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# Mother and Teacher Interaction in Preschools during Parent-Teacher Conferences

Gail Marie Noel

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MOTHER AND TEACHER INTERACTION IN PRESCHOOLS  
DURING PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCES

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2008

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The education of children has been a long-standing issue for stakeholders over numerous years. Various literatures recommend that formal learning should begin during the preschool years of a child's life, and must include home-school partnerships. Empirical data has shown that parents and teachers who work together can positively impact a child's success in school. This study sought to gain insight into the phenomenon of parent-teacher interactions in preschools, via the lens of symbolic interaction. A comparative case study method between two private preschools with different quality ratings was used. Parent and teacher interviews were conducted prior to conferences to learn existing perspectives (*i.e. the definition of the situation*) of their relationships; then parent-teacher conferences were observed; subsequently, post-conference interviews were conducted to learn if perspectives had changed. After interactional and thematic data analysis, results revealed that parents and teachers at both preschools show positive ways in which to foster good parent-teacher relationships, notwithstanding quality ratings and other distinct differences. But similarities in family values, faith, respect, and programming at both preschools facilitated dialogue that brought dignity to parent-teacher interactions.

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God Almighty has brought me;  
the love of family has supported me;  
the joy of friendship has uplifted me, and  
with the guidance given by the Holy Spirit,  
I have arrived!  
(Author unknown)

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In a completely rational society, the best of us would be teachers and the rest of us would have to settle for something less, because passing civilization along from one generation to the next ought to be the highest honor and the highest responsibility anyone could have.

Lee Iacocca

Over the past 40 years, increasing legislation from federal, state and local lawmakers such as the U.S. Department of Education's Goals 2000 Educate America Act and the California Education Code have increasingly recommended and mandated, respectively, that parents become more involved at schools that their children attend (Brook & Hancock, 2000; Chrispeels, 1996; Hiatt-Michael, 2001; Johnson, 1981; Kagan, 2002). Federal Title I legislation of 1965 as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 include language that calls for parental involvement in schools (North Carolina School Boards Association & Public Schools of North Carolina, 2003). Even though there are no legal mandates for preschool family partnerships, much research in the area of parental involvement shows that all students reach optimal learning when parents actively participate in the education of their children (Brown & Thomas, 1999; Chase & Katz, 2002; Diamond & Hopson, 1998; Johnson, 1981; Kemple & Nissenberg, 2000; Lazar, Broderick, Mastrilli, & Slostad, 1999; Lazar & Slostad, 1999; Robinson & Fine, 1994). Understanding the factors that interfere with widespread successful parent-teacher collaboration is the primary focus of this research project. There is a general consensus among everyone responsible

for educating our children that parental involvement is a “good” thing, but conflict in parent-teacher interactions seems to delay progress being made in the establishment of effective parent-teacher partnerships.

A requirement by schools that parents and teachers get along for the benefit of children seems like a simple mandate; yet, it is not. According to Davies (2002), schools are experiencing difficulty in meeting the educational needs of children, and some are facing takeover by their state systems. Parents, teachers, school administrators, legislators and anyone who comes into contact with or whose actions impact the lives of children contribute to the outcomes that children attain (Adcock & Segal, 1983; Chase & Katz, 2002; Diamond & Hopson, 1998; Jenkins, 2000; Kagan, 2002). It is reasonable to imagine that a society might want productive, well-adjusted, decent human beings who are prepared for integration into and who are charged with sustaining our communities; according to Wyness (1995), this desire is another reason for parental involvement initiatives. Learning at the preschool level is critical because a child’s cognitive development between 2 and 6 years of age (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Diamond & Hopson, 1998; Sandy & Boardman, 2000), can facilitate better life outcomes for the child (Bogenschneider & Johnson, 2004). Bogenschneider & Johnson (2004) suggest that early, consistent quality education, coupled with on-going parental involvement, will likely minimize the child’s susceptibility to being poor.

#### Statement of the Problem

For parents and teachers to build a long-standing alliance would require clear acknowledgement and sharing of the real issues that thwart effective

partnerships. Planalp (2003) suggests that consideration of the influence of a person's emotional state before parents and teachers make decisions about partnering could help remove the proverbial elephant in the room during meetings; then meaningful communication could take place and move opposing forces in the same direction. If a universal goal in society is effective education of children, then persistence might be expected of all participants in order to accomplish the mission.

Novick & Grimstad (1999) suggest that people behave in ways that are normal to them, without acknowledging that details of another person's life may be distinctly different. Even though parents and teachers may construe the other's behavior as lack of interest, the reality may be a lack of awareness of respective backgrounds. People tend to focus on what is sacred to their own agenda unless attention is redirected to issues that concern others. As Adcock and Segal (1983, p.141) stated, "All of us, adults and children, are socially out-of-step at times ...." Success in parent-teacher partnering programs is possible if attitudes are adjusted, the other's perspectives are valued, and understanding of the need to work together is acknowledged (Novick & Grimstad, 1999).

Not everyone agrees that formal education at the preschool level is appropriate. Fischer, Elkind, & Hirsh-Pasek (reported in Diamond & Hopson, 1998), would consider collaboration between parents and teachers at the preschool level irrelevant. They argue that parents and teachers of such programs do harm to children by imposing the discipline of formal instructive learning too early. The decision for children to participate or not in preschool

programs is ultimately one only parents can make (Diamond & Hopson, 1998). But for children who are enrolled in preschool programs, early attention given to the relationships between their parents and teachers may jumpstart the creation of a positive collaborative process over the traditional 12-year educational period.

Although home-school collaboration is important, it often does not happen. Parents and teachers lack efficacy and leadership skills (Katz & Bauch, 1999); teachers lack parental involvement training (Scheidler, 1994) and cultural diversity expertise (Adcock & Segal, 1983; Derman-Sparks, 1989; Kendall, 1996). Traditional school policies and practices, likewise, contribute to a failure of parent-teacher connections (Lazar & Slostad, 1999). According to Lazar & Slostad (1999), school ethos and administrative attitudes that remain constant over time may not encourage parent-teacher partnerships. Katz and Bauch (1999) confirmed in their study of the Peabody Family Involvement Initiative teacher-training program, that unless school administrators promote parent-teacher partnerships they do not occur.

Other impediments to parent-teacher partnerships exist. Teachers express fear over losing control of their classrooms to parents (Katz & Bauch, 1999). But schools have traditionally protected teacher autonomy by minimizing parent authority (Wyness, 1995). Tension between parents and teachers may also be heightened by uncomfortable parent-teacher conferences (Stevens & Tollafield, 2003) in addition to unsettled issues that may arise prior to and subsequent to conferences (Kendall, 1996). Keogh (1996) suggests that teachers oftentimes intimidate parents, and parent-teacher communications are affected. When

parent and teacher expectations are difficult to express, the potential for frustration exists, which can lead to negative perceptions (Robinson & Fine, 1994).

Hughes & MacNaughton (2001), Kelly & Berthelsen (1995), and Sumsion (1999) have all published empirical data that reveal conflict present in some parent-teacher relationships. Details of these studies and others addressing similar issues, particularly parental involvement in schools, will be discussed in the literature review, which will also include a literature review assessment by Rimm-Kaufman (2004) about the disconnection between some parents and teachers on perspectives related to school readiness. Furthermore, The Philadelphia Child Care Quality Study (Jaeger & Funk, 2001) and the Pennsylvania Early Childhood Quality Settings Study (Fiene et al, 2002) report that parent-teacher interactions at the preschool level fall below acceptable quality standards as recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), the premiere childcare accreditation agency in the United States (Barnett, 2003). Quality standards in the preschool context will also be discussed in the review of the literature.

### *Research Questions*

The promotion of parent-teacher collaboration requires knowledge about barriers to communication. The first research question is: What are the pre-existing perceptions that mothers and teachers have of their relationship, and how do these definitions of the situation change in the course of interaction during parent-teacher conferences? The answer to this question has potential to

influence how parents and teachers evaluate future interactions and make appropriate adjustments in their own behaviors in order to facilitate more productive partnerships. Both parents and teachers have expertise on how children learn and what they need to excel in school. A sharing of information between parents and teachers could establish an environment within which children could learn and grow.

Research question 2 is: What is the nature of the relationship between mutual understanding between parents and teachers and rated school quality? A strong need exists for the institutions of home and school to merge ideas on best practices for the education of children so that children can compete with world peers (Bogenschneider & Johnson, 2004). This research looks at whether formal “Keystone STARS” quality ratings are reflected in parent-teacher interaction.

Symbolic interaction theory gives us guidance on how to interpret the nature of human behavior (Lyman, 1988). People become who they are and behave the way they do based on life experiences. These life experiences influence how people think about various situations. When parents and teachers interact, they define these encounters based on what they know about their past histories. This causes them to respond to situations in particular ways. They define the situation and assume roles necessary to fulfill expectations. Hence, the *definition of the situation* represents the process individuals go through when they engage others, their reaction under the circumstances, and how they determine what other people might want from them (Shaffer, 2005).

The implications of this study are numerous. The greatest potential is that specific barriers to parent-teacher collaboration will be uncovered; schools will have more data to help with development of parent-teacher partnering programs; parents and teachers can reflect on past experiences, gain new perspective, and learn how to strengthen relationships with each other; the social-emotional learning capacity of children may be positively influenced by cooperative interactions between parents and teachers; more people may learn how to communicate effectively.

### *Method*

At best, relationships are complex. Sociological inquiry can help explain the norms in society, school culture, and the behavior of individuals (including teachers and parents). The issue of parent-teacher collaboration has been investigated using the comparative case study method (Yin, 1994) from the perspective of the constructivist paradigm. According to Mertens (1998), this interpretive approach inductively seeks understanding of the true feelings of research participants; i.e., parents and teachers. Such insight into the hidden perspectives of parents and teachers can only be obtained through the many experiences of those directly involved (Mertens, 1998).

According to Yin (1994), the case study method is appropriate for understanding and explaining phenomena when control of outcomes escapes the researcher. The emerging constructs are indicative of participants' views only. In this study, preschool teachers and parents were interviewed to learn their views of one another. Then they were observed during parent-teacher conferences to

learn how initial views might change during the interaction process. Follow-up interviews were conducted to determine whether conference expectations were met.

This research project was accomplished first by identifying qualified preschool sites. Then I telephoned each director to solicit support of the proposed research. Subsequently, draft copies of the research proposal were mailed to two school directors, followed by my in-person meeting with them in their offices. Shortly thereafter, I secured written letters of authorization from respective directors to utilize the two preschools as research sites. I also received Institutional Review Board (IRB) and graduate school approvals to conduct the study.

Approximately 7 days prior to the onset of pre-conference interviews I delivered participant solicitation notices, consent forms, and a lock-box in which to secure completed consent forms from persons who agreed to participate in the study. I retrieved signed consent forms on a daily basis and scheduled interviews via telephone. I utilized interview guides (CHAPTER 4 pp. 68-69 & APPENDIX A) to conduct in-person, pre-conference, tape recorded interviews that took place either at the research site, participants' homes or places of employment, at the researcher's school office, or, in one instance, at a park. Then I observed parent-teacher conferences (previously scheduled by teachers) at the research sites. I utilized an observation guide (APPENDIX B) to take hand written notes. Subsequently, in-person, post-conference interviews were conducted either at the research sites or researcher's school office, and tape recordings of

conversations were made. Hand written notes were also taken during each phase of interviewing. All participants were asked whether conferences had met their expectations and whether anything had changed in their perspective of the parent-teacher relationship as a result of the conference. Various other supplemental questions were asked that were germane to responses provided by individual participants during the conferences (APPENDIX C). When data gathering was completed I removed the lock-box used to obtain signed consent forms and any remaining research materials from each study site. After tape recordings were transcribed, data analysis completed, and member checks and peer reviews done, nominal cash payments were made to each participant either at the research site or participant's home. Each participant was required to sign a receipt of payment form (APPENDIX D).

Data analysis began with tape transcription. Then I read and highlighted relevant data noted in the transcripts. Next I sorted and labeled data based on its internal and external homogeneity, followed by the use of a uniform coding system to identify emerging themes. Multiple iterations of this process continued until no new information was revealed (Patton, 2002). Subsequently, McHugh's (1968) "emergence and relativity" data analysis technique (APPENDIX E) was used as the framework to interpret *definition of the situation*. Emergence and relativity, respectively, have 6 and 5 components. According to McHugh (1968), the sequential arrangement of data into these components can reveal when or if definition took place by parents and teachers who participated in this study.

### *Content of Remaining Chapters*

Chapter 2 will review the literature and discuss what research discloses about the dynamics of parent-teacher collaboration, school ethos, and how the development of partnerships between parents and teachers facilitates effective learning in children. Chapter 3 will highlight relevant sociological concepts from symbolic interaction theory. Chapter 4 will discuss the methodological approach used to address the research questions. Chapters 5 and 6, respectively, will include research findings and discussion. Chapter 7 will provide a summary, conclusions and recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The preceding chapter provided an overview of the proposed research. An argument was made as to why this study on parent and teacher interaction in preschools is an important topic. Stakeholders in the education of children agree that more attention must be given to building cooperative alliances. The research questions were stated, and the methodological approach to answering that question was noted. This chapter will outline reviewed literature and research on how parent-teacher partnerships, school ethos, and parent organizations impact children's learning outcomes.

Data gathered from research indicates that parents and teachers lack efficacy and leadership skills (Katz & Bauch, 1999) and that teachers lack parental involvement training (Scheidler, 1994). The literature also suggests that the lack of teacher training in cultural diversity is a significant obstacle to building parent-teacher partnerships (Adcock & Segal, 1983; Bullard, 1996; Derman-Sparks, 1989; Kendall, 1996). Hiatt-Michael (2001) asserts that parents and teachers must learn how to talk to one another, because communicating is of primary importance in forming partnerships that work. This literature review will include the history of parental involvement, changes in education, the role of teachers, parents, and parent organizations in forging effective home-school partnerships, and a contextual view of preschools. I will then focus on research methods used in the literature, and the methodological approach for the current inquiry.

## The History of Parental Involvement

When children graduate from school without basic skills in reading, writing and math, federal, state and local legislation is sometimes enacted to ensure that children be afforded the benefits of a good education in order to lead independent, productive lives. The New Education Fellowship (NEF), an organization established in 1921 by and through the efforts of Beatrice Ensor, formulated new pedagogic practices in early childhood education, which positively impacted school systems, both domestically and internationally, for a span of 30 years until the 1950's (Jenkins, 2000). NEF adopted an emancipatory approach to ensure that every domain or caveat in the life of each child be included in a school's curriculum for educating them.

Jenkins (2000) further stated that NEF's emancipatory interests sought to "free" children from an old educational system that promoted worldwide political conflict, in order to protect the economic potential and long-term emotional disposition of children, their parents and the nuclear family unit. Apparently, NEF would argue that the strength of family bonds could ensure parental involvement throughout the lives of children. Educational interest in familial bonds goes back to 1874, and consideration of mothers and fathers being initial educators of their children gained popularity beginning in 1960 (Holloway & Fuller, 1999). However, dissenters like Sarup & Brehony argued that progressive education and radical political views were completely separate issues (Jenkins, 2000).

NEF's mantra was "God is Love" (Jenkins, 2000, p. 4); i.e., faith in the almighty creator would ensure change. The public voicing by NEF leaders of

religious views that connected religion to progressive educational practices, fueled discourse among new education practitioners who opposed the hypocrisy of associating with religion's hierarchical construction, representative of a rationalized Weberian bureaucracy (McIntyre, 2002), while simultaneously championing emancipation of children from oppressive educational practices (Jenkins, 2000). Unanimous agreement was never reached on this issue, which caused NEF to represent its mission in a more politically correct fashion; hence, the umbrella of "universal personalism," where secular and religious views were merged (Jenkins, 2000). In the years to follow, momentum in solidifying emancipatory practices in early childhood education waned because of worldwide political warfare. At the same time many organizations and educational institutions emerged that embraced the philosophy of "child-centeredness" in education, making it not only a home and school affair, but also a larger family that included the nation (Jenkins, 2000). Post World War II, a resurgence of focus returned to progressive education in hopes of restoring stability in families. Early childhood education grew, and the development of different teaching approaches emerged, the more prominent of which, Piagetian Theory, focused on what educators could surround children with to promote various aspects of learning (Holloway & Fuller, 1999).

This section illuminated the fact that the education of children is not a new issue. Changes in the focus on how educating children is best accomplished

remains a topic of discussion. The next section will explore the changes in and the debate over early childhood education and the respective roles played by teachers and parents.

### *A New Era in Education*

Governmental mandates are attempting to broaden educational opportunities for families. Federal Title I legislation of 1965 [The Federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (FESE)], as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (North Carolina School Boards Association & Public Schools of North Carolina, 2003), was enacted to fund programs that would improve educational outcomes for underachieving students (Laredo Independent School District, 2002). Federal Title VII legislation in 1968 of the FESE is “The Bilingual Education Act,” geared toward enhancing learning outcomes for bilingual students (Santa Clara County Office of Education, 2002-2005). The U.S. Congress in 1975 enacted The Education for All Handicapped Children Act” (later reauthorized as “The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) (IDEA),” to protect the rights of disabled children to have free public education (NICHCY, No Date Given). Federal Title I, Title VII, and IDEA all include language that calls for parental involvement in schools. The U. S. Department of Education’s Goals 2000 Educate America Act facilitated national multi-level policy on parental involvement. Even the court systems are upholding dismissals of teachers who fail to establish collaborative relationships with parents (Chrispeels, 1996). According to Lazar & Slostad (1999), teacher accreditation agencies also agree that teachers should have the ability to engage parents in a cooperative effort to

educate their children. According to Scriven (1975) the “Free School Movement” (p. 53) facilitated ways for parents to participate in establishing curriculum and other protocols. Chrispeels (1996) reported that charter school legislation (Senate Bill 1448, Hart, 1992) made great strides in elevating the role of parents in school decision-making. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) during 1997 suggested that educators refrain from judging parents but seek to make inquiry about parent perspectives (Holloway & Fuller, 1999). NAEYC is the premier agency in the United States charged with accrediting childcare organizations (Barnett, 2003). However, the fact that federal laws and policies require that parents and teachers work together for education and children’s sake may not mean that this alliance actually occurs.

When an organization is considered a school, certain collective ideas may come to mind as to what exactly comprises such an institution. Large public schools in general are bureaucracies. But the same may not be true of preschools. Preschool culture differs in many respects (Williams & Mitchell, 2004) from that of other schools. The preschool ethos is different from that of elementary, middle, and high schools, particularly because many preschools also provide personal day care. Moreover, preschools are not the initial start of the traditional school experience, mandated by law (Fiene, 2002). Diamond and Hopson (1998) and Johnson (1981) report that some theorists, educators, and practitioners believe children should stay at home with a parent until enrolled in kindergarten as a better option to preschool. The alternative is to enroll children

in daycare or preschool. According to a Temple University Family Survey (2002, p. 5), “an estimated 64% of children under the age of 6 are in some form of non-parental care.”

There are differing views on how to best educate preschoolers. But research indicates that any environment with smaller student/teacher ratios, which enriches children via “literacy-based, response-oriented” programs (Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992) through play, music, physical exercises, interactive learning, verbal communication, and even hugs, with the encouragement of parent participation, increases a child’s ability to properly develop necessary life skills (Diamond & Hopson, 1998). Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz (1992, p. 49) summarizes the alternative outcome by stating: “. . . without training, children can quite easily grow into irresponsible adults . . . dependent in a society that requires independence.”

Research also indicates that certified, experienced traditional schoolteachers are better educators (Justice, Greiner, & Anderson, 2003). In their study that focused on determinants of good teacher preparedness via traditional 4-year education versus teacher certification programs, Justice, Greiner, & Anderson (2003) used quantitative and qualitative methods to identify the significance of one program approach over the other. A total of 159 former Texas A & M University – Commerce students from 1995-2000 teaching in Texas participated in this study. They indicated, via a telephone survey on how they were trained, how satisfied they were with their level of preparedness and their future teaching aspirations. Survey outcomes showed that 88% of traditional

teachers as opposed to 40% of certificate-only teachers indicated confidence in strong teaching ability. However, many teachers and caretakers of preschool aged children often are not as experienced and hold minimal certifications (e.g. first aid training); furthermore, preschool teacher salaries are low, and turnover is high (Fiene, 2002).

Justice, Greiner, & Anderson (2003) report that when teacher attitudes are negative, student academic performance and excitement for gaining knowledge are low. Stress may contribute to the negative attitudes that some teachers have. Grubb (1997) states that success in on-going parent-teacher relationships is also made difficult by employment obligations of the family and instances where various school leaders view parental involvement programs as a nuisance. However, according to Lazar & Slostad (1999), teachers believe the establishment of on-going relationships with parents lowers the overall stress that usually accompanies teaching.

Justice, Greiner, & Anderson (2003) revealed in their study the importance of having well trained professionals in the classroom. Teachers should possess a sense of applicable knowledge and transferable skills needed to effectively facilitate educational programs. Even though this study did not explore the quality of teacher education course content, it is clear that teachers want and require skill development through proper initial training and continued guidance. This study did not specify any particular grade of school teacher, which suggests that the same thinking maybe applicable to preschool teachers as well. The capacity to teach and other roles of teachers will be explored next.

