

# The Communication Requirements of Democratic Schools: Parent-Teacher Perspectives on Their Relationships

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*Research on parent-teacher relationships tends to relegate parents to visitor roles in schools and to reinforce student achievement as the primary goal of parent-teacher relationships. This article argues for the recognition of the importance of talk among parents and teachers—both as a research methodology and as a desirable outcome—in creating and sustaining democratic communities that support school improvement. The study described used a qualitative approach that incorporated interviews and focus groups in a participative inquiry. Individual interviews with fourth through eighth grade teachers and parents determined the issues to be explored first in separate and then joint focus groups. Teachers and parents together discussed issues such as defensiveness, communication, and alliances. While parents and teachers did not espouse “democratic communities” per se, the values they expressed as important—investment in the school community, direct and honest communication, trust, mutual respect and mutual goals—all reflect the “communication requirements” of such communities. Parents and teachers may routinely frame the meanings of their encounters in terms of the children they have in common, but it appears that what they look for from each other is clearly connected to what they need for themselves as people who share a community that reflects democratic values.*

In discussing research that explores parent-teacher or school-family relationships, it is difficult to resist citing Waller's (1932) infamous comment: that “both, supposedly, wish things to occur for the best interests of the child; but . . . the fact seems to be that parents and teachers are natural enemies” (p. 68). Such a sentiment, which many might suggest continues to prevail today, does not bode well for the development of stronger relationships between parents and teachers, let alone the development of democratic communities in schools.

Nonetheless, a study of parent-teacher relationships in three Chicago elementary schools, discussed in this article, sought to create a process by which parents and teachers, through participation in interviews and

homogeneous focus groups, could identify and explore what they perceived as the issues and themes of their relationships and ultimately process these understandings in focus groups that incorporated both populations. The resulting evidence strongly suggests that, given the opportunity, parents and teachers, despite time constraints, perceived agendas, and “mutual distrust and enmity” (Waller, 1932), may find quite a lot to talk about if they get past their initial suspicions and, in the process, may create foundations for democratic communities in their schools.

Some attention has been paid to the critical task of creating school environments that sustain the communication requirements of democratic communities, but generally parents are not presented as part of the equation (see, e.g., Apple & Beane, 1995; Hemmings, 2000; Kahne, 1996; Soder, 1996). A desire to explore this challenge provided a foundation for the original subject of this inquiry: Given an opportunity for collaborative analysis, what can parents and teachers tell us about their relationships with each other? The data analysis presented here is informed by theories of democratic communication that strongly suggest that collaborative discourse between parents and teachers—both as a methodology and as a desired outcome—is crucial for better relations between parents and teachers, and therefore for the improvement of schools.

#### THE EVOLUTION OF THE STUDY

This work came out of an interest in what seemed to be a lack of opportunity for direct and meaningful parent-teacher interaction and the implications of this deficiency, rather than from a clear focus on democratic communities per se. The questions asked of parents and teachers reflected an attempt to get at some important facets of the parent-teacher relationship process, from both a personal and a political perspective: What kinds of meanings do parents and teachers attach to their encounters? What are the educational issues that most concern parents and teachers, and do they share these concerns? What kinds of collaborative relationships would parents and teachers choose to have with each other if they felt they had a choice? How can parent-teacher discussion inform our understanding of how parent-teacher communication and collaboration can be improved? How can parents and teachers become agents in shaping their interactions toward optimal collaborative support of children’s success and resolution of shared concerns?

It was only as interviews continued that it became clear that teachers and parents were indeed talking about the building blocks of democratic communities. The desire to be *seen* and to be *heard*—to not simply be reduced to a role, but to be recognized as people who have something to

offer the school community—resonated for them. The notion of democratic community as a theoretical construct—incorporating respect, inclusiveness, a focus on process as opposed to outcome, an investment in participants' growth, and acceptance of differences—was therefore an entirely appropriate conceptual framework in which to situate the accumulated data. This framework is not often used to examine parent-teacher relationships, possibly because it challenges the embedded authority of traditional relationships, by suggesting that parents and teachers exist (or should) on a level playing field. As it stands, while there is research that documents the imbalances in the parent-teacher relationship (see, e.g., Lareau, 1989), the literature by and large assigns responsibility to the teacher to learn about and adapt to or accept whatever particular parental limitation is exhibited or to find a way to “manage” the parent successfully (Thorne, 1993). The teacher retains authority, and the parent remains in the client position. Only recently is research beginning to document the importance of mutual respect and “social trust” (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Payne & Kaba, 2001) for successful schools.

While parent and teacher perspectives about their interactions tended to remain student focused (i.e., focused on the benefit to the student of closer relationships), there was some acknowledgment of the broader power of stronger connections. An eighth grade teacher, asked if improved relations were important to her, said, “Well, yes, because everybody’s buying into the same thing then. It just seems that the school community would be united under one cause then. There wouldn’t be a sense of separation of buildings, the school being a separate entity from the home . . . they [parents and teachers] could just share the teaching” (teacher interview). A fifth grade teacher put it even more clearly, saying, “I think there are a lot of teachers who aren’t interested in establishing a relationship with the parents of the students they teach, or the parents of the students in the school. There is a separation. ‘This is my job . . . this is not my life.’ *I feel as a teacher I am part of the community*” (teacher interview; italics added).

Parents evoked a communitarian perspective as many talked about the responsibilities they shared with teachers. As one parent put it, “[Teachers are] a part of [a student’s] life. We’re supposed to be a team, you know. My child is with you just as much as with me. So how can you feel hostile towards me, and we share the same kid?” (parent focus group). This association—the joint responsibility to a child and to each other—was mentioned frequently by parents, less so by teachers. While such comments fall short in demonstrating recognition of schools as “sites of democracy,” the belief was conveyed, in interviews and focus groups, that these connections are valuable and that strengthening these connections is important.

## SOCIAL TRUST: A BRIEF PHILOSOPHICAL HISTORY

These conclusions are evident in the work of Bryk and Schneider (2002), Mapp (2002), and Payne and Kaba (2001), who found that social trust, as measured by the quality of relationships in a school, is a significant predictor of school improvement. Teachers who regard parents as supportive are more likely to try out new ideas in the classroom. Parents who feel comfortable and valued contribute willingly to a school's success. Students who know that parents and teachers are regularly and respectfully in touch tend to work harder. Perhaps most significant in a time of hyperaccountability are the improved test scores posted by schools with high levels of social trust. These social connections remain underappreciated and underestimated by reformers and researchers (Payne & Kaba, 2001).

Social trust is not an accident. A number of educational philosophers over the decades have sketched the ingredients needed to create and sustain an environment that nourishes strong relationships. In *Democracy and Education* Dewey (1916/1966) offered his classic criteria for democratic community:

Now in any social group whatever . . . we find some interests held in common, and we find a certain amount of interaction and cooperative intercourse with other groups. From these two traits we derive our standard. How numerous and varied are the interests which are consciously shared? How full and free is the interplay with other forms of association? (p. 83)

Building on Dewey's vision, Raup, Axtelle, Benne, and Smith (1950) favored a method they labeled practical judgment—a quality used in the process of coming to consensus in a “community of persuasion.” This process involves clarification of both common purposes and desired aims; a survey and assessment of the existing state of affairs; the accommodation of ideas relevant to the situation as a whole; and merging what is current and what is desired to formulate a program of action. They argued:

Obviously, there is no difference between this ethical criterion of judgmental validity and the ethic of democracy. Both are dedicated to the ideal of a people actively participating and actively sharing in the community of consent which determines the validity of the decisions and policies that direct their lives. (p. 206)

What is striking about *The Improvement of Practical Judgment* is the authors' insistence on the integrity of the process. “Persuasion” is meant to embody an agreement not only about a course of action, but about the reasons for

such action. Those involved in a decision must have talked enough to share a common understanding of the framework in which a decision has been made; this moves a group toward more sincere investment in the solution or agreement. While acknowledging the likelihood of resistance to this approach, Raup et al. (1950) nonetheless believed that this was the “ideal toward which deliberation should move” (p. 101).

In the types of ideal speech situations Habermas (1979) discusses, people can experience straightforward interactions, even in bureaucratic institutions like schools that traditionally feature speech that is deliberately distorted in an attempt to control or maintain power. Ideal speech situations are those in which individuals seek the involvement of others in decision making, rather than hoarding such responsibility. All those who are interested and able to do so may participate in deliberations without fear of censure; no information is withheld, regardless of its potential impact on the decision or the consequences for members of the community; and the emphasis is on coming to consensus rather than “winning.” Distortion is thus minimized, if not eliminated.

