

CONCLUSION

Borderlands and Crossroads

Mirrors and Metaphors

SCHOOLS HAVE ALWAYS been the arena where the cultural and historical dramas of our society get played out. Joseph Featherstone's view of schools as society's "theater" not only recognizes that schools mirror societal priorities, values, and conflicts, but also the ways in which—in vivid microcosm—they magnify and intensify them. We look inside schools—and at the relationships between the schools and the communities they serve—and see vivid reflections of our society's struggles to enact democracy, to reduce inequalities, and to open access and opportunity for our diverse citizenry. We witness the political and intellectual arguments surrounding bilingualism and multiculturalism. We hear the rancor in the competing perspectives on immigration, assimilation, acculturation, and indoctrination. Schools as theater reveal—in bold relief—the dissonance between our professed values and our behavior, between, for instance, our societal claims that "children are our most precious resource" and what we are actually willing to expend and sacrifice in order to assure their safety and development.

At the borders of families and schools, parent-teacher meetings become the tiny stage on which these broad cultural priorities get translated into dialogue. Beneath the polite surface of what appears to be civilized and polite ritual, we hear the adult actors' voices shaping a significant and powerful drama that is rich with emotion. Between the spaces of orderly, structured text of a practiced script, we notice the spaces and emotion of a subtext that is often inaudible to the participants. This subtext—more powerful because it is largely unconscious and unnamed—is shaped by both intergenerational and autobiographical experiences and broader historical and cultural narratives. Every time parents and teachers come together, their dialogue is to some extent related to their early childhood experiences, which get rehearsed and replayed in the classrooms of their children. As parents and teachers sit facing one another they are drawn back in time, to the time when they felt small and powerless, to the specters from their youth. These ancient ghosts invade the classroom, crowd into the conversation, and often make it difficult for the adults to place themselves in time and space. It is as if there are two plays being enacted simultaneously: one in which the adult actors speak rationally and early about the young person for whom they are responsible, and a second drama that goes on inside, where adults reenact scenes from their own childhoods.

These two plays compete and converge to produce the doorknob phenomenon. At the end of the conference, just as he is about to leave, the father suddenly unleashes the anguish that he has managed to ignore and repress during the meeting. He warns the teacher that he is determined that the trauma he experienced as a fifth-grade student will not be inflicted on his son. He will do anything to protect his boy from a repetition of the same pain. One of the great challenges facing teachers and parents is to recognize the presence of these autobiographical echoes—the ghosts in the classroom—that reverberate through the conference, and then to be careful not to let them drown out the dialogue that should be focused on the student. There are both important insights and dangerous distortions carried in these ancient echoes, and bringing them to consciousness helps parents and teachers distinguish the good from the bad.

Teachers who are aware of this "double channel" going on in the parents' heads find ways of helping them unravel the knots of converging narratives. Elizabeth Morgan, for example, speaks about her use of "wait time," a purposeful pause in the dialogue that opens up space for inchoate feelings and formless reflections. She uses these "silences," generously and strategically, to make room for the wandering, improvisational talk that often leads to new insights and interesting discoveries. "I'm very good on the back roads," she says about the comfort she feels in letting the drama unfold. She gathers the pieces of the jagged conversation together, "giving it back to the parents in a form that makes sense and moves the conversation forward." All the time, however, Elizabeth works to keep the child in focus. The travel along the back roads must be in the service of carving out a more straightforward and productive path for the child. The adult reflections and retrospection that the silences permit must be in the service of moving the student forward.

It is important to recognize that these ghosts inhabit the psyches of both teachers and parents, and that most of the ancient material in both refers to experiences of trauma, not moments of victory and achievement. In fact, every teacher I spoke to needed to begin with their early childhood experiences as a way of describing the origins and motivations of their work with families. And every childhood narrative was charged with disappointment and pain, a pain that radiated into the present, a pain that these teachers were determined not to pass on to their students, a pain that, for some, seemed to be the major reason they chose teaching as a career. As one teacher put it, in a voice that gave thanks, "You know, teaching gives me the chance to heal myself."

But the drama of parent-teacher conferences is not only composed of these autobiographical scripts—the haunting laments of the psychic ghosts—it is also fueled by broader historical and cultural narratives. In the small scene of parent-teacher dialogue we see reflected a long-running play about, for example, how our society deals with the hierarchies of race, class, and gender. Or we see the enactment of our deep cultural ambivalence about whether schools should challenge or reinforce these pervasive inequalities. Or we hear the actors express

the great expectations that we as a society hold out for our schools. Then we listen to the inevitable disappointment and cynicism that follows when schools don't come close to meeting these ambitious goals. Each of these larger cultural dilemmas and social conflicts gets played out in schools, the most visible of our social institutions, whose very transparency allows us to see the unfolding drama. But, as this book attests, it is in the places where families and schools meet—in the conversations between parents and teachers—where the drama reflecting these cultural themes is most vividly manifest.

Once again, there are two plays converging in the heads of parents and teachers, a text and a subtext that illuminate the tiny stage. The first is a conversation about the individual experiences and development of the student in school. Here the parents discuss their expectations and aspirations for their child and the teacher offers judgments about his or her learning and development. The second reflects the broader social and institutional backdrops that frame parental expectations and aspirations for their children and help to define our society's perspectives on childhood. No conversation between families and schools seems to fully escape the press of these cultural preoccupations; no contemporary dialogue is not, to some extent, shadowed by powerful historical antecedents.

When Elizabeth Morgan, a middle-class African-American teacher who is the principal of an elite independent elementary school, is confronted by the angry upper-class white parents of kindergarten children who disagree with a hiring decision she has made, she is overwhelmed by the vehemence of their rage. The fathers are relentless in their verbal assaults, and Elizabeth feels suddenly impotent and becomes uncharacteristically mute. Even as she struggles to find her voice and resist their badgering, she knows that this is not just a discussion about the wisdom or viability of her administrative decision or even about its impact on the educational experience of their children. It is also—perhaps primarily—a power struggle with race and class at its center. The aristocratic white parents do not seem to be able to stand this middle-class black woman in authority, and this conversation is intended to keep her in her place.