## *The Role of Teachers*

Research suggests that teachers have a responsibility to teach, and even a greater responsibility to ensure that they have the proper training and tools necessary to teach effectively. According to Chase & Katz (2002, p. 30), “the single greatest determinant in the success of a child’s schooling is the quality of the classroom teacher.” This includes teacher ability to create suitable lesson plans for the full scope of young learners’ issues, coupled with a strong commitment (Raver & Zigler, 2004). Hence, teachers must be able to implement “Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP)” (Frede, 1995, p. 121) in their classrooms. According to Frede (1995), results of various research studies showed that inclusion of DAP protocols has reduced tension in children of lower-socioeconomic families, increasing outcomes on standardized exams. Their perspective underscores what Scheidler (1994) references as the key to school reconstruction—teachers; i.e. “Reforms are carried into practice by teachers (Scheidler, 1994, p. 8).” In 1982 NAEYC responded to calls for better-prepared educators of children during the first 8 years of life. Results of survey research conducted by NAEYC of existing teacher practices led to the establishment of NAEYC certification requirements for educators of young children (Seefeldt, 1988). These teacher requirements were created as DAP in 1986 (Carl, 2006).

There are many reasons why tension exists between parents and teachers. Scheidler (1994) notes lack of parental involvement training. Lazar & Slostad (1999) add the fact that school district history and policies interfere with teachers making contact with parents. This conclusion is based on Lazar &

Slostad's (1999) interpretation of the historical nature of rigid school systems. Katz & Bauch (1999) note that teacher efficacy is a significant factor. This was a significant finding in their study of pre-service student teachers, in-service student teachers, and teachers who graduated from the Peabody Family Involvement Initiative training program within the prior 36 months. They concluded that training could help teachers better prepare for their roles; however, with or without training, teachers are likely to subscribe to the protocols embedded in school ethos (Katz & Bauch, 1999). For example, if the establishment of parent and teacher partnerships is a highly respected agenda in the school, then teachers may acquiesce and commit to forming and maintaining such relationships. However, MacNaughton & Hughes (2001), in a qualitative case study on teacher perspectives on home-school partnerships, suggests that high quality parent-teacher relationships may only be possible through less structured, yet in person, contact. While teachers may find it easier to connect with parent perspectives under more relaxed conditions, administrators who establish school ethos must consider all demographic variables that may be problematic when outlining guidelines (Seefeldt, 1988). Whatever the catalyst, early childhood teachers are challenged with job mandates to care for medical, bodily, and security needs as well as the academic demands of individual children (Seefeldt, 1988).

Teachers may lack confidence in their ability to work cooperatively with parents. Some teachers fear that parents will usurp their authority in the classroom (Katz & Bauch, 1999). Bullard (1996) argues that parents are just as

fearful of teachers and that they cause no threat to teachers' classroom autonomy. Wyness (1995) argues that, traditionally, schools minimize the authority parents and children possess, and protect the teacher's power and control. This empirical study included interviews with 20 teachers and 20 guidance counselors/teachers from 5 Scottish secondary schools. This study sought to analyze the adoption of teacher behavior and the impact on parent authority in schools. The findings show that school culture sets the tone for teacher behavior and the extent to which parent control is operationalized (Wyness, 1995). Even though this study does not focus on the preschool environment, it directly points to a common denominator found in all parent and teacher partnerships—school ethos. Understanding this aspect of school culture and why it might influence teacher behavior can be useful in determining what factors might deter successful parent-teacher interactions. This issue will be highlighted in the discussion on the nature of position power.

Kagan (2002) describes a similar phenomenon in his analysis, which traces the history of Head Start programs, developed to meet the preschool needs of children from ethnic, racial, and culturally diverse low-income families. According to Kagan (2002), many of these mothers who were subjected to marginalization by administrators asserted themselves and demanded respect. Parent-teacher interactions in mainstream schools exhibit similar tensions (Sumsion, 1999). Bullard (1996), Chase & Katz (2002), Derman-Sparks (1989), Kendall (1996), and Lamme, Krough, & Yachmetz (1992) agree that such attitudes hinder parents' and teachers' ability to communicate effectively.

Sumsion (1999, p. 1) reported the uneasiness experienced by one preschool teacher in Sydney, Australia when engaging parents over the initial 24 months on the job. Results highlighted the arduous process teachers may follow to move away from a survival mode to one of partnership with parents (Sumsion, 1999). This study suggests that teachers understand that establishment of effective parent-teacher relationships is more of a job responsibility than probably originally imagined (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995). Furthermore, according to Stevens & Tollafield (2003), often parents and teachers are like-minded in their reactions toward what they see as stress inducing parent-teacher conferences—they would prefer to avoid the awkwardness altogether. But if parent-teacher conferences are viewed as a necessary bridge to communication, continued focus on them can convert complicated circumstances into opportunities for growth (Alden, 1997). According to Alden (1997), too often stalemates occur and little is accomplished. Both parents and teachers hold firm to their positions and seldom budge.

Alden (1997) “sought via a qualitative study to capture the essence of parent-teacher conferences of kindergarteners (p.53)” and to determine a different snapshot of these meetings given higher levels in satisfaction of participants. Also of consideration were the “perspectives of 10 teachers (5 male-5 female), 3 focus groups of parents, and 4 experts on the subject matter (Alden, 1997, pp. 53-54).” Alden (1997) found that implementation of the following may contribute to better parent-teacher interactions:

- Increase the percentage of time parents and teachers make contact to balance power.
- Parents and teachers need development of appropriate interpersonal behaviors.
- Dialogue without boundaries in conferences should be made with confidence in a shared forum.
- Teachers should accommodate time constraints faced by parents.
- Consideration should be given to student attendance at conferences.
- Teachers should give parents advanced written notice about the conference agenda, welcome parent agenda items, and jot down a brief statement of encouragement.
- Conferences should focus on the student, their assessment, and the importance of ratings on school achievement.
- Acknowledgement of familial roles as a part of school ethos may encourage home support, and increase student performance.
- At minimum, hold conferences for one-half hour.

Alden (1997) also noted that individuals and groups of stakeholders are grappling with the same issues (e.g. power; efficacy; time constraints, content, etcetera) surrounding parent-teacher conferences. Apparently, addressing disconnection among stakeholders is an appropriate approach in improving the outcomes of such conferences. For example, pre-post planning which would include skill-based training for teachers, shared decision-making between

participants, context and content of discussion, and discussion about who will attend meetings, when, where, frequency, and duration of conferences are recommended.

Richardson (2001-2003), likewise, offers guidance to teachers on how to facilitate effective parent-teacher conferences. In general, conferences that exude a caring, attentive, and honest sharing of legitimate information in a sensitive manner, have the best chance of positive outcomes (Richardson, 2001-2003). According to Kendall (1996), tension can occur when teachers harbor resentment over unresolved issues with parents. But with appropriate training, teachers can realize that their negative perceptions of parents are misplaced, particularly those regarding people of low socio-economic status (Justice, Greiner, & Anderson, 2003). Katz & Bauch (1999) suggest that the effectiveness of teachers to facilitate and maintain parent-teacher relationships is determined by their initial training (or lack thereof) and other programs available to them at work. Research specifically geared to parental involvement such as the Peabody Family Involvement Initiative reveals that a low percentage of state boards offer a complete course about parental involvement to pre-service teachers. Of teachers who received the training, a near majority felt parental involvement courses should be mandated (Katz & Bauch, 1999). Hiatt-Michael (2001) states that California has initiated and remains alone in mandating (California Education Code 44291.2, 1993) pre-service teachers and certified teachers to participate with families.

It is clear from the research noted above that teachers have much to contend with. They are expected to teach and nurture children, adhere to school protocols, and be sensitive to the needs of parents; yet it appears sufficient training is not afforded teachers. Next, the discussion will focus on what the literature says about parent roles.

### *The Role of Parents*

Chase & Katz (2002) suggest that parents can take the lead and request an audience with teachers, or any school official capable of answering their questions. Keogh (1996) suggests from a practitioner's perspective that if parents receive good customer service with a timely response during the same day their request, they feel assured that school officials value them as customers. Chase & Katz (2002, p. 9) write: "No Way! Your role is far more important than that of a mere consumer. If anything, your role is that of a partner—a full-fledged partner." Parents are not incidental people to the school system—they are legitimate stakeholders. A 1981-1985 longitudinal study of the *Parents as Teachers Program* (Pfannenstiel, Lambson, & Yarnell, 1996) comprised of 380 families in 4 Missouri school districts supports this argument. Pfannenstiel, Lanbson, & Yarnell (1996) found that not only did children benefit with significant social-emotional and academic development, parents became more educated in caring for their children, parent attitudes about educational systems were favorable, and teacher awareness of student needs increased.

Keogh (1996) states that parents should not let themselves become intimidated by school officials. However, research indicates that some parents,

like teachers, lack efficacy (Katz & Bauch, 1999). Parents also lack the ability to recognize the influence their participation has on the learning of children. Lapses in communication between parents and teachers may spark tension. These lapses often occur during parent-teacher conferences. Robinson & Fine (1994) reviewed studies that revealed when parents are confused about what teachers expect from them they become agitated and negative perceptions are born. Their article offers ways in which schools can effectively collaborate with parents based on an interpretation of literature reviewed.

Parents feel powerless when teachers determine the time and place of parent-teacher conferences and when teachers use jargon during meetings (Robinson and Fine, 1994). Parents may perceive a lack of teacher respect when teachers fail to solicit their support for school activities. Parents sometimes experience anxiety about whether or not they are capable of helping their children with learning needed skills or doing class projects. Epstein & Van Voorhis (2001) suggest that at home projects are sometimes used as a tool to strengthen the relationships between parents and children, and between parents and teachers, the premise being that the more quality time spent together doing productive things has potential to create stronger bonds.

Parent involvement is important for children's well being. Parents who give attention, encouragement, and validation to children can boost their self-esteem (Lamme, Krogh, & Yachmetz, 1992). Parents possess many hidden talents and abilities to share with their children that should be identified and used (Hill, 1989). Parents can show interest by asking questions and listening, getting involved in

activities, and being available to children (Paulu, 1995). When parents actively participate in the lives of their children, children perceive that their parents genuinely want that involvement (Chase & Katz, 2002). When parents are involved children flourish (Pfannenstiel, Lambson, & Yarnell, 1996). Children are more eager to learn, academic performance is increased, behavior is well managed, and children are happier.

The research reviewed supports the notion that parents are an integral part of the educational process. Parents are useful to teachers in sharing needed information about their children's personalities and behaviors, but oftentimes such exchanges are not made because of the inability of parents and teachers to effectively communicate with one another. A mixture of empirical data, practitioner experience, and editorial literature has given attention to the roles that school culture, teachers, and parents play in the educational arena. They all have merit in the discussion of what is best for educating young children. The message of paramount interest is that parents and teachers should harness a cooperative spirit of involvement influenced by sound school ethos. The next section will review one traditional way in which schools have tried to facilitate parent and teacher alliances.

### *Parent Organizations*

Parent organizations have existed a long time under different names, like the commonly known Parent Teacher Association (PTA), or Parent Associations facilitated by parents, and even some with inviting titles such as "Friends,"

comprised of a representation of all stakeholders in the school system (Brook & Hancock, 2000). The intent of establishing such organizations was to bridge the communication gap among parents, students, teachers, and school administrators. The *Children Achieving reform plan* implemented in 1995 in Philadelphia, PA public schools entitled organizations comprised of parents and teachers as *Home and School Associations* (Gold et al, 2001). Some strides have been made with the help of these organizations, but in many cases low support and low attendance at meetings, along with lack of funding, virtually turned these organizations into mere social organizations, and many simply dissolved (Brook & Hancock, 2000). Otherwise, they are slow in promoting a shift of parental decision-making roles in schools as originally envisioned by the Children Achieving reform plan (Gold et al, 2001).

According to Sandy & Boardman (2000), when schools offer significant training courses (e.g. conflict resolution) during the times that best accommodate parent schedules, parents are more drawn to participate in school activities. Sandy & Boardman (2000) report findings of a two-year evaluation of The Peaceful Kids Early Childhood Social-Emotional Learning (ECSEL) Program. Preschoolers (404), parents (more than 171), and teachers/staff (33) in various daycare and Head Start centers in New York participated in the study, which sought to learn the impact of the ECSEL Conflict Resolution Program implemented over a two-year period. The program was evaluated between 1997 and 1999. Participants were separated into 3 groups: Children, parents and teachers; children and teachers; and the control group of participants who

received no training. By far, children grouped with parents showed a significant reduction in adverse behavior (Sandy & Boardman, 2000). Stevenson & Baker (1987) concur that parental involvement contributes to positive learning experiences for children. They specifically concluded in their study of the impact of parental involvement on student learning, that a well-educated mother is a good barometer for the level of parent participation a teacher can expect, and the earlier years in a child's life can, likewise, be a good indicator for potentially high levels of parental involvement (Stevenson & Baker, 1987).

This section points out that parental involvement is crucial in directing the behavior of children. Therefore, parent organizations might rethink approaches to accomplishing their mission. Establishment of strategies to penetrate well-established school culture that may not ordinarily subscribe to parental involvement practices should be explored.

The research reviewed here suggests that, although parent-teacher collaboration is important, it tends to be problematic. Teacher perspectives can be influenced by school ethos and lack of training to support parental involvement; parent behavior, likewise, can be a direct result of consistent lack of school policy on acknowledgement of parental authority. Stakeholders may all aspire to serving the educational needs of children, but a disconnection lingers on how best to accomplish the complex goal of collaboration. The next section examines the context within which parent-teacher interaction occurs.

### *The Preschool Context*

Preschool environments can range from a personal residence to a community center to a formal public or private school. Staffing, teacher educational requirements, salaries, costs, availability, type and quality of services all may be different from one establishment to the next; little or no consistency exists in operations (Barnett, 2003; Williams & Mitchell, 2004). For example, according to Williams & Mitchell (2004, p. 1), “only 21 states and the District of Columbia require a Baccalaureate Degree—29 do not; 14 states and the District of Columbia require pre-service training in Early Childhood Education-26 do not; only 13 states require pre-service training in Early Childhood Education for Master Teachers—29 do not.” However, it is important to note that research indicates that most parents do not give much consideration to the formal educational levels of preschool teachers; they make their assessments on how well the teacher performs based on the quality of the child’s relationship with the teacher (Shumow, 1997).

Shumow (1997) interviewed a total of 34 parents of children attending two elementary schools. Parents were questioned about their views on the purpose of schooling, assessments, parent and teacher roles, and the training and educational levels of teachers. Even though Shumow’s (1997) study focused on elementary schools, the discussion is applicable to parent-teacher interaction in preschools, as the majority of preschool age children receive daily care in various settings away from home (Temple University Family Survey, 2002), which may at times include a public school. The next stage of education is elementary school

where parents may not shift from concern about the quality of their child's relationship with their teacher as being a positive one (Shumow (1997). The persistent attitude is if the child likes the teacher so will the parent; although Johnson (1981) reports that parents generally prefer qualified, certified teachers for their children.

Johnson (1981, pp. 1-2) made qualitative inquiry about parent views on their preschooler's learning program. A near majority of female parents (203) plus 12 men from a preschool in Topeka, Kansas equaling 215 participants answered a Likert survey with 42 questions. Notable findings were that the majority of parents agreed that parental involvement is good school policy; neither gender nor socioeconomic status influenced parent perspectives about learning programs for young children; the academic level achieved by parents is a good indicator of the degree of parental involvement teachers might expect; more educated parents are likely to participate more in their child's education and will expect more from their child's teacher and school administrators—to include teacher certifications and higher educational degrees (Johnson, 1981, pp.79-83). Outcomes suggest that parent-teacher interaction is not merely an option but a critical link to the successful education of children, and the continuing education of parents, teachers, and other stakeholders.

McMullen & Alat (2002, p. 1) used developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) as a way to determine how teacher perceptions and own schooling influenced how they cared for and educated young children. Findings indicate that preschool teachers who have higher education degrees are more likely to

aspire to DAP protocols than non-degreed staff holding early childhood certifications (McMullen & Alat, 2002). However, those opposed to DAP question the applicability of standardized behaviors that lack consideration of various backgrounds. Children are not carbon copies. And to suggest that one provision fits all children raises concern (McMullen & Alat, 2002). This conclusion is contrary to what the NCLB legislation purports to do (Laredo Independent School District, 2002), which is to remove disparity in learning for all children giving way to an equal opportunity education.

It is hard to imagine that fulfillment of a goal for all children to have equal opportunity to a good education can be done without consistent school policy and appropriately trained personnel. It seems that a universal shift in mandating all early childhood teachers to hold at least a baccalaureate degree has only positive implications for the education of young children. Another benefit may possibly be that this population of teachers traditionally on the low spectrum of the pay scale could command competitive wages. The prospect of increased earnings might encourage teacher stability in the early childhood workforce and the hope of better professional development practices being exercised between teachers and parents, and teachers and students.

The lack of consistency in services provided, particularly in the level of qualifications for preschool teachers, addresses the issue of quality believed pivotal in successful child development outcomes. Research indicates that the quality of a preschool environment greatly determines how well children are able to adopt societal norms and build strong minds capable of sound reasoning

(Bradley, 2001; Espinosa, 2002; Fiene et al, 2002; Fight Crime: Invest in Kids Pennsylvania, 2003; Howes & Brown, 2000; Jaeger & Funk, 2001; Raver & Zigler, 2004; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000; Xu & Gulosino, 2004). Yet, Jaeger & Funk (2001) found in their study of 208 in-home and center-based childcare classrooms using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R) that childcare quality in Philadelphia, PA was below acceptable standards. The ratings span from 1 equaling poor performance to 5 equaling good performance to 7 equaling excellent performance (Harms, Clifford, and Cryer, 1998). The Philadelphia Child Care Quality Study consistently reported ECERS-R scores below 5.0 (Jaeger & Funk, 2001).

The purpose of ECERS-R is to provide childcare givers with a barometer to improve quality, when caring for children and supporting families through their services (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998). It identifies a host of items educational researchers consider significant to the care and development of young children. The ECERS-R measurement tool seeks to raise teacher consciousness about the level of care and learning experiences they provide to children. Quality is viewed in terms of two components: process and structure (Espinosa, 2002; Howes & Brown, 2000; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). Although characteristics of each can sometimes be interchanged, processual and structural quality generally represents different things.

Process reflects what teachers do with children and where (e.g., activities, treatment, involvement, environment), and also includes communication with parents or other custodians; structural quality pertains to number of children

assigned to caretakers or teachers, level of training achieved by employees and requisite pay, and size of space in which activity is conducted (Espinosa, 2002; Howes & Brown, 2000; Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). Several studies on preschool quality concluded that many preschools in the United States provide substandard quality in preparing young children for entrance into a formal academic learning environment (Espinosa, 2002). The Philadelphia Child Care Quality Study (Jaeger & Funk, 2001) and the Pennsylvania Early Childhood Quality Settings Study (Fiene et al, 2002) both support the need for better care and educational programs for children.

Elmore (2000) suggests that the structural nature of school history conflicts with increasing standardized reforms that are probably not the answer to increasing quality in schools. This is attributed to Weick (1976), Rowan (1990), and Meyer and Rowan's perspective on "loose coupling" (Elmore, 2000, p. 5). Loose coupling pertains to where power lies within the boundaries of school systems. In the past, teachers generally decided how to conduct their classrooms with loose guidance from administrators. The advent of standardized reforms has shifted control of the classroom from teachers to administrators who stringently enforce mandated governmental policies. Whereas before it was believed that, "Teachers—not the school system—possess individual power and control over what takes place in the classroom. Schools have established an understanding with parents and other participants in school arenas via "logic of confidence" (Elmore, 2000, p. 6). The premise to logic of confidence is that teachers are indoctrinated into pretend roles that represent a level of professionalism,

although performance in no way rises to that of, for example, doctors. Teacher autonomy in deciding the best approach to protecting the future lives of school children via education in no way rises to the importance of a doctor's life saving decisions when providing medical treatment to patients. Research is available to assist school systems to implement "best practices" to ensure that children get what they need for success in life, but because few checks and balances exist, outcomes are variable (Secretary Bennett, as cited in Boyd & Hartman, 1998). As previously noted, since 1986 NAEYC has tried to address this issue via establishment of DAP protocols (Carl, 2006).

Preschools, which presumably exist outside rigid organizational systems [although the "Goals 2000" campaign, which seeks to prepare all children for formal schooling (Rimm-Kaufman, 2004), might dispel this notion], may have a greater challenge in establishing protocols for good, consistent care and education of children, despite widely held beliefs that children are entitled to a good education (Taylor & Sobel, 2002). Even thoughts on what aspects of preschool to fund are at odds (Williams and Mitchell, 2004). Focus may be on whether or not to accommodate schedules of a wide range of parents in the workforce, financially needy children and their families (e.g. Head Start), or providing care versus learning curriculums. Nevertheless, Howes & Brown (2000) suggest that focus on any preschool reform must first be directed toward structural issues, because positive structural outcomes would directly benefit process quality (e.g. teacher interactions with children and their parents).

Research shows that preschools generally exceed recommended number of children per classroom (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). Vandell & Wolfe (2000) prepared an in-depth report analyzing the need for quality preschools to determine the extent to which government intervention is needed to resolve what appears as a public crisis in early childhood care and education. They learned that when teachers have fewer children assigned to them, a better environment of care and learning is created. This is one of the many standards recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). The more time and attention children receive from a teacher increases process quality and the child's learning experiences. Ultimately, family relationships grow, and society benefits from having fewer taxes and educated, responsible citizens (Vandell & Wolfe, 2000). While there are many stakeholders who may be considered responsible for providing quality care and education of young children, parents and teachers are on the frontline to promote and secure sufficient early and long-term learning experiences (Rimm-Kaufman, 2004).