More recently, Anderson (1998) discussed authentic participation in reform efforts. He raises questions around who should be participating, in what areas and under what conditions, and he also asks, participation to what end? He calls for a more explicit linking of means and ends; the inclusion of all those affected by decisions; an appreciation of the possibilities inherent in struggle and conflict; and advocacy for children in general, rather than individually focused investment.

It would be inadequate to appraise these communication requirements solely in terms of procedural struggle, however. The *political* consequence of distorted communication in the school setting is a lack of consensus regarding the goals and purposes of education; students are left at the mercy of a narrower set of interests than is necessary and consequently do not reap the benefits of shared understandings and mutual goals. This struggle for control is not new. Conflict around the “legitimate” source of authority regarding schooling has consistently been a part of American educational discourse for two hundred years. Government intervention, whether direct or perceived to be represented by the professional status of teachers and administrators, has come up against parental demands for inclusion over and over again (Cutler, 2000). Fine (1993) goes so far as to charge that “the structures and practices of big-city educational bureaucracies serve to split teachers from parents. In such contexts, teachers and parents are set up as adversaries, fighting over inadequate resources and authority, while the grossly disproportionate share of both remains centralized” (p. 684). This conflict continues today in the angry rhetoric around accountability and school choice, as well as in more personal encounters in the hallways and classrooms of our schools.

## PREVAILING CONTEXTS FOR PARENT - TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

The term “community” can evoke a number of interpretations (Furman & Starratt, 2002; Raywid, 1989). While the connectedness, support, shared beliefs, and interdependence of communities can be nurturing and supportive, such qualities can evolve into a reliance on exclusivity and uniformity (Furman & Starratt, 2002). It is crucial to preserve room for diversity and difference in the democratic communities that schools can foster, and so “community” as it is employed here is meant to convey the cohesion among those who are stakeholders in a school, built on acceptance of differences, a commitment to the common good, and a recognition that the school and its environment are interdependent and mutually supportive—in many ways, echoing the characteristics of the communities of persuasion or ideal speech communities discussed above.

## DEMOCRATIC SCHOOLS

The reality for such “democratic schools” is not encouraging. As Furman and Starratt (2002) note, “the practice of democracy in schools has been minimal” (p. 9). They believe that this is because

The perceived risks of democracy [in schools] are apparently chaos and loss of control . . . to head off potential chaos, students and educators are expected to conform to hierarchically imposed decisions about what they study and teach and when, what the outcomes of instruction should be . . . how they behave and talk, and even how they look . . . Learning about democracy may be one of the least experiential aspects of K-12 curricula.”(pp. 10–11)

If students and teachers, who spend their days in the school, find little that is democratic about their experiences, those who only “visit” may find even less. As Apple and Beane (1995) argue, “The idea of democratic schools has fallen on hard times . . . . Local decision making is glorified in political rhetoric at the same time that . . . the needs of business and industry are suddenly the preeminent goals of our educational system” (p. 31).

Despite these obstacles, it makes sense to forge connections between parents and teachers, two uniquely significant stakeholder groups. Such connections are in the best interest of the child for optimal educational outcomes and can serve to strengthen the democratic culture of the school community. However, while enhanced learning experiences for children are an obvious objective for both parents and teachers to embrace, the intrinsic value of collaborative parent-teacher relationships is less readily

acknowledged. Independent of students' academic needs, parent-teacher relationships can foster individual growth, opportunities for mutual learning, support and respect for adult efforts, and renewed appreciation for participation in the community of the school.

By far, most of the research addressing parent-teacher or family-school relationships uses enhanced student achievement as its measure of the worth of these relationships (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). And most literature discusses parental involvement within the parameters of particular boundaries—parent *tasks* or parent *roles*. While sometimes raising power and control issues, these discussions do not question the organization or orientation of the school itself, or the nature of the relationship beyond its practical utility for academic achievement. More democratic perspectives on the value of these relationships have generally been neglected. Even scholarship on democracy and schools (see, e.g., Apple & Beane, 1995; Guttman, 1987; Hemmings, 2000; Kahne, 1996; Soder, 1996) pays only cursory attention to parents as critical figures in a democratic school community. This is a mistake; as author and former teacher Richard Peck warned, “As long as young people go to school secure in the knowledge that their parents and teachers will never meet, the . . . peer group is the only real government in the school” (Alessio, 1999).

#### TRADITIONAL ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Most of the research on parent involvement encourages interactions that continue an unequal relationship. Sending home more frequent newsletters, providing workshops so that parents can help children with homework more effectively, creating positions for parents on councils, and encouraging teachers to contact parents more frequently (and with occasional good news) does create more of an interaction between the school and the home, but also continues to keep parents in the role of visitors. Such activities do not provide parents with a real voice that contributes to what Fine (1993) calls a “democratic, critical, lively public sphere within public education” (p. 708)—a sphere that students are chronically underexposed to (Thornton, 2001).

These barriers, for the most part, are not new. The sense that there is a “disconnect” between parents and teachers about parental involvement goes back decades. In 1941, researchers found differences in the attitudes of school personnel and the community about parent participation in schools (Mort & Cornell, 1941). Erickson (1953) concluded that “educational employees usually feel that they have some understanding of public thinking as to the desired subject matter, content, and method of teaching,” (p. 34) but found through a survey of Portland, Oregon, parents and teachers that teachers were unable to accurately reflect the responses of

parents. Biddle, Rosencranz, and Rankin (1961) found that parents felt teachers discouraged and disapproved of parental involvement, while teachers saw themselves as supportive and inclusive. Goodlad and Klein's (1970) study of classrooms found a discrepancy between what teachers perceived as their behaviors and attitudes regarding parent participation and what observers recorded, which did not support the teachers' perception of actively encouraging participation.

Teachers themselves do acknowledge the need for more effective working relationships with parents (Epstein, 1995; Harris & Associates, 1998; Houston & Williamson, 1990; Williams & Chavkin, 1985), though an undercurrent of wariness runs through this endorsement (Atkin & Bastiani, 1988; Harris & Associates, 1998; Henderson, 1987). For teachers, positive benefits of closer relationships include a sense of greater support and appreciation from parents, a rediscovery of enthusiasm for problem solving (Swap, 1987), and more positive feelings about their work and the schools they work in (Epstein & Dauber, 1991). While school systems can encourage or even mandate teacher efforts for greater parental involvement, if teachers themselves are uncomfortable or unwilling, it is easy to ignore and even sabotage directives from "above" (Anders & Richardson, 1994; Guskey, 1995).

Enhanced academic learning, reinforcement of democratic participation, and strengthened connections and individual growth for adults and students may seem to be rewarding objectives. However, collaborations between parents and teachers do not come easily. While it appears that parental involvement positively effects student achievement (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Epstein, 1991; Henderson & Berla, 1994; Henderson & Mapp, 2002) and results in greater satisfaction for parents and teachers regarding their interaction (Comer, 1988; Swap, 1987), it is also clear that teacher candidates tend to have little formal training in working with parents in their teacher preparation programs (Houston & Williamson, 1990; Radcliffe, Malone, & Nathan, 1994; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997). There is a growing belief that programs need to incorporate such a component (Ammon & Chrispeels, 1998; Shartrand, Weiss, Kreider, & Lopez, 1997; U.S. Dept. of Education, 1994).

## BARRIERS

In elementary and secondary schools, there are many reasons why parent-teacher relationships can founder and the level of family involvement is discouraging. These reasons include class sizes that impede meaningful participation (Shartrand et al., 1997); lack of administrative support (Chavkin & Williams, 1987; Miretzky, 2002); parents' and teachers' differing expectations of involvement (Krasnow, 1990); ambivalence about

the importance of parental involvement on the part of both teachers and parents (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Riley, 1994); and language barriers (Cryer, 1989; Moles, 1993). Time (Swap, 1990), cultural and class barriers (Henry, 1996; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Sosa, 1996; Winters, 1993; Yao, 1988), and psychological hurdles (Atkin & Bastiani, 1988) are further obstacles.