But Elizabeth experiences another layer in this unfolding narrative,

an older story in which this contemporary struggle is embedded. This is not only a battle over the institutional and interpersonal forces that shape disparities and conflicts in race and class. For Elizabeth, this is an even more troubling and ancient drama—the enactment of the master-slave relationship. In this northern Virginia town, where the vestiges of the Southern plantation are still evident, these parents' voices echo the abusive assaults of the master punishing his uppity slave, and Elizabeth's silence and passivity is a response carved out of a bloody and horrible history. When she does not pick up the telephone that rings and rings during their conference, she comes close to endangering her own son, who is in crisis.

Throughout the narratives in this book, we see the interplay of larger cultural and historical dramas that shape and inform the play-within-a-play that is the parent-teacher conference. The presence and power of the larger framework are particularly troublesome when parents and teachers are trying to communicate across the chasms of class, race, and ethnicity, or navigate the disparities in educational background or immigrant status. When there is an asymmetry of power and status between schools and the families they serve, when prejudice, ignorance, and fear expose broader social and economic hierarchies, then parent-teacher encounters are more likely to become the sites of misunderstandings and conflict. Teachers and parents must work extra hard not to let these broader cultural biases obscure their clear sight of one another and distract them from focusing on the well-being of the child.

In *The Vulnerable Child*, Richard Weissbourd warns us about the power of the deep-seated prejudices that hover over family-school encounters and give adults a distorted view of the strengths and capacities of children. He reminds us, for example, of the danger of the self-fulfilling prophecy that assumes that children who come from impoverished communities are necessarily the most vulnerable and the least likely to be successful in school. And he challenges our expectation that whole categories of children should necessarily be labeled "at risk" because of their socioeconomic or racial backgrounds. Weissbourd finds instead that while poverty and prejudice may contribute to the disadvantage of millions of children, that there is much evidence

to suggest that other factors, such as parental stress and depression, have an even more powerful and deleterious impact on a child's educational fate. In fact, it is the individual problems of children—their difficulties with hearing and vision, learning disabilities, and social isolation—that have far more to do with learning and developmental outcomes than any simple formula based on the broad categories of race, income, ethnicity, or family structure.

Weissbourd also speaks about the plasticity of human development, the many opportunities for growth and learning that occur across a person's life span. He urges us to recognize the strengths in even the most scared and delinquent child, and the vulnerabilities and weaknesses that lurk below the surface of children who appear to be strong and successful. All of Weissbourd's warnings underscore the ways in which our cultural preoccupations and prejudices can intrude upon our clear-sighted view of children and distort relationships between families and schools. Meaningful dialogues between parents and teachers, and authentic assessment of children's capacities, necessarily means resisting the prophecies of prejudice deeply ingrained in our culture and history, and focusing instead on the individual qualities and trajectories of children.

Many of the teachers I interviewed spoke about their efforts to resist these broader societal forces, to resist the mirrors and magnification of the broader cultural drama. When Andrea Brown meets with the striving middle-class parents at her Montessori preschool, she challenges the societal forces of competition and materialism—what she calls "the constructions of capitalism"—that shape the values and behaviors of parents and influence the expectations they hold and the ways they advocate for their children. This "value frame" that parents bring into their meetings at the school is not only about money. It is about all of the qualities of life that emerge when accumulation of personal wealth and the pursuit of social and economic power are primary life goals. Andrea believes that these parental preoccupations work against the kind of dialogue that she hopes to develop with them. In working with families, she wants to "create a space" for a different, more "organic and fluid" kind of conversation that supports a process of inquiry and discovery. She is clear that in

creating these spaces for dialogue about children, she is "purposefully and strategically resisting" the press of contemporary culture, which she believes rules the lives of families who live in "a world of entrepreneurship and profit."

Like Andrea Brown, Sophie Wilder, a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher in an alternative public school, "resists" the hierarchies of power and the unequal distribution of resources that she witnesses each day as her students—from widely diverse racial and social class backgrounds—enter her classroom. Sophie loves the fact that her school is deeply committed to parental involvement and sees families as vital to the education of the whole child. But over the years, her enthusiasm has been quelled by the unequal patterns of parent participation she sees that privilege her affluent students and too often cause the least advantaged children to be ignored. Not surprisingly, it is the highly educated white parents who tend to be the most actively involved and the most demanding of teachers, while the poor and working-class minority parents are much more reluctant to be engaged in schools and aggressively advocate for their children. In the last year, Sophie has tried to "resist these hierarchies of participation" by balancing what she calls "the currency of the classroom." When the more assertive parents come to her and ask for special favors for their children, she tries to "mentally advocate" for the children whose parents are not there. Sophie muses about a strategy that she is still in the process of figuring out. "I am trying always to be disciplined in my thinking. . . . I've heard the views and demands of the vocal parents. Now, what would the other parents say or need me to do if they were here?" These kinds of mental calculations require energy and vigilance, and Sophie worries that it is hard to translate "her head trip" into her interactions with children and families. But she believes in the kind of intentionality of resistance that is embedded in the corrective actions she takes, and she knows that over time her efforts will make her classroom feel less like a mirror and magnification of the worst aspects of society.

Children at the Center

CHILDREN SHOULD BE present—and given a voice—at parent-teacher conferences. They are the only people who know both the family and the school domains. They are the best interpreters of, and authorities on, their own experience. Their presence helps the adults stay focused on their primary reason for coming together in the first place: to support the learning and the development of the child. And student participation should not be reserved for the teenage years; it should begin when children are very young. Of course, they must be old enough to use and understand language, sit relatively still, and attend to what is going on. Molly Rose's first graders are present and vocal at all of the parent-teacher meetings; they tell their parents about their own experience in school, about what they have learned and what things are still hard for them. Their portfolios—filled with their work and reflecting their growth and their progress—offer the evidence that supports their presentation. Molly sees the child at the center of the conference and the adults as audience, listening attentively and responding appreciatively. In fact, she believes that a major benefit of including children in the ritual is that they begin to develop the skills of self-evaluation. They learn how to present and take responsibility for their ideas and their work. And for the first time, many of their parents are able to see their children with new eyes. They are surprised and pleased to see their growing competence and self-assurance.

