Partnership between myth and reality: structural asymmetries in parent-teacher relationships

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PARTNERSHIP BETWEEN MYTH AND REALITY:
STRUCTURAL ASYMMETRIES IN PARENT-TEACHER RELATIONSHIPS

by

Marisa Bel Holtz

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
in Partial Fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

School of Education
Department of Educational Administration and Policy Studies

2010
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ABSTRACT

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by Marisa Bel Holtz

Despite a historically unprecedented increase in advocacy for parental involvement in education in recent decades, parents continue to express dissatisfaction with their communication with teachers, while teachers continue to identify their interactions with parents as a source of tension and stress. While the practitioner literature recommends parent-teacher collaboration as an attainable goal, the theoretical literature suggests that, given the structural asymmetries of parent-teacher relationships, open communication may be impossible. Via unstructured interviews with parents and teachers of suburban secondary students, this study explored the structural limitations on authentic parent-teacher communication. A two-layered analytic approach combined thematic analysis and narrative discourse analysis of interview data collected from parents and teachers. Findings suggest that while parents and teachers must negotiate conflicts in a social arena that advocates equality and collaboration, the institutional differences in their respective roles and positions prevents the realization of the partnership ideal. Findings suggest teachers’ stronger structural positions may stem from greater status, authority and power and reveal teachers’ use of defensive routines to maintain their superior positions. Parents appeared to experience limited success in overcoming their imbalance of power with teachers and in negotiating what they perceived as desirable outcomes for their children. Both parents and teachers described their relationships as temporary and wary alliances, invoking the partnership ideal only as a rhetorical device utilized to buttress their position.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would simply not have been possible without the support and assistance of my husband, James Holtz. Thanks honey for being my best cheerleader and remaining the platform from which I leap.

Dr. Heinz Meyer acted not only as committee chairperson, but also as mentor and guide throughout my coursework, comprehensive exams, and dissertation research in the doctoral program. I am deeply grateful for your support, suggestions, and guidance over the last few years.

And finally, to my two daughters, Noelle and Jolena, whose young lives have been conceived, born, and lived during this project, I’m sure you will be relieved to have Mommy at home on the weekends. No more ‘ernie-versidad’ or ‘blueberry-teca’. Let me know what normal mommies do, and I’m all yours. I’ve been told it involves cookies and credit cards.
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CHAPTER ONE. OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Introduction

This research investigated parent-teacher relationships in American public secondary schools and scrutinized the assumption that parent-teacher relationships are a cooperative and harmonious venture in which parents and teachers work together towards a shared goal of student achievement. This assumption, embedded in all major parent-involvement models, ignores the structural aspects of parent-teacher relationships that inhibit cooperation and prevent open communication. In this study, these structural limitations were specifically investigated as factors that prevent authentic communication between parents and teachers.

Recognition of the undercurrents of parent-teacher relationships and an improved understanding of parent-teacher communication remain important for all educators today. In recent decades, as parents’ political power in American public education has increased, so has their desire for increased communication with teachers. Parent-involvement models have become increasingly marked by rhetoric that advocates for improved parent-teacher collaboration. In fact, the expectation that parents and teachers will work together collaboratively permeates public education so thoroughly, that it has recently been characterized as a ‘partnership ethic’ (Keogh 1996; Mager 2001). As a social value, the partnership ethic may actually serve to increase tensions between parents and teachers, as it forces them to maintain an appearance of collaboration when negotiating solutions to real problems on which they might hold different perspectives.
This research study investigated how teachers and parents manage a possible dilemma of appearing to collaborate as equals while, in actuality, they operate in an asymmetrical relationship. Role theory provides a conceptual framework from which to analyze attributes of parents’ and teachers’ roles and positions as institutionally-derived identities that empower each actor differently and unequally. Interview data was collected from parents and teachers, several email exchanges between parents and teachers were recorded, and as an educator/administrator, I maintained field notes during the course of my professional work as a teacher and department supervisor. Data was analyzed using a hybrid approach of thematic and narrative discourse analysis, with special attention paid to how parents and teachers either consciously or unconsciously work to maintain their respective positions when seemingly working to resolve specific conflicts.

Background

During the last fifty years American education has experienced a marked shift towards greater inclusion of parents in the process of their children’s education (Powell and Diamond 1995). A combination of social, economic, and political forces altered the supposition of schools as an absolute authority (Evans 1998; Powell and Diamond 1995). Advocates of increased parental participation argue that increased parental involvement in educational systems leads to improved social behavior and academic achievement for students and greater responsiveness of schools to constituents’ needs. As a response to national and state education policies mandating
increased efforts on the part of schools to include parents, schools developed parent involvement programs and procedures.

In the last few decades, the array of programs and strategies designed to increase parental participation has been diverse. Some programs sought to involve parents’ comfort in and visibility in the schools (Beresford 1992). Others focused on parenting skills, such as encouraging parents to attend informational programs with their teenagers (Pelco and Ries 1999). The 1990’s were characterized by an explosion in shared decision-making bodies that sought to include parents in governance and decision-making at the school level (Malen 1999). While many site-based management teams and many other parental programs have fallen away (Malen 1999), schools continue to seek ways to include parents in their children’s education.

Not only do schools’ parent-oriented programs and policies continue to evolve, but so do educators’ perspectives of parental involvement. As will be demonstrated later in greater detail, prevailing models surrounding parental involvement have moved from a school-centric perspective to one marked by collaboration to the current parent-centric perspective. Early parental-involvement models popular in the 1980’s recommended programs and practices that were designed to encourage parental behavior but were rooted in existing school practices (Epstein 1986). Programs in the 1990’s encouraged schools to view parents as equal partners and to work on improving home-school interactions as a form of on-going collaboration (Chrispeels 1996; Comer and Haynes 1991). In recent years, greater attention has been paid to understanding the needs of parents as schools are
encouraged to develop ‘parent outreach programs’ that are responsive to parents’ needs (New York State Board of Regents 2007).

Although perspectives, programs, and practices have evolved significantly over the past thirty years, a common thread that interweaves almost every dialogue about parental involvement concerns the interactions between parents and teachers. Among the various definitions of parental involvement, parent-teacher communication can be found as a central component. Perhaps more revealing is that among the competing definitions of parental involvement and home-school relations, the element of parent-teacher relationships is never absent. Since the majority of direct communication between homes and schools does occur between parents and teachers (Pelco and Ries 1999), this phenomenon seems appropriate. Some consider the parent-teacher relationship to be the ‘nexus’ of the home-school partnership (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, and Hoy 2001; Keyes 2002). In a recent meta-analysis of 18 empirical studies conducted between 1980 and 2002, Cox concludes not just that parental involvement interventions are effective in improving student outcomes, but that the most effective feature of parental involvement efforts lies in the interactions that occur between parents and teachers (Cox 2005, 491).

Despite the great influence and potential impact of parent-teacher communication, parent-teacher relationships remain an area of tension for both parents and teachers (Conelly 2007; Fatma and Guler 2003; Glynn 2000; Henry 1996; Keogh 1996; Lawson 2003; Mager 2001; Miretzky 2002; Rockafellow 2002; Serpe-Schroeder 1999; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001; Stattelman 1999). It is sensible to
assume that since parents and teachers share the common goal of students’ education, growth, and preparation for future success, they would embrace a collegial relationship marked by collusion and two-way exchanges of information. However, such collegiality has not historically marked the parent-teacher relationship. A 1932 text utilized for teacher preparation noted, “The fact seems to be that parents and teachers are natural enemies, predestined each for the discomfiture of the other (as quoted in Miretzky 2005, 68).”

The nature of the parent-teacher relationship does not seem to have improved in recent times. Many educators continue to hold negative perceptions of parents and parental involvement (Allen 1997; Brown, Anfara and Roney 2004; Gibbs 2005; Hughes and MacNaugton 2000; Lazar and Sloomstad 1999; Ramirez 2001; Rich 1995). A 2005 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: An Examination of School Leadership (2005) demonstrates the deep fissures that teachers perceive to exist between parents and teachers. While nine out of ten new teachers reported that working with parents was “very important,” only one in four of the new teachers found working with parents to be “very satisfying.” (Israel 2005) One of the top workshops offered for teachers in the last five years is titled “Dealing with Difficult Parents,” (Rich 1995; Tebbano 2006); and articles in teachers’ publications carry titles such as “Sparring Partners,” (Rich 1995) or “No Parents Past This Point” (Kent 2006). The cover story of the February 21, 2005 issue of Time Magazine was titled “Parents Behaving Badly: Inside the new classroom power struggle: what teachers say about pushy moms and dads who drive them crazy.” The article proceeded to describe “…even good parents
who exceed their boundaries: the eager parent who pushes too hard, the protective parent who defends the cheater, the homework helper who takes over, the tireless advocate who loses sight of the fact that there are other kids in the class too…the hovering parent who is over-involved (Gibbs et. al. 2005, 42).”

While parents report less frustration overall with their relationships with teachers, parents consistently report a desire for increased communication from teachers (Allen 1997; Fatma and Guller 2003). Parents reported greater satisfaction with teachers who communicated more frequently (Glynn 2000) and whose communications were more personal (Halsey 2005). In one study, parents reported teachers’ lack of communication as their top frustration with teachers (Serpe-Schroeder 1999). One researcher who observed that parents' perceptions of teacher communications were dynamic and subject to change, recommended greater consideration on the part of teachers for the “…the role they occupy in influencing parent perceptions (Stattleman 1999, 262).”

Despite the tension and stress that remain evident in parent-teacher relationships, rhetoric encouraging home-school connections and promoting parent-teacher communication remains strong. This leads both educators and researchers to conclude that in the political and social climate of the day, a “partnership ethic” has emerged that effectively governs the speech of teachers and parents (Connelly 2007; Henry 1996; Keogh 1996; Mager 2001; Miretzky 2002; Nakagawa 2000). Described as a strong social expectation of cooperation between parents and teachers, this partnership ethic is reflected in practices, programs, workshops, and policies that are
designed to enhance parent-teacher communication (Mager 2001). The extension of this goal into a partnership ethic has become more marked in the last twenty years and even more recently has become firmly entrenched in the social rhetoric employed by parents and educators (Mager 2001). This trend can be well evidenced via a simple Google search using the terms ‘parents, education, and partners’ that yielded over 150 million hits (in English, December 2009).

Some websites attempted to explain the concept of parent-school partnerships in more detail (emphasis added):

“Parents and teachers may look at young children's learning from different perspectives, but they share a common goal: making sure that children receive the best possible education. Mutual respect and communication between programs and families takes advantage of both perspectives to provide children with the kind of care and education that will help them thrive. Today's family members and caregivers have many responsibilities and time constraints. It takes extra effort on both sides to build strong partnerships.” [link]

“Why Parents and Teachers are Partners in Education:

Success in school is a goal that parents have for their children, and teachers have for their students. When parents and teachers work together, it is a goal that can be more easily reached. Learning improves when parents are involved in their children’s education and when parents work in partnership with their children’s teacher, the children clearly benefit.” (Saskatchewan Teacher’s Federation pamphlet) [link]

This latter site went on to list specific activities that teachers and parents should take to support children’s learning. Teachers were encouraged to share information with parents and answer their questions. Parents were encouraged to read information sent home, promote school as important to their children, oversee good work habits and behavior at home, talk with their children about what they were learning at
school, and inform teachers of any relevant information regarding their child’s health. Parents were also advised to trust teachers’ expertise as educators. While the pamphlet was produced and published by the teacher’s organization, it should be noted that the first site mentioned above was a site dedicated to supporting parents’ involvement in education and listed fairly similar descriptors for parents’ and teachers’ roles.

The website definitions of parent-teacher partnerships suggest that parents and teachers should work together to achieve a mutual goal of children’s success in school. But after reading the description of duties for parents and teachers above, one might delineate each actors’ roles as: *teachers are primarily responsible for students’ education and parents are expected engage in actions that support teachers’ work*. However, this division of labor does not sound much like a real partnership at all. In both legal and common/lay terminology, ‘partnership’ implies at least a rough equality between actors. A popular on-line dictionary defines a partner as:

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1. One that is united or associated with another or others in an activity or a sphere of common interest. A partner participates in a relationship in which each member has equal status. [http://www.thefreedictionary.com/partner](http://www.thefreedictionary.com/partner)
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In an ethnographic study of a large middle/upper class school district, Henry was struck by the disjunction between district rhetoric and actual parental involvement (Henry 1996). In this case study, the researcher felt that instances of effective home-school collaboration were not equal to the strong advocacy of parental involvement on the part of the district. Others have noted a similar
disjunction on the part of teachers, in that teachers’ declared opinions in favor of parental involvement were, at times, unsupported or were undermined by teachers’ actual practices and behaviors (Henry 1996; Rockafellow 2002).

**Importance of the study:**

Several elements have been introduced in this first overview.

1. School programs encourage parental participation in education and emerged as a response to social, cultural, and political dynamics.

2. Schools continue to seek ways to involve parents more actively in their children’s education, although parental participation programs and practices have evolved and changed somewhat over the past thirty years,

3. The parent-teacher relationship remains one of the most important factors in school-home interactions and exists as a central element of all parental involvement models.

4. The parent-teacher relationship is marred by tension and stress.

5. A partnership ethic governs the rhetoric of parental involvement, and this social value may discourage closer attention to elements of tension in parent-teacher relationships.

This study investigated elements of tension in parent-teacher relationships, an area that remains understudied in the literature. Since both parents and teachers acknowledge that they carry their past experiences with one another into their current interactions (Connelly 2007; Serpe-Schroeder 1999), negative experiences carry the potential to damage future parent-teacher relationships (Swap 1993). This
consequence makes sense when we recognize that most people are inclined to avoid situations likely to produce conflict, tension, and stress (Biddle and Thomas 1966). Psychologists view tension as an emotional response to the potential for conflict, or as a feeling that exists as the result of a previous experience of conflict and as “experienced when one feels frustrated or hindered by some other party (Nauta and Kluwer 2004, 465).” Given this definition, it is unsurprising that the element of tension in parent-teacher relationships discourages satisfying and productive parent-teacher interactions.

Since some argue that parent-teacher interactions hold great potential to improve student achievement (Cox 2005), positive parent-teacher communication remains important and the negative elements that seem to persist in parent-teacher relationships merit further research. Findings from this study may be useful in identifying weaknesses in current school programs that aim to promote increased parent-teacher communication. A more realistic understanding of the inherent inequalities of their relationships with parents could also prove useful in the training and development of current teachers and teacher candidates. With an improved recognition of the structural limitations inherent in their relationships with parents, teachers would be better equipped to manage conversations with parents, reduce their own stress in working with parents, and ultimately make their interactions with parents more productive.
Theoretical Framework

Role theory offers a comprehensive framework for this investigation of the structural limitations of parent-teacher relationships. Role theory attempts to account for social behavior when individuals act within positions that carry a set of associated expected behaviors for each position (Biddle, Rosencranz and Rankin 1961). A central assumption of role theory is that individuals’ behaviors are neither idiosyncratic nor random. Rather, people act within predictable role patterns that are based upon their understanding of the social norms and expectations associated with a social position (Clouse 1989). One’s own expectations combine with the expectations of others in the group or society in which they participate, and contribute to the development of these social norms (Biddle, Rosencranz and Rankin 1961; Clouse 1989). Role theory acknowledges that individuals most often hold and act within multiple roles at the same time, based upon the various aspects of their personal and organizational lives. For example, teachers may also be parents, spouses, siblings, coaches, and so forth.

According to role theory, individuals hold expectations for their own roles and the related actions and behavior within each role. Individuals also hold expectations for others’ behavior related to their roles. Roles are defined as a set of norms, standards, descriptions, and expectations applied to the holder of a particular social position or status (Biddle and Thomas 1966). Although communicated in indirect and subtle ways, these social norms and rules are powerful forces that work to control and shape an actor’s behavior in a role, by providing a specific social ‘script’
for the actor to follow (Clouse 1989). These social scripts influence not only actual behaviors, but also our expectations for and perceptions of others and ourselves (Biddle, Rosencranz and Rankin 1961). While social roles are omnipresent and inescapable, they are also extremely covert. The norms, expectations, and behaviors associated with roles work beneath our active consciousness. Verbal and non-verbal clues in social interactions serve as the primary mechanisms that transmit roles and values, and are generally both sent and received beneath the level of our own awareness (Ollhoff and Ollhoff 1996).

It might seem then, that social roles and expectations are fairly well-defined and help to smooth interactions among social participants. Indeed, the psycho-social purpose of roles is to support social interactions. Roles help guide actor’s individual decisions by providing delineations for acceptable and unacceptable behaviors ascribed to a role. They also help us to understand and interpret others’ behavior (Biddle 1979). Actors who hold similar expectations and role definitions of one another exhibit more harmonious interactions due to the ‘reciprocal compatibility’ of their role definitions (Clouse 1989) and their relationships tend to be more productive (Gettinger and Guetschow 1998).

More common, however, are the role conflicts that occur constantly as a part of social interactions, although they pass largely unidentified as such. Role conflicts can emerge within an individual: when the required behaviors for a role are not aligned with personal abilities or violate personal values; when one must act within opposing role expectations; when roles are ambiguously defined; or when there is
poor communication about expectations associated with the role (Biddle 1979; Biddle and Thomas 1966). Role conflicts also develop between actors who hold opposing role expectations.

In general, role conflicts are considered to be generally stressful, produce tension, and lead to dissatisfaction (Biddle 1979). Researchers have observed that actors generally respond to role conflicts with a variety of coping behaviors: defensiveness, rejection, avoidance, and/or withdrawal from the stress (Biddle 1979). A secondary result to such coping mechanisms is the weakening of interpersonal bonds (Serpe-Schroeder 1999). Because of the constant possibility for role conflict in a social setting, actors immediately seek to find, establish, or search for their role when entering a new situation as a way of avoiding tension and stress (Ollhoff and Ollhoff 1996). Thus, actors constantly negotiate their roles and positions during interactions and continually re-define and reconstruct their own role definitions for themselves and others. Consequently, roles remain fluid, as actors remain engaged in a dynamic process of identity construction (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine 1999).

One of the major contributors to role theory, Bruce Biddle, combined research on role theory and educational roles in his definitive work of the 1960’s and 1970’s. With his colleagues, Biddle explored the definition of the teacher’s role from the various perspectives of teachers, parents, students, and school officials (Biddle, Rosencranz and Rankin 1961). By comparing each groups’ perceptions of appropriate behaviors for teachers, Biddle contributed significantly to our understanding of role development, role definition, and role conflict.
Biddle found significant, but predictable, differences among actors’ positions. That is, variance of perspectives within each group was limited, but among groups, was predictable. In simpler terms, each position (parents, teachers, students, and school officials) held different perceptions and expectations for teachers’ behavior (Biddle, Rosencranz and Rankin 1961).

Research that combines role theory and education confirms the tension and stress characteristic of many parent-teacher relationships and suggests that opposing role definitions may contribute to misunderstandings between parents and teachers. In a multi-year ethnographic study in South Dakota, Allen investigated the roles that teachers and parents defined for themselves in regards to children’s education (Allen 1997). Using interviews and participation-observation, Allen identified the top ten expectations parents held of teachers, and the top ten expectations teachers held for parents’ behavior. The mis-match between expectations of the two lists was readily apparent and demonstrated more discrepancies than similarities (Allen 1997, 32). For example, while teachers reported that they would like parents to be more involved in their children’s education, parents believed that they were already very involved (Allen 1997, 33). An example of a similarity is that both parents and teachers expected each other to communicate regularly with one another about students’ needs.

Serpe-Schroeder’s dissertation work relied upon interviews to gather parents’ and teachers’ perspectives of their interactions. Results supported Allen’s findings and added a new element: parents expressed great frustration with teachers when
their expectations of teachers were unmet. For example, parents expected teachers to show a personal, caring interest in the child, to be approachable, to report academic problems to parents, to communicate regularly with parents, and to supply parents with strategies to help students at home. Parents expressed disappointment with teachers who did not exhibit these behaviors. Disappointed parents characterized teachers as ‘rude, uncooperative, or unhelpful’ and perceived teachers as quick to become defensive. Teachers in this study expressed frustration with parents who did not follow through on previous interactions or who questioned teachers’ grading practices. Disappointed teachers characterized parents as ‘rude, pushy, intrusive, and demanding’ (Serpe-Schroeder 1999, 253). Additionally, both parents and teachers expressed frustration when the other party stepped into an area viewed as ‘exclusive territory.’ For example, parents perceived punishment as the exclusive decision of parents, and teachers perceived grading to be their exclusive domain. It became clear to the researcher that both unmet role expectations and perceived interference with one’s ascribed role led to role conflicts (Serpe-Schroeder 1999).

One recent study focused more specifically on the negotiation of roles during parent-teacher interactions and demonstrated the fluid boundaries of role definitions. In a multi-case study, Connelly concluded that initial parent-teacher interactions were generally influenced by four factors that were the same for both parents and teachers: prior experiences, role perceptions, expectations, and personal attributes (Connelly 2007). However, over the course of the study, the researcher observed that actors not only continually revised their perceptions of roles and expectations during
repeated interactions (p.9), but that these perceptions became more similar over time. These findings suggest, and are supported by role theory, that despite parents’ and teachers’ pre-conceptions regarding their and others’ roles, the process of negotiation of role identity remains an active ingredient in the parent-teacher relationship. The existence of tension and stress in parent-teacher relationships, the persistence of role conflicts between them, the persistence of unmet expectations, and the continued negotiation of power that continues as parents and teachers interact remain a concern, given current parent-involvement models that presume that parents and teachers enter their relationships as equal partners with cooperatively agreed upon goals (Connelly 2007).

Role theorists would argue that, given the different structural positions of parents and teachers, the presumption of equality is an illusion. That is, since their roles as parents and teachers of students are connected to an organization (school) and are thus institutionally-derived, there are specific characteristics of their roles that are inescapably stipulated by the social structure and functional purposes of the institution (Biddle 1979, 92). These structural positions accompany roles and serve to clarify the identity, purpose, expectations, rights and obligations of actors in reference to other positions within the same social structure (Davis, in Biddle and Thomas, 1966, 67). For example, teachers are expected to possess content knowledge and to instruct students by sharing this knowledge. Teachers work with groups of students and must be balance the needs of individual students with the needs of groups of students and the institution as a whole. Parents, on the other
hand, focus on individual interests, often without any particular concern for the rest of the group their children belong to, or indifferent to the needs of the institution as a whole.

While structural positions include the functional nature of a role relationship, they also include aspects of status, authority, and power. Positions are both ascribed, as a part of one’s connection to a social structure or organization, but can also be achieved, as the result of negotiation by individual actors. The differences in the structural positions of parents and teachers may explain some of the continued tensions in parent-teacher relationships. Parents and teachers’ roles and positions, do not exist independently from their connection to schools. Thus, their relationships are functional (intended for a specific purpose), temporal (last only for the duration of the school year), and professional (as they are linked to the occupation of the teacher) (Heritage 2005). Additionally, each position carries with it aspects of status, authority, and power that are ascribed to the position and that are, in fact, not equal. Many researchers have observed that, for the most part, teachers’ structural positions carry greater status, authority, and power than do parents’ structural positions as will be explained in greater detail below (Beresford 1992; Crozier 1999; Henry 1996; Todd and Higgen 1998).

At the outset, it should be made clear that, like role definitions, these differences in structural positions remain collective generalities and that exceptions do exist. As an illustration, consider a math teacher, who would normally possess greater expert knowledge than a parent about the field of mathematics, unless, of
course, the parent were a math expert in his or her own right, perhaps working as a statistician or as an engineer. In this case, the teacher’s structural authority as an expert would be diminished.

Additionally, like role definitions, structural positions are not absolute. Rather, they can be ambiguous and exist along a continuum between extremes. For example, while most would agree that parents generally hold less power in parent-teacher relationships than do teachers, parents are not completely without power. Parents do hold some amount of political power in that school systems consider their individual and collective voices of importance. School officials generally expect that teachers will be responsive to parental demands and expectations (Simons and Fiedman 2008).

Despite this expectation, many agree that teachers generally carry greater status, authority, and power into with their structural positions than do parents (McGrath 2007; Vincent and Martin 2002; Wilgus 2005). For example, many observers of parent-teacher interactions have noted teachers’ superior social status as compared to parents (Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001; Vincent and Martin 2002). Some researchers argue that status differences accompany teachers’ level of education, social class, age, and race, and that these differences furnish teachers with greater social and cultural capital in the parent-teacher relationship (Lareau 1987; Lareau and Shumar 1996; Weininger and Lareau 2003). In addition to general advantages in status, teachers also carry greater authority via their position as educational experts and their specific knowledge of the school, the school system, of
grades, students’ behavior in the class, and so forth (Crozier 1999; Lawson 2003; McGrath 2007; Todd and Higgens 1998; Vincent and Martin 2002; Wilgus 2005). Some define authority simply as the power that is derived from one’s positional membership (Biddle 1979). Combined with this authority, teachers also generally possess greater power in their relationships with parents. Teachers’ power over parents is actually derived indirectly, via teachers’ relationship and power over parents’ children, who are their students. Teachers’ ability to impact students’ education, grades, and emotional well-being gives teachers a powerful advantage in any negotiation with parents.

While status, authority, and power have been discussed as disparate factors, they intertwine and interconnect to the point that they can be considered a mutually reinforcing force in social relationships. In this sense, the three elements can be considered a composite factor in structural relationships and will henceforth be referred to simply as ‘power’ in the sense of one’s general ability to exert influence (Biddle 1979). In conclusion, the imbalance of power that accompanies parents’ and teachers’ structural positions results in an institutional relationship that is structurally asymmetrical. Thus, the social expectation of partnership that permeates practitioner literature is not only an unattainable ideal, but may actually complicate parent-teacher communication by forcing parents and teachers to pretend equality while operating in relationships that are inherently unequal.
Synopsis of the Study

This research study investigated how teachers and parents managed the dilemma of appearing to collaborate as equals while, in actuality, they operate in asymmetrical relationships. Role theory provides a conceptual framework from which were analyzed the inherent attributes of parents’ and teachers’ roles and positions as institutionally-derived identities that empower each actor differently and unequally. Interview data and email exchanges were collected from parents and teachers and analyzed using narrative analysis and comparing participants’ reported perspectives with those that they revealed during recollections of memorable prior events.

In the fall of 2009 several suburban public school districts in upstate New York were contacted regarding to elicit participation in the study. In those districts who agreed, interviews with parents and teachers were conducted in the spring of 2009. Two focus groups were conducted with teachers, one group of three middle school teachers and one group of three high school teachers. Interviews and focus group sessions were recorded and transcribed and then coded using a qualitative software program, NVivo.

Collected data were analyzed using a hybrid approach of thematic analysis and narrative discourse analysis in an effort to reveal strategies used by parents and teachers to negotiate and bargain for their respective positions. Thematic analysis involves a straightforward coding and organization of coded segments into categories and sub-categories. This level of analysis looked more closely at the surface content
of participants’ responses and revealed general themes in the data. Those codes that
included high numbers of coded segments were used to further identify and clarify
important themes and categories in participants’ responses. Thematic analysis
focuses on those perspectives and opinions that participants report directly during
the interviews and focus groups.

Narrative discourse analysis comprised the second layer of analysis and
evaluated participants’ responses on a deeper level. Narrative discourse analysis
focuses more on the choice and use of language by looking more closely at the
stories, or ‘memorable conflicts’ shared by participants. By doing so, narrative
discourse analysis reveals the perspectives, contradictions, and opinions that are
unconsciously revealed through stories. As people tend employ fewer filters when
telling stories, the content, resolution, form, structure and linguistic features of these
stories provide a rich source of information for analysis.

Narrative discourse analysis also helped to account for elements of social
desirability bias in collected data. Because of the existence of a social partnership
ethic in parent-teacher relationships, participants may interact and respond to
questions in ways that are in accordance with the expectations of the partnership
ethic, an effect that has been observed by other researchers (Henry 1996; Keogh
1996; Mager 2001; Miretzky 2002; Nakagawa 2000). Narrative discourse analysis
helps to filter out the social desirability bias by allowing for the identification of
participants’ unconscious perspectives that were revealed in their stories (Savin-Baden
& van Niekerk 2007). The combination of thematic and narrative discourse analysis
strengthens the findings of the research by motivating interpretations of the data that might have otherwise escaped consideration with the use of a single approach (Savage 2000).

**Research Questions**

1. How do the asymmetries in parents’ and teachers’ structural positions impact parent-teacher interactions?
2. What strategies do teachers use to defend and maintain their positions?
3. What strategies do parents use to overcome the imbalance of power in parent-teacher relationships?
4. Does the partnership ethic impede the process of conflict resolution?

**Glossary of Terms**

Key terms used in the scholarly literature have been defined or explained differently. The definitions and understandings adopted for this research are provided below:

1. *Parental Involvement:* In this study, ‘parental involvement’ will refer to any and all actions, beliefs, and behaviors on the part of parents that encourage their children’s academic and social success in school.

2. *Home-school collaboration:* In this study, home-school collaboration refers to a philosophical ideal founded in the suggestion that schools value and work with parents as equal partners in children’s education and is predicated upon the idea of a
reciprocal flow of information between parents and school personnel (Chrispeels 1996; Christenson 2004; Comer and Haynes 1991).

3. Partnership ethic: In this study, ‘partnership ethic’ refers to the social value and expectation placed on parents and teachers that they will work together as equal partners for the shared goal of students’ success. The partnership ethic works as a covert expectation placed on parents and teachers that they value and share one another’s contributions to this goal (Mager 2001). Statements and behaviors that conflict with this expectation are perceived as socially undesirable.

