it says that right thing in the right way" it seems that Shannon is deferring to how she thinks she should speak to a parent.

#### *When Teachers Write and Respond*

Despite the drawbacks of being accessible all the time, email is Jennifer's preferred mode of communication with parents because it allows her to determine when to contact her parents of first graders or when to respond to an email. Using the phone during the day is virtually impossible for Jennifer and calling parents in the evening is sometimes tricky because parents are often busy putting their children to sleep or it is dinner time. Jennifer said:

I think I actually prefer email, while it is a double edged sword that they have constant access to you and expect a constant response which is a challenge. But I do think it is the most effective way because you can shoot an email and get right back to somebody or

you can get back to them at your leisure...The evenings are really hard for the parents and during the day is hard for me.

This suggests that there are appropriate and inappropriate times for teachers to contact parents. Parents may be busy at home and teachers may not want to disturb family time in the evening. Because teachers are not available during the day, email seems to be a way around the possibility of contacting parents at inappropriate times.

Jennifer also says that she wants to contact parents when it is convenient for her, “at your leisure” which suggests that there are times when she prefers to contact parents and times she does not.

Though Jennifer, who does not have children on her own, is often on email “late at night, like 11 pm,” she reports that she responds to emails within “24 hours.” Because she can do email late at night, and at home, Jennifer does not mind responding quickly to email. Similar to Jennifer, Melanie, a fourth grade teacher at an affluent public school, says that email is the best way to get in touch with her, and she says “I always respond to parents the same day [that I receive an email].” In these cases, it is difficult to tell if teachers defer to parents’ schedules or if they respond to parents based on their own needs and desires.

Karen, a teacher in the elementary at Montgomery Montessori, is very different from the other teachers in the elementary at her school. She often uses email to communicate with parents, but she does not respond immediately like other teachers reported. Karen decides how often to check email and when to respond:

[I communicate] via the phone very seldom, I let my parents know that I am great with email and I check it a couple nights a week to see if parents have written with a question or concern.

Karen reported that she “lets my parents know” how she likes to communicate. Parents must follow Karen’s lead as she sets the terms for communication with parents. Because many parents work and use email in their personal and professional life, they may expect the same kind of immediate response from teachers. Though some teachers respond within 24 hours, their class schedules do not allow them to respond instantaneously, as some parents may be used to in their work environments. More data is needed to understand how email use affects both teacher and parent expectations of responses.

#### *Teachers Determine Where and How*

It is often the teacher who sets the terms for the conversation, with the teacher setting the method and time for the communication. As Jennifer, a first grade private school teacher, said:

If it is something serious, I do think it is better to talk face-to-face.

When you are talking about something about a kid that is really falling behind or being aggressive, it is hard to convey all of that with examples and to convey the seriousness of what is going on. Usually with that kind of stuff I will email some of it and then say I would like to set up a time to meet and have somebody else there to set the tone that it is more important than just an email.

Eleanor, a third grade teacher at mixed income charter school, echoed Jennifer when she said:

I do think email is best for certain situations...if it is a serious situation, I would let a parent know via email that I thought it was important that we meet in person and I got the counselor involved, that kind of thing you can't do over email, you can't get other specialists involved. In situations like that I would use email as a way to set up a meeting and then talk in person.

Eleanor, like Jennifer, uses and prefers email, but makes a distinction between kinds of topics that are appropriate for email. The teachers determine if the content of the conversation is appropriate for email or must be communicated through an in person meeting.

The other benefit of face-to-face meetings is the option of bringing in other school staff to help teachers. This suggests that teachers may need additional support when discussing serious issues with parents and they want to be prepared. In this case especially, parents must follow the teacher's lead to come to the school for a meeting with multiple school staff. Some people have suggested (Pushor 2007) that the very act of having all meetings with parents at the school is an act of asserting power on the part of the teacher. Often, meetings are in classrooms where parents must sit in small children's chairs and listen to the teacher. In this way the teacher can have a "home court advantage" in these cases.

Melanie, a fourth grade teacher in an affluent suburban school, likes to use email, but does not use it for more serious issues either. She reports using email to discuss when:

[Parents] want to bring in a birthday treat (laugh), maybe someone didn't do well on a test and they want to come in and talk about it or social issues, friendship issues, those are the basics, nothing super heavy.

Some things though can only be done in person. Melanie suggests that in using email so much, she often misses the opportunity to work together with parents and students. For more serious issues, Melanie will email a parent and ask them to come in for a meeting in the morning before school starts. Melanie also reported an additional benefit to face-to-face meetings:

I like to have the child come to school with the parent. I have the child sit outside while I talk to the parent, and then when we have solutions, we bring the child in.

She uses this as a "teaching moment" for the child and feels that if the child knows the parent and teacher are on the same page, the child will respect decisions or consequences more.

Though email is a useful tool for both teachers and parents, teachers are aware of the drawbacks to using it. Teachers in this study reported using email to initiate discussion or to remind parents about upcoming events, but they are careful not to discuss potentially serious or sensitive issues via email. With so many people using email today as a main mode of communication, the relationship between parents and

teachers has had to change with it. It seems that teachers are trying to use email for what it can offer them while still trying to maintain a personal connection with parents. The teachers in this study try to manage their relationships with parents by leading the types and frequency of communication.

There are some teachers however, who do not use email. This also is a way that teachers negotiate their relationships with parents through communication. Suzanne, a second grade teacher at a low income public school, was a little different than most of the teachers who I interviewed in that she preferred not to communicate via email at all. While all the teachers acknowledged the shortcomings of email - no detectable tone, all access all the time - Suzanne felt strongly that talking to a parent face-to-face or on the phone was better than email. She described wanting the parents to:

Hear my tone of voice, and know that I was calling because I cared about and loved the student not because I was upset or angry.

Suzanne felt that that kind of communication went a long way in forming her positive relationships with parents. The other teachers agreed with her characterization of the drawbacks in the use of email, but found that the benefits of ease and access caused them to prefer it.

Though he uses the phone and face-to-face meetings, David, an elementary teacher at Montgomery Montessori, reported not using email very much to communicate with parents:

I don't use email very much and I have a specific reason for not doing it. The parents send me a lot of emails and call them back [I do that because of] family experience, personal experience. Things on paper tend to come back and bite you, you don't have the intonation, seventy or eighty percent of the communication is missed through writing and it can be interpreted in a whole bunch of different ways...it also requires an enormous amount of time to draft a response, drafts and drafts. It is just so much time that I didn't want to do.

David differs from some of the other teachers I interviewed in this study. They found that having the time to draft a well written email was preferable to talking on the phone where a teacher might not have the time to think about he or she is saying before saying it. Though David reported he does receive emails from parents, he decides to return the communication with a phone call. Parents must conform to David's preferences and talk to him on the phone, rather than using email, which many of them prefer.

Lucy, who also teaches at Montgomery Montessori, is more like Suzanne in that she does not use email at all. Though that does not mean that she does not communicate with parents. Lucy fosters both formal and informal paths of communication:

Parents call me at lunch, they stop by after school, they will call and make an appointment so it is pretty much every version, there is a formal version when they call [the school secretary] and make an

appointment or something more informal, they will call up and say will I be at school today, and can you ask her if she has 15 minutes for me after school today. Some of the other informal levels, the parents are in the parking lot and want to talk for 5-10 minutes about something that just cropped up. I try to connect with families in a way that is good for my family and that is good for their family, like I will go to families' houses sometimes for activities.

For Lucy, there is no one set way to communicate. She finds that she prefers having many opportunities to talk with parents. Parents follow her lead by catching her whenever they can. Lucy will set aside time during the school day to speak to parents on the phone at lunchtime and she will schedule meetings with parents, but she also catches parents in carpool line and will chat with them. Unlike the other teachers in the elementary at Montgomery Montessori and unlike the other teachers interviewed for this study, Lucy reported doing activities with school families outside of school. She does this to get to know families and to make them comfortable with her. Lucy has the most unstructured ways of communicating with parents, but does report that communication happens, albeit more on the fly than in structured ways. In my observations at Montgomery Montessori, I saw parents stop by her classroom and some even mentioned in my interviews that they have learned that she does not use email and it is best to just stop by the school and talk with Lucy. While many parents would prefer to use email, they have to adjust their practice and go along with how Lucy prefers to communicate<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> For the parents' perspective on this, see chapter seven.



Teachers I interviewed who do use email reported using it to send notes to the class parents as a group reminding them about field trips or supplies they need to send with their children, but they also reported using email to contact individual parents about particular issues. Most teachers differentiated between what they would discuss via email and what warranted a face-to-face meeting. Teachers also reported employing email more than phone calls because teachers felt email is easier to use. Teachers interviewed in this study reported liking that they could respond at their leisure and that parents could respond when is convenient for them instead of trying to reach them during their busy evenings at home. They also reported preferring email because it allows them time to formulate their thoughts or responses before actually sending the email. By using email, teachers can manage how they present their ideas.

By taking a closer look at how teachers use email to communicate with parents, we can see that teachers use email to their advantage. Teachers use email as a way to set the agenda of a conversation with parents. They also can use email as a way to determine when they communicate with parents. Finally, they can decide not to use email at all which also is a way that teachers negotiate terms for communication with parents and a way that teachers try to manage their relationship with parents.

*When and how do parents and teachers communicate?*

Though some researchers (Epstein 2001; Lareau 2000; Lawrence-Lightfoot 2003) have examined parent involvement and the ways that parents and teachers communicate, it is not clear if communication occurs at all times or only during

scheduled meetings. According to what the teachers reported in this study, it seems that they prefer having set times to interact with parents, especially during the pre-arranged twice yearly conference.

### *Parent-Teacher Conferences*

The school scheduled parent teacher conference is often the first opportunity that parents and teachers have a set time to talk privately. Because it is scheduled by the school and the teacher, the parents must follow their lead and come to the school, the teacher's domain. This is another example of how teachers can try to manage or negotiate their relationships with parents. It is during this time that parents often address concerns or tell teachers what they want the teachers to know about their child. As Gabriel, a first grade teacher at a low income public school said, "parents talk to me most at conferences, almost always at one of the first conferences." This is the time for parents to head off future issues or to let the teacher know what they can expect from their student. This first conference gives the teacher an initial insight into the student from a perspective different from their own.

Teachers report that do not want parents to drop by their classrooms unannounced and prefer scheduled meetings or phone calls. As Aaron, a second grade teacher in a low income suburban school, reported:

They [parents who come to school during class hours] interrupt and they sneak up and that is when we have a problem because it really is distracting when a parent walks into the room...So it is not so good when they come in the beginning of class that is just because it is a disruption and honestly even if they stood outside the door it

wouldn't be a big deal. I think it is valuable that the parent wants to make that connection but there is a time and a place.

Aaron appreciates that the parents want to communicate with him, but he prefers parents to not arrive at his door unannounced during school hours.

Melanie, a fourth grade teacher in an affluent public school, reported that she has very involved parents who sometimes do not know boundaries:

You always have the parents who are just the social parents who just come in to chat...they don't understand that it is not great for them just to show up. I have had parents just come in the middle of the day just popping in and it isn't a good time. One of the other teachers has a mom who comes in every morning, comes in with her dog, carries her dog like Paris Hilton and just chats...if it becomes a problem, you need to say, 'I would love to talk with you, but you really need to make an appointment'.

Though parents in Melanie's school are supposed to check into the office before going to the classrooms, many parents do not do so. Melanie tries to create boundaries and manage parents to visit when she prefers, but despite these efforts, parents sometimes push through the fences.

Though parents sometimes bend the rules and stop by classrooms unannounced, teachers do say that most conversations do not happen during those times. Lena, a veteran first grade teacher at a private school said that she prefers to talk with parents, "when they have an appointment." Lena did indicate that she has had "good conversations because a parent catches me when I didn't have the kids

[and am free] so I drop everything and sit and talk.” Despite that, Lena finds that meetings are:

Most productive when I am able to plan and bring in other teachers the child may have and we can sit and have an overall discussion... [if I don't have it scheduled] I am not prepared enough for this meeting, and it is not as productive as I would like it to be, [I would rather] give me an email, tell me when you are coming, so I am prepared, I get all my agenda and I can be done in half an hour.

Lena reported that the most productive meetings are ones in which she can prepare in advance and can meet in person at a scheduled time. Teachers in this study suggest that they want to seem prepared in front of parents and want to act professional in having an agenda with set topics to talk about. This puts a boundary around the conversation and allows teachers to manage the conversation. Though as Lena reported, it does not always happen that way.

Montgomery Montessori is making a concerted effort to engage parents and teachers in communication. The school provides specific opportunities for parents to get involved such as volunteering for field trips or joining the class for a holiday festival, but the organization of the school also seems to allow for increased interaction between parents and teachers. For example, each child is picked up and dropped off by a parent, there is no school bus, and in the Primary grades, a teacher brings each child to and from the car. To facilitate this, a teacher goes outside to the carpool line and opens each car door and helps the child out of the car and into the school building.

While observing at Montgomery Montessori, I watched the carpool line a number of times. One morning, I was observing the carpool line and talking to a teacher who was telling me about the family who was about to pull in the driveway. The teacher told me that the little girl had fallen on the playground and had hurt her bottom. As these field notes show:

Two teachers go outside to the line of cars and open doors and welcome each child and help them out of the car. The teacher with the child with bruised bottom talks to a parent in a car about the incident. The teacher says she will get more details and get back to the mom. The teacher closes the car door and leads the child into the school front door.

This incident happened quickly, within two minutes, as there was a line of five cars waiting behind this minivan. The conversation seemed to be one in which the teacher began a conversation but would call the parent later to discuss more details. The teachers and parents at Montgomery Montessori have a window to chat during this time, whereas this does not happen in “traditional” schools, but long conversations do not seem to happen then.

David, an elementary teacher in the elementary at Montgomery Montessori, likes to set aside time to talk to parents. Teachers try to manage what topics are presented at what times and in what places. David said that he said to a parent:

‘Your child is having trouble with focus, I think there might be some attentional issues’ That would be an in person conference...so I can give specific examples of things I have seen and that parents might

want to check out. I give little bits and pieces of information that I don't consider to need a serious sit down and take time out of your day, I can do at carpool, or a phone call, I can try to get some support for that over the phone.

He said that parents sometimes try to have conversations with him in the carpool line when they pick up their children after the school day, but that he does not like to have conversations at that time:

I see parents in the car pool line sometimes [but] I don't really want to have quick conversations [there].

It is not that David does not want to talk with parents, it is that the time is not convenient for him.