Molly is one of those rare teachers who manage to get 100 percent attendance at parent-teacher conferences. She does this year after year in a city school with a large immigrant population, with a majority of students from single-parent homes, and with families who are poor and often illiterate. Certainly her unbridled enthusiasm and persistence, her willingness to meet parents, grandparents, and caregivers ("whomever the children call their family") any time and any place (and not "take it personally" when they don't show up or cancel at the last minute), and her weekly communications that keep them abreast of classroom activities encourage their attendance at the twice-

yearly conference. But I also suspect that parents come to these ritual meetings because they look forward to hearing their children hold forth; they relish the chance to watch them perform. Their child's participation in the meeting is a big draw. After all, no parent wants to disappoint a child who has worked hard to prepare for his or her most important and appreciative audience.

There are, of course, occasions when teachers and parents need to speak privately and in confidence; when the news may be too painful, difficult, or complex for children to hear; when the adults need to strategize on the child's behalf; when the conflict between the adults would make the child feel conflicted or unsafe. At these moments, children should be out of hearing range and out of harm's way. But I believe that these adult-only conversations should be the exception, not the rule. If the typical ritual is presumed to be three-way—parent, teacher, and child—then the adults will become more and more comfortable with the youngsters' presence and discover that their voices enrich and inform the encounter.

Carol Steele's story about Steven, one of the special-needs high school students in the Pilot Program she heads—who had promised to attend the meeting with his divorced parents, the learning specialist, and the social worker, but who at the last minute disappeared from school—is a tale about the lengths that Carol will go to get students to participate in and take some responsibility for the problem solving and decision making that will affect their learning and healing. It was actually Steven's father who had the bright idea of tracking down his son on his cell phone. Steven answered the call, knowing it was from his father because he saw the number on the phone screen. He must have been at least ambivalent about joining the conversation, both wanting and not wanting to endure the discomfort of what was sure to be a difficult scene. But, at the last minute, Steven's voice was not only incorporated into the conversation, it became the dominant voice. Carol laughs at the irony: His long-distance participation didn't marginalize him, it put him at the center. Six grown-ups sitting around the table at school hanging on every word of one adolescent tuning in from his car. Carol tells this story both to underscore the importance of student participation in parent-teacher meetings and to

emphasize that adults must be willing to improvise, to go the extra mile, to reach out and include them. This is particularly important for adolescents, who want to assert their independence and who are likely to see the conference as an ambush, with the adults lying in wait to expose their weaknesses, hurl criticisms at them, or put them down.

But even if adolescents are not worried about being ganged up on by the most powerful adults in their lives, there is a tendency for parents to respond to their teenager's need for more autonomy—and the secrecy and silence that often accompanies that—by becoming less involved in the school scene, by deciding that their presence at parent-teacher conferences is no longer as crucial as when their children were young. Parent participation certainly recedes as children grow older. Some studies show a precipitous decline in parental involvement during the teenage years by as much as 50 percent, for example, between grades six and nine. Even though adolescents may turn surly and rebuff their parents' efforts to stay connected to their school life, and even though parents may feel awkward not knowing exactly how to advocate for someone who suddenly feels like a stranger to them, it is important for parents to remain vigilant, particularly since the academic decisions their children are making are likely to have real consequences for their future lives.

Steven's willingness to respond to his father's telephone call, despite his disappearing act, speaks to another reason why children should be included in parent-teacher meetings. However hard it may be to attend the conference and risk hearing criticism, it is even harder to be completely outside of the conversation, to be sitting somewhere knowing that your teachers and parents are having a conversation about you without being there to defend yourself, or even to lap up all of the wonderful praise. Molly Rose makes such a big point of including her first graders in the grown-up conversation because she has vivid and painful memories of the two evenings each year when her parents would hire a babysitter and drive off to her snazzy private school to rendezvous with her teacher. Molly would wait at home racked with anxiety, desperate to know what they were saying, playing over in her mind the possible scenarios. Even though she was a

high-achieving student whose report cards were full of A's and "Excellent," and even though she enjoyed the admiration of her parents and teachers, being excluded from this essential conversation made her feel exposed and vulnerable. And it made her both yearn to hear all the good stuff and worry about not having the opportunity to correct or explain the things that the adults might be misinterpreting. After all, even at a very tender age, Molly recognized that she was the only one who knew both the home and school scenes. Only she knew what it took to navigate across the family-school border. I believe that even when students seem to be reluctant, even resistant, to attending parent-teacher meetings, there is a part of them that wants to be a part of the conversation. It feels worse to be excluded and given no voice in the conversation than it does to be included and forced to listen to things that are hard to hear.

Learning About the Other: A Teacher-Parent Curriculum

IT IS IMPORTANT to remember that the teachers whose work is documented and celebrated in this volume are not typical in the ways they engage and communicate with parents. In fact, I chose to watch their good work and I listened very carefully to what they had to say because I believe that their voices carry important lessons and valuable wisdom, and because I believe that too much of the educational literature is focused on recording the deficiencies of teachers, the pathologies of families, and the weaknesses of schools. Too often the literature's focus on pathology ignores the goodness that is there in schools, offers us few lessons about how to make things better, leads to a kind of chronic cynicism and despair, and ends up blaming the victim. Without denying education's problems and failures, or romanticizing and idealizing evidence of progress and productivity, I think it is most instructive to examine what is good enough and to excavate and identify the useful lessons.

The teachers in this book, then, were chosen because they are unusually good at joining forces with parents on behalf of children.

They are rare in how they are able to build relationships with the families of their students, relationships that are collaborative and authentic, relationships that seek symmetry and alliance. They see parents as the first educators, are respectful of their experience and perspective, and listen carefully to their observations and insights about their children, which will help them be better teachers for these children. It is not that these good teachers are perfect or flawless in the ways they forge relationships with parents. Their encounters are not always productive and smooth. In fact, all of them are able to recall scenes where miscommunication erupted into angry accusations; where unconscious prejudices caused fear and defensiveness; where they were left feeling bruised and raw or racked with terrible guilt about the hurt that they caused.

So these caring and compassionate teachers are considered rare not because they are perfect. Negotiating family-school borders is, at best, an imperfect and delicate enterprise. Rather, they are unusual in the value and focus that they place on parental engagement, and in the way they see parents as essential to the child's healthy development and optimal learning. They are unusual in the many ways they reach out to parents, in the creativity and improvisation that define their approaches. They always search for what works best, tolerating—even welcoming—conflict that seeks clarification and problem solving to move past moments of impasse. And they are unusual when compared to the majority of teachers, whose relationships with parents tend to be defensive and formulaic, who look to the institutional bureaucracy to shield or buffer them from what they see as the intrusions of families.