According to Blanchard (1998), the majority of U.S. citizens acknowledge that parent-teacher bonds are necessary to support positive outcomes for children, but their behavior suggests otherwise. One explanation might be that like parents and teachers, Americans in general lack consensus on ideas pertaining to the roles stakeholders should have in educating children (Rimm-Kaufman, 2004). Rimm-Kaufman (2004) makes an assessment of various bodies of literature on school readiness. One study, from The National Center for

Educational Statistics, revealed that teachers and parents have different perspectives on what “school readiness” means (Rimm-Kaufman, 2004, p. 2):

Teachers identified ‘ready’ children as those who are physically healthy, well-rested and well fed; able to communicate needs, wants and thoughts verbally; and curious and enthusiastic in approaching new activities... Teachers did not attach particular importance to specific numeracy and literacy skills. Parents, in contrast, typically define readiness in terms of academic abilities, such as the ability to count or know the alphabet.

The preschool environment has much to contend with in dealing with the diverse perspectives of parents and teachers. The parents’ perspective on what is best for their children comes from the experience of raising children from birth; teachers garner perspective from experience working with children in the classroom. Children’s transitioning from home to school is an emotional event. McClelland (1995) studied the phenomenon of what it felt like for 9 mothers of European American descent, as kindergarten began for their children. The results showed, overwhelmingly, that parents worried about the overall well-being of their children and that parents had personal struggles in dealing with adaptations to the parent-child relationship (McClelland, 1995). This study illustrates how sensitive the nature of teacher interaction with parents can be, given the emotional state of parents coming to terms with a new dimension in parent-child communications. The school ethos under which discourse takes place can bridge the opposing perspectives or exacerbate a difficult situation with stringent or non-participatory rules. It appears from various aspects of the early childhood literature that parents, teachers and other stakeholders in the educational community want what is best for children. However, it seems the individual reins

of control are still held tightly by parents and teachers. The next section will explore some reasons why and how power is manifested in preschools.

### *Nature of Position Power*

The structure of the school system may perpetuate already tenuous relationships between parents and teachers. Administrators presumably are charged with overseeing the daily operations of school business, and ensuring that all staff duties are carried out responsibly and efficiently. According to Novinger, O'Brien, & Sweigman (2003), in a paper focusing on discourse around the skill level of early childhood teachers, preschool teachers possess minimal authority in their environment. The positions preschool teachers generally hold are situated without power due to their lack of certified training and experience. Preschool teachers are constrained by professional discourses identified by Foucault. The power relations between early childhood education trainers, school administrators, and preschool teachers are resistant to change. Each participant is steadfast in holding his or her position of power. Their behavior is a product of the situations encountered in school and interactions that informed their thinking (Novinger, O'Brien, & Sweigman, 2003).

Rippon & Martin (2003) studied via symbolic interaction the start of partnerships with first time teachers and established teachers. Scottish students in the field of education (1136) were solicited from 2 universities. Survey and focus group results revealed 3 types of relationships new and seasoned teachers have. First, the *procedural* relationship is driven by already outlined privileges and duties for institutions of learning. Second, the *power* relationship represents

the superior and subordinate positions seasoned and newer teachers hold, respectively. The seasoned teacher is charged with assessment of the newer teacher during the indoctrination period into school culture mandated by school policy (Rippon & Martin, 2003, pp. 215-219). Given the dynamics of this power relationship, new teachers are probably at least faced with a choice of conforming to established norms or challenging school ethos. Third, the *personal* relationship described the critical role that individual feelings have on creating new and seasoned teacher bonds. A respect for each other's emotional dispositions can help acclimate and smoothly move new teachers through their first year of teaching (Rippon & Martin, 2003, pp. 219-220).

Rippon & Martin (2003) did not specify any grade of student or focus on the parent-teacher relationship. What is useful to the present study is the conclusion Rippon & Martin (2003) drew that all stakeholders in any relationship have emotional needs that must be acknowledged and nurtured in order to establish and maintain a strong and successful alliance. This means that a reasonable balance of power is crucial, and that school culture is an integral component to displaying a meaningful philosophy; through new teacher support, parent support, and other parental involvement efforts (Rippon & Martin, 2003).

When considering the climate under which preschool teachers must work, teachers might seem territorial to parents. Sumsion (1999) chronicled a 2-year period in the workdays of one preschool teacher. This narrative inquiry illuminated how jockeying for position or status among other teachers and with parents can be a daunting task. The prospect of balancing control with the needs

and wants of school policy, parents, and children invites different kinds of tension. These tensions may be involved in gaining and protecting competence in decision-making, preserving personal values, honoring student needs, or giving deference to parent wishes. Findings support the need for rethinking how preschools, teachers, parents, and children are connected for purposes of elevating learning capacity of children, and that power might need to be shared among all stakeholders (Novinger, O'Brien, & Sweigman, 2003). According to Cochran & Dean (1991), a universal definition of empowerment may not always be clear, and the definition of empowerment adopted may not represent inclusion of everyone impacted. Empowerment must be evidenced by accepted action (Cochran & Dean, 1991). Participants should (to some degree) recognize their input in reflected outcomes.

It is conceivable that without the relinquishment of power from one stakeholder to another, that tension caused from interaction between parents and teachers will heighten. Kelly & Berthelsen (1995) conducted a study on how 8 public preschool teachers of 4 and 5 year olds experienced stress. The teachers were all female between 28 to 46 years of age with 4 to 15 years of teaching experience (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995, p.7). Two of the significant findings germane to this discussion are the stress caused by teachers trying to accommodate program needs for quality instruction and establishing positive relationships with parents. Teachers stated that they often struggle to honor school policies as they juggle daily changes in curriculum as needs of children, parent schedules, and administration demands can quickly change. Also

frustrating are the perceptions that teachers believe some parents have of them. Teachers expressed dismay over parents who send children to school without proper grooming or who are ill. In addition, it is troubling for teachers to learn that parents keep children at home too often when it might be beneficial for children to receive valuable academic instruction in school, or when it appears that parents are using the teachers as babysitters (Kelly & Berthelsen, 1995).

Preschool teachers take offense at being seen as babysitters because they consider themselves professionals and resist conceding such status (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001). Hughes & MacNaughton (2001) conducted a qualitative study of teacher perspectives on relationships with parents. Participants included 15 preschool teachers in 3 early childhood centers in Australia. Findings revealed that casual contact with parents was the best means for teachers to effectively engage parents, where the power of their professional position would be least likely challenged. Teachers felt participation of parents was important in preschools to gain better understanding of children, but that parent involvement created power struggles.

Teachers felt that parents should defer to their expertise (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001). Ironically, preschool teacher expertise is a significant issue of debate in educational arenas. Preschool teachers are at the bottom rung of the educational ladder, with teachers positioned above unwilling to share power; hence, exposing preschool teachers to increased scrutiny and vulnerability (Novinger, O'Brien, & Sweigman, 2003). When parents are too close in proximity too often, teacher limitations could be revealed and some loss of power to the

parent might occur. According to Entwisle (1995) in an article addressing guardian and staff wants and school responsibility in securing long-term educational benefits to children via effective programming, parents of preschoolers generally possessed a greater degree of influence on teacher decision-making, than parents of older children. This finding is reminiscent of Foucault's discussion of the social stage of competing wills (Hughes & MacNaughton, 2001). Yet, "true partnerships require that parents have a voice (Gold et al, 2001, p. 10). "

This section sought to establish a general description of how power is a component of social process in schools. People are socialized into roles such as school administrator, teacher, parent and child, with expectations that ownership of whatever accompanying rights and privileges will be honored and maintained. The reality is that an imbalance in power has the potential to create conflict. The next section will explore more ways in which power impacts parent-teacher interactions.

### *Structural Factors*

The preceding section illustrated how power dynamics can be indicative of parent and teacher relationships. Establishment of preschool outside the auspices of parent care and control and placed in the hands of a teacher suggests that responsibility and accompanying rights of possession and control passes to the one with custody. According to Selander (2003), such relationships contribute to societal expectations that teachers are professionals who provide regular, unique and specialized care to children. Presumably, when teachers are

with children for any given number of hours each day, they know what is best for children. Conversely, the same presumption rests with doctors who may know what ails patients and are expected to provide appropriate care.

Professional dominance is a concept based on the fact that doctors hold the most prestigious position within the scope of commonly accepted professions, and are granted authority as a group to exert control in their professional capacities (Freidson, 1970). This is made possible by educational, cultural, and socioeconomic differences, which create a gap in the body of knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired between the doctors and their patients. These factors can have an intimidating effect on patient behavior causing the patient to defer to the doctor's presumed sound judgment (Freidson, 1970). The "profession" is protected with the isolation and hoarding of information for use only by doctors (Selander, 2003). Doctors behave in a consistent manner to which others acquiesce. Elmore (2000) might argue that the power element in relation to parents and teachers would not be due to the professional status of teachers. According to Elmore (2000), teachers can in no way compete with the skills, training, abilities, and responsibilities which doctors possess; a position supported by the general lack of preschool licensing and consistent educational requirements of preschool teachers (Barnet, 2003; Selander, 2003; Williams & Mitchell, 2004). Thus, numerous preschool teachers feel cut off from other professional groups (Black, 2004). But the structural nature of protocols in the

school environment tells us that while teachers may not be considered “professionals” in the same sense as doctors, they often are perceived as having more authority than parents.

Structural-functional theory in sociology illuminates the commonalities that exist in organizations and among people in the way behaviors are characterized (Darling, 2000). Shared expectations exist. When something is done a particular response is warranted. The structure of an organization and individual behavior function according to generally established norms. Society is structured in a way that explains why people conduct themselves in a certain manner. Pattern variables of treatment or behavior specifically explain the culture that exists and the conflict that arises between professionals and the people they serve (Parsons, 1951 as cited in Darling, 2000).

Given the structural nature of the professional role, it makes sense that the professional’s perceptions of duty might conflict with client expectations. Professional roles (e.g. teachers) coincide with universalism, functional specificity, achievement, affective neutrality, and dominance (Friedson, 1970; Parsons, 1951); whereas the opposite may be true of client roles (e.g. parents) as being more closely related to particularism, functional diffuseness, ascription, and affectivity (Darling, 2000). Professionals are expected to treat everyone the same, maintain order in the way in which services are provided, exhibit behavior commensurate with the prestigious title of, for example “doctor” or “teacher” they have earned, and remain distant to avoid establishment of personal relationships, in order to solidify their dominant position over clients. Clients often assume the

subservient role and succumb to the will of their practitioners. But they want special attention, they want their needs attended to in a holistic manner regardless of their social status, and they want professionals who administer services to care about them and their circumstances (Darling, 2000). Clients welcome sensitive and compassionate professional workers who acknowledge them as individual human beings with feelings—not just an object which is temporarily focused upon to perform a job. These expectations may result in conflict with those of professionals.

When organizations (e.g. schools) function in a universalistic manner people are treated in like fashion, i.e. all children are treated the same. When operations are functionally specific, focusing only on educational outcomes, teachers may overlook child characteristics that are important to parents. The teacher's position is achieved—it is a job—but parenthood is an ascribed status. When teachers remain distant to avoid emotional ties with customers (i.e. parents and children), and teachers share only professional expertise; parents may resent their lack of emotional involvement in their children's lives.

Preschool takes many forms. It can be at home, a daycare within a place of employment, public or private childcare and learning centers, traditional school buildings, or even at churches (Williams & Mitchell, 2004). Teachers expect that children will be prepared by parents to learn when they arrive at school. The fact that children may be able to recite the alphabet and the like is below what is needed for educational preparedness (Boyd et al, 2005). According to Boyd et al (2005), kindergarten teachers stated that at least one fifth of incoming students

(10% higher for children from poor homes) lack interpersonal proficiencies necessary for proper learning. This reality translates into teachers' time being redirected from academics to socialization. Teachers see the parents' role as at-home educators, particularly to establish boundaries and acceptable social behaviors that can only come from often and consistent loving parent-child orientations. Otherwise, teachers perceive their jobs as more difficult and are likely to provide less encouragement. Children cannot form friendships with classmates, and school becomes a place where the child does not want to go (Boyd et al, 2005).

The option of nonattendance at school is not available. The best alternative is parental involvement in order to help children have better school experiences. But the extent of involvement can be minimal to a large degree because time is limited (Marcon, 1999). Marcon (1999, p. 3) sought to learn if a perfect threshold of parental involvement was evident during a qualitative study of 62 preschool teachers of children from presumably difficult families to connect with. The 708 children attending 49 different public school programs were students of participating teachers. Teachers were interviewed about their substantive interaction with parents. Responses were quantified using various measures. The results showed that participation by a parent in miniscule doses is better than nothing at all (Marcon, 1999). This study suggests that it may be helpful for school administrators to devise a plan that would identify those parents who do not participate in schools, find out why, and be creative in facilitating partnerships with teachers, however small.

This section has highlighted the structural effects of teachers and parents in relation to the positions of power they hold. Societal norms play an integral part in how rights and expectations are employed in the preschool environment. Teachers and parents each have roles that must conform to established school culture. The process of fulfilling these expected roles can be difficult, as indicated in the next section.

### *Process Factors*

Parents hope that teachers will be experienced to cope with the demands of caring for and educating their children (Taylor & Sobel, 2002). This would include the ability of teachers to connect with children on a personal level in order to expose them to experiences that will make sense in their lives (Shumow, 1997). Shumow (1997) reported that most parents who participated in his survey believed that they should share in the role of promoting learning for their children. But according to Dwyer & Hecht (1992), some parents leave the education of children to teachers because that is what teachers are paid to do. Such behaviors may stem from a parent's own struggles in school and other perceived harsh life experiences. Even for parents who do want to take on educational responsibilities, little time, lack of efficacy, or feelings of getting in the teacher's way could hinder participation (Dwyer and Hecht, 1992). Parent empowerment can be developed via school programs (Kreider, 2002). Thompson (reported in Gibbs, 2005, p. 7) recommends parent behaviors to facilitate a mutually acceptable collaboration (during parent-teacher conferences):

1. Make yourself available
2. Pay attention
3. Talk about the kid's disposition
4. Use assessment reports to open communication
5. Probe into academic performance
6. Welcome guidance
7. Be calm and proceed with confidence
8. Abandon stereotypes

Although the article mentions grade school children, it is plausible that this information easily applies to preschoolers, due to the nature of parent-teacher contact during conferences at all levels. Similar information on building effective partnerships is probably applicable at all stages of children's academic journey. The fact that parents, teachers and other stakeholders may hold various perspectives, affirms the importance of resolving structural problems in quality (like teacher training) so that process quality in parent-teacher interactions is better (Howes & Brown, 2000).

Also problematic in professional-client interactions is the confusion that arises when situations are difficult to define. It could be that the situation has not been experienced before or the place or circumstances are, to some extent, unfamiliar. People may have no point of reference to use. It might be that children and their parents who are introduced into a new environment such as preschools have no basis on which to formulate an opinion.

Preschools are typically not held to any legally binding ritualized order (Williams & Mitchell, 2004; Barnett, 2003), and teachers do not belong to a hierarchical professional group (Elmore, 2000; Selander, 2003). Preschool is not mandatory (Boyd & Hartman, 1998; Muenchow, 2003; Rimm-Kaufman, 2004; Rous et al, 2003) and teacher standards are largely unregulated (Williams & Mitchell, 2004). One school can differ from the next, and the only barometer parents may have is recollection of their own distant exposure to school decades ago. Education evolves over time and such changes can be overwhelming for parents, particularly those who feel they were not good students or who do not have fond memories to embrace (Coleman, 1991). Gibbs (2005) suggests that parents let go of negative past experiences in order to embrace new perspectives.

Teachers have limited experience and generally are without training on how to address issues arising from contact with parents (Xu & Gulosino, 2004). According to Xu & Gulosino (2004, p. 14), “teacher’s practice more than family background decides family involvement in a school family partnership.” Teachers could be viewed as assuming a paternal role. Preschool teachers are gatekeepers of care routines, lesson plans, attitudes, behaviors, and any and all conversations or activities that take place while in the company of children. Teachers have the power to make it easy for parents to feel welcome to participate or to create walls to block parent access to participate in various activities within the school. Teachers can do this by withholding school processes, protocols, and details about children, and treating parents as ill-

equipped to decipher information held within the boundaries of school policies and procedures. Such attitudes have potential to leave parents feeling dejected or withdrawn (Baker, 1997). Rous et al (2003) reports on a review of literature pertaining to parental involvement in preschools and concurs that these parents experience isolation when not consistently included in various aspects of school programming.

Parent-teacher conferences are often cited as a form of parental involvement. However, parents have noted that minimal time frames (usually 15 minutes) scheduled for such meetings are insufficient for meaningful dialogue (Baker, 1997). Both teachers and parents show anxiety during such meetings, because they either do not know what to expect, are ill equipped to handle adversity, or simply resent being required to conduct parent-teacher conferences or to being summoned to school (Hoover-Dempsey & Walker, 2002). Baker (1997) reports that one parent perceived that involvement is acceptable as long as the teacher controls when, where, and what the involvement will be.

Parents view involvement as helping out in classrooms, going on field trips, making curriculum suggestions, participating on governing committees, setting an example for children; teachers view involvement as getting children to school on time, donating money, volunteering for fundraisers, attending conferences and school performances, helping with homework or, in the case of pre-schoolers, building learning capacity—which is a constant source of frustration as parents frequently do not know what the extent of help should be or even doubt that they are capable of providing it. Teachers resent parents

randomly imposing their presence and ideas on them. Parents would much rather have more frequent visits on a weekly basis in order to build effective partnerships. Teachers want available time allotted in their regular work schedules to accommodate relationships with parents (Baker, 1997).

Elmore (2000) reports that teachers oftentimes state that they are their own supervisors. Teachers had difficulty in describing established accountability protocols that they followed in doing their jobs. So while it could appear that teachers are operating within established guidelines, research suggests that this may not be the case. Regardless of the lack of professionalization in teacher status (Elmore, 2000), teachers still project the image that professionalization exists (Duong, 1996), maybe to maintain dominance over parents.

Teachers have the power of influence even without significant credentials or any at all. Baker (1997) shared that one parent characterized their child as leaving one household and going to another when they went to school. Also noted was that parents temporarily relinquished control of their children to teachers. Similarly, Powell (2003) suggests that teachers sometimes project themselves as substitute parents and disparage parent capabilities. They can act as if they are charged to rescue children as opposed to just being a temporary custodian.

The diverse perspectives that parents and teachers have tend to create stress when they interact. Ferguson (2005) suggests that the key to school reform is for stakeholders to understand barriers and take steps to create partnerships. This may even require continued creative efforts (already done by

some teachers) to literally immerse themselves into the neighborhoods of their students, in order to convince parents that their input is a valued resource to teachers, schools, and most importantly, their children (Ferguson, 2005). Thus, the context within which teachers and parents play their roles may create conflict. Although such conflict has been documented in the literature, few studies have analyzed actual interactions between parents and teachers.

A review of the literature has uncovered information about parent and teacher perceptions of parental involvement. Aside from commonly acknowledged factors such as race, gender, age, income, socio-economic status, and time, beliefs about training and certification of teachers, teacher salaries, and beliefs about school ethos were shown to be important. Differences in experience and prescribed roles also may contribute to a breakdown in communication. A theoretical orientation that provides a basis for interactional analysis will be presented in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The first chapter introduced the proposed research project on parent-teacher interaction in preschools and explained why it is important. The second chapter reviewed the literature on the background of early childhood education, the roles that teachers, parents, and parent organizations have, the preschool context and the ensuing power dynamics present in such environments. This chapter will provide a theoretical basis for understanding the ways in which parents and teachers come to think and behave in the context of parent-teacher conferences.

Symbolic interactionists such as Mead and Blumer suggest that society consists of people interacting with one another (Lyman, 1988). Symbolic interactionism offers a *micro-level* perspective on society as opposed to the *macro-level* perspective offered by structural-functional theory, which suggests that people in society behave similarly, due to established norms. Structural-functional theory explains “when” and “why” people behave the way they do but falls short in illuminating the process of how behavior comes into existence and is susceptible to change (Lyman, 1988). According to Lyman (1988), Blumer believed that individuals made sense of the world and how to function in it not exclusively based on their environment, but as an interpretation of life experiences. Reality is reflective of former, current, and on-going encounters individuals have with one another. Reality is not stagnant (Lyman, 1988). The human experience consists of numerous, ever-changing constructions of reality

simultaneously as people meet with new or altering situations. Every time people interact, for whatever purpose, the meaning of that exchange is constructed. Symbolic interactionism offers insight into understanding the behavioral aspects of human nature (Lyman, 1988). People are linked together because of their capacity to anticipate action or to have expectations, formulate beliefs, and internalize acquired social behavior (De Grave, 2004).