4. Social desirability bias: This study adopts the definition of social desirability bias as the possibility of respondents’ misrepresenting themselves during data collection (Leite and Beretvas 2005) due to the inclination of humans, as social creatures, to offer responses that uphold social expectations. In a meta-analysis of the psychological literature on social desirability bias, Tourangeau and Yan (2007) noted a positive relationship between the perceived sensitivity of a topic and the likelihood of survey respondents to misrepresent themselves. The relative sensitivity of a topic was calculated based upon the degree to which negative answers are considered to be socially undesirable, that is, “…when the questions asks, in effect, that the respondent admit he or she has violated a social norm. This conception of sensitivity presupposes that there are clear social norms regarding a given behavior or attitudes…and that deviations from the norms are considered socially undesirable (Tourangeau and Yan 2007, 860).”
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first portion of this review provides a historical context for the current study as well as a description of the current social expectations regarding parental involvement in American public education. An overview of the research reinforces the relationship between student achievement and parental involvement and consequently, the importance of encouraging parents’ continued involvement in their children’s education. The second portion of this section reviews the four major models of parental involvement that have become popular in the field of education as a way of demonstrating the evolution of our understanding of parental involvement from a fairly simplified school-centric approach to more recent models that include considerations of power differences and parental role construction. The final portion of this chapter presents aspects of roles and positions that parents and teachers bring to their interactions and introduces ways in which parents construct and negotiate roles, identity and power during communication.

Parents’ Changing Roles

In the last few decades, relationships between parents and teachers have become more ambiguous as cultural changes in American society demanded an increased valuation of parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Before these changes, that is, throughout the 1800’s and the first half of the 1900’s, parent-teacher relationships were predicated upon the assumption that parents would benefit from the expert knowledge of teachers (Powell and Diamond 1995). The flow of
information and advice was generally from the teacher to the parent, but rarely the reverse. Although teachers generally lived in and were closely connected to the communities in which they taught, their greater education, as compared to the general population, set them apart and provided teachers with elevated social status and positions in the community (Powell and Diamond 1995).

Even as America became more urbanized in the first half of the 1900’s and Parent Teacher Associations grew at a phenomenal rate, the perception of the teacher as an expert remained strong. Included in the literature of the national organization of PTA’s were clear stipulations regarding the role of local PTA’s and discouraging them from seeking to influence the administration or policies of the school. The beliefs that children would benefit from communication and coordination between parents and teachers, and that parents needed expert information and guidance in providing good environments for children at home and in the community were central tenets of the PTA’s mission (Powell and Diamond 1995, 73).”

In the latter half of the twentieth century, a combination of social, economic, and political forces altered the supposition of schools and teachers as absolute authorities (Evans 1998; Powell and Diamond 1995). The changing nature of work, women’s entrance into the workforce, increasing use of technology, a more diverse population, and increasing mobility were among the many forces that changed, and probably continue to change, American families in terms of roles, education, and structure (Keyes 2002). In response to these cultural changes, families’ perceptions of, expectations for, and needs from schools have inevitably changed as well. Parent
organizations, better organized after a period of tremendous growth in the first half of the century, became more interested in developing more active roles as children-advocates and decision-makers in all areas of the school (Powell and Diamond 1995).

At the same time that parental groups became better organized, a number of research studies published influential reports citing the scholastic benefits of parental involvement (Hill et al. 2004). The Coleman Report on the Equality of Educational Opportunity (1966) identified the home environment as one of the most important predictor’s of students’ academic success (Powell and Diamond 1995). In response to such research and to other social forces, legislators began to include encouragements, and even outright requirements for the increased participation of parents in education in their crafting of education policies and programs. Policies such as Head Start, Title I, Goals 2000 and NCLB all include stipulations that link federal funds with the inclusion of parents in educational planning and decision-making (Powell and Diamond 1995; Ramirez 2001). Shared decision-making bodies, parent advocates, parent representatives on school committees, and increased literature and resources intended to inform and facilitate parents’ involvement with schools are among the many initiatives developed by school districts to fulfill policy mandates.

Even were it possible to ignore significant cultural shifts and considerable academic research, schools most certainly could not ignore requirements tied to federal and state financial aid. These requirements remain in evidence in most current education policies. Most recently, in October 2007 the New York State
Board of Regents announced significant changes in state funding and accountability measures that further links funding with state-specified goals. Among the many programs that will be supported with additional state funds to school districts will be “…$6.5 million in funds to high need areas to involve parents and families in their children’s education. Regional Education Alliances and Literacy Zones would be eligible to receive the competitive grants. The funding would link family service agencies with schools and school districts and help parents understand the State standards and their children’s curriculum and participate more actively in their education. Funding would also revise annual school report cards to hold schools accountable for creating effective parent engagement programs (New York State Board of Regents 2007).”

In response to measures such as these, administrative literature for much of the past thirty years has called upon educational leaders at all levels to develop programs that include parents as important components of children’s education, school governance and the school community (Chambers 1998). As executors of the new requirements, school administrators implemented new school procedures with varying degrees of enthusiasm. For example, in the 1990’s many education administrators, taking a leaf out of the book of a popular business model, advocated for improved “customer service” on the part of schools (Chambers 1998; Jones 1997). Training faculty and staff to think of and respond to parents and students as ‘customers,’ became widespread. As the central tenet of the school-family partnership, teachers became a focal point. Teachers were encouraged to
communicate more actively with parents and to assume greater responsibility for students’ academic success.

Thus, since the 1960’s, there has been strong advocacy by parents’ organizations for increased involvement, education policies that have consistently encouraged schools to include parents in multiple aspects of schooling, considerable research demonstrating the relationship between parental involvement and students’ academic and social success (Cox 2005; Jeynes 2007), and school administrators who actively reinforce the importance of parents in the educational process. Some assert that these cultural changes have formed a new paradigm of power for parents demonstrated by parents’ increased expectations of teachers and schools, their expectation to have input in schools’ decision-making, and their willingness to hold schools’ accountable for student achievement (Caviness 2000; Ramirez 2001).

Parents expect that teachers and school systems, as a routine part of their work, will actively reach out to parents in an effort to make schools seem more responsive to parental concerns, more accommodating, more welcoming, and more accountable to them (Evans 1998; Jones 1997). This new role for parents as active participants in the educational process has changed both parents’ defined roles and their structural positions in educational systems.

**Benefits of parental involvement / sources of parental power**

One of the clearest changes in parents’ enhanced roles in public education involves parents’ increased power in schools. While some of this change can certainly be ascribed to the improved organization of parents’ groups and to
government mandates, a significant aspect of parents’ power stems from the fact that parental involvement has, in fact, been positively associated with improved student achievement. In an era of accountability, educators cannot ignore this correlation. In point of fact, the impact of research findings that support the effects of parental involvement and student achievement may be acting as a continued buttress for parental involvement programs. In areas where research findings do not support parental involvement, those programs are falling away. To demonstrate the role of research findings in parents’ acquired power, we will contrast parents’ lack of power in areas not supported by research findings (parents’ inclusion on school decision-making bodies) with parents’ growing influence in areas of parental involvement supported by research findings (student achievement).

In the 1980’s, many argued that including parent representatives in school governing bodies would help to improve schools’ responsiveness to constituents (parents, students, and the community) (Kroth and Schroll 1978; Stallworth and Williams 1983). Yet, research findings have generally not supported this argument (Malen 1999; Marchesani 1993) and recognize that elements of power differences between parents and schools remain difficult to change. In an evaluation of available literature and research on site-based councils, Malen concluded that the value of including parents’ opinions was considerably offset by the increased stress and difficulty of ‘managing’ the more diverse opinions of parents. Malen concluded that parents’ participation in school decision-making bodies provided only an illusion of parental power and influence. Tensions about the proper role of parents… “set the
stage for a protective politics. These tensions tend to be managed by ceremonial exchanges that reflect and reinforce a traditional pattern of power wherein professionals, notably principals, control school policy, teachers control instruction, and parents provide support (Malen 1999, 210).” Marchesani’s observations of parental involvement in school decision-making bodies at a middle school noted with surprise teachers’ opposition to parental involvement in school policy-making and concluded that “…the solutions to many of the problems with the school were political, and that understanding the power base of both teachers and the union is a necessary precept to any parental action for improved home-school communication (Marchesani 1993, 1).”

Parents also seem to recognize that their role in school decision-making remains largely symbolic. In qualitative studies that collected parental opinions, many parents concluded their real power in influencing school decisions was nominal (Malen 1999; Vincent and Martin 2002). A noted parental perspective was that parents were free to voice their opinions, but then “they (i.e. school personnel) would do whatever they want to do anyway (Vincent and Martin 2002, 119).” In recent years, attention to parental involvement on school committees and shared decision making groups have fallen by the wayside (Malen 1999).

While schools have apparently become frustrated by including parents’ voices in policy and decision-making and have somewhat abandoned such efforts, schools continue to court parental involvement as way of improving student achievement and continue to promote parent-teacher communication as an important aspect of school
outreach efforts. While research findings on parental involvement are far from clear-cut, a positive relationship between student achievement and parental involvement has been demonstrated in many research studies (Cox 2005; Epstein 1991; Fan and Chen 2001; Hill et al. 2004; Ho and Willms 1996; Jeynes 2007; Lazar and Slostad 1999; Ramirez 2001). Actually, there has been such a wide array of studies in the last thirty years investigating the effectiveness of parental involvement programs, that the discussion here is limited to relatively recent meta-analysis of parental involvement studies. One such analysis evaluated 52 studies conducted in urban settings and concluded that parental involvement and student achievement are positively associated (Jeynes 2007). Holding variables of gender and race constant, the researcher found a significant relationship between parental involvement and student achievement. This finding is supported by the work of Cox, who statistically analyzed eighteen empirical studies concerning home-school collaboration interventions and student outcomes. She found that increased parental involvement was not only positively associated with improved academic achievement, but that this relationship held true for students’ improved behavior outcomes as well (Cox 2005). Another meta-analysis of twenty-five empirical studies supported a finding of a small to moderate relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement, leading researchers to find an overall meaningful impact (Fan and Chen 2001).

Despite such findings, researchers continually note the difficulty of evaluating research on parental involvement due to the wide variety of definitions used by researchers for parental involvement, methodological weaknesses, and the diversity of
performance indicators used to calculate academic achievement (Fan and Chen 2001; Fishel and Ramirez 2005; Katyal and Evers 2007; Useem 1992). Indeed, from an initial pool of 2,000 studies on parental involvement, Fan and Chen could only identify 25 studies that met their criteria for empirical research with clearly defined definitions for parental involvement and for academic achievement. In order to develop comparable results, they transformed correlation coefficients into weighted $z$-scores and were ultimately able to find a small to moderate relationship between parental involvement and student achievement (Fan and Chen 2001).

The weight of the research supports the position that parental involvement does have a positive impact on children’s education and that increased parental involvement would benefit schools. School officials have also concluded that parents do play an important role in their children’s education and that schools are well-advised to continue to encourage parents’ involvement (Simons and Friedman 2008). It is this very recognition and valuation of parents’ roles as important to schools’ success that empowers parents. We now turn our attention to the ways in which schools have approached parental involvement and will focus this review in particular on the rhetorical aspects of each model and later contrast this rhetoric with the actual role construction of parents.

**Models of Parental Involvement**

In the last thirty years, four major models of parental involvement have emerged, gained popularity, and expanded our understanding of how to improve
parents’ involvement in education. In this section the central tenets of each model are described briefly, some of the key research findings are reviewed, and the major criticisms of the first three models are presented. This review of the four models demonstrates a number of interesting features:

• The partnership ethnic has emerged and been strengthened in each subsequent model, and reflects a cultural evolution of sorts from a school-centric view, to a school-home collaborative view, to a parent-centric model.

• Identifying how, and which specific attributes or activities of parental involvement actually impact student achievement remains a challenge.

• Parental involvement models have become increasingly complex, as they progressively include more aspects of social life: cultural, economic, status, power, and ultimately, psychological elements.

Reviewing each model also helps to improve our understanding of why role construction emerges integral factor in the last model and the ways in which role construction responds to weaknesses or gaps in earlier parental involvement models will become apparent.

Epstein’s Typology

Joyce Epstein at Johns Hopkins University has conducted much of the foundational research in the field of parental involvement, and certainly the most-frequently cited research. With her earliest research on parental involvement dating to 1982, Epstein’s work has considerably influenced the dialogue on parent involvement during the last quarter century. Now referred to as Epstein’s typology
of home-school connections, she outlines six arenas in which families can be involved in school:

1. *Basic obligations of families*, to include providing for children’s health, safety, materials for school, and providing stable and supportive home conditions.

2. *Basic obligations of schools*, to include communicating with families about school programs and children’s progress.

3. *Involvement at school*, to include parents volunteering at schools, attending school functions, sports events, and the like.

4. *Involvement with learning activities at home*, to include overseeing and assisting in the completion of homework and home assignments, as well as making decisions about school programs.

5. *Involvement in school decision-making* to include advocacy, school government, parent-teacher associations, or other committee work.

6. *Collaborative exchanges with community organizations*, to include connections with agencies, business, and other groups to support and share responsibility for children’s education and future success. (Epstein and Dauber 1991)

While Epstein’s work relies largely on parent and teacher surveys, the target audience is clearly school administrators. She advocates the explicit creation of targeted parent involvement programs, practices, and policies on the part of schools and school districts, and further outlines suggestions for successfully launching and supporting school initiatives (Epstein 1987; Epstein and Dauber 1991). Some argue that the popularity of Epstein’s typology relates to the ease with which it can be
translated into the range of activities that can be implemented by schools (Fishel and Ramirez 2005; Houston 1999). Others say that it is this very quality that limits its usefulness.

Although perhaps of interest for school administrators, Epstein’s model has been criticized on a number of fronts. The criticism of most relevance for this research concerns the role definition for parents to include additional behaviors and/or more specific activities for parents. Some aspects of parental involvement that do not seem to fit into Epstein’s typology included elements such as parents’ supporting school personnel on discipline issues (Todd and Higgins 1998), parents making decisions about students’ academic programs (Useem 1992), and attending training programs at the school to improve parenting skills (Beresford 1992).

In response to additional research and criticisms of her model, Epstein expanded her typology to include the sixth factor, ‘collaborative exchanges with community organizations,’ and also expanded the descriptions of each factor to include more activities, behaviors, and an expanded role definition for parents (Epstein and Sanders 2006). These ‘updates’ respond to criticisms of Epstein’s model as exhibiting a lack of reciprocity between parents and schools and critiquing the perspective of ‘educators as experts’ who are ‘welcoming’ outsiders to the building (Christenson 2004; Christenson, Rounds and Gorney 1992; Miretzky 2002) and reflects the emergence of the partnership ethic in practitioner research.
**Partnership Model**

Many argue that Epstein’s typology focuses on parental behaviors and ignores other qualities such as parenting style, parents’ self-efficacy (Swick and Broadway 1997), trust (Adams and Christenson 2000; Goddard, Tschannen-Moran and Hoy 2001), or parents’ aspirations for students (Hill 2004). In his review of 52 studies of parent involvement, Jeynes actually finds that the variable with the greatest impact upon student achievement is not even in Epstein’s typology. He found a very high correlation between parents’ expectations for students’ and student achievement (Jeynes 2007). Further, Jeynes found that parents’ attendance at school events and volunteering in the school were not significantly related to student achievement. Such findings challenge the real value of programs designed to increase parental involvement in ways that were primarily defined by the school, such as parents volunteering at school or over-seeing children’s homework.

Recognizing the effect of parents’ intrinsic values and traits on parental involvement spurred the emergence of a counter-perspective to Epstein’s typology (Comer and Haynes 1991; Cox 2005; Fishel and Ramirez 2005). This perspective argued for a broader view of parental involvement and the expansion of the definition of parental involvement to include the concept of partnership. This perspective contends that the traditional definition of parental involvement had been constructed from the point of view of the school and was thus limited in only encouraging parents to interact with the school within carefully scripted and school-defined roles (Todd and Higgins 1998). In contrast, the partnership model advocates
a reciprocal relationship between home and school (Chrispeels 1996; Christenson 2004; Comer and Haynes 1991; McGrath 2007; Miretzky 2002; Todd and Higgens 1998).

Founded in the family-systems model, the partnership model encourages schools to cultivate a cooperative relationship with families via improving home-school communication, extending frequent invitations and opportunities to participate, and incorporating parents more deeply into school planning and management teams (Christenson 2004; Comer and Haynes 1991; Vickers and Minke 1995). The focus of research grounded in this conceptual framework centers on evaluating factors that inhibit parents from interacting with the schools and those factors that encourage parents’ involvement (Allen 1997; Christenson and Hurley 1997; Cox 2005; Swick and Broadway 1997). The partnership model argues that it is only by recognizing and honoring such qualities as the different levels of education, background, experiences, living situations and the needs of families, will schools be able to design effective parental involvement programs that are responsive to the real needs of their community.

In many ways, the partnership model represents an attempt to disrupt the traditional hierarchical structures of status and authority that had traditionally existed between parents and schools for centuries. Theoreticians attempted to improve educators’ understanding of parents and supported their arguments with research that better explained some underlying misconceptions that educators held about parents. For example, educators have long been aware of the relationship between parents’
levels of education and their children’s academic success (Powell and Diamond 1995). Ecological researchers delved more deeply into this association and observed that parents’ education levels were related only to parents’ involvement at school, but not to their self-reported involvement activities at home (Ho and Willms 1996). Follow-up longitudinal research noted that involvement in their children’s academic lives by parents with higher levels of education was more effective than similar efforts made by parents with lower levels of education (Hill et al. 2004). The researchers theorized that although parents with less education desired and attempted to remain involved in their children’s academic lives, their positive impact remained elusive when parents had less knowledge and fewer skills to concretely influence their children’s education (Hill et al. 2004). These findings suggest that perhaps it is not parents’ involvement in education *per se* that has an impact, but rather more specific qualities such as the requisite knowledge to assist children with homework, or the ability to help children organize materials and information in support of their learning. Research founded in the partnership model has the potential to improve educators’ understanding of parents and diminish educators’ value judgments of parental involvement, or perceived lack thereof. The partnership model argues for schools to provide information and supports for parents in ways that help parents be more effective.

The partnership model also indirectly recognizes aspects of parents’ role construction and an understanding of parents’ social positions. This recognition takes the form of attention to parents’ beliefs about their ability to be effectively
involved in their children’s education (Anderson and Minke 2007; Lareau 1987; Serpe-Schroeder 1999; Swick and Broadway 1997). While schools and teachers may extend invitations and create opportunities for parent involvement, parents with lower levels of self-efficacy take less advantage of these opportunities (Swick and Broadway 1997). These researchers believe that parents’ feelings of ability and their consequent readiness to remain involved in their children’s academic lives emerges as the product of several factors: parents’ self-image, belief in their locus of control, interpersonal support, and the synchrony between their expectations about what parenting should be and the reality of what it is for them (Swick and Broadway 1997). As has been previously described, such beliefs are all aspects of parents’ role construction. Interestingly, recent research found that while parents’ self-efficacy impacts their involvement with home activities, it had little impact upon their involvement at school (Anderson and Minke 2007). This last finding suggests that parents publicly act according to the social script that they understand is expected of them, but in a more private setting, enact their parental roles according to a more personal role definition.

The partnership model furthered our understanding of parental involvement and clearly solidified the concept of home-school collaboration as an entrenched social value. Additionally, it set the stage for an improved understanding of the ways in which our unconscious social values impact home-school relations by opening the door to alternate position-taking in social science research on parental involvement.
**Socio-Political Limitations**

While not discrediting the value of the partnership perspective, a third perspective on parent involvement encouraged educators to develop an even deeper understanding of home-school relations. Proponents of this perspective argue that parental involvement in schools cannot be thoroughly understood without the consideration of power inequalities or of social and cultural differences. By including elements of status, communication, roles, and relationships between and among individuals and groups, this perspective recognizes the impact of social constructs that are present in all human interactions. While including many disparate elements from psychological, sociological, and political perspectives, these researchers identify ways in which the two-way relationship advocated by the partnership model is limited by the real patterns of interaction that occur in social relationships.

Annette Lareau’s qualitative research into parental involvement practices has been influential in drawing attention to the social inequities that exist between families and school personnel (Lareau 1987; Lareau and Shumar 1996; Weininger and Lareau 2003). Arguing that schools are middle-class institutions with middle-class values, organizational patterns and forms of communication, she asserts that working-class families are often at a disadvantage (Lareau and Shumar 1996). As a result of her participant observation work in first grade urban classrooms, Lareau concluded that social class differences provided parents with unequal resources to comply with teachers’ requests for participation (Lareau 1987). She noted barriers to parents of lower social class that included reduced educational capabilities, limited
information about schooling, less flexibility in childcare obligations, fewer financial resources, less access social support networks, and different understandings about their and teachers’ respective roles in children’s education (Lareau 1987). Such limitations to working-class families have been echoed in others’ research (Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001; Vincent and Martin 2002). In a later study of fourth grade families, Lareau and Shumar reiterated the importance of social resources for families in complying with schools’ requests for involvement (1996). The authors expressed frustration with the literature for its “failure to come to grips with observable differences in parents’ and guardians’ educational skills, occupational and economic flexibility, social networks, and positions of power that they bring to home-school encounters (Lareau and Shumar 1996, 24).”

A dramatic example of the impact of socio-economic differences was demonstrated in observed parent-teacher conferences described in a later paper (Weininger and Lareau 2002). In an analysis of parent-teacher conferences with eighteen families, the authors identified advantages held by families of higher socio-economic standing. These parents asked pointed questions to gather information from the teacher and were able to negotiate greater “customized pedagogical” attention for their children from the teacher (Weininger and Lareau 2002, 375). Parents of lower socio-economic status spent more time in the conferences reassuring the teachers of their appreciation of teachers’ work and the parents’ commitment to education. These parents asked fewer questions of the teachers and,
unlike middle-class parents, did not challenge teachers’ evaluations of their children (Weininger and Lareau 2002).

Others recognize the dangers of ignoring social and cultural differences between parents and school personnel. Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel contrasted the interpretations of school personnel in a northern California community with the perceptions of parents. They found that what school personnel interpreted as parents’ lack of interest in education and their children’s development, low-income parents attributed to obligations and constraints they felt were beyond their control: limits of time, distance, childcare obligations, etc. (Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2002). Vincent’s work concurred that the lack of parental participation in schools was the result of a lack of resources and the support needed to be able to comply with schools’ requests (Vincent 2002). Working-class parents assert that they want to remain involved in their children’s schooling despite these limitations (Chavkin and Williams 1989). One study found no relationship between SES and parents’ self-reported desire to remain involved in their children’s schooling (Chavkin and Williams 2001). This has led some researchers to become even more specific in studying parental involvement practices at home, and those that occur at the school. In an empirical analysis of NELS data, Ho and Willms found little relationship between SES and parental involvement at home, although a small to moderate relationship between SES and parental involvement at school did exist (Ho and Willms, 1996).
Despite the differences in parents’ involvement, school personnel frequently make judgments about parents’ involvement practices, judgments that some argue are poorly informed (Baker, et al. 1999; Bakker, Denessen and Brus-Laeven 2007). For example, during interviews situated in a low-income urban school, O’Connor noted that teachers tended to question the parenting abilities of parents who they did not perceive as involved (O’Connor 2001). This tendency persisted, despite teachers’ recognition that both the social class differences and differences in professional expertise between teachers and parents could be intimidating for parents (O’Connor 2001). While teachers recognize that they are unable to witness parents’ behavior at home and must base their assessments upon parents’ attendance at school events, they still rate parents of higher SES as more involved and parents of lower SES as less involved (Bakker, et. al. 2007; Vincent and Martin 2002).

Such misinterpretations of parents’ seeming lack of involvement persist across various school levels (Ramirez 2001). In his survey/observation research in high schools, Ramirez observed that when parents’ actions did not meet school personnel’s expectations of them, school personnel relied upon stereotypes to explain perceived lack of parent involvement. Attributes such as families’ lower SES, minority, or single-parent household status were identified by teachers as the cause for parents’ perceived lack of involvement in education (Ramirez 2001). This same tendency to stereotype parents who did not conform to teachers’ expectations was also observed in a British study of secondary schools (Crozier 1999) as well as in American elementary schools (Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2002). In both of these
latter studies, teachers interpreted parents’ non-attendance at school events as ‘non-caring’ or ‘uninvolved,’ and sought explanations in demographic variables.

In addition to some of the social class and status issues described above, inequalities in power between families and school personnel are also recognized as potential limits to the implementation of the partnership model. While the rhetoric surrounding the partnership model encourages “communal systems and supportive relationships (between families and schools) where all have equal voice and power” (Barge and Loges 2003, 158), many researchers agree that this perspective is, at the moment, an idealized goal, rather than the current reality of home-school relations. Rather, the current power differences between students, parents, teachers, and other school personnel remain traditionally hierarchical (Beresford 1992; Henry 1996; Todd and Higgens 1998). Some qualitative researchers have observed during their work that teachers’ expert/professional knowledge, experience and knowledge of schooling, and information about parent’s children serve to place them in a position of power over parents (Crozier 1999; Lawson 2003; McGrath 2007; Todd and Higgens 1998; Vincent and Martin 2002; Wilgus 2005). Others observe that teachers seemed unaware of how much power they held (McGrath 2007).

While not presented in practitioner literature as a cohesive model of parental involvement, these research considerations of roles, status, power and social positions in home-school relations lay the foundation for the newest model on parental involvement that has emerged in the last decade. This model includes aspects from all three previous parental involvement models: it includes specific parental
involvement activities described in Epstein’s typology, remains grounded in the parent-centric perspective of the partnership model, and considers the socio-political constraints to parents’ involvement. These elements are combined in the Hoover-Dempsey & Sander model in that it approaches parental involvement as a *parental* decision influenced by parents’ perceptions of social scripts and role definitions.

**Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler model**

As a comprehensive theoretical model of parental involvement, the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler model was presented in 1995 and recently elaborated and revised in 2005 (Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler 1995; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005; Walker et al. 2005). This model focuses on the parental half of the parent-school equation, and seeks to identify those factors that influence parents’ decisions to become involved in their children’s schooling. Parental involvement itself is broken up into two distinct behavior variables: involvement behaviors that take place at home and involvement behaviors that occur at school. Parents’ involvement at home includes activities such as overseeing children’s homework, helping children study for tests or complete projects, communicating with their children about school, and parents’ aspirations for children’s education. Involvement at school includes volunteering at school, attending school events, and participating in school committees and/or governance. Communication with teachers or other school personnel is mentioned inconsistently by researchers using this model, at times as an input variable or, at other points, as an element of parent involvement at school, or even as a third outcome in the model.
The focus of the model remains on the psychological processes and attributes that are linked to each of the three outcomes. In the model revised in 2005, such factors were re-organized into three categories:

1. **Parents’ motivational beliefs**, composed of two elements: parental role construction and parental self-efficacy.

2. **Parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others**: general school invitations, specific child invitations, and specific teacher invitations.

3. **Parents’ perceived life context**, that includes parents’ self-perceived time and energy, and parents’ self-perceived skills and knowledge.

Theoretically, these elements can positively or negatively impact parents’ decisions to be involved in children’s schooling.

While researchers have, for many years, investigated many of the above elements as separate components that can impact parental involvement, this model synthesizes social, political and psychological factors into one comprehensive model. In the recent revision, the researchers attempted to operationalize each construct and establish the relationships among them. Researchers report developing and refining survey measurements over the years based upon their research and also integrating the applicable research of others (Walker et al. 2005). After a review of each construct and the research relating to each, the authors offer two lengthy lists of ‘strategies to increase schools’ capabilities for inviting parental involvement’ and ‘strategies to enhance parents’ capacities for effective involvement’ (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005, 118, 120). The researchers contend that one of the strengths of
the model is in how it allows school leaders to encourage the involvement of all parents, regardless of demographic factors and family circumstances (Hoover-Dempsey et. al. 2005).

Another possible strength of the Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler model lies in its identification of parental role construction as a foundational element that can significantly impact all facets of parental involvement. In this model, parental role construction is defined as “…parents’ beliefs about what they are supposed to do in relation to their children’s education and the patterns of parental behavior that follow those beliefs (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2005, 107).” Indeed, role construction as an intervening variable in parental involvement has begun to receive closer scrutiny by researchers and suggests that the expectations parents have for their involvement is a powerful factor that may outweigh other forces influencing their involvement with schools (Anderson and Minke 2007; Gettinger and Guetschow 1998; Serpe-Schroeder 1999; Sheldon 2002; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001).

Parental Role Construction

Despite recent findings that suggest the power of parents’ role definitions, research that attempts to codify the specific role definitions held by parents has only recently begun and remains in an exploratory phase. Researchers have either attempted to capture role definitions as a broad perspective (Hoover-Dempsey) or as an organized set of related behaviors (Epstein and Dauber 1991; Barge and Loges 2003). For example, in their work to better delineate the types of role that parents construct for themselves, Hoover-Dempsey and others coded interview data in
search of major patterns in parents’ perspectives (Walker et al. 2005). They identified three clearly different role definitions that parents held: the belief that parents were ultimately responsible for children’s education, the belief that schools are ultimately responsible for children’s education, and a partnership perspective of jointly-held responsibility. To further test these three roles, a questionnaire was developed and subsequently tested with 887 parents. While somewhat satisfied with the instruments’ reliability in capturing parents’ perspectives, researchers continued to struggle with assessing a dynamic social construct via a fixed survey form. For example, an attempt to cross-check their findings with reports of actual parental involvement behaviors proved difficult. Ultimately, researchers have not been able to corroborate parents’ self-reported role identification with actual parental involvement activities (Walker et al. 2005).