But the teachers whose stories are told here are *not* unusual in the lack of formal preparation and training they have received for working with families and in the criticisms they offer for this "hole in their curriculum." Most of what they do well results from trial and error and from the learning that follows failure, from intuition and accumulated experience, or from witnessing and absorbing the ways in which their own parents and teachers encountered one another. Several of them even speak about their strengths in working with families as growing out of temperamental inclinations. "I love working on the

margins of institutions," says one. Another speaks about relishing the "complexities and difficulties of relational work." A third says the teachers need to have the personality and skills of "ethnographers." She muses, "I feel as if it has been a lifetime of watching the way my mom and dad dealt with people and relationships in the world. . . . This is the first and most important informal training that I received." But ultimately she admits that she was "largely self-taught," leading with her "intuition, imagination, and developing ideas." So even though all of these teachers manage to invent a productive, ever imaginative, approach to working with families, they all lament the absence of a curriculum that explicitly and deeply prepared them for this important part of their professional role.

Across the country, and in a wide variety of educational settings, teachers receive almost no training or support in developing relationships with the families of their students. Graduate and undergraduate teacher training courses do not help students anticipate or prepare for—conceptually or pragmatically—their work with parents. And once new teachers are hired, they receive almost no guidance, support, or supervision from their administrators or colleagues in this area. They make it up as they go along, usually relying on perspectives and practices that they learned as children watching their own parents and teachers. Those who have good memories tend to want to reproduce and incorporate those values and behaviors into their adult repertoire. Likewise, many teachers with childhood memories of unease and conflict on the family-school borders try to do the opposite of what they observed and experienced as youngsters.

I believe that a core part of the curriculum of teachers in training needs to be focused on productively relating to the parents of their students. First, they need to learn to value the authority and wisdom of parents and recognize the contributions that they can make to the child's success in school. Second, they need to develop a wide-angle view of the broad ecology of education, be able to envision a map of the several institutions where children are socialized, and develop an appreciation of how students individually and collectively navigate the terrain between home and school. And third, teachers in training need to develop strategies, tools, and skills for supporting productive

dialogues with parents. They need to learn to listen—patiently, intently, and respectfully—to parental perspectives on their children. They need to develop their powers of observation so that they will be able to see, and then document, the important evidence, illustration, or anecdote that will help them offer a vivid portrayal of the child's life in school and help them convey to parents that they know their child and care for him or her.

Once teachers finish their training and join the faculty of a school, they need to receive mentoring and supervision from administrators and senior colleagues about communicating effectively and building productive relationships with parents. They must be socialized into a community of colleagues who value the knowledge and perspective of parents and see it as essential to supporting their students' development, and they must receive their collective wisdom about the best practices in working with families—practices that are shaped by and responsive to the surrounding community. Newcomers to a school faculty should never be left to simply figure it out on their own, and their knowledge of the families and community must not be reduced to the snippets of gossip—often pejorative—that they might hear in the teachers' lounge.

Teachers need to learn about building productive relationships with families, but parents also need support and guidance in figuring out the scope and dimensions of their role. Even when the rhetoric and policies of the school seem to support parental engagement and participation, many parents feel as if they are trespassing when they cross the threshold of the school, as if they are treading on territory where they don't belong. This makes them feel ill at ease, off-balance, and often defensive. Other parents—particularly those who speak a different language, who are poor, or who themselves were school dropouts—feel excluded by an institutional bureaucracy that seems opaque and unwelcoming, hard to understand and difficult to navigate. And they feel demeaned by a subtle message that they are inadequate parents who have not prepared their children to succeed in school. Still other parents feel ill equipped to play their roles productively and strategically. They are unclear about how to best advocate for their children, how best to strike a balance between engagement

and intrusiveness, between accompanying their children and giving them the space to develop independence. And they feel alone and at sea, afraid to reveal their anxiety to teachers and even to other parents. They are fearful of doing the wrong thing and reducing their child's competitive edge.

Whether parents' discomfort comes from not knowing how to navigate the bureaucracy or from their response to subtle institutional barriers that make them feel as if they are trespassing, or whether they just have no clue about the appropriate dimensions and limits of their role, I believe that parent-teacher conferences would be far more productive if schools became clearer and more explicit about their expectations, made the rules and rituals of parental engagement more transparent, and marked the boundaries and defined the common ground more clearly. This means that teachers and school leaders need to spend some time at the beginning of the school year educating parents about how to make their dialogues with teachers more productive, about how to prepare for and what to expect during these encounters, about what to listen for and good questions to ask, and about those aspects of school life in which they should not be involved.

Jane Cross, the teacher of four-year-olds at a progressive private school, talks about the conflicts and tension between families and schools that arise when the limits of parental authority are not defined clearly. This is particularly problematic in a school where influential and highly educated parents want to be involved in every decision that might impact their child's successful climb to the top. Even though Jane works to create "a seamless connection" between home and school by welcoming the parents into her classroom each morning and keeping in close touch with them about their child's progress, she also feels that the school needs to be much clearer with parents about what things are not open for discussion, about areas of educational jurisdiction in which they should not have a voice. To spend years haggling with parents over whether French should be offered—along with Spanish—to four-year-olds is, in Jane's judgment, a waste of everyone's time and sends a message to parents that Jane feels is disingenuous. It is a message that pretends that teachers value

their opinion on these curricular matters, a message designed to make parents feel as if the school is "endlessly flexible and open to their views." Teachers chafe at the intrusion into their "professional territory." Much of the tension and exasperation that is felt by both teachers and parents might well be lessened, if not resolved, if the school helped parents understand the appropriate limits of their involvement and responsibility.

It is also important for parents to make good and wise and strategic decisions about the nature of their involvement in schools. There are so many ways in which parents can make their presence felt in the life of the school: from making cookies and brownies for a bake sale, to becoming active in the parent-teacher association, to chaperoning school trips, to sitting on boards of directors, to helping out in the classroom on special projects, to attending parent-teacher conferences, to assisting their children with homework. Although each of these ways of engaging the school may be important to providing needed resources and supporting the school community, those activities that are fairly remote from the child's learning experience seem to contribute less to successful relationships between parents and teachers, and, more important, seem to have less impact on learning and achievement.