This means few opportunities for parents and teachers to extend their mutual roles beyond traditional school boundaries. Should “meaningful, substantive discussion,” as Lightfoot (1978, p. 27) puts it, take place, parents and teachers might find that they could support each other in ways that go beyond the everyday issues of the classroom. Mutual concerns about broader educational issues have galvanized parents and teachers (and community) before, as in the movement that led to the establishment of local control and parent-led councils in Chicago schools (Kyle & Kantowicz, 1992; O’Connell, 1991). One Chicago fifth grade teacher believes, “The parents aren’t aware enough. I don’t think most of the general public has any idea what it’s like to be a teacher, or what issues are in education now, cause it’s not been out there for them to know. Cause if they did know, it would change” (teacher interview). Parents and teachers, given the opportunity, might identify similar concerns and become mutual advocates—in essence taking on roles as change agents in the educational system.

## RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODOLOGY

W Elementary School, J Elementary School, and R Elementary School, all located in Chicago, were sites for this study.

### W SCHOOL

W School had a student population that was approximately half Hispanic and half White (largely Eastern European), with about 30% of the students being limited English proficient (LEP) and 75% low income. The school was overcrowded even though an additional building had been constructed within the last 5 years. The grounds of the school were inviting and clean. There was a garden and a new playground, and the school was surrounded by single-family homes, occupied mainly by middle- and working-class families.

W School sent home a monthly school calendar via student backpack to all families; there were a number of scheduled activities for W families, such as movie nights, assemblies, and curriculum nights. A garden club attracted the participation of many families. September brought a well-attended open house, and a carnival took up residence in the playground each summer, with many in the community attending. There was an active PTA and Local

School Council.<sup>1</sup> It became apparent that there was a “core group” of parents who were involved at the school; I saw many of the same faces at activities. Many of these parents were White (though not necessarily Eastern European). Some parents acknowledged that the adults (parents, guardians) among the three populations at the school—White “non-ethnic,” Hispanic, and Eastern European—tended not to mix at meetings or events, though there was no overt hostility, and that White parents (or as one mother put it, the “monolingual Whites”) were more involved in volunteer efforts. Whether this was intimidating or not to non-English-speaking parents appeared to be a matter of opinion.

Meetings of the LSC and PTA were held in the school during the evenings. Information was readily shared by the principal at meetings, including budget figures. There was a yearly School Improvement Plan (mandated for every Chicago school), the result of joint work among teachers, administration, and staff at W, and this document was presented to the school community at a poorly attended meeting. W school staff seemed committed to meeting the needs of parents (responding to requests for math tutoring and for supervision for students before school at two of the meetings I attended), and the parents who turned out for meetings and events appeared highly motivated and invested in the school, but by far the vast majority of parents, according to everyone I asked, came to school for report cards and open house, and little else.

## J SCHOOL

J school had an almost evenly divided Asian and African American population that was 35% LEP and 95% low income. The school building was located on a residential street near a commercial district and so did not have a great deal of open space. The current building had replaced its predecessor about ten years before, but already looked somewhat dated due to its design. Visitors walk into a spacious lobby after being buzzed in by a security guard. It was striking how quiet the school was throughout all three of its floors.

J School sent home both a bilingual and English version of their monthly newsletter. Parents were encouraged to attend LSC and PTA meetings, as well as volunteer at the school. There was a monthly Family Night spearheaded by one of the teachers, and parenting workshops were periodically offered. These tended to be poorly attended (Family Nights drew about 20 families, including quite a few grandparents), and the explanation I heard most often was that many of the Asian parents were working two jobs and had no time to come to the school except to pick up report cards; in addition, many spoke little English. African-American and Asian families did not seem to mix at these events, and this separation,

which occurred among students as well, was confirmed by most of the J School teachers and parents who were interviewed. As at W School, the feeling was that there was a lack of connection, rather than any overt tension or conflict between the groups. A special art project some of the students were participating in involved creating murals that would illustrate the two cultures of the school, and the hope was that students would use this opportunity to interact more meaningfully with each other.

PTA meetings, which focused mainly on fundraising efforts, were very poorly attended, and the teachers and parents who did attend were mainly African-American. The LSC's parent and community representatives, on the other hand, were entirely Asian. This meeting, too, drew very few audience members. According to J's principal, non-Asians do not have much chance of winning election to the LSC because they tended not to vote.

J School was one of a number of CPS schools that offers an after-school program for its students until 6 p.m. each school day, and this program was heavily used. There was also a designated Parent Room in the school. Occasionally one or two parents were seen in this room at the start of the school day; it also served as a teacher lounge, copy area, and mailroom.

#### R SCHOOL

R School's students were 90% African American and 99% low income. Multiple buildings house primary, middle, and junior high students; there are over 1,000 students attending R School. The neighborhood surrounding the school is bleak—large stretches of vacant lots overgrown with weeds, garbage, and glass; men hanging out on corners; liquor stores and churches—the look of many inner city neighborhoods. The school itself, while old and in need of repair, was inviting at its main entrance, with a number of plants and student displays and bulletin boards on the walls.

R had the fewest opportunities for parents and teachers to mix; I attended a kindergarten graduation and some LSC meetings. There were no PTA meetings, student assemblies, or open houses. There was no newsletter going home to families, though announcements and flyers were sent home via student backpack. An Open House was attempted a few years ago but drew little interest, so another was not planned for the current school year. There were student assemblies by grade and a kindergarten graduation that was very well attended by proud parents and caretakers. One teacher remembered a monthly performance for middle school parents that she felt was very successful in bringing parents into the school, but this was dropped when the administration changed. The LSC met monthly and drew more staff than parents, though the parents on the LSC seemed to be very involved with the school and with district-wide LSC

activities. There was significant parental involvement through the IASA (Improving America's Schools Act) program, which pays parents for participation at the school, but this seemed to be confined to parents of the youngest students.

R School was the most challenged of the three schools in the study—on probation for poor test scores, surrounded by poverty, and faced with frequent teacher turnover and morale problems. Parental involvement was a concern, but one of many. As one upper grade teacher noted, “I think that the school has such low expectations of the parents and that’s a big part of the reason why the parents won’t step up and play an active role in the school because they know that the school administration doesn’t expect them to . . . because they realize most of these people are from low income, very little education, so they don’t expect them to play a role in the school, so they don’t get them involved” (teacher interview).

## THE DESIGN

A methodology built around the generation of issues and topics by teachers and parents, for the purposes of mutual discussion, made a great deal of sense for this study, despite the lack of precedent. The research design was meant to create an environment for frank discussion and active participation by parents and teachers; something close to what Reason (1998) called cooperative inquiry, during which “people can learn to be self-reflective about their world and their action within it” (p. 280). He argued that any findings suggested by a researcher who remained outside of the experience being researched, that were *imposed* on the practical and experiential knowledge of the subjects, are findings that do not reflect anyone’s experience (p. 265). Consequently, while the study began with an overriding question and semi-structured interview questions, the questions that followed were based on what *participants* deemed worthy of further discussion.

Observations took place in the three elementary schools, prior to any formal data collection. The data were collected through interviews of 17 parents and 21 teachers of fourth through eighth grade students. One parent group and one teacher group, with participants culled from individual interviews, then met to refine agendas for two mixed parent-teacher groups, and these mixed groups discussed issues such as defensiveness on the part of both parents and teachers, obstacles to effective communication, and potential alliances. In order to facilitate freedom of discourse and a diversity of experience, all focus groups were mixed, that is, they included parents and teachers from different schools rather than the same school.

The collected data reflects a design that allowed parents and teachers to thoughtfully consider their perceptions and assumptions about each other

separately *and* together, and in the process, literally contributed positively to parent-teacher relationships. Even if no great revelations resulted, the opportunity to talk together, in and of itself, was beneficial.<sup>2</sup> The vast majority of studies exploring parent-teacher relationships have gathered data through on-site observations with an ethnographic focus and separate interviews with parents or teachers or both. Generally, respondents have been asked to talk *about* their interactions with the other. There is very little literature that documents any process of parents and teachers talking together about the relationship they share. What does exist (Birrell et al., 1998; Coahran, Kay, & Fitzgerald, 1999; Harner & Davis, 1991) suggests that personal interaction, beyond the usual venues of conferences, classroom newsletters, and open houses, will be key to truly moving parents and teachers past stereotypes.<sup>3</sup>

Each component of the research design—observations, interviews, and focus groups—is a well-established qualitative methodology (Mertens, 1998). Putting these methods together as outlined below, with an emphasis on the *process* of the inquiry (how the inquiry evolves; how participants in a focus group interact with each other), meant that the data would enhance an understanding not only of issues and concerns of parents and teachers, but of the dynamics of the interchange between them.