Callero (2003) explains that Mead believed reflexivity was the primary and most essential process of social encounters because it explains how participants internalize the social experience. Acknowledgment of the experience and ownership of interpretations are made. Mead's conceptualization of the "I" and "Me" describes the process by which individuals assess their own behavior and interpret what they believe another person might think of those same behaviors (Shaffer, 2005). Shaffer (2005) states that Thomas & Znaniecki (1918) coined the term "definition of the situation" to represent the process individuals go through in determining what is happening when interaction occurs with others, how they will respond, and what others might want from them. Maines & Morrione (1991) concur that "situations" frame the constructs of social reality.

This section summarizes how people are socialized into society. The experience of interaction with others shapes what people believe and how they behave. These perspectives have potential to change each time interaction occurs. How people make sense of experiences with others is the next topic of discussion.

## Definition of the Situation

We know from symbolic interaction theory that there is a reason why people behave the way they do. People reflect on life experiences and determine how they feel about particular issues. The adopted perspective influences what people do in their daily lives as they encounter various situations (Lyman, 1988). According to Thomas (1931), birth initiates the individual stages of social behavior. Children are trained to conclude what may be right or wrong, acceptable or deviant, and pure or evil on the one hand, and what may be funny or distasteful, pretty or ugly, and nice or unkind on the other, based on how their first teachers defined the situation. Mothers, fathers, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other extended family members may constitute the nuclear environment that molded the conscious and subconscious thinking and behaviors of a child. As the child's social group enlarges and individual experiences expand with age, the process of defining the situation is internalized and new attitudes and beliefs are formed, and outwardly projected by behavior. As maturity develops, individuals' brains do not universally forget histories, but use the constructs of those encounters to make sense of present day situations.

During interactions participants assess the situation prior to assuming roles (Seligman & Darling, 1997). *Role-taking* refers to the way in which people develop a keen sense of knowing what others expect from them. Individuals making contact with one another accomplish this process (Troyer, 1967). According to Troyer (1967), Mead theorized that various human behaviors in the form of speech, bodily gyrations, and physical actions could precipitate an event

that stimulates focus on something (i.e. an object) in order to gain understanding. The object functions as a symbol by which people communicate. Symbols then have potential to represent collective experiences of people and the meaning it has for them. Once connections are made and whether or not shared understanding exists, the effort made (i.e. the act) took on a life of its own with a beginning, middle and end. As such, individuals can either be unmoved by experiences and maintain their same constitution (i.e. "I"), or adopt those experiences as being important and change their viewpoint (i.e. "Me") (Mead, 1962). Peoples' behavior cannot be separated from what goes on in their heads (Mead, 1962). Mead (1962) outlined the process of how people learn from and respond to stimuli in their environment. What an individual thinks and feels and how other people do the same is what influences human behavior (Mead, 1962).

The *mind* gives individuals the ability to process action, interpret its meaning, and to respond in an appropriate fashion. The environment (e.g. family, neighborhood, culture) in which learning takes place establishes the foundation for who people believe they are, i.e. *self*. After having been exposed to various circumstances, individuals are programmed to decipher situations and act in a manner consistent with learned behavior. If the response is wholly reflective of past acts, then behavior is thought to have been unchanged; if the response is indicative of behavior adopted from current interactions with others that has influenced a new perspective, then a *me* is established (Mead, 1962).

Social interactions have the potential of creating pleasant or more tenuous relationships as participants involved can reframe their *definition of the situation*

at any time, particularly in cases where individuals defer to the will of established norms (Shaffer, 2005). Effective role-taking is evident when people can feel the same way about a situation (Meltzer, 1967). The skill and ability to do this comes from personal interactions throughout life. Based on these interactions, people define the situation and relate it back to past experiences in order to determine socially acceptable behavior under the circumstances (Seligman & Darling, 1997). Past experiences contribute to the way people view the world. People attach meaning to situations based on how they were socialized (Darling, 2000). Therefore, it is conceivable that people will bring to interactions different beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and unique history that have the potential to influence their perceptions of any given situation. Incongruent perceptions can create conflict, which makes amiable relationships difficult to establish or maintain (Darling, 2000). Perceptions can collide because parents and teachers may fail at appropriate role-taking (Darling, 2000). Neither party correctly perceives what the other expects.

Darling et al (2002) revealed this disconnection in a survey on various perspectives held by clients and human service professionals. The findings overwhelmingly indicated that clients and professionals are apt to view situations differently. What professionals saw as a problem, clients brushed off as insignificant to them. For example, clients rated universal human needs such as secure employment, shelter, transportation, and access to knowledge of primary

importance, yet professionals tended to highlight problems of substance abuse, dysfunctional relationships, and low self-esteem as critical client needs (Darling et al, 2002).

The same was true in a study on parent and teacher views about reading success conducted by Orellana, Monkman & MacGillivray (2002). When researchers asked immigrant parents to share feelings on how poverty played a role in the educational futures of their children, parents' responses positively focused on core values of decency and the ability to be self sufficient without mention of possible impediments due to low socio-economic status. However, teachers focused on various apparent challenges to immigrant children in terms of poverty, language barriers, and health without having any direct knowledge about what the daily life experiences of these families were. The challenges that parents were most concerned with were ironically the same as those that would be expected of any fairly well off parents of children e.g., being exposed to crime and immoral behavior (Orellana, Monkman, & MacGillivray, 2002).

Kumar & Hruda (2001) report research findings that show, regardless of the socio-economic conditions parents find themselves in, they collectively aspire for their children to achieve academic success. Kreider (2002) reported similar findings on parent feelings about preschool readiness. Parents often compared ideas on their child's academic abilities to memories of their own early school experiences, to include the capacity to build friendships. Parents expressed anxiety about the transition from home to school. They wanted their concerns alleviated and felt that establishing a relationship with teachers would help with

the transition. Teachers can be proactive about parental involvement to dispel attitudes that may wrongly persist about teacher dispositions (Rous et al, 2003). Research indicates that what teachers might perceive as disinterested behavior by parents is not the case at all, but may largely be due to transportation issues, money, language barriers, and the parent's anxiety over own unrewarding school experiences when a child (Fantuzzo et al, 2004).

Defining the situation is an on-going occurrence (McHugh, 1968). The various experiences that people bring to interactions determine how they interpret what is taking place during encounters. This section highlighted how the different backgrounds and experiences of people, resulting in incongruent definitions of the situation, can create conflict during interactions, particularly between parents and teachers. Next, we see how establishing effective communication during interactions is possible when people consciously consider each other's perspective and act on it.

### *Role-taking*

Role-taking is a process that involves putting oneself in the place of the other (Darling, 2000). Making sense of someone's *habitus* (i.e., background) can have tremendous impact on whether or not a positive connection is made. Hurst (2004) reported that the term, *habitus*, identifies an individual's historical construction that frames their social perspective on life. Gaining knowledge about a person's livelihood, ancestors, upbringing—roots, can help to explain why people may talk, act, or react the way they do. Teacher perspectives on parents reveal that teachers sometimes judge parents too harshly regarding participation

in their child's school (Powell, 2003); parents have traditionally judged teachers harshly as well (Black, 2004). Taylor & Sobel (2002) report that when teachers become culturally aware of differences in lifestyles and up-bringing of some parents and students, their attitudes change for the better, which improved educational outcomes for the children involved.

Because successful role-taking is based on common language and cultural understandings, parents and teachers from different backgrounds may not understand each other. When role-taking fails, participants' ability to accurately define the situation may be affected. In extreme cases, the result is *anomie* in the form of meaninglessness and/or powerlessness. McHugh (1968) defines anomie as a consequence of individuals traveling along different paths in their thinking and understanding of a situation. These paths do not cross, and connections are not made. The respective journeys are distinct. A common experience does not exist. It is hard to recognize oneself in others. It is even harder to acknowledge that others could be like oneself. The same level or degree of sensibility has not surfaced (McHugh, 1968).

In relationships where anomie is present, a sense of frustration might cloud communication. The lack of control in expression and meaning has potential to leave people feeling weak and left out of the loop; hence, powerlessness is evident. A person believes everyone essentially ignores his or her behavior. Another possibility is that meaninglessness occurs. When expectations are not fulfilled, people may be unable to comprehend events, especially when attempts at role-taking fail.

Consideration of these aspects of anomie may be helpful to understanding the relationship between parents and teachers. For example, during conferences it could be that parents and teachers have nothing in common to establish rapport. Life experiences may not parallel one another. They have no similar memories of particular behavior considered normal under the circumstances. Parents and teachers are faced with trying to elicit familiar responses from each other in order to communicate information about children. Only when the ensuing behavior is recognizable by both parties, can a foundation be laid for an effective parent-teacher conference.

### *Role-playing*

After taking the role of the other, *role-playing*, or behavior, occurs (Darling, 2000). How people sound, move, and physically position their bodies when interacting with others can send intended messages in a verbal and nonverbal way. This behavior is not only a consequence of their definition of the situation, but can also include interpretations of current messages obtained while communicating (Seligman & Darling, 1997). Hence, role-playing and role-taking are components of the same exchange (Darling, 2000). When people interact with each other, ongoing dialogue has the potential to shift the perspective of the recipient's attitude and change corresponding behavior. An example of such behavior is identifiable particularly in cases where an aggressive tone emits tension, and the use of kinder, gentler assertive language facilitates calm. Holloway (2004) concluded from her experience working with parents and

teachers conducting research in various early childhood venues, that many times parents and teachers think they are connecting or are “on the same page” during interactions, but this is usually not the case.

It has been my experience that numerous incidences of failed communication have occurred between parents and teachers that escape the microscope of researchers. For example, a colleague shared the following family experience: A preschool teacher put a red circle sticker on her nephew’s shirt with a message reminding the child’s mother that his lunch money was due or overdue (APPENDIX F). This display had not only the potential to embarrass the child, but insult the parent if the sticker notice were ever delivered. Apparently, the school’s playground and parking lot were often littered with lost or deliberately discarded stickers (J. W. (Stansbury) Rogers, personal communication, July 3, 2006). Although anecdotal, this episode illuminates the need for further exploration of ways in which to facilitate better exchanges of information between teachers and parents. Papers being sent home by teachers for parents to read may not serve their intended purpose (Powell, 1990). Baker (1997), as summarized in Chapter 2, found that communication was a challenge, and that parental involvement had different meanings for parents and teachers.

Role-playing can also involve adjusting to others to obtain desired goals (Seligman & Darling, 1997). The fluid nature of redefining the situation to meet objectives can be conscious or subconscious. Because people are conscious of social norms, they continually refine their own definition of the situation in order to fulfill expectations when interacting under various circumstances (Darling,

2000). Teachers may have a tendency to represent to parents an adequate report of a child's substandard performance in order to avoid confrontation, wrongly thinking that they might be protecting parents from unnecessary worry. But parents want to know the good, unpleasant, and questionable behavior of their children when they are not with them. Parents resent being ambushed with news of behavioral problems that could have been rectified prior to children being labeled as deficient in some manner (Baker, 1997). The teacher may view the child as a discipline problem, yet the parent may be in a position to explain the behavior due to some family crisis (e.g. death or divorce) that the teacher may be unaware of. Parents feel that they know their children better than anyone else, and can serve teachers well if teachers would rely on that knowledge (Baker, 1997).

The process of defining the situation gives people the opportunity to not only learn about each other but also learn from each other. It gives people a clear chance to know what will please others. When people present themselves honestly surprises can be limited or avoided (Hewitt, 2003). Parents can feel confident that information about their children is not being withheld. Teachers can be secure in knowing that parents welcome any and all information about their children and that parents want to support the education of their children as best they can, given specific guidance from teachers (Powell, 2003).

Thus, the concepts of definition of the situation, role-taking, and role-playing can provide a framework for interpreting interaction. In the preschool situation, both parents and teachers have pre-existing definitions of the situation

based on their past experiences. When parents and teachers meet in face-to-face interactions, each begins the process of role-taking, or trying to make sense of what the other is communicating. When role-taking is successful, role-playing proceeds smoothly. Both parents and teachers may modify their definitions of the situation in the course of interaction by successfully taking the role of the other. On the other hand, poor role-taking can result in communication failure, or even anomie.

The research to be undertaken will explore the pre-existing definitions of the situation, interactional contingencies, and definitional outcomes in a sample of parents and preschool teachers. The proposed methodology for this research will be described in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Chapter 3 offered a theoretical framework from which to understand how parents and teachers may adopt perspectives on educating children. The diverse backgrounds of teachers and parents probably to a large degree influence the way they think and behave. The potential exists, however, for both parties during interactions to change their definition of the situation through effective role-taking and role-playing. This chapter outlines the proposed approach to exploring pre-existing definitions of the situation that parents and teachers have about their roles, how these perspectives may change during interaction, and how understanding emerges.

Wolcott (2001) recommends that researchers provide personal background to readers for the basis of research being presented. The notion of parent-teacher relationships as a research project resulted from observation of my own and others' interactions between parents and teachers at the preschool my daughter attended. I noticed that teachers seemed cautious and somewhat apprehensive in fully engaging parents in conversation, and parents seemed rushed and uninterested in initiating communication of any kind with teachers. Because it is important for me to leave my daughter in the best possible environment when I am not with her, I continually made inquiry of the teachers about the overall school program or daily activities. I sensed some agitation from teachers in my repeated attempts to ask questions of them or just by my unannounced presence to ensure that my daughter became acclimated and was

doing well in her new environment. I was perplexed when I offered sticker and marker supplies to one of my daughter's teachers and the teacher seemed reluctant to accept my gesture of kindness and appeared devoid of gratitude. I perceived she suspected that my gift to her classroom had an ulterior motive attached to it. The impression was that this teacher saw my good deed as a way to manipulate her, rather than as support of her efforts to educate and provide care for my daughter. Consequently, parent-teacher partnerships garnered my research attention.

This experience with my daughter's teacher(s) made me question the commonly held belief that parents are responsible for poor parent-teacher relationships. I realized that teachers owned some of the responsibility in failed communications with parents. Because of my predisposition to the sensitive nature of parent-teacher interaction it was imperative that I acknowledge my feelings throughout the research process, using the reflective activity of progressive subjectivity (Mertens, 1998). I documented my initial thoughts of data gathering in interview and observation logs. If I was emotionally impacted by what I had learned, I stated so. If I was perplexed by what I had witnessed, I made note of it. I also wrote about instances where I had similar experiences a participant may have spoken of. In any event, transparency was sought. As a result of my literature review and my personal experience, I expected this research to show that more likely than not, parents and teachers of preschool children would have challenging interactions. I took this view because of the ages of the children, as preschool is often the first time parent and child are separated

for an extended period of time each day. Both parent and child must make room for a third party (i.e. the teacher) who, likewise, has to consider this dynamic when considering how to establish their own individual relationships with parents and their children. The parent temporarily has to relinquish physical parental control to the teacher and the teacher has to garner trust from the parent, which in my own experience can be a tricky proposition. Parent-teacher collaboration is a subject under much discussion. Educational literature suggests that establishment of successful partnerships is stifled because both parents and teachers lack efficacy and that training is needed (Katz & Bauch, 1999).

The bodies of work in early childhood education and symbolic interactionism together offer understanding of how people become who they are, and help explain difficulties in parent-teacher interaction. The objective of this study is to learn the perceptions that parents and teachers have about each other's roles in the education of preschool children, how definitions change, and how understanding between participants emerges. As previously stated, I will pursue answers to the following research questions:

- What are the pre-existing perceptions that mothers and teachers have of their relationship, and how do these *definitions of the situation* change in the course of interaction during parent-teacher conferences?
- What is the nature of relationship between mutual understanding between parents and teachers and rated school quality?

I acknowledge my own belief and expectation that parents and teachers have an obligation to set exemplary behavioral standards in order to educate impressionable preschoolers. I will argue that a feasible way to investigate the issue of parent-teacher collaboration is through qualitative inquiry, which seeks to discover hidden meaning in behavior (Patton, 2002). The following discussion will focus on the research design, pilot study, data collection methods, sampling, authorizations, data analysis procedures, and data quality checks. This section will conclude with study limitations.

### *Research Design*

According to Patton (2002), qualitative research promotes opportunity for deeper, richer and more specific data to probe questions of interest. Greater latitude with information gathering exists in qualitative research because of no-cost verbal exchanges (notwithstanding subsequent transcription expenses if incurred) when the researcher and participants meet (Mertens, 1998). This is unlike other traditional methods that can be costly due to the expense of printing and mailing surveys, and ineffective in relating the true feelings of participants (Patton, 2002). According to Morrison (2002, p.18), "...all educational research needs to be grounded in people's experience...." An understanding of the conceptualization process may be helpful in identifying changes in perception.

Conceptual density benefits the researcher insofar as data are consistently matched to where they originated, offering credibility to the study. Guba & Lincoln (1989) measure credibility based on the connection between participant perceptions and the researcher's interpretation of those beliefs. This

approach will ensure data are kept in their proper context. The voices of the participants are heard through researcher interpretation, which is likely to contribute powerful, factual data for use in theory development and enhancement of parent-teacher partnerships (Patton, 2002).

### *Pilot Testing*

I conducted pilot testing in a preliminary attempt to confirm that the proposed interview guides could solicit the ontological perspectives of participants (Mertens, 1998). This contributed to my understanding of theory development about parent-teacher partnerships, but also gave attention to the thinking that fuels participant behavior (Maxwell, 1998). According to Mertens (1998), pilot testing can also serve to narrow research details like identifying people at the research location who might provide the best data, when and how often they are available, and to determine the number of hours necessary to conduct the study. Yin (1994) concurs with Mertens (1998) that pilot studies help the researcher to focus on the process of data gathering.

Two parents and one teacher from research site 1 participated in the pilot study. The consensus was that interview questions were clear, comprehensive, and relevant to the subject matter of parent-teacher interactions. In addition, interview questions were appropriate, non-intrusive, and followed a good, open-ended pattern. One participant expressed that question #10 (“How would you expect the process for the conference to proceed?”) might include examples. Another participant suggested including this question: “How have changes been

made to improve communications?” Both suggestions were in some form or fashion incorporated into the data gathering process.

### *Data Collection*

I conducted in-person one-on-one semi-structured 1-hour long interviews of teachers and parents of pre-school children in order to gain insight about how they perceive relationships with each other. The purpose of interviewing is to gain knowledge or unique perspective from the minds of those interviewed that would not otherwise be available. I utilized an interview guide to maintain consistency in asking questions and to ensure that participants were responding to the same questions (Patton, 2002). I asked the following open-ended preliminary interview questions, although others arose (APPENDIX A) as themes emerged:

1. What do you expect from the child’s parent/teacher?
2. How do you view your role in relation to your child’s preschool experience?
3. How would you rank the importance of parent-teacher partnerships?
4. How would you describe a positive parent-teacher relationship?
5. How would you describe a negative parent-teacher relationship?
6. How might a positive parent-teacher relationship benefit child/student?
7. What do you think the parent/teacher will say at the conference?
8. How do you think this teacher views your child?
9. What are your objectives for this conference?
10. How would you expect the process for the conference to proceed?

11. How do you view the usefulness of the parent-teacher conference?
12. What do you think the outcome will be?
13. How might your prior interactions with parent/teacher influence anticipated outcome?
14. How might your own early school experiences impact parental participation?
15. What would encourage you to talk openly and often with a parent/teacher?
16. Describe your familial relationship with your child?
17. Do you have any older children? What was your experience with their teachers like?
18. Is there anything related to this parent-teacher relationship I did not ask about that you would like to share?

I tape-recorded conversations and made transcriptions; and I took hand-written notes to serve as a backup in the event of technical failure with the tape recorder.

This interview took place from 3 days to 1 hour (depending on participant availability) prior to a scheduled parent-teacher conference to determine each participant's pre-existing definition of the situation.

Then I conducted a follow-up interview either immediately after the conference or within 3 days of the conference, to verify whether definitions had changed as a result of the face-to-face interaction that occurred during the conference. During the average 20-minute follow-up interview, questions (APPENDIX C) were determined by the nature of the content of the parent-

teacher conference. However, all participants were asked whether the conference had proceeded as expected and whether they had “changed their minds” in any way as a result of the conference. I also conducted a 1-hour long interview with the director of each preschool site. In addition, I did a document analysis in order to gain knowledge of school history, philosophy, culture, programming, and policies.

I used different data collection methods (i.e. triangulation) to minimize subjectivity and enhance credibility of the study (Patton, 2002). I triangulated interviews with observation of interactions between parents and teachers during parent-teacher conferences, which on average lasted 20-minutes. This required my physical presence and interaction with the participants under study for emic perspective. I directly experienced the dynamics of the environment and identified nuances that substantiated or reflected participants’ comments. I used care when documenting details of the observation location, participants, activities, and other related information in an observation guide (APPENDIX B) to include sensitizing concepts, which are predetermined behaviors to look for (Patton, 2002). The use of an observation guide likely offered less researcher intrusion on participants and avoided heightened anxiety, which is already known to exist for parents and teachers during these types of meetings (Katz & Bauch, 1999). I did not tape record conferences to ensure student privacy, and to minimize intrusion on the meeting.

I subsequently prepared a data analysis guide (APPENDIX G) solely used for my initial phase of data analysis, which is based upon McHugh’s (1968)

concept of Emergence and Relativity (APPENDIX E). According to McHugh (1968), data has potential to describe an individual's definition of the situation. In hindsight, information outlined in APPENDIX G initially combined with information sought in APPENDIX B would have been preferable and more useful as a data-gathering tool during observations. Nonetheless, when I had previously completed observation guides and observation logs and reviewed them, I determined that data were available to accurately assess participant behaviors given McHugh's perspective on the definition of the situation. Therefore, data collected in APPENDIX B were also utilized to answer the questions outlined in APPENDIX G. The results of data analysis will be reported in Chapter 5.