Unlike Hoover-Dempsey’s perspective of role definitions as a somewhat philosophical perspective on the part of parents, other researchers have attempted to organize the actual activities and behaviors that parents identify for themselves into more practical categories. In a series of focus groups with urban middle school parents, Barge and Loges recorded four areas of parental involvement that seemed most important to the parents in the study (2003). In order of importance to parents, parents constructed their roles as:

1. Monitoring students’ academic progress: overseeing homework, talking to children about school, and communicating the importance of school to their children.
2. *Cultivating personal relationships with teachers.* Parents in this study perceived that their children would 'receive better treatment' if the faculty were aware of parents’ involvement and interest in their children’s progress.

3. *Using extra-curricular programs*

4. *Developing community support systems*

Researchers theorized that the latter two categories might be more important to low-income parents who felt the need to take full advantage of available resources. Despite some initial progress, the specification and organization of actual parental involvement activities and behaviors into distinct parental role constructions has yet to be completed.

Notwithstanding the lack of specificity in parents' definitions for their own roles, some research does suggest that teachers’ influence of parents’ role construction is considerable and carries the potential to significantly increase parental involvement (Ames et. al. 1995; Hoover-Dempsey et. al. 2001; Stattelman 1999). Roles are not constructed in a vacuum. Rather, parents and teachers actively and constantly construct their roles, as well as their understanding of each other’s roles, during their interactions with others. Role theory reminds us that although every social position and status is accompanied by a set of related behaviors, norms, and expectations for behavior that are maintained by those in the position, as well as by others, for the position, these role scripts are dynamic. That is, role definitions change and shift on a continuous basis in response to social and cultural shifts and individual’s perceptions and beliefs. Yet, these changes are generally incremental in
nature, and occur so slowly as to be essentially invisible to all but the diligent observer. In truth, role expectations are generally unconsciously transmitted among actors. Behavior that fits the scripted role is usually praised and rewarded. Behavior that does not fit the scripted pattern for a specific role is generally interpreted as aberrant behavior and condemned socially (Biddle 1979; Biddle and Thomas 1966).

Like other roles, parents construct their understanding of their parental role socially. The beliefs and expectations they have for their own involvement in their children’s education is based, in large part, on their own values, their beliefs about how children develop, and on the aspirations or expectations they hold for their children’s educational success. Parents’ role construction is also shaped by the expectations of individuals and groups important to the parent. As will be shown here, initial research supports the idea of role construction as positively related to parental involvement behaviors and suggests that external forces, such as interactions with teachers or with other parents, can influence parents’ role construction.

In survey research in elementary schools, Sheldon attempted to identify the relationship between parental involvement and parents’ social networks (2002). The study sought to extend previous research that suggested that parents’ social interactions with others was positively associated with the frequency and type of parental involvement. Sheldon’s work more specifically addressed the impact of parents’ social networks on the reported amount of parents’ involvement at home and at school. Results suggested that parents with larger social networks at the school reported higher rates of both involvement at-home and at-school. This
relationship remained even after controlling for self-efficacy and demographic variables. Specifically, parents with more ties to other adults were more active in their children’s education. By examining specific survey questions related to parents’ role construction, Sheldon further found a moderate relationship with parental involvement at school. Sheldon concluded, “The more parents believed that all parents should be active in their child’s education, the more they tended to be involved at school (Sheldon, 2002, 310).”

In a recent empirical study of minority elementary parents, Anderson and Minke investigated the elements that motivated parents to be involved in their children’s education (2007). Founded in the Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler model, the researchers analyzed variables in terms of their influence upon parental involvement behaviors at home and parental involvement behaviors at school. They measured parents’ role construction using the same 18-item scale developed by Sheldon (2002) because it focused exclusively on parents’ beliefs about their roles. Researchers found a small, but significant relationship between parents’ role construction and parental involvement behaviors both at home and at school. Again, parents’ who believed that all parents should be involved in their children’s education were more likely to be involved. The strongest relationship in this study however, was the positive impact on parental involvement of ‘specific teacher invitations.’ The researchers theorized that such invitations might be especially important for low-income parents who might not otherwise expect to be involved (Anderson and Minke 2007).
This recent research confirms findings from the mid-1990’s regarding the impact of teacher invitations on parental involvement. In an experimental study of elementary teachers, Ames reported increased parental involvement for those parents who expressed greater satisfaction with parent-teacher communication (1995). The study documented the results of an intervention program designed to increase teachers’ communication with parents. The intervention encouraged and provided support for teachers to send parents information about the class learning activities, goals, and curriculum; to keep parents actively apprised of their children’s progress; and to provide parents information with how to help their children at home. Using a longitudinal design, researchers were able to track parents’ involvement at home and at the school and parents’ reported satisfaction with the teachers and the school. As compared to parents of teachers in the control group, parents who received more frequent and higher quality communication from teachers reported much higher levels of involvement, were more satisfied with the teacher and felt more comfortable at the school (Ames et al. 1995). These results were sustained for parents of all levels of education, with parents’ with lesser levels of education reporting the greatest gains in all measures over the course of the study. Results were maintained when controlling for parents’ sense of efficacy as reported at the outset of the study. Additionally, parents’ reported self-efficacy improved for those in the study, most especially for parents with less education. These findings support the idea that parents’ role definitions are not fixed, but rather, can be positively influenced by teachers.
One of the most important elements of parental involvement from a teachers’ point-of-view concerns parents’ overseeing homework and other at-home academic work (Barge and Loges 2003; Epstein and Dauber 1991; Korkmaz 2007; Munk et al. 2001). In a review of 59 studies about parents’ involvement with homework, Hoover-Dempsey and others (2001) concluded that parents become involved with homework for three reasons: because they believe they should be involved (role construction), because they believe their involvement will make a positive difference (self-efficacy), and because they believe that the teachers want them involved (role construction, teachers’ invitations). Some of the studies they reviewed found that parents continued to oversee children’s homework despite parents’ concerns about their own personal limitations or their worries about their children’s learning difficulties (Hoover-Dempsey et. al. 2001). Despite much research that finds a significant relationship between parents’ self-efficacy and parental involvement at home (Anderson and Minke 2007; Deslande and Bertrand 2005; Sheldon 2002), the pattern observed by Hoover-Dempsey suggests that parents’ role construction and teachers’ invitations may have a moderating effect on the relationship between parents self-efficacy and parental involvement.

While teachers’ invitations to parents do act as a form of communicating their expectations for parents’ involvement to parents, parents do not always perceive teachers’ expectations positively. Some research suggests that parents may actually negatively interpret teachers’ expectations of parents’. For example, in a small qualitative study set in an urban middle school, Stattelman’s interviews of sixth grade
parents revealed parents’ negative perceptions of teachers’ communications (1999). One of the themes repeated by parents in these interviews was parents’ perception that teachers expected parents to act in an audience role during parent-teacher communication and their dissatisfaction with this relegated role. Other researchers have observed the prescribed parental role of ‘parent as audience’ as well (Chavkin and Williams 1989; Rockafellow 2002; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001). These findings support the hypothesis that schools’ and teachers’ communications to parents transmit their expectations for parents’ behavior, and can, at times, serve as a device to control and shape parents’ behavior.

Research that investigates teachers’ expectations of parents more directly, confirms that teachers do have specific expectations of parents’ behavior, although their expectations vary. In an interesting study by Korkmaz, teachers were given just three open-ended questions asking them to describe their expectations for parents’ behavior (2007). Organizing teachers’ responses into general categories, teachers’ responses clustered into generalized expectations such as: basic obligations to provide for, love, and support children; obligations to have good communication with teachers and the schools; and the importance of parents’ to take responsibility for children’s education by overseeing homework, motivating their children, and holding them accountable for learning (Korkmaz 2007).

In a study that gathered teachers’ perspectives on parental roles by using surveys and focus groups, Barge and Loges identified three general categories of teachers’
expectations for parents that include the same elements as above, but organized a bit differently (2003):

1. **Communication**: with teachers, and also by encouraging students and remaining in contact with children about their school day.

2. **Participation**: helping with homework, attending school events.

3. **Supervision/parenting**: being a good parent, holding children accountable for poor grades and behavior.

Teachers reported that parents’ failure to carry out these roles, or doing any of them negatively (e.g. negative communication, poor discipline), would hinder teachers’ work (Barge and Loges 2003). Although this study was set in six urban, middle schools, other research describes teachers’ expectations of parents similarly (Allen 1997; Epstein 2006).

**Role Conflicts**

The research on parents’ perspectives of their roles and the research on teachers’ perspectives of parents’ roles remain very preliminary. However, a comparison of parents’ role definitions and teachers’ construction of parents’ roles as reported in the research reviewed above suggests that they are not closely aligned. Role theory identifies these differences as sources for potential conflict (Biddle 1979). Ambiguous roles and poor communication about expectations for roles also work as sources of conflict (Serpe-Schroeder 1999). Conversely, when group members communicate frequently and have shared understandings of role expectations and preferences, relationships experience greater success (Gettinger and Guetschow
The goal then is to develop ‘good connections’ between roles and role expectations of parents and teachers.

Some research suggests the absence of these good connections. The disparity between parents’ role construction and teachers’ expectations of them became clear in Rockafellow’s observations of parent-teacher conferences (2002). The researcher observed parents approach the conferences from a ‘partnership’ role construction with an expectation that they would work with teachers as an equal contributor to the process of educating their children. However, teachers seemed to operate more from an expectation of ‘parents as audience’ and ‘teacher as expert’ during the conferences. Rockafellow concluded that the differences between these perspectives hampered effective communication between parents and teachers, decreased productivity of the conferences, and acted as a source of frustration for both teachers and parents (2002). This idea of ‘parents as audience’ in parent-teacher interactions has been observed by other researchers as well (Chavkin and Williams 1989; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001; Stattleman 1999). Unfortunately, Rockafellow’s research was limited in that parents’ roles were characterized as broad perspectives, and the specific behaviors and expectations that parents and teachers associated with parents’ roles were not identified.

Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel’s descriptive study based upon in-depth interviews with parents suggested that the lack of alignment between parents’ role constructions and teachers’ expectations for them might account for the tensions that continue to characterize parent-teacher relationships (2001). They noticed that when parents
failed to act in the manner expected by teachers, that teachers made personal judgments about the parents (Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001). Parents in this study expressed frustration with feeling marginalized by school personnel during interactions with the school. Parents’ responses demonstrated their acute awareness of teachers’ negative perceptions of them.

Teachers’ tendency to make personal judgments about parents who did not meet their expectations was also remarked upon by Serpe-Schroeder. Like others, this researcher noted that rather than experiencing these disappointments as isolated events, teachers allowed negative memories to impact their characterization of parents as a group (Serpe-Schroeder 1999; Swap 1993). Hughes and MacNaughton’s qualitative interviews with early-childhood teachers identified that teachers associated four communication strategies with ‘good parents’: when parents disclosed personal information to them about family life; when parents demonstrated understanding and respect for teachers’ professional knowledge about their child; when parents acknowledged their own ignorance as much as their own expertise; and when parents offered to act as resources for the center (Hughes and MacNaugton 2000). Parents who did not communicate according to teachers’ expectations of them were not as highly regarded by teachers. Such observations, while not couched specifically in the framework of social role theory, nonetheless contribute to our understanding of the differences between parents’ role definitions and teachers’ expectations of them.
Institutional Talk and the Negotiation of Power

Thus far, this review of literature has provided a historical context for recent changes in the social and power relations between parents and school personnel. It has reviewed the four major models of parental involvement that have dominated practitioner literature and research and traced the progression from one model to the next. This progression demonstrated the emergence and entrenchment of the partnership ethic in parental involvement models despite researchers’ recognition of the imbalance of power in home-school relations. The final model underscores the importance of parental perceptions and beliefs as integral aspects of parental involvement and recognizes the contributions of parents’ role construction in their decisions to remain involved with their children’s education. Teachers’ ability to both positively and negatively impact parents’ decisions to be involved with their children’s schooling has been reviewed, as well as the potential of unaligned role expectations to contribute to tensions in parent-teacher relationships.

All of the parental involvement models and much of the research reviewed thus far however, seem to include an unspoken assumption regarding parents’ involvement in schools: that the differences between parents and school personnel, if better understood, are surmountable. Yet, there is little evidence to corroborate this assumption, and a good deal of evidence included above that suggests that these differences are not surmountable. Indeed, role theorists suggest that the inequalities between parents and school personnel are so deeply embedded in the socio-political structure of educational institutions, that individuals cannot escape their structural
positions when operating in their institutional roles (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine 1999 in Sarangi and Roberts, eds.). That is, the imbalance of power (discussed in the first chapter) that accompanies teachers into their interactions with parents cannot be discarded by teachers, even voluntarily. The attributes of status, power and authority have been socially assigned to the teacher’s position and as such, even an ‘enlightened’ individual teacher, possessing an advanced understanding of this power imbalance and desiring to operate from a partnership perspective, cannot escape these differences, any more than a doctor could enter into a doctor-patient interaction free from the knowledge, authority, and status that accompanies a doctor’s position.

This is not to say that parents and teachers contentedly accept the socially-prescribed asymmetry of their relationships. In actuality, parents and teachers constantly engage in a subtle negotiation and bargaining process during their interactions. This bargaining and negotiation process is not unique to parent-teacher relationships, but actually exists as an integral part of all social relationships.

Exponents of this perspective suggest that as individual actors enact their roles during social encounters, the interactional and dialogic aspects of the encounter contributes to the construction of individual identities within each actors’ role (Hall, Sarangi and Slembruck in Sarangi and Roberts, eds. 1999). This concept of ‘identity-in-interaction’ explains that actors must negotiate their own individual enactments of their roles, within a range of acceptable expressions of that role or a general set of frames, during social interactions (Aronsson 1998). Roles and positions, relationship asymmetries, and social context then exist as constructs that
are neither completely preformed, yet nor are they completely open (Aronsson 1998). Social interactions can thus be seen as an activity in which actors’ participation both shapes and is shaped by the social context and during which actors must construct and negotiate their individual role-identities in order to situate themselves in social situations. This process, of course, occurs through talk.

For parents and teachers forced to interact as a part of their institutional roles, this process of negotiating and constructing identities remains an inescapable aspect of every interaction. The asymmetrical nature of their roles and positions and the social expectation of the partnership ethic further complicate their communication and make parent-teacher conversations a complex and delicate web of discourse. When parents and teachers must communicate to resolve the conflicts that occur as a predictable part of educating children, the negotiation and resolution of problems becomes more complex, nuanced, intense and of greater consequence. It is during these types of situations that the asymmetrical aspects of parent-teacher relationships becomes more critical in that participants must attempt to assert or overcome the imbalance of power that accompanies their institutional roles in an effort to negotiate an outcome that is to their advantage. Indeed, observers of parent-teacher conferences have noted the elements of tension during parent-teacher conversations (Baker and Keogh 1995; MacClure and Walker 2000; Todd and Higgins 1998) and have commented on a “…spectre of blame and accountability that haunted all the parties in these brief encounters…” (Walker and Maclure 1999).
Conclusion

This review reveals the disjunction between idealized models of parental involvement and parent-teacher relationships and the structural differences of parent-teacher relationships as demonstrated in theoretical literature. Despite the differences in parents’ and teachers’ institutional roles and positions, the social value of the partnership ethic persists. This discord between appearance and reality presents a challenging dilemma for parents and teachers and presents itself as an interesting topic that merits closer scrutiny.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

This research investigated the ways in which parents and teachers navigate the multiple hurdles of power imbalance, the partnership ethic, and role expectations when negotiating conflicts. Data was collected from parents and teachers via unstructured interviews, focus groups, and written communications. Data were analyzed using a two-layered narrative analysis in an effort to overcome social desirability bias and identify communication strategies and aspects of language employed by actors to assert or maintain a position of power. The goal of the analysis was to better understand the ways in which actors attempt to maintain or overcome the structural asymmetry of their institutional roles. Thus, the first layer of analysis was a thematic content analysis conducted to identify readily apparent concepts and organize actors’ perceptions into categories and themes. The second layer of analysis looked more closely at the discursive elements of the narrative in an effort to identify the construction and function of participants’ responses and thus more deeply unravel meaning, expose underlying perspectives and assumptions, and clarify seeming contradictions in the data.

Participants and Procedures

The bulk of research data collected was in the form of unstructured interviews with parents and teachers and two focus groups conducted with teachers. To identify participants, seven school districts in upstate New York were invited to participate in the study. These districts were predominantly suburban districts with average student populations of approximately five thousand to eight thousand students. Four
districts expressed an interest in participating in the study. In each of these districts, a short explanation of the research and request for participants was sent via email to the schools’ middle school and high school faculty. Interested teachers volunteered to participate in the study and were then interviewed individually or in small focus groups. While the exclusive use of volunteers may not have been ideal, the small number of interested participants necessitated their use. One advantage of using volunteers is that one can be relatively confident that since participants have volunteered to be in the study, they are willing to share their opinions and stories with the interviewer. However, it remains difficult to discern how representative their opinions are of the greater population (Neuman 2006).

**Teacher Participants**

Although it was not possible to conduct purposive or random sampling of participants, a variety of teachers were included in the set of teacher participants in terms of content, years of experience, and their own status as parents. Of the fourteen teachers interviewed for the study, five teachers had less than five years of experience, two had five to ten years of experience, five had eleven to fifteen years of experience, and four had more than sixteen or more years of experience teaching. Eight of the teachers were themselves parents of school-aged children. Teachers taught in five different school districts at the time of the interviews, but several had also taught in other districts as well. Three of the teachers taught English, four taught Social Studies, two taught math, four taught special education, and one taught business.
It is possible that the use of a non-random sample and reliance on volunteers resulted in a group of teacher participants that may not be representative of all teachers. In addition, some homogeneous aspects of teacher participants may further limit the representativeness of the teacher sample, in that all but one teacher worked in suburban secondary schools and none of the participants could be classified as a minority in terms of racial background. Furthermore, teachers in this study identified themselves as somewhat more flexible and more likely to initiate and encourage communication with parents than they perceived their colleagues to be. It was not possible to compare the validity of participating teachers as having more positive attitudes towards parents as compared to all teachers. However, the data did suggest that participating teachers’ self-perceptions were unaligned with their actual approaches and practices regarding parent-teacher communication, an observation also noted by other researchers (Henry 1996; Rockafellow 2002).

**Parent Participants**

Parent participants were selected using snowball sampling, as participating teachers forwarded information about the study to parents who they knew personally. In all, seven parents were interviewed in unstructured interviews. Parents in this study may also not have been representative of typical parents. Parents in this study described themselves as consistently more involved in their children’s scholastic lives and purposeful in overseeing their children’s academic educations as compared to other parents they knew. Participating parents also described themselves as more likely than other parents to pursue concerns and issues with teachers, administrators,
and the board of education. Three of the parents in the study acknowledged that their background training or work experience in the field of education made them feel more confident in their interactions with their children’s schools and school personnel.

Parents’ socio-economic backgrounds were exclusively middle class and all parents were married to their children’s mother or father. Three parents worked full-time, one worked part-time, and three others did not currently work, but had in the past. Two parents were full-time administrators in the field of business and expressed having experience and confidence with conflict resolution as a result of their professional lives. All of the parents in the study had completed a degree in higher education. Despite the skewed nature of the parent participants, common threads in their perspectives were readily identifiable as parents described consistent trends and similar patterns in their interactions with and perspectives of teachers. Participating parents perceived themselves to be more highly involved with their children’s education and more ‘assertive’ in their interactions with school personnel as compared with other parents they knew. Unlike the contradictions within the teacher data, parents’ self-perceptions were confirmed by the stories that they recounted during interviews. As will be discussed in Chapter Five, the data also suggested that had a more diverse sample of parents been included, the findings may have been even more distinct and the findings on the relatives positions of parents and teachers more amplified.
Unstructured Interviews with Parents and Teachers

Individual, unstructured interviews were conducted with all seven of the parents and eight of the teachers. Teacher interviews tended to last approximately fifty minutes, but parent interviews and focus groups were longer, about seventy-five minutes in length. The total hours of teacher interview data, excepting a lost focus group audiofile, was eight hours and thirty minutes. There were six hours and ten minutes of parent interview data. The questions used as a foundation for the interviews are included in Appendix A.

In accordance with the narrative approach, interview strategies were designed to help participants construct a narrative rich in personal experiences and perspectives. As described by researchers Hollway and Jefferson (2000), the narrative approach to interview data collection recognizes that research subjects filter interview questions through their own personal lenses, construct responses to protect vulnerable aspects of self, and unconsciously disguise at least some of their feelings and actions (p. 26). These researchers ultimately discarded interview questions that asked interviewees to directly report their feelings and experiences on socially sensitive topics, and instead developed a series of interview strategies designed to help participants share a narrative and stories that included the same information. Particular strategies these researchers suggest include:

- using open-ended questions that allow respondents a wide range of possible responses.
• eliciting stories as a way of helping participants anchor their responses in remembered events.

• avoiding ‘why’ questions, as uninformative when participants are asked to intellectualize on the topic.

In the unstructured interviews with parents and teachers, open-ended questions were followed up with more specific questions in an effort to draw out additional perspectives and opinions. Participants did provide further reflection on various topics and the data analysis then accounted for the differences in perspectives directly reported by participants with those revealed unconsciously in the course of the interview.

The role of the researcher during the interviews was to be an effective and sympathetic listener. Because of my personal background as a teacher, it was easy to establish my position as an understanding audience with teachers. By sharing a bit about my experiences as a mother of two school-aged children, I was similarly able to develop a quick rapport with parents as well. While this strategy can lead to clear benefits in that participants may reveal perspectives that they might otherwise reserve, developing a camaraderie with participants may also skew responses in another direction as well. That is, because the narrative is a social interaction that is co-authored by interviewer and interviewee, narrators may also make efforts to construct responses in a way that is perceived to please the audience, or interviewer (Mishler 1996; Tourangeau 2007). The potential of this latter effect was taken into consideration during the analysis of the narratives and accounted for with the
discursive analysis of the data as will be discussed below. My overall impression was that teachers were honest and forthright during interviews in sharing their perspectives and opinions with me. Parents also seemed comfortable in sharing both positive and negative opinions and perspectives and readily shared a number of personal stories that had occurred in their own lives as parents.

**Focus Groups**

Two focus groups were conducted, one with a group of three middle school teachers and another focus group with three high school teachers. Unfortunately, the audiofile of the middle school focus group became corrupted, so only the research notes from the session were available for analysis. Focus groups were led with a semi-structured approach with open-ended follow-up questions developed during the session, see Appendix A.

Teachers in both focus groups professed their opinions and perspectives more directly, shared fewer personal stories and experiences, used more hypothetical situations to exemplify their opinions, and tended to speak more in generalities. In the one focus group transcribed, three teachers shared six stories. In comparison, during the individual interviews with the other eight teachers, 34 stories were shared, approximately twice the number of stories per teacher. Research shows that due the social desirability of the partnership ethic, the presence of others may influence participants to exercise greater care to share only those experiences that would make them appear in a positive light to their colleagues (Fisher 1993; Rothwell 2010). This appeared to be the case during both focus groups in that teachers tended to agree
with and support one another’s positions and rarely offered a contradicting perspective.

It was hoped that the spontaneous and interactional aspects of conversations between participants might contribute to the data by encouraging opportunities for participants to explore and clarify views during interactions with peers, a feature that is less accessible during individual interviews (Rothwell 2010). However, as teachers in the focus groups were more likely to censor their responses and conform their contributions to the group’s norms, the interactional benefits of did not develop and the use of focus groups was discontinued. Other researchers have found similar limitations with focus groups that discuss socially-sensitive topics and have suggested a variety of strategies during data collection and analysis that can assist in overcoming such limitations (Fisher 1993; Rothwell 2010). However, as the power of participants’ stories became more evident during the data collection portion of this project, individual interviews were pursued as a stronger method in which to collect participants’ personal memories of interactions with parents and teachers.

Although the use of focus groups was not continued, the data from the surviving audiofile of the high school focus group was transcribed and included in the data analysis. This data was coded and evaluated in a similar fashion as the interview data. However, since the focus group data included fewer narrative stories, it contributed less during the layer of narrative discourse analysis and was more valuable to the thematic analysis of participants’ responses.
Analysis of the Data

Recorded interviews and focus groups were transcribed and entered into a data management program, QSR NVivo. I transcribed the entirety of the audiofiles myself, as a way of becoming more familiar with the nuances of the data. Transcripts of captured written communications were imported into the same program and coded in the same manner as the interview transcripts. Data analysis was not begun until all of the interviews and transcriptions were completed, in order to preserve a fresh approach to the collection of participants’ stories. In keeping with the narrative perspective, researchers suggest avoiding in-depth analysis until data collection is completed in an effort to avoid imposing meaning from one participant’s interviews on the next (Seidman 1998). However, I should note that the follow-up questions I asked of participants in later interviews did indeed build upon themes that had already begun to emerge in earlier interviews. This was done to gather more information about conflicts and concerns that seemed particularly troubling to some participants. I judged this strategy to be beneficial in confirming, better defining, or even eliminating themes and issues by gathering additional participants’ perspectives.

Thematic Analysis

The first layer of data analysis included a basic thematic analysis of all of the data. The transcripts were carefully read several times each and sections of text were highlighted and coded to capture the main idea of the passage or story. Many codes used participants’ own language, for example, “helicopter parents” or “we’re all busy.” Once an initial coding of the data was completed, codes themselves were
reviewed, organized, merged when necessary, and clustered into trees of codes as possible. These steps were mostly ways of organizing the data into basic conceptual categories. Some examples are: “parental perspectives on communicating with teachers” which included sub-themes such as “teachers are busy”, “giving up on a teacher,” “positive results of parent-teacher interaction” and several others.

Because the software program makes it so easy to multiply-code the same passage and even overlapping passages, codes were rarely eliminated, but rather generally merged into similar or larger themes. After this initial round of preliminary coding and reorganizing of codes, the transcripts were re-read in their entirety and re-coded. This step helped to apply all of the codes to all of the transcripts and to re-evaluate the data to see if new concepts or categories emerged. Ultimately 975 passages were coded into 23 free-standing codes and 20 ‘tree’ codes that included 140 sub-codes. A list of all codes, the number of passages in each code, and the number of sources for each code is included in Appendix B.

After this preliminary layer of thematic coding was completed, I began to sketch out preliminary concepts and to draft findings that emerged in the form of patterns. In beginning to look for meaning in aggregated clusters of coded data, the focus at this point remained more on “what” was said, rather than looking more deeply into implied meanings, choices of language, and the purpose of parts of a participants’ response. This emphasis on the surface content of the data has been reported as useful for theorizing across a number of cases to construct and elaborate a developing theory (Reissman 2003). While some have criticized such thematic
analysis as overly accepting of data as authentic representations of truth (Savin-Baden & van Niekerk 2007), others find value in a literal reading of the data, as a way of allowing the text to lead and formulate meaning, before introducing the researcher’s interpretation and construction of meaning (Schutt 2004).

The thematic coding and thematic analysis of the data revealed elements that I had not anticipated and was, in my opinion, an important first step in the analytical process. For example, so many participants discussed their own emotions regarding parent-teacher interactions, or even their feelings about the other actor’s emotions, that it became clear that a cluster category for “emotion” was warranted. Within this category ten sub-categories were developed, including “angry parents,” “managing parents’ emotion,” “parents’ sadness” and the like. There were 70 passages coded into the category of “emotions,” making it such a large factor in the data that it could not be denied as an important aspect of parent-teacher relationships. Thematic analysis laid the foundation for the organization and categorization of the data, and clarified perspectives and opinions that the participants held on a conscious level, that is, those opinions that they claimed explicitly.

**Participants’ Stories and Memorable Conflicts**

During interviews and focus groups, participants’ remarks trended in three ways: as direct reporting of their opinions and perspectives, as hypothetical situations that participants would imaginatively create in order to emphasize or support a particular point, or as recollections of actual and significant encounters with parents or teachers that they had either directly experienced themselves or experienced
vicariously through a colleague. Most of participants’ stories described specific situations that stood out in their memories as particularly frustrating for them. In general, when recounting these ‘memorable conflicts,’ participants’ voices and body language would convey the negative emotion that they still associated with the event, which was generally expressed as frustration, anger, exasperation, disbelief, and/or sadness.

In accordance with the narrative perspective, the unstructured interviews included generalized interview questions designed to collect perspectives and stories about parent-teacher interactions that participants remembered as particularly frustrating or troubling in some way. Most interviews started with a general question, “What do you find most striking about your interactions with parents/teachers?” Questions from that point forward followed the direction of participants’ responses. In some interviews, the question was posed, “Did you ever have a situation with a parent/teacher that you couldn’t resolve?” For the most part however, it was not necessary to ask this or even similar questions that encouraged participants to recount specific memories about intense interactions with parents or teachers as participants appeared comfortable in sharing their perspectives and embedded stories into their narratives as a way of sharing, illustrating, or explaining their perspectives. In all, the seven parents interviewed recounted 26 memorable conflicts and the eleven teachers recounted 40 memorable conflicts about prior parent-teacher interactions.

These mini-stories are significant in that they seemed to have become fixed in participants’ minds as powerful examples of ‘how things are.’ Not only were these
memories accompanied by a good deal of residual emotion, but they also seemed to be utilized by participants to construct general understandings of parents or teachers as a group. This observation is aligned with the perspective of narrative analysis that considers stories to be sense-making social constructions (Soderburg 2006).