## OBSERVATIONS

Observations at all three elementary schools took place prior to any formal interviewing, over roughly three months, and included attendance at Local School Council and Parent-Teacher Association meetings, as well as any school events parents would be invited to (assemblies, workshops, open houses, etc.). These observations were an attempt to get a sense of the “culture” of parent-teacher relationships in the school, looking for ways in which communication was established and sustained (e.g., newsletters, teacher access to e-mail or phones); how inviting the school seemed to be; the presence of parents in the school; and the types and frequency of activities involving parents. Observations also provided context for individual interviews. Once in the school, snowball and opportunistic sampling for interview recruitment were used, as those who might have viewpoints or experiences that would add to the understandings being developed were identified.

## INTERVIEWS

Interviews allowed a “trying out” of the questions emerging from observations and attempted to elicit and understand more deeply participants’ sense of the dynamics and meaning of their interactions.

They also provided the opportunity to continue to develop the scope of the research and allowed for assessment of interest on participants' parts regarding continued involvement through participation in focus groups.

While teachers were relatively easy to approach,<sup>4</sup> given their proximity, parents were not. Due to confidentiality concerns, I could not simply "get names" from the front office. I initially dealt with parents who tended to be involved at the school on some level, through volunteer work or parent organizations. Disengaged parents could not be sampled in the available time; my option was to locate participants who were "easy to get to and hospitable to . . . inquiry" (Stake, 1995, p. 4). Ultimately, I was able to interview a total of five parents from R, four from J, and eight from W. All had at least one child in Grades 4 through 8; four were fathers; eight were single parents. Three were Hispanic, nine African American, one ESL Eastern European, and one Asian; three were monolingual White.

Parents and teachers were interviewed wherever was most convenient for them. Teachers tended to prefer meeting at school, during a preparation period. Parent interviews were conducted at their work, their homes, or at restaurants. Teacher interviews averaged 40 minutes; parents, less constrained by time, more in the hour range.

Interviews were structured with some broad questions that were consistently asked of both parents and teachers. These included: What role do you see parents playing in your school? How do parents, teachers, and administration in your school view parent involvement? Do you believe there are any benefits for parents and teachers when they have closer working relationships? What are the educational issues that most concern parents and teachers, and do they share these concerns? How would you characterize parent-teacher relationships in your school? What would you like to learn more about from each other in focus groups? However, the interviews also were flexible, in that the interviewee's responses determined the direction of the interview (Aisenberg & Harrington, 1988).

## FOCUS GROUPS

In the focus groups, parents and teachers continued in their roles as inquirers. Individual interview data had yielded seven themes for the homogeneous focus groups: parent comfort level, teacher comfort level, perceived differences between parents and teachers, lessened communication/involvement as students got older, indirect or "kids in the middle" communication, difficulty in seeing non-student centered benefits, and time. These were presented to both groups for discussion. The parent and the teacher groups did not discuss each of these per se; they used these topics as springboards. These transcripts were then analyzed, and

defensiveness, obstacles to effective communication, and potential alliances emerged as the manifest focus for the two mixed focus groups.

Ideally, each of the four focus groups would have had 6 to 8 participants. J School was poorly represented throughout, with one parent participating in both a parent and a mixed group, and a teacher and parent in the other mixed group. Four of the five parent group participants came back to participate in a mixed group; only one teacher participated twice. The optimal design, with members of the first set of groups continuing into the second set, was not fully realized. Nonetheless, the participants did function as “acute observers . . . who are well informed,” who seemed to substantiate Blumer’s (1969) claim that “A small number of such individuals brought together as a discussion and resource group is more valuable many times over than any representative sample” (p. 41).

All interview and focus group transcripts were coded, and emergent patterns and themes in the words of the parents and teachers were analyzed on an ongoing basis,<sup>5</sup> serving as the roadmap to continued discussion. “Member checks” (Mertens, 1998, p. 182) were provided by participant review of interview transcripts; focus group members were asked in written evaluations whether their discussions reflected issues highlighted in their individual interviews.

#### WHAT ARE PARENTS AND TEACHERS TELLING US?

Some of what parents and teachers seem to be saying reflects what we already know through research and common sense; other comments offer a perspective or an insight that has been overlooked. They believe stronger, better relationships are important. They would like to see more opportunities for connections and closer working relationships. They believe that commitment to the child and to the school community is vital to stronger, effective schools and that such commitment is the responsibility of every parent and every teacher.

They also don’t know how to nurture the kind of community that would support such goals. They want to talk to each other, but find many obstacles to engaging in satisfying conversations. They want to be supportive of each other, but find it difficult to articulate this request in a meaningful way.

The “telling” of these beliefs was expressed in three ways: direct suggestions, indirect remarks, and through the observed interactions in focus groups (what was *seen* in addition to what was discussed). Neither parents nor teachers were shy about specific behaviors they would like to see changed; for example, teachers want parents to check in with them before believing students’ versions of events; while parents want timelier notification of concerns about student problems. These kinds of suggestions

were offered quite directly. Less directly, both parents and teachers don't always say in so many words that they want their contributions recognized and appreciated by each other, but that desire underlies many comments. While rationally both parents and teachers know they are not insignificant, they sometimes feel treated as such. Lastly, the way parents and teachers interacted with each other in focus groups provided additional insight into the nature of their relationships. A conflict in one group was pursued to a point of mutual understanding; another group diplomatically moved away from a touchy opinion that nonetheless colored the rest of the conversation.

#### THE ORGANIZATION OF THE DATA

Data was collected through 40 interviews, averaging an hour apiece, and four focus groups that lasted ten hours total. The mixed group sessions, though the heart of the research, represent only a fifth of this time. Managing the analysis of the data took some consideration. Because of the abundance and richness of what was shared all through this process, from individual interviews to the joint meetings, there was a great deal of information to present. I elected to return to the original five questions that had shaped my thinking as I conceptualized the study, recognizing that these questions remained as relevant at the end of the study as at the beginning and most of what parents and teachers shared “fit” under the umbrella of one of these questions. Organizing the data in some other way simply was not as effective in reflecting that there are far more similarities between parents' and teachers' perceptions, values, and beliefs than differences.

#### WHAT KINDS OF MEANINGS DO PARENTS AND TEACHERS ATTACH TO THEIR ENCOUNTERS?

Parents and teachers tend to define themselves in relation to the student they have in common and how much control they have over what the student experiences, rather than through relationships forged in other ways (e.g., common activities or community proximity) (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). It was difficult for both parents and teachers to identify benefits for *themselves* through improved adult relationships. They tended to see benefits as they accrued to the student—and thus by extension to that student's parent or teacher.

Some teachers related stories that illustrated the personal satisfaction they felt in going beyond their traditional roles—the connection they felt with another adult, or the opportunity to stretch themselves professionally. A middle grade teacher at W called home about an underachieving student and found herself successfully working with an adult sibling to reengage the

boy with school. Asked if the adults' satisfaction was all that important, she didn't hesitate: "Of course it's important. People say that teaching is a thankless job, right? But it really isn't. It really isn't. If you can make a parent feel good about being a good parent, and when the parent can make you feel good about being a good teacher, that's like your day. That's terrific" (teacher interview). A new teacher at J described "a heart to heart with one parent. Just sat down, the first time it ever happened, but just really talked about what we both do at the end of the day, to try to relax, and just being really tired from the kids and stuff . . . it was nice to talk to a parent, it's nice to have that support; it was nice to know that the parents actually care about their kids and I'm not alone" (teacher interview).

But for the most part, teachers felt that *students* gained as a result of closer relationships; when asked about the benefits of stronger relationships for the adults, teachers tended to reply in terms of students (i.e., "It makes it better in terms of the kid knowing that these are two people who care about me, and care about what I'm doing," "It's certainly good for us to get a sense for the kinds of things that the parents are concerned about" [teacher interviews]). There were no mentions of changes at the school or in the curriculum as a result of joint parent-teacher work. This is not surprising, given the lack of opportunities for parents and teachers to interact with each other about anything other than student performance (U.S. Department of Education, 1998). In addition, a number of teachers saw parents more as clients than colleagues, making it less likely that they would see themselves as benefiting from interactions with parents.

Parents, many of whom dealt with teachers regularly as volunteers, also had to be pressed to think about the possible growth either they or the teacher might experience as a result of enhanced relationships. Most initial responses were student focused (i.e., "The teacher will understand what is going on with my kid better"). Some parents talked about "turning over" the child to the school, and the need to feel that the child is cared for, or understood, by the teacher. While none of them used the term, for many parents, creating and maintaining a teacher-parent relationship provides a type of social capital, some assurance that the student has an advantage that will serve him or her well in the classroom (Lareau, 1989).