In my observations at Montgomery Montessori, I had the opportunity to observe carpool line and the interactions between David and parents. Though I did see him say "hello" to each parent in the cars and sometimes he would say a brief sentence or two about what the child did in class that day I did not see him engage in long conversations with parents. I also had the opportunity to observe a couple of parents come to the school during the day to drop off a forgotten lunch or supply. During those times, the parent would come to the door of the classroom, peek her (in both cases I observed this, it was a mother) head in and hand the forgotten item to the teacher's aide. There was no interaction at that time between David and the parent. The parents seem to follow David's lead and do not enter the classroom without permission, or an appointment scheduled with David.

David seems to want to set aside time to interact with parents. He does not even want to talk about quick things in the carpool line. Another time that David does not like to talk with parents is at the beginning of the school day, in the morning around drop off time. This is also a time where he cannot give them his complete attention:

Sometimes a parent will come in before school which is a real bad time for me, that is when I am planning for the day and they will say, well I just wanted to talk about this, and I will say can we meet at 3:30, it is much more convenient.

Though in general David prefers not to talk in the carpool line, he does acknowledge that it is a convenient time when he sees parents and can tell them something that he believes does not need discussion. For example, on the day that I interviewed David, he told me about a first year elementary student in his class who was having trouble keeping his “work record” (a student written record of what work they did that day and when it was done):

He is doing fine in all areas, but is really struggling with this. I asked the parents for some support and I gave them some work record pages, and I presented this idea through the window of the car, I said, ‘this would be supportive to me to maybe work with him on this and have him record major events at home’, like when they have dinner. That came through the car window, little things that I don’t think are so major.

David makes a distinction between kinds of things he feels warrant discussion and things that do not. David, like other teachers in this study differentiates between the kinds of things he talks to parents about on the fly versus at set meetings. Most of the “important” issues are discussed at set times rather than in passing without an appointment.

Karen, another elementary teacher at Montgomery Montessori elaborated on how she communicates with parents. She does use the conference as a time to ask parents about what they observe at home, but she also uses informal times such as during car pool line and during school events to communicate with parents. Karen did differentiate between types of conversations and where it is appropriate to have them:

There are times when you are trying to get the kids in the carpool and the parent has something really critical to talk to you about you have to ask them to set aside some time...Most of the time the informality works well. And it is up to the teacher to say ‘I can’t give this issue the appropriate attention it needs, let me check my schedule so we can set aside some time to talk about it’.

Karen here clarified the point that not all conversations are appropriate for the car pool line and some issues deserve closer attention at a set meeting. She reported that she liked being able to use informal channels such as the car pool line and school events for communication, but she noted how sometimes it was better to make a set time to talk about more serious issues. Karen puts the onus on herself and other



teachers to determine what can be talked about during car pool and what would warrant a set meeting.

*Parents Who Hold Manage Their Relationships with Teachers*

Despite teachers' best efforts to manage their interactions and relationships with parents, they are not always able to do so. There are many kinds of parents who are involved in different ways, some of who are pushier or who feel more entitled than others. There are times when parents assert themselves and do not allow for teachers to set the terms for the relationship.

*Parents who are needy*

Previous research (Epstein 2001; Epstein and Jacobsen 1994; Lee 1994) has said that teachers and parents communicate more around problem children or children with "issues." My interviews with teachers suggest that this is not always the case. Teachers in this study responded that communication between parents and teachers not only reflect students' needs, but parent needs as well. It is contrary to the literature that suggests that teachers communicate most with parents who have children with problems in school. It also seems that parents can sometimes reach out to teachers and ask them to do more for their child. There are also times where parents demand attention in the form of meetings or phone calls. In these cases, parents might get pushy or insist that teachers act according to their wishes.

Eleanor said that it is parents who want to make sure their children are challenged and are pushing ahead academically that contact her the most:

Those parents are proactive, if there is not a concern, I email equally, but some parents will approach me about things beyond the usual

emailing or talking in person, and these are the parents that really won't settle for what everything else is getting, they want more.

At the beginning of the year especially, Eleanor wants to learn about her students' home lives and interests, but as the year progresses, she does communicate more with some parents. In this case, Eleanor suggests that it is the parents who need more reassuring or who want more challenging work for their children who contact her the most. Because many teachers feel that parents are clients, they must do their best to accommodate them and make sure they are happy. As we have seen in the literature, teachers are often afraid of parents questioning their teaching skills or methods, so accommodating them is one way that teachers may be able to ease some of that tension.

Some parents in Eleanor's third grade charter school class reached out to her more. These were not necessarily parents of students who are performing poorly academically. Eleanor said that most of those are "parents who rarely settle for what everyone else is getting academically, and want more." Some parents appear to be anxious and have psychological needs for teacher connection even when their kids are doing fine.

Shannon, a fourth grade teacher in a public school reported that she does not communicate equally with all parents either. One of the frustrations that Shannon reported was a language barrier with some of her Urdu or Arabic speaking parents. But even beyond the language barrier, Shannon said she speaks to some parents more than others and not necessarily because there is an academic issue or problem, as Eleanor reported. She said she did speak to one parent every week because her son

was having academic and social issues, but that there was also a parent who she spoke with as often whose children were “incredible students,” Shannon did not elaborate on what she meant by “incredible students” but it seemed that she was talking about well behaved, academically engaged students. Shannon reported that she contacts some parents about children with issues, and some without. She said, it was “close to half” of each kind. The mother with the “incredible students” just wanted to suggest projects or to tell her about something her children were really happy working on:

There was the one kid who I every week was talking to mom because he wasn't doing his work and he would pick on someone at recess. He has an IEP, he is really very special ed, very bright but has a lot of issues. But then there is the other mom whose two girls are just incredible students always calling or emailing, and saying just, ‘hey this is a great project’...I would say it is half and half, just preemptively asking for more time on an assignment, or telling me a child really is enjoying an assignment.

It is not only student needs that dictate the amount of communication she has with parents; it is sometimes parent needs that dictate the relationship between parent and teacher. In these cases, parents and teachers may have a complex relationship where sometimes the teacher follows the lead of the parent and sometimes the parent follows the lead of the teacher. This may happen based on subject, time, or the where in the course of the relationship they are. The relationship and the leadership within the relationship may change over time as both parent and teacher become more comfortable with one another.

Margaret, a second grade private school teacher, reported that she also does not communicate equally with all parents. But again, it is not necessarily the parents of students with problems that she talks to most. Margaret said:

Some parents who very frequently contact me with regards to a question about work, schedule, plans for the next year, there is always going to be one group of parents who need more assurance about how things are going in the classroom and who have more concerns.

In this case, communication seems to be based on the needs of the parent, and the parent makes requests of the teacher despite the fact that Margaret might seek to manage the interactions more closely.

At Montgomery Montessori, Lucy echoed what Margaret said and reported varying amounts of communication with various parents. However, it is not necessarily parents of children with problems or issues that she communicates with most. Lucy said:

[The amount of communication] varies, some parents a lot, some a little, depending upon the child and the parent. Sometimes the parent needs a lot of interaction, but the child doesn't, it is a huge variance.

Lucy made a very clear distinction in noting that the amount of communication sometimes depends on what the parent needs, not the child. In the health and medical fields this is known commonly as the "worried well." This term generally refers to people who are worried (or convinced) that they have a particular disease, even

though they are physically healthy. Sometimes parents need to be reassured or need more information, even if their child is on target and performing well.

*Parents who are demanding*

In addition to parents who lead teachers based on their emotional needs, and who want more for their children, there are also parents who demand more from teachers. In these cases, despite trying to manage the relationship, teachers must react to the parents. The vast majority of teachers in this study reported having positive experiences and relationships with parents. In the following examples, teachers reported “negative” experiences with one or two parents. In these situations, teachers can react in ways that give parents what they ask for, or they can assert themselves and not do so. Especially in more affluent or private schools, teachers seem to conform to many of the parents’ demands.

Allison, a fourth grade teacher in an affluent public school, gave a student a C on a math test. The student’s parent got very upset, as Allison reported:

He got a C and his mom just showed up one day after school and said, ‘I want to talk to you about this test.’ ... I thought about telling her that she needed to set up a time, ‘I can’t right now,’ but I just wanted to get it over with. I didn’t want to have to deal with her again... So, we sat down and went through the whole test.

After the discussion of the test, Allison reported that the mother berated her for not telling the parents how to prepare their children better for tests:

She went on about how my parent communication was terrible and I needed to reach out more and let them know what was going on...I felt attacked by that.

For Allison, a better way for the parent to have dealt with the situation would have been:

Call or email let me know that they want to come in, set up an appointment. That way if we are going to talk in detail about how a kid is doing, I like to look through their things, refresh my memory so that I am ready to talk about it. I feel like she did not have any respect for me at all. And I don't respond to that well.

In this case, Allison felt she had no choice but to have an unpleasant conversation with a parent who demanded it. Allison was upset about the interaction, but did not seem to let the parent know how angry she was. In this case, the parent was able to push through the boundary that Allison was trying to create.

Melanie works in the same affluent suburban school as Allison does, also as a fourth grade teacher. She echoed what Allison said when she reported:

Some of these parents take a lot of liberties. They think they can pretty much do what they want. It is that kind of community. They feel like they can come in when they want, they can just stop and chat about things...I prefer them to make an appointment. I don't often [tell them to] do that because it is sometimes easier just to have the 2 minute conversation then to make a big deal about it.

Like Allison, Melanie would prefer parents to make an appointment, but sometimes agrees to talk with parents when they show up. She could do this for multiple reasons, but it seems that teachers prefer one way negotiating their boundaries with parents, but if their plan A does not work, they will move on to a plan B which might be to talk to parents when they do not make an appointment. In the situation above, Melanie decided it was not worth it to assert herself and ask the parent to make an appointment. But there are other times when a teacher might resist the will of the parents. For example, Melanie was pregnant while she was teaching one year and felt that parents had “gotten out of hand” when they wanted to choose the substitute teacher her class would have:

The parents in my classroom felt they should be able to choose the sub to replace me...So one mom started a petition and was trying to get parents to sign it. When she got wind that she was not going to be able to do that, she demanded to have her child moved out of my classroom. She emailed me about it saying ‘I want my child out of your classroom.’...I forwarded it to the principal since I do not make those decisions...She was not happy.

In this case, Melanie thought that the parent became too demanding and was out of line in her request. She resisted the parent and sent her to the principal. Though it made the parent angry, Melanie stood firm and did not give in to the parent’s demands.

Margaret, who teaches second grade in a private school, also reported having very positive relationships with parents. She did say though that there were times where:

Parents were unhappy where their child has been placed and the child is not placed in the top group. And parents who are not happy and who call frequently and ask that their child be moved to a different group... Sometimes a child gets moved against your better judgment just because someone is so insistent. This is what they want.

Unlike Melanie or Allison, Margaret felt that it was ok when parents did assert themselves. Maybe it is because she works in a private school where parents pay tuition that she reported “I feel like that’s life, there are politics in the school as well as in the government.” Margaret seemed resigned to the fact that sometimes she had to conform to parents’ demands.

Teachers in this study seem to seek to negotiate the boundaries of their relationships and interactions with parents. Much of the time, teachers are successful in managing the relationships and putting boundaries around the frequency and ways that they communicate with parents. Sometimes though, despite these efforts, parents are able to push through these fences.

Though my interviews included teachers from all different kinds of schools, (urban, suburban, affluent, lower income) the only teachers who reported on pushy parents or parents who acted entitled, were teachers from affluent suburban schools or private schools. As Lareau (2000, 2003) has found, social class does have implications for the ways that parents are involved in schools. Middle class families



are more likely to attend conferences and are more likely to be active participants in schooling than are their working class counterparts. Lareau found that middle class parents “have extensive information about their children’s schooling, and they are more very critical of the school, including the professional performance of their children’s teacher(s)” (Lareau 2000, p.8). Since the only teachers in my study to report parents who requested teachers, complained to the principal and who tried to intervene in hiring or placement decisions, were those who taught in private or affluent suburban schools, it seems to be that social class does indeed have an impact on their involvement in school. Middle class parents’ sense of entitlement and their extensive involvement and knowledge of school does seem to have an effect on the relationship they form with teachers.

#### *Disconfirming Evidence*

Some teachers do have different experiences than the ones above; there is some variation among teachers. With regard to when and where to talk, some teachers felt that while a set meeting or conference would be best, they utilize any opportunity they have to talk with parents. Helen, a third grade teacher in a low income urban school, reported:

[I] tried to catch parents when I could, for the parent who I never see, I would drop everything and talk to them, if I had to, I would get someone to cover my class or I would stand at the door to talk to them and have minimal supervision over the class. I think meetings are very intimidating for a lot of parents, especially the ones that are most reluctant.

Helen works at a very poor urban school where many parents are not present in their children's school lives and they are hard to reach. This particular sentiment seems more to do with the specific population that Helen was working with. It is not necessarily a generalizable finding.

Jane, a fourth grade teacher at an affluent suburban school, said that she gets a lot of information when she brings up a topic to the parents and that this could happen at any time. She felt that parents were sometimes reluctant to confide in her and that sometimes they would only tell her something if she asked about it. Jane felt that there were some things that parents "didn't want me to know until I had to" and that she brought up an issue and then parents would offer insight, but not until then. Jane said that she talked to parents when they dropped off their children at school. She also learned information from parents when they wrote her a letter at the beginning of the year and through conferences. Like Helen, she talked to parents when she could.

While there are commonalities across the teachers even when they follow similar practices I did also find, particularly from my interviews with parents and from my own observations at Montgomery Montessori, that there were nuanced ways that the teachers differed from one another even within the same school. Since this is something of a side issue to the more general points in this chapter, I have elaborated on it in Appendix A.

### *Summary*

Epstein (1991) describes the parent-teacher relationship as a partnership, which implies equality. This approach is fixed and does not focus on how teachers manage their relationships with parents. In some instances teachers bring more

resources to the process than do parents. These resources could include content knowledge, knowledge of pedagogy or general knowledge about the students in the classroom and the school in general.

My evidence suggests that often teachers seek to set the parameters of key aspects of their relationships with parents. Teachers seek to shape the interactions they have with parents. Sometimes this effort does not go the way teachers would like, but the effort to manage the interaction by the teachers still exists. This is different from a partnership, where parents and teachers would work together and both decide how to make their relationship happen. If the relationship was more of a partnership, I would expect teachers to invite parents to share in creating the relationship. I would expect teachers and parents to sit together to figure out how their relationship and interactions would unfold.