In many instances, participants’ direct reporting of their perspectives and positions conflicted with the actions and reactions they recounted in prior specific situations and events. Contradictions between participants’ conscious perspectives (those directly reported or explicitly claimed) and unconscious perspectives (those perspectives that are implied and revealed indirectly when recounting memorable events) have been remarked upon by other researchers and can be explained in a few ways. First, for the most part, while human beings do hold fairly clear understandings of their own and others’ roles, our beliefs, perspectives, and expectations for ourselves and others generally operate subconsciously, beneath most people’s own awareness (Ollhoff and Ollhoff 1996). Secondly, as previously discussed, social expectations do in fact govern actors’ self-assessment and subsequent portrayal of themselves and result in participants moderating their responses in ways that are intended to be socially acceptable (Rothwell 2010; Tourangeau 2007). As a social expectation, the ‘partnership ethic’ may make it more difficult for teachers to evaluate and admit their true perspectives, especially when those feelings and beliefs conflict with that which is socially desirable (Henry 1996; Keogh 1996; Mager 2001; Miretzky 2002; Nakagawa 2000).
Addressing contradictions between conscious and subconscious perspectives

An example of how participants’ stories conflicted with their explicitly-claimed perspectives may help to demonstrate this phenomenon. In a fascinating interview with an experienced special education middle school teacher, Michelle described herself as very flexible, non-judgmental, and very accepting of all types of parents. Several times in the interview Michelle made a point to portray herself as accepting of others:

Michelle: So, anyway, we are doing an after-school program. Part of the whole idea of this after-school program is we’ve got kids, any of the kids that we have that don’t do well, is they don’t have support at home. They don’t have support at home because mom and dad have got to work two jobs, maybe mom and dad… so, we’re not judging them because they don’t have support at home, we’re just saying, you don’t have it. And you’re not a bad mother because you can’t provide it.

Michelle: That’s exactly. And it would help things out so much better… and don’t judge, don’t judge. People judge so amazingly easily. And I’m the first to say, I’m intolerant of intolerance, you know what I mean? I can’t stand that. Here, I get mad at people who are intolerant.

However, Michelle’s responses were embedded with comments, asides, and mini-stories that seemed rather judgmental. When describing parents that frustrate her, she characterized some parents as “overbearing,” another as a “real whack-a-doodle,” and many as too quick to go to administrators and too quick to defend their children. Her tone of voice and phrasing suggested an actual contempt for these types of parents. She described other teachers or teams of teachers as cruel, unreasonable, or inflexible, and administrators as catering to parents’ demands, overly fearful of litigation, doing a poor job in developing teachers’ personal attributes, and not adequately managing their own time and workload. While Michelle didn’t always
make such statements directly, they were certainly revealed in the many stories she recounted. Michelle’s interview included 18 references to remembered interactions (most were not parent-teacher conflicts) and five hypothetical mini-stories designed to illustrate her perspective. Although she didn’t often use direct adjectives to describe parents, other teachers, and administrators, her feelings and perspectives were very clear in the full narrative of her interview. In the selection below, Michelle describes her frustration with administration’s perceived lack of support for teachers in their conflicts with parents:

Michelle: Because sometimes you want to take a stand. I’ll give you another example. I was standing with an eighth grade teacher who had just graded research papers, spent a lot of time grading those research papers. A kid came to her, said, she had an 88 on the paper… they had a rubric. And the kid said, and part of it was, she got maybe two out of four points or something for accuracy or something it may have been. “I would not have put anything in there if it wasn’t accurate blah, blah, blah.” (describes how the teacher defended the grade she gave the student) But I know this person (parent), so I can see in the back of her mind is, “You mean you gave my baby a buu-buu-bbuuu-bah?!!” (in a high falsetto voice).” OK, take the two points.

Rr: It’s not worth the hassle.

Michelle: No, it’s not worth the hassle.

This passage above was coded both as “Memorable Conflict_Parent Won” and “Memorable Conflict_School Won” in the narrative discourse analysis because Michelle describes both how the specific teacher held firm in this situation and also how Michelle would have capitulated. Her tone of voice and choice of words suggest that parents have a tendency to be overly-protective and/or overly-emotional which reveals a negative perspective of parents that appears to conflict with her self-claimed tolerance. While one instance or comment may not countermand a participant’s
claimed perspective, combined with several other comments and stories, Michelle unconsciously holds far different opinions of parents than she might consciously admit. As a note, the thematic codes for parts of this selection included ‘balance of power depends on administrative support,’ ‘defending yourself is frustrating,’ and ‘teachers control grades.’

As can be seen in the example above, rather than assessing memorable conflicts as direct responses to a question posed by the interviewer, participants’ descriptions of memorable events were coded and assessed as separate from any antecedent question or comment. This lack of linear evaluation of participants’ narratives helps to avoid reconstructing meaning that may or might not have been intended within an interactional context (Mishler 1986). Instead, stories of memorable conflicts were considered to be an almost second form of data that could be used to assess and evaluate the veracity of participants’ professed opinions.

In this research, participants’ unconscious perspectives were regarded as more accurate representations of participants’ real beliefs than those that they explicitly claimed. Weighting unconscious perspectives as more accurate representations of participants’ perspectives when discussing topics that are socially desirable, accounts for the tendency of research subjects to construct responses to protect vulnerable aspects of self and unconsciously disguise at least some of their feelings and actions (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). However, interpreting stories as truth also cannot be absolute. Because humans make sense of their experience by casting it in narrative form, and because memories and stories inevitably include aspects of sense-making
and interpretation that may skew the accurate memory of historical events, opinions expressed via memorable conflicts cannot be considered as absolutely pure representations of participants’ true beliefs (Mishler 1986). Rather, narrative stories may be used to confirm or dispute directly reported opinions, to provide a perspective where none was directly reported, or even as one manifestation of dual and conflicting opinions held by one actor.

**Narrative Discourse Analysis**

Narrative discourse analysis was instrumental in this process of comparing participants’ conscious, explicitly-claimed opinions with those revealed unconsciously. As a fusion of narrative analysis and discourse analysis, narrative discourse analysis includes identifying the constructions and functions of the language of the text, unraveling the underlying meanings and possible assumptions, analyzing how experiences are expressed, and considering the role of linguistic features in the narrative (Mishler 1986). The first part of this approach includes an understanding of narratives as actively created social constructions that occur during the interview. Narrative analysis works from an assumption of the text as interrelated with both the context and social function of the narrative and accepts that speakers both experience and construct meaning via stories and narrative descriptions (Hollway and Jefferson 2000). In this sense, the narrative is considered a ‘retrospective interpretation’ of reality, but one that serves a specific function (Soderburg 2006). That is, the narrator seeks to articulate a prior experience, come to terms with past events and develop a self-understanding. The retelling of a story is,
in itself, a process by which a selected number of events are articulated into an organized whole and ascribed with meaning (Lorem 2008). The narrator actively prioritizes and orders the events in order to suggest connections between the events and to provide causal explanations (Soderburg 2006). In doing so, the narrator selects and incorporates interpretive devices to include the attribution of motive, assigning responsibility or blame, ascribing causal connections between incidents, and so forth. In this sense, narrative analysis accepts storytelling as “a part of the process through which actors attach meaning to events and activities by entering them into the plot they have created on the basis of their personal experiences (Soderburg 2006)” and discourse analysis evaluates the elements of speech used to accomplish this task.

In this project, narrative discourse analysis specifically involved coding speakers’ text in order to reveal speakers’ conceptions, representations, and perspectives that can be hidden in talk (Fairclough 1989; Olsen 2006) with the understanding that this is largely an unconscious process on the part of discursants (Fairclough 1992; Olsen 2006). Discourse analysis can take several approaches, in that the narrative can be evaluated in terms of the language structures utilized by participants (use of pronouns, use of passive voice, use of exclamations and expletives, formality of structures, modality, etc.). A different level of analysis concerns the interpersonal functions of the language and how participants construct role-identities and communicate their perspectives through their choice of language (vocabulary, connotation, face-saving devices, politeness strategies, etc). A third level
of analysis seeks to identify the sociocultural aspects of language and concerns issues of power and negotiation between actors (asserting or claiming power via use of specialist vocabulary, topic-changing, implied charges, expressing approval, rebuttals and defenses, moral stories, use of direct statements, etc.). Fairclough has also described these three levels of analysis as evaluating the surface of the utterance, the context of the utterance, and the purpose of the utterance (1989).

While the interview transcripts were not specifically coded with all three layers, a new round of coding identified participants’ stories, specifically coding them as ‘memorable conflicts’. These passages were coded not only by function, but also by their resolution, in that the outcome of the story was resolved to the seeming benefit of the teacher, or resolved to the seeming benefit of the parent. Within each story, choice of language, use of pronouns, and power strategies employed were all identified as a way of digging more deeply into the narrative. Narrative discourse analysis has been credited with helping to make ambiguous connections in the data more clear (Clandinin and Connelly 2000; Mishler 1986) which was certainly the case with this interview data as well.

As will be described in the next chapter, teachers and parents described their use of a variety of strategies as they recounted stories of prior interactions. Of the 40 memorable conflicts described by teachers, 31 of them, or 78% of them resolved in closer to the teacher’s desired outcome. Of the 26 memorable conflicts described by parents, 11 of them, or 42%, resolved closer to the school’s or teacher’s desired outcome. An overview of this numerical data is presented in the table below:
Memorable Conflicts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Resolved for the School</th>
<th>Resolved for the Parent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recounted by Teachers (n = 11)</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>n = 31</td>
<td>n = 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recounted by Parents (n = 7)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>n = 11</td>
<td>n = 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>n = 42</td>
<td>n = 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is unclear what these data suggest. It is possible that parents and teachers in the study were more likely to remember and relate situations that they perceived as concluding favorably for them. It may be that parents on the whole, are less successful in negotiating favorable outcomes in situations with teachers. While the numerical data above are interesting, the descriptive data in the fourth chapter provide a much deeper picture parent-teacher dynamics and interactions.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Parent-teacher relationships are institutionally-derived and temporary relationships. For the duration of approximately ten months, parents and teachers must communicate with one another regarding children’s physical, social, and scholastic progress. To this end, interactions between parents and teachers are purposeful and generally are task-oriented. Participants in this study described the majority of their exchanges as either the relaying of informational messages or concerning a situation or problem that one party would like the other to address. In sharing their perspectives, memories, and stories, participants revealed the limitations of their relationships and their unconscious efforts to either maintain or overcome these limitations.

1. Power Inequities in parent-teacher relationships

When teachers in this study were asked directly about who held more power in their interactions with teachers, teachers uniformly replied that parents held more power. However, parent participants perceived teachers as holding much more power in their interactions, and were greatly surprised that educators did not recognize something that was, to them, so obviously apparent. While educators adamantly denied having greater influence than parents in their relationships with them, their stories of prior conflicts and interactions with parents revealed a different pattern indeed. In fact, in almost 80% of the memorable conflicts reported by teachers, the outcome of the conflict was resolved in favor of the teacher and/or the school. Looking more deeply at the text of the interview data with teachers reveals
that teachers not only possess and actively leverage more power in their interactions with parents but also utilize unconscious strategies that, in effect guard and preserve that unequal power structure. In contrast, parents’ stories revealed both a more overt recognition of their inherent lack of power and a more conscious acknowledgement of strategies that they could utilize to claim more power in specific situations.

A. Teachers’ as Educational Experts

Teachers’ mixed acceptance of the gradual decrease in their higher status

The most long-standing reservoir of teachers’ power is derived from the elevated social status that accompanies their social roles as teachers and stems from their positions as educational experts. As compared to parents, teachers generally hold advanced educational degrees, have greater knowledge of educational practices, extensive knowledge of the curriculum, and deeper knowledge of student learning and behavior. In recognition of teachers’ greater knowledge in these areas, parents traditionally have largely deferred to teachers’ expertise and authority. In recent decades, this automatic deference to teachers has significantly decreased. Sociologist have observed several social and cultural changes as contributing to this trend: our populace has become more highly educated in general, the advent of the Internet, a trend towards more actively-involved parenting, and stronger and more well-organized parent groups and networks. Participants in this study recognized that an automatic deference towards teachers-as-experts is less common and expressed a variety of feelings regarding these changes.
The two youngest teachers in the study expressed a general acceptance of this change as part of a natural cultural evolution, even while recognizing that the shift was fairly drastic:

Sara: I know that when I was growing up, my parents, and this might be something that actually affects how I deal with parents, my parents never called or spoke with my teachers, ever. If my parents were talking to a teacher, it was like, “What could have possibly happened today that my mother is on the phone and talking to a teacher?”

(Other teachers agreeing and laughing)

Eddie: I think it’s a different world.

Sara: It is a different world, a generational thing. So, for… I can see that being…

Eddie: She’s 22.

Sara: What a lie! No! I’m 26. (Laughing) But for me as a student, if my parents had called, it would have had to have been because I was having some sort of crazy emotional breakdown that I couldn’t handle on my own. I do think that kind of skews the way I deal with parents too. Because I’m always like, “Well your student hasn’t said anything to me. If he hates what we’re doing in class, or whatever, then why don’t they just talk to me, so we can talk about it?”

Eddie: Yes I came from a very…, my parents are so old fashioned, that’s why I always get made fun of in that I’m coming from the nineteen fifties. It’s true. There was no doubt in my mind in my home that the teacher was 100% right, and I don’t care what you said. It’s just a different world now. And it’s just a different world. And I don’t think that’s necessarily the right thing to do, to assume the teacher is always right. I don’t think that’s right at all to always do that, but that’s just a different way and that was just kind of an adult kind of thing. “The adult is correct, you are not.” That’s all there is to it. If he said this, you did this. That’s all there is to it. It’s just different. So I guess I don’t remember it ever happening, because I was always told, that if a teacher ever yelled at me, I should be prepared to get yelled at much more at home, or something like that. It’s just a different world now. But I think it’s not a bad evolution.
Unlike Eddie and Sara’s professed acceptance of recent social changes, older teachers expressed either directly or indirectly, some dismay with this trend. Jennifer in particular bemoaned this shift away from teachers’ position as expert:

Jennifer: I’ve worked in communities where the teachers were perceived as the intelligentsia, we were the educated ones, and we were put in an exalted status, and that caused parents to defer to us as social workers, as this authority on child rearing, and “What do you think I should do?” (teacher replies) “Well, I really think you should take away his privileges and his motorbike for the weekend.” And having to say that…. I don’t feel that that is the case now. I constantly feel today that there’s always someone trying to tell me how to do my job.

This idea of desiring freedom from being accountable to parents was reiterated by other teachers in the study, often in the sense of teachers’ having the right to make decisions on their own. This perspective was communicated both directly and indirectly via small comments or reactions to situations. For example, Mike and Nick both expressed direct opinions about the authority that accompanied their position as teacher. “I’m being entrusted with the child, so I need to be able to make some of those decisions.” (Mike) and “I think the school has to draw the line because we’re the educators.” (Nick) In both of these comments, supported by several other comments in the teacher data, teachers revealed their shared expectation of a higher status and authority as compared to parents, a status that they expect would automatically accompany their role as educational experts.

**Teachers unconscious expectation of higher status as compared to parents**

Other comments by teachers were less direct and more contextualized to a particular topic or embedded in a response. For example, in describing her self-perceived willingness to communicate with parents, Catherine defended her position
via a hypothetical conversation with a parent: “(I would say)...here’s what the
required work of mine is. Here’s what you can do for me, is communicate back.”
The teacher’s unconscious assumption revealed in her phrasing above is that as the
teacher, she would naturally share her expectations for the parent’s behavior in a very
direct, almost demanding way. This reveals Catherine’s understanding of herself as
holding a superior position in her relationship with the parent. Contrasting teachers’
comments such as these with parents’ indirect, conciliatory, and careful approach in
their communications with teachers (described in section four below), further reveals
teachers’ unconscious assumption of a superior-subordinate status hierarchy in the
parent-teacher relationship.

While just one example of this expectation of an ordered teacher-parent
hierarchy is included above, the teacher data was filled with a preponderance of
similarly phrased comments, many of which also revealed teachers’ expectation that
decision-making power was a right and responsibility inherent to the role of the
teacher. There was some evidence in the responses to suggest that teachers’ comfort
with this perspective increased over time. When discussing teachers’ general anxiety
regarding communicating with parents, nine teachers overtly recognized that their
interactions with parents gave them less anxiety as they accrued more years of
experience. Six of these teachers attributed their increased confidence to an
improved security in their positions as teachers, seeming to unconsciously rely at least
in part upon the status they derived as a part of a larger organization. Kristen
describes this self-confidence below as a combination of her experience (knowledge) and her association with the school (reputation/position):

**Kristen:** Of course, I became more secure in my professionalism. I now… I know I can say, “Well, I’ve been working in this school for nineteen years. I’ve been working with seniors for over twenty years, so I pretty much know. I see patterns. I have experience.” And even if parents have older children, they haven’t seen or worked with as many as I have. So I believe that that confidence comes across and it does make it easier (to interact with parents).

Despite teachers’ expectation of deference in regards to their decisions, when queried directly about the impact on parent-teacher interactions of their greater status, teachers denied any advantage as a result of their position as expert and instead espoused an egalitarian system of equality with parents. They recognized that parents might be intimidated by teachers, but refused to accept the conclusion that their status as experts translated into greater power in their interactions with parents. Nina understood that parents could at times be confused by the ‘educational jargon’ that was used during meetings, and recognized that specialist language might make parents feel intimidated. Mike and Jamie attributed parents’ intimidation to teachers’ holding advanced educational degrees and the status that accompanies advanced education. In her work as a guidance counselor, Melanie observed parents’ feelings of intimidation, but relegated that feeling more to the imbalance of knowledge between parents and teachers.

In addition to generally refusing to admit status differences as such, teachers portrayed themselves as respectful of parents as equals. In fact, ten of the fourteen teachers were also parents themselves and many expressed an understanding of parents’ concerns, perspectives, goals, and emotional needs. At various points in
their narratives, all of the teachers expressed some willingness to have collaborative conversations with parents about their children’s education and many of these remarks did convey a perspective of approaching parents as equals and valuing parents’ contributions:

**Catherine:** I would invite them. I would invite any parent to do what they feel that they need to do. Because I feel that I’m fair. And I feel that I’m approachable, and I make the information as available as it can be, and consistent.

**Eddie:** I put such value on respecting parents because they have done an amazing job getting the kids to this point.

**Nina:** I would like to see parents more involved, I really would like to see parents coming in as partners. We have writing for seventh graders who have an opportunity to come in with their parents in after school hours, in the evenings, with their parents, and they write together and so teachers and parents and students are all writing collaboratively, creatively together. I think that’s fantastic.

However, in contrast to these reported opinions, there was a much larger body of evidence that established teachers’ frustrations with what they perceived as parents’ lack of respect for them and their positions. One could argue that if teachers truly believed that their status were equal to parents, that they would also be much more comfortable with parents questioning and disagreeing with them and their educational opinions. Generally, those of equal status have the ability to ask questions, challenge one another’s perspectives, opinions and beliefs, and express their own ideas free from a negative reaction (Berger and Zelditch 1998). However, teachers’ recollection of memorable conflicts demonstrated quite the opposite. Rather, teachers expressed a good deal of frustration regarding having to respond to parents’ requests for information, to answer questions about teachers’ decisions, and
to defend against parents’ giving greater credence to their children’s recollection of school events.

One theme that revealed teachers’ frustration with parents’ lack of deference to their status as teachers centered around the issue of trust. Teachers frequently reported interpreting pointed questions from parents as a lack of trust in their position as experts and as adults with authority over children. Every teacher had at least one story about a parent who called to ‘check’ on their child’s story, asked a teacher to defend a grade their child received, or sided with their child rather than the teacher. As the assistant principal of a middle school, Mike, characterized parents’ lack of trust in teachers as a significant source of frustration for the teachers in his school:

**Mike:** I think many times the teachers feel like there’s no trust with the parent because the parent is listening to the kid more than they are the teacher.

**Rr:** What do you mean by ‘trust’? How does that play out?

**Mike:** I think trusting that, going to the teacher and forming the relationship with the teacher as opposed to when their kid comes home and says, you know, “The teacher threw me out of class again today and I didn’t do anything and I wasn’t the only one talking.” And then the parent comes in, “He wasn’t the only one talking” or calls the teacher. I think that’s really hard on teachers.

Nick, in describing this exact frustration with a mother who reacted to a situation and believed her daughter rather than him, expresses his disbelief at having to defend himself to her. In this quote, Nick describes how offended he was that the mother believed her daughter’s version of the situation:

**Nick:** Two or three years ago there was a woman who went at me because I had called her daughter out on plagiarism. And, she was really negative. She said, “How dare you accuse my daughter of plagiarism? She would never do such a thing!” So, I
went back, and I found all of the places where she had copied from, and then... and then the mother’s tact changed, and she was now upset about the way I handled it, not with the fact that I had accused her daughter of plagiarism. The kid was a good kid, she was a really good student who did this. But, she had clearly done it. And, without any kind of checking of facts, the mother just reacted. She didn’t look into it. She didn’t look at the essay that the girl wrote. It was just, “How dare you accuse my daughter of this?” I was really disappointed.

To summarize teachers’ professed opinions then, despite teachers’ alleged beliefs about their status as compared with parents, teachers unconsciously responded to the status associated with their position as teacher and sought to preserve this status. Teachers explicitly claimed to believe that parents and teachers were of equal status and that parents should feel comfortable to approach teachers at any time. Teachers’ minimized parents’ intimidation as related to educational differences, rather than the result of any behavior, expectation, or strategies enacted by teachers. However, teachers’ conscious and unconscious beliefs included an expectation that parents automatically trust their decisions as experts, professionals and adults. Teachers expected this deference not from any particular action they had taken, but expected to be given the benefit of the doubt simply because of their position as teachers. When parents acted in ways that countered teachers’ expectations for their behavior, teachers either withdrew from further contact with parents, or conflicts and tension ensued.

**Parents’ willingness to defer to teachers’ expertise is conditional**

In an interesting contrast to teachers’ belief that parents were disinclined to accept them as authorities, parents at times not only recognized and appreciated teachers’ expertise with children, but sought out their guidance as needed. Danielle
Ellen, Jody, Noelle, Jamie and Rhonda all mentioned instances where they sought the help of school personnel for more information about raising a child. As teachers, Nick, Lieren, Kristen, Jennifer, Eddie, Catherine, Nina, Michelle and Christine all mentioned instances in which parents had solicited their advice. Yet, hesitations persisted on both sides about these exchanges. Noelle and Nick were both struggling with their teenage sons and pursued the school’s support and assistance, but did not blindly accept the school’s perspectives.

**Noelle:** Well I think by virtue the fact that they spend all day with teenage boys, obviously they know more about their behaviors than I do. I mean, I have one, they have 800, and that’s what they’ve devoted their careers to. Actually I look to them for their expertise, I do. I look to them for their expertise, but my frustration comes in when…. and I’m not quite sure how to articulate this, but I’m never quite sure that they have the parents’ best interest at heart. It’s always…. I always get this underlying feeling… But, if they fail to the effectively communicate expertise to me, or they do it in such a way they make me not okay, and put me on the defensive, then their level of expertise is completely lost in their demeanor and approach. It’s over.

**Jamie:** Well, for example, my teenager, um, struggling…very intelligent kid, very intelligent. In elementary school, 3’s and 4’s on all his state tests, fours mostly. In middle school, work’s not getting done, all communication is supposed to be done now via internet, or by checking all the teacher’s different websites. But it’s not always all there, what needs to be done. And everything is taken upon the child to be more responsible. Not responsible (pointing up to the ceiling towards his son’s room). Homework’s not getting done. And we’re supposed to just let him crash, because he’s not responsible? So we had to go to the district, and request that they put him on some type of plan, which we currently have. We got together with his team, with his whole team, and we formulated a behavior/academic/athletic plan for him, where all his coaches and his teachers and his parents got together and we created this plan that he has to do well in academics, in school and out of school, and basically be a good citizen and all that, and it’s been working. One of the teachers, who’s not his teacher, but is one of the lacrosse coaches, came up with this idea, and it’s been working great. We check up on it weekly, every Friday, how he’s performing, and if he’s not performing up to par, then he can’t play in whatever activity he has scheduled for that weekend.
These last two excerpts seem to demonstrate parents’ qualified or conditional acceptance of teachers’ and schools’ expertise with children. While they may accept help and guidance from the school, their acceptance seems contingent upon their own comfort with that help from Noelle’s perspective, and Nick’s insistence on a plan to help his son that included a more active role for the school and held the school more responsible for his son’s success. Both cases demonstrate that while these parents may not blindly accept the school as an absolute authority, they still recognize to some degree educators’ expertise and influence as authorities in their children’s lives.

Even while seeking the school’s support and expertise, other parents, even those who considered themselves to be relatively assertive, admitted to feeling intimidated by school personnel. Several confident women who worked in professional fields (Jody, Danielle, Jolena, and Noelle), recollected feeling intimidated by school personnel, felt less confident because of their lesser knowledge as compared to school personnel, and/or described a number of parent-friends that they knew who were much more intimidated than they were by school personnel. Danielle described a situation that occurred in her friend’s daughter’s elementary school, in which the school had announced that they would no longer give spelling tests to students. Danielle’s friend asked to meet with the principal to discuss the rationale for this change:

**Danielle:** Well, you know, she went in and she was very, you know… “Nothing, I just want to know.” Well they treated her like she was some sort of pariah. And you know, “Well, we know better because we’re the administrators and the teachers.”
And it was like, “How dare you?” and this and that. And she came away feeling, and even when she brought her own support, showing the positive sides, you know, they just sort of, you know shoved it under the carpet. She said it was a very, very uncomfortable thing. Oh, and then the district deputy superintendent came to the meeting. So she said, “I was feeling totally, you know, right. Totally overwhelmed.”

**Rr:** Intimidated.

**Danielle:** Intimidated. Right. These people almost making her feel, you know like, “How dare you ask these questions? We are the teachers. We’re the administrators. We know better.”

As a result of this meeting, Danielle related that her friend was very upset and completely withdrew from pursuing not only the concerns about the spelling tests, but future concerns about other issues as well.

Ultimately, regardless of whether teachers want their positions as educational experts to give them authority, and regardless of parents’ need and/or acceptance of teachers’ expertise, teachers’ positions as educational authorities played out in situations recalled as memorable conflicts by both parents and teachers. Eleven teachers in some way alluded to their position as a part of the school as an organization when recalling a memorable event. Four teachers described memorable events that were resolved in favor of the teacher as a result of the teacher claiming status as a teacher. Several teachers even described their allegiance and loyalty to the position of teacher, even when they knew that a teacher was wrong. Michelle described listening to a parent relate her daughter’s frustration with a colleague:

**Michelle:** I don’t go there, you know what I mean? I’m a teacher in the district, and I support teachers in the district. And I can’t always say what I think. But, the teacher, she humiliated the little girl in front of the class and made her feel lousy. Man!
Teachers use discursive strategies to claim status attached to their positions

In reviewing the memorable conflicts related by teachers, it was clear that teachers’ drew attention to their association to the school by utilizing collective pronouns (we, our, us). At times, the referent noun for these pronouns was simply implied. That is, in recalling the story, there was no direct reference to the school, other teachers, or a larger organization, and yet, the intended understanding seemed clear. For example, in recounting an email he sent to a parent, Nick remembered telling the parent, “…if you want to work together with us, I’d be more than happy to do that.” (larger quote on page 161) In this passage, Nick listed actions he had performed as a teacher, but then referenced them as ‘steps the school’ had taken. Although the conflict only concerned his particular class, Nick utilized the pronoun ‘us’ in communicating with the parent, thus reminding the parent that Nick was operating in his role as a teacher with the authority of the school behind that position. This example illustrates one of the ways in which teachers claim their authority as an extension of the school organization, when necessary and convenient to do so.

There was little evidence that parents could directly overcome this status differential in their relationships with teachers. The only direct way that parents reported their status was by referencing their own background, experiences, and/or employment. For example, Nick made a point of telling teachers during parent conferences that he was also a teacher.

Nick: I feel as a teacher, that I know too much and I bring that knowledge with me to these parent-teacher conferences, or any type of discussion with the teachers. But I
do bring that teacher role with me into the parent-teacher conferences. I let them know, that you’re not going to BS me in any type of conference that we have. You’re not going to talk around me, or over my head, ’cause I know exactly what you’re going to say.

Two mothers, Noelle and Jody worked in administrative positions, and recognized that this made them more comfortable in talking with teachers, but didn’t describe mentioning their professional positions to teachers, although they may have. Rhonda and Danielle both served on school and state committees, but only shared their prior service in the sense that it gave them additional knowledge, not equal status with teachers. For the most part, parents reported utilizing other strategies to claim power during specific interactions and encounters with teachers, and did not describe attempting to develop equal social status with teachers.

B. Knowledge of School Processes

Teachers utilize their knowledge during interactions with parents

Even beyond the status and authority derived from their position as educational experts, teachers’ knowledge of the school systems, processes, programs, and what happens in their own classrooms is overwhelmingly greater than parents’, excepting those parents with some background training in the field of education. Parents recognized that this inequality of knowledge put them at a huge disadvantage during interactions with the school. Teachers also recognized this in some ways, but didn’t feel that it presented a huge barrier or detriment to working with parents. For the most part, while teachers recognized that parents could be less knowledgeable,
when pressed, teachers consistently refused to admit that these differences created an unequal foundation for their interactions with parents:

Catherine: I don’t think that it makes them (parents) less powerful. I think it’s that they’re not in the classroom, so you’re more knowledgeable. And I don’t think that translates necessarily into power and you’re communicating that knowledge about what it is they’re calling you about or what you’re talking about. And you, if you’re a good listener, are receiving something that is going to help you out as well. So, it might be, one side is more informed about a situation, but I don’t know about more powerful. (teacher’s emphasis)

As a middle school teacher, Nina insisted that teachers readily shared information with parents:

Nina: They (teachers) are just thinking that it’s their responsibility as part of their job to communicate with parents and to provide any necessary information that is needed. I don’t see it’s ‘us against them’ if that’s where you’re going.