Some parents did note that they had gained personally from their proximity to their child's instructor, in areas such as disciplining their children, enhanced math or writing skills, and even (English) language enrichment. But clearly, the child's academic success and classroom functioning stood as the primary outcomes of successful working relationships, according to most.

In their comments, parents and teachers seemed to identify what a student represented for them ("my baby" vs. "that mother needs to back off") despite locating such tendencies in other parents and other teachers,

not in themselves. However, many shared resentful or indignant feelings about a student-focused misunderstanding or unpleasant situation they had experienced in parent-teacher interactions. As Biklen (1982) notes, the majority of the time “parent” ends up meaning “mother,” and the expectations each of these largely female groups have about the other’s performance (Lightfoot, 1987; Swap, 1990) are frequently not met. These tensions serve to keep the adults at a distance as they approach each other, not as the adults they are, but rather as *roles*. Interestingly, Atkin and Bastiani (1988) and Sikes (1997) discuss the shifting perceptions teachers develop once they have become parents themselves; they tend to become more understanding of the concerns involved in “handing over” the child to the school.

Parents and teachers did not espouse “democratic communities” per se, but the values they expressed as important—involvement, direct communication, trust, respect, emphasis on common goals—all reflect the building blocks of such communities. So while they may routinely frame the meanings of their encounters in terms of the children they have in common, it would appear that, given the opportunity, what they look for from each other is clearly connected to what they need for themselves as people who share a community. The meanings they attach to their encounters could be characterized as a search for reinforcement—that their individual contribution to this child is important; that their trust is not misplaced; that there is mutual respect for each other as people and for each other’s opinions—and an all too frequent sense of disappointment when this is not mirrored.

#### WHAT ARE THE EDUCATIONAL ISSUES THAT MOST CONCERN PARENTS AND TEACHERS, AND DO THEY SHARE THESE CONCERNS?

The possibility that parents and teachers would respond in similar fashion to this question (i.e., “There is too much standardized testing”) was written off fairly quickly. The issues raised were as diverse as the people who raised them, though it is worth noting that some teachers felt if parents were more aware of the kind of pressures and difficulties that came up daily in the classroom that there would be more consensus on educational priorities.

One issue explicitly raised (perhaps not coincidentally, given the focus of the study) was parental involvement. Both parents and teachers lamented the lack of involvement, while recognizing the various reasons why this might be so. Nonetheless, they believed that regardless of the limitations parents bring to the school setting (i.e., single parenthood, language barriers, work demands), there remained a clear responsibility to be involved with their children—preferably at the school, but at minimum through support at home. Both parents and teachers had limited patience

for parental excuses for noninvolvement, and at least some parents saw some ethnic or class differences in how other parents in their schools dealt with their children's circumstances.

Despite acknowledgment of the obstacles many parents face, most of the interviewed parents felt that there was some way around these obstacles if a parent felt strongly enough to want to be involved at the school and to have some control over their child's education. Parents (and teachers, too, after their initial surprise at hearing how vehemently parents argued this point) emphatically maintained that while more affluent parents would tend to have greater flexibility, there was simply no reason to accept lower-income parents' lack of involvement as understandable or acceptable, a perspective argued by many researchers of family-school relationships (Calabrese, 1990; Scribner, Young, & Pedroza, 1999; Williams & Chavkin, 1993).

Some of the parents interviewed used themselves as examples. They had little money, they were single parents, or English was not their first language, but it was their responsibility to find a way to be involved and keep on top of what was happening with their child at school. "Who else is supposed to?" many of them wondered aloud. They felt sorry for the children of drug-addicted or alcoholic parents, but they did not feel sorry for the parents. Many described programs that were available, sometimes through the school itself, that parents could take advantage of for themselves and for their children. In their eyes, such programs were adequately publicized, but as one mother put it, if parents didn't want to "receive" such information, what more could be done? It was particularly frustrating, as another parent pointed out, because "they sure know about the sports programs" (parent focus group).

The African American parents, in focus groups, were blunt in their assessment of an attitude they attributed to some other black parents—an apathy or passiveness that they had little patience for. One described seeing Hispanic families "stick together" to advocate for their kids, while feeling as though many lower-income black parents "settled" for whatever was doled out. Another talked about volunteering at the school, saying, "If a teacher gives me that opportunity, I'm gonna take it. This shouldn't be upper middle class, it shouldn't be white; it should not even be that way, you know? And I am saying, where do we stop with our excuses? I chose to have these children . . . I think we should stop making excuses, you know? Because . . . all of us here are Black" (mixed focus group).

This expectation for parental responsibility is a powerful asset. It transcends race, religion, and ethnicity. Parental responsibility (as well as the sense of responsibility teachers feel for their students) has great significance for the success of democratic communities in schools. Certainly "interests held in common," as Dewey put it (1966, p. 83), provide an impetus for interaction and a basis for discussion. For the parents in this

study, this investment is a given, and they found it hard to understand why other parents didn't act from the same perspective.

Teachers tended to address parental responsibility by questioning what parents were willing to do to enhance their children's education at home and to improve themselves as parents. They focused directly on parent limitations, reflecting the control issues inherent in the relationship. Many of the teachers interviewed teach children who come from circumstances that are discouraging. They identified adequate rest and food, a stable home environment, and appropriate resources (i.e., eyeglasses, paper and pencils) as having significant influence on a child's success in school. Some of the frustration they expressed reflected a belief that schools and teachers were being asked to take on roles traditionally performed by parents or guardians, or by default deal with the effects of parents not performing those tasks. One fifth grade teacher spoke for many when he commented, "I don't know that you think it's appropriate to discuss their home life . . . but I feel like, I feel like that's where we need to be, that's where the energy needs to go. Maybe parents and teachers could discuss how to put some structure in a kid's life. But who are we to get involved? I feel pretty awkward about that" (teacher interview).

These frustrations, sometimes expressed in anger, may reflect a genuine caring for students, a resentment of parents who are seen as lazy or uncaring, or an unwillingness to see any need for growth or learning on the part of the individual teacher—or a combination thereof. It was the rare teacher who felt it important that parents be asked "What would make you feel more comfortable in the school and in the classroom?" This emphasis on parent improvement reflects a "teacher as professional/authority" orientation that tends to cast parents in the role of clients or adjuncts to the educational process.

So while other educational issues were mentioned (excessive testing, lack of resources, safety in schools), parents and teachers found common ground in their assessment of the importance of parental involvement and their lack of patience with excuses, even if they approached the issue from different perspectives.

#### WHAT KINDS OF COLLABORATIVE RELATIONSHIPS WOULD PARENTS AND TEACHERS CHOOSE TO HAVE WITH EACH OTHER IF THEY FELT THEY HAD A CHOICE?

There is a considerable disparity between the communication ideals described by Anderson (1998), Dewey (1966), Habermas (1979), and Raup et al. (1950) and the reality that exists in many schools. These ideals, though frequently unrealized, provide guidelines by which to assess, interpret, and

understand relationships and help make sense of why parents and teachers are not satisfied with their current relationships.

Parents and teachers did not offer particularly sophisticated descriptions of the kinds of collaborative relationships they would aspire to. Most wanted to be able to talk about the child they have in common without feeling that they had to defend their professional or parental perspectives. Focus group discussions, usually driven by parents, did move into more complex areas, such as shared concern about children with uninvolved parents, parent mentoring, community building, and ways that parents and teachers could learn from each other.

As noted, many teachers want to know how parents are willing to change; as one teacher put it, “How can I have a relationship with these parents when they don’t have their own act together?” (teacher interview). There were some teachers who characterized relationships with parents as partnerships, and many more who felt their jobs would be easier if parents were more supportive at home of the educational efforts of the school. There was also ambivalence about increased parental presence in classrooms. For teachers of older students, there are concerns about supervising parents in the classroom (Eccles & Harold, 1993). Another adult in the classroom, for many teachers, potentially breaches their autonomy (Atkin & Bastiani, 1988; Harris & Associates, 1998); as one teacher commented, “Teachers don’t like other people in the classroom . . . They get kind of nervous about somebody else watching them” (teacher interview).