Though teachers are sometimes not considered professionals and there is a current debate about how they are or are not, researchers maintain (Addi-Racah and Arviv-Elyashiv 2008; Grady 2005; Helterbran 2008; Shulman 2005) that part of professionalism is maintaining a knowledge base specific to one's work that others do not possess and some level of autonomy in decision making. In trying to set the terms in the parent-teacher relationship, teachers may be seeking to exert professional authority. Professionals often have a set of guidelines that direct their work. Teachers can use guidelines such as their knowledge and autonomy to dictate their interactions with parents. Though some teachers in private or affluent schools reported on occasions when parents pushed through the fence they were attempting to

build, it does seem that teachers were making an effort to set limits and negotiate the process.

Traditionally, and in most schools today, teachers “claim the ground that is school, and design and enact policies, procedures, programs, schedules, and routines for the children of the community” (Pushor 2007). Teachers use their professional education and knowledge to claim this space and become the decision makers, oftentimes without input from the parents in the community. This is a dynamic that has implications for creating or maintaining interactions between parents and teachers. If the parent-teacher relationship was more of a partnership, it might look more like a friendship or a business relationship where there can be mutual reciprocity and relatively similar levels of resources. Some partnerships, however, do involve the domineering pattern of one person over another which may not be ideal for the parent teacher relationship. In some cases, parents and teachers may bring equal resources to the encounter and these resources should be recognized. If that happens, both parties can take the lead and they can work together to ensure that everyone’s needs are met in satisfactory ways. This though does not seem to be the case according to the teachers I interviewed in this study. Pushor (2008) states that teacher “professionalism is used as a boundary to keep parents out, something to hide behind.” This may be the case with the teachers I interviewed in this study; they may be using their professionalism to try to negotiate boundaries between themselves and parents. There is more to be learned though about how teachers and parents interact and why they act as they do. Are parents frustrated because they are sometimes shut out of schools and classrooms? Are teachers frustrated because parents do not give

them information that they need? These are questions that further study might examine.

## *Chapter Six*

*How do we understand influences on teachers now that we have seen how teachers think and behave?*

In trying to unpack how teachers understand their relationships with parents, I looked to see how teachers came to have their own ideologies about their work with parents. Some teachers have positive attitudes towards parent involvement and communication while others have a more negative perspective on the topic. Some teachers are good at involving parents and communicating with them, while others are not. What influences teachers in the decisions that they make when dealing with parents? How do they form their world-view of parent involvement? Now that we have seen how teachers think and behave, how do we understand what influences teachers' perceptions of the way they interact with parents? The literature does not sufficiently examine what actually influences teacher attitudes towards parent involvement and communication.

### Pre-service Preparation

Teachers are expected to communicate with parents via phone calls, hold parent teacher conferences, and include parent volunteers in their classrooms. Practicing teachers, especially new teachers, are nervous and ill prepared to perform even the basic parent involvement tasks, let alone go beyond that to create partnerships with parents (Ammon 1999). How does pre-service education prepare teachers for these roles?

The majority of both research and practice paint a bleak picture for preparation of both pre-service teachers and current teachers in terms of working with

parents. The literature on teacher education maintains that many teacher education programs provide little, if any, preparation in parent involvement. A national study found that “one-fifth of teacher education institutions offered no parent involvement preparation, a few colleges include some parent involvement content in five or more courses, and 79.1 % of teacher education programs offer one or more courses that include content dealing with parent involvement” (Katz 1999, p.3). So how do teachers know how to work with parents? How have they learned how to do this?

According to the literature, pre-service teachers, as well as practicing teachers, report that they have both personal and professional barriers to engaging in, or enhancing their work with parents (Ammon 1999) with some faulting their pre-service preparation. Although classroom teachers assert that working with families is important and can increase student achievement, “they receive little formal training and, thus, possess minimal knowledge and skills to work with parents” (Hiatt-Michael 2001, p. 4). Creating an environment that is supportive of student learning is one of the teacher’s jobs. Part of that environment includes forming and maintaining positive relationships between teachers and families; “the quality of these relationships depend on the preparation of the teachers. Therefore, one of the single most important barriers to parent partnerships is the lack of preparation of teachers to work with families” (Kochar-Bryant 2002, p. 3).

In a study by Greenwood and Hankins (1989), 826 teacher competencies were examined by asking teachers about their practice. Of the 826, fewer than 2% focused on any area having to do with parent involvement (Kochar-Bryant 2002). While

teachers, teacher educators, and policymakers believe family involvement is important, little has been done to include the topic in teacher education programs.

#### Pre-service Teacher Biases and Experiences

In addition, cultural biases and past experiences, both personal and second hand, affect pre-service teachers' abilities to work effectively with parents. Many education students are apprehensive about family involvement in education. Peg Hartmann-Winkelman's (1999) research has shown that prospective teachers have either had or have heard about negative experiences with parents in the classroom. In either case, the teachers' resolve to work with families was shaken. In many cases, Hartmann-Winkelman shows that teachers are nervous about being able to stand up for their curricular decisions, teaching strategies, and behavior plans. Hartmann-Winkelman categorized pre-service teachers' concerns into four general categories: "How do I defend my curriculum and teaching practices?, How can I involve *all* families in the education of their children?, How much family participation do I really want in my classroom? And How do I communicate with parents about children's problems and weaknesses?" (Hartmann-Winkelman 1999, p.85). Student teachers' concerns are a barrier to parent involvement. Apprehension about the relationship and negative past experiences will affect a teacher's willingness and ability to form partnerships with parents. Educators and policymakers cannot ignore teachers' concerns. They need to face them and prepare teachers to have the confidence and ability to form the necessary relationships.

#### Teachers' Perceptions of Their Preparation for Parent Interaction



The above research shows that teachers do not get the education they need in order to effectively work with parents. The literature states that teachers do not receive preparation in parent involvement and communication, but it does not help us understand what does influence teachers' perspectives; this is a missing piece of the literature to date. So how do teachers know or make decisions about what to do once they get into the classroom? In order to shed some light on teachers' attitudes on parent involvement and communication and to understand what influences them, I asked teachers about their teacher preparation and about what affects their perspectives.

#### Observational Learning

The teachers in my study reported that, indeed, they did not receive training or preparation with regard to parent involvement or communication, except for a few workshops in the Teach For America program. However, they did report that their student teaching experience, i.e., watching and learning from their mentor teacher, had a large impact on their ideas and practices of parent involvement. They also reported that their school leadership (in both their student teaching and teaching schools) and administration could foster or inhibit an environment that would be conducive to positive relationships between parents and teachers.

#### *Cues From Mentor Teachers*

Despite not having formal preparation in how to work with parents, teachers in my study reported that they do feel at least somewhat, if not totally, prepared to deal with parents. Most teachers reported that their mentor teacher from their student teaching days has informed their practice. Some reported emulating and copying

positive behaviors that they saw their mentor teaching doing, and some reported that their mentor teacher did not have positive relationships with parents, so they learned what not to do in their own practice. In this way, it seems teachers decided for themselves what they felt was the appropriate way to form relationships with parents. Teachers determined on their own, through watching their mentor teachers, what practices they would or would not adopt. The variety of experiences that teachers had with their mentor teachers leads me to believe that teachers have a certain level of freedom to act as they believe they should, not necessarily according to a prescribed set of expectations. As Allison, a fourth grade teacher at an affluent suburban school, reported:

I think that mainly I take my cues from other teachers. When I was student teaching I watched how my cooperating teacher interacted with parents and how they got in touch with them.

Allison noted specifically that she learned how best to communicate with parents, both in terms of the content of the conversation and the practicalities of how best to reach parents, through watching her mentor teacher while she was student teaching. Allison used the term “take my cues” when explaining how she learned from her mentor teacher. She did not say that she copied exactly what her mentor teacher did, but she suggests that she learned how to set a tone and how to communicate with parents from watching her mentor teacher<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> Allison’s mentor teacher did not seem to specifically tell Allison how to work with parents. Rather, Allison suggests that she absorbed some information and incorporated signals or prompts from what she observed her mentor teacher doing. There is no way to know if the practices that Allison learned are best practices. It

Jane, another fourth grade teacher who works with Allison, also recalled her student teaching days as forming her beliefs and practices around working with parents:

I student taught, so I think just the observation between the teachers that I have worked with and the parents I had in those classes...Seeing how the teachers I have worked with deal with parents and how that has turned out. I did my student teaching in Boston so I called her [mentor teacher] very frequently my first year, so she was more of the person I was going to.

In addition to mentioning things she does in the classroom that she learned from her mentor teacher, Jane mentioned that there are things that she deliberately does not do that she saw her mentor teacher doing. Jane saw how her mentor teacher's actions led to both successful parent encounters and negative ones. Jane was able to change her practice based on her experience with her mentor teacher. Interestingly, she did not mention that her practice changed based on a prescribed set of expectations, but rather, she was able to act according to her own preferences and comfort levels. After she completed her student teaching, Jane continued to rely on her mentor teacher for advice on how to work with parents. Jane's experience suggests that the relationship between student teacher and mentor teacher can have long lasting effects on teacher practice.

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seems that Allison used her own judgment, possibly using her own personal value system, to determine her own practice.

Like Jane, Tiffany, who works as a fourth grade teacher with Allison and Jane, reported seeing different teachers act differently towards parents and filtered out what she thought of as unproductive behaviors:

When I was in college and when I student taught, I could see how some of the parents and some of the teachers had different perspectives and I took some of that in, thinking I could tell that teacher didn't really address that parent or that parent didn't really listen to what that teacher was saying. You just kind of think of ways to compensate from what you saw your mentor teacher do.

Tiffany suggested that she learned from observing teachers and parents interact. Through these observations, Tiffany was able to learn cues that helped her determine when parents and teachers really understood each other and when they did not. She suggested that she kept in mind what she observed and learned and changed her own practice based on her student teaching experience. Acting as a street level bureaucrat, she used her own value system to decide what were positive interactions with parents and what were more negative ones.

While many teacher education programs focus on theory and research, many teachers reported that reading in books is very different from actually being in a classroom. As Jennifer, a first grade teacher at a private school, said:

I think the biggest influence has been watching other teachers. I would say first and foremost when I was student teaching; the things you read in books sound great, but watching it in practice is a totally different thing.

Jennifer said: “I was lucky to have positive role models while I was student teaching” and that what she learned from them was more valuable to her than her class work or reading assignments. Jennifer reported feeling more comfortable with her teaching practice after being in a classroom and watching her mentor teacher work with parents.

Though some mentor teachers have positive relationships with parents and some have negative ones, teachers in this study reported that they were able to separate the good practices from the bad and use those experiences and observations to inform their own teaching. Actually seeing a teacher engage in interactions with parents helped teachers create their own perspectives on how to work in their own classrooms. The teachers in my study imply that they saw different teachers act differently which suggests that at least some teachers act as street level bureaucrats doing what is comfortable to them in terms of how to interact with parents. Teachers seem to have the freedom to behave autonomously and according to their own values within their own classrooms.

There is a danger, though, to learning this way. One could easily learn bad habits, or see things that did not work for their mentor teacher but not know how to do it differently in order to make it work positively. They are also not guaranteed to see best practices and some pre-service teachers may not be able to determine good practice from bad. Skills learned by observation from others who might have also learned them this way may be a precarious, inefficient and ambiguous way to develop quality practice.

*Cues From Other Teachers With Whom They Work*

While student teaching and working with a mentor teacher often is done only during teacher preparation, and often only for a short time, teachers in this study reported relying on their relationships with other teachers in their school throughout their teaching career. Some teachers in my study reported that their teammates, or other teachers in their schools, have been a source of leadership in informing their practice. They have watched and even asked advice of other teachers they admire and have learned from them and incorporated what they have learned into their own practice. As Allison, a fourth grade teacher at an affluent suburban school, said:

My first and second years teaching at my old school, the fourth grade team that I worked with did everything together...we planned everything together and always talked about parents and kids and issues, I relied on them a lot. They had all been teaching a long time, I watched them and did what they did [in order] to learn.

Allison suggests that she felt lucky to have more experienced teachers with whom to work and that they collaborated often. The time Allison spent with her colleagues seems to have been a learning opportunity for Allison who was newer to teaching. Allison suggested that their experience and expertise could help her in her own classroom teaching.

Jane and Allison work together, both as fourth grade teachers in the same school. Jane agreed with Allison and said that she relies on some of her colleagues that have had more teaching experience than she has had:

I think my current colleagues have an influence. Two of them have been teaching longer than I have. Sometimes I will go to them and

ask them what should I do in this situation, email, call or set up a conference or should it go on the Friday folder or do they need to tell them [parents] ahead of time. I definitely go to them for advice on how to deal with parents, they just have more experience so I do it with them. They have a big impact.

Jane suggested that it was their years of experience that contribute to her feeling comfortable going to her colleagues for help and advice. Although she did not say it explicitly, Jane approved of the way her fellow teachers practice and how they interact with parents. She valued the way they have learned to do things through their years of experience and she took the opportunity to learn from them.

Eleanor, a third grade teacher at a mixed income charter school, mentioned two things in her response to how she formed her perspectives and practices.

I think though some people can do great research but when it comes to practice of talking to a parent one on one, it is like they didn't really teach me this. It also just takes experience, and I can have all the theories in the world and when you try to apply it with different parents, it might not work at all. I think with research, real life experiences, talking to other teachers and getting advice from them and getting ideas from them.

Eleanor mentioned research and teacher preparation, but emphasized learning from experience. Eleanor suggests that each parent is different and might require different kinds of interactions. She learned to be flexible and to treat each situation individually through trial and error. Because of the flexibility needed in teacher

practice, this implies that teachers can change their actions to fit a given situation and act on their own accord. But Eleanor also mentioned that much of the way she learned was by talking with other teachers and taking advice from them. Eleanor said that having colleagues with whom to talk was an important aspect of her teaching and of how she learned.

Just as they learn how to communicate with parents from mentor teachers, new teachers can also learn from their teammates and other teachers in the school what works best for the particular parent population in that particular school. As Melanie, a fourth grade teacher in an affluent public school said:

My perspective on how I work with parents probably came from what I learned from the teachers around me...I learned about the Friday folders from another teacher and the best ways to contact people, you take hints from whatever everyone else is doing. I wouldn't say most of my colleagues have the same attitudes as I do, but I would say many do.