### *Sampling*

I used purposeful sampling to gain rich, in-depth information about several concerns. Mertens (1998) suggests that such sampling allows for dependability of data from select participants who are most likely to offer the best understanding of the issue being studied. School administrators and teachers directly assisted in this effort. How they helped will be described shortly. I focused on the preschool environment in order to elevate the consciousness of parents, teachers and administrators about the benefits of positive parent-teacher relationships that possibly were never visualized (Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), the size of the sample is determined by what information is sought, why it is needed, and its usefulness.

Sample size consisted of 2 preschools, and 20 parents, 4 teachers, and 2 school directors (equally divided, i.e., 10 parents, 2 teachers, and 1 director from

each preschool), and various documents on each school's literature and policies. This sample size is sufficient because the purposes of the study for theory development to gain understanding about parent and teacher interaction in preschools will be achieved. A comparison of parent-teacher interactions between pre-schools can be made, a good representation of available preschool parents and teachers is possible, given limited sizes of preschool classrooms and number of teachers. The observation of teacher behavior with various parents of the children assigned to their classrooms helped to directly focus the study to answer the research questions.

Mertens (1998) suggests that the bases and parameters for participant involvement be highlighted. For purposes of comparison, I used two preschools. My criterion for school selection was that one school have a Keystone STARS quality rating of 1, and the other have a Keystone STARS quality rating of 4 (APPENDIX H). Prior to this study's inception, these ratings were assigned independently by raters with no connection to the present study. Keystone STARS is a voluntary Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare childcare incentive program to encourage participating centers to provide the highest level of quality care to children and their families who reside in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The lowest STAR rating is 1, and the highest STAR rating is 4 (Keystone STARS, 2004). Conducting research in two preschools at different ends of the quality spectrum may provide the best opportunity for understanding what factors contribute to the successful establishment and maintenance of parent-teacher partnerships. I contacted via telephone the contractor responsible

for overseeing the Keystone STARS program. Lists of Keystone STARS participating providers in a geographical area with quality 1 and 4 ratings were emailed to me, so that I could pursue participation of preschools logistically accessible from my domain. The STAR 4 list contained 11 preschool sites to solicit; the STAR 1 list contained twice as many preschool sites as the STAR 4 list did. Since a STAR 4 level is the highest quality level a preschool can attain, it could be surmised that at that time more STAR 1 (i.e. lower quality) preschools existed in the geographic area I had requested lists for; considering only those schools in the area who voluntarily participate in the Keystone STARS program. I essentially went down each list and made telephone calls to prospective research venues until I located school administrators who agreed to at least meet with me. Some administrators during those initial telephone calls declined participation outright, some did not have parent-teacher conferences, and others did not return telephone calls. When I did secure meetings with administrators of the two preschools who eventually participated in this study, these agreements came approximately three weeks subsequent to several follow-up telephone calls, emails, and formal letters of approval from the respective sites.

I had expected that parents and teachers would be selected by me according to their willingness to share personal history, feelings and experiences about self, family and subject matter, and availability over the length of study. While it is true that parents and teachers met these criteria, they each actually volunteered and were accepted on that basis alone. But the integrity of purposeful sampling was maintained since the sample pool of participants that

included approximately twenty-two parents to choose from were all deliberately targeted to participate in this study. At preschool 1 the teachers personally handed out the solicitation notice and encouraged parent participation, perhaps biasing the sample in favor of parents with positive perceptions of the school. When necessary, teachers verbally explained their understanding of the project and made concerted effort for participation until my participant level of ten parents was met.

At preschool 2, the administrator identified participants who she thought would benefit in various ways from participation in the study. I followed up with perspective participants to ensure that their participation was voluntary. However, the selection process may have resulted in parents perceived as “needier” than those at preschool 1. All participants read, signed, and honored commitments outlined in the consent form. However, directors and teachers provided solicitation support through the posting of flyers, distribution of flyers, and talking to the parent population about the importance of the study, which proved instrumental in attaining 100% subject participation. However, given the small sample pool of parents and preschool teachers available in the overall total of three classrooms between both research sites limitations may exist in the diversity of data obtained. For example, the teachers eligible to participate were all women. Parent participants were all mothers. A few fathers did attend the parent-teacher conferences; however, they were not available, unwilling to participate, or possibly not as fully invested in the subject matter as the presumably primary parent (i.e. mother) might be to lend full participation to all

aspects of the study. It is conceivable that given opportunity for voice and provided willingness to share male/father perspectives, a different dimension of parent-teacher interactions could have been explored and yielded more usable information on this topic.

My decision to conduct 26 interviews is based on the number of preschool teachers at the research site(s) who cooperated in the study, matched with a parent sample of 5 per teacher in order to observe teacher behavior with different parents (particularly during parent-teacher conferences), and to gain director perspectives.

### *Authorizations*

Bickman, Rog, & Hedrick (1998) suggest that the researcher should be aware of who at the proposed data gathering venue has authority to grant permission to conduct research and that some relationship or degree of trust be established in order to ensure approval. Through telephone conversations, in-person meetings, and sharing drafts of study documents with school officials, I secured permission from the directors of each private school. Since these early childhood learning organizations exist outside of the public school domain, no other administrative approvals were needed.

Sieber (1998) recommends that “voluntary informed consent” be obtained from all research participants. This means participants are not forced by anyone to answer questions or be involved in any way. To my knowledge neither administrators nor teachers manipulated parents to participate. This is exemplified by one father who had (verbally and via a signed consent form)

agreed to participate in this study, but ultimately withdrew for unknown reasons, without consequence. Even participants who may have found it unpleasant at times to continue their participation did so without hesitation. In addition, participants must share the same understanding of the research project and their role in it as any other person would in a similar position before agreeing to engage in the study (Sieber, 1998). Consent of teachers and parents participating in this study was essential. I gave each participant a standardized Indiana University of Pennsylvania consent form. It clearly and specifically stated exactly what the participants agreed to do. The consent form also contained any and all information about the research project to include researcher name and contact information; details about the inquiry, which includes possible risks, and compensation. APPENDIX D is the Receipt of Payment Form used to document cash payments in the amount \$25.00 made to each participant at the conclusion of data analysis. Lastly, knowledge about participant ability to withdraw voluntary cooperation at any time was, likewise, included in the consent form, in order to meet the highest ethical standards (Mertens, 1998).

I also obtained approval from Indiana University of Pennsylvania's IRB to conduct the study. Institutional review boards serve as the legal overseers of people related research (Mertens, 1998). Universities must ensure the safety, privacy, rights, and overall well-being of human subjects participating in any kind of research.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

Qualitative researchers must analyze enormous amounts of data and figure out what they mean (Patton, 2002). Yin (1994) cautions that in a case study comparative analysis researcher diligence is critical in connecting themes that explain the intended phenomenon under study; otherwise, focus on answering the research questions can be lost. Data analysis consisted of my tape transcription, reading, sorting, and labeling of data relative to its *internal* and *external homogeneity* (i.e. how well data do or do not fit together), and applying a uniform coding system to identify emerging themes, comments, attitudes, and behaviors in first and subsequent iterations until avenues to different information were exhausted (Patton, 2002).

The search for emerging themes will continue until new avenues to pursue are exhausted or until discovery of mutual understanding is realized (Patton, 2002). I documented data sorting activities with an *audit trail* (APPENDIX I). According to Patton (2002), an audit trail is an informal record used to enhance the *confirmability* and *dependability* of data because it is grounded (i.e. traceable), and its use increases the credibility of the researcher. The audit trail contains a list of activities in the sequence done.

Prior to thematic review and analysis, I used McHugh's (1968) "emergence and relativity" data analysis technique as the framework to interpret *definition of the situation*. Components of emergence are: theme, elaboration, fit, authorship, revelation; relativity: typicality, likelihood, causal texture, technical efficiency, moral requiredness, substantive congruency (APPENDIX E).

According to McHugh (1968), the *definition of the situation* occurs when participants are able to make sense of events based on expectations (i.e. emergence is evident); when emergence is lacking, relativity is shown, and anomie (meaninglessness, powerlessness and/or innovation) may occur.

I reviewed each parent's interview/observation data to determine the parent's expectations for the conference (McHugh's "theme") and how these expectations were affected by conference proceedings. Representative quotes were then selected to illustrate support for or changes in the parent's pre-existing definition of the situation. Quotes were selected based on how well they described participants' perspectives and offered a direct response to answering the research question(s). The purpose of this study is to interpret the meaning of those words that captured the essence of their definition of the situation. These quotes were then labeled using McHugh's categories. The frequency of occurrence for categories associated with emergence, relativity, meaninglessness, and powerlessness suggests whether the interactions were orderly or anomic. The prior use of McHugh's (1968) data analysis technique in research of this kind is unknown. Following are synopses of other studies that have applied McHugh's concepts.

Cheng (1982) sought to explore, via a qualitative pilot study, how meaning emerges during the process of communication, and to locate a useful way to show evidence of such occurrence. Cheng made a comparison of participant interpretations of the same information provided in a tape-recorded speech and/or interviewer/interviewee situation. A total of 8 participants subsequent to

listening to the recording, were asked to submit a written account of what they heard, which was followed by interview questions based only on individual statements in order that participant comments were clearly in context. Then Cheng isolated ten occurrences that all participants made note of. Follow-up interview questions were based on differences in the way participants viewed the situation. The purpose of triangulation was to determine whether the spoken word on the tape matched that of written accounts and how these statements were understood and used by participants. Data collected pertaining to the ten occurrences were aligned side-by-side in a chart for visual comparisons. Cheng concluded that interactive skills (e.g. social and cognitive) can contribute to successful communications and that triangulation of data does make understanding of the process clearer.

Like Cheng (1982) I used participants' own words to identify like themes. While Cheng (1982) seemed to generally apply McHugh's (1968) data analysis concepts, I chose to use the literal approach that seemed more appropriate to answering my research question(s). In both instances the applications made tended to elicit clearer understanding of participants' views. This was more likely than not validated by the use of triangulated methods. Like Cheng, I used a multi-stage approach to data gathering and analysis.

It appears that McHugh's emergence and relativity data analysis technique is utilized in multi-faceted ways. Sanger (1990) in an action research project considered how power is associated with a person's ability for in-depth learning, and how an instructor can initiate and maintain major growth within a

classroom. This is a spin-off from a previous study, “called THIL, the Teaching Handling Information and Learning Project [Sanger, 1989] (Sanger, 1990, p 175),” where some former and current instructors (including the researcher who facilitated the group) agreed on one theme to further develop. They focused on developing guidelines for scoring student assignments. The size of the group was not stated, but diversity existed in various other ways ranging from histories to number of years teaching. The teachers interviewed students in their classrooms to gain perspective on grading. Responses were brought back in 3 week intervals to group discussion for purposes of putting student expectations in context with existing approaches to grading. Each participant provided input that drove richer conceptualization. This process continued until power was distributed and change emerged in the way students were assessed, which had more meaning to all stakeholders.

Sanger (1990) followed McHugh’s (1968) effort to search for meaning by interpreting the perspectives of participants. The difference between this approach and mine is that Sanger (1990) used a working group to bring meaning to the subject under study. The plausibility of effective inter-rater reliability was made sound given the challenge of group accountability. As previously indicated, I attempted to minimize challenge to results by triangulating data collection and analysis.

Lastly, Weinstein (1972) applied McHugh’s concepts in terms of developing independent categories pertinent to medical research conducted about patient views on the nature of their conditions. Information from “interviews

or questionnaires of 500 adult psychiatric patients were subjected to qualitative analysis using four different approaches based on the categorization of specific responses (Weinstein 1972, p. 44).” These responses were compared to actual patient diagnosis in order to track the process of patient understanding (or lack thereof) about respective illnesses. Conclusions suggest that application of various approaches to data analysis offer opportunity for deeper understanding; in this instance, on how best to identify what drives patient perceptions and address needs for enhanced mental health. What this study illuminates is that McHugh (1968) has offered a broad lens through which to view various aspects of a situation.

#### *Data Quality Check*

In this study I utilized several data quality checks (i.e. member checks; peer debriefing; progressive subjectivity) to enhance the credibility of data (Mertens, 1998). According to Strauss & Corbin (1994), member checks are a way to obtain feedback on the recording of data. I gave participants the opportunity to review the summary of data and analysis presented by me in the interview and observation logs. I mailed copies of these logs to respective participants. I was not made aware of any inaccuracies and did not obtain further information useful to the study. However, I did have opportunity to recall forgotten information that might eventually be incorporated into the final results (Strauss & Corbin, 1994).

Mertens (1998) states that peer debriefings occur when the researcher talks about data outcomes with uninvolved or detached persons from the study to

challenge and direct researcher efforts. I had a contingent of four professionals who provided inter-rater reliability. One of these individuals holds a PhD; the other an EdD. Both are well versed in analyzing qualitative data. A third person, a PhD, is experienced with the nature of preschools and parent-teacher relationships. The fourth person who offered a critical lens to my data and analysis is a PhD candidate who was helpful in my approach to data reduction and keeping of an audit trail. These professionals over the course of several months during my data analysis either offered verbal or written feedback on data provided for review, or sat down with me and brainstormed the best ways to present this research. Most times we agreed about how to handle the data and on occasion we did not. Sometimes I accepted their viewpoint and other times I did not. The greatest benefit to me from these collaborations was that I obtained process clarification and confirmation that the integrity of participant voices was upheld.

As previously indicated, progressive subjectivity is integrated into each phase of the study; whereby the researcher maintains awareness of their role in the process via reflexivity, which is documented for subsequent scrutiny. Furthermore, according to Guba & Lincoln (1989), qualitative research offers *transferability* as a measure for usefulness of findings. This is apparent when data are highly detailed and drive decision-makers of like organizations to recognize their benefits, and utilize the information to address their own issues and concerns about the subject matter (Mertens, 1998).

### *Limitations*

Preschool ethos can be individualized from one school to the next. For example, a public daycare, preschool (or early learning center as some are called) may differ from a private one (or even from its own affiliates) in its operations or services provided. The allotment of time for care giving and nurturing of learning skills may be different. Also, the emotional dispositions of administrators, parents, teachers, and children can influence school ethos. In addition, the fact that one private preschool in this study is incorporated as a not-for-profit organization, and the other incorporated with a for-profit status may impact the school's philosophy. Furthermore, one school is charged in a full-time capacity with the care and education of children enrolled in preschool through kindergarten; the other from preschool through eighth grade.

This study seeks only to gain knowledge about the phenomenon of parent-teacher interaction from two private preschool programs. Probing into participant personal history might have diminished the amount and quality of data obtained if participants viewed interview questions as too intrusive. It was important that participants understood that the researcher's primary goal was to acquire data, without intention to pass judgment or transform them in any way (Patton, 2002).

Patton (2002) also states that other drawbacks in interviews, observations, and sampling could affect data quality. Participants' personal ideologies, mindset during interviews, inability to act normally when being observed; researcher's

discernment of what is ordinary activity or not when taking notes, since one cannot expect to see and decipher everything taking place, and the school's timeframe in which to conduct observations may likewise present challenges. Also noteworthy is the limitation in the parent-teacher sample pool due to class size(s). Each of 3 classrooms between the two research sites had enrollment of approximately 16-20 children with parents to solicit. Of the approximately 48-60 parents in the population where 20 parent volunteers were sought, a possibility existed for a lack of diversity in the data. For example, all 26 participants (including 4 teachers and 2 directors) are women. Perhaps, the male perspective would have offered greater diversity in the results obtained. But with rigorous hermeneutical dialogue, "thick descriptive" reporting, audit trails, and data quality checks, limitations in the parent-teacher sample pool due to class size and single gender representation, the impact of limitations is diminished (Patton, 2002). Mertens (1998) acknowledges that it is impossible to create a foolproof approach to educational research.

Lastly, mid-year conferences (rather than year-end conferences as included in this study) may offer more of an opportunity to redirect participant approach to support and guidance provided to preschoolers and parent-teacher relationships. Assessments of conceivably newer relationships can be made in order to determine what is working, not working, or needs adjustment to enhance

communication between parents and teachers, and to facilitate children's success in preschool. Perhaps focus on mid-year perspectives and behavior could yield a more vivid or dynamic view of parent-teacher interactions.

In the next chapter, I present and analyze the data from my pre- and post-conference interviews and from my observations of the conferences.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### DATA AND ANALYSIS

The proceeding chapters provided the overall basis and intent of this research project. Chapter 1 introduced the problem this study addresses, the research questions, and the approach taken to understand the phenomenon of parent-teacher interactions in preschools. Chapter 2 highlighted what the literature discloses about various components of the parent-teacher relationship ranging from a historical perspective, to a discussion on respective roles, to the way in which power may influence behavior. Chapter 3 locates the subject matter in theory that explains the dynamics of how parents and teachers interact with one another. Chapter 4 outlines the methodology used to answer the research questions and includes research limitations. This chapter will describe the participants and report research findings.

#### Demographic Information

The table of participant demographics (APPENDIX J) provides a quantitative overview of the subjects in this study. Two private preschools were under study, one a not-for-profit organization with a high quality rating by Commonwealth of Pennsylvania program standards, and the other for-profit with a low quality rating. A total of 26 participants between both sites are women; white females comprised 80% of participants at Preschool site 1, and black females accounted for 80% participants at Preschool site 2. All participants are high school graduates. A total of 90% of participants are college graduates. The majority of site 1 participants are married, but the majority of site 2 participants

are unmarried. From my interviews of school administrators and my review of school promotional literature, the following information provides additional context to each preschool site under study that, perhaps, will offer a clearer view from which to interpret results:

### Preschool Site 1

This private not-for-profit preschool began over 30 years ago with a few students in a basement of a church. Over the years it has changed its domain to various facilities to accommodate its growth in student body that now includes some 200 children enrolled in preschool through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The school is now located in a suburban township within five miles south of the city-center area in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The city of Harrisburg is situated along the east shore of the Susquehanna River. The school's barely 3-year-old building (built to specification) sits in a secluded farm-like residential community on a multi-acre stretch of land that the school owns. Security is loose in the sense that enrolled families and visitors are free to come and go at will. Preschool 1 cannot be seen from the busy stretch of two-way road connected to the street used to access the school's parking lot. The school was established as a cooperative, which means that administrators, teachers, parents, students and other stakeholders have a vested interest in it. It is primarily funded through grants, private donations, fundraisers, and tuition and fees received from families whose children attend the school. Tuition costs over \$6000 per school year (i.e. September to June) plus activity and supply fees for a child to attend this school. In addition to paying

tuition and fees, families are also asked to volunteer approximately ten hours each school year to defray costs (e.g. school maintenance).

Most families are of middle to upper socioeconomic status and are financially able to fund 100% of their child's education. The jobs held by participants in this study are mostly white collar. However, each school year one-sixth of the school's operating budget is allocated for scholarships. This outreach ensures diversity in its student body. The diversity is not only in race, but also in ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language and religion.

The school's philosophy is one of inclusiveness. It takes a holistic approach to education that fosters home-school relationships. Approach to academics is of an organic and fluid nature that allows for a child's curiosity and imagination to flourish. Multi-age and multi-grade classrooms, small class sizes and student-teacher ratios allow for individualized instruction to meet student needs. The teachers are all state certified and hold degrees in higher education. The school has an integrated curriculum and uses progressive technology in all of its classrooms, and its students have received several local and national academic honors over the years. This school is recognized with a Keystone STARS quality 4 rating by the state of Pennsylvania. A description of the Keystone STARS program will be provided shortly. In addition, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has accredited Preschool 1. These are the highest rating and accreditation given by the state and premier national child accreditation service, respectively, for providing quality childcare and education to families.

## Preschool Site 2

This private family-owned for-profit school was established 11 years ago in a residence. It was initially a group home learning center for a few children, which expanded to include infant and child care and a before and after school learning program. Eventually, the school was relocated into two separate commercial properties splitting its respective services between sites. Today all services are offered to approximately 75 children enrolled in daycare to preschool and various school age children in the after school program at one commercial property the school owns. Preschool 2 is within 5 miles of Preschool 1 in the same suburban township, within 10 miles of the city center in downtown Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The building of Preschool 2 looks like a home renovated to suit a school. It is well-secured and only enrolled families and those with appointments are allowed to enter. It is considerably smaller than Preschool 1. Preschool 1 has 5 rooms designated for just its preschool and kindergarten programs alone. Preschool 2 has approximately 5 rooms total and sits on approximately one-half acre of land. The entrance faces a busy two-way road that runs north and south of the Harrisburg metropolitan area. The community that surrounds the school comprises middle-class single-family homes, apartment buildings, a neighborhood diner, small businesses, and large and small churches. The school's philosophy was inspired by biblical teachings. Its practices represent inclusive and holistic approaches to home and school development of the child. The approach to academics is more structured than that of Preschool 1. It follows the state mandated curriculum for all pre-k schools.