Most often, teachers said that relationships with parents are important, but were not a priority given time constraints and the perception that such relationships were not important to their principals. Especially in the current school climate, when test scores have become the measure on which to base the success or failure of students, teachers, and schools, it becomes harder to justify spending time, let alone money, on enhancing relationships with the home. Schools are not put on probation, teachers note, because there are no parents in the halls.

For many parents, it is not unusual to feel in a “one down” position when dealing with teachers, and some believed that other parents, especially those who didn’t speak English or had limited education, felt intimidated as well. Interestingly, one of the J teachers—who expressed limited empathy for parents—described picking up her own daughter’s report card:

You know, I want to hear this teacher [say] “Oh, she’s an A student.” Do I hear that? . . . No . . . you know, I’m going to hear that she’s trying and she’s a B student or something. Umm . . . there are times when I’ve said, “Why don’t you try doing something this way” and I’ve gotten shot down. I’ve had teachers tell me, “But I’m the teacher of this class.” (teacher interview)

In the context of the interview situation, parents indicated less reticent views about the potential for relationships with teachers. Some felt frustration with the lack of time excuse, especially in the context of communication over student difficulties. They wanted to be informed about what was going on with their child on a more regular basis, and to hear good as well as bad reports. They felt that parents could be utilized more effectively at their school more often—as mentors to other parents, for example.

Collaborations beyond the classroom didn't come up often in interviews. There is little precedent for such collaborations—Local School Council meetings, for example, were poorly attended. These schools, especially R and J, are struggling to achieve the simplest parent involvement goals—adequate school supplies for each child, interest in a beginning of the year open house. They are a long way from parent-teacher curriculum committees or designated classroom parents.

There is a great deal of ground to cover before the notion of parent-teacher collaborative relationships comes to fruition. The most basic communication between parents and teachers is often compromised at R, J, and W schools. Given these limitations, it is understandable that the parents and teachers of this study, for now, would be satisfied with clearer and more direct communication about classroom matters. Until enough “successes” have been experienced, collaboration beyond the immediate needs of the child and classroom is difficult to imagine.

#### HOW CAN PARENT - TEACHER DISCUSSION INFORM OUR UNDERSTANDING OF HOW PARENT - TEACHER COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION CAN BE IMPROVED?

One obstacle to trusting and respectful parent-teacher relationships, according to teachers, is parents' tendency to accept their child's version of what happens in the classroom, as opposed to clarifying the situation with the teacher. Especially with older students, teachers expressed resentment at how frequently parents would assume that the child's story was accurate. Because there is so little parent presence in schools and little time for phone calls, there is often a forced reliance on the child to relay good and bad news. That many teachers acknowledged that they often did not contact a parent unless or until a child was in trouble contributes to polarization.

Some measure of self-esteem for both parent and teacher is bound up in the student. From a parent's perspective, their child's failure to do well in school or behave appropriately may seem to reflect badly on their parenting. Though parents who “don't care” might exist, most parents feel some amount of pride when their child gets a good grade, scores the winning run, or does a good thing. Though a less intense relationship, a

student who is having problems in school is on some level conveying the message “what you’re doing doesn’t work” to his or her teacher. Regrettably, the student’s difficulty can escalate to the point that both adults might feel their authority or values are riding on some particular resolution, and defensiveness takes over. Teachers frequently commented that they felt their professionalism was being questioned when parents accepted student versions of events at face value, and they wondered whether parents had any respect for their training and experience. Parents felt caught in a bind when they were not informed of problems from the start, yet were expected to immediately address a problem once informed or were stonewalled when they tried to get more information.

The prospect for establishing communities in which both teacher and parent perspectives are valued, and where there is honest and open discussion and healthy disagreement, is difficult if there is little direct communication. Dealings that are filtered through someone, no matter what the intention (e.g., fostering independence), are subject to distortion. Reliance on students as messengers or reporters was not endorsed by either parents or teachers.

Both groups identified overcoming defensiveness as crucial to enhanced communication and collaboration. The second focus group, made up of African American mothers and teachers, featured a remarkable exchange that underscores the significance of having time to talk through the defensiveness. Sherise tries to describe to Edna, a teacher, what it was like for her when a note to her own child’s teacher went ignored:

*Sherise:* It ain’t like I’m stopping you in the grocery store; it ain’t like I’m stopping you in the parking lot.

*Edna:* I get stopped in the grocery store.

*Sherise:* It ain’t like I’m coming to your house.

*Edna:* I get stopped all over.

*Sherise:* I’m on the business premises, you know what I’m saying? That is what would make me just [angry] . . . cause you not being professional.

*Edna:* OK.

*Sherise:* You’re not treating my child like this is your business, you know. You want to talk about responsibility—every child that’s in your room, that’s your business. I don’t care if you have 35 students. You’re supposed to keep up with your lesson plans. You’re

supposed to keep up with their grades; you're supposed to grade these papers . . .

*Edna:* Whoa, whoa, whoa. You supposed to. . . . Ok, but then you come off saying . . .

*Sherise:* I'm just saying . . . I'm not saying that in one day . . . I'm just saying. . . .

*Edna:* Wait a minute. We have six hours or less with your child everyday. In that six hours we are supposed to teach. Now during that time you might have a prep, during music or gym or library. And after you take your kids to your prep, you might get time to grade maybe two or three, four papers. Wait a minute . . .

*Sherise:* Now let me stop you. Because you're going on and I'm not saying that, in the course of one day . . .

*Edna:* There's gonna be times when a teacher's not going to respond to you at a particular time.

*Sherise:* No, no, I worked at the school . . . I worked with the children, and I understand all that. I'm saying if I send a note on a Monday, I would expect to get a report, or at least a response to this, by at least . . .

*Edna:* By Tuesday, Wednesday.

*Sherise:* I would even say that following Monday

*Edna:* OK.

*Sherise:* I'm not saying right then and now, on that day. No, I'm not saying that. I'm just saying . . .

*Edna:* There should be some kind of response.

*Sherise:* There should be some kind of response.

*Edna:* That's true. That's legitimate.

Edna and Sherise could have argued to a stalemate, felt misunderstood, and acted that out for the rest of the focus group, but they did not. Their exchange was dynamic, and it was resolved because they allowed themselves to move beyond assumptions and defensiveness to get at what was really being said. In this group of African American women, the teachers were willing to step outside of the "teacher role" and relate emotionally as well as intellectually, fostering an atmosphere in which parents felt comfortable challenging them. This kind of straightforward

interaction happened a few times in the course of the two hours these women met together.

The other focus group, which was more heterogeneous (two men, three women, diversity of race), tended to be less confrontational and more careful about their comments; however, an interesting exchange occurred when one father proffered an opinion about the work ethics of suburban and city teachers. In describing frustration with what he saw as his school's teachers' unwillingness to push students with extra homework, he shared his belief that suburban teachers "work harder" because they received higher salaries. After a moment of silence, other parents diplomatically confronted his perception, and when one of the teachers did finally comment, it was to acknowledge that it might be difficult for many parents to understand just how much work went on in a classroom on a daily basis, and she lamented the lack of opportunity to share this reality. The group then segued into a broader discussion of teacher professionalism and what that meant to them. Evaluation comments, written at the end of the group, indicated that each participant believed that teachers tended to be "taken for granted" and that the discussion had shifted their perceptions.

In addition, teachers say that communication and collaboration would become more of a priority if school administration sent a clear endorsement of such efforts. Because of the demands on their time, teachers wait for signals from their principals as to what is most important to pay attention to. As an eighth grade teacher from R put it, "It has to come from the administration down. For the expectation to be more than what it is, it has to come from administration down" (teacher focus group). Parents in turn wait for signals from teachers that they are welcome and valued (Chavkin & Williams, 1987; Epstein, 1986; Litwak & Meyer, 1974).

Teachers understood that traditional forums, such as report card pick-up days and open houses, are inadequate for building relationships and pointed out obstacles such as limited translation services in heavily ESL schools (leading to over reliance on students to convey messages) as further barriers. Practical support in the form of phones in the classrooms, more preparation periods, email, more aides, and smaller class sizes were viewed as concrete efforts on the part of principals to make room for parents and teachers to connect. Creative efforts that allowed for meaningful contact outside normal class hours, like the skating party W School sponsored or the summer "visit the school" opportunity one R teacher suggested, can make a difference, but unless these were scheduled or encouraged, teachers who already felt overwhelmed expressed little enthusiasm for voluntarily meeting with parents on their own time.

The message was clear—making time for talk, commitment to mutual respect, and awareness of the shared (but different) investment in the

student are crucial to improved relations, but even these are not enough if administrative support is lacking.