Again, Melanie learned from other teachers not only how to communicate with parents, using specific tools like a Friday folder, but she also developed attitudes based on how the teachers around her felt about parents and based on how parents responded to those attitudes. Melanie suggested that having similar experiences in her teaching and having similar values to teachers around her made it easier to learn from others and from other experiences and be able to incorporate those experiences into her current teaching practice. It is unclear where and how Melanie formed her



own beliefs of what were the “right” and “wrong” ways to interact with parents. Melanie’s own personal values may contribute to her actions.

The teachers in this study seem to have at least some colleagues in their schools whose attitudes, perspectives and practices are positive and like their own. They are able to work closely with other teachers, learn from them and incorporate their practices into their own classrooms. On an ongoing basis, these teachers have a support system of people whom they trust to give advice and to whom they can look for experience and practice. While this is reassuring to teachers, it does not guarantee that they learn the most effective ways to work with or interact with parents.

#### *Administration/leadership Role*

The teachers in my study had mixed feelings about the influence their school administrations had on their practices or perspectives on parent involvement. Most felt that having a supportive administration or principal helped them achieve their goals. But if the administration or principal had negative attitudes towards parents, teachers said they would do what they felt was positive and productive despite the leadership’s attitudes. Though school leadership may have some impact on teachers’ actions regarding parent involvement, my interviews with teachers suggest that they assumed the freedom to act according to their own values. Many teachers also felt that some principals talked about having positive relationships with parents, but that many in actuality did not have those positive experiences. As Allison, a fourth grade teacher at an affluent public school, reported:

In theory they [school administration] want parents to be very involved and parents and teachers to work together, but...they don’t

necessarily practice that so much...The principal talks the talk, but doesn't really do it. If there is a problem going on [with a parent] I don't talk to her all that much because she is not that great (laugh).

For Allison, there was a disconnect between what the principal says she wants and what she does in reality. Allison disagreed with how her principal deals with parents and does what she thinks is right. This presented a problem though when Allison needed support from the principal; she reported not getting it except for a brief mention of calling a parent. Allison suggests that she acts according to her own principles and not according to how the school administration acts. It seems that for Allison, the school administration does not have a large impact on her practices of parent involvement.

Aaron, a second grade teacher in a low income school echoes what Allison said when he says that he does what he thinks is right regardless of how the principal acts:

They [school administration] buy into it, they want parent involvement. You get the sense from the principal, administration, that she is big into it. We have meetings about it, though the last one she didn't attend, but there is a community involvement committee, we have had staff meetings that focus on parent involvement and brainstorming sessions, she in the past has left herself open to dealing with parents. But I don't think that her being into it makes a difference for me. It doesn't matter if I buy into it or not, I still do

my job, we [teachers] are the front line, it doesn't matter what she thinks.

Aaron does not seem to be complaining about his principal's attitude towards parents or her practices. Instead, he says that no matter what her perspectives would be, he would do whatever it took to get his job done. Aaron is suggesting that the administration's attitudes do not affect his classroom practice since it is he alone in the classroom and that he is responsible for what occurs there.

Unlike Allison or Aaron, Eleanor, a third grade teacher in a mixed income charter school, reported feeling that her principal truly had a positive relationships with parents and that it helped Eleanor's practice:

I see my principal modeling it. And I think that it is good that she encourages us to talk about it. We do a teacher orientation before the kids come in the summer and we spend a whole afternoon on parent communication and we talked about really practical skills to have. But I am sure we could always do more...I think you can be a teacher who loves to communicate, but you would be the lone sole person and that would make it hard.

Eleanor suggests that having a supportive administration makes it easier to have positive relationships with parents. She also noted that when the administration makes parent involvement a priority, they can provide learning opportunities that also help make Eleanor's practice easier. Like Eleanor, Suzanne, a second grade teacher in a low income suburban school, made parent involvement a priority based on the priorities of her principal:

I think the principal really cares about communicating with parents. She makes it clear that she wants teachers to communicate with parents. In meetings she will tell us, and she models it. She communicates with all the parents, she is very warm with them, she approaches a lot of parents and talks to them...I think it makes a big difference when you have a principal who believes that communicating with parents is important. In meetings she encourages us to talk to parents and I even notice for instance, in terms of modeling, when she first came to the school she wrote a letter to the parents and the staff introducing herself... She communicates her philosophies and what our goals should be and what we should expect from parents and what parents should expect from teachers. It makes a big difference when you have a principal who believes that communication is central.

Because Eleanor's and Suzanne's principals value parent involvement and positive communication between parents and teachers, they reported feeling more prepared than others in my study. Eleanor's school has professional development opportunities devoted to how to work with parents. Eleanor and Suzanne reported feeling that their jobs are easier because their principals and other teachers they work with share their view on working with parents. Both Eleanor and Suzanne suggest that modeling by the principals has had an effect on their teaching. An administration's ideas matter, but it is the execution in practice that is most important to teachers.

Like Eleanor, Gabriel, a first grade teacher in a low income public school reported feeling supported by his principal and colleagues. In fact, he said that because of the principal's attitudes, more like-minded teachers were hired:

She [principal] is very much into parent involvement. She always encouraged us to have parent support and interaction. She encouraged us very intrinsically, she would motivate us to want to do it, we were never paid to come in and do it. She always hired young teachers who had a lot of free time on their hand not older teachers with families...She also would model it. She would come in and talk to the parents too in the hallway and model it.

Though teachers in his school are not paid extra to work with parents, Gabriel felt that it was part of his job, and it was expected that he work to have positive relationships with parents. The principal of his school encouraged these interactions, modeled them and created a community of teachers who valued the same things. This suggests that these are the things that influence teacher practice in Gabriel's school. Although Gabriel felt it was part of his job, the time he spent with parents was often done after school hours, on "his own time." Because it was not part of regular school practice, the administration might be sending a mixed message to teachers at his school about the importance of communication. Though it is valued by the principal, extra time is not made for accomplishing communication with parents within the school day.

My interviews with teachers suggest that modeling from principals helped teachers learn what to do. Being open to talk with staff about parent involvement helped teachers feel supported. Although Helen, a third grade teacher in a low

income urban public school often talked with her colleagues and received their advice, it was the principal's support that affected her most:

I have known how the administration feels about parent involvement. The ones I worked for all really valued it and also helped support me as a new teacher in that. I knew that they valued it because they modeled it. They were very visible, they made home visits, they talked to parents, treated them with respect...I think it makes a difference for teachers how the administration feels because especially for new teachers and especially in situations that are volatile, you have to have their support, it is essential I had the support of co-teachers, colleagues which was great, but you have to have that support. I think school leadership is really important because you don't earn the respect of teachers and families if you don't respect them and the principals I have had really do.

Helen reported learning from principals' modeling of good practice with parents. She also reported feeling that the principal did all he could to reach out to parents who she initially could not reach herself. Helen suggested that this support was crucial to her becoming a better teacher over the years.

#### Private School vs. Public School

In a private school, teachers and administrators may feel that it is especially important to have positive relationships with parents and to communicate with them often since they are paying for their children's education. At the private school where Jennifer works as a first grade teacher, she reported:

They [school administrators] value good parent-teacher relationships. They think it is really important, I think it is one of the things they feel strongly about, they actually require that everyone make a phone call to every single parent the first week of school which is a big thing to ask the people to do, and they are very big on communication so they are very appreciative. I think it [parent involvement] is a big part of our school. We talk about it all the time, parent emails and communication, I feel like we spend staff meetings talking about parent communication and documentation and feeling like it is encouraged and supported and looked positively upon, because if it is not valued, why do it.

Margaret, a second grade teacher at another private school, echoed what Jennifer reported:

The principal makes it known that communication with parents is important, it is a request from the director that emails and phone calls be answered within 24 hours and so it is a specific request and the director says straight out it is very important. In a private school, it is very important to communicate with parents because parents who feel that they are paying for their education really feel that they want to have an input.

Though a lot is expected of teachers at Jennifer's school, she felt appreciated and supported. By being able to talk about parent communication with school administration, Jennifer realized the importance of doing it and learned skills that she

could apply when she worked with parents. This double advantage approach made Jennifer feel better about her job. She was happy to do the work since it was appreciated and (because?) everyone seemed to have similar perspectives on the importance of having positive relationships with parents. In private schools, parents might expect more communication and attention because they are paying for school. Teachers there may learn that it is valued and important and thus, they may adopt strong feelings about the importance of parent involvement.

#### Differences in Teacher and Principal Perspectives

Not all teachers respond well to how the principal acts or the tone and expectations that the principal sets for working with parents. In some cases, the teachers and the principal disagree on how to work with parents. As Rick, a third grade teacher in a mixed income rural school, reported:

She [principal] very much likes positive relationships...she enforces it, she definitely likes having the conferences, she wants everyone to have that first conference, she encourages that. And that attitude trickles down to the teachers, absolutely. But even though the principal has these attitudes, some of the teachers don't. She has a vision of what she sets and she lets the teachers know at the beginning of the year and she told us then and there we need to establish good relationships with our parents throughout the year, the teachers are listening, but...I just think some teachers don't react to that very well in our school so I think some are a little old school.



Although Rick himself is aligned with the principal and positive parent-teacher relationships were important to him, other teachers in the school did not share the same value. In this case, the positive attitude of the principal did not always impact all the teachers. This suggests that principals have only a limited effect on teachers' practice in Rick's school and teachers indeed act on their own as street level bureaucrats. This might also be because teachers have different personal values or perhaps the other teachers create an atmosphere where they support one another in not valuing parent contact.

In an reversed scenario, Tiffany, a fourth grade teacher at a suburban public school in an affluent neighborhood reported having a very positive relationship with parents in her class despite having a principal who did not value parent involvement.

This principal we have now is a little more difficult, she is not open to discussing anything with parents and she makes it difficult to meet with parents and teachers. She makes it very official and it seems very organized and professional, but really she has some social anxiety and I think that she is perceived as her being stand off-ish so a lot of parents do not go to her to talk...she is not very visible in the school and the kids don't really have a strong relationship with her and that is hard. It is really hard, the parents are afraid to talk to her.

And I can see why, she is scary.

Jane, another fourth grade teacher who works with Tiffany, echoed what Tiffany reported:

I feel like she doesn't care if you make an effort with parents when things are going well. And I do. I think that is a big thing, if I see major improvement in a kid, I tell the parents, I write a note home or send an email... My teammates and I, the 4 of us, disagree with every aspect of the principal so I don't look to her at all for anything in terms of support or advice, if I have an issue with a parent. I know it is touchy between teachers, and parents and administration and I don't want to mess that up, but I would say that I don't look to the administration at all as a model. My perspective isn't really informed by what they think or do.

Despite not having support from the principal, Jane and Tiffany suggested that in order to be productive successful teachers, they needed to have positive relationships with parents. In this case, they are supported by other teachers that they admire in the school. The positive relationship that they have with each other and with other colleagues might help explain their choices and actions related to parent involvement. Jane and Tiffany did not let their principal's differing attitude affect their teaching practice. Though they wished it could be different, they were unwilling to change what they do because of the principal. Tiffany and Jane had the freedom to act in a way that was consistent with their own values, which were different from the principal's and did what they felt was right within their own classrooms.

Many teachers in this study reported having positive relationships with parents and most reported that having a supportive principal and school administration helped them foster those relationships. On the other hand, if teachers believe in one way to

do something, a differing attitude from the principal will not sway them to change their ways if they believe it will help them be better teachers. Given how teachers responded in this study, it suggests that a school administration that has positive perspectives and practices will help teachers, but that administrations that have negative perspectives will not deter teachers from creating their own positive relationships with parents.

It also seems that sometimes, despite an administration's perspective on parent involvement, teachers act as "street level bureaucrats" in their own practice. Policy implementation research (McLaughlin 1991; Weatherly and Lipsky 1977) states that in some cases, individuals, rather than institutions, have more of an influence on policy implementation. Individuals will decide on their own what practices to follow based on "incentives, beliefs and capacity" (McLaughlin 1991, p. 191). Individuals will fit their actions to the multiple demands, values and circumstances of their environments. Individuals become "street level bureaucrats" (Weatherly and Lipsky 1977) and implement, or practice according to their own needs, goals and motivations. Teachers are individual actors motivated by self-interest and have autonomy in their own classrooms. These "street level bureaucrats interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs and have substantial discretion in the execution of their work" (Weatherly and Lipsky 1977, p.172). In this case, though there is "policy" or school philosophy handed down from the school and the administration, individual teachers have interactions with parents that may differ from the philosophy. The literature on street level bureaucrats maintains that teachers may

have the flexibility to behave in ways that are consistent with their own values and comforts rather than subscribing to norms set by others.

The evidence in this chapter suggests that in implementation, within a teacher's own classroom, they have the freedom to act as street level bureaucrats, acting according to their own comforts, circumstances, and value systems. Each teacher's values might come from a different source: from their colleagues, their mentor teachers, their own previous experiences, or external factors like their school philosophy or principal's attitudes.

#### *Own parents influence on teaching*

In addition to mentor teachers, teammates and school administrators having an influence on teacher's beliefs and practices of parent involvement and communication, teachers reported that their own parents had an influence on them. Rick, a third grade teacher at a rural school has a mother who is an educator and a former school superintendent, and he reported:

There is not really a class that can teach you, I think it is the type of person you are and who you grew up to be. The type of parents your parents were, your parents do have an influence on you. My mom had a huge influence on me, growing up, being in education, dealing with people as a superintendent and as a principal.

Rick felt that seeing his mother deal with teachers and parents informed his view of parent involvement when he became a teacher. He remembered his own mother treating parents and teachers with respect and saw her try to understand the parent perspective when she was an educator. Rick used those memories to inform his view

of how to interact with parents. It is also important to note that Rick said that he believed that experience was the best way to “teach” about parent-teacher relationships and that it would be difficult to teach through a class or through reading about it.

In addition to having a few workshops on parent involvement in her Teach For America teacher education program, Shannon, a fourth grade teacher at a mixed income public school, reported that her practice of valuing parents was informed by her own mother being an involved parent:

My mom was always at school, and I think I was sort of an atypical student in that I loved seeing my mother at school, all the way through, and knowing, for good kids and for bad kids, knowing that your parents have a relationship with your teachers is very powerful. It leaves no doubt that if I run up and punch Sally at recess, mom is going to know about it by the time I get home. On the flip side of that, knowing that if I work really hard on this assignment, mom is going to get an email tonight saying what a great job I did.