Nina also made sure to refute any suggestion of an oppositional relationship between parents and teachers, although prior interview questions hadn’t alluded to that perspective. In the memorable conflicts that Nina recounted, she also did not describe utilizing her knowledge of school processes to resolve those conflicts. However, Christine, Jennifer, and Mike recollected four memorable conflicts that were resolved in favor of the school as a direct result of greater knowledge of the school’s internal systems.

Mike: And then the parent said, “Well my child has asthma and missed 18 days of school.” And I say, “well that probably has an impact as well.” They say, “The school should have done something.” And I said, “Well, the school would have, we would have put a 504 plan into place. But, I didn’t know that until you’re telling me right now. So, let’s set up a 504 meeting.” And we set it up to come up for the summer. “But unfortunately, your child is going to repeat seventh grade.”

Christine: It was when I taught special ed, seventh grade. And I had a parent come in and basically tell me what he thought I should be doing in resource room, which was not necessarily what my employer had told me they wanted me to do. And I was
sitting there saying, “Well, we do, do that, but we also do…” and I was trying to explain it. And one of my very experienced, very wonderful colleagues stepped in and said, “I’m in the room when she has resource in here,” because he shared the room, he said, “She is doing exactly what she is supposed to be doing.” And that was about it.

Parents perceive less knowledge of school processes as a disadvantage

Parents generally characterized the teachers and the school system in general as being ‘protective’ of information about many aspects of schooling. The one parent who did not feel this way was the mother an only child who was extremely gifted. In fact, he had just graduated at the top of his class and was planning to attend a prestigious college in the fall. This parent expressed appreciation for all the special programming and advanced classes her son had been encouraged to take. The other six parents, and several of the teachers as well, recognized that the schools tended to guard information internally. Interestingly, parents characterized this as more of a generalized ‘school’ approach, and not a reflection on actual teachers at all. For example, Rhonda understood that her son was very bright, but when she asked the teachers for more information about accelerated classes, she felt that she had been deflected and ultimately decided that she couldn’t really influence her children’s education too directly:

Rhonda: You know, my problem is I never know what to get them to study to get them prepared to whatever they’re supposed to be getting. Especially for the accelerated classes for my son, it’s either that you have it or you don’t have it. I don’t know how to prepare him ahead. He probably could have easily gotten into it if I would have known what is he supposed to do to get into the class. But you see, that’s all kind of hidden, because they don’t want you in the class, because there are (only) so many slots.

Rr: And that’s frustrating for you then?
Rhonda: Yeah, but I’ve kind of learned to live with it now. I’ve let go. I feel like my son is going to succeed, or my daughter, because of what they want to do themselves. So I think it’s part of letting go a little bit.

Even parents with knowledge of school processes still felt that they had to “fight for” services for their children. Jolena actually worked as a teacher’s aide in her home school district and also had served on a state-level Committee for the Blind. In these capacities, Jolena had a good deal of knowledge about special education law in general and also knew about specific programs available for her son. Since she possessed ‘inside’ knowledge of programs, she was able to observe that the district rarely offered that knowledge to her as a parent:

Jolena: I just feel that they want to have all that control in their hands, and if you go in quiet and you just agree to everything they say, they know they can just continue to push you along. But it’s when you question them, and you ask them about specific services or materials or you know, extra support they can have, they question you to the tenth degree before they’ll consider it. And I just feel that if you don’t know what you should ask for…. well you have to fight for that.

Jamie works as a special education teacher in another district, and used his own knowledge from his work to negotiate additional services for his son:

Jamie: For example, my younger child, he’s been struggling since first grade with reading and I want to make sure he’s getting all the reading services that he got. And then they told me that he no longer needs reading services, however he’s not performing well in the classroom. And I’ve basically kept saying to them, well I think he needs some type of support. And I said basically, what about some type of academic intervention program for him? They said, you know, jeez, I don’t know if he needs one. And I said, well I think he needs one. And in my experience with children like my son, and I want him to have one, so now he has one. But someone who’s not a teacher or doesn’t even know that an AIS program exists wouldn’t have that resource and say that. So, I got that because of my knowledge of what’s out there.

Jamie also described that in his work as a special education teacher, he had been
admonished by his superiors for mentioning available programs to parents during CSE meetings. He felt caught at times between what he considered to be a moral obligation to help parents of special education students get the best support services for their children, versus his role as a representative of the school that needed to control costs. In describing this conflict, Jamie recognized that parents were at a disadvantage in their interactions with schools in general as schools had greater knowledge and authority. In contrast, Melanie didn’t see this as a problem and expected parents to seek out information they needed for themselves:

Melanie: Well, I think that if you want your child to have more enrichment or outside and advanced work to do, is calling the teacher directly and saying, maybe so-and-so is not in that particular program, if they want their child to be in an advanced program, that’s one thing, if they want their child to have outside enrichment that’s kind of another thing. As a parent, you can kind of do that on our own as well. If you have access to programs..., you have to do some research on your own. In our school district we have..., they have many options for kids. And you have to, as a parent you have to take that responsibility, you really have to kind of research it. The programs are out there.

C. Control over Curriculum, Instruction, and Class Policies

Teachers defend their right to exclusive authority in specific domains

An even larger source of teacher’s authority is derived from their almost exclusive control over four specific domains: curricular decisions, instructional practices, class policies, and grading practices. Teachers’ exclusive control over these areas accompanies their institutional role as teachers. In this one area, teachers were able to consciously recognize and admit that their domination in these areas gave them greater power when negotiating conflicts with parents:
Lieren: I don’t know if I’ve really worked with any who take advantage of (their position), that are you know… I think there are some teachers who do know how much power they have, and do… I don’t know…. they’re going to do things the way they’re going to do it, and that’s the way it is. You know?

Christine: I say, “You’re welcome to email me whenever you think about it, and I’ll respond.” I never don’t, I’m never non-responsive to an email. So, I kind of throw it back on them, “I’d be happy to keep you informed. I don’t necessarily see your son or daughter every Friday, so that’s maybe a difficult thing. Why don’t you email me once a week and I will get back to you?” Sometimes I don’t, because it’s English, I don’t necessarily have a new grade in the book. I’m grading 125 essays when I assign one. So, I might have collected it on Monday, but…I might be able to tell you if he handed it in, but I’m not going to be able to tell you the grade.

Not only were teachers able to consciously recognize the advantage this control gave them over parents, but they also consistently and consciously resisted any attempts made by parents to influence their decisions in this area. Of the thirty-one memorable conflicts recounted by teachers as being resolved to the advantage of the teacher, close to half of those resolutions came about as the result of the teacher exercising their right to exclusively control various aspects of their work. Lieren explains how she and the teachers on her middle school team of teachers refuse to post assignments on the school’s electronic parent communication network:

Lieren: That’s actually something I won’t do. Our team won’t do that. It’s great, we’re all on the same page. We won’t put homework on there, because the kids get an agenda, and we teach them they have to write down their homework in the agenda, and then check it at the end of the day, and bring it home. And I do feel like if you put it on there, it’s an out. It’s like, I’m not going to write anything down, because I can just go to the portal and check it. So, we won’t post homework, we put that all on the kid.

Even though participating teachers characterized themselves as unusually flexible as compared with their colleagues, they all adamantly opposed sharing any type of control in these areas. Indeed, participating teachers did seem more open to
actively communicating with parents than most teachers in my personal experience, but nevertheless, were not willing to negotiate course content and materials, grading decisions, instructional methods, or the like. Christine, who also professed a ready willingness to work with her high school English students to be flexible with assignments and due dates, nevertheless defended certain areas as her exclusive domain: “But in terms of my gradebook, I still control it ultimately and I think administration stand behind us with that.” By referring to the school’s internal hierarchy as supporting teachers’ exclusive decision making, Christine further strengthens her claim to that authority. Nick also declared his willingness to be flexible when working with parents and responding to their requests. When pressed to consider a model of partnership that gave parents any type of influence over curriculum and instruction however, he resisted:

**Nick:** Well with those kinds of situations, if you’re talking about…I mean, if you’re talking about systemic stuff, like what my grading policy is…each test is worth fifty points, and a parent comes in and says, “Well I think that there’s too much weight on the tests and it should be a smaller percentage.” I’m not necessarily going to cede that ground.

Lieren couldn’t even fathom such a concept:

**Rr:** Sometimes parents will interpret ‘partnering’ as parents giving more information to the teachers about their particular kid and helping to guide the teacher in terms of curriculum, assessment, and instruction, on what would work best for their kid. How does that second part of the model, or that idea strike you?

**Lieren:** Honestly? That might be my first thing, like, “Oh my gosh, this is kind of over the top!”

Despite their complete control over these areas, teachers did not demonstrate patience regarding actions that they interpreted as intruding into their exclusive
domain. Suggestions for change, requests for explanations, or queries for specific information such as grades were perceived with annoyance by teachers. Jennifer’s recollection of a parents’ request for a project grade demonstrated her aggravation and subsequent judgment of this parent as demanding and over-involved with her child’s education:

Jennifer: Sometimes the other problem… is the expectation of the parent is that we are just going to enter everything (snapping) just as quickly as can be. I had a presentation in class and that parent, the helicopter parent, keeps calling me about her daughter, “Well how did she do?” Really searching without really asking about the grade, all the way around and back. I said, “Yes I’m working on the grading,” and then on Friday, sent me an email, “I have not heard an update from you.” (teacher thinking…) “OK, well I gave you an update last week.” Now I said, “I am working on grading right now, so I won’t have an update until the top of next week.” And I’m thinking, “Climb off of me. This isn’t going to make me want to grade your kid’s paper any faster, it’s a matter of your kid’s paper isn’t the only thing I have to do here!

Parents frustrated by their inability to influence teachers’ decision-making

In general, parents seemed to recognize the futility of attempting to influence teachers’ domain over curriculum, instruction, classroom policies, and grading practices, but that acceptance didn’t make their powerlessness less frustrating for them. Jolena describes choosing to let the smaller issues slide so that she can focus on the more egregious situations. Despite Danielle’s frustrations with feeling that her son’s special education teacher wasn’t fulfilling her role, she ultimately gave up on her quest to influence what happened in the classroom. When Noelle met with an administrator to discuss her daughters’ over-whelmed math teacher, she felt as though aside from expressing her displeasure, little would actually change in the classroom. Indeed, every single parent retold a memorable conflict that
demonstrated their frustration with their lack of power over classroom processes, but also their recognition that this arena was impenetrable. Fully half of the memorable conflicts that parents recounted as being resolved in favor of the school were the result of the teachers’ exclusive power to make decisions regarding grades, policies, and the like. Parents described a process of attempting to influence a teacher or administrator, but eventually giving up:

**Rhonda:** This was in the fall, in November. So, I knew she had these issues, and let me just tell you, from a communications standpoint, I was going every day, after school and asking the teacher if Sara was doing fine. Because, she was getting a lot of…. she’d get worksheets this thick every Friday. They would be marked, red marks all over them. Because she wasn’t doing them properly. I was so worried, because she had all these mistakes. So, everyday, I’d come pick up my daughter, and talk to the teacher, “Is she doing OK?” And the teacher would just speak in generalities, complain about the class in general, blah blah blah. She would never really give me any definite things with my daughter. So then I get this call from my friend, whose daughter was sobbing because the teacher had thrown (the contents of my daughter’s) desk on the floor, thrown everything out of it, and made her clean up her desk in front of the class. I was flabbergasted.

After working out her concerns about this event with the school’s principal, Rhonda decided to stop asking the teacher for ways that she could help her daughter improve. However, she did insist that the teacher stop making red marks on her daughter’s worksheets. She described helping her daughter get through the remainder of the year and feeling relieved when the school year concluded.

**Jody:** Ninth grade though, we had issues with the Biology teacher at the high school. Although she answered my questions and concerns in a real super-timely fashion, the response most of the time was, “Middle school to high school is an enormous change. There’s an expectation level that’s obviously greater in high school than it was in middle school. We don’t hold their hands. And it’s the first time many of the smart kids now really have to apply themselves and study.” I totally agree with everything she just said. How am I supposed to do those? We’re now in ninth grade, and I’m thinking that our study habits and our organizational skills are so wonderful, and now I’m being told that they’re not. What am I supposed to do?
**Rr:** Did she give you suggestions?

**Jody:** Not really. “He’s a good student, he’ll work it out. I’m always available during the extra-help period.”

**Rr:** So again, reassuring, but no information, no strategies, no suggestions.

**Jody:** Yeah, right. There’s no strategies! And I would assume that I couldn’t be the very first person ever to bring up this issue, so one would assume that somebody else must’ve gotten to the bottom of this. Like, we shouldn’t have to reinvent the wheel. Like the wheel’s already been created. There must’ve been a child similar to my son. You know, how did they work it out?

Jody eventually gave up on attempting to get more information from the teacher that she could use to help her son improve in the class and instead focused her efforts on trying to help her son learn how to work directly with the teacher when he needed extra help.

**D. Access to Specific Student Data**

Teachers utilized their ready access to specific information and data about students as another source of power in their interactions with parents. Participant teachers readily acknowledged that they had more specific information about children’s performance in their classrooms than did parents and also the ability to compare that information with averages and norms. Teachers described actively using this knowledge to defend and explain their decisions as educators.

Interestingly, when teachers described voluntarily sharing information with parents, they conveyed enthusiasm and pride in themselves for doing so and characterized themselves as very willing to share information. However, when having to share information with parents was done involuntarily, at the parents’ request, teachers
expressed frustration and resentment. As in other areas, the duality of teachers’ feelings about sharing information was revealed when comparing teachers’ directly reported perspectives with those they revealed in describing memorable conflicts. Further, when recalling memorable conflicts, teachers also negatively judged parents who questioned teachers’ interpretation of the data, portraying those parents as ‘emotional,’ interested in only their child, ‘over-involved’ and ‘arduous’ to work with.

**Teachers prefer to share information voluntarily**

Without fail, participating teachers characterized themselves as pro-active in sharing information and in extending open invitations to parents to seek more information from them. Various teachers maintained class websites, wrote newsletters home, posted assignments and grades into the school’s parent-communication network, completed mid-quarter reports, issued quarterly averages, called and emailed parents, and attended meetings and conferences with parents. High school teachers of upperclass students recognized that they usually tried to resolve issues directly with their students and only notified parents as a last resort. As a middle school teacher, Nick’s perspective of his willingness to share information was fairly typical of the teachers interviewed:

**Nick:** Right, I guess it’s hard to get word out there. I mean, in my beginning-of-the-year communication, I write to parents, “If you have any concerns, feel free to contact me. Don’t hesitate to contact me.” Every email, that’s one of my last statements: Don’t hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns, I’m happy to address them.

By utilizing available forms of communication, most teachers felt that they had, for the most part, fulfilled the burden of their duty in notifying parents about
their children’s progress. In fact, parents who did not use available sources of information and intervene to help children at risk in what teachers would consider a timely fashion provided a huge source of frustration for teachers.

Sara: I think that’s the most frustrating thing for me though is that I’ll get emails from parents that say, “Is my child missing anything?” And I always want to say, “It’s there. Your child is there. Ask your student. It’s on the Parent Communicator. Why are you emailing me asking me what the homework is? Every time I do anything I give you the website.” So, like some days…and it depends on my mood, I’ll admit, but there’s some days when I look at the email, I mean, I’m always nice I never yell at parents (laughing) but there’s times that I have to walk away, and think, “I have to answer this email next period, because I can’t right now, because I’m really frustrated. I don’t have time to email you back and tell you if your student is missing anything. Look at the Communicator! It’s all there.” If there’s a big flag, then yeah, they’re missing something. So, I think there’s that frustration too, which can be a barrier to good communication, because we’re spending all this time telling you what we do in class every day, what the homework is, and entering my grades on-line. I mean, I’m a believer in that, I think it’s great. And it’s not that I don’t want to talk to you, but maybe we could have a different discussion than, “what do they owe” because you already know that, or you should already know that.

Some teachers acknowledged that they took advantage of these forms of communication primarily in an effort to decrease parents’ requests for information. Other teachers felt that using these communication tools was a preventative strategy that protected the teacher against accusations of not informing parents about their child’s progress.

When in a position of having to respond to a parent-generated request regarding their child’s progress, teachers generally fell back on ‘the data’:

Nick: I try to be as factual and… I just try to lay out everything that has happened. “This is what happened. This is why the consequences that happened, happened. This is why your child got the grade that they got, because this is missing, this is missing, this is missing. I’ve had these communications with you through interims, through report cards, through the guidance counselors, through all these other kinds of ways. And this is why we are where we are.”
Teachers perceived data as very helpful in explaining children’s progress to parents, as can be seen in the excerpt above. Teachers interpreted their sharing of this information with parents either as factual, as helpful for parents, or as a way of clarifying the situation for parents. By sharing specific grades, assignments, due dates, missing work and prior communications, they felt that they ‘illuminated’ the situation and made it more clear.

**Parents perceive teachers use of data as an impenetrable shield**

In direct contrast to teachers’ perceptions, parents felt that student data was utilized by teachers at times as a shield of sorts and as such, was incredibly difficult to penetrate. Parents perceived teachers who defended their positions by using class data as unapproachable, inflexible, quick to become defensive, or as having a ‘tough’ personality. Jody describes a process of being stonewalled by information in her attempt to understand her gifted son’s drop in English, so she eventually retreated and just encouraged her son to do the best he could:

**Jody:** There was, and I think it was somewhat of a personality conflict, and I wasn’t going in and playing the emotional card. I just said, “There’s such confusion. I don’t understand, you know, …how did he get this far with such accolades of his writing skills, and now this is such an opposing opinion?” (The teacher said) “I don’t know, I’m just telling you this is what I’m reading, and this is what I’m getting, and this is what I’m seeing, and this is how I’m grading.”

Jolena described that she would try a few times to get a teacher to shift their position, but if the communication didn’t go well, she was less inclined to make another attempt:

**Jolena:** If I feel that they may have just pushed me off a little too much and I don’t feel that they are approachable, so then I won’t even try.
Every parent interviewed had at least one story regarding feeling stymied by a wall of information when asking a teacher for an explanation or special consideration. The irony is that teachers reported that they were extremely approachable, that they warmly shared information, and that they encouraged parents’ queries. When talking in generalities, teachers characterized themselves as happy to share information and welcoming of parents’ inquiries.

**Lieren:** I think you have to have that open relationship. I think you have to share exactly what’s going on in the classroom.

**Catherine:** And I’d rather have them ask also, because I do a ton of writing… I do a lot of open-notebook testing. And to me, some people, and some parents don’t see the value in that. I’d rather have them ask, “What’s the policy in your class?” Maybe last year ‘open notebook’ was the last thing anyone would allow them do. I’d rather explain how my classroom works, so at least in the beginning of the year, I don’t mind those calls.

**Teachers utilize data to defend their decisions and positions**

Again, while teachers directly reported a willingness to share information with parents, their recollection of memorable events told a different story. In six different conflicts recounted by five teachers, a picture of emerged of teachers who did indeed use their ready access to data and information to counter and rebut what they perceived as a parental attack. Nina, a highly experienced middle school English teacher, described having to defend a students’ project grade as stressful. She suggests that the parent’s difficult personality was the real problem. Her defense consisted mainly of going back to the grading tool she had designed to explain why the student had received a lower grade:

**Nina:** I think personality plays a role too. Personality of a teacher versus a student and versus a parent. Personalities come into play. And I think the situation that
caused some stress for me was that the student was telling the parent one story, which was not accurate. And then, because the parent believed the student over me as a teacher, I felt as though I was in a no-win situation. And I simply said, “We have to agree to disagree.” And it was regarding a classroom participation grade for a speaking unit. We were doing speeches on the Holocaust. And one small part of the rubric was classroom participation, you had to be a listener, and you were not going to be interrupting or distracting any speakers, and that student did. And that student lost five points off of a score of... instead of a 95, he earned a 90.

**Rr:** And so you had to defend that.

**Nina:** Yes I did. And I did it very well, because it was in the rubric.

Lieren used the data to defend herself to the mother of a sixth grader, even though she admitted that she should have notified the parent about the child’s poor performance:

**Lieren:** The second problem was that he ended up getting a D for me in reading, because he did not hand in a final project in reading. And she just called me and said, “This was unacceptable, all year you’re calling me about behavior, yet you did not call me and tell me that he was getting a D in reading, and I have a real problem with this.” And in some ways, she was right. In some ways it was. But, the boy and I had had numerous conversations, where we had sat down and I had said, “Here is your average, you are going to get a D if you do not hand in this project.” You know, come in and see me eighth period.” And he’d come in and work, but then he’d never hand in anything in. I made it very clear to him. I guess, what I felt was that it’s the end of the year, at this point, and you’re in sixth grade, and you know the consequences, and you know he has to make this decision. But her point was, “If I had known, he would have handed it in.” And she really was right, to some degree.

Some of the most striking and consistent interview data from the teachers was related to their reactions to a common parental complaint: that a child is not being well-challenged in the course. Of the five teacher interviews and one focus group where this topic was broached, all eight teachers side-stepped this parental concern by suggesting that there was a completely different reason for this complaint.

Without fail, teachers utilized their access to academic data to support an assertion
that a bored child was actually just lazy. The following excerpt from a focus group of high school teachers was extremely typical:

**Catherine:** If now we’re in the last marking period, and they’re saying that “my child is bored,” well where have you been the previous three marking periods? Has your child felt bored at that time and what have you done about it then? It’s more questioning. But I think those students whose parents are saying, “They can do...handle more” I think you can more readily agree or disagree with them based on substance, based on grades, based on what you see in the classroom: are they participating, are they awake?

**Eddie:** You’ve got back up data, I mean you’ve observed them, usually you’re going to know who is bored....

**Catherine:** Absolutely.

**Eddie:** …who’s saying that because they don’t want to do the work, and you can back it up by saying, “It’s not that they’re not doing well, or they’re not excited about it, that they’re bored it’s that they …they need to focus on doing this, this, and this.” You've got a bunch of… (pieces of information) Usually if it’s later in the year, then for sure you’ve got that.

A few teachers expressed a good deal of frustration to this particular parental complaint and Lieren explained that she perceived this complaint as a personal criticism of her work, confessing “That one for some reason always gets me.” Two teachers ridiculed parents who made such statements as probably wrongfully believing that their child was ‘gifted’. No teacher suggested that the criticism might be merited and worthy of additional attention.

**E. Ability to affect Students Emotionally and Academically**

Without doubt, the most powerful source of teachers’ power in parents’ minds stems from teachers’ inordinate ability to affect their children’s social, emotional, and academic well-being. The idea of possible negative repercussions that might result
from a parent’s communication with a teacher played a dominant role in every single
parent’s decision to approach teachers. Essentially, parents had to calculate the risk-
to-benefit ratio before contacting a teacher. That is, were the potential benefits from
a positive outcome worth the risk of possibly alienating, or worse, angering their
child’s teacher? Based on prior interactions with teachers, even were those
interactions relatively benign, all parents considered teachers to be an inordinately
defensive group of professionals. Noelle’s reflections are very typical:

**Noelle:** They get defensive. Teachers, in my opinion, tend to get defensive if you
question them, because I think they internalize it that you’re questioning their skill
level. When really what you’re questioning is the progression of the academic
performance.

**Rr:** Okay. So are you extra careful when you are….

**Noelle:** Yes. (very emphatic) Not only are we extra careful, that we also have a
tendency to make sure that we are not creating any type of an environment when our
child could experience repercussions.

**Rr:** Okay. And you’re always aware of that.

**Noelle:** Always. Whenever we’re in a situation like this particularly um, with our
son, we’ve always said you know we don’t want to make the teacher defensive or feel
inferior because then we don’t want to see the repercussion against our child.

Parents expressed fear over small and large potential repercussions against
their child: that the teachers wouldn’t be as warm to the student, might not go the
‘extra mile’ to help the child, or worse, could actually target and belittle their child.
Jolena described her fears that she would develop a reputation as a ‘tough parent’
which would follow her child. She acknowledged, “I am the black-listed parent,” but
refused to back away from what she perceived as important educational supports
needed by her blind son. She recounted a story in which she felt that her son had
been further targeted and the teacher had become increasingly difficult after a few interactions between her and the teacher. She ultimately stopped interacting with the teacher and communicated via her son’s school counselor instead. Teachers’ ability to negatively impact their child’s grades was another concern. Jody stressed that “Nowhere in education do your grades count as much as when you’re in high school.”

Many teachers agreed that parents’ fears could be legitimate. Only one teacher, Nina, absolutely opposed the possibility of negative repercussions on a child, considering it to be “deplorable” and a “black spot on my profession.” Four teachers insisted that while other colleagues might allow negative interactions with parents to impact their work with children, that they personally would never do so. Several teachers proudly characterized themselves as always being ‘consistent and fair.’ For the most part, it seemed that teachers with fewer years of experience were more insistent that repercussions should not occur. Teachers with ten or more years of experience were more practical, and admitted that they understood either distancing oneself emotionally from the child or perhaps not extending oneself as far for the child after a difficult interaction with a parent. Most of the teachers were able to mention a colleague in their building however who was notorious for ‘digging their heels in’ after a negative situation with the parents, that is, becoming less flexible in working with the student and more rigid in enforcing their own rules and policies.

A few teachers asserted that while they might pull away from a child emotionally who was perceived has having a ‘difficult’ parent, that their awareness of
the parent’s involvement might prompt them to be more careful of that child’s grades. Three teachers said that they would probably be warmer to the child, feeling sympathetic that the child had to deal with such an irrational parent at home. However, those teachers did mention keeping better ‘mental and physical records’ in terms of grades, copies of completed assignments, attendance records, and the like.

Teachers who were parents of school-aged children themselves, were also more ready to recognize the power teachers hold over children. Kristen recognized that teachers do indeed have significant power to control grades:

Kristen: Right. That’s one thing I do….I’m always very careful if I’m talking to my son’s teachers because, a teacher, it’s human nature, you couldn’t even help it if you tried, there’s some things, I don’t know, 89.4, will a teacher give that student a 90? If they can, have the ability, because you know that student is a nice student with the nice parents. But if somebody is yelling at you, with an 89.4, you’re not really going to go that little bit of extra if you don’t have to you, if you have a choice.

Christine recounted a class her own daughter had to ‘survive’ as a second grader:

Christine: I just knew enough from my involvement with the district, and spending time in her elementary school, that it was very likely….when my daughter comes home and tells me, “Mom, she has him (another student) standing with his nose to the wall.” And I said, “What about when the principal is there?” And she says, “She has him sit down when the principal is there, and then when he leaves, she makes him get back up again.” And I thought, “This is clearly a person who knows how to manipulate…” And I was not going to put my daughter in that position. And it made it…, it was a hellatious year, a hellati ous year. She came home and cried at least twice a week. And she wasn’t the target of the yelling, and she was that stressed. After several months, Christine finally decided to call the principal, but made sure to let him know, ‘you didn’t hear this from me.’ While Christine wanted to protect her daughter from similar treatment from the teacher, she did, in retrospect, feel guilty about not doing more to intervene on the targeted student’s behalf. Christine recognized that the boy’s parent might not have had as many resources as she did to
advocate for the child, but she felt that as a district employee, she had to be more careful. Taken together, her actions and comments suggested that teachers turned a blind eye to their colleagues’ negative treatment of students. In these interviews, even when teachers condemned teachers for treating students differently after negative interactions with their parents, no teacher suggested taking any action to prevent or hold teachers accountable for doing so.

All in all, of the five broad categories of power outlined in this section, the ability to negatively affect a child’s well being was the one area in which teachers most easily acknowledged that they held a much greater and obvious advantage over parents, but that it wasn’t fair or appropriate. The greatest difference between parents’ and teachers’ perspectives in this category was really a matter of degree. That is, parents and also their children, expressed profound anxiety over the possibility of repercussions by teachers, and this anxiety made parents avoid resolving problems with teachers, hesitate as long as possible, or approach teachers with extreme caution. Teachers, while able to admit that repercussions occurred and that parents’ fears were legitimate, marginalized this fear as not as important as parents made it out to be. The drastic difference in the importance parents and teachers attributed to repercussions was, quite simply, absolutely tremendous.

2. How Parents Claim Power

As shown above, teachers are structurally positioned in their relationships with parents holding a great deal of power that stems from their role as representatives of
the institution of school. However, parents utilize three major strategies in an effort to overcome the imbalance of power with teachers. Time and again, parents described how careful and cautious they are in their conversations with teachers. Parents described utilizing a myriad of politeness strategies in these interactions. These discourse strategies included the use of lexical hedges (maybe, perhaps, should…), modal auxiliaries (might, would, could, may…), use of indirectness and circumlocution, and preceding criticisms with a compliment. These discourse strategies seemed to be abandoned however when parents unconsciously employed emotion as a method of pressuring a teacher. One pattern that is very clear in the review of parent interview data below is that, unlike teachers, parents were much more willing to discuss power differences on an overt level. While teachers generally shied away from claiming stronger positions of power, status, and authority over parents, parents were much more comfortable in admitting those differences as such, and in discussing specific strategies they used to overcome those differences.

A. Access to Administration and the Board of Education

Five of the parents interviewed described instances where they had gone to an administrator when not satisfied with a teacher’s response. The parent who was also a teacher seemed to access his own knowledge of school systems instead when needing to advocate for his children. The parent of the gifted child had never gone to administration with a problem, but she had voiced concerns regarding planned program changes at school board meetings. Parents viewed the administrative chain
of command as a vitally important resource for them in resolving conflicts. They were unapologetic in using administrators as a resource and several mentioned how they actively encouraged other parents to do so as well. Jolena described her relationships with a school administrator and the school counselor as the ones she trusted the most at the school:

**Jolena:** Just two weeks ago, I had the counselor, we had a situation in May with the chemistry teacher, and in my hysteria in calling the guidance counselor, which I don’t usually do, I’m usually pretty put together, I just left a message and said, please call me. Well, as soon as I heard the voice, I bawled. And I talked to her for about 25 minutes. She was very upset to hear about him coming home very upset. And that happened to be a Thursday. She was out of the building on Friday, and she called me for an hour on Saturday and really got to the bottom of things, resolved a lot of the issues, had pursued things, (even) being away from the school district on Friday. So, I really feel that those two people (the counselor and an assistant principal) in particular really have our best interest.