Many families at this school are of lower to middle socioeconomic status and are predominately African American. Some are subsidized through childcare funding offered by local and state programs. In addition to tuition, the school also receives funding from grants and fundraisers. The tuition and childcare costs are approximately \$140 per week on a year-round basis. This amount is considerably less than what is charged at Preschool 1. But as some participants in this study indicated, the burden placed on them to pay tuition costs even when subsidized was tough. As best I can determine, none of the parents at Preschool 2, at least those who participated in this study, worked in a white-collar capacity. Most children continue on to public school once they complete initial educational training at Preschool 2. The teachers are all certified but at least one lacks a college degree. Like Preschool 1, Preschool 2 has an integrated curriculum and uses progressive technology in its largest room that was divided into two classrooms simply by desks moved either over to the far right or far left. But an uncanny order exists as if four walls separated the two classrooms. This school is recognized with a Keystone STARS quality 1 rating by the state of Pennsylvania, which indicates that Preschool 2 at this study's inception was deemed a low quality school. Further explanation of this rating follows. But according to the school's administrator, the school has a good reputation under other evaluation standards done by educators and even assessments of past and current families who promote Preschool 2 via "word of mouth", which accounts for an on-going waiting list for new enrollees.

## Keystone STARS

As previously stated in Chapter 4, Keystone STARS is a voluntary Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) childcare incentive program to encourage participating centers to provide the highest level of quality care to children and their families who reside in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This program began in 2002. It seeks to establish a broad base of primary education from which children can build a successful academic history. The targeted quality benchmarks for childcare and learning center providers to meet are derived from empirical data that indicate standards to help children excel in school. The performance standards are outlined in four stages for the purpose of encouraging ongoing growth in the quality of services. These standards require commitment to staff certifications and professional development, child assessments, home-school and community partnerships, and leadership and management guidelines. Centers are rated on how well these protocols are incorporated into programming (APPENDIX H). The lowest STAR rating is 1, and the highest STAR rating is 4. On-site periodic assessments by DPW staff determine when and whether a center has achieved a particular quality standard. When the standard is met, centers will receive a “STAR” rating certification and monetary incentives to help with further center improvements or maintenance of maximum quality levels. When this study began, the 2004 version of the Keystone STARS rating criteria was in effect. The latest update was made in August 2007, and the Keystone STARS program has distinctly put emphasis on parent-teacher relationships (Keystone STARS, 2007).

### *Response Rate*

Solicitation for participants in this study, subsequent interviews and observations were conducted over a 2-week time frame per research site. The overall rate of participation attained was 100%.

### *Preschool Sites*

Preschool site 1 was the first data-gathering venue. Year-end conferences were held in June 2006, weeks before final conferences were held at preschool site 2. Pre-conference and post-conference interviews were recorded on cassette tapes and transcribed. Preschool Site 2 was the second data-gathering venue. Year-end conferences were held in July 2006, weeks after final conferences were held at Preschool site 1. The interview data on cassette tapes were transcribed. In addition to the transcribed interviews, data included my notes taken during the conferences at both sites.

Data analysis was based on McHugh's (1968) concepts of emergence and relativity (APPENDICES E& G). These concepts specify the components of participants' definitions of the situation. Emergence suggests that participants have a common understanding of the situation and includes five categories: Theme, elaboration, fit, authorship, and revelation. Emergence implies a consistent pattern of meaning over time and congruent definitions of the situation between participants. Relativity includes six categories that measure the degree of understanding during the process of role-taking exhibited by participants. Relativity occurs when emergence is problematic and participants try to make sense of events by comparing them with known principles, including typicality,

likelihood, causal texture, technical efficiency, moral requiredness, and substantive congruency. When relativity is unsuccessful in establishing meaning, the consequence is anomie and interactional breakdown. Thus, analysis using these concepts may point to differences in interactional quality and participant satisfaction at the two preschools. Following this interaction analysis, I will review the findings to identify themes that occur across cases. I will then compare the two preschools in terms of interactional quality and thematic differences.

### *Interaction Analysis*

#### Preschool Site 1

##### Parent 1

##### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had one prior conference with this teacher and had some idea of what to expect. This is what she had hoped to hear from the teacher:

From the previous conference that we had she had kind of like a layout, questionnaire on different things...It was a lot of things like what he should be doing by his age...I definitely expect a good report and I'm pretty sure that I'm going to get a good report....

The parent is hopeful for a productive parent-teacher conference. When asked what her objectives were for the conference, the parent stated:

I'm...interested in what [the teacher] has to say...to hear her point of view...it's always kind of...a surprise....

The parent described her surprises as more about enlightenment with the depth of information the teacher has provided in the past. The parent had the following to say when asked how she would expect the process for the conference to proceed:

...I'm sure she'll...basically...explain...everything...she has any notes on...it varies...social habits to...educational experience.

THEME

Following is what the parent had to say when asked what she thought the outcome of the conference would be:

...I'll be more informed with [my child's] progress...how he's done this year...beginning...middle...end...able to...read over and see how much progress he's made.

### Notes on the conference

At the beginning of the conference the parent was greeted by the teacher with a smile and offered a seat at a desk. During the conference the teacher provided the parent with her child's assessment in narrative form, and was given a few minutes to read it, along with samples of the child's schoolwork. The teacher expressed concern about the child's nail biting and his tendency not to listen. The teacher made some recommendations to the parent about how to cope with life changes, such as divorce. The parent welcomed the information and agreed with the teacher's assessment. The parent also shared with the teacher about her visit to a child psychologist to discuss her concern about the child's increased nail biting, and to obtain advice about how to support her child after divorce.

### Post-conference interview parent 1

When asked if the conference proceeded as expected the parent said "Yes." But the parent did acknowledge that even though she was aware of her son's nail biting that she had not previously discussed that with the teacher. However, this issue was revealed by the teacher during the conference, yet was not a surprise to the parent. This is what she had to say:

That was the only thing that we didn't get to communicate to each other about the nail biting...I was really happy that she

put something in there...And also helping him listen...follow instructions...I knew that, I'm his mom....

There was another distinction that the parent made between this parent-teacher conference and a previous one. The previous conference utilized a generic assessment form that contained question and answer choices, wherein the teacher simply placed a checkmark in the box of the appropriate response for the child's progress. The current conference centered on a narrative assessment of the child's overall performance. The parent expressed a preference about the way she received information about her child, by stating the following:

...before it was just a question and her answer and this just from reading it you can always tell who is the author of something they wrote...I knew she put thought into it...it was much easier for me than guessing from the questions where she was coming from.

When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference based on prior expectations the parent had this to say:

No...I honestly don't feel like anything changed whatsoever, the way that I perceived anything.

Parent 2  
Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had several prior conferences with this teacher. When asked what she thought the teacher would say at the conference this was her response:

...she's going to tell me how wonderful my son is...what a joy he's been to have as a student...give me ideas on how to...stimulate his curiosity...keep him intellectually engaged...how to best get him ready for kindergarten...she is going to have very...complimentary but truthful...things to say....

The parent seems to expect good feedback from the teacher. She had this to say about her objectives for the conference:

To learn how my son survived the school year...they do an extraordinary job of telling me what's right with your children instead of what's wrong with them....

When asked how the parent would expect the process for the conference to precede she said this:

She'll probably sit down...may have some sort of developmental testing [my child's] done...share those results...we'll discuss them [the teacher] will show me some of his...class work...ask me if I have some questions...give me some ideas...where he could use...further work over the summer....

This parent expressed a great deal of optimism and had the following to say about her expected outcome for the conference:

I think that it's going to be a good conference...I'm not going to hear anything that's going to surprise me....

### Notes on the conference

The teacher greeted the tardy parent with smiles and laughter, and both took seats. They took turns talking about the child's performance and shared personal stories about the child while the parent reviewed the child's class work.

The teacher had positive things to say about the child. The teacher showed a great deal of sensitivity to the parent by listening and answering questions for educational activities over the summer. The parent cried when the teacher's assessment of her child showed no developmental issues, because the parent had faced a degree of autism with her other children. Also the parent was emotional over the child's move to another classroom and teacher for the next school year. The teacher expressed gratitude to the parent for sharing a handwriting program "T.E.A.R.S" that the parent uses at home and can be useful to the teacher. The parent and teacher hugged when the conference ended.

## Post-conference interview parent 2

This is how the parent responded to the questions of whether or not the conference proceeded as expected, “Yes, it did”

When asked if there were any surprises during the conference the parent stated, “No, no surprises.”

When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference the parent said, “No...we’re still really, really happy....”

## Parent 3

### Pre-conference Interview

#### THEME

This is what the parent said when asked what she thought the teacher would say at the conference:

My hope is that the teacher start off with strengths about your child and the observations...I think teachers really need to be in tune with what it is that the child is capable of doing and the kinds of things that they like to do...a good teacher would reflect on that...then would create more opportunities for the children....

Aside from her hopes about the conference, the parent shared her objectives for the conference as follows:

...to find out...her impressions as to how she’s doing...to see if we’re on the same page. I think we will be...If there are things that we see that may need to be addressed, how best do we go about addressing them?

The parent also shared her thoughts about how she expects the conference to proceed:

I’ll follow [the teacher’s] lead...we’ll sit down...She probably will share with me some documentation...of [my child’s] work... maybe their journal or portfolio...hear what she has to say. I’m sure she’ll allow me an opportunity to ask questions....

The parent has had prior experience with this teacher. She seemed relaxed, open, yet cautiously optimistic about her expectations. She said the following about what she thinks the outcome of the conference will be:

...it will be very positive...areas that need to be addressed...will still be presented in a positive light...ways to...be proactive and work together. The teacher's aware of it. I'm aware of it. So let's come up with a plan and put it in place to make it work....

### Notes on the conference

The teacher greeted the parent with smiles and apologies for the delay to the start of the conference. The teacher began the meeting saying wonderful things about the child. The teacher expressed an accepting attitude of the child's behavior, and successfully demonstrated to the parent that she knew how to interact well with the child. The parent and teacher took turns sharing stories about the child, frequently laughing, and seemed to value each other's perspective. They reviewed the child's work together and focused on every nuance of the child's disposition. The parent asked for and received recommendations for transitioning the child to a full day at kindergarten. The teacher told the parent that she would further encourage the child to pursue other types of activities. The teacher outlined attributes which accurately represented a clear understanding of the child, particularly the child's stubbornness. The conference ended with hugs and kisses between the parent and teacher.

### Post-conference interview parent 3

The parent said this when asked if the conference proceeded as expected, "Yeah, I think so."

The parent seemed satisfied with the outcome of the conference. When asked if any surprises occurred she said:

No surprises...I saw...new documentation of [my child's] work... I hadn't seen before but...I'm so familiar with the classroom... nothing [the teacher] shared with me was new or surprising.

The parent responded in this way when asked if anything changed as a result of the conference:

...no...it proceeded as...I thought it would...anytime...you interact with your child's teacher...a relationship...develops... opportunity where I could...share...my one concern...her sensitivity and being emotional...I wanted to...get confirmation ...that she's aware of my concern...the more...parents and teachers interact, the more it fosters the relationship hopefully in a positive manner....

#### Parent 4

##### Pre-conference Interview

###### THEME

The parent had this to say when asked what she thought the teacher would say at the conference:

...she will tell me...where she's improved or where she is starting to behave better or worse...what she sees...might be

some of the aspirations...where she would probably be best suited going into kindergarten...some tips of what can we do with her over the summer to continue her learning....

The parent felt confident about her expectations because she has had parent-teacher conferences with this teacher in the past. When asked what her objectives were for the conference, the parent said the following:

###### THEME

I want to know more about the choice that I made in where I was going to place her for kindergarten...she will be...thorough. I don't think there's anything I...need to ask. She will let me know everything.... Not only does this parent feel well informed about the content of

discussion during the conference, but she also shared a detailed account of how she would expect the process to proceed:

...I'll just sit down...she'll pull her report out and...go through... from the beginning...talk about specifics...give me a copy...we'll

both read...she'll elaborate with certain issues...something really key...you should know about...pieces of artwork...something that's been unique...her journal...when it's all done she'll just talk, say lots of positive things....

It seems that this parent has high expectations for a good conference.

THEME

When asked what she thought the outcome of the conference might be, she said

the following:

Nothing but good. I expect to hear all of her little actions...some growth...what she's headed for, what I should be seeing soon, what I can do to strengthen some of her skills...it will be a very good conference. I expect a really good one.

### Notes on the conference

The teacher greeted the parent with a smile. After they sat down the teacher gave the parent a copy of the report. The parent was allowed a few minutes to review the assessment. Then the parent and teacher discussed specifics of the child's daily behaviors to include the child's strong-willed disposition. The teacher let the parent take the lead as they looked at and discussed the child's artwork, reviewed her journal, and discussed the child's readiness for kindergarten. During the review, the teacher made positive comments about the child. The parent acknowledged the teacher's good understanding of the child by laughing and verbally concurring with the assessment. The parent and teacher were mutually accepting of each other's opinions. They listened to each other and followed-up on each other's thoughts and comments. At the end of the meeting the parent offered to help the teacher clean the classroom before the summer break.

#### Post-conference interview parent 4

When asked if the conference proceeded as the parent had expected this is what she had to say:

TYPICALITY

Yeah. Actually, I expected it to be a little bit more in-depth, maybe like the one I got the first time around. But she said it was a plain overview so it was thorough...to kind of wrap it up for the end of year. And they're pretty accurate.

Even though the parent received a less in-depth assessment than expected, she was apparently satisfied with what she did receive. So when asked if she had gotten any surprises at all, the parent stated the following:

No, none, none. She never surprises me with what she has to say anymore [the teacher] no, she doesn't surprise me at all.

This parent seems to respect and value the teacher's opinion. This was evident as the parent struggled with decision-making in where to place her child for kindergarten. So when asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference, the parent's response focused on how the teacher helped her to decide the next phase of her child's education. She stated:

Yeah...she just felt that she would get more out of the other class for whatever reason...that was a big turn...I decided to change...She said...I'm really glad that you decided to make that decision...I did it...without consulting...dad...that was a big change. Other than that, no.

REVELATION

#### Parent 5

##### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had a 2-year parent-teacher relationship with her child's teacher. When asked what the parent thought the teacher would say at the conference, she said this:

THEME

...she'll probably talk about how much [my child] has changed  
...how she's really blossomed...her creativity...the friendships  
she's formed...that she's a leader....

Perhaps because the parent has a long-standing relationship with the teacher, she does not have a lot of issues noted for discussion. When the parent was asked to state her objectives for the conference, she responded in the following way:

...I don't have huge objectives for the conference. I feel like I do know what's going on...I just want to make sure that [the teacher] feels that she is developing appropriately....

Even though the parent does not have a lot of her own agenda items for discussion, she does have certain expectations for the direction of the conference. When asked how the parent would expect the process for the conference to precede this is what she said:

I'll meet [the teacher] in...her classroom...she'll show me... some of the artwork she's done...written work...assessments that they've done over the years...[the teacher] prepares a page summary of your child...we'll go over that...she'll ask if I have any questions...then we'll just...talk generally about [my child] going on next year to kindergarten...have some open discussion....

It seems from the data that this parent has a good grasp on what she feels will take place during her interactions with the teacher. When asked what she thought the outcome would be for the conference the parent expressed love for the teacher and pride for her child. She stated, "I'll probably walk out loving... more. And feeling great about...."

#### Notes on the conference

The teacher greeted the parent with smiles. The parent followed the teacher's lead. They took turns talking during the review of child's class work,

which consisted of artwork, special projects, and photos. The parent inquired  
ELABORATION  
about the child's development in writing alphabets, and sought guidance on the  
types of math skills for the child to work on over the summer. The teacher  
responded to all the questions asked by the parent, and stated positive things  
about the child. The teacher provided details unique to the child's activity. The  
ELABORATION  
teacher clearly identified particular traits about the child which showed the parent  
how well the teacher knew the child. The parent and teacher told each other how  
much they appreciated each other's commitment, and ended the meeting with  
laughter, hugs, and smiles.

#### Post-conference interview parent 5

It appeared during the conference that the parent and teacher have a well  
established, successful relationship. When asked if the conference had  
proceeded as expected, the parent said, "Yes...Everything was pretty straight  
forward."

When asked if the parent encountered any surprises, the parent said,  
"None." When asked if anything changed as a result of the conference, the  
parent said, "No, no."

#### Parent 6

##### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had a parent-teacher conference with the teacher before.  
THEME  
This is what the parent said when asked what she thought the teacher would say  
at the conference:

...here's a perfect example of communication. I've already received  
his progress note to read and review...I have a good feeling about  
how he's progressing...what he needs to do now...It's not like half  
of our conference is going to be sitting there reading this letter...it

can actually be...an interactive conference where I can say this is great you see this. This is what I see at home. I can ask her for suggestions...sort of without her being there invite her into my home and share...the key words...any cues [the teacher] is giving him. (i.e. The parent is describing how she can utilize at home the same techniques the teacher uses at school to teach her child.)

The parent seems very enthusiastic about her interactions with the teacher, particularly in sharing ideas about transitioning home/school activities. When the parent was asked about her objectives for the conference she stated the following:

...to do some comparison, to talk with her a little bit about pre-reading readiness...the summer...some structured activities...to think about getting him ready...and to cut the umbilical cord. He's going to be in kindergarten next year....

This parent is seemingly well informed about how her child's teacher operates. When asked how she would expect the conference to proceed, she responded as follows:

...You come in and she'll ask if I've read over, she'll probably start with some positive comments...show me his...journal...the little stuff that they collect...She'll ask me if I have any questions about what I've read from the notes that she's already given...then we'll just get into some dialogue about any questions I may have. She'll share any thoughts she may have...hugs and...tears.

The data suggest that the parent is quite invested in supporting her child's education by establishing bonds with the teacher. Because of the quality of the parent-teacher relationship, the parent expressed mixed feelings about the expected outcome of the conference. This is what she said with glee:

I think I will find out that [my child] is ready to go to kindergarten. That he loves learning...I'm going to have to let go of [the teacher] which is always a little traumatic and dramatic....

## Notes on the conference

The parent arrived a few minutes late because her child had a nose bleed. The teacher greeted the parent with a smile. They were very friendly and comfortable with each other. They took turns talking, listening, and laughing together. The teacher showed the parent the child's artwork, bird project, space guidebook, photos, and other class work completed. The teacher gave the parent time to review everything. The teacher had positive things to say about the child. The teacher showed the parent that she had a good understanding of the child via description of the child's behavior. They encouraged each other to share stories about the child. The parent asked for the teacher's guidance on the child's emotional tendencies to quickly become teary-eyed. The teacher reassured the parent that the child was developing normally. The parent told the teacher how much she appreciated the teacher's skills and training experience. The teacher welcomed the parent's advice on use of a camcorder for some class projects. Each stated that they were going to miss each other next year, since the child was moving on to kindergarten. The meeting ended with hugs between them.

## Post-conference interview parent 6

The data shows that the parent and teacher have a very cordial and respectful relationship. When asked if the conference proceeded as expected, the parent said, "Absolutely."

When asked if the parent had any surprises during the conference, she stated the following:

No, the only surprise was the amount of visual material [the teacher] had out for us to look at...As usual [the teacher] overshot my anticipation...No surprises. I hit all the questions that I wanted to ask of her...her responses were what I anticipated....

Based on the data it is clear that the parent and teacher shared a successful parent-teacher relationship. The parent left no question about her acceptance of the teacher when asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference. This is what she said:

No, nothing has changed. I went into it with a positive attitude, a comfortable feel...and confident of our relationship and understanding. There were no surprises...nothing that would shake or wave my confidence in [the teacher] or our relationship....

### Parent 7

#### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has known the teacher for a number of years and has had several parent-teacher conferences. Given this history, when asked what the parent thought the teacher would say at the conference she responded as follows:

...I love my conferences...I always get teary-eyed when she talks about my kids because she knows them so well...she talks about interesting things...that [my child] actually likes to do. We typically get a progress report ahead of time...before the conference that we can read...I usually read it a couple times. I'm so excited... because...she'll say how much he likes art...likes one on one with [the teacher]...friends that he likes to play with...talk about things that she wants to see happen...next year...the role he might take....

This parent has expressed fondness for the teacher and alluded to the usefulness of the parent-teacher conference. She had this to say about her objectives for the conference:

To get an assessment of how he is since our last conference... progress socially...how's he's adapted...maybe become more confident...looking for what she wants to see happen and kind of help foster for the next year...hear some of the things that she feels like he really enjoyed...a summary....

Next the parent was asked how she would expect the process of the conference to proceed. She stated the stated the following:

...She...has [my child's] portfolio...journal...progress report... opens it up...we're sitting across from her. [The teacher]...opens with a...story...activity or something...he's...enjoyed...let us look through the journal...have some discussion...It's very comfortable...it flows. It's not...so systematic that you have 10 minutes for this, 5 minutes for this discussion...A conference is definitely not going to be that way...it's more...interactive...we'll come up with some questions...the educational component too...  
THEME  
he's identifying letters...should we be concerned...he's not reading...we get...time to...look at...projects....

It appears that the parents expects to have, and looks forward to a very in-depth and engaging conference. This is what the parent had to say when asked about her expected outcome for the conference:  
THEME

I'll have a sense of what she sees for him...next year...to see kind of evolve in the class [my child's] skills...I'll get a good summary...in all...forms, academically, socially, everything. Summer break...what's in it for him....

### Notes on the conference

The teacher greeted the parent and offered her a seat. Both participants had excited, happy, and friendly dispositions. They shared stories about the child which involved laughter and on-going conversation. They looked over child's journal. The teacher was thrilled to share the child's book on space, project on the digestive system, trains, and solar system. The atmosphere was very relaxed, and both the parent and teacher were given ample time to share information. They listened well to each other and followed the other's lead. The teacher made positive comments about the child's overall growth. The teacher reassured the parent that the child is reaching developmental milestones, which includes preparation for reading. The parent got teary-eyed. The parent was very

complimentary of the teacher's skills in exposing her child to the wonderful subject matter. At the end of the conference the child joined in. The teacher showed the child his work and made positive comments to him. The parent and teacher hugged at the end of the conference.