Since her mom was involved in her education, Shannon tried to involve the parents of her students. She often sent notes home, emails or called parents when her students did something good, or when they misbehaved or were struggling academically. By doing that, Shannon believed students were more motivated to do well, as she was when she was a student. Shannon suggests that parent involvement makes a difference in how students in her class performed.

Like Shannon, Tiffany, a fourth grade teacher at an affluent suburban school, also was raised with a mother who was very involved in her schooling. Tiffany reported:

I would say somehow how I was raised influenced my attitudes on parent-teacher relationships. My mom was PTA president when I was in elementary school, and I later found out that she couldn't stand two of my teachers but I never knew because she had the common sense not to talk about that in front of me. Also I think because I was raised in a house that if the teacher called, it was serious and the few times someone called because I did something bad, it was a big deal in my house. For the most part mostly how my parents behaved, I assumed that was how people behaved and my friends, that is how their parents were also.

Tiffany also felt motivated by calls home from the teacher and looking back she really valued that her mother was involved in the school but kept some things private. Tiffany saw her mother respect teachers and appreciated that even when her mom had bad feelings towards a teacher, it didn't come home. Tiffany suggests that remembering how her own mother acted in schools informed her view of how to work with parents as a teacher herself.

### *Summary*

There are potentially many ways that teachers can be influenced when they are creating their practices and their educational philosophies. Personal experiences, what they learn in school, their own family life and history, as well as mentor

teachers, colleagues and school administrators can have an impact on how classroom teachers interact with parents. Teachers interviewed in my study suggest that though they are not formally taught about parent involvement in their teacher education programs, teachers can form positive attitudes towards parents through having role models that can reinforce and teach constructive ways of involving and communicating with parents. That said, this does not testify to the quality of teachers' practices. Although teachers in my study report positive relationships with parents, a better way to learn about how to engage and communicate with parents might be through teaching of best practices that have been researched and found effective.

The existing literature on parent involvement and on teacher education does not go far enough when it explains that teacher education programs do not prepare teachers to work with parents. Simply saying that it is not taught does not attempt to explain what then does influence how teachers think about parent involvement. My interviews with teachers add to this body of literature to help explain what influences teachers' attitudes towards parents. Though the literature is clear in stating that there are few, if any, courses in teacher education programs that explore parent involvement, it is not possible to predict if additional courses would affect their practice to the extent that other colleagues, their mentor teachers and their own experiences affect their perspectives. The teachers seem to suggest that they are happy with their current practices and did not wonder what else could be done. A couple of participants felt that they could do more in terms of parent volunteers, but they quickly made excuses as to how difficult that was. Teachers reported that they

felt that parent involvement and communication skills between parents and teachers would be hard to teach through classroom or textbook based courses, though they would have liked to be better prepared for the work they have to do with parents. A more rigorous screening and teaching of mentor teachers might be a good way to ensure that best practices are being passed down to new teachers.

Interviews with teachers also seem to imply that they have a fair amount of freedom when it comes to implementing parent involvement practices in their own classrooms. Teachers in this study act as street level bureaucrats and do what they feel is “right” in interacting with parents. Though some say that the school philosophy or principal leadership affects teacher practice, this study suggests that teachers’ own values, perspectives, and circumstances generally dictate their practice since they have little else to draw upon in their work. This finding has implications for both teacher education programs and poses the question of how significant principal leadership is in establishing parent involvement practices.



## *Chapter Seven*

### *Conclusion*

Over the past ten years, there has been a growing body of literature on the topic of parent involvement. This dissertation builds on the existing literature that argues for the importance of parental involvement. Research has shown how parents working as volunteers, homework helpers, and participants in school activities impact student success (Epstein 1986; Henderson 2002; Lopez 2001; Maynard 1997; Sanders 1998; Smrekar 2001; Weiss 1998). This literature has created a stepping stone for a closer examination of parent-teacher communication. Previous literature has not made clear how those different forms of involvement work. The perspectives' of teachers has been missing from the literature, as has a detailed examination of parent-teacher communication. This previous research does not unpack the different aspects of parent involvement. This dissertation has sought to contribute to the effort to understand parent involvement through the eyes of teachers.

One question in the literature has centered on different types of parent involvement such as parent volunteering. Some researchers suggest that volunteering is one of the major ways that parent involvement can contribute to student achievement. Volunteering is but one form of involvement. This study examined the value of types of involvement from the perspective of teachers and they did differentiate between parent volunteering and communicating with parents. Some forms of parent involvement do not provide teachers with information and some do. It is forms of involvement, such as communication, that provide teachers with information about individual students that is most important to teachers and that influences their curriculum. In this study, teachers do differentiate between forms of

parent involvement such as volunteering in the school and targeted communication with a parent about a specific student. In some cases even, teachers report a negative association with parent volunteers; volunteers often create stress and more work for teachers. On the other hand, some parents and teachers report that volunteering creates a context for communication and helps parents gain a comfort with the teacher. This is an important distinction to make and further refines the field of parent involvement research. It helps us understand some of the teacher perceived benefits of each form of involvement and leads to an increased understanding of how teachers think about what parents have to offer them.

Existing literature has not illuminated if or how parent involvement, or parent knowledge, impacts classroom teaching. My research suggests ways that elementary teachers report using information that they receive from parents in their teaching. Teachers report specific ways that this knowledge influences their teaching. They use students' interests in classroom examples and in writing assignments, they use knowledge of children's emotional states to determine their assignments or behavior towards children, and they report using parental knowledge to make accommodations for individual children by customizing their curricula. This might be the first step to teachers using parent knowledge to really change what they do as teachers and how they do it. They can move from making their lessons more accessible to students to co-constructing homework policies, units of instruction and lessons with knowledge from parents. Not only would teachers' classroom lessons change, but their relationships with parents would change as would what parents have to offer teachers. The current literature does not explore the specific information exchange between

teachers and parents, nor does it examine how teachers report using that information. While much of parent involvement has been seen as symbolic, and not necessarily contributing to classroom instruction, this finding identifies ways that teachers use parent knowledge directly in their classroom practice.

Most of the parent involvement literature treats the parent teacher relationship as a partnership. But my research indicates that this relationship may not be a true partnership with implied equality. Though teachers report wanting to foster positive relationships with parents, they report trying to do so on their own terms. Teachers attempt to manage their relationships with parents by setting meetings and by trying to establish rules for communication in their interactions with parents. One reason for this exertion of leadership by teachers may be their desire to maintain a form of professionalism in their interactions with parents and to create a sense of professionalism for the field of teaching as well. Once this dynamic is identified, teachers can create more equal and meaningful relationships with parents, so that all parties involved feel that educating children is a joint effort where everyone can help one another in the healthy development of children.

Some of the communication between parents and teachers occurs via email in many cases. This is a relatively new aspect of the parent-teacher relationship that deserves more examination. As teachers in this study reported, the use of email is a mixed blessing. On the one hand it allows teachers to respond at their leisure, formulate a well thought out response, and keep the conversation on one topic. On the other hand, teachers may be expected to respond via email at all hours,

immediately and it leaves a paper trail with which some teachers do not feel comfortable.

This study also addresses how we understand influences on teachers' attitudes towards parents. This is an important issue since my other findings reflect how teachers think and behave. According to teachers in this study, and previous research, teacher education or courses did not influence their actions. Though those studies found that teacher education programs did not prepare teachers for parent involvement practices, they do not go farther to explore what does influence teachers. The teachers in my study report that mentor teachers, school colleagues, and a teacher's own parents seem to have the largest influence on them. Going beyond what influences teachers, the Montessori teachers in this study, David, Karen, and Lucy, demonstrated that there can be differences between how teachers perceive parents, even when working in the same school with a distinct philosophy. Though they agree that working with parents is part of their job, they go about the practice of doing so quite differently that implies that they perceive their relationships with parents differently. While surveys can help us understand the means and the frequency of parent teacher interactions, they cannot help us understand the tone and texture that are behind these actions. This is why observations and interviews are important in this area.

*Implications for further research, policy and practice:*

This study included interviews from a total of 21 teachers. The data in this study were self-reported from the teachers themselves and there could be an element of "social desirability" in the data in which teachers reported what they thought was

the “right” thing to say. And though this is not a comprehensive enough data set to create policy recommendations, and I cannot make claims based on only 21 teachers, I can say that more research is needed on parent involvement in order to effect policy. I also can say that this study can have implications for future research and for practice.

There are also differences between teachers that are not explored in depth in this study. These differences include variations between teachers who teach in schools with vastly different socioeconomic conditions and teachers who teach in private versus public schools. There may also be important differences between teachers of different grade levels that I do not explore in this study. Despite these possible variations, this study provides an important conceptual contribution to the field of parent involvement and makes the case for further research.

I have found that communication is one of the most useful forms of parent involvement and can enhance schools’ parent involvement programs. Although central to many school programs, the fundraising programs, holiday celebrations, book fairs, and school carnivals, it is easy for educators and parents to lose sight of the point that teachers value one on one communication with parents. Schools can make an effort to encourage the kinds of involvement that really affects classroom teaching, such as communication. This is especially reassuring to parents who work or who are not available to interact with the school community during school hours. Though parents acting as volunteers and being active on the PTA may be beneficial for parents themselves and may be an extra bonus for teachers, an effort to stress the importance of communication between parents and teachers should be made.

When crafting parent involvement policies, schools, districts and other policy makers should be aware of the different forms of involvement and what teachers find is most useful to them. Schools may be able to offer more time for teachers to communicate with parents. They could also offer substitute teachers for times when teachers need to meet with hard to reach parents. There is a human resources aspect to encouraging parent involvement that schools and districts should consider when staffing and planning for the year.

Increasing the amounts of the types of involvement that teachers perceive as useful to them could enhance their teaching and their relationships with parents. A more nuanced distinction in the research literature between types of parent involvement may lead to greater understand of the field as a whole and its different pieces.

Parents may not know that teachers want to have information about their child outside of school or about their family situations. Teachers should find ways to encourage parents to talk with them and schools should provide teachers with time to do so. Additional education and training might be necessary for teachers to learn how to best reach and communicate with all kinds of parents.

It is interesting to note that some teachers feel that they have the flexibility and the authority to either accept or reject their school's administrators' attitudes toward parent involvement. This finding in particular has implications for practice and for further research. Teachers report that they feel they are not prepared to work successfully with parents; they also report that their mentors and colleagues have the largest impact on their teaching practice. This can be an opportunity for schools, both

pre-service education schools as well as schools where teachers work, to invest in ensuring quality mentor teachers and in professional development for all teachers. If more teachers in schools have positive attitudes and quality practices for parent involvement, they can influence other new teachers that may have an impact on school culture and on individual teacher practice. This adds to the literature on teacher leaders (Epstein 2001) that suggests that some teachers are leaders and can influence how other teachers behave, but makes the distinct point that some teachers will act according to their own values despite what other teachers do in their own classrooms.

This study has opened the door for meaningful future research to take place on the topic of parent involvement. This study adds to the existing literature by arguing that relationships between parents and teachers, and the knowledge gained from these interactions, can be especially significant in effective teaching. Though this current study did not examine how the different aspects actually affect student achievement, we can speculate that some aspects of parent involvement influence teaching practice more than others, and changes in teacher practice is what theoretically will affect student learning. First, it would be useful to conduct a study to further this research by exploring how teachers actually use parent knowledge in their classroom practice. Though this study examined how teachers *report* their use of parental information, it would be beneficial to further examine the actual practice of teachers. Such a study would extend this research to go beyond teacher self reported data. Second, this research provides the rationale for a further study examining how different parent involvement practices actually impact student achievement. Such a study would

explore the effects of parent involvement on student grades, behavior and test scores. This would help teachers be able to identify and encourage practices of involvement that lead to certain needed results for specific students. Finally, a study of individual teachers and the parents of students in the same class would provide a more balanced approach to this work. Such a study would provide insight into specific duos of parents and teachers and their interactions and relationships.

The present study contributes to the growing interest in parent involvement in policy, research and practice. By discovering how teachers perceive parent involvement and exploring how they use parental knowledge in their teaching, I was able to unpack different aspects of parent involvement and contribute a more nuanced approach to examining parent involvement in all its forms. This research illustrates the integral role that researchers can have in continuing to explore parent involvement from multiple perspectives and that they can have in expanding the current literature on the subject.



## **Appendix A**

In the study of parent involvement in schooling many researchers stress the importance of communication. Yet, as noted in chapter five, our understanding of the processes of communication has been incomplete. In chapter five I examined how teachers and parents communicate and how their relationships develop. Some teachers reported that they use email, while others do not. Most teachers reported using the parent teacher conference to communicate with parents, and others reported that they often see parents while they are in the building volunteering. Though chapter five explored the ways that teachers perceive they communicate with parents, it only briefly touched upon what those communication patterns could mean for the parent-teacher relationship. While conducting in depth interviews with teachers and parents at Montgomery Montessori, and through observations there, I found that there could be even more nuance to the way that these three teachers perceive their relationships with parents. Teachers can perceive parents differently, even when working in the same school with a strong philosophy. Building on the ways that parents and teachers reported communicating with each other, we see how teachers at Montgomery Montessori differ in their attitudes toward parents.

This dissertation is fundamentally focusing on teachers but I also have some additional insights from parents and these are included in this appendix that explores teacher and *parent* responses. This appendix shows how there is variation between teachers and illustrates the textural and tonal differences between teachers and their relationships with parents.

*Similarity or Variability Within A School?*

The literature (Epstein 2001; Hoover-Dempsey 1987; Lareau 2000) has suggested that school philosophy, principal leadership, parental social class, and other factors help us understand how and why parents become involved in schools and how teachers interact with parents. Sometimes school culture is heavily influenced by social class or by the school leadership and much of the time, it is expected that the culture and norms of the school are followed by classroom teachers. This implies that in any given school, teachers would have similar methods of instruction and similar ways of engaging with both students and parents. Though this may be the case in some schools, my interviews suggest more individual variability in parent-teacher relations *within* a school than the literature suggests. The literature also suggests that parent involvement is relatively similar within a school. For example, Lareau (2000) studied two schools representing different social classes and found that practices of parent involvement within each school were similar, but different from one another; the difference was between the schools, not *within* them. Lareau states, “family-school relationships vary between working class and upper middle class communities (as demonstrated by the respective schools). Relations between working class families and the school are characterized by separation...By contrast, upper middle class parents forge relationships characterized by scrutiny and interconnectedness between family life and school life” (p.8). Each school Lareau studied had similar mechanisms for parent involvement, yet in practice, the involvement was different.