As parents, Danielle, Rhonda, and Jody described detailed stories in which they had attended meetings of the Board of Education and actively campaigned for a particular position or program. In Danielle’s reflection of this strategy, she demonstrates an acute awareness of how parents’ can claim power by bringing a concern to such a public arena as a school board meeting.

**Danielle:** And another thing that parents don’t do, again I think they’re afraid, is bringing their concerns, if they are valid, to the school board. The last thing in the world, trust me principals, teachers, trust me, not that you ever go and mention a person by name, but I would mention the school, is bringing concerns to the school board. Trust me, I tell people all the time, “If this is really a concern, you need to go to the school board.” I think people don’t realize the power of the school board. The school board really carries a lot of power and there’s press at the school board meetings. And it’s for the record, anything you say the school board meeting is taken down. There’s notes, there’s minutes taken and now our district has started videotaping them, videostreaming. So, it’s a very powerful tool that parents don’t use, and I don’t understand why… because for years I have brought issues to the school board I have felt to be critically important. I’ve had to bring it and speak about it multiple times, and I can tell you, things do happen.
Teachers report great frustration with parents’ use of administration

Parents’ willingness to utilize the administration frustrated all of the teachers in this study. Even if they did not have a direct experience of this themselves, teachers had an acute awareness of this parental practice. As a middle school special education teacher, Michelle presented at face value as holding a sympathetic perspective of parents. Nevertheless, she was keenly aware of how parents’ willingness to take issues to higher levels changed parent-teacher dynamics:

Rr: Do you think teachers realize how much power they have in interactions with kids and parents? Parents think that teachers are absolutely powerful. They hold all the cards….

Michelle: No, because we think the parents hold all the cards.

Rr: Can you talk about that a little bit?

Michelle: Well I think they do.

Rr: How?

Michelle: Well, the parent calls your administrator up. They’re loud. They’re vocal. Not in that they’re loud on the phone, but they’re vocal. Then they’re going to talk to the superintendent next and yadda, yadda, yadda. And, as our superintendent tells us, “Parents are our consumers.” OK? So we’re supposed to do everything we can to please the parents.

Other teachers were more understanding of parents’ need to advocate for their children and realized that ‘going to a administrator’ was at times, warranted. However, without fail, teachers expected parents to approach them first with their concerns. In talking about her work as a school counselor, Melanie understood this unwritten expectation on the part of teachers:
Melanie: Well, I always would encourage parents, if they weren’t happy with the response from the teacher, then encourage them to go to the principal, or encourage them to put something in writing, and then present that. But some people have typically taken that route, but some parents are just the type that go right to the principal.

Nina, Sara, Eddie, Jennifer, and Mike expressed frustration with teachers who go directly to the principal. In an interesting exchange with Eddie, he thought that this practice was one of the most grievous actions a parent could take:

Eddie: I also think that with the other thing there, going to straight to the administrator, before they ever talk to you once, that honestly, is a different story. Now that’s almost like, “You’re not even worth the time to talk with. I’m going above you.” That’s a different story than if they come to me and say, “Here’s my concern, I don’t know if you’re doing this, this is my concern with that.” Then that’s a window to them, a window to their kids, and that really helps. But if they’re the kind of person that goes straight (to the principal), “I’m going to get this teacher right now. I’m not even going to talk to them, they’re not worth it.” That’s a different story to me. That’s a red flag. They don’t even see you as an equal that they can talk to you, they’ve got to go to somebody above you. That’s a red flag to me.

After I explained some of the situations that parents had shared that they felt warranted bypassing the teacher and going directly to an administrator, Eddie persisted, “It would have to be something gigantic, really gigantic.”

Ironically, seven of the teachers at other points in the interviews used the term ‘advocate’ and explained that they understood that parents needed to advocate for their children. Eddie and Mike even recognized that parents might not necessarily appreciate how the teacher or administrator might need to make decisions that were in the best interest of the majority of students, rather than just one child. Both teachers and parents agreed that an acceptable part of parents’ role was to advocate for their child as an individual. However, similar to other aspects of parent-teacher
relationships, while teachers expressed an explicit acceptance of parents-as-advocates in theory, their stories about memorable conflicts revealed their frustrations with this practice:

**Catherine:** I’ve had a parent call, in the previous school that I was in, a parent called the administrator because the son complained I was not smiling enough the hallway. And I am not lying, I am like, are you kidding me? I’m not smiling enough in the hallway?! And to really stop and think, what is going on? And this was, it turned out, a really a vindictive parent.

Catherine could have expressed sympathy for the child’s delicate emotional state, or for the parent’s inability to help his son manage his feelings. However, Catherine expressed a great deal of frustration with the situation and labeled the parent as ‘vindictive.’

The teacher data further revealed that for some teachers, hearing about another teacher’s experience was enough for them to develop a positive or negative perspective regarding the effectiveness of parents going to administrators for support. Nina, Nick, Eddie, Christine, and Michelle explained that a teacher had never gone to their administrator about a problem with them, but that their awareness of the practice did affect how they responded to parents in general. In fact, of the nine memorable conflicts teachers reported being resolved in favor of the parents, only 3 of those resolutions came about because the parent had gone to an administrator. Of the 15 memorable conflicts recounted by parents as being resolved in their favor, only 3 resolutions came about as a result of two parents going to an administrator.

Nevertheless, this strategy factored as both the most frequently used and most stressful from a teacher’s perspective.
Michelle described a fellow teacher who received a call from a parent who was not happy with a particular grade her son had received on a project. Michelle recounts a process whereby other instances in which the administrations’ prior decisions that ‘sided with the parent’ had influenced teachers in the school and led them to capitulate more easily to parental demands.

**Michelle:** It makes us feel that we don’t have any support, because sometimes you want to take a stand. I’ll give you another example. I was standing with an eighth grade teacher who had just graded research papers, spent a lot of time grading those research papers. A kid came to her, said, she had an 88 on the paper… they had a rubric. And the kid said, and part of it was, she got maybe two out of four points or something for accuracy or something it may have been. “I would not have put anything in there if it wasn’t accurate blah, blah, blah.” and kids, and the teacher says, “The reason I did that,” and I know this person, so I can see in the back of her mind, this is, “You mean you gave my baby a buu-buu-buu-buu-bah?!!” (in a high falsetto voice). OK, take the two points.

**Rr:** It’s not worth the hassle.

**Michelle:** No, it’s not worth the hassle. And see, so many of us are doing that for a lot of things because, we are not going to get support administratively, because the parent will win.

**Rr:** All right. And do you feel like that is a common perception, at least among teachers in this school?

**Michelle:** Yes.

In this story, the teacher actually agrees with the student simply to avoid an anticipated phone call from the parent and then possible future discussions with administrators. Kristen, Lieren, and Nick all related similar personal stories in which the administrator had agreed with the parent and how discouraged they had felt as a result. Lieren and Christine had worked in more than one school district and were able to compare administrative responses in different schools. They both felt that the
degree to which administrators were perceived to ‘back the teachers’ made teachers feel more or less powerful in their interactions with parents.

Lieren: I think it depends where you work. Because I worked in one place where the principal would always side with the teacher, and then he might ream you out afterwards, and be like, “I didn’t agree with this, but I backed you to the parents.” I worked in another, because I worked two places and in the other place, it is frustrating because the principal is going to side with the parents in most situations. And that’s frustrating because then the parents really do have more power. In the other school, I would say we had more power. And in this second school, the parents did have more power, if they talked long enough, or loud enough, they were going to get their way.

In general, teachers characterized their interactions with parents as a large source of anxiety and their anticipation of administrator’s involvement as a large part of that anxiety.

It should be noted that parents understood that going to an administrator did not necessarily guarantee success. In fact, four parents expressed frustration with what they perceived as a ‘protective stance’ of administrators. Danielle complained:

Danielle: I do perceive that in many instances that the function of the principal has really gotten distorted. I feel that a lot of principals are more concerned with sticking up for their teachers and their union rights than they are for sticking up and being involved with parents and students.

Thus, a parent’s ability to go to an administrator, whether exercised or not, remained a significant, but not absolute check on a teacher’s responsiveness to a parental request.

B. Persistence

Parents in this study described another powerful tool that they utilized when working with teachers and schools: persistence. Interestingly, parents described this
practice of repeatedly going back to the teacher for more information or to repeat a
prior request as ‘being assertive,’ ‘not giving up,’ or ‘having to fight.’ Teachers used
terms such as ‘demanding,’ ‘relentless,’ and ‘aggressive’ to describe parents who
persisted in seeking information. One of the most-used criticisms from teachers was
their categorization of parents as ‘over-involved’ or ‘helicopter parents.’ In contrast,
only one parent ever perceived her oversight of her children’s education as over-
involved. Rhonda admitted that her daily conversations with her daughter’s teachers
wasn’t helpful and learned to moderate her personal need for information.

Parents expressed frustration with teachers who did not follow-through and
with administrators who did not hold teachers accountable. Persistence was the
strategy that parents reported as being the most successful. More than half of the
resolutions of memorable conflicts they reported as resolved in their favor came
about as a result of their persistence. Jolena described how she had developed a
philosophy of sorts of simply having to actively ensure that her children received
modifications and accommodations as laid out in their IEP’s. Jolena had developed
a complex system of frequent email communications, periodic meetings, and nightly
agenda checks to ensure that teachers followed through on the stipulations of the
IEP:

**Jolena:** Well, I... the only problem I have, is that we’ve had so many problems in
the past that I don’t trust the professionals that care for him. Because they can’t
provide material on time, they don’t give him what he needs immediately like every
other child. They continue to keep him at a disadvantage. He is a very bright child.
He is an A+, B student. So there is no reason why they shouldn’t easily
accommodate him. All they have to do is send him either something electronically,
or give him large printed material. They can’t do it consistently. Not every teacher,
but it happens. “Oooh, I forgot!” “Well, what do you mean you forgot? It’s June! What do you mean you forgot?”

Danielle experienced a similar frustration with her son’s special education teacher who was supposed to help her son develop organizational skills:

**Danielle:** Well, one was a special education teacher and my son was just getting, he would see her just three times a week. She did nothing. She was not implementing my son’s IEP; he just went basically to see her for study skills. She was supposed to help him stay organized, but the only time it seemed anything ever got done was like if I called a meeting or said, “You know, we need to sit down, I think there’s things that we need to…” All of a sudden, you know, and then the binders would finally get organized.

Eventually Danielle gave up on having this teacher work effectively with her son.

She felt fortunate in that her son was finally at the point of being able to be successful without this intervention, but she expressed sympathy for those children in the class who really needed this teacher’s support. Her son ended up using the class period as a study hall and Danielle gave up trying to get the teacher to follow through.

Three other parents described similar situations of feeling frustrated with a teacher’s performance and deciding that only by repeatedly staying in contact with the teachers could the parent ensure that their child would be successful. Parents suggested that this process was actually fairly exhausting and frustrating for them. While two parents acknowledged that this was simply what their children needed from them, other parents expressed a desire that teachers and the school district could make the process of supporting their children easier for them as parents.

In some instances, such as Danielle’s above, parents were able to accept that they would not be able to improve a situation for their child, but that ultimately it
would be okay. This attitude was reflected in stories told by Jody, Danielle, Christine, Rhonda, and Noelle. At other times however, parents’ inability to improve their child’s situation led to a good deal of emotion, and at times a feeling of helplessness. Jolena started to cry when recounting how frustrating it was to have to send her child off to a teacher every day who she did not perceive as being competent or concerned about him personally.

At first, Danielle was fairly exasperated when the special education teacher tried to absolve herself from helping her son learn study skills. Before Danielle ‘gave up’ on the teacher, this was a big source of frustration for her:

Danielle: I just think this one particular person just wasn’t doing her job. And every time we came to a meeting, you know, she would say, “Well, I explained this to your child, and I did la, la, la.” In other words, she’s trying to make…, everything that was going wrong, was my son’s fault. And I’m trying to you know, say, “You know, if my son was capable of doing this stuff, he wouldn’t have an IEP!” I said, “So, for you to be sitting here trying to blame him for his binders not being organized…” I said, “The reason why he has an IEP is because he has documented organizational issues with which you’re supposed to be helping!”

Parents did demonstrate some awareness that school’s internal ability to improve a teacher’s behavior was somewhat limited by tenure laws and other factors. However, both Noelle and Jody, who worked as administrators in the business world, found this to be extremely exasperating:

Noelle: I don’t know about it, but you know it just doesn’t seem to be that way in public education. And, there seems to be teachers, don’t get me wrong we’ve had our fair share fantastic teachers, there are some that just have not met in the needs of our children. And we say to each other, “How do they continue to keep their job? “How does that happen? You know, why aren’t they… Why isn’t it dealt with?”
Teachers described personal judgments of parents’ involvement

As teachers, Nick, Eddie, and Christine recognized that that involved, supportive parents were preferable to parents that they would characterize as under-involved or absent from their child’s education. Without fail, when teachers reached out to parents of struggling students, they expected both verbally-supportive responses as well as an improvement in the student’s behavior. When parents did not respond positively, or the child’s behavior did not improve, the teacher would generally not initiate another contact with the parent again, aside from completing required school progress reports. Christine, Mike, Sara, and Nick M. described situations in which this had occurred for them. Sara described this type of parent as the most frustrating for her, and feeling like she was not ‘backed up’ by them.

Sara: I don’t know. I find myself getting the most frustrated and feeling the most hopeless with parents that say they’re going to back me up at home, and then it doesn’t happen. So, if I call up and say, before the end of the Mikeing period, and say, “We’ve had 3 weeks this quarter, I’ve gotten no homework from your student, this is what I’ve done, this is what we’ve put in place, your child and I together, and I’m just letting you know, and if you could support at home.” And you get, “Yes, definitely, they’ll have it tomorrow, for sure, that’s all they’re going to do this weekend.” And then Monday rolls around and you still don’t get the work. And you say, “What did you do this weekend?” “Well, I went to a carnival, I went to…” Well, that’s not necessarily backing me up. Not even on a personal level, but I find that to be the most frustrating. I end up giving up. You call once or twice, you hear that, and then you’re like, it’s not going to do me any good to call home anyway, so I’ll just deal with it, with the child. So I find that to be the most frustrating, as opposed to the parent who, I’ve never had them say this to me, but who is like, “Look there is nothing I can do about it, so it’s all you and the kid.” That would almost be better! (laughing) That would almost be more open. It would be annoying, but it would be honest, I feel like.

Directly reported responses from other teachers supported Sara’s acceptance of parents who don’t feel able to be supportive. Mike, Nick M., Christine, Lieren,
and Michelle all expressed a conscious understanding that some parents had fewer resources and could not be as supportive as other parents. As Lieren said, “Then you just know that you have to pick it up a little bit on your end.” However, as will be discussed in greater detail in the last section of this chapter, teachers tended to negatively judge parents who did not respond in ways that teachers expected or desired. Teachers described parents as uninvolved, anti-school, not valuing education, and having emotional issues. Teachers attributed parents’ perceived lack of involvement to parents being too busy and over-committed, to the family’s poverty, to working too much, and to their situation as single parents. These judgments and rationalizations for parents’ undesirable behaviors have been observed by other researchers as well (O’Connor 2001; Ramirez 2001) and are described more fully in chapter three.

While teachers definitely preferred ‘supportive’ parents to ‘uninvolved’ parents, teachers still tended to be most critical of parents that they would characterize as ‘over-involved’. Essentially, it seemed that teachers wanted parents to be responsive to teacher-initiated requests, but preferred that parents limit their requests of teachers. Too many parent-initiated requests were considered to be excessive, intrusive, time-consuming, and ultimately annoying.

Lieren: When I say, like someone who’s over-involved, that would be the parents who at this level, their child is doing well but they’re e-mailing constantly. We do have one of those this year. The child is exceptional. She’s very quiet, but she gets a 100 on everything. She’s just wonderful. But the mother is always emailing still. And you do get a little bit like, ‘Are you kidding me?’
Jennifer: I have one that emails me at least twice a week, “How is my daughter doing? Does she have all of her work in to you?” Oh really, then again this is at the advanced level. So like I said, helicopter parent. That’s the kind of email that I get.

Sara: I think for me the frustration comes from if it’s the same parent calling. Like, if I give a test and the parent emailed me, and maybe I give a test in January, and I hear from a parent I haven’t heard from all year who asks about the test, my initial reaction is, “Whoa. I need to go back and look at the test to make sure that what I am saying is accurate.” Then, that does not frustrate me as much as a parent that I hear from maybe once a week, “Can you explain what’s going on in class.” That to me, is “you need to back off.” This is a little much.

Kristen: I feel that there are two types of parents, and they’re both the extremes. One is totally, what’s the word, overpowering and controlling of the student and wants to make sure that the students pass and earn good grades, but want the school district to do it all. Then the other extreme are parents who believe that their students should be responsible and be learning to be independent, and they don’t want them to have special ed help, and they want them to face consequences, and learn how to become adults.

Teachers criticized parents who they perceived as overly-involved in their children’s schooling as not understand the importance of having that child learn to be an independent learner. Yet, teachers remained vague regarding how much parental involvement was too much and how much involvement was considered supportive. Ultimately, seven of the teachers suggested that responding to parent-initiated communications became tiring in that they felt somewhat beleaguered, feeling as though they had to continually defend their decisions and practices. While parents found the strategy of inquiry and persistence to be effective, teachers found it to be somewhat intrusive, time-consuming, and ultimately distracting from the rest of their work.
C. Emotion

Because parents care so strongly for their children and naturally want to protect their children from harm, parents felt strong emotions when they perceived threats to their children’s welfare. All of the parents described feeling angry, sad, distraught, or other powerful emotions when recounting memorable conflicts. Five of the mothers cried briefly during the interviews when retelling stories about tough situations for their children. These moments inevitably occurred as the mothers were recalling their incredible frustration at not feeling heard by school personnel or remembering how powerless they felt at the time to improve the particular situation for their children. Two mothers told how they had cried during meetings with school personnel. Three mothers described that during memorable conflicts, they had become so emotional and nervous that they would tremble and shake, but that they preserved regardless of their own emotional reactions.

While most parents recalled feeling frustration and some degree of anger over situations with their children, only one mother recounted ever expressing anger to a school administrator. In that situation, the fourth-grade teacher of Rhonda’s daughter had, in front of the rest of the class, dumped the contents of her desk on the floor and ordered the girl to pick it all up and reorganize her desk. Rhonda was so enraged at how her daughter had been humiliated, that she called the principal directly, met later with the superintendent, and requested that the teacher be disciplined for this event. Four parents however described the great pains they took to keep anger out of their interactions with teachers, and how hard they strove to
manage their emotions so that they would not leak out during their interactions with teachers, despite the intensity of those emotions.

**Jolena:** Well, having had pretty difficult issues since sixth grade, and he’ll be a junior, there seems to be issues every year with one teacher. It doesn’t matter on the subject, it just happens to be a teacher that doesn’t get along way to him, or has difficulty with one of his accommodations. I’ve had to do this for seventeen years and it’s very emotional and I don’t want to keep him dependent. I want him to live on his own. And I want him to do everything by himself, but when you see a child’s spirit crushed, I really have to try not to go in and harm the teacher…. verbally.

In general, both teachers and parents understood that parents would naturally feel strong emotions regarding their children. Differences occurred in expectations about how those emotions should be managed. Parents implied that school personnel should be more accepting of parents’ emotions. Noelle expected that teachers would not only accept parents’ emotions as a part of their work, but that teachers be more proficient at managing and responding to parents’ emotions.

**Noelle:** And it’s OK for parents to disagree with the teacher and it’s OK for parents to have emotion and that emotion could be deep sadness. That emotion could be anger. It’s not only OK, it should be expected. You’re dealing with their precious commodities. You have to be prepared for that. You have to understand when you get an angry parent, who disagrees with you, how to diffuse that and not create more defensiveness. They have to be empathetic, but they have to at the same time they have to be honest and candid. And I don’t know, I don’t know that they’re taught that.

**Teachers’ responses to parents’ emotions**

Teachers generally accepted sadness as an appropriate or at least, as an understandable emotion from parents. As a school counselor, Lieren was the most comfortable with parents’ emotions, and expressed a desire to reassure parents. Kristen mentioned that she felt badly for parents who seemed hopeless, and that
made her want to help them more. Three teachers mentioned listening to parents’ emotions and concerns, and then re-directing the conversation back to the issue at hand.

Teachers’ responses to parents’ anger were drastically different. Six teachers felt that when parents brought their anger into parent-teacher interactions, the conversation became much more difficult. Only Jamie and Mike, both of whom worked in urban settings, displayed little frustration with parents’ displays of anger. Jamie said, “Oh yeah, I see that kind of stuff all the time in my school. It’s just a part of it.” and Mike described angry parents as just wanting to vent. Mike recommended the best response a teacher could have was not arguing back, but just letting the parents let their feelings out at first. After that, he explained, a more productive dialogue could occur between the parent and the teacher.

Nick was perhaps the most emphatic about his frustration with parents who brought anger to the table and perceived this type of behavior as inappropriate. When asked what he thought would be a more appropriate parental approach, he replied:

**Nick**: There wouldn’t be the visceral reaction. There wouldn’t be the finger-pointing and name-calling and that kind of thing. It would be a more rational approach to the whole situation. I think that the same kind of rules which govern all interactions in life, should govern interactions between teachers and parents. If you’re going someplace and start screaming, people aren’t going to react well to that. If you want something, you know, a calm approach gets you a lot further.

Two parents, Danielle and Melanie, also expressed great dismay at parents’ inappropriate displays of anger:

**Danielle**: I can’t even explain it, anger, I mean sometimes there are some parents
who are just so over the top disrespectful. There’s no room, there’s no..., I mean they walk in the room and I mean even... and I’m a very vocal parent member, when something, you know I’m not just someone who will sit there and shake their heads, I’m very vocal. But some parents just come in and they’re, well they’re nasty and they’re angry.

Teachers described different responses to parents’ anger, reporting that they usually became more inflexible in their positions, wanted to fight back, or dismissed the parents’ concerns as ‘irrational’. Jennifer described a process of continually re-focusing the parent on the child’s issues, rather than the parent’s emotional needs. Nick’s response to emotional parents was to become extraordinarily factual. He utilized student data in an attempt to “make the conversation more rational.” When I asked teachers how prepared they felt to manage parents emotions, they admitted that they weren’t, declared that they were not ‘social workers,’ and explained that they had received little to no training regarding how to work with parents. Nick responded:

**Nick:** I don’t think I’ve ever considered that. I’d say I’m probably not well equipped to handle emotional responses in general. I don’t necessarily see that as part of my job or part of my training. I present the facts and say, “This is what’s happened and this is why it’s happened. I’m happy to have a conversation about it.” But if someone gets..., if there’s a lot of emotion brought into it, I don’t know necessarily how to respond to it.

Jennifer explained how parents’ emotions could make her work as a teacher more difficult: “They complicate your ability so much to get the child through the course, because they’re bringing so much to the table that I can’t solve or manage because it’s outside of the scope or the realm of possibility for me.”

Teachers’ frustration with parents’ emotions and anger most specifically, is exactly what makes emotions such a powerful tool for parents. Jody describes her
tears as the turning point in a conversation at a Board of Education meeting. Before she began to cry, Jody felt that the school representatives spoke in platitudes and generalities. Her tears emphasized the depth of the importance of the issue to her and helped school personnel address her concerns with a greater degree of sincerity.

**Jody:** I know we had an issue when they were going to move our fifth graders back to the middle school, and I was on that whole committee, and I can remember standing up at a meeting, and I wound up, I wound up crying. Because they kept saying, “They’ll be…they’ll be okay.” And I said, “On paper they’ll be okay, but will they be fine? And that’s what you need to look at.” And it makes me teary-eyed even now, I said, “We have to work together. It’s not two separate entities…somehow we have to come together. You know? Just because it works on paper, you have to look at the bigger picture, these are little individuals.”

**Rr:** Did you feel like the school district lost sight of that sometimes?

**Jody:** They did. And let me tell you, when I started crying, a bunch of them were like, “Oh my god.”

**Rr:** When they were reassuring you that it was going to be okay, it still wasn’t satisfactory?

**Jody:** It wasn’t satisfactory. I kept bringing up…I was asking specific questions. What about the interactions with older children? I needed to understand the dynamics. How are you putting 10-year-olds with middle schoolers….

**Rr:** with 14-year olds…

**Jody:** with 14-year-olds!

**Rr:** I agree. Fifth and eighth graders are so hugely different.

**Jody:** So hugely different. And I think it wasn’t until I started crying that anyone could hear me. And I kept asking the same questions. And finally, I just said, “You’re just not answering the question.” And one man, I don’t know who he was, he actually came, made sure I was okay, and then they started to express more clearly and in far more detail, how these children, even though they would be in the same building, how they would be very much segregated from the older children.
Teachers’ unconsciously respond to parents’ emotions: the case of emails

Like the one above, teachers’ stories demonstrated how parents’ emotions changed the level of their responsiveness to parents’ concerns. Another way that this was revealed in the interview data was during teachers’ discussions about the disadvantages of email communication. An interesting feature in the interview data was that despite the absence of questions about methods of communication, fifteen participants brought a discussion of the benefits versus disadvantages of email into the conversation. Two teachers and four parents preferred email for its ease in managing small problems and exchanges of information. Seven teachers made of point of discussing the limitations of email for communicating with parents. As one of the most consistent threads of data in the study, these teachers all stated that if they perceived a negative emotion in a parent’s email, that they would call the parent back via telephone. The teachers felt that they were much more able to convey their own concerns, empathy for the parent and child, and understanding of the parent’s position via telephone. When questioned further about this, teachers explained that the lack of tone and inflection in written correspondence, two elements that are so important for conveying emotion, made oral conversations more effective than email communication when communicating with an emotional parent.

Kristen: I think that that is when you can get the emotion across and somebody would understand if you said, “Listen, I really like your son, but he’s got to start working here.” Now if you just wrote that, I don’t know if that has the same message.

Jennifer: I think you are able to hear the tone of the person’s voice, you are able to hear the stress, or the concern of the mom being at her wit’s end in this case.
However, phone calls are much more time-consuming for a teacher than sending a quick email response. The fact that they are willing to make the extra effort to speak with the parent on the phone demonstrates the importance that teachers give to parents’ emotions and their heightened response when they perceive that parents are feeling emotional about an issue.

**Christine:** If I get an email, I usually reply via e-mail, unless that is, I have had parents with concerns about..., that wanted to explain an anxiety their child had about writing and of course I call back for that so we can talk.

Regardless of this evidence of teachers’ heightened responsiveness to parents’ emotions, parents are most likely simply unconsciously sharing emotions as a natural part of communication about events that are important to them. There was no evidence that suggested that parents consciously leveraged emotions as a way of manipulating a more desirable response from teachers. Nevertheless, it remained an effective strategy that helped them penetrate teachers’ defensiveness and protective natures.

To review, the three main strategies used by parents to overcome imbalances of power as demonstrated by the interview data are to speak with administrators, to persist in their inquiries and requests of teachers, and to use emotion as a way of demonstrating the importance of a situation to them and thus pressure teachers to a higher level of response. Parents also mentioned that they felt more powerful when they combined into groups of parents and that then their concerns were more likely to be heard by school personnel. There might, of course, be other strategies utilized by parents that were not revealed in the interview data. These strategies served as
ways of balancing the authority that teachers derive from their position as representatives of the school, but they may not be enough to overcome the inequities in parent-teacher relationships. Despite these strategies, parents still perceived that they were less powerful than teachers, and thus, for the most part, attempted to avoid direct conflicts with teachers. If a parent felt that they did indeed need to confront a teacher, they approached teachers very carefully and employed a variety of discursive strategies in an attempt to manage teachers’ responses.

3. Soft-touching a teacher

Parents in this study reported that, in their opinion, the majority of teachers who had worked with their children were very good teachers and generally responsive to their requests. Rhonda reflected that because her children’s teachers in their first few years of school were so good, her expectations for all teachers might have been unrealistically high. In general, parents and teachers agreed that there was significantly more communication between parents and teachers at the elementary level and that communication decreased even further as a student progressed through the middle and high schools.

While teachers gained more confidence as a result of interactions with parents and years of experience in their profession, parents also developed perspectives of teachers based upon their own set of personal and vicarious experiences. Parents described their own realizations about teachers and how to manage them: realizing that the teachers were aware and nervous that a dissatisfied parent could go to an administrator; learning that teachers perceived themselves as more busy than other
professionals; and learning that tapping into parent networks for more information about the teacher and the school could be helpful, but might not always be reliable.

Some parents expressed a feeling that the teachers or school were trying to ‘manage’ their perception of them, however some parents also described taking steps to manage teachers’ impressions of them as well. For example, Danielle made a point of personally introducing herself during open house evenings, and purposefully did so in an attempt to influence teachers into thinking of her as an ‘involved’ parent.

Parents in this study expressed the consensus that teachers could become defensive very easily and offered various rationalizations for this reaction:

**Noelle:** They get defensive. Teachers, in my opinion, tend to get defensive if you question them, because I think they internalize it that you’re questioning their skill level. When really what you’re questioning is the progression of the academic performance.