HOW CAN PARENTS AND TEACHERS BECOME AGENTS IN SHAPING THEIR INTERACTIONS TOWARD OPTIMAL COLLABORATIVE SUPPORT OF CHILDREN'S SUCCESS AND RESOLUTION OF SHARED CONCERNS?

Teachers want to be viewed as professionals by the parents of the children they teach. Parents want to have their own efforts, expertise, and insight respected. Both approach their interactions defensively, expecting something unpleasant, often because of previous experiences. I listened to some teachers complain about parents, deriding their uncertainty about how to handle problems at home or questioning their values. Some parents, in turn, doubted a particular teacher's competency or commitment to children. Expecting unpleasantness frequently prompts unpleasantness; at minimum, encounters are not likely to feel safe.

It is difficult to see how alliances, whether around a student, a school, or an issue, can be facilitated if so many teachers continue to identify parents as problems because of perceived limitations. This can be a significant issue for minority families. Calabrese (1990) found that minority parents feel less welcome at their children's schools, are less likely to see their children's teachers as supportive and caring, and are more likely to receive negative communications about their children than White parents. He also found that they were more likely to see school rules and regulations—especially those created without parental input—as inconsistent and quirky, and to be skeptical of the school's sincerity about any request for involvement. Such circumstances do not lend themselves to parents and teachers perceiving themselves as mutually supportive agents of change.

Participants in this study agreed that they must get past their defensiveness in order to work together more effectively. To that end, they would like to see more informal encounters that take the student out of the equation and allow teachers to be seen as everyday people. While “professional” and “approachable” might seem to be incompatible attributes, especially to parents intimidated by the perceived authority of the school, focus group participants felt that it was quite possible for parents to see teachers as both. The opportunity to interact in less formal and less scripted situations was seen as an avenue to foster an appreciation for the professionalism of teachers while also “humanizing” them, thus easing the power differential inherent in so-called professional-client relationships (Strike, 1993). Too frequently at school-sponsored events, the teacher is the imparter of information and the parent the passive recipient.

Participants also felt that it was essential to take responsibility for their words and attitudes. Karen, a fourth grade teacher at H, felt that her

position as teacher brought with it principle responsibility for “the interaction that goes on between myself and a parent, because I can approach that parent with suspicion and I can approach that parent being accusing, but . . . I won’t be successful . . . I just think it’s more in the teacher’s lap, of really like how it’s gonna be” (mixed focus group). Sherise, a fifth grade mother from W School, felt that parents tended to forget that “It’s not about me. It’s not about me. I need to have some power under control” (p. 183).

Other ways to build connections were mentioned. Teachers say that making calls to relay positive news always paid off with both parents and students, though it was time consuming. Parents endorsed the idea of mentoring, believing that if “veteran” parents could be available to “newer” parents, teachers would be freed up to attend to student needs and to be more accessible to parents in general.

Most significantly, the process of sitting down and talking *together* was a worthwhile and instructive experience that participants would recommend to other parents and teachers. This consensus was reflected in written evaluations of the mixed parent-teacher focus groups. They felt comfortable talking, indicated they had learned more about each other and about more effective communication with each other, felt the issues discussed were relevant, and felt such forums could continue to be useful.

The focus group evaluations suggest that the opportunity to talk face to face helped chip away at erroneous assumptions. Focus group participants in mixed groups had the chance to see each other outside the usual school context; the types of exchanges that took place were not likely to happen out in the hall before the bell rang. Parent-teacher contact is generally confined to bits and pieces of time rather than embedded in the life of schools, and this is unfortunate. The overwhelming majority of parents and teachers who took part in this study would welcome increased and more meaningful interaction, if the complications could be cleared away. This is unlikely to happen, though, until both parents and teachers attend to the basics; “optimal collaborative support” won’t happen without mutual trust and respect. The evidence strongly suggests that each need to feel that their individual expertise and contributions are valued and respected, and that they can count on each other for support in service of the child, rather than for continued struggle for control. When this accommodation is achieved, according to respondents, a foundation is built for further collaboration on broader issues.

#### REVISITING THE ORIGINAL QUESTION: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

It is difficult to avoid a seemingly straightforward conclusion after listening to the voices of the parents and teachers who took part in this study: It is

unlikely that any intervention will be more significant in strengthening parent-teacher relationships than making room for them to talk to each other.

Parents and teachers tell us that they are connected—like it or not—and sometimes that connection doesn't feel very positive. They often feel misunderstood and underappreciated. They find it hard to see personal benefits resulting from extending themselves to each other. They agree that stronger relationships are important, but don't believe that they have much power to create the conditions to foster these closer connections. They struggle with how to be allies to each other in the classroom, let alone on behalf of larger issues. They feel strongly about educational issues, but don't know how to channel their concerns. And they know they're defensive with each other.

The best of what parents and teachers have to offer to students, to each other, and to their school community will not be fully realized until they learn to talk to each other . . . until they “learn each other,” as the principal of R School put it. There is no more effective intervention than face-to-face conversation in breaking down the barriers between parents and teachers, and this deceptively simple conclusion is what the parents and teachers of R, J, and W schools are saying—and more important—demonstrating.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The initial research question was prompted by an interest in understanding how parents and teachers might assess their current and potential relationships if given the opportunity to talk *together*. I didn't ask specifically, “How do you create a democratic community?” but I believe this question was implicit in the discussions. If we are truly serious about schools being sites of democracy, and about encouraging Dewey's “interests held in common,” then parent-teacher relationships cannot be overlooked. The significance of this focus extends beyond the classroom into educational policy and therefore deserves some attention from teachers and administrators and those who teach them.

However, civic and community concerns are lesser priorities in today's educational climate, driven as it is by an emphasis on high-stakes testing. It could be argued that this narrow focus on particular student outcomes is one of the main impediments to increased investment in parent-teacher relationships. As noted, there is a large body of research that links parent involvement with student academic achievement (Henderson & Mapp, 2002), but the interventions that might therefore seem logical compete with a host of other suggested or mandated initiatives that are geared to raising test scores. Many of these interventions—reading programs, school

uniforms, increased testing—probably seem less difficult to implement than the complicated work that would be necessary to engage diverse groups of parents, especially in schools that already struggle to get what little parental presence they do have. If principals and administrators in particular do not signal their investment in parental involvement, it is unlikely that teachers who are already feeling overwhelmed will take the initiative to reach out, especially if they do not see any immediate benefits.

In addition, despite the fact that one can find scores of parental involvement initiatives “on the books,” the reality is that programs can be mandated but not necessarily buffered from teacher resistance. That is to say, teachers can easily “close the classroom door” and wait for the storm to blow over. This might be a particularly appealing tactic when facing an effort that would involve additional work and time for the benefit of a group that has traditionally been kept at a distance.

#### ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

Is this problem fixable? The parents and teachers in this study said yes. Comments on focus group evaluations suggested that a sense of increased comfort was one result of the mixed group meetings, along with an enhanced understanding of “the other” point of view. Just as teachers wish parents understood the difficulties they face in their classroom, so too do parents wish teachers understood the realities of their neighborhoods and family situations. This learning happens when people feel comfortable enough to talk to each other and share their worlds, a deceptively simple intervention school leaders and administrators might productively embrace.

The pretense that parent-teacher relationships are formed as a result of objective, rational behavior, in isolation from the child’s relationship to each adult (Ost, 1988), is an obvious barrier to honest communication and ought to be challenged, though it is unlikely that this will be productively accomplished without professional development and possibly facilitated interactions. Dealing directly and constructively with tension could lead to what Crowson and Mawhinney call for with their endorsement of “partnering with conflict”—a creativity at “finding ‘peace’ despite mutual distrust” (Bauch et al., 1998, p. 74). The mutual acknowledgment, appreciation, and acceptance of the investments parents and teachers both have in students clears the way for redirecting energy to resolution of other problems.

#### POLICY AND PRACTICE ISSUES

In an ideal world teachers, principals, and superintendents would all be comfortable with parent and community involvement and recognize its

importance—both in service of student achievement and in the building of democratic communities in schools. They would approach facilitating these relationships in much the same way we want them to approach academic achievement, school climate, professional development, and other concerns. In other words, they would use the available resources, talents, and professional expertise to create a culture that would nurture and support efforts on behalf of these goals. They would use parents to recruit more parents, take advantage of community assets, and tailor their efforts to fit their populations. As one parent put it, “You can say you are reaching out to parents and send out notices forever, but the key has to be personal contact. You can’t say we have this program, come to us. Schools have got to go to parents” (Williams, 1998).