In a study of effective strategies to foster urban school resiliency, Wang (1997) found that if a school had an “inclusive approach for service delivery,” a school wide program for classroom management and for diverse parent engagement,

schools could make great strides in promoting academic achievement for its students. The study implies that if the whole school adopts these practices, it will be successful. This study however, does not examine differences in classroom teachers' practices that might affect student results or how it might affect teachers' relationships with parents. Epstein and Becker (1982) for example have shown that some teachers are "teacher leaders" in practicing strategies for parent involvement and are more successful in getting parents to become involved and that other teachers are less successful in their practice. This implies that there are different teacher practices within a school. This idea needs further clarification and examining three teachers in one Montessori school will provide a unique opportunity to see how teachers practice within the confines of their own classrooms and to what extent their practice follows school ideology.

Each school has its own particular philosophy that the principal often exemplifies and expects teachers in each classroom to adhere to, but there can be variability among teachers in the same school. For example, Montessori philosophy dictates that class work be student-directed, that classrooms are multi-aged, and that parents are an integral part of the school community. Although Montgomery Montessori adheres strictly to Maria Montessori's teaching philosophy in terms of student directed learning, close observation of students, individual or small group lessons, there is variability in practice between the three elementary teachers in terms of parent relationships. In this school, the principal believes in having a strong "parent presence" in the school and school policies encourage parent involvement, as does the Montessori philosophy. Yet, within this school, teachers' practice varies.

The ways that these three teachers vary is in the ways that they choose to communicate with parents, their warmth to parents and in the rigidity of the boundaries they set. The impact of these differences however, is not clear.

In the last chapter we saw what influences teachers. We know about teacher leaders and how they may make a difference in how teachers (Epstein 1982) behave and how they think about parents. But what teachers report actually doing in the classroom may also reflect how they perceive relationships with parents. Though each of these three teachers, and parents of children in their classes, report having positive relationships with each other, their relationships look very different. The way these teachers think about parents and how they should interact with them are different from one another. Though they all reach the goal of having positive relationships with parents, their methods are different and the resulting relationships are different. What might make these relationships look and feel different? The understanding and perceptions of the teachers that underlie their actions make the relationships different. It is important to try to understand the underlying reasons so we can better understand teacher practice. Two aspects of the parent teacher relationship, communication patterns and boundary setting, illustrate ways in which teacher perceptions lead to certain practices of parent involvement. It is not just the frequencies and the ways that teachers communicate with parents that matter; it is through the tone and texture of the interactions that we can understand a teacher's perception and attitude about the relationship. It is not just counting the number of times that teachers contact parents that gets at the heart of understanding the parent

teacher connection. We need to take a closer look at the warmth, the texture, and the comfort between parents and teachers to understand the nature of this relationship.

This chapter is based on the three Montessori teachers, not each of the 21 teachers in this study because the data used for this chapter is largely based on observations. I only observed teachers at Montgomery Montessori and thus, this chapter is based on that data.

#### *Description of Montgomery Montessori*

The school is a private Montessori school serving ages pre-k through eighth grade with approximately 150 students, between 25-35 children per class. Montgomery Montessori adheres strictly to Maria Montessori's philosophy of teaching which includes a parent volunteer requirement, a commitment to a classroom and extended community. In this, as in other Montessori schools, students almost always have the same teacher for multiple years that help teachers and families form deep and/or long relationships. School tuition is approximately \$12,000.00 per year per student, with financial aid available to those families who need it. Classes are multi-aged, based on Montessori philosophy. There are three elementary aged classrooms.

The characteristics of the teachers in those rooms is as follows: one of these teachers was a man named David, the other two were women, Karen and Lucy. Two teachers were fairly new to teaching, less than five years, and one was a veteran teacher, all three teachers are white. All three teachers have advanced MA degrees, and David also has an MBA. The teachers are all married, David having gotten married during the summer after I conducted my observations.

Montgomery Montessori is on a multi-acre campus located in a Maryland suburb fairly far from a large city center, approximately one hour from Washington, DC. The campus abuts a large state park and the students make use of this wooded area. To arrive on the campus, you travel down a long, hilly, paved road with expanses of land on either side of the road. As you approach the two school buildings, there are horse stables and riding courses on either side of the road as well as a swimming pool and tennis courts in front of you. The school buildings do not look new, nor do they look old. They are well kept and clean, there are brightly painted wooden signs directing cars to the main building, stables, and visitor parking.

The majority of students are dropped off and picked up by one or both of their parents in a car, though a few students carpool together. The school owns a small bus on which approximately ten to twelve students are transported to and from school. The students have a dress code of blue or khaki bottoms (pants, skirts, or shorts) and solid tops with collars (blue, red, white, yellow) in which they dressed each day, though some wore school logo sweatshirts on colder days.

#### *Description of the Montessori Teachers*

David is a fairly new teacher. He came to Montessori teaching three years ago from a career as a banker. David is 37 years old, has short brown hair and blue eyes. David is usually dressed in business casual attire, sweaters or button down shirts with khaki or dark colored dress pants. He often wears “urban sneakers” and a small thin silver ring on his pinky. In this elementary class, there are 19 students. David’s classroom is separated from the main building and is near the greenhouse. There are no other classes in this building. The room is a large rectangular shape, has

large windows that face the greenhouse and hills and give the room lots of light. There are shelves around the perimeter of the room and the Montessori materials are carefully and neatly arranged on the shelves. The room consists of floor space and about 15 small, wooden, rectangular tables with small chairs or stools at them for working. The teacher has a small wooden desk with a small hutch above it in the far corner of the room, it is not very visible. Near the teacher desk is a cage with mice or hamsters. The room is tidy and the students seem comfortable in their surroundings.

Karen is 51 years old and like David came to teaching recently as a second career. Previously, she was in computer customer service. Karen has long straight brown hair that is often in a bun held together with 2 brown wooden fashion sticks. She usually wears black comfortable looking cotton pants, a short sleeve shirt and a cardigan sweater. She also often wears a silver necklace and silver hoop earrings and black sandals.

There are 11 tables with two to four chairs each scattered around the room, two of the tables are round and the others are square. There are hooks by the back door where students hang their backpacks and there are green plants sitting on shelves all around the perimeter of the room. The room has high sloping ceilings with large skylights and windows along two walls that look out onto grassy hills. The room has blue carpet, is filled with light, and has white painted walls with pictures of nature and prints of famous Van Gogh paintings. There are 24 students in Karen's class.

Lucy is a veteran Montessori teacher, she has been a Montessori teacher her whole career. She also was a Montessori student herself growing up. Lucy is 46 years old and has chin length straight brown hair. She wears black pants and

patterned shirts, or v neck shirts with flowing silk skirts and often wears different tasteful necklaces and jewelry such as a large silver necklace made of silver hoops and a gold watch.

Like the other classrooms, the shelves around the perimeter of the room are neatly arranged with Montessori materials. In this class there are 12 small tables with 2-4 small chairs around them, there is a coat closet near the door, and a bathroom near the kitchen/science area which is towards the back corner of the room. There are light filled windows all along the back wall that faces out onto a field and the school playground. There are 23 students in this class.

When I met each teacher, David, Lucy, and Karen, they were all friendly and seemed interested in my work. They all asked about my background in teaching and what I was hoping to find through my work at Montgomery Montessori. I tried to be friendly and honest, without giving away too much detail of my study, so as not to bias the teachers. I briefly told them I would be studying relationships between parents and teachers and I assured them that I would not be evaluating them in any way.

During my first meeting with each of the teachers, we set up a schedule to determine which days and what time of day I would observe in each classroom. The scheduling was based on which days and times had the most amount of “teaching time” without being interrupted by art, PE or music specials so I could observe these specific teachers, not the teachers of the specials.

Throughout the semester when I observed, the teachers, school staff and principal were all friendly and nice and I tried to be friendly, nice and as unobtrusive



as possible. Lucy was the most social and open teacher; she often would send me looks of pleasure, exasperation or frustration from across the room and would chat with me at the beginning or end of the day. She would chat about specific interactions or children in the class or about her personal life generally. Karen was also affable and would check in with me to make sure I was comfortable, though she did not chat with me very much. David was also friendly, but he was more reserved, as he was with parents as well, than the two women teachers and seemed very focused on his teaching and on the students most of the time. The way the teachers acted towards me mirrors their relationships with parents as we will see in a later chapter.

All three of these teachers teach the same grade level, elementary, and went through similar Montessori training, and teach in the same school. David and Karen are both newer to teaching while Lucy is a veteran Montessori teacher. Karen and Lucy are both married with children of their own who have gone through, or are in the midst of, a Montessori education. They adhere to the strong Montessori philosophy in their practice and in their world-view of teaching. Though Montessori philosophy delineates policies and practices for parent involvement, David, Lucy and Karen, each have different kinds of relationships with parents. This can be seen through their communication practices and the boundaries they set between themselves and parents.<sup>14</sup> Examining these practices can help us understand these teachers' perceptions of parents and the relationships they have with them.

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<sup>14</sup> There could be numerous explanations for these differences such as teacher personality, training, or years of experience these are beyond the scope of this study.

The ways that these three teachers delineate their boundaries, the ways they separate themselves from parents, the ways they determine how close they become with parents as well as their methods of communication shed light on how they perceive their relationships with parents. The term boundary “is a metaphor for rules and limits, which can lead to a sense of safety...this sense of safety evolves from having an appropriate balance of closeness or distance in a relationship” (Nelson, Summers and Turnbull 2004, p.153). There is a continuum on which teachers may find themselves, from professional, where the relationship is more formal and participants only play one role in each other’s lives to a more informal relationship such as between friends and family. In education, there are no prescribed rules that define the boundaries teachers should have with regard to families (Nelson et al 2004). Therefore, there is variation among teachers, some of whom want close relationships with parents, others who do not. For example, David acts as distant and professional, Karen acts professional and more laissez faire, while Lucy is personal and has an informal attitude in her perspectives on interacting with parents. This chapter will describe each teacher, through their own words and through parent’s responses and will demonstrate how boundary setting and communication patterns illustrate these teachers’ perceptions of how they relate to parents.

*David – Distant and Professional*

David has been a Montessori teacher for two years, both at Montgomery Montessori. He came to teaching from a career in the business world. Since he is a fairly new teacher, David explains that he teaches according to how he was taught in his Montessori training, and that he “plays by the rules” of that training.

## *Boundaries*

During interviews, the teachers at Montgomery Montessori talked about boundaries between themselves and the parents of the children in their classes. Despite the school having a “very relaxed policy,” according to David, about socializing between teachers and parents, David made a conscious effort to create stronger boundaries and he had specific reasons for doing this. As he explained:

I try to keep it pretty professional... There are some really cool parents there that I would love to be friends with, but I think it is safer and smarter because you are in a sense a public figure. Getting close to somebody you let your guard down, and I just think it is dangerous... I think what could happen, you are socializing with a parent and a parent makes a comment about another child or another parent or teacher and it puts you in an uncomfortable situation. How you respond or don't respond can be interpreted in any number of ways by that parent... The idea of, are you being friends with me because you want me to show favoritism to your child. I am trying to avoid all that.

In David's Montessori training he was taught “you open a can of worms the more you socialize with parents.” Though he personally likes many of the parents, David feels that socializing with them outside of school would go beyond his comfort level. David would worry about parent motivations, about his reactions to hearing about other students, parents or teachers and how that would reflect on his relationships. David reported trying to play it safe by creating boundaries between himself and

parents. By not socializing with parents, David maintains a professional relationship with them and maintains a distance from them.

During my classroom observations, I attended a field trip with David and his class. There were five mothers acting as chaperones on this trip to the Museum of Natural History. We took the children on Metro to the Washington Mall, went through the museum in small groups, and later had lunch on the grassy Mall. During the ride on Metro, David was focused on his students, making sure they were all accounted for and safe. A few times during the day the mothers tried to engage David in conversation, but David was serious and very focused on the students. At lunch, David laid a sheet out on the grass and the students sat around him eating their brown bagged lunches. The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates how David kept himself separated from the mother chaperones:

During the beginning of lunch, one mom goes up to David, she was sitting on the opposite side of the blanket sort of off to the side. She waits patiently standing next to him until he gets off the phone (he is talking to a professor who may meet the group for a short lecture, but he is too far away to get to the mall on time). The mom asks him: “one of the other moms is going to watch over my group while I go just over there to get a soda (she points to a small kiosk a short distance away), I need the caffeine, if that is ok..” David says sure, she asks him if he wants anything, he says no and smiles. During this conversation, David is looking and listening to the mom, but also has one eye on the students.

During lunch I sit near one of the moms and David on the edge of the blanket on the grass. David seemed “cool” to chit chat as the following notes describe:

We try to engage David in conversation about his upcoming wedding (the class is invited to the courthouse to see the civil wedding). He says a little about it, but does not seem to want to engage. Another mom also joins in this conversation as the students have brought home invitations to the wedding. David gets up, picks up trash, goes to play Frisbee with the kids. He does not interact much with the parents. The parents talk to each other, the kids play and run around and David hangs out with the kids.

Though it was a special day where the class was out of school in a public place on a field trip, I thought David’s behavior really did reflect his philosophy of not socializing with parents and reflected the power dynamic between parents and teacher. It also was an illustration of how his distance created the tone of his interactions with parents. It seems that these interactions are symbolic of David’s perceptions of how he feels about relationships between teachers and parents. I wanted to hear from David about this observation so during an interview, I asked him if he noticed that he did not interact very much with the parents on the field trip.

Here is his response:

Yeah, that is a good observation. I think there might be some other outlying factors, it could be part of my personality, but if I have 20 kids out in the world somewhere, even though those parents are there as chaperones, they are not responsible, I am, so I could care less if I

hurt their feelings, I am just watching, things can happen and this, especially since I am a new teacher, I am not very relaxed out in the world like that...So I may come across to parents as maybe not that concerned with what they have to say.

It seemed that David felt there was a conflict between attending to parents and his responsibility to having “peripheral vision” for all of the students:

I would like to be really focused for the parents and there for them. But sometimes...even with parent and child I will be the same way. They will come in and want to talk. But I have this peripheral vision for all the other kids and looking out for them where one kid is wrapping himself in a bead chain [a Montessori teaching material for math] and can ruin the whole evening. I probably give that impression a lot.