**Jolena:** And you know, I wasn’t that kind of parent, it was only when it was an issue that affected their education or their safety that I really became the interventionist. I really…. My ultimate goal is to not come and attack you as a professional, I want to come and I want you to work with me, because this is my kid that you’re spending all this time with. And I don’t want to make this rift between us. I really want to work with you. So, if I say, “This is a situation that he’s been trying to handle for three consecutive classes and he’s getting nowhere, could you intervene?” Instead of saying, defensively, “I’m doing everything I’m supposed to be doing,” or “I’ve tried everything.” You don’t even know the dynamic of the situation here and you’re telling me that.

Three parents and two teachers also mentioned that teachers tended to take criticisms very personally:

**Melanie:** I think that maybe they’re protecting themselves. If you’re asking if maybe they’re feeling attacked…. I think that they have to expect that, because maybe the parents are questioning their ability as a teacher. I don’t know that I’ve seen many teachers that I’ve had experience with where they felt like, attacked. But, I’m sure that it has happened, I’m sure. But I think that they are protecting themselves and their reputation.
Six of the teachers agreed with these perspectives, mentioning either their own feelings, or having observed colleagues’ defensiveness:

**Catherine:** I can see where you would feel defensive too, depending on the tone relayed in a call. If they start right away being accusatory before they’ve even given you the opportunity to speak, because you as a person, your class is really, it’s meeting a curriculum, but it’s a very personal thing. And there’s a lot that each of us put into, I mean it’s hours and hours and hours of planning, and you know, well if I do this, most of these guys will get it, and I need to do something extra for this, and so what if I…. So you’ve not just walked in that morning and decided, what are we going to do today…. You’ve invested so much of yourself into it.

**Sara:** I can see that perception though. Maybe not for the three of us sitting in this room, but I’m sure we all have colleagues that you’ve heard talking on the phone that seem, that are a little bit less respectful than you would hope they would be. But, I think that there is a natural defense to that call. I mean, my initial reaction to when a parent calls and asks a question about something that was done in class or something, my thought is immediately, “Well, let me look at what I have. Let me look at the assignments.” And that is defensive, because I can’t answer your question, unless I have the information.

As a result of teachers’ emotional reactions, three parents explained that they would let the small things slide. **Jolena** clarified that she didn’t ‘dismiss’ the small things, but she waited, in an effort to give her child a chance to work the problem out on his own:

**Jolena:** I'm keeping track of what the smaller things are and when it seems to get to a point where he’s become frustrated, and not gotten anywhere with the teacher, seems to frustrate him more and he comes home in tears, and this child doesn’t cry, I immediately interact.

Three parents explained that they had learned to trust their child’s feelings about a teacher, especially since the number of personal contacts they generally had with their children’s secondary level teachers was so limited. **Rhonda** described a few instances in which her children had really enjoyed teachers that she did not personally
like. In one way or another, five parents expressed that they had learned to trust their child’s perceptions of the teacher and/or a specific situation, and thus their child’s perspectives became a large part of the information they carried with them into an interaction.

**Jolena:** I really don’t want to attack the teacher, feeling frustrated for my son. And I try to let them explain the situation and what their view is on it. And tried to come to some sort of compromise and an understanding based on what their side of the story is and what his side of the story is, because I have been hearing his side for days, maybe weeks. And then to get the teacher’s side in one conversation is really a balancing act.

Given the perceived volatility of a teachers’ reaction to a parental request, the potential for negative repercussions on their child, and the lack of substantive options that parents at times felt that they had, parents developed strategies they could employ in an effort to manage teachers’ responses to their requests and queries. These strategies included expressing appreciation for teachers’ work, voicing support for teachers’ efforts and decisions, expressing a desire to reinforce learning at home, complimenting teachers before making requests, and using a number of indirect approaches when making a suggestion. These strategies were used in an effort to maintain a façade of collaboration with the teacher, even when attempting to influence a change in the teacher’s work.

Many of these strategies are visible in Rhonda’s recounting of a time that she approached her son’s teacher about a classroom management strategy. The teacher had been keeping the class inside for recess as a punishment for poor behavior. She consciously planned a very cautious conversation with the teacher:
Rr: Let me go back to that, if I can, the time that you met with that second grade teacher I think it was for your son, you had to go meet with her to try get her to change her policy, what did you have to be careful of when you were talking with her?

Rhonda: I made her think that it was her idea to change.

Rr: Why did you feel like you had to do that?

Rhonda: Because I didn’t want to hurt…. it was her first year of teaching, well, she had taught, she had worked with the mentally challenged before, but it was her first time in just a regular classroom.

Rr: So you’re trying to be careful of her feelings?

Rhonda: Yeah, and I wanted it to work… I wanted her to really… so I talked to her about like, boys are very energetic, and it’s hard for them to sit still, and my son…” and I just went on and on about how bad my son was, and that he couldn’t sit still, and that he can’t do his work, and that he has to stand up.

Rr: So, you weren’t really direct with her. It sounds like you kind of went around a sideways way in talking with her.

Rhonda: Oh! Absolutely! And about how…, I was like, “I can’t believe that you can stay in the classroom at 2:00, and are they able to stand in their chairs? Are they hanging from the chandeliers?”

Rr: Did that work? Did she change policy?

Rhonda: Not the next week, but I noticed it happened less and less.

Rr: And how do you feel like that conversation resolved with her, positively?

Rhonda: I think so.

Rr: Okay, you think she was open to it? Because it sounds like you kind of “soft touched” her a little bit.

Rhonda: Yup.

Rr: And do you generally do that with teachers?

Rhonda: Yeah, it depends…. yeah, always.
Rr: You approach them cautiously.

Rhonda: Oh, always!

Rr: Can you tell me why?

Rhonda: Well, I think, you know, teachers are sensitive. I think everybody is sensitive, but in their job is tied to… I don’t know. First of all, they are all scared of parents, I guess or they’re either scared, or they just don’t... they don’t want to be around parents. I really feel that...

Rr: They’re trying to avoid you a little bit?

Rhonda: Yeah, I don’t feel that they are never really comfortable, even the best aren’t truly comfortable with parents.

Rhonda had learned, based on previous interactions with her older daughter’s teachers, that teachers easily became defensive and tended to interpret simple queries for information as personal attacks. As a result, Rhonda and other parents in this study described the almost excessive caution they used to approach teachers. Because of teachers’ inordinate power over their children’s daily lives and emotional and academic well-being, the risks of offending a teacher were great. The next and final section will demonstrate how teachers appreciate this ‘soft-touching’ approach and interpret these and other behaviors that they approve of as ‘partnering’ and in contrast, how teachers stereotype and dismiss parents who do not approach them with this level of caution and/or who do not engage in ways preferred by teachers.

4. We’re partners when you agree with me

At the beginning of the chapter, two excerpted explanations of parent-teacher partnership suggested that a working definition of parent-teacher partnerships might be, ‘teachers are primarily responsible for students’ education and parents are expected to support
teachers’ work.’ Interview data from teachers supports this perspective. Further, when a parent responds in a way that is not interpreted by the teacher as supportive, teachers generally implied that parents were not ‘acting as partners’. In the excerpt below, Nick describes his response to what he considered an ‘aggressive’ parent email:

**Nick A.** I just had one student here who was doing extremely poorly; he failed the first two and a half marking periods. The mother wrote an e-mail, and said, “The communication with the school has been terrible, I didn’t even know that my child was failing. You haven’t told me anything all year.” And, I wrote back as calmly as I could and said, “There have been two interim reports, and this is what the interim reports have said. There have been two report cards and this is what the report cards have said. I have written in his agenda two or three times. I corresponded with you earlier in the year and these are all of the steps the school has taken. And, if you want to work together with us, I would be more than happy to do that.” After that initial, aggressive e-mail, she came in for a meeting with the team and she was calm.

After employing his access to student data and knowledge of school processes, Nick’s email suggests that the parent must accept that the teacher has fulfilled his duty to communicate, retreat from making accusations, and that, if those conditions are met, then the teacher will be willing to re-engage. The underlined portion in the data above reveals Nick’s idea of partnership: the teachers will consent to work with the parents as long as the parent acts in a manner according to standards established as acceptable by the school.

Jennifer reveals a similar understanding of what it means to her for a parent to be working ‘with’ her. Jennifer relates two different emails exchanges she had the week before the end of school with parents of seniors. In both emails, Jennifer is notifying parents that their children are missing work and may fail the class, and thus, possibly not graduate from high school two weeks hence.
Jennifer: I emailed mom, I said, “Look, I’m really concerned. I’m really frustrated. I’ve asked your son for this, I’ve asked him for that. It’s not coming in. I need to have this stuff; he has a 45 average. He needs to have much more than that. We have an exam coming up on the fifteenth.” She emails back, “Well I don’t understand why you haven’t contacted me sooner. There’s only a week left.” I’m like, “I’m contacting you because there’s only a week left and I’m trying to deal with your kid like a young adult.” (sounds like talking with teeth clenched) and I’m thinking like, “OK, don’t get defensive, let’s see what she’s saying.”

But then you get one the same day; I had to let a parent know, “Yes your son still owes the following four items. I want to help you, can you help me with this?” She said, “I thank you so much for your patience. Thank you for contacting me. I really appreciate it. I’m at my wit’s end with him. He really has dropped the ball. We want you to know, my husband and I really appreciate the fact that you kept in contact with us, and that you kept on top of him, and that it’s clearly his issue. If he doesn’t go to graduation, it’s on him.” And I thought, “Great, the person assigning responsibility to the right person. And actually acknowledging that we’ve been working together, and that we’re on the same page.” And that’s all I want I communicate in the first place. But, too, you’re talking about the same class, same day.

Again, the underlined portion at the end of the passage reveals Jennifer’s perspective on what it means to work collaboratively with parents. Both parents received essentially the same information, and have very little time to make an improvement in their child’s grade. However, the second parent expresses appreciation for the information and absolves Jennifer from responsibility for this late notification. Jennifer interprets this latter response as “working together” and “being on the same page.”

The essence of these two passages were repeated in other places in the teacher data, at times with teachers using phrases such as, getting parents to “partner with you” (Eddie), “I try to call as a partner and suggest some ideas we could try” (Eddie), and “parents who are willing to partner with you” (Lieren). Nowhere in the teacher
data were there passages that suggested that the teacher would need to respond to a parents’ query or request in order to demonstrate ‘partnering.’ The verbal positioning of parents before teachers in the phrasing used also suggests that parents must take actions to be considered partners, but teachers do not.

Only two parents used the term ‘partner’ in the interviews, and their phrasing of the term reversed the order of parents and teachers, to suggest that teachers needed to take actions of some sort. Rhonda described parents needing teachers to be their partners, “…and the more you can keep them as a partner, then the more everybody succeeds.” Noelle critiqued an elementary teacher of her son as being very inexperienced, and thus, not really being able “to partner with the parents” to make a good decision. Danielle’s phrasing was a bit different.

**Danielle:** I’m a firm believer in education… the process that kids don’t just learn at home, they don’t just learned at school, that in order for things to be extremely successful, there has to be collaboration between home and school. Things may not always be perfect, but again very early on, I knew or sensed that the way to make things work for my child was for me to work collaboratively with the teachers.

Of note is that these three instances with Rhonda, Noelle, and Danielle are the only instances in the parent interviews in which parents used any derivation of the terms *partner, partnering, partnership*, etc. or any version of ‘collaboration.’ Teachers used versions of these words in only five instances. The lack of use of these terms in otherwise extensive interview data totaling almost fifteen hours of talk about parent-teacher relationships, suggests that the partnership ethic may not factor significantly into teachers’ and parents’ considerations when negotiating conflicts with one another. Instead, it has perhaps been relegated to a life of rhetoric, and a tool
utilized by teachers and parents to evaluate one another’s actions, assign blame, and absolve oneself of responsibility for a negative interaction.

In addition to this notable absence of the language of partnership and collaboration, was a significant body of evidence in the interview data that revealed teachers’ negative opinions and judgments of parents. As discussed before, teachers made several derisive comments about parents as over-involved, helicopter parents, overly emotional, under-involved, and the like. Granted, this research and the interview questions were designed to purposefully elicit teachers’ frustrations with parents, and discussion of positive and rewarding aspects of parent-teacher interactions was, for the most part, not pursued. However, an unexpected discovery in the data revealed a pattern in teachers’ perspectives: teachers would purport to accept parents’ inability to be actively involved in their child’s education, made judgments about why parents acted in a particular way, and then portrayed their judgments as being open-minded on their part. Other researchers have also commented on teachers’ tendency to stereotype parents and prior research findings establishing a pattern of unwarranted negative judgments by teachers were confirmed in this study (Baker, et. al. 1999; O’Connor 2001). What is of marked interest in the passages to follow, is how extraordinarily comfortable teachers appear to be in their judgments of parents. Even during the focus groups, teachers easily and directly revealed their negative judgments of what they perceived to be uninvolved or difficult parents. As other researchers have remarked, teachers made judgments about
parents’ behavior without possibly having the depth of knowledge to make those judgments (Ramirez 2001; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2002).

In the teacher interviews, teachers concluded that parents were not responsive or involved in their children’s education because the parents were too busy, had emotional problems, were anti-school, or didn’t value education. Four teachers described parents as being ‘too busy’ to be involved in their children’s academic lives and attributed this to parents’ busy schedules, being a single parent, or poverty:

**Lieren**: …you know, the ones that either are a single mom, working three jobs, and just can’t do it. Or, the ones that, it’s just not important to them and school’s not a priority. I think you kind of know that, going into teaching, that you’re going to have those people that aren’t going to give you the support, at home.

Six teachers mentioned parents’ with emotional problems that made them unable to manage their children’s education:

**Nina**: And there’s some baggage there too with some parents that they bring to the table when we have teacher conferences. And they bring it to the table.

**Kristen**: Yeah, many of the parents who want us to do the work, who are very worried about their children not making it, are emotional. Many of them are angry. They are angry at schools, you know, angry at “the man”, they don’t even know. They don’t even know who they are angry at, they’re just angry people.

**Michelle**: I’ve got a little kid this year, has a mother that’s a real whack-a doodle. She (the girl) was not coming to school last year. She’s coming to school this year.

Seven teachers theorized that parents were simply ‘anti-school’ as a result of their own negative experiences as students:

**Eddie**: I think that past experience, if they liked school, if the parent liked school as a kid, and they had good experiences with teachers, they are more likely to be a partner with you than somebody who hated teachers, had teachers who were terrible to them, and they see it as a pretty evil profession.
Nick: Every year there are a couple of parents who don’t like teachers and who, aren’t out to ‘get you’ necessarily, but who want to find fault or are looking for fault before they are looking for positives. And I think that is part of the job, and part of what…. our society doesn’t really value teachers as much as other societies do, or as much as other professions. So, that doesn’t necessarily surprise me.

Many teachers characterized parents’ lack of response to their requests as indicative of parents not valuing education. Christine’s recollection of a difficult conversation with a father demonstrates her interpretation:

Christine: (In my first year as a teacher,) I worked in a place where there wasn’t a lot of parent support. I was teaching English and I was fresh out of undergrad school and I had seniors. I was filling in for a leave, and I had a senior who literally needed to hand me one paper in order to pass, in order to graduate. And I called home and I said, I got his father and I am pretty sure that was his sole parent at the time, and I said, “He needs to just hand in this one paper.” and his father said, “What do you want me to do about it?” and I said, I was stunned. I was really young, and I was just stunned. I said, “Well, if you could just please remind him. Thank you very much.” And I got off the phone as fast as I could. And I realized that if this young man was to graduate, it would be because I harassed him until he got the paper in, and so that’s what I did. And he did graduate, so it was a positive… the result was positive, but that was my first realization that there were parents out there who just didn’t value education.

In Christine’s re-telling of the situation above, she interpreted the father’s response as the parent not valuing education. While perhaps that could have truly been the father’s perspective, it’s also possible that there were other reasons for his actions.

Teachers appeared to make judgments such as these in an effort to explain, understand, and accept actions and behaviors by parents that do not align with teachers’ expectations of them. However, these judgments also served in a way to enable teachers to dismiss parents’ worries, fears, emotions, need for help, frustrations with them as teachers, dissatisfaction with their children’s education, and so on. By negatively categorizing parents’ actions and behaviors, teachers appeared
to give themselves and one another permission to dismiss what could very well be legitimate complaints made by parents.

6. Concluding Remarks: The Partnership Ethic, an Irrelevant Construct

The ideal of partnership continues to dominate parent-involvement models and the practitioner literature. The findings of this research suggest that the expectations of a parent-teacher partnership does not so much impede conflict resolution as much as it is simply irrelevant to it. However, in reviewing the data, there does not seem to be enough evidence to draw firm conclusions in this regard and further research may be warranted.

Instead of being governed by a theoretical expectation of partnership, there was a body of interview data that suggested that participants’ prior experiences and their own memorable conflicts formed the basis for participants’ future perspectives/approach towards other parents and teachers, a finding of prior researchers in the field as well (Connelly 2007). Teachers became hesitantly mistrustful of parents in general and developed strong mechanisms to defend themselves against perceived attacks. Parents perceived teachers as quick to become defensive and developed a cautious approach towards most teachers. Parents developed specific strategies that they could employ in an effort to stave off anticipated teacher reactions. Some participants described how repeated interactions with one teacher or one parent allowed for the development of a relationship based on mutual trust and respect, but for the most part, while parental-involvement models advocate a parent-teacher relationship model based on collaborative
partnerships, parents and teachers in this study described instead relationships that sounded much more like temporary and wary alliances.

Two examples will serve to both emphasize the absence of the partnership ideal and to demonstrate several of the study’s findings in application. The first was an interesting hypothetical situation described by Lieren when I asked her what she would do if she had a serious problem with a teacher that she could not resolve:

(1) **Lieren:** I think if it gets really difficult, you would go to an administrator and be like, “hey, this is not…” And thankfully my children have always had great teachers I’ve never been…. There are teachers who are like that within my children’s school but they’ve never gotten that teacher. I would say, you’d have to go in, I’d go in to the administrator if it got out of hand. But otherwise, I’d try to sit down with a teacher and be really friendly, and not be like “you’re mean to my kid!” I think you have to go in more like “Listen, my child has some anxiety and is there anything that we could do?” If not, I think you might have to work more with your child and be like “Listen, there’s different people in the world, that you are going to have to work with, and you just have to get through this year. So how can you make yourself less anxious in the classroom?” (2)

In line 3 Lieren recognizes that difficult teachers do exist. In lines 1 and 3 she suggests claiming power by speaking with the school’s administrator. In line 5 Lieren recognizes that going to the administrator may not resolve the problem. In line 6 Lieren suggests soft-touching a teacher, “be really friendly.” In line 6, she gives an example of what not to say, emphasizing the pronouns as a way of assigning responsibility and blame “you’re mean to my kid!” In line 7 Lieren imagines what she
would say to a teacher and takes responsibility for the problem away from the teacher so as to not trigger a defensive reaction “my child has some anxiety.” The use of the word “anxiety” introduces an element of emotion in an effort to increase the teacher’s responsiveness to the problem. In line 8 she poses her request for a change in behavior in the form of a question to soften the request. She also makes the only reference to a collective pronoun, “we”, implying that the teacher and the parent could work together on a solution. This is the suggestion, or perhaps a reminder of the partnership ideal and indicates the parent’s willingness to share the burden for the resolution of the problem with the teacher. In the last few lines, Lieren recognizes that despite her use of 3 strategies (soft-touching a teacher, going to an administrator and emotion) she may have to give up and ultimately help her child deal with the problem for the remainder of the year.

A second example can be seen in the following email exchange between a teacher and a parent. This parent initiated the email to the teacher and requested a reply:

(1) Hi Ellen,
(2) My daughter has informed me that she has been placed in an after-school peer tutoring program. She seems to be very upset about this and I am struggling to understand how and why this took place without parental notification, input or consent. I understand that the decision to place her in the program may have been to help her but at this moment I am not sure what is going on and I’d really need to make sure we are all on the same page.
(8) I am reaching out to you at my daughter’s request and would greatly appreciate it if you would contact me to provide me with more information. She is not
feeling very self-confident these days and is extremely upset that she has been
signed up to work with someone she barely knows.

Thanks so much…I look forward to hearing from you.

Theresa

In lines 3 and 10 the mother uses words to convey her and her daughter’s emotional
states. In lines 4, 5 and 12 she conveys her expectation for the teacher’s role
enactment to communicate with parents. Line 7 includes the reference to
partnership, but no suggestion to share in the burden of resolution. As this parent
has sent prior email requests to the teacher, there is also evidence of persistence.

The teacher’s reply:

Dear Mrs. Smith,

Good afternoon. Thank you for contacting me regarding your daughter’s
concerns. I placed her in the program for the next two weeks to give her some
additional support in her preparation for the midterm exam. I am concerned
primarily because she has been absent and has missed some important
information that we have covered in class. I truly as her teacher that this
program will be extremely beneficial to her and will help her to be successful on
the midterm exam that she will take in two weeks.

I understand that working with a student she is unfamiliar with can be
intimidating and uncomfortable, however the young man that she is working
with is very nice and is a very kind an considerate person who has also
established himself in this class as someone who works very well with others
and enjoys helping his peers.

I am willing to work with your daughter whenever she needs it, but she has not
stayed after school to work with me yet this year. She is welcome to come any
day during the extra help period after school.

If you have any further questions, please don’t hesitate to contact me.
Despite the parent’s more relaxed use of first names, the teacher maintains distance and formality in her response by using professional titles and formal socializing phrases in lines 1, 2, 18 and 19 (“Dear” instead of “hi” and “thank you” instead of “thanks”). She claims status in line 6, “as her teacher.” She exercises her authority via greater knowledge of the school, curriculum, and programs in lines 5, 7, 8, and 16. She uses the authority of her knowledge of specific student data to buttress her decision in lines 5 “she’s been absent” and 14-15 “she has not stayed after school.” While there is no direct mention of the teacher’s exclusive ability to make decisions, the absence of an apology for not communicating with the parent and the teacher’s lack of capitulation for placing the child in the program are both ways in which the teacher maintains her power over the situation. There is no reference to a partnership with the parent or use of collective pronouns to indicate such. Interestingly, in the last email of this sequence, the parent replies, “Thank you so much for your attention to my inquiry and for the speedy reply. I truly appreciate it. I will speak with my daughter tonight and get back in touch with you with an update. I do want her to do well on the midterm and I’m grateful that you are looking out for her.”

The two examples above demonstrate the ways in which parents attempt to claim power in unequal relationships with teachers and attempt to influence teachers’ responses as much as possible in their interactions with them. Teachers unconsciously work to maintain their superior positions in parent-teacher
relationships. On the whole, the partnership ideal seems incidental to the process of conflict resolution. There was no evidence that teachers and parents worked to maintain a façade of collaboration during conflict resolution, however the absence of evidence does not necessarily disprove the possibility of that being the case.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Parent-involvement models suggest that parent-teacher interactions be founded in a perspective of partnership and collaboration and should be characterized as harmonious, or in the least, cooperative. As described in Chapter One, both practitioner and research literature report that parent-teacher interactions are a source of stress and frustration for both parties. The purpose of this study was to examine the sources of tension that underlay parent-teacher relationships by investigating the dynamics of parent-teacher interactions and those structural aspects of parent-teacher relationships that make cooperative and equal relationships difficult to realize. Indeed, by looking more deeply at the underlying structural aspects of parent-teacher relationships, findings identify several elements that appear to make communication and conflict resolution more challenging for parents and teachers. With a better understanding of these elements, teachers can better understand parents’ perspectives and expectations. Teachers could use this knowledge to improve their approaches and responses to parents, reduce the tension that teachers report feeling during their interactions with parents, and help improve the overall quality and effectiveness of parent-teacher communication.

This chapter includes a brief review of the main findings of the study followed by a discussion regarding the possibility of parents and teachers either bypassing or overcoming the structural asymmetries of their relationships. Findings are then contextualized from a perspective of role theory and recommendations for the use of
these findings by future researchers and educators are offered. Findings will be discussed more fully in an effort to address the guiding research questions:

1. How do the asymmetries in parents’ and teachers’ structural positions impact parent-teacher interactions?
2. What strategies do teachers use to defend and maintain their positions?
3. What strategies do parents use to overcome the imbalance of power in parent-teacher relationships?
4. Does the partnership ethic impede the process of conflict resolution?

Summary of Main Findings of the study

The various elements from which teachers derive stronger structural positions were categorized in Chapter Four into five categories. The first category discusses teachers’ status as educational experts. The next two categories position teachers as authorities in terms of their knowledge of school processes and their access to specific data and information about children. The last two categories discuss teachers’ greater power in terms of control over the curriculum, instruction, and their own class policies, as well as their ability to negatively affect students emotionally and academically. In each these five areas, all of which will be discussed in greater detail below, teachers appeared to be in much stronger positions as compared to parents.

Teachers’ knowledge as experts in the area of education, of educational practices, of the curriculum, and of typical patterns of student learning and behavior translated into a greater social status as compared to parents. Traditionally, teachers have held higher social status than most parents, as they often were the most
educated people in the villages and towns in which they taught. While this status and subsequent deference to teachers as experts has somewhat diminished in recent years, teachers are still able to tap into a reservoir of knowledge about education that is generally not accessible to most parents. Data demonstrated several instances of parents’ qualified or conditional acceptance of teachers as educational experts, which parents rationalized as appropriate based upon teachers’ greater knowledge of education, children, and learning. The data also included many instances of teachers referencing their own educational knowledge during interactions with parents. There were many instances of teachers reminding parents of their knowledge as professional educators as a way of buttressing their position when attempting to resolve a conflict with a parent. Thus, in today’s modern world, while teachers’ greater social status may not be as significant as in prior eras, their knowledge and experience as professional educators provides a similar effect in maintaining a greater status as compared with parents.

Two areas served to give teachers greater authority than parents: teachers’ knowledge of school processes, systems, policies, and programs; and teachers’ reservoir of personal observations of children’s behavior in their own classrooms. Parents admitted to feeling intimidated at times when interacting with school personnel and described a perception that schools shielded information from parents about schools’ internal systems. Parents perceived themselves as disadvantaged in their interactions with teachers and school personnel when they did not possess as much knowledge about the schools’ programs and processes. Even parents with
professional training in the field of education described having to ‘fight’ for programs and assistance for their children. Teachers recognized that parents might feel a bit intimidated, but attributed parents’ intimidation as stemming from teachers holding higher educational degrees than parents or to the use of specialist language and jargon that might be confusing to non-educators. Yet, when describing memorable conflicts, teachers revealed many instances of utilizing that knowledge of school processes and using their knowledge of specific children to buttress their positions. In this area, teachers’ greater knowledge positioned them as authorities of school information, and gave them a distinct advantage when interacting with parents.

Teachers held two significant sources of power over children, which in turn, positioned them in stronger positions during their interactions with parents. The first area concerned their absolute control over curriculum, instruction, and class policies. Teachers were unyielding of any control over these areas to parents, who readily recognized these areas as beyond their sphere of influence. The most extraordinary repository of power for teachers however came from teachers’ ability to negatively affect children’s emotional and academic well-being. Whether or not teachers were willing to recognize the degree of power that this gave them, parents unanimously concurred that in teachers’ daily interactions with children, teachers held the potential to harm children emotionally, and/or that teachers’ near absolute authority over grades could have far-reaching negative repercussions for their children’s futures. Given the importance of high school grades in the college admissions process, parents’ expressed even greater caution in approaching high school teachers. The
intensity of parents’ and children’s fear of repercussions was apparent in all interviews with parents, and to a lesser degree, present in the interviews with teachers who were also parents of school-aged children. Although teachers were generally unaware of the intensity of this fear, it nevertheless translated into the greatest inequity of power of all five areas, giving teachers an unconscious but distinct advantage in their interactions with parents.

**Overcoming Imbalances**

In terms of status and authority, the data suggest that teachers’ structural positions appear to be stronger than parents. There was no evidence in the data to suggest that parents could claim status and authority in their relationships with teachers. In terms of power, parents were able to engage in several strategies to claim power in their interactions with teachers that served to help them somewhat overcome the inequities in their relationships with teachers. Parents’ willingness to approach school administrators and the board of education either directly constrained teachers’ power, or did so in effect. That is, even teachers’ indirect knowledge of parents’ access to administrators acted as a *de facto* limitation on teachers’ willingness to disregard parental requests and concerns. A second strategy parents used to influence a teacher was to repeatedly request information from and express concerns to teachers. Both parents and teachers described parents’ persistence as extremely frustrating to them: parents were frustrated in having to repeatedly ask for information, but felt that it was important for them to help their children be successful; teachers found the strategy somewhat intrusive and time-consuming, and
thus seemed to respond to parents more quickly, simply so that they could focus on
tasks that they felt were a better use of their time and attention. The third strategy
that parents employed appeared to be, for the most part, an unconscious response
and involved parents sharing their negative emotions with teachers (anger, sadness,
frustration, worry, and the like). While parents and teachers both reported negative
effects of this strategy in that excessive anger could at times cause further distance
and alienation on the part of a teacher, the stories shared as memorable conflicts
demonstrated that parents’ sharing of emotion was an effective strategy in that for
the most part, it increased teachers’ attention and responsiveness to their concerns.
In this sense, the use of emotion was an unconscious or subconscious ‘strategy’ and
highlights one important aspect of parent-teacher interactions: that requests,
responses and the exercise of the strategies described in these findings are in large
part, the unconscious enaction of one’s role, rather than a conscious and deliberate
scheme to influence the behavior of the other actor.