#### Post-conference interview parent 7

This parent is satisfied with her parent-teacher relationship. It seems that her long-established interactions with the teacher have proved fruitful. When asked if the conference proceeded as expected she said, "It did, yes."

The parent also had a direct response to the question of whether or not she had experienced any surprises during the conference. She stated, "No surprises."

When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference, the parent did provide a direct response but elaborated further:

No...it only furthers in my mind any interaction I have with [the teacher] further cements why I want to have...there again ...I really don't think that I could sit here and tell you a negative in this process whether it's with the conference...my expectations, with what wasn't achieved...it's...all positive.

#### Parent 8

##### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had at least one prior conference with the teacher. The parent stated the following when asked what she thought the teacher would say at the conference:

...I think she's just going to...summarize the areas...he's grown over the past year...especially since our mid-year conference...in terms of his emotional...social...cognitive/academic development. I don't anticipate any problems...she would have let us know way before a conference that something was going awry...she gives us a written report beforehand.

When asked what her objectives were for the conference, the parent said:

...just to hear the areas that she's seen growth...to know how it...manifests at school...socially who his friends are...what he's doing with them...what he likes to play on the playground....

This parent seems focused on what she hopes to find out during the conference and is confident with the relationship established with the teacher.

This is what the parent had to say about how she expected the process for the conference to proceed:

[The teacher] will summarize what she's seen over the last half ...year...she'll say 'Do you have any questions?'...we'll say no... It will be quick...I'll...bring this up just so you're aware. My husband and I always sort of disagreed on the whole kindergarten readiness thing...we agreed to let it up to [the teacher]...she...also strongly felt no, do not start him early...let him have another year...I don't think it will come up at this conference...He could still bring it up....

Even though this parent's husband is not a participant in this study, the parent has indicated that he will be present at the conference. Notwithstanding, the parent felt sure she would get a good report when asked what the outcome of the conference might be. The parent responded this way, "...that [my child] is doing great and have a great summer...."

### Notes on the conference

The participant and her husband attended the conference. The teacher greeted them both. The teacher gave the parents the child's work to review.

However, one pizza box of work was missing, so the teacher and parents helped each other reconstruct what was included in that container. The parents seemed to take no offense at the teacher having misplaced some of their child's work.

They looked over what they did have—the evaluation, photos, and some of the special projects. The teacher allowed parents time to enjoy what they saw. They

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all continued to share and laugh over various stories about the child. The teacher

ELABORATION

talked about the progress the child has made, she had positive things to say

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about the child, and discussed the child's friends and his activities with them.

They talked about the child and parent(s) acknowledged how well the teacher

ELABORATION

understood their child. The teacher asked the parents if they had any questions.

The father asked if anything in particular the child should be concentrating on

over the summer. The teacher asked about child's academic learning at home

and recommended that it be continued over the summer. The parents accepted

the teacher's response. The parents had different perspectives on number of

days child should be at school. The teacher gave advice on the child's schedule

for the next school year in hopes to help resolve parent dilemmas. The parents

responded by accepting the teacher's perspective. The conference ended with

the participant and teacher hugging each other.

#### Post-conference interview parent 8

The parent expectations seemed to have been validated. When asked if the conference proceeded as expected the parent stated, "Yup."

The parent was obviously confident at what was going to take place during the conference. So when asked if any surprises occurred she stated, "Nope."

When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference, the parent said, "No."

Parent 9

Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had at least one conference with the teacher before now.  
THEME  
When asked what she thought the teacher would say at the conference, this is how she responded:

...we'll cover his social interactions...cognitive and...physical developments...coordination skills...how he works with the group  
THEME  
...independently...whether or not he could be in kindergarten....

The parent has some idea of what will take place at the conference, and intends to raise specific issues she would like to address. When asked what her objectives are for the conference, she stated the following:

THEME  
...I want to see where she thinks he is developmentally...if he is getting some of the more academic type ideas...how he's doing socially....

When asked how you would expect the process for the conference to precede, this is what the parent had to say:

...you sit down...she'll go through a checklist...different cognitive skills...she'll ask do you have any questions...go through his actual work...a journal...pictures...artwork...she'll talk about those and let us look at them...there's another test...look at where they are...it's definitely teacher lead...she'll present everything....

The parent has described a conference that is expected to have a teacher  
THEME  
who will facilitate the flow of information. This is what she had to say about her expected outcome for the conference:

...that he's right on track...he interacts very well...I expect it to be positive...he's made a big leap since our last...conference...she'll have some more to say about his development....

## Notes on the conference

The participant's husband also attended the conference. The teacher greeted them with smiles and offered seats to them. The teacher told the parents positive things about the child's social interaction skills. The teacher seemed deliberate in pointing out positive traits of the child, possibly an attempt to show the parents that she had a clear understanding of their child and family dynamics. The teacher gave the parents a narrative assessment to review. As they read it, the father recognized that the teacher had misspelled the child's name. The teacher chuckled and apologized. The mother was surprised that the report indicated that the child showed no interest in math. The teacher made clarification and stated that the comment only pertains to manual applications. The child does show interest and participates in verbal math exercises during circle time. The teacher offered to make the appropriate change in the report. The parent said it was not necessary. They reviewed the child's journal and portfolio. The parent(s) stated that they recognized changes in their child's speech. The father asked the teacher for recommendations for continued guidance of his child at home. The teacher acknowledged appreciation of the parents' parenting skills, and stated that the parents should continue what they are doing. The parents agreed. The parent tried to make a point about the parent's job, but the teacher missed opportunity for clarification. The meeting ended in a friendly manner.

## Post-conference interview parent 9

The parent seemed a bit anxious about what she learned during the conference, but by the time it ended she was satisfied that her son had met

necessary milestones. When asked if the conference had proceeded as expected, she said the following:

Yeah, pretty much...the January one...was more of a checklist...she gave a written paper instead that talked about what he was doing. Everything was as I expected. There wasn't really any surprises at all.

There was one surprise in the report the parent encountered that was discussed and resolved. When asked if any surprises occurred the parent stated:

...she wrote he hasn't shown interest in any of the math readiness activities...at home...he's always do math...I  
REVELATION  
was surprised that she meant sitting down and writing numbers...she explained...I understood.

The misunderstanding the parent and teacher had was addressed, clarified, and dismissed as an issue. The parent used the conference to alleviate any concerns she may have had. When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference, the parent said:

No...I knew more what to expect...the January conference was more important...as changing my perspective on things....

#### Parent 10 Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had a parent-teacher conference with this teacher before.  
THEME  
When asked what she thought the teacher would say at the conference, she responded as follows:

...the feedback...across the board is going to be positive.  
[The teacher] will show us different types of art...ways she's developed through...writing...her activities...talk about her social development....

The parent's expectations for the conference seem to parallel what she wants to hear at the conference. This is what the parent had to say about her objectives for the conference:

...to see developmentally if she's chronologically on target in the social...emotional...areas...as well as cognitively. To see who we might pursue as a friendship...over the summer...just reassurance.

The parent made the following statement when asked how she would expect the process for the conference to precede:

...they'll be a friendly, warm greeting...we'll sit in the mini chairs... I'll have to elbow my husband to keep him awake...different key topics ...are touched on...social...cognitive...emotional growth...we'll see some examples of work....

The parent has described a conference that might be relaxed and well informed. This is what she thought the outcome of the conference might be:

...the outcome will be positive...I haven't spent time thinking of any questions...I'd like to know if there's any areas that she could use some work over the summer....

### Notes on the conference

The father attended the conference with the participant. The teacher greeted the parents, and offered them seats. The teacher gave the parent(s) the child's assessment, journal, and artwork to review. The teacher gave the parents positive feedback about the child and her work. The parent asked for guidance in selecting playmates for the child over the summer. The teacher made some suggestions. The parents thanked the teacher. The parents and teacher allowed each other time to talk and respond to questions. The parents disclosed what they thought is aggressive behavior of the child; the teacher described the child's behavior in terms of expressing feelings. The meeting ended with smiles.

### Post-conference interview parent 10

The parent had a straightforward parent-teacher conference. It appeared that all concerns were addressed to her satisfaction. When asked if the conference proceeded as expected, she said the following:

Yes...we were a little pushed for time. We could have enjoyed a longer, more relaxed period for conversation, but because of the back to back appointments with the kids, it didn't work....

Even though the parent was subjected to her own personal time constraints, it appears that she accomplished what she wanted for the conference. When asked if she had experienced any surprises during the conference she said, "No."

When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference, the parent responded as follows:

I enjoyed seeing a more relaxed teacher...she was not harried ...she was feeling good...that's the person we enjoyed so much at the beginning of the year...that was nice...through some of the things she said, I know that she truly, truly loves the kids...That's very reassuring....

### Teacher 1

#### Pre-conference Interview

This teacher has over 30 years of experience in the area of early childhood education. She has participated in numerous parent-teacher conferences during these years. This teacher facilitated the parent-teacher conferences involving the previously noted participants: parents 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8. Following is what she thought the parent(s) would say at the conference:

...it would probably depend on who their child is...share their portfolio...journal...major projects...talk a little bit about how far they've come on certain issues...at...mid-year conference

...I leave it...open ended for the parent to bring up anything... we have a pretty good time at our conference...usually, they're really pleased...often will be concerned...about...things... need to work on...over the summer....

Even though the teacher has several independent conferences with various parents, the parents generally have similar things of interest to talk about with the teacher. The teacher expects to respond to some of the same questions during each conference. When asked what her objectives were for these conferences, she responded in this way:

...basically it's looking at how far their child has come, primarily from mid-year...most of it is intended to be positive...I try not to... unless there's a big issue bring up any problems...I might just inform them...this could potentially be something that you may hear later about your child in school...I don't want to be remiss... so you'll be prepared...mostly it's...ooh-ing and aah-ing about the wonderful progress their child has made....

Taking into consideration all the issues the teacher suggested that she would possibly cover during a typical parent-teacher conference, she outlined how that would happen. Following is what she said when asked how she would expect the process for the conference to proceed:

...this can be...different depending on if both parents are there... bring their child...the child can go to childcare or...stay in the room...if the child is there, I have the child show...things in... portfolio...talk...about them...child will look through...pick out some pictures from the journal...talk about what went on...I can add...comments...so...parent can still hear what I want to share... fieldtrips coming up...our picnic...their progress report...or... anything they want to discuss...I have already...written the progress report in a narrative form...the parents have gotten... to read beforehand....

The teacher seems to describe a fairly open opportunity for parents to talk about whatever they care to. But she does facilitate the discussion to ensure that

information she may need to share gets said. When asked what the teacher thought the outcome(s) of the conferences would be, she said:

...my past experience...has always been very positive...I've hardly ever had a conference where I felt like the parent...surprised me with dissatisfaction or left uncomfortable. Usually, I have sense about it...before they come...to the conference and we try to work that out...they're reassured about any questions they may have... in general the conference is...successful...the parent feels comfortable and pleased about their child which is my goal...we're able to communicate about all the issues that we both want to share...Sometimes, we'll wish we had more time. Sometimes, the conference time seems too long....

#### Notes on the conference(s)

As previously indicated, this teacher had conferences with parents 3, 5, 6, 7 and 8. The notes on those individual conferences included observation of the teacher's behavior. The teacher's description of what she thought those conferences would be like is in keeping with the way the five parents described them. For example, the teacher welcomed them with smiles, offered seats to them, and shared the child's class work that included journals, artwork, and special projects. The teacher and parent talked about the child's overall assessment. The teacher had warm, friendly, child-centered conversations with the parents where in she had positive things to say about all the children. One child attended the conference near the end of the parent's meeting, and the teacher showed the child his work and said positive things to him. The teacher was respectful, considerate, and sensitive to parent concerns. The teacher apologized to one parent for misplacing a child's box containing some projects. The parents took no offense. They were familiar with their child's missing work, and seemed to enjoy reconstructing with the teacher what the child had done.

The teacher listened and responded to parent questions about their children's social, emotional, and academic progress; suggestions for summer activities, and placement for the next school year. All the conferences were emotionally charged with laughter, tears, and/or hugs between participants.

#### Post-conference interview teacher 1

The teacher appeared to have favorable conferences. The parents seemed happy with what they learned, satisfied with the process, and emotionally bonded with the teacher. When the teacher was asked if the conferences proceeded as expected, she stated:

...they did. They flowed really well...the way I planned...They asked questions that I thought they might be concerned about ...everyone seemed pretty pleased with the progress report... some...are relieved to see who their child is in the classroom compared to who they are at home....

The teacher was not specifically asked if she had any surprises during the conferences, but said this when discussion about the missing pizza box arose:

...it was under 3 others. It was sitting on that shelf the whole time. I couldn't believe it!

The teacher was able to accommodate the needs of one set of parents regardless of misplaced class work; and the teacher seemed to positively engage the other participants. When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conferences, the teacher stated the following in regard to the spouse of parent 8:

...I felt good...he trusted more...my professionalism and... knowledge...that was a very positive outcome....

## Teacher 2

### Pre-conference Interview

This teacher has over 30 years of teaching experience with less than half of these years in early childhood education. She has participated in numerous parent-teacher conferences. This teacher facilitated the conferences involving parents 1, 2, 4, 9, and 10. When asked what she thought the parent(s) would say at the conferences, she responded as follows:

...is really going to vary from parent to parent...they'll say yup... that's my child...There doesn't seem to be any surprises...ask what they can do over the summer to get...ready for next year... how...curriculum will be different...where...child might have

some problems...why I have not done more...bookwork...work paper...children...enjoy coming to school...manners...improved....

Even though parents may have different needs and interests for attending conferences, the teacher generally has an agenda to respond to the various needs of parents. When asked what her objectives were for the conferences, the teacher stated the following:

...to summarize this school year...to chart their child's growth and changing enthusiasms...set goals for the following year...do this summer...10 minutes reading a day...join the library program...swim ...catch bugs...fireflies...relax...play games...garden...talk about what you see...to develop language....

The teacher has clear objectives for what she wants to accomplish during the conferences. Following is what she stated about how she would expect the the conference to proceed:

...the parents come in, they...sit in small chairs...I'll have a fan blowing on us because it's going to be plenty hot...I have their child's report laying face down in front of them...give them an opportunity to read that...I am really scared...if I hand mine out early...they will stress out over something...I didn't...mean...we

...read through it together...talk about the different points...I answer...questions...about the report...they'll look through... child's journal...portfolio boxes...ask me what to do in the summer...I will answer they need to read to their children....

Because this teacher has indicated dealing with an array of parent perspectives, and has expressed having some anxiety over the possible types of responses she may receive from child assessments, she tries to prepare herself for what may happen during the conferences. When asked what she thought the outcome(s) of the conferences might be, she stated:

I never know. Some years I have four or five parents who cry...if it's an especially difficult child I'll...end the conference...by affirming the strengths....assure the parents...what great kids you've got....

#### Notes on the conference(s)

As previously indicated, this teacher had conferences with parents 1, 2, 4, 9 and 10. The notes on those individual conferences included observation of the teacher's behavior. The teacher's description of what she thought those conferences would be like is in keeping with the way the five parents described them. For example, the teacher welcomed them with smiles, offered seats to them, and shared the child's class work that included journals, artwork, and special projects. The teacher and parent talked about the child's overall assessment. The teacher had friendly and child-centered conversations with the parents where in she had positive things to say about all the children. The teacher was respectful, considerate, and sensitive to parent concerns; particularly with developmental and behavioral concerns that two parents had, respectively. The teacher apologized to one parent for spelling the child's name wrong. The parents accepted the apology. The same parent(s) questioned the

teacher's assessment of the child's math aptitude. The teacher successfully clarified her statement. The parent understood. The teacher listened and responded to parent questions about their children's social, emotional, and academic progress; suggestions for summer activities, and placement for the next school year. But the teacher missed an opportunity to follow-up on a parent's comment about the parent's job. All the conferences included laughter; one ended with tears of relief and joy for which the parent gave the teacher a hug; and all seemed to end with parent feelings of reassurance about their child's academic growth and development.

#### Post-conference interview teacher 2

The teacher seemed pleasantly surprised at how well all the conferences unfolded. She was able to resolve any issues, reassure parents, and accomplish her goals for the conference. When asked if the conferences proceeded as expected and if any surprises occurred, the teacher stated the following:

...I was a little surprised and pleased [Parent 9] recognized [her child] is developing at a different rate...that he is his own person...I don't feel under...pressure I did...I was...concerned she was going to want me to push academics rather than...developmental, holistic approach...I was relieved...I was surprised [Parent 1] sought advice from a child psychologist...It did crack me up...she's concerned about his oral fixation...she's an ex-smoker...she was chewing gum...I was surprised [Parent 2] cried...it was a sense of relief for her....

The teacher had previously indicated that she could not predict what the outcome of the conferences might be. Post-conferences, however, she has described outcomes that could be characterized as successful parent-teacher conferences. When asked if the teacher felt that anything had changed as a result of the conferences, the teacher responded as follows:

REVELATION

...I am...relaxed...I was in a real quandary between my personal philosophy, [the school's] philosophy and what I perceived incorrectly about [Parent 9]. I feel a big sense of relief...I can...run my classroom like I need to....

All of the interaction data from Preschool site 1 suggest good parent-teacher relationships and a smooth flow of interaction during the observed conferences. The smoothness of the interaction is indicated by the preponderance of emergence throughout the protocols. The few instances of lack of fit or of relativity are quickly resolved through revelations that are accepted by the parents involved. These parents seem to respect the teachers and to have a warm relationship with them, as evidenced by easy acquiescence, smiles and hugs.

Preschool Site 2

Parent 1

Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had several parent-teacher conferences in the past; but has had at least one conference with this teacher. When asked what the parent <sup>THEME</sup> thought the teacher would say at the conference, she responded this way:

...she's going to tell me that she's improved on her letter recognition...some things that [my child] may still need to work on...how she's doing right now...how they're going to progress ...what we could do to advance her....

The parent had a general idea of what she might hear from the teacher at the conference. This is what the parent said when asked what her objectives for the conference was:

...get...feedback...where she's at...see if there's anything that we <sup>THEME</sup> need to be doing at home besides what we're doing currently....

The parent had a somewhat open agenda about what she might want to talk about during the conference. Following is what she stated when asked how she would expect the conference to precede:

...she has...a folder for each child...she'll show...what they've been doing...how she's improved...she knows where each child is in their development and where to help them...ask me ...my expectations...we'll try to be on the same page...get her where she needs to be....

THEME

When asked what she thought the outcome of the conference will be, the parent stated:

I'll know what I need, if there's anything we need to work on... I pretty much know my child...nothing she tells me is not really a surprise....

#### Notes on the conference

The teacher greeted the parent with a smile and offered her a seat. The conference took place in the classroom among sleeping children. The lights were out. The teacher gave the parent the child's work folder that included a 19-  
page evaluation form that included a narrative about the child's progress. When reviewing the work folder the parent briefly showed interest in a homework paper that was indicated as late; but the parent seemed to dismiss it as insignificant because she quickly moved on without inquiry to the teacher. The teacher walked the parent about the room to show artwork, the weather chart, graphs, and other projects to include a postcard done by the class. The teacher spoke most often and made positive comments about the child. The teacher often addressed the researcher as if a party to the conference. The researcher told the teacher to ignore her. The teacher responded to the parent's questions about the child's overall progress and development. The parent and teacher seemed to

appreciate what each other had to say. The conference was interrupted once when the teacher answered the telephone. The conference was interrupted again when the teacher went to answer the door. Then the teacher invited that parent to sit at the table where the current conference was taking place. When this conference ended, the teacher requested that the parent make written comments on the evaluation form along with the parent's signature. The parent showed reluctance by stating that she didn't have anything to say, but she did honor the teacher's request.

#### Post-conference interview parent 1

The parent seemed to enter the conference with the attitude that the teacher will provide her with information that she needs to know about her child, and is fully prepared to accept what she learns. When asked if the conference went as the parent expected she stated, "Yes."

When asked if the conference had any surprises the parent stated the following, "No, because...we speak on a daily basis...."

The parent seemed quite satisfied with the outcome of the meeting. Her objectives were apparently met and she faced no surprises. When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference, the parent stated:

"No, because I can say we conversate...daily, so no...."

#### Parent 2

##### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has a long-standing relationship with the preschool. She has had many parent-teacher conferences. When asked what she thought the teacher would say at the conference, she responded as follows:

...he gets good reports...I love coming in and hearing about him...he enjoys school...I want to keep that enthusiasm going....

The parent's past experiences encourage her to expect good news from the teacher during the conference. When the parent was asked what her objectives were for the conference she stated the following:

I...want to make sure that he is on the right path...We had an issue a few years ago where they didn't think his speech was developing the way it should have been...we had him tested...

THEME

I want to make sure that he's developing as he should be....

Since the parent has had many conferences in the past, she is confident about what the conference will be like. When asked how she would expect the conference to proceed, the parent said the following:

...this is like my ten-thousandth one...I'm kind of used to it... I've been coming here for 8 years. It's pretty brief...they have the whole report written out...I'll sit there and...review it...if she has any concerns...she'll address them...if I have any questions I'll say it but I usually don't...there are some things that he needs to work on...she brings to my attention...we take a copy of...report...and...work on those things....