David recognized himself in the description that I gave of his actions during the fieldtrip. David’s response illustrates that he believes it is his students who are his first priority, not his relationships with parents. He would rather talk with parents at set times, when he can give them more attention because students are not around. This shows both his preference for meeting during set times, and for keeping a boundary between teachers and parents. Parents are forced to adhere to the boundaries that David set. On the field trip, parents may have wanted to blur the boundaries more, but David consistently stuck to his rules and the parents had to follow suit. David was exerting his preference for keeping his relationships with parents on a professional level in a pronounced way in this example. On the field trip

David acted as though the students were his clients and maintained his distance from the parents. One could say that parents in a school are the clients, but in this case, David felt his responsibility was to the students and he acted as his professional norms dictated.

There is one instance though where David's actions seem to contradict his strict enforcement of boundaries between himself and parents. During the end of the semester that I observed at Montgomery Montessori, David got married. He married a woman from Chile and a wedding celebration was planned to take place during the summer in Chile. In addition to the wedding in Chile, there was to be a small ceremony, a legal wedding, at a local courthouse. David invited all the students in his class and their parents to the legal ceremony. When I asked him why he did this, he said:

I just thought it would be a good learning experience for them. I thought it would be interesting and fun for them. I like the kids, they are fun to hang out with and I thought they would enjoy it.

David did not seem to think that inviting his students and their parents to his wedding was crossing the boundaries he set up. This action does not seem to line up with his stated philosophy, though most of his other actions do conform to his strict boundaries.

### *Communication*

In addition to the boundaries that David talked about setting between himself and the parents of his students, the way he communicates with parents also erect a type of boundary. David does not talk with parents during school visits, on field trips,

during car pool line or while parents are volunteering. Since he does this, David sets clear patterns of communication that he wants parents to follow. David creates interactions that have the tone and texture of a professional relationship. Although parents are often in the school volunteering or picking up their children from school, David reported that most communication between himself and the parents of students in his class occurred during teacher scheduled conferences. Jeanette, a parent of a girl in David's class agreed with this statement and reported:

Most communication happens during the conference, I volunteer in class, but no real communication happens during that time, [I am] just helping to organize parties.

Like other teachers in this study reported, David prefers to communicate during scheduled times. Similarly also to other teachers in this study, Jeanette reported that she does not discuss issues or communicate with David during times that she is volunteering. During times when parents are in the class volunteering, David reported that he is busy focusing on the children and their needs. Although in an interview, David did not recall telling parents that he cannot talk during class time, when students are around, parents know this and do not attempt to communicate with him during this time. Though unspoken, or not explicit, David set these terms for interaction with parents. By setting these terms, David can control the kinds of interactions he has with parents; usually student centered and formal. This situation leaves little room for closer relationship to develop between David the parents of students in his class.



In discussing when to initiate contact with teachers, parents and teachers in the elementary at Montgomery Montessori talked about the interaction that happens during car pool time at school. The parents in David's class report "knowing" that carpool is not the time to begin serious conversations with him. They acknowledge the difficulty of the time and respect his right not to talk with them during carpool. David confirmed that carpool was not a time to begin in depth conversations and Abby, a parent of a student in his class reported:

I wouldn't want to start a big conversation in carpool, that is for quick things, he is busy trying to get everybody safely in their cars, and of course wanting to get home. So he will ask me to come in when he needs something, or he will make a phone call.

Despite the fact that many parents see David during carpool time, it seems that there is a mutual understanding of what kinds of interaction happens then. Abby does not seem upset or annoyed that David will not talk with her during carpool, in fact, she seems relaxed since she knows that he will call or ask her to come in for a meeting if there is something that needs to be discussed. The same is true for Maggie another parent of children in David's class. Maggie said:

I try not to ask him too many questions in car pool line because it is for another purpose. There are kids coming and going and so I try to be respectful of that, so unless it is something he can answer yes or no or quickly [and if not], in which case I will make a special visit.

Neither Abby nor Maggie reported being told by David that carpool is not a time to talk, but they seem to "know" how to navigate that time and only engage in quick

conversations at that time. By imposing limits on interactions, David is able to maintain a strictly professional relationship with parents which reflects his perceptions of how the parent teacher relationship should be carried out.

Marla, the mother of a boy in David's class reported that she often defers to David about when and how to communicate with him. When asked about how she decides when to talk to David, Marla reported:

[Based on] Time. Time factor, if I needed their attention for more than just a couple of minutes, I would send in a note to give, not to pull them out of a class, to give them the opportunity for them to decide when is the right time.

Here Marla says that she allows the teacher to determine when a good time to meet would be. This quote gives us a clue into understanding the tone of the relationship between Marla and David. It is not just how and when they communicate, but that David is the one who decides these things. This gives the relationship a professional feel where the client (the parent) defers to the professional (the teacher). Another parent, Maggie, said that she feels comfortable communicating with David. I asked her why she felt that comfort and she replied that David invited conversations:

He says that [he is open to communication] at parent meetings, back to school night, in the beginning of school picnic, he says that in the things he sends out to home, you know that kind of stuff. Another thing is his body language. You know, he is not (makes gesture of folding her arms across her chest and frowning), and part of that is the Montessori way, you always greet and make eye contact and he

does that as well, he models that for the kids, and I think that is one of the things that makes him feel more approachable, is his body language and his mannerisms, it is not a closed off.

Because of his openness, Maggie feels comfortable making an appointment to meet with David, or to talk with him more informally. She continued:

Maybe once I did that [requested a formal meeting]. Yeah, typically it is pretty minor, it has been minor stuff so it is more just a pop in thing, or to try to catch him you know, or ask him when might be a good time, or can I have a minute after car pool is over or something, not typically formal.

Even in her response, Maggie differentiates between pop-in, informal times that are appropriate for interaction with David and times that are not, like car pool line.

Maggie learned from David and respected his unspoken rules by asking him for a time to talk, even if it was not requesting a formal meeting. Again, the tone of the relationship between David and the parents seems to be where the parents defer to him because he has set some terms for how he wants to relate to parents.

Marla, a mother who has three sons at Montgomery Montessori, one of whom is in David's class, talked about why she trusts David, why she takes his lead and does not communicate with him very often. She said:

I kind of feel that these people [the teachers] are part of my family. They are kind of like extended family...If you think about it, a child sleeps 11 hours, 10 hours a day, so there are 14 hours left, and then they are in school for at least 6 hours, minimum, and my guys always

had to do extended days because of our jobs, so you are looking at 7-8 hours a day. And how many hours with me?

Marla trusts the teachers at Montgomery Montessori. She knows that her children are in school and with teachers much more than they are with her. She chose the school because she could trust that teachers were communicating her values to her children when she was not around:

My point is, if they are not supporting my values, then they are raising my kids differently than I want them raised so I have to pick people that are supporting my values, otherwise we are fighting each other all the time, and I have not felt that. I have felt that they listen to what is important to me, I listen to what they think is important and it matched and we follow each other like that and they help me raise my kids.

Because she feels they share similar values, she trusts the teachers to make the right decisions about her sons and she often does not feel the need to communicate with the teachers. One of the reasons why Marla chose this school was because of shared values and the trust she has that the teachers will approach her with anything they need to discuss. Here Marla gives over her control and allows David to “hold the cards” and contact her when he needs to. She does not initiate contact most of the time. The time Marla communicates with David is dictated by him. Marla does not report having a distant or uncomfortable relationship with David, but it is one where David has exerted influence to maintain a professional relationship.

Though parents in other classes did raise the teacher's use or non-use of email, in interviews, the parents in David's class did not. David though explicitly talked about email and why he does not like to use it for work:

I just think it is safer to not communicate [through email], as little as possible, but little tiny things I would discuss, but not any sort of issue with a child or personal things, there are probably teachers who would, but I don't. I do a lot of email in normal life, but I tell them [parents] that I prefer a handwritten note or phone call and I will get back to them within 24 hours, that is what I prefer. I think they want to do email because that is really easy to do, but I discourage it.

David reported that he does not like certain "sensitive" topics to be written down in an email. He reported a fear that things written in email might be seen by others who were not meant to see it. In this case, David explicitly tells parents how to communicate with him: via phone, in person, or through handwritten notes. By telling parents that he does not use email, David, the teacher, sets rules for communication that the parents follow.

*Karen – Professional and Laissez Faire*

Though the boundaries and communication patterns that Karen sets are not as distant or as formal as those of David, she still maintains professionalism while being warm and nurturing. Karen also has a more laissez faire approach to communicating with parents and she does not delineate strong boundaries or "rules" for communication as David does. Parents who have children in Karen's class report feeling comfortable with her, but they do not mention that they are particularly close

with her or that they know her very well. Though she has a more informal attitude than David, she does not seem to socialize or spend a lot of time with parents. Her practices of communication and the loose, but not close, boundaries Karen sets with parents is a reflection of how she thinks about and perceives relationships between teachers and parents.

Parents who have students in Karen's class reported various ways that they communicate with her: email, phone calls, notes in backpacks and the school scheduled conference. In addition, they reported that Karen is good about scheduling additional meetings if the need arises. Eve has a daughter in Karen's class and she reported:

I think the conference is the one time where you have free reign so say everything you want to say now, this is your time and so that is of course good, it kind of puts a framework around it, you can say anything you want right now because this is your time with the teacher.

Eve suggests that she felt comfortable using the conference as a time to lay the groundwork for anything she wanted to tell the teacher. Though not explicitly stated, Eve implies that the most effective way to interact with Karen is through the conference. Eve seems to know that the school scheduled conference was the most appropriate time to talk about student issues and she used the conference for that purpose. This is a time where Eve knew she would have Karen's complete attention. I wonder if Eve feels distant from Karen and if she feels that she does not have another outlet for communication with her. Since Karen maintains professionalism,

Eve might feel that the conference is her only time to talk with the teacher. Because there might not be many other times that Karen interacts with parents, Eve might feel the professional boundary that Karen is erecting.

Janet reported that her daughter has Karen for the first time this year and that she feels comfortable with Karen, but that there is a distance between them:

I don't know Karen that well. We have had one parent conference, but otherwise I haven't talked to her much. In Montessori we don't get progress reports or homework coming home, so it is almost a leap of faith. I think Karen is doing a good job, I trust her, I have an innate trust of everyone there [the school], I know if there is a problem, they will bring it to my attention, but otherwise I don't talk with Karen much.

The sense of trust that Janet feels does not seem to be related to the closeness, or lack thereof, of her relationship with Karen. Even though Janet reported that she does not know Karen well and that she doesn't talk with her very much, she trusts her and feels she is doing a good job. Because Karen is professional, she maintains good relationships with her students and their parents, but does not allow relationships to become more personal. Janet does not know Karen very well and does not seem to feel close to her, but that does not prevent Karen from doing her job as a teacher. Karen might feel that her job is to remain professional and not become close or get to know parents on a personal level.

Echoing somewhat what Janet said, Sarina reported:

Karen is very no nonsense, she is very direct and straightforward, but at the same time, she has got a warmth to her.

While Sarina seems to appreciate Karen's directness, and maybe her professionalism, she does feel that Karen is warm. The two sides of Karen create the basis for the kinds of interactions and relationships she has with parents. This could reflect her perspectives on how she thinks about parent teacher relationships.

Another example from Sarina illustrates the professional, yet warm relationship she had with Karen. Last year when Sarina's daughter was in Karen's class, Sarina was planning to leave her husband. Karen was the first person she told about the impending divorce. Sarina reported having a "very good" relationship with Karen, but it was very professional at the same time:

I left my husband and it was very difficult...I had to sit down and explain it all to Karen...she was very reassuring that she would keep an eye on Jessie [daughter] and report back to me...that was the right thing to do, to bring it back to Jessie.

Though it seemed difficult for Sarina to talk about her divorce, she appreciated that Karen focused on her daughter and how she would help at school. Karen did not respond by asking personal questions, she brought it back to her role as teacher. None of the parents I spoke with reported socializing with Karen outside of school or speaking with her about personal matters. Nor did Karen report this. There was a clear distinction that Karen was their child's teacher and communicated with them in a professional manner.



A number of parents who have students in Karen's class reported that they could communicate with her in many ways. This represents Karen's more laissez faire approach to her interactions with parents. She does not seem to have clear cut rules about how or when to reach her. Candice has a son in Karen's class and reported that she felt that Karen was open and welcoming of communication. Candice prefers to communicate via email with Karen and reported feeling that Karen preferred that as well:

I think I have a very good relationship with her [Karen], she is open, via email...I work on the computer all day...if I email her she will respond right away or we can call and leave a message and she will call back, or write notes...the majority of communication with her is note or email or phone.

Candice suggests that it is easy to reach Karen and she can do so a number of ways. As opposed to David, Karen seems to be open to whatever mode of communication is most convenient. She does not have set patterns as David does. Candice expressed her appreciation that Karen responds to her quickly which might contribute to why Candice feels that she has a good relationship with Karen. There was no discussion with Candice about feeling "close" to Karen, but she did feel that she could reach her when needed, a professional yet laissez faire approach.

Karen's lack of clear boundaries and set communication patterns give her a laissez faire attitude towards working with parents. She seems to feel comfortable in her relationships with parents, but she maintains a professionalism that allows her to focus on the students while creating a trusting relationship with parents. She is

different than David who has strict boundaries and clear patterns of communication, but she is also different from Lucy who is much more informal and personal as we will see in the next section. Because Karen is not strict about her communication with parents, they feel warmly towards her, but she does not cross into the territory of becoming friends with parents outside of school. This allows her to be professional while still being able to be less rigid in her communication patterns. Parents can reach her through many avenues such as email, phone, in person conferences and notes (a laissez faire approach), but the content and context of those interactions remain professional. The way Karen acts and interacts with parents may be a reflection of how she views or perceives parents. We can begin to understand Karen's perspectives on parents through her practices relating to them.

#### *Lucy – Personal and Informal*

##### *Boundaries*

Lucy seems to illustrate the opposite extreme of David in terms of their relationships with parents and how they set up boundaries and communication patterns that facilitate the kinds of relationships they prefer. Lucy prefers parents to talk with her at any time, whenever they happen to see her. She is very close with some of the parents who have children in her class; she speaks to them on the phone and socializes with them during the weekends with her husband. Lucy often socializes with Montgomery Montessori parents and families outside of school by going out to dinner with families and/or power walking in the neighborhood with some moms. Lucy does explain that it is not just for gaining new friends or because

she is a social person. She reported that by doing so she can better teach the children because she has a fuller picture of her students:

It [socializing with parents] is part of my community development, for myself and for the child and for the family to get to know the family and the child so I can better help the child. I have always believed that the premise that the parents in the classroom are not my friends and it's one of the things that is very hard about my job because we meet fabulous people and I form relationships with them and the truth of that is that most of them are happy with being very close with me, and that's fine just so long as you are sharing the upbringing of their child. In a Montessori environment [you have a child in class] for more than one year, so it could be 3, 4, or 5 years, so you have this long term relationship with this person which is professional in its socializing, but in order to understand the family and child, there needs to be some social boundary that needs to be crossed. I find if I don't [socialize with parents] I really have a hard time getting to know the child.