There is no doubt, though, that regardless of the path a given school takes, time is a critical ingredient. Time was mentioned again and again as a major obstacle to meaningful parent-teacher involvement, which suggests that schools and their administrators need to consider opportunities for parents and teachers alike to develop their capacity for interaction—or pleas for parental involvement will ring hollow. Room for parents and teachers to come together for extended periods of time—to work on a project, to share information, to write a report, to somehow talk—is also necessary. A facilitator might be considered, especially for initial meetings, to help set agendas and to keep participants on track. Teachers would benefit by having paid time in which they can be available to parents for meetings or phone conversations. Even parents and teachers with warm feelings toward each other cannot make strong connections when they try to grab two minutes in the hall or play phone tag because the only phone available is in the school’s front office.

Administrators and teachers would benefit by including parents as they struggle with dilemmas—for example, confronting external mandates for accountability while attempting to provide rich learning experiences for students, or debating the viability of recess periods. Parents who are aware of the implications of such struggles might feel more inclined to publicly raise questions and advocate solutions. Educational discourse often seems to exist on two different planes—one composed of academics, educational bureaucrats, and politicians; the other of those on the front lines, including parents and teachers. While closer classroom-based relationships cannot help but educate parents regarding the decisions that affect their children in the classroom, direct outreach by administrators to parents on educational issues, through newsletters and forums, might also be considered.

Of course, for this to happen in a meaningful way, professional educators would need to put aside traditional notions of power, control, and authority; reconceptualize their own roles; and endorse a vision of schools as

democratic sites (for an extended discussion of these concepts, see Murphy, 2002). Principals can certainly learn about parent involvement and gather ideas to recruit more parent volunteers or pull more parents into school activities through classes or books. Strategies and tips for teachers work just as well for principals.

However, if principals and administrators see their mission as fostering community—if they recognize the importance of “restructuring schools and communities toward enriched educational and economic outcomes . . . and inventing rich visions of educational democracies of difference” (Fine, 1993, p. 707)—they will see things very differently indeed. Policies would begin to reflect a recognition that appropriate outcomes are not only about achievement test scores, but about the kinds of adults we want children to become, in the kind of society we want them to live in, along with ways the adults who care about them can most effectively model these ideals through interaction and collaboration.

Can this be mandated through policy? Theoretically, Local School Councils in Chicago were created so that principals, parents, and teachers could together design School Improvement Plans—blueprints detailing where a school is and where it needs to go in terms of school climate, curriculum, parent and community involvement, and other areas. It is clear that the establishment of councils alone doesn’t necessarily foster effectiveness or cooperation, at least not without effective training and cooperative relationships (Malen & Ogawa, 1988; Ryan et al., 1997). Training for principals, with room for reflection on their role vis-à-vis their students, families, and community, is a critical factor in a council’s success (Devereaux, 2000). Advanced degree programs for administrators featuring internships that deliberately expose students to nontraditional situations and collaborators in the community, and then asks them to reflect in their coursework on the new understandings they gain, are relatively new innovations (Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002).

In terms of teacher education, reality must catch up with rhetoric. Despite federal exhortations for increased parental involvement (National Goals Panel, 1997; United States Department of Education, 1994, 1998), we know that colleges of education have neglected parent and community involvement. Social foundations courses, the most logical place to incorporate these areas, are under increasing pressure to justify their inclusion in teacher education programs (Tozer & Miretzky, 2000), while social foundations textbooks are only just beginning to include sections on students’ families and communities as context for understanding the child in the classroom. If nothing else, a rapidly diversifying school population demands that such considerations be given more prominence, as we recognize the increasing numbers of at-risk, minority, and special needs students in classrooms.

Information and techniques are not enough, however. The seventh grade teacher at W School who told me about the regular home visits she made at her old school, to meet her Mexican students' families, clearly valued these opportunities and took advantage of them to learn more about the students and their culture. There is no book about Mexico or course about cultural differences that could substitute for her willingness to reach out to her students and their families and learn from them. In a different vein, teachers have a variety of ways to react to parents who ask questions about classroom practice or homework policy; they may answer the questions, but the way they respond may leave parents feeling uncomfortable or feeling affirmed.

What this suggests is that, along with information, teacher education courses ought to provide some opportunity for students to write about, discuss, and process their own feelings about dealing with parents and families, especially families of different backgrounds, race, and ethnicity, and instill a "reflection ethic" that will stay with teachers throughout their careers. Questions such as "How were your own parents involved in your education, and how is that different from what you've observed?" or "How do you feel about dealing with an angry parent?" open the door for consideration of personal feelings and experiences that influence teacher responses, consciously or not (Miretzky, 1997). Like qualitative researchers, teachers themselves are "tools," and the more familiar they are with their own values, assumptions, and prejudices, the more effective they can be.

#### EXPLORING THE AIMS OF SCHOOLING

What we have now in schools is more of a talking *about* democracy, primarily in social studies classes, with little evidence of its practice (see Furman & Starratt, 2002; Thornton, 2001). The potential link between students' adult choices regarding participation in and contributions to the larger community and their exposure (or lack of) to a school-based democratic process remains largely unexplored and has lost ground in the current focus on standards and accountability. And the gap between schools and homes prevents rich discussion of our aspirations for our children as people and as citizens, the modeling of participatory democracy meant to benefit all students, and the potential alliance of parents and teachers on behalf of students and their needs (as well as the growth of the participants themselves).

Consideration of schools as democratic sites assumes a greater prominence when stronger connections among the stakeholders in education are valued, pursued, and reinforced. The data from this study tell us that these connections are valued—but when push comes to shove, parent-teacher relationships frequently go to the back of the line. There is

much work to be done in the quest for comfortable relationships, let alone for the types of interaction that would facilitate “democratic deliberation” (Rallis, Shibles, & Swanson, 2002).

While it would have been nice to hear more hopeful assessments expressed by parents and especially teachers, it must be kept in mind that we live in a society in which people have grown increasingly disengaged from each other (Putnam, 2000). However, if parents and teachers are brought together and given the opportunity to talk with each other, the wariness subsides. Like prejudiced people who realize, after meeting the target of their hostility, that “those people” aren’t so bad after all, parents and teachers find that they can indeed communicate, explain themselves, and share their understandings with each other. If the occasions for such contact do not exist, it is up to those who run schools to create them.

If for whatever reason—academic achievement; positioning schools as sites of democracy; meeting student needs in a more comprehensive manner—we believe that stronger connections between parents and teachers are important to cultivate, we need to listen to these two groups before making decisions about how best to do that. No researcher who spends time in schools, no matter for how long, can truly inhabit the relationships that make up a school. Parents and teachers can teach us a great deal about such efforts if they have the opportunity to do so, highlighting issues and concerns that are frequently overlooked.

It is time for researchers and scholars to take the lead in portraying parents and teachers as something other than “natural enemies” (Waller, 1932) whose relationships must be managed. It is important to demonstrate that community can exist and communication can flourish in school communities. And it is crucial to reinforce that the modeling of democratic community through parent-teacher discourse is, as one Chicago father put it, “a worthwhile contribution to society” (parent interview)—both the society of the immediate school, and the larger society students are being prepared for.

### *Notes*

1 LSCs are the governing councils for every Chicago public school, created by Illinois law in 1989. Elementary school councils are made up of six parents, two teachers, two community members, and the principal. By design, parents hold the balance of power.

2 Comments of participants in joint groups, for example, included, “I think that this group opened up many issues and has made me question/look at myself more. This experience was a great and productive learning opportunity,” and “It’s something we need to try at our school.”

3 Schools do tend to provide such structured opportunities, but they are less likely to report efforts to involve parents in activities that move beyond traditional roles and provide opportunities for more complex interactions (U.S. Department of Education, 1998).

4 I was told that teachers were really looking forward to the interviews because “nobody ever asks us anything.” Eight W, six J, and seven R fourth through eighth grade teachers participated in interviews. Ten were White; nine were African American; and two were Asian. Eleven were mothers themselves; one teacher was male. Only one teacher, a teacher at J School, turned down a request for an interview.

5 This was done on a cut-and-paste basis; hard copies of transcripts were examined and relevant comments were cut out, placed in piles according to categories (i.e., “parent limitations,” “dynamics of interaction”), moved around as necessary, and refined to reflect the dominant themes of the data set.

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