Researchers who have studied the types and levels of parental participation and their impact on achievement patterns of children make a distinction between the proximal and distal engagement of parents in school. They find, for example, that children are likely to do better in school when parents are vigilant in helping their children with homework, when they are conversant with the classroom curriculum, and when they regularly communicate with the teacher about the child's experience in school. Likewise, learning will not necessarily be enhanced for students whose parents primarily focus their efforts on institutional maintenance, on those aspects of school life that do not engage the teacher or the child directly.

Joyce Epstein, a researcher at Johns Hopkins University, has spent the last twenty-five years exploring the dimensions and impact of family-school engagement. She finds that parental involvement in a child's education—more than the family's educational background—can be one of the strongest predictors of academic success. But which

kinds of activities parents become engaged in matters a lot. Sitting on steering committees or running capital campaigns may make parents feel committed, but, says Epstein, they are likely to have a negligible effect on children's achievement. Much more fruitful, for example, are the connections parents make at home with their children, discussing and reinforcing the classroom activities.

Molly Rose, the first-grade teacher in a city school serving poor and working-class children, seems to do the most thorough job of engaging parents in a way that is likely to have an impact on their children's success in school. Each week, for example, parents receive *The Rose Room Report*, a newsletter that describes what is going on in her classroom—the class trip to the aquarium, the planting of avocado pits, the working on vowels, learning to count by twos—and it also suggests activities that parents and their children might engage in together at home to reinforce their child's learning in school. Molly believes that these weekly communications help parents understand what is going on in their child's world and give them access to a part of their child's life that is usually invisible to parents. "Most kids," says Molly, "will reveal very little about what is going on at school when their parents quiz them directly. This allows the parents to open up the conversation in a very specific way, and it gives them a context and a language." It also gives parents confidence in approaching Molly. Armed with knowledge of the curriculum and classroom activities, ready with common points of reference, they feel better prepared to engage in a real conversation with their child's teacher.

All Children Have Special Needs

CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN parents and teachers are often least productive when they are discussing a child who is considered "average": a student who does not have any visible or identifiable deficiencies or any obvious and compelling strengths, a student who does not stand out, cause trouble, or make waves. "Average" children tend to get lost in the shuffle. Those teachers who work successfully with the most vulnerable children have a lot to teach us about the kind of focused

and empathic attention that *all* children should receive. Carol Steele, who runs the Pilot Program, sees parents as necessary allies and collaborators. In an odd way, the adults benefit by their awareness that they can't do without one another's support. Without a joint effort, the youngsters will languish. And parents and teachers of special-needs students are more likely to see themselves as responding to real problems that require complex remedies, persistent problem solving, and a discerning and honest accounting of the student's vulnerabilities and strengths.

Although very few schools and programs can afford the kind of time, energy, and resources that Carol has at her disposal, there are lessons here for teachers and parents in more "average" and ordinary settings—lessons about listening and alliance, about identifying and naming the deficiencies and celebrating the strengths, about not indulging or making excuses for the student's vulnerabilities, and about pushing him or her toward independence. "I'm always intent upon moving them out of this protective asylum, helping to make them strong enough to withstand the rigors of the regular school," says Carol.

When we watch Carol's extraordinary vigilance—her commitment, creativity, and truth-telling—it is important to recognize that her attentiveness is supported by a federal mandate called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), signed into law in 1975. IDEA focuses specifically on the families of children with special needs. In fact, this is one of the few arenas where public policies in education support the good works of teachers who choose to enact the spirit of the law with caring and compassion. (There are, of course, many special education professionals who may follow the letter of the law but still manage to exclude and diminish parents and stereotype and limit their children.) Though the IDEA may be translated differently from state to state and district to district, it is the only federal law that is specific in its requirements for parental involvement in the decision-making process about their children. Parents have a right to be part of an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) team along with a special education teacher, a regular education teacher, an evaluation specialist, and any other specialists who are involved with

the student's education. The IEP team decides on a plan for teaching and providing special services to the child.

Not only are parents legally entitled to participate in writing the IEP, they also have a number of rights regarding the extent and frequency of their involvement and their input into the decision-making process, and their rights of appeal about decisions with which they disagree. There are "procedural safeguards," including the need for informed parental consent, the right of parents to appeal decisions through a mediator, and the right to request evaluations and reevaluations of their child. In her conference with Tony's parents, other special education specialists, and the social worker from the employment agency, Carol Steel enacts—with discernment and humor—the spirit of IDEA. The discussion is open, collaborative, and inclusive, using the wit and wisdom of all of the participants. And the highly educated, deeply concerned parents know their rights and responsibilities so that they can be effective advocates for their son.

Even when there is an explicit law in place, however, it is often hard for parents to fully and effectively participate in developing the IEP. They may be made to feel stupid by teachers and specialists who withhold or do not sufficiently explain crucial information. They may find the requirements and regulations of the law too complex and opaque to decipher. Audrey Pierce, who teaches sixth graders in a heterogeneous classroom in a small town in Maine, works closely with the parents of special-needs children who are primarily poor and illiterate and who "don't have a clue" about their rights and responsibilities under IDEA. She enjoys her role as translator and advocate for these parents. As she works to make their rights understandable to them and walks them through the bureaucratic and legal steps, she is determined not to speak down to them or make them feel infantilized. Audrey knows that the law is an empty instrument that must be filled with knowledge and goodwill, and must be made usable and understandable to parents.

But Audrey does more than help illiterate, undereducated parents translate the letter of the law into understandable rules of practice. She does more than help them navigate the complicated bureaucratic regulations. Her understanding of the notion of "special needs" ex-

tends beyond the few children in her class who have been so classified. She believes that every child has strengths and weaknesses, even those who appear to be thriving and achieving in the classroom, even those whose "very averageness" causes teachers to almost ignore them. In order to recognize the individuality of all of her students and make every child visible in her sight, Audrey reframes the conversation that she has with students and their families, so that it begins with the assumption that *all* of the children in her class have "particular challenges" that stand in the way of their full and optimal development. They all have dimensions of their intellect, their character, and their skills that need special attention and improvement. And it is a reframing that forces everyone—teachers, parents, and students—to articulate goals for each student and measure progress not only in relation to a uniform collective standard, but also in relation to the individual student's trajectory.