In summary then, based on the data collected, teachers’ structural positions
appear to carry greater authority, status, and power than do parents’ positions.
However, parents are able to exercise various ‘strategies’ that help them claim power
in their relationships with teachers and serve to help them manage the imbalance of
power in parent-teacher relationships. What could not be determined from the
interview data was the frequency with which parents’ strategies were effective in
balancing the scales with teachers. The data collected suggest that in parent-teacher
relationships, teachers’ structural positions are considerably stronger than parents’
positions. However, in recollections of memorable conflicts, both teachers and parents described specific instances in which parents were able to overcome structural inequities to realize an outcome in their own favor.

Ultimately, the degree to which parents were able to overcome the inequalities in their relationships with teachers was inconclusive. In addition, it is difficult to estimate whether data collected from a larger and more representative group of parents (single parents, remarried parents, working class parents, more fathers, etc.) would yield different results. However, I suspect that the results of the analysis above would be even further skewed to the benefit of teachers, in terms of status, authority, power, and resolutions to conflicts in teachers’ favor. This is because parents in this study described themselves as unusually assertive as compared to other parents and this self-perception was supported by their descriptions of prior events in which they had repeatedly exercised strategies designed to influence teachers’ or school’s decisions. A larger set of parents would more than likely include a smaller proportion of ‘assertive’ parents, which might make the power differential described in this study appear even more disparate.

Aside from the consideration as to whether the inequities in parent-teacher relationships can be overcome by either actor, the conclusion that parents and teachers operate in asymmetrical relationships cannot be ignored. These asymmetries stem from the institutionally-driven structural positions that accompany parents’ and teachers’ roles, and as such, cannot be avoided. The limitations are real and present. Rather than disregarding the imbalances in their relationships, parents’ and teachers’
candid recognition and understanding of the existence of these structural limitations could make navigating future interactions easier for them both.

**Conflicting Role Identity Perceptions**

Within the framework of role theory, the analysis of the data collected in this study supports prior research findings regarding parent-teacher roles, relationships, and communication, and suggest that parents and teachers do hold clear, albeit subconscious, understandings of the structural limitations that govern their relationships, and both consciously and unconsciously exercise specific strategies in attempts to either reinforce their positions, or overcome the limits of their positions. The interview data indicate that both parents and teachers do have clear understandings of and expectations for their own and other actors’ roles and how they expect those roles to be executed. Since this research study was not designed to elicit a comprehensive description of parents’ and teachers’ role identity perceptions, a complete list of expectations is not possible nor warranted here. However, it is clear that study participants held definite, although differing, opinions of what actions and behaviors they considered appropriate and inappropriate for themselves and for others.

The absence of good connections between roles and role expectations suggested by prior research was also confirmed in the data as evidenced within the memorable conflicts described by parents and teachers. The events became memorable in that parents’ or teachers’ expectations for the other party were not met and were accompanied by a strong negative feelings that persisted during and/or after
the event occurred. In both the theoretical research and that focused specifically on parent-teacher relationships, role conflicts are considered to be stressful, to produce tension, and to lead to dissatisfaction (Allen 1997; Biddle 1979; Serpre-Schroeder 1999). These findings were upheld by the interview data. Further, both parents and teachers in this study tended to make personal judgments about each other when their expectations for role execution were not met, an observation that prior researchers had noted in regards to teachers (Ramirez 2001; Crozier 1999; Smrekar and Cohen-Vogel 2001). Parents in this study referred to teachers who did not meet their expectations as inflexible, defensive, lazy, and inept. Teachers characterized parents as under-involved, over-involved, demanding, unrealistic, and unsupportive. Such ambiguities and contradictions within actors’ understanding of their own role identities, combined with conflicts between actors’ role expectations, make a true collaborative partnership between parents and teachers more difficult.

**Structural Asymmetries in Parent-Teacher Relationships**

Even beyond role identity conflicts, differing levels of status, authority and power move parents and teachers farther away from a plane of equality in their interactions with one another. When communicating with the other actor, parents operate according to the social norms, standards, and expectations associated with their role identity as a parent, and teachers operate from the professionally-associated expectations that accompany their role as a teacher. As institutionally-derived identities, certain aspects of these roles are dictated by the social structure and functional purposes of the institution (Biddle 1979). As such, actors act within the
framework of a specific role identity, but, during functional interactions, actors take positions in relationship to one another. In purely social interactions that are not role-driven, actors might unconsciously negotiate these positions during the interaction and/or over the course of several interactions. However, because their roles and interactions are institutionally-derived and serve specific functions that are attached to that institution, parents’ and teachers’ respective positions are, in large part, pre-determined and difficult to overcome. That is, actors inherit pre-established structural positions that automatically accompany their institutional role.

Parental involvement models and much of the reviewed research based conclusions about parental involvement upon the assumption that the differences between parents and school personnel, if better understood, were surmountable. However, role theorists argue that structural inequalities are so deeply embedded in the socio-political structure of institutions that individuals cannot escape their structural positions when operating in their professional roles (Holmes, Stubbe and Vine 1999 in Sarangi and Roberts, eds.). As concluded above, the attributes of status, power and authority that are assigned to a particular position cannot be escaped, even should the actor choose to do so. The one caveat to this assertion is that since individual actors enact their roles during social encounters, actors have some freedom to negotiate their own individual enactments of their role, within a range of acceptable expressions of that role (Aronsson 1998). This implies that while structural positions are carried into social situations, there is room for differences in
these positions to be diminished somewhat as actors construct and negotiate their relative positions during interactions.

In this study, research data suggest that despite some individual fluctuations, structural differences in parents’ and teachers’ positions indeed are fairly fixed and difficult to overcome. Teachers held significantly stronger positions in their relationships with parents, possessing greater status, authority and power as compared to parents’ positions. As also observed by prior researchers (McGrath 2007), teachers in this study seemed unaware of how much power they held in the parent-teacher relationship. Despite teachers’ denial regarding their stronger positions, there were no instances reported in which teachers voluntarily relinquished their stronger position to parents. In fact, there were several instances in which teachers purported to not have greater power or authority over parents, but when retelling memorable conflicts, described instances in which they had defended their stronger position by invoking those social or strategic elements that gave them greater power.

**Recommendations**

As discussed in Chapter Three, no parental involvement model currently accounts for the embedded hierarchical differences between parents and teachers. Given the findings of the study, an improved or alternate model for parent-teacher interactions might be helpful in improving parent-teacher communication. The current ideal of partnership between parents and teachers is a metaphor that is not practically realistic, given the structural asymmetries embedded in their
relationships. Essentially, the ideal of partnership exists as a social myth and as such, serves a sociological function in at least providing an objective or aspiration for behavior between parents and teachers. In this sense, myths do provide an important function in that they ease the friction of proscribed social relationships. Nevertheless, a new metaphor for parent-teacher relationships might better reveal the embedded inequalities in parent-teacher relationships and thus assist in the inevitable conflict resolution that accompanies schooling. Unfortunately, the creation of a new metaphor for parent-teacher relationships is certainly beyond the scope of this paper and would also require additional research and input from theoreticians and practitioners alike.

However, this is not to say that parent-teacher relationships cannot be influenced in more immediate ways. The most direct way to influence parent-teacher interactions would be by helping teachers develop a larger understanding of and new approaches to their relationships with parents. Similar work has been carried out in recent decades in the medical field in an effort to improve doctor-patient relationships by focusing on physicians’ perspectives and approaches to interacting with their patients (Ainsworth-Vaughn 1998; Gwyn and Glyn 1999). Recommendations to improve doctor-patient interactions concluded that the actor with the greater and/or more obvious power in a relationship must be willing to either relinquish that power, or in the least, moderate its use (Roberts and Sarangi 2005). Additionally, as an organized institution, the medical field possesses an organized structure to facilitate communication with at least one half of the doctor-
patient equation, but it is more difficult for them to change patients’ perspectives as easily. The field of education possesses similar structures as the medical field and an organizational features that could be harnessed to improve teachers’ conceptualization of working with parents: teacher training programs, professional development requirements and practices, established research and professional journals and publications, and an organized administrative hierarchy that can influence access and utilization of these resources.

In the long term, additional research that extended or revised the reliability of this study’s findings would also be useful in improving teachers’ approaches to parents. As with any study, the findings of this research were inevitably driven by the research questions posed and the theoretical framework chosen. Further investigation of parent-teacher tensions through a different lens could yield interesting results. For example, an investigation of tensions in parent-teacher relationships grounded in a different theory of power, could filter results in an alternate way and provide additional illumination on parent-teacher relationships. Or, extending this research to rural or urban settings and to the elementary level could evaluate the impact variables such as class and culture and their impact on the enactment of power during conflict resolution between parents and teachers. The contextualization of current findings in the current time and place of culture is incredibly difficult, but might expand our understanding of the current asymmetries between parents and teachers even further.
Ultimately, many teachers could benefit from assistance in developing a fuller understanding of teacher-parent relationships so that teachers can improve their own responses to and interactions with parents for the greatest benefit of their students. This can happen most immediately via professional development and teacher training programs, but would be best supported in the long run by additional research that expands teachers’ ability to understand and effectively interact with parents.

Limitations of the Study and Recommendations for Further Research that Could Overcome these Limitations

1. Limited number of participants: Not only were there a limited number of participants in the study, but they may not have been completely representative of parents and teachers in general. Teachers volunteered to be included in the study, and for the most part, seemed to be more open and interested in working with parents than most teachers in my own experience. It is less likely that teachers who hold resentful, frustrated attitudes towards parents would have volunteered to participate. As discussed earlier, parent participants also seemed skewed towards parents who were more comfortable with confrontation or had a greater knowledge of school systems. However, it is possible that if more ‘typical’ parents and teachers were involved in this study that findings would have been confirmed, but to a greater degree. That is, resentful teachers would have maintained their stronger positions even more and non-confrontational parents would have demonstrated parents’ unequal positions to an even greater degree.
Further research could attempt to reach a wider audience of parents and teachers using a survey instrument that could be designed to confirm the findings of this research. Parents and teachers could be asked whether they agreed or disagreed with statements such as “I would go to the administrator if needed.” or “I worry that the teacher will treat my child differently if I express dissatisfaction with his or her work.” Of course, follow-up interviews with parents and teachers using a set of interview questions designed to gather more and more-specific information would also be helpful.

2. **Recording of actual parent-teacher conversations wasn’t possible.** It was the original intent of this research to record actual conversations and interactions between parents and teachers. Obtaining permissions from school districts for that data proved challenging and eventually became an additional layer that was beyond the scope of this project. However, additional research that included parent-teacher conferences conversations would be helpful to investigate the actual strategies used by parents and teachers to negotiate outcomes during phone conversations and face-to-face interactions. Such research might confirm this study’s findings, contradict them, or expand the categories of status, power, and authority that were revealed in this data.

3. **Limits of RoleTheory:** Unlike the field of education, there has been a much greater body of research conducted on power differentials in cooperative-product relationships in the health care industry. This research has investigated doctor-patient and doctor-nurse interactions as a way of understanding the negotiation of hierarchy differences in these relationships. Recent research has attempted to evaluate the
effectiveness of the recent promotion of a flatter hierarchy in health care teams and
the realization of this egalitarian team model. The work of several researchers
recognizes that “The contradiction between what is espoused as the ideal structure
and the reality of a deeply ingrained hierarchy has created significant role tensions
(Apker et al. p. 100, 2010).” Recent work in this field has included the theory of
dialectics to better evaluate the dynamic and interdependent expectations for roles
and provides a deeper understanding of role construction and enactment as a product
of social relations. Role dialectics considers the fluid nature of roles and accounts for
the ongoing contradictions that are constructed and reconstructed between actors
(Apker et al. 2010). While this research considered memorable conflicts as more
accurate representations of participants’ true beliefs, role dialectics might be used to
analyze narrative data in a deeper way that better accounts for contradictions in
participants’ responses.
APPENDIX A: PROTOCOLS FOR INTERVIEWS AND FOCUS GROUPS

QUESTIONS USED DURING UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS:

1. In your experiences with parents/teachers, what strikes you as most frustrating?

2. Have you ever had an issue with a parent/teacher that you couldn’t resolve? What happened? What was the end result?

3. What do you think worked well in that situation?

4. If you could change something about communicating with parents/teachers, what would it be?

QUESTIONS USED DURING SEMI-STRUCTURED FOCUS GROUPS:

1. What do you have to be careful of when speaking with parents?

2. When parents want you to do something that you think is unreasonable, what do you do? Have you ever said ‘no’ to a parents’ request? How do you feel about saying ‘no’?

3. What is most troubling about interactions with parents?

4. What constrains you when you are talking with parents?

5. If you could change something about communicating with parents, what would it be?
APPENDIX B: LIST OF CODES

**Free Nodes / number of sources / number of coded passages:**

- Chain of command / 2 / 3
- Collegial support is important / 1 / 1
- Few bad teachers stand out in memory / 1 / 1
- Good st. get less Tr. attention / 1 / 1
- Grateful parents / 3 / 5
- Having a voice / 2 / 2
- Importance of dealing with parents / 1 / 1
- Issue of Trust / 10 / 20
- Memorable Conflict__School won / 15 / 45
- Memorable Conflict__Parent won / 12 / 24
- Minimizing parents' concerns / 1 / 2
- Partnership model__is it realistic? / 12 / 19
- Repercussions 13 / 26
- Reputation / 1 / 1
- Resolving conflicts / 6 / 10
- School and Teachers as experts / 8 / 16
- School can influence parental perspectives / 2 / 3
- Special Education
- Stay focused on the students' needs / 2 / 3
- Teacher sharing information / 1 / 4
- Teachers do lie / 1 / 1
- Teachers stereotyping Students / 1 / 1
- Venting just to relieve stress / 4 / 4

**Tree Nodes, and sub-categories / number of sources / number of coded passages**

*Common Parent Criticisms:*
- Administrators protect, defend teachers / 2 / 3
- Not a good teacher / 3 / 4
- Teacher is lazy / 2 / 2
- Teacher is mean...rude, etc. / 2 / 3
- Teachers not held accountable / 2 / 4
- Too much homework / 3 / 4
- You're not challenging my child / 9 / 15
Communication between parents and teachers:
- Grey communication / 6 / 12
- Less Pt-Tr interactions at secondary level / 3 / 3
- Open Communication / 1 / 1
- Parent Portal / 6 / 8
- Parents as information seekers / 8 / 16
- Teacher Invitations / 3 / 3
- Who initiates pt-tr interactions / 2 / 2

Emotions:
- Angry Parents / 11 / 18
- Extremely worried about my child / 3 / 3
- Managing parents' emotions / 9 / 14
- Parents' sadness / 2 / 4
- Pts. work to restrain their emotions / 5 / 10
- Rude and Irrational Parents / 5 / 8
- Teachers Dealing with Parents' Anger / 2 / 2
- Teachers reassuring Parents / 2 / 2
- Teachers should manage parents emotions / 2 / 5
- Teachers should NOT have to deal with parents' anger / 2 / 4

Methods of Communication:
- E-mail / 10 / 20
- Open House Night / 3 / 3
- Talking on the phone / 4 / 8

Parental Perspectives of Teachers:
- Great teachers are wonderful / 2 / 2
- Inflexible Teachers / 10 / 20
- Parent networks confirm Teacher's reputation / 2 / 2
- Parent careful to not intimidate the teacher / 1 / 1
- Parents empathize with teachers / 1 / 3
- Soft-touching a teacher / 5 / 9
- Teachers aren't any busier than anyone else / 2 / 2
- Teachers get defensive easily / 11 / 24
- Teachers Giving Up / 2 / 3
- Teachers take criticisms personally / 5 / 8
- Teachers under-appreciated / 1 / 1
- Teachers work very hard / 1 / 1
- Teachers more comfortable with kids than adults / 1 / 1
Parents' Expectations for Teachers' Role:
- Information should be more specific / 4 / 5
- Teacher's role is to manage the meeting / 1 / 1
- Timeliness of Teacher's response / 6 / 10
- Teachers should post grades, interims, etc. / 2 / 2
- Teachers Giving Up / 1 / 1
- Teachers should notify parents of missing work / 3 / 5

Parents' Expectations for themselves:
- I'm the 'Blacklisted Parent' / 1 / 4
- I am my child's advocate / 2 / 2
- Demanding parent can be effective / 3 / 5
- Trusting yourself as a parent / 1 / 1
- Parents have to demand an accounting / 3 / 7

Parents' Expectations of Schools:
- Admin. should represent Students first / 3 / 7
- CSD should get rid of bad teachers / 2 / 5
- Meetings_communic. can be unproductive / 1 / 4
- Parents expect more business-like behavior / 3 / 7
- Wish we had more guidance from the school / 1 / 4

Parents' Feelings about Schools:
- Administrators are helpful and provide access / 1 / 1
- Child's opinion of teacher is influential in building trust / 1 / 2
- Feeling guilty as a parent for child's lack of success / 3 / 3
- Inexperienced as parents / 2 / 3
- Insensitive school personnel / 1 / 2
- Learning to accept limitations to what I can affect / 2 / 2
- Parents' anger is justified at times / 2 / 3
- Parents don't know school system procedures / 4 / 7
- Protective Stance of CSD / 4 / 8
- Pt. not satisfied with school's or teacher's actions / 4 / 9
- Some Teachers and school personnel really care / 1 / 1
- Unsatisfied with school's_or teacher's response / 2 / 2
- Wish I had more information about his curricular program / 2 / 2

Parents' Feelings about their Children:
- Different kids respond diff. to same teacher / 1 / 1
- Knowing your child / 1 / 1
- Trusting your child / 2 / 2
Parents' Frustrations with Teachers:
- Parents have more tolerance with good teachers / 2 / 3
- Parent understanding doesn't decrease frustration / 1 / 2
- Teachers not following through / 4 / 7

Parents' Perspectives__communicating with teachers:
- Giving directions to teachers / 1 / 1
- Giving up on a teacher after negative or unsuccessful interaction / 3 / 4
  It seems like the best trs though, I don’t have to communicate with. 1/1
- Managing Teacher's perception of Pt. / 1 / 1
- Parent-Initiated communication / 1 / 1
- Personality of teacher is key / 5 / 6
- Positive aspects of Pt.Tr. Interactions / 3 / 3
- Pt. aware that they are being managed / 1 / 1
- Pts. let the small things slide / 3 / 3
- Seeking specific changes in teacher's work / 2 / 2
- Teachers afraid parents will go to admin / 2 / 2

Power:
- Acceptance of Teachers' authority has decreased / 2 / 2
- Balance of Power depends on Admin. support / 4 / 5
- Fighting by myself / 2 / 4
- Going to the BOE / 1 / 2
- Groups of parents more powerful / 1 / 1
- Knowledge is power / 1 / 2
- Parents are intimidated / 5 / 8
- Parents go to administration / 2 / 7
- Parents have a lot of power / 1 / 1
- Stuck with a Tr. for the year / 1 / 1
- Teachers have a lot of power / 8 / 13
- When to go to an administrator / 2 / 3

Teachers Accepting vs. Judging Parents:
- Accepting Parents for what they can do / 4 / 5
- Over-Involved parents / 7 / 23
- Showing you Care / 4 / 5
- St. achievement is a function of family demographics / 1 / 2
- Teachers' Readiness for working with Parents / 5 / 6
- Teachers approach educated parents differently / 1 / 2
- Teachers Give up on Parents / 1 / 1
- Under-Involved Parents / 5 / 8
Teachers' Expectations of Parents' Roles:
- Parents should be Advocates / 8 / 9
- Parents should help with homework and studying / 3 / 3
- Parental Involvement with curriculum and instruction / 2 / 2
- Responsibility for Learning / 4 / 7
- Teaching Parents how to Parent / 5 / 8

Teachers' Frustrations with Parents:
- Angry Parents / 0 / 0
- Defending yourself is frustrating / 5 / 8
- Feeling attacked by parents / 3 / 9
- Parent not keeping track of student's work / 3 / 4
- Parents don't utilize available sources of info. / 4 / 6
- Parents place Resp. for learning on teacher / 5 / 6
- Parents who abuse their children / 2 / 2
- Teachers who have overall negative perspectives on parents / 1 / 1

Teachers' Perspectives of Parents:
- Most parents are great / 1 / 1
- Parents are too busy / 4 / 4
- Parents Giving up / 4 / 4
- Some Parents are Anti-School / 6 / 7

Teachers' Perspectives on Parent-Tr. interactions:
- Dealing with parents easier with more experience / 9 / 16
- Having children of your own improves understanding of Pt. Persp. / 2 / 2
- Interactions with parents are stressful / 7 / 9
- Long-term effects of negative interactions / 5 / 6
- Parents' demands unrealistic / 1 / 2
- Teachers' anxiety about talking to parents / 5 / 6
- Teachers avoiding parents / 3 / 4
- Teachers learn caution in dealing with parents / 2 / 3
- Teachers Managing Parents / 4 / 5

Teachers' Perspectives on their own roles:
- Decision-making rests with teacher / 1 / 2
- Part of my job is to communicate with parents / 1 / 1
- Teachers control grades / 1 / 1
- Teacher aware of professional role / 1 / 3
- Teachers short on time / 4 / 6
- Teachers establish class rules / 1 / 1

Who is Responsible:
- Life Lessons / 4 / 6
- Children should be responsible for their own work / 7 / 13
APPENDIX C: USE OF NVIVO AS A DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

NVivo is a qualitative data analysis program produced by QSR International that facilitates the classification, organization, and analysis of rich text- and media-based data. The software program enables the researcher to import and then highlight and code blocks of text, sections of audio-files, and even visual media. Pieces of data can then be analyzed, classified, and examined in a multitude of ways using the program’s search engine and query functions. Queries can be developed and then further filtered along several variables lines. In this way, NVivo is a program that has the power increase the researcher’s access to the data by exponentially increasing the ease and efficiency of organizing data. While NVivo is a program that lends itself to a wide variety of research methods, the program cannot ultimately make connections and interpretations independent of the researcher. It remains simply a researcher’s tool, replacing the index cards, highlighters, and sticky notes of prior decades.

In this research project I utilized NVivo to facilitate both layers of data analysis. Transcribed interviews were imported into NVivo and coded individually. I developed ‘in vivo’ codes when possible, but for the most part, developed a short description for passages that merited interest. Codes, or nodes as they are called in the program, were moved and organized into ‘trees’ or hierarchies as themes developed. At times, some nodes could be merged when the data selections became apparently similar. Nodes were rarely deleted, as their merit might be proved later in the project. Nodes with high numbers of coded selections drew greater attention and
evaluation during analysis. The second layer of narrative discourse analysis utilized NVivo to code and identify participants’ stories, both remembered and hypothetical. These stories were coded as ‘memorable events’ and filtered using the program’s search engine and evaluated accordingly.

In the example below, a section of text was multiply-coded simply by highlighting different blocks of the text and assigning selections to various nodes. This enables the researcher to easily code over-lapping fragments into multiple categories and thus utilize the data in a deeper and more flexible way. I found that the program allowed me to more quickly view the data from different angles and to experiment with different connections among seemingly disparate blocks of text. I believe that this encouraged me to suspend judgments and decisions about patterns during data analysis, as searching, sorting, filtering, and re-organizing the data were so easy as compared to working with hard copies of the transcripts. I’m convinced that the time-consuming nature of working with data in hard-copies would have discouraged such a rich and deep analysis of data.

While some might argue that working with hard copies of the data helps the researcher become personally immersed in the data, I believe that this intimacy with the data was developed as I transcribed the audiofiles myself, which necessitated listening to them repeatedly. It took approximately ten hours to transcribe each interview. So as I later read and coded the transcripts, I could hear in my mind the voice, inflection, and tone of the speaker, and was able to use that information to assist with making decisions about appropriately coding passages. Ultimately, I
cannot imagine completing the same breadth and depth of data analysis without the assistance of a program such as NVivo.

Picture #2: Sample of coding using NVivo software program

“...I've worked in communities where the teachers were perceived as the intelligentsia, we were the educated ones, and we were put in an exalted status, and that caused parents to defer to us as social workers, as this authority on child rearing, and “what do you think I should do?” Well, I really think you should take away his privileges and his motorbike for the weekend.” and having to say that.... I don't feel that that is the case now. I constantly feel today that there's always someone trying to tell me how to do my job. And that causes you, every time you get a parent phone call, every time you get an e-mail, to... your back goes up a little bit. OK, what did I do wrong?” and that is literally, when I pick up the phone, when I'm dialing up my voice mail, that is almost the feeling that I have.”

1. Yellow: Free Node: Schools and Teachers as Experts
2. Pink : Tree Node = Power: Acceptance of Tr’s Authority has decreased
4. Purple: Tree Node = Tr’s Frustrations on Working with Parents: Defending yourself is Frustrating
Researcher’s address

November 1, 2008

Sample letter to
Superintendent of Schools
Blue Central School District
Upstate NY

Dear Superintendent:

My name is Marisa Bel and I am a doctoral student at the University at Albany, in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy Studies. This letter seeks your help in identifying participants for my dissertation research on parent-teacher relationships. I am interested in interviewing a few parents and teachers from the secondary level and recording their perspectives and stories regarding parent-teacher interactions.

Enclosed are sample letters to participants that could be sent to teachers to solicit interest in participation. However, should you be willing to allow me to interview parents and faculty, I would be most happy to work with you to develop and present any introduction that you think would work most effectively in your district. For example, I would be happy to attend a faculty meeting to introduce myself and my work, answer questions, and distribute information about the study.

Ultimately, I would only need an hour of time from each participant to record our confidential conversation regarding their perspectives on parent-teacher interactions. I would be happy to meet with participants at a time and location that are most convenient to them.

Please be assured that this research study has been designed and reviewed with the oversight of tenured faculty advisors at the University at Albany. My dissertation committee chair, (chair’s contact information) should you have questions regarding the approval process and oversight of doctoral research. Additionally, this research study has been approved by the Office of Regulatory Research Compliance, a copy of which is enclosed for your reference.

I’ve also enclosed my resume so that you can gain a sense of my background and experiences. With almost fifteen years of experience as an educator and seven years experience as a mother, I hope to be a sympathetic listener for both parents and teachers. The goal of my research is to attempt to identify specific areas that challenge parents and teachers in their interactions and communication with one
another. Surprisingly, despite the anecdotal evidence in practitioner materials, this information has not been previously codified in research-based, peer-reviewed literature. Hopefully, with an improved understanding of parent-teacher relationships, educational leaders will be better equipped to help teachers improve their communication and interactions with parents.

I would be happy to speak or meet with you at any time to discuss my proposed research and your district’s potential participation in this study. I will contact you in one week to set up a time for us to meet and check for your interest in my proposal.

Should you wish to speak with me before then, I can be reached at (researcher’s contact information).

Thank you for your time and interest in reviewing this letter and enclosed materials.

Marisa Bel
APPENDIX E: SAMPLE LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

Dear Participant:

Thank you for your interest in helping me to complete my dissertation research as a doctoral student at the University at Albany. My research project concerns parent-teacher relationships, so your input and perspectives are extremely helpful.

By way of introduction, I have been an educator in public education for the past fourteen years. I also currently work as a department leader in an Albany-area school district. In addition to these roles, I am a mother of two elementary-aged daughters. As both a parent and a teacher, I’m aware of the challenges of maintaining effective communication between parents and teachers.

As a student at the University at Albany, in the Department of Educational Administration and Policy Studies, I’ve had time to explore the challenges of parent-teacher relationships more deeply. I’m excited to be concluding my work at the University with this research project.

Please be assured that all aspects of this research project have been reviewed and approved by my faculty advisors at the University. My dissertation committee chair, Dr. Heinz-Dieter Meyer, can be reached at (518) 442-3662 should you have questions regarding the approval process and oversight of doctoral research. Additionally, the specific research data collection, data storage, and confidentiality procedures of this project have been reviewed and approved by the University at Albany’s Office of Research Compliance and the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

In addition to maintaining the highest standards of confidentiality, as established by the IRB, I personally assure you that all information will be kept confidential at all times. Identifying information will be removed and replaced with codes and all recorded data shall be destroyed at the completion of the project.

At any point of this research, should you wish to withdraw from participating in the study, you are completely free to do so. You are also welcome to decline to answer any question(s) during the course of your participation.

I truly appreciate your willingness to participate in this research study and would be happy to answer any questions about the study that you might have.

Sincerely,

Marisa Bel
APPENDIX F: CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

Permission to Participate in Research Study

This research study, conducted by Marisa Bel, concerns parent-teacher relationships. Information collected during interviews with participants will be audio-recorded only and transcribed for use as data in this study. Only Ms. Bel will have access to this information. All information will shared with the researcher either during formal interviews, or at any other point of the study, will be considered to be confidential. Identifying information will be removed from the data and all recorded and other information will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Furthermore, participants may elect to not respond or participate in any portion of the study with which they are not comfortable, or may withdraw from the study at any point.

I, _________________________________________, have read and understand the above description of this research study, and agree to act as a participant in the study. I agree to allow Ms. Marisa Bel to audio-record our confidential conversations during the course of this research. Further, I understand that this information will be used solely for this research study and that neither others nor I will have access to this information at any time. I understand that my participation in this research survey is totally voluntary, and that declining to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. Choosing not to participate will not affect my employment or professional standing in any way. If I choose, I may withdraw my participation at any time. I also understand that if I choose to participate, that I may decline to answer any question that I am not comfortable answering.

___________________________________________  Participant’s signature
___________________________________________  Participant’s name (printed)
___________________________________________  Date
REFERENCES


Kent, Mike. "No Parents Past This Point." *Times Educational Supplement*, (September 1, 2006): 60.


Wilgus, Gay. ""If You Carry Him Around All The Time at Home, He Expects One of Us to Carry Him around All Day Here and There Are Only TWO of Us!" Parents' Teachers', and Administrators' Beliefs about the Parent's Role in the Infant/Toddler Center." *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* 26 (2005): 259-273.