As Lucy explained, she does not socialize with parents merely to increase her circle of personal friends. She has found the knowledge she gains about her students through these interactions is a valuable tool that helps her teach. Because Montessori teachers usually teach children for more than one year, relationships between teachers and families have time to grow and often become close. Lucy reported feeling that she misses getting to know a child well if she does not have a relationship with the

family and that knowing a child well helps her be a better teacher. Nancy, a parent of a child in Lucy's class explained the relationship between teacher and her students' families like this:

In the Montessori environment you can have a teacher for 3, 4, 6 years (laugh) that is a huge chunk of time that you are investing in your child, I mean if you add up all that time that that person has an influence on your child, that could be more than a grandparent.

The sheer amount of time that is spent between a Montessori teacher and his or her students is great, so great that the teachers can become like family members. Because of the time and intensity of the relationships formed, teachers can get to know their students on different levels and in different situations as they grow up and this knowledge may be able to inform their classroom teaching. Nancy may be reacting to the closeness that Lucy tries to cultivate between herself and her students' families. Of all the teachers in the elementary at Montgomery Montessori, Lucy seems the most comfortable with soft boundaries. Some would argue that by becoming so close with parents of her students Lucy is acting in an "unprofessional" manner and might do more harm than good for the way parents view teachers and their roles.

Katrina, another parent of a child in Lucy's class reported having a very close relationship with Lucy. One summer, Lucy and Katrina made jam together at Katrina's house. Both Lucy and Katrina felt that it was a pleasurable experience and not only led to deeper communication and a positive relationship, but made Katrina feel comfortable reaching out to Lucy at other times. It could be argued that a teacher going to a parent's house on a weekend to make jam together was a crossing of a

boundary. But Lucy reported that she obtained valuable information that helped her understand her student more fully. Not only was that experience useful to Lucy in obtaining knowledge about family life, the experience was useful for Katrina as well. Later that same year, Katrina found herself in a real bind on a Sunday without a babysitter. She called every parent in her daughter's class, but no one could babysit for the whole day as she went to an old friend's wedding. She was about to give up when she saw Lucy's number in the school directory.

I got in a real pinch at one point, where I had some babysitting lined up for the kids for all day for a very dear friend's wedding, finally at age 45, (laugh) that I was not going to miss in Fredrick and it was going to be hours and like 6 or 7 hours and it fell through last minute, and I went through the whole parent list of everybody in our class and nobody could do it at the last minute, and I finally got to the teacher's name and she said, oh sure, drop her off. So it is very different.

Katrina recognized that the situation was very different than in a non-Montessori school, or different from what she could expect from another teacher. In this situation, nobody felt that boundaries were crossed, but Katrina did follow Lucy's model of forming a relationship with soft boundaries. This model represents Lucy's perspectives on how she wants to work with parents and how their relationship should be carried out. It seems that Lucy feels that her close ties to parents and families help her be a better teacher. The way she expresses closeness with parents helps us

understand the tone of her relationships with parents and how she perceives their interactions.

### *Communications*

Like David, Lucy does not use email, but unlike either Karen or David, she does not have a set way of communicating with parents and parents do not necessarily use the conference or scheduled meetings to talk with Lucy. The parents of the students in Lucy's class have mixed feelings about the ways in which she communicates. Lucy tends to be more informal and prefers hurried conversations when she sees parents at the school. Reacting to the reality of how Lucy works, Eve reported that she does not mind that Lucy is quick and that she is best reached by catching her at school:

For me, with Lucy I tend to do it by trying to catch her, it is just her style, she is boom, boom boom boom, even if you catch her and that is just it, that is all you can do. And if it is something serious with her, she will call you at home at night or at lunch.

It seems as if Eve has resigned herself to communicating with Lucy on the fly, since that is how Lucy operates, but Eve knows that if there is something serious to discuss, she trusts that Lucy will call her. Eve reacts and adjusts to how Lucy sets the terms for communication and this affects the interactions that they have. The relaxed way that Lucy has of communicating reflects her relaxed perspectives on how parents and teachers should interact. Later in the interview though, Eve reported:

If Lucy had a set way of communicating, that you can email or I take appointments every Monday from 3-5 I am available, you call and

the secretary puts you on a schedule, or if there was some set channel, I think that would make it easier, it would be more ideal. Or like I said, if she said you can respond by email and I will reply within 48 hours, whatever it may be, but for me it is ok, it is what it is. One challenge for me is that she doesn't use email, that is a big challenge for me. I find that email is a great way to communicate with the teachers because you can't get them at any given time they are tied up.

Though Eve does not think the situation is ideal, she concludes by saying that it is ok. Eve does not care what form the communication takes, though she prefers to use email, but would like to know when Lucy is available. Though she did not report this, I wonder if she has had trouble reaching Lucy and thus would rather know when she could be assured of talking with her. Lucy dictates the way parents communicate with her based on her personal style and personality and parents adjust their expectations and methods accordingly, thus creating the conditions to further her goals of becoming close with parents.

The relaxed way that Lucy communicates with the parents of students in her class does not seem to affect the relationships that they have with one another, nor does it seem to inhibit necessary discussions from taking place. The parents reported mixed feelings about the ways in which Lucy communicates, but they did not report negative feelings about her as a teacher or about their relationship. There seems to be a trusting relationship between parents and Lucy that allows for some discomfort to be acceptable.

The ways that Lucy has set up her boundaries and her communication patterns allows for a relaxed informal relationship to develop between herself and parents. Because Lucy believes that having a close relationship with parents helps her be a better teacher, she creates ways to facilitate that happening. Her perspective of how parents and teachers should interact forms the basis for how she sets the tone and influences her actions.

### *Summary*

There are both similarities and differences between the three elementary teachers at Montgomery Montessori. The ways that each teacher creates boundaries through communication patterns and through the ways in which they interact with parents gives us some insight into their perspectives on parents. There are differences in warmth and rigidity among the teachers in this study. There is a difference in tone and texture to the relationships that each teacher creates with parents. By looking beyond the numbers of how much parents and teachers communicate, or how often teachers meet with parents, we begin to understand a bit more about the nature of the parent teacher relationship. We can feel the texture and tone of the relationship when we examine more closely how parents and teachers interact.

According to Epstein (1982, 2001), teachers use a variety of tasks and strategies to teach and through which they communicate with parents. Teachers use their own knowledge and comfort in deciding what actions to take. In each instance, the teacher maintains the control of setting the terms of the relationships with parents of students in their classes in ways that further the kinds of relationships they want to have with parents. As we saw in a previous chapter, teachers seem to assert their



professional status and dictate the terms of the parent-teacher relationship as it relates to their own perspectives on parents.

David's desire to maintain a purely professional relationship with parents leads him to erect strict boundaries that creates distance between himself and the parents of the students in his class. Karen, while maintaining professionalism, exudes warmth while doing so which enables her to have professional, yet personal and laid back interactions with parents. Lucy, on the other hand, seems to use her close relationships with parents to enhance her teaching and blurs the lines of professionalism more than others would be comfortable with. Each of the ways that these teachers identify boundaries reflects the perceptions they have of parents and of how they view the parent teacher relationship. More study is needed to understand what impact this may have on teacher practice.

**Appendix B**  
**Interview Protocol for Teachers**

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me, I just want to let you know that there are no right or wrong answers and every teacher is different, I will not be evaluating you all, I am just trying to get a picture of parent teacher relationships in schools.

1. What grade/s do you teach?  
Probe: Tell me about the students in your class.
  
2. What are the ways in which you communicate with parents?  
Probe: Email?  
Probe: Phone?  
Probe: Notes?  
Probe: In person?  
Probe: How often do you use each of the above?  
Probe: Tell me about the there different things you use each of the above for.  
Probe: Are there different kinds of information you share via phone and email?
  
3. How do you best like to be contacted by parents?  
Probe: What do you like about it?  
Probe: How do you least like to communicate with parents?  
Probe: What don't you like about it?  
Probe: Do you have a cell phone?  
Probe: Do you give out your cell phone number or home phone number to parents? If so, when/how do you give it out?  
Probe: Where do you communicate with parents?
  
4. Can you tell me about a time a parent initiated a meeting?  
Probe: Can you tell me about a time you initiated a meeting?  
Probe: Can you describe a recent encounter?  
Probe: What is the purpose of most of your interactions with parents?  
Probe: Tell me about a time that there was an event/incident/etc, after did you contact a parent?  
Probe: When? How soon after?  
Probe: Tell me about a time that a parent contacted you.  
Probe: When do you respond?  
Probe: How do you respond?
  
5. What kind of information do you solicit from parents?

- Probe: What kind of information do parents offer you?  
 Probe: Does information from parents influence your teaching at all?  
 Probe: Can you give me an example of how you might use parental information in your class or in your teaching?  
 Probe: academic?  
 Probe: behavior?  
 Probe: connection with student  
 Probe: Can you give me an example of what kind of information is most useful/helpful to you?  
 Probe: Can you give me an example of what kind of information is not helpful to you?
6. Can you describe the kind of relationships you have with parents?  
 Probe: Can you tell me about a time that an interaction with a parent went well.  
 Probe: Can you tell me about a time that an interaction with a parent did not go well.  
 Probe: How did you develop your approach to parent relationships?  
 Probe: Was there anything in your teacher preparation  
 Probe: What about past experience?  
 Probe: Did learning from other teachers/staff play a role?  
 Probe: Does the behavior of the student influence you?
7. Is there anything you wish parents would tell you more about?  
 Probe: What is most helpful about what they say?  
 Probe: Why?  
 Probe: What do you wish parents would stop telling you/tell you less about?  
 Probe: Is there anything you would want to change about interactions/relationships with parents?  
 Probe: If so, what?
8. How does your school/principal feel about relationships/interactions with parents?  
 Probe: What helps with communications with parents?

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Protocol for Parents**

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me, I just want to let you know that there are no right or wrong answers and every parent is different, I will not be evaluating you all, I am just trying to get a picture of parent teacher relationships in schools.

9. In what grade/s do you have children?  
Probe: How is your child doing in school?  
Probe: Tell me what kind of experience your child is having in Mrs... class?  
Probe: How does your child like class?
10. Tell me about Mrs....  
Probe: Tell me about what you like about the teacher Mrs....  
Probe: Tell me about what you don't like about the teacher, Mrs....  
Probe: Can you describe the kind of relationship you have with the teacher?  
Probe: How much contact do you have with the teacher?
11. Tell me about having a teacher that was easy to work with.  
Probe: What made her/him that way?  
Probe: How did it help your child?  
Probe: Tell me about having a teacher that was hard to work with?  
Probe: What made it that way?
12. What are the ways in which you communicate with teachers?  
Probe: Email?  
Probe: Phone?  
Probe: Notes?  
Probe: In person?  
Probe: Do you have the teacher's: email, cell phone, home phone?  
Probe: Which do you prefer to use? Why?  
Probe: Do you know which the teacher prefers you use? How do you know that?  
Probe: What works well with the teacher?  
Probe: Can you give me an example of when you initiated a meeting?  
Probe: Can you give me an example of when the teacher would initiate a meeting?  
Probe: How do you best like to be contacted by the teacher?  
Probe: What do you like about it?  
Probe: How do you least like to communicate with the teacher?  
Probe: What don't you like about it?  
Probe: Where do you communicate with teachers?

Probe: Can you tell me about a time that there was an event/incident in the class.

Probe: Did you hear from the teacher?

Probe: When? How soon after?

Probe: How much time passes before an email/call/note is responded to by the teacher?

Probe: What do you think about/how do you feel about your interactions with teachers?

13. Can you describe an encounter that happened recently or that was meaningful to you?

14. What kind of information do you solicit from teachers?

Probe: Are there things you learn from the teacher?

Probe: Can you give me an example of the kind of information is most useful/helpful to you?

Probe: Can you give me an example of the kind of information is not helpful to you?

Probe: What do you wish teachers would tell you more about?

Probe: What do you wish teachers would stop telling you/tell you less about?

Probe: What kind of information do you offer the teacher?

Probe: Why do you think that information is helpful to them?

Probe: Are there things that you wonder if you should tell her/him but do not do so?

Probe: What are some examples?

Probe: Are there things you wish the teacher did not know?

Probe: What are some examples?

Probe: How do you determine what information you tell the teacher?

15. If you had an ideal teacher, what would he/she be like in terms of your relationship with him/her?

Probe: What would be a disastrous relationship with a teacher?

Probe: Why?

Probe: Are there ways that you think it has an impact on your child if you have a close working relationship with the teacher?

**Appendix D**  
**Interview Protocol for Principals**

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me, I just want to let you know that there are no right or wrong answers and every principal is different, I will not be evaluating you all, I am just trying to get a picture of parent teacher relationships in schools.

16. What is your philosophy about parent-teacher interactions/relationships?

Probe: Do you disseminate that to the teachers in your school?

Probe: If so, how?

Probe: How does the school view parents?

Probe: What influences that view?

Probe: What do you like about the way your school/teachers deals with parents?

Probe: Are there school policies about interactions with parents?

Probe: If so, what are they?

Probe: Do you talk with teachers about parents?

Probe: If so, how?

17. Can you describe the kind of relationships you have with parents?

Probe: What are the ways in which you communicate with parents?

Probe: Email?

Probe: Phone?

Probe: Notes?

Probe: In person?

Probe: Can you tell me about a time that you initiated a meeting with a parent?

Probe: Can you tell me about a time that a parent initiated a meeting with you?

Probe: Can you describe a typical encounter?

18. Can you describe the kind of relationships the teachers in your school have with parents?

Probe: How do you want the teachers in your school to communicate with parents and how often?

4. How often do you communicate with parents?

Probe: Where do you communicate with parents?

5. What kind of information do you solicit from parents?

Probe: What kind of information do parents offer you?

Probe: Can you give me an example of what kind of information is most useful/helpful to you?

Probe: Can you give me an example of what kind of information is not helpful to you?

Probe: What do you wish parents would tell you more about?

Probe: What do you wish parents would stop telling you/tell you less about?

6. Is there anything you wish you could change about the way your school/teachers deal with parents?

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