In reframing the conversation, however, Audrey is careful not to denigrate children's strengths or focus exclusively on their weaknesses. The blunt naming of vulnerabilities out of context and without an appreciation for the counterbalancing strengths causes parents undue anxiety and makes them become defensive. Instead, Audrey frames things in terms of "goal setting," a process in which the students are deeply involved. It is the students who identify the skills and qualities that need work and improvement and who record their aspirations in their individual portfolios. Matthew, a high-achieving student whose competitive stridency left him friendless, wrote in his portfolio his most important goal for the year: "I need to work on my problem of seeing everything as winning and losing . . . and always having to have my own way." Once the student has identified and named the challenges he or she faces, parents and teachers can join together in mutual support and help him or her reach those goals.

Creating New Spaces for Conversation

THE NARRATIVES AND reflections of the teachers and parents in this book express an intriguing paradox: We need to make conferences

both weightier and lighter, both more serious and more casual, more structured and more improvisational. Encounters between families and schools need to be richer, more productive, and more meaningful, and yet we should not overburden them with unrealistic expectations. Likewise, they need to be seen as central to the educational experience of children, yet the significance of the family-school relationship must never overshadow our focus on the development and learning of the student. Managing this balance—of giving parent-teacher conferences our full attention and not letting them dominate the scene—requires shifts in the values, practices, and purview of educators, and in the responsibilities and commitments of parents.

First of all, the traditional two parent-teacher conferences each year is nowhere near enough time for teachers and parents to stay in touch or communicate with one another productively. Meetings need to be more frequent, and they need to last longer than the usual twenty minutes typically reserved in a crowded schedule during an evening open house at school. More time and more frequent contacts would, of course, require a major shift in the value that schools place on parental engagement. The school's attitude cannot continue to be one of defending against the intrusions of parents or seeing them as competitors, or even enemies. The conference must not be reduced to a reporting out of test scores and a recounting of innocuous platitudes. Rather, there must be a stance of welcoming parents, seeking their alliance, listening to their perspectives, honoring the ways in which they see and know their child, and seeing them as a valuable and essential resource for working successfully with their children. This stance of alliance rather than competition, of bridge building rather than boundary drawing, must not be seen as a distraction from teaching and learning—the central agenda of school—rather, it must be seen as a necessary dimension of building successful relationships with children that will ultimately support their academic success.

Not only is it important for parents and teachers to meet more frequently and be allowed more time to swap stories, share information, problem solve, and suggest remedies, it is just as important that teachers develop alternative ways of communicating with parents about the progress of their child and about the classroom curriculum.

Molly Rose's weekly newsletter—simply written, but never "talking down"—allows parents to see into her classroom, makes her expectations "transparent," provides a model for carrying on the classroom curriculum at home, and gives parents a language for talking with their children about school. A brief note accompanies the newsletter to parents about their child's experience that week. The notes are often just one-liners reporting a new friendship with a classmate, or a wonderful observation on a science experiment, or a struggle on the playground at recess. But these one-liners allow the parents to see the their child's growth over time and force Molly to take stock of each individual student's progress. It also, she admits, helps her recognize the "good things" that children are doing on a daily basis and gives her the chance to report the "good news" to parents. So much of the communication from teachers to parents focuses on the weaknesses, problems, and pathologies of the student—the things that need attention and remediation. Molly's practice of capturing "something special" about each child each week does not avoid identifying the problems that some children are having, but it does allow every child to be in her sight and it allows goodness to be more often revealed.

Molly Rose's system of communication with parents is deliberately structured to give all parents equal access to the school experience of their child. The system is purposely designed to be "just, inclusive, and transparent." Once her parent communication model is in place, her face-to-face meetings with parents become more productive and meaningful. They seem more like continuations of an ongoing conversation than like anxiety-laden, bigger-than-life events. The frequent communications about the individual progress of the child and the collective experience of the class support and inform the parent-teacher meetings. "There are rarely surprises," says Molly about the conferences that are made richer by the regular and frequent exchanges of information.

If Molly manages to build bridges through a well-developed model of communication, Carol Steele, by contrast, has developed a highly improvisational way of offering the parents of her adolescent special needs students access and seek their support. She brags about "going

to any length" to lure parents into the circle of support for their youngsters. She is open to parents visiting the classroom unannounced, as long as they don't abuse the privilege and as long as their presence does not begin to feel intrusive to their son or daughter. She will stay on the telephone for hours with a parent who has been endlessly evasive or reluctant to meet with her face-to-face. "Timing is everything," she claims as she seizes the moment for a connection with a family that has been eluding her all year. She will even allow a student to participate in a meeting by using his cell phone. Carol is undaunted and endlessly creative in offering parents the opportunity to solve problems and join in the decision making about their child. And she is relentless in helping them understand their responsibility in following their child's progress and building an alliance with the school. Carol's communications with parents have been extended by daily e-mails, in which she reports on the progress of a classroom project or announces upcoming events or activities or lets parents know about a problem that has arisen that day with their teenager. She enjoys the efficiency and ease of communicating through e-mail, and she understands that the busy, upper-middle-class parents of her students appreciate the daily updates and immediate rapport. She believes that e-mail messages should never replace face-to-face contact; real communication about complex and intimate issues demands that she see the expressions and gestures of the parents to whom she is speaking. "I need to look deep into their eyes, and they need to see how much I care," says Carol, when she talks about the courage it takes to deliver painful news. E-mails allow people to hide out, to mask their emotions—or even fabricate their identities—behind a flat written response that usually lacks nuance and dimensionality. Likewise, she worries about the ways in which teachers and parents might use e-mail to "keep the student out of the loop" or "catch the student in the act of doing something wrong or dangerous." So everything that Carol writes in an e-mail to parents she also discusses first with her students. She never wants them to be blindsided by a parent who has received information from school about which the student is unaware or misinformed.

Carol Steele's use of e-mail represents a growing phenomenon in

school systems across the country, particularly in relatively affluent communities where families have computers at home. In many suburban districts, for instance, where dual-career families commute long distances to work and feel detached from their children's school life, schools have created Web sites and instituted voice-mail systems that allow parents to receive up-to-date information about school activities and programs. Some Web sites give parents information about their youngster's attendance, grades, homework assignments, and scores on standardized tests. This kind of quantifiable, discrete information keeps parents abreast of the academic progress of their child, and it may even help them begin a conversation about his or her experience in school. With something specific to talk about, parents may be better able to push past the silence that so often greets them when they ask their youngster, "How was school today?" But I believe, as Carol Steele does, that parents need to remember that the Web site offers only a partial view, and one that is defined by those dimensions that can be quantified and measured. It does not include those aspects of a student's experience that are not reducible to numbers but may, in fact, be the most significant to the child's development and learning. And parents and teachers must also remember that while e-mail communications may be a useful supplement to face-to-face meetings, they should not be seen as a replacement for them.

Even though schools need to be welcoming and teachers need to be vigilant in their efforts to encourage parents to attend and fully participate in parent conferences, it is important to recognize that in some communities the ritual of individual face-to-face meetings with families may not be the most productive and meaningful way to relate to them. In communities where parents are collectively reluctant or uncomfortable about attending parent-teacher conferences, schools need to create other arenas for parental engagement. Maria Lopez, a third-grade bilingual teacher in an inner-city school, dutifully follows the school system's mandate of two conferences each year, but even with all of her notes and telephone calls and prodding, only a handful of parents show up for the meetings. "That's not where the action's at for them," Maria says without an ounce of defensiveness in her voice. These immigrant families—recent arrivals from Costa Rica, El Sal-

vador, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic—feel awkward and estranged when they cross the threshold of their child's school. The institution feels opaque and difficult to navigate, the rules unclear, the rituals unfamiliar. "They are," says Maria, "strangers at the gates." Even though Maria sees herself as "one of them," and even though she and they share the same mother tongue, there is something about the conference that underscores their feelings of inadequacy, reinforces their foreignness, and makes them fall mute.

Maria's family workshops are designed to do the opposite: make parents feel engaged, challenged, powerful, and supported, and help them better understand their new country and the role that they might play in supporting their children's education. The workshops are communal events that welcome all comers. Everyone feasts on good Spanish food. There is warm conversation, storytelling, role playing, laughter, and harmless gossip. Maria believes that the workshops offer nourishment and knowledge to the parents whose needs must be met before they can provide support and guidance to their children. And she knows that she needs to create a "space that feels culturally familiar" to them. When parent conferences are experienced as irrelevant, when the ritual seems restrictive and foreign, schools and teachers must be ready to develop alternative arenas and scenarios. They must create places and spaces where the institutional and cultural boundaries that inhibit communication can be eased to create new forms of alliance and collaboration.

Connections and Constraints

THIS SHIFT IN attitude toward a more inclusive and communicative stance with families does not mean, however, that schools should be without boundaries. The teachers in this book are good at the complex and subtle negotiations that both welcome families and limit access to their classrooms. Andrea Brown, for instance, who calls herself a "yes" woman because she almost always responds to parental requests with openness and generosity, makes the barter explicit. Parents can visit her Montessori preschool classroom whenever they want,

but they are not allowed to participate; they must be observers, sitting quietly on the edge of the activity. They must not interrupt the flow and texture of the classroom culture. And Jane Cross, the teacher of four-year-olds in a progressive independent school, wants to create a "seamless connection" between home and school so that the children will feel comfortable in making their first transition to school, and so that parents will be able to understand and trust what is going on behind the classroom door. So each morning the parents come to the classroom and hang around for half an hour, giving extended good-byes to their children, reading them one last story, talking to one another about their common challenges and expectations, and exchanging useful pointers.

Even though Jane Cross seeks this easy and fluid rapport with parents and wants them to feel "warmly welcomed and completely at home," she also knows that the school needs to set limits and needs to be clearer to parents about those agendas and arenas in which they should *not* be involved. Parents need to be told—in no uncertain terms—about those places where their participation is likely to be uninformed and intrusive, where their presence may even be injurious to their children's successful acclimation to school and inhibiting to the development of their autonomy. So, like Andrea Brown, Jane Cross is involved in a subtle negotiation with parents. Her message is double-edged and differentiated, a balance of connections and constraints, reaching out and resisting. And she looks to the school, and its policies and practices, to help her draw the line, to help her find a firm clarity in defining this fluid, treacherous landscape.

Willard Waller's image of parents and teachers as "natural enemies" is helpful in underscoring the different perspectives each brings to the table. He helps us see the contrasts between the universalistic relationship of teachers, who focus on the collectivity of students—seeking to create a just classroom that offers equal resources to all children—and the particularistic relationship of parents, who are protective of their own child and tend to advocate for special favors for him or her. Waller's "natural enemies" metaphor is also helpful in pointing to the productivity of these contrary adult perspectives and

how these contrasting relationships with children support their development and learning. Children need both: the distance and the intimacy, the objectivity and the advocacy. But Waller's image of adult enmity is also distorting and misleading. It conjures up a picture of static roles, rigid boundaries, and hierarchies of power between families and schools. It does not embrace the contradictions embedded in productive, symmetric relationships, nor does it appreciate the coexistence of boundaries *and* bridges, of open access *and* closed doors. And, importantly, it misses the essential ingredients of empathy and respect that define successful parent-teacher encounters.

Productive dialogue requires, in fact, that both teachers and parents push past the constraints of their universalistic and particularistic roles and see the necessary and crucial claims of each other's position. Each must respect and value what the other knows and sees; each must attend carefully and listen deeply to the perspective and wisdom that the other brings. The only way to remove the sting of enmity, I believe, is to replace it with empathy. By empathy, I do not mean a gushing sentimentality or an exaggerated rhetoric of appreciation. By empathy, I mean putting yourself in the other person's shoes, seeing the world from the other person's vantage point.

There are three images that appear in the narratives of this text, offering useful contrasts to Waller's notion of "natural enemies" and making room for the development of an empathetic stance between families and schools. The first is one that does not put parents and teachers on opposite sides of a physical or metaphoric boundary; it does not place them at odds with one another. Rather, positions them "on the same side of the table," joined in their support of the student, coordinated in their efforts to problem solve, open in their expression of needing one another. In her work with special-needs adolescents, Carol Steele offers up this image of parents and teachers "on the same side of the table," facing the complex and difficult challenges together, in alliance against the dangers—both internal and external—that their adolescents are facing. As a matter of fact, her meetings with parents—which usually include a large cast of social workers, tutors, counselors, and regular classroom teachers—do not allow

people to line up on either side of the table. She purposely seats people around a large circular table, an arrangement that does not easily permit the drawing of sides or the hierarchies of power and authority.

As Carol works to get parents and teachers on the same side of the table, she is trying to change the pronouns that define their positions. She wants to transpose the language from one in which positions are staked out in the first person singular of "I" to one that respects their collective quest on behalf of the student. "*We* is my favorite word," says Carol adamantly, referring to the alliance she believes that this alliance is crucial for communicating successfully with families and necessary for supporting her students. Having watched Carol work with parents, I also know that the "we" is punctuated with a soft but incisive humor that is never cynical or self-serving, a humor that is slightly self-deprecatory and pokes gentle fun at parents (with whom she is deeply identified), easing the tension and helping to quiet their fears.

The other way in which Carol builds alliances with parents and obliterates strict roles and hard boundaries is to "cross the line of objectivity." By this she means that a teacher's role in supporting her student must not be constricted by rigid distance or detachment, by always taking a universalistic pose. Rather, she believes that there are moments when teachers need to cross over the line and become "nurturing mothers." In these moments—carefully chosen—teachers must express their advocacy through deep identification, connection, and intimacy. Carol is unapologetic when she claims this "totally unobjective" place in the conversation—when she dares to speak about her "love" for her student, when she joins with her students' parents in emotional, passionate engagement. At the culmination of her meeting with Tony's parents and the representative from the Safe Haven employment program, for example, Carol's voice rises in a crescendo that feels both totally natural and completely strategic. "I'm carrying the torch trying to find someplace good for this amazing boy . . . trying to find other people who will mother him like we have."

The second image that offers an alternative to Waller's notion of parents and teachers as natural enemies is one that also draws a line between families and schools but gives the boundary a different,

much softer definition. It was Sophie Wilder, a fifth- and sixth-grade teacher in an alternative public school, who suggested the wonderful, old-fashioned picture of parents and teachers coming together like "neighbors chatting over the back fence" as a way of conveying the mutuality of their concern for the child. The conversation between good neighbors honors the fence that separates their families, but it also marks their collective responsibility for all of the neighborhood children, their need to look out for each other's well-being. It is a conversation that is easy and natural and that anticipates living side-by-side for years to come. Sophie calls this collective, community-based concern "a loose kind of love" that allows for the forging of deep connections and the marking of boundaries. "Good fences make good neighbors," Robert Frost reminds us.

A third image that speaks to the development of empathy between teachers and parents, and offers a vivid contrast to Waller's assumption of enmity between families and schools, extends the theater metaphor that opens this chapter. The great performance artist Anna Deavere Smith stretches our conventional view of empathy. She draws a distinction between "getting the character to walk in the actor's shoes," the acting tradition that Smith herself was trained in, and "getting the actor to walk in the character's shoes," which is what she is aiming for in her work. The distinction is both subtle and huge. In the former case, the characters reside in the experiences and parameters of the actor, while in the latter the actor must travel outside of his or her range to find the character. The second approach requires a greater stretch, a deeper identification, some risk taking, and a leap of faith. As Smith puts it, "the spirit of acting is the *travel* from the self to the other." Her conception of this "deeper empathy" speaks to the challenges and possibilities in parent-teacher dialogues. It means that teachers and parents—working to support the learning and development of children and devoted to a discourse that will capture their different perspectives—must move beyond their frame of reference, and travel the distance to "the other."

Each of these three images—sitting on the same side of the table and getting to "we," neighbors chatting over the back fence expressing a loose kind of love, and walking in the other's shoes and travel-

ing the distance to inhabit the character—offers an alternative conception of parent-teacher encounters. Each suggests a dialogue that develops out of a growing trust, a mutuality of concern, an appreciation of contrasting perspectives, and a deep empathy. All three images also suggest the risk taking and courage required to navigate the tender and treacherous terrain between families and schools, a terrain full of surprises and minefields. The terrain is difficult because the signposts are not always clear and because productive encounters require the balancing and embracing of stark contradictions. In seeking meaningful alliances, parents and teachers must build bridges *and* mark boundaries; they must reach out *and* resist; they must find points of mutual identification *and* hold fast to their different perspectives.

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldua describes the frontiers in which these contradictions get played out, where the dialectics of difference make way for intimacy. Borderlands, says Anzaldua, are "present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, or upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy." By this definition, the parent-teacher encounter can certainly be termed a borderland. The participants in this space may very likely be of different cultures, races, and classes, but the borderland—separating and joining contrasting orientations—is there in *any* family-school arena. Through a personal narrative of prose and poetry Anzaldua, a self-described Chicana "border woman," witnesses the treacherous and contradictory negotiations that take place when we live in the borderland.

In the Borderlands
you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back

To survive the borderland, Anzaldua claims that we must embrace still another contradiction. We must learn to live "*sin fronteras*"—without borders. We must "be a crossroads." The borderland that Anzaldua sketches, then, is full of oppositional forces, which are stark and persistent. And it is a place where each person plays multiple roles. Enemies are kin and kin are enemies; people are both strangers and familiar. They are the crossroads, existing and acting without borders. I believe that the borderland is a powerful metaphor for parent-teacher meeting spaces. The natural enemies are also intimates, family, sharing much in common and also strangers. Those who make these encounters meaningful and productive are those who can cross boundaries and live in both the contested terrain and the common ground.

The images of battleground and crossroads hold deep peril and exciting promise. The battleground is where the conflict is played out—each parent and teacher *is* the contested terrain, the flashpoint for the struggle over issues creating contrast, opposition, and discord. At the same time, each parent and teacher *is* the crossroads, offering multiple paths and choices, presenting ways out to new places and uncharted territory. These images give a great deal of power and creativity to the participants in these encounters. In their hearts, minds, and actions they hold the conflict and the resolution, the problem and the solution, the battle and the peace.