It is clear that the parent is well versed on how parent-teacher conferences function at this preschool. When asked what she thought the outcome of the conference would be she responded in the following way,

THEME

"...he'll have a good report...everything is...glowing...."

### Notes on the conference

The parent arrived and was welcomed into the room by the teacher and offered a seat. The lights were off and children lay asleep. The teacher smiled and gave the parent her child's evaluation form to review. The parent was happy with the evaluation because the child got a good report. The parent and teacher talked a little about the child's overall performance. They took turns talking and

ELABORATION

ELABORATION

ELABORATION

laughed together. The parent expressed a concern about the child's level of independence. The teacher validated the parent's concern, and reassured the parent that her child was functioning well. The parent was relieved. The conference ended quickly.

### Post-conference interview parent 2

Consistent with the parent's demeanor and expectations, it appears that she had a successful parent-teacher conference. This is what the parent said when asked if the conference went as expected:

Yes...This is normal. After we got over the initial developmental issues years ago, all of his conferences are like this.

This conference was basically ritualistic for the parent. Nothing out of the ordinary was expected, and no surprises occurred. When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference, the parent stated the following:

No...it is because...we have a personal relationship as well as a professional...that's what makes it so easy...we are on that level with each other...she works with me...on things....

### Parent 3

#### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has a long-standing relationship with this preschool but has participated in few parent-teacher conferences. When asked what the parent <sup>THEME</sup> thought the teacher would say at the conference, she stated:

[My child] is very strong willed...she's progressing for her age... When [my child's] in a bad mood...she'll tell me she probably needs to work on a little bit of that...I don't get too crazy about what the teachers tell me. I just try and support them...she's four. She has plenty of time to work on it...I'll...reinforce that as we go along....

The parent seems to have a practical approach to processing the information that she is likely to receive from the teacher during the conference.

Following is what she said when asked about her objectives for the conference:

...be informed of what's going on, what they would like me to work on with [my child] and get general feedback...on everything....

Even though the parent is not as experienced with conferences relative to her time associated with the preschool, she probably has a good idea of what will take place. This is what she said when asked how she would expect the process for the conference to precede:

...they'll have a hand out...of criteria...questions... things... [my child's] working on... an assessment...go over each item... concentrate on items...out of the norm...good or bad....

The parent seems open to receiving any type of information about her child. When asked what she thought the outcome of the conference will be, following is what she said:

I don't really know...I've been through a couple of them before... I chose to do this time to participate in your survey, but my husband usually takes care of the conferences...he works right down the street...I guess the outcome will be...needs to work on A, B, C, and D and keep...doing F, G, and H and when it comes up in the fall, we're...doing L, M, N, and O.

### Notes on the conference

The teacher welcomed the parent with a smile and offered her a seat. The lights were off as the children were napping. When both the parent and teacher were seated the teacher became emotional with tears flowing down her face. The parent put her hands on her own face and asked the teacher what was wrong. The teacher explained that she was concerned about her ill mother who needed blood. The teacher apologized for her emotional display. The parent was very

sympathetic towards the teacher by allowing her time to vent and eventually  
compose herself. Then the parent took charge and facilitated the onset of the  
conference. The parent took the folder containing her child's work and reviewed  
it. The teacher looked through the folder with the parent and made positive  
comments about the child's work. They discussed the evaluation and the parent  
asked a lot of questions. The teacher answered them and reassured the parent  
that the child was performing well. They shared a laugh over an incident when  
the teacher took away the child's swimming privileges for misbehaving. When the  
parent asked why, the teacher explained that the child hit her brother. The  
teacher demonstrated what the child did by touching the parent's arm. The  
parent expressed agreement with the teacher's discipline of the child.

### Post-conference interview parent 3

The parent appeared to have an unusual start, but had a direct, honest,  
and respectful conference with the teacher. When asked if the conference  
proceeded as expected the parent stated:

Yes...I love [the teacher]. I feel bad for her. She's a long  
way from home...her mom...she's going through cancer...  
[the teacher] split with her husband. I feel sad for her....

The parent was clearly sensitive to the challenges that the teacher has,  
and was not offended in any way by the teacher's emotional display at the  
start of the conference, and gave it no further consideration. When asked if any  
surprises occurred during the conference the parent said, "No. Nothing  
abnormal."

The teacher's momentary emotional lapse was apparently of no consequence to the parent. When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference the parent stated, "No."

Parent 4

Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had several parent-teacher conferences at this preschool. The parent has two children enrolled in the preschool program. She has had at least one conference with each of two teachers. When asked what she thought the teacher(s) would say at the conference(s), she stated the following:

I really couldn't predict. They usually are pretty positive...We haven't had any behavioral issues with the children....

The parent seems open to whatever she may hear from the teacher during the conference. This is what she said about her objectives for the conference:

...find out what they've been working on...I'm there... frequently  
...I don't rely solely on the teacher conference to know what's going on...I see their interactions a lot....

The parent seems to try and maintain ongoing contact with and observation of her children and their teacher(s) while they are at school. She responded as follows when asked how she would expect the process for the conference to precede:

There isn't much process involved usually...we basically sit down at a table...they have a checklist of different things...they tell me what they've worked on. [The teacher] will show me paperwork... things that they've colored or projects.

The parent appears to view the conferences as a regular part of the school experience, and accepts her responsibility to participate. When asked

THEME

what she thought the outcome of the conference(s) would be, she stated: “I anticipate they’ll be positive for the most part.”

Notes on the conference(s)

The first conference was with the younger child’s teacher. The teacher greeted the parent with a smile and invited her, into the unlighted room with sleeping children, to sit at a table next to another parent she was finishing up a different conference with. Meanwhile, the teacher gave the parent a copy of the child’s evaluation to review. When the teacher ended the other conference, she read the narrative portion of the evaluation form to the parent. They discussed the assessment. The teacher walked the parent around the room to weather graphs and other charts of work the child participated in. The teacher talked the majority of the time, and did make positive comments about the child. The teacher sought the parent’s input and guidance with helping the child to talk more during class. The parent explained to the teacher that the child’s shyness is a trait probably adopted from the parent. The teacher said she was surprised since other family members, to include this parent, are boisterous. The parent and teacher laughed about the teacher’s accurate description. Then they discussed whether or not the child could benefit from additional homework. No decision was made. The teacher told the parent to write a comment on the evaluation and to sign it. The teacher continued to talk to the parent while the parent tried to accommodate the teacher’s request. When this conference ended the parent went across the room to the other teacher for a conference with her older child’s preschool teacher.

The other teacher came over to the parent and reminded the parent to come across the room to her table, so that she could remain on schedule. The <sup>ELABORATION</sup> teacher gave the parent the evaluation form to review, along with folders that included the child's artwork and other projects. The parent was afforded time to look through everything even though the teacher had fallen a little behind. The <sup>ELABORATION</sup> teacher told the parent good news about the child's progress. The parent asked questions and the teacher answered them. The parent appreciated the teacher's work and programming with exposing her child to standardized tests. The teacher volunteered to help the child at anytime. The teacher also complimented the parent for her interest. The conference ended with the teacher asking the parent to write a comment on the back of the evaluation and to sign it. She did.

#### Post-conference interview parent 4

The parent had two different teacher perspectives to negotiate during separate conferences for her two children. When asked whether the conferences had proceeded as expected, the parent responded in this way:

<sup>TYPICALITY</sup>  
I think the one was a bit more informative...than I would have expected...but they pretty much went as expected...they were pretty positive...I don't know if I expected her to express as much <sup>LIKELIHOOD</sup> insight into his shyness...but I was glad that she did...I was quite pleased...that's being...addressed rather than he needs to start talking...I felt good to know...she's trying to work on it...I felt satisfied today....

Parent 4's statement about being "satisfied today" suggests that communications with Teacher 2 has not always been favorable. For example, Parent 4 described an earlier experience:

...one day I just walked through the door and she [Teacher 2] was like you need to comb her hair...I don't expect them [teachers] to attack them [children] about her hair. That's it. I don't want to hear it.

She cries and screams. I don't like to feel like I have to make excuses. And I walk through the door and this and that. You need to do this. Her hair's all going to fall out. It's going to break off and this and that and then I think she [Teacher 2] had also addressed it with her [the child]. I thought that was a very negative parent-teacher interaction.

When asked if the parent had experienced any surprises during the parent teacher conferences she stated, "Not quite as much...Not particularly, no."

The parent seemed to appreciate all the feedback she obtained during the conferences. It appears that the lines of communication were open between the parent and the teacher, and had expanded during the former conference between the parent and the teacher of her younger child. When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conferences the parent stated, "No...."

#### Parent 5 Pre-conference Interview

This parent has a long-standing relationship with this preschool. She has had several parent-teacher conferences with this teacher. When asked what she <sup>THEME</sup> thought the teacher would say at the conference the parent said, "Basically, she'll tell me where she is as far as getting her ready for school."

This is what the parent said when asked what her objectives were for the conference:

<sup>THEME</sup>  
I...want to make sure that she's where she should be...for first grade...It's going to be her first time going to school all day...in a setting with different classes...subjects...I...want to make sure that she's going to be ready....

The parent does not appear to have many expectations for the conference, which suggests that it may be fairly quick and straightforward. When

asked how the parent would expect the conference to proceed, she said the following:

...it goes pretty good. She tells me what's going on...goes over what they're doing, what they've done...shows me the work...tell me where [my child] is at that point.

It seems that the parent has had good experiences with conferences in the past. When asked what she expected the outcome of this conference might be, she responded in the following way:

I hope it's a good outcome...I think she's been doing fine because during the year I'll stop in and say 'how's she doing?' ...she'll say 'she's doing okay.' That's how I know she was working on her reading...with her...everyday.

#### Notes on the conference

The teacher welcomed the parent with a smile. They sat down at the table inside the classroom where the children were napping. The lights were out. The teacher gave the parent the folder of her child's work to look through. They talked about the child's artwork and other projects. They appreciated each other's stories about the child and laughed together. The teacher talked about specific lessons the child learned. She clarified the child's understanding about what was taught and how the child interpreted the lesson. The teacher had positive things to say about the child. The parent signed the evaluation and left.

#### Post-conference interview parent 5

It appears that the parent has experienced another successful parent-teacher conference. When asked if the conference had proceeded as expected she stated, "Yes."

The parent was focused on what she wanted to learn at the conference, and apparently got all of her questions answered. When asked if the parent encountered any surprises during the conferences she stated, "No."

The parent seemed satisfied with the assessment, and left the conference with a generally good feeling about her child's overall performance. When the parent was asked if anything had change as a result of the conference, she stated the following:

No. The only thing that's wrong is that she won't have that one on one time anymore with my baby.

#### Parent 6

##### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had an ongoing relationship with this preschool for a few years; but this is only the second formal parent-teacher conference she has participated in. When the parent was asked what she thought the teacher would <sup>THEME</sup> say at the conference, she stated the following:

She'll let me know...the stuff that they do every day...and if he's behaving or if he has a behavior problem.

This parent gave a broad response to what she had expected to hear from the teacher during the conference. When asked what her objectives were for the conference, she responded in this way:

None...I just want to make sure that he's doing good in class and he's learning all his ABC's and...know some stuff.

The parent provided the previous response after having been asked the question three times. It appears that she had planned to attend the conference in order for the teacher to talk to her and not vice versa. This is what the parent said when asked how she thought the process of the conference would proceed:

...she's going to...show me his work and stuff...homework that we do there, tell me what they're doing at that point....

The parent did not seem confident in knowing what the teacher might say during the conference. When asked what she thought the outcome of the conference would be, she stated:

I'll know what my child is doing in class...his strengths... weaknesses.

### Notes on the conference

The teacher held this conference in a private room. The lights were on and the teacher closed the door after inviting the parent in to sit down at a table. The parent brought her two year old son to the conference. The teacher gave the parent the evaluation to review, along with other work and projects that child had completed. The teacher complimented the child's good work. The teacher read the narrative part of the assessment to the parent. The teacher told the parent that the child, for a five year old, was behind in his academic progress. The evaluation contained a lot of adverse information. The teacher said this occurred because the child does not pay attention due to playing, and does not regularly do his homework. The parent told the teacher she was surprised because the child does well at home and she helps him with his homework. But the parent did agree that she does sometimes forget to send in his homework and said that it was her fault. The parent learned from what seemed like the teacher's lecture, that a consequence of the child's failings to complete and return homework, he missed out on some school fieldtrips. The parent was upset about that fact and stated that she would not have had allowed her son to come to school the day of the fieldtrip only to be left behind. She said she had no idea that incident and

similar others had occurred. The teacher said that the child knew and that notes went home with him. The parent said that the child does not always tell her everything. Also troubling to the parent was the fact that the teacher stated she often corrected the child during in-class lessons. The parent was concerned about whether or not the child was being embarrassed by the teacher. The teacher explained that each child has their own individualized work plan, and that she could not discuss the status of other children's performance with the parent. The parent suggested that she only wanted to know if the other children heard the teacher correct her child. It appeared that the teacher did not validate the parent's concerns nor did she understand the parent's perspective. The parent stated that she was going to take the child out of this preschool and enroll him elsewhere. The teacher told the parent that the child is behind and it would not do the child any good to leave so abruptly, because he would be tested at the public school and still not be ready for first grade. The parent told the teacher that her son was scared of the teacher. The teacher disagreed. The teacher left the room and returned after a few minutes. The teacher insisted that the parent write a comment on the evaluation form and sign it. She only signed the form and left.

#### Post-conference interview parent 6

The parent was apparently dissatisfied with the conference. She did not like what she heard about her child's performance in school. The parent also seemed to have trouble effectively communicating with the teacher. When asked if the conference had proceeded as expected, the parent stated: "No. It did not. I didn't expect all that...Sounded just terrible!"

The parent reacted as if she were very disappointed and astonished by the information about her child that she obtained from the teacher during the conference. This is what she said when asked if she was surprised by anything at the conference:

Yeah. Very surprised...I knew they were going to talk about the playing and he can't focus, but I didn't know he was as far behind as he is. I didn't know that...I think my son was capable of doing it....

The parent not only had to contend with the negative information she received about her son, she also had to reflect on how she was unaware of the extent of the problem. It seems that the parent also had to consider how or if she wanted to strengthen her relationship with the teacher. When asked if anything had changed since the conference, the parent stated the following:

ANOMIE—POWERLESSNESS

No. Nothing changed...No, nothing's not really going to change in the relationship with me and the teacher, but I'm going to do some different things, as a outcome of the conference...The homework. That's a big one...I have to get some flash cards, probably today. I don't know where...I'm definitely going to try and improve it...I don't think he's going to get it here. I think he's intimidated by the teacher....

TECHNICAL EFFICIENCY

### Parent 7 Pre-conference Interview

This parent has a long-standing relationship with the school. She has had several parent-teacher conferences. This conference was split between two teachers because the child was transferred half-way through the evaluation period. When asked what she thought the teacher would say at the conference, she stated the following:

...go over things...they do on a daily basis and let me know if there are any concerns like educational wise...I should be

aware of...things that I need to work with him at home...how he's progressing...ask me if I have any concerns....

Even though the parent was not specifically asked about the format of the conference, the parent seems to have a good general sense of what the teacher might say and do at the conference. The parent responded in the following way when asked what her objectives were for the conference:

...for them to...basically keep me informed as to how he's progressing...areas where he needs improvement...that he's ready for K5...I don't want him to be behind....

It is clear that the parent wanted to be kept well informed about what her child was doing in school, so that she can help correct any deficiencies, if necessary. The parent wanted to ensure that her child was fully prepared for the next grade level. When asked what she thought the outcome of the conference would be, the parent responded in the following way:

...I'll get a good report...I'm hoping that I will...it usually is an enjoyable experience. They just tell me little stories and stuff about him, things that he does...They...let me know that he's on point and I'm happy with that...

### Notes on the conference

Teacher 1 greeted the parent with a smile and offered her a seat at a table. The children were napping inside the room. The lights were off. Teacher 1 gave the parent a folder of the child's work to review. They talked about the activities done by the child, and the teacher made positive comments. The teacher suggested that the child should practice using crayon by coloring and making letters. Teacher 2 interrupted this review and gave the parent her child's evaluation form. The parent was allowed a few minutes to review it. Teacher 2 told the parent that the child had a lack of interest in dramatic play and art, which

accounted for the low mark in development in that area. The teachers and parent stated appreciation for each other's otherwise good work with the child.

#### Post-conference interview parent 7

The parent seemed pleased with the overall assessment of her child's work. When asked if the conference proceeded as expected the parent said, "Yeah, I knew that..."

The parent apparently had a successful conference, and responded in the following way when the researcher stated that she was satisfied, had no surprises, it went well: "Yup."

When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference the parent said, "Nope."

#### Parent 8

##### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had a brief relationship with this preschool. The parent has had meetings with teachers before, but this was the first formal parent-<sup>THEME</sup>teacher conference she has attended. When asked what the parent thought the teacher would say at the conference, she stated the following:

...I'm not sure. I guess it can range...I know the progress of where they're at educationally. It will just be more formal...they'll keep me abreast with or without a conference.

This parent has indicated that she regularly has informal meetings with the teacher, but can only speculate on what will be said at the formal conference.

When asked what her objectives were for the conference, the parent responded in the following way:

I...would like to know where she is educationally, if she's up to par  
THEME  
with her age group. Is she doing at least average based on her  
THEME  
peers? Is she ready for preschool...K4, K5....

When asked how she would expect the conference to proceed, she had  
this to say:

...she would probably ask me if I had any questions...Explain to me  
...the process of what's going on with her educationally, if she's  
developing properly.

THEME  
This is what the parent had to say when asked what she thought the  
outcome of the conference would be:

Based on...that I talk to them pretty often, it probably won't  
be a long conference. I'm sure they'll update me with what's  
going on...if there needs to be any changes...anything...we  
need to work on...I'm pretty confident with everything going  
according to plan. We should be right on target because we  
do conversate so much.

### Notes on the conference

The teacher greeted the parent with a smile and offered her a seat at a  
table. The children were asleep in the room. The lights were off. The teacher  
ELABORATION  
gave the parent her child's evaluation form. While she reviewed the form the  
teacher talked most of the time, read the narrative part of the evaluation to the  
parent, and turned the pages in the child's work folder for the parent during her  
review. The teacher provided positive feedback to the parent about the child's  
overall performance. But the parent did question a low mark on the child's lack  
SUBSTANTIVE CONGRUENCY  
of understanding problem solving. The parent inquired why a 4 year old child  
would be expected to do such advanced work. The teacher stated that it met  
REVELATION  
the public school board guidelines. The teacher left the conference to answer the  
telephone and to let another parent into the room. The teacher sat the parent

next to this parent that she was currently having a conference with. Then the teacher shared her time and attention between both parents for two individual conferences. The parent ended this conference by accommodating the teacher's request to write a comment about the evaluation and to sign the form.

#### Post-conference interview parent 8

The parent seemed a bit disturbed with how the conference unfolded.

When asked if the conference had proceeded as expected, she stated:

ANOMIE—MEANINGLESSNESS

“Not really. It was a little different.”

Even though the parent did not have a good idea about how conferences are generally run, she did appear to have wanted a little more quality than what she may have gotten. When asked if there were any surprises during the conference, the parent responded in the following way:

TYPICALITY

Yes. I expected more one on one...there was another parent there. I didn't get as thorough of an explanation...as I thought I should. Like a breakdown. It was more...me reading and just going over...I prefer to get...more verbal clarity with everything. I think it would be a good idea...like have the child be in the meeting with the parent at some point....

It seems that the parent, at the very least, expected a private parent-teacher conference. It also seems that the parent left the conference with unanswered questions. When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference, the parent stated the following:

Nah. Not at all...I would probably recommend or suggest...it definitely needs to be...a single family meeting...I wasn't comfortable with it because I didn't expect it...didn't feel that  
TECHNICAL EFFICIENCY  
either one of us got thorough individual attention...she left my meeting and started explaining things on the wall to her....

## Parent 9

### Pre-conference Interview

This parent has had a longstanding relationship with this preschool. She has had several parent teacher conferences with this teacher. When asked what the parent thought the teacher would say at the conference, she stated:

THEME

I don't know. I'm afraid. No, I think she'll say, hopefully, mostly positive things.

It appears that the parent is expecting the teacher to say good things about her child during the conference but has expressed the possibility for a different type of feedback. When asked what her objectives were for the conference, the parent responded in the following way:

... better insight on how my son's doing in school...if there's anything I need to work on with him at home....

THEME

This is what the parent said when asked how she would expect the conference to proceed:

She'll go over...what they've been working on, how [my child's] been doing, interacting with the other children, what's expected of him...projects they'll be doing in the future.

The parent seemed to have a general idea of how the teacher might facilitate the conference. The parent responded as follows when asked what she thought the outcome of the conference would be:

THEME

...it will be...positive...we'll share ideas...to help my son do better in school and things like that.

### Notes on the conference

The teacher welcomed the parent with a smile and invited her to sit at a table inside the room where the children were sleeping. The lights were out. The teacher handed the parent the child's work folder and evaluation form. They

ELABORATION

ELABORATION  
looked through the information together. The teacher had positive things to say  
ELABORATION  
about the child. The parent and teacher told stories about the child and shared  
laughter together. The parent asked questions and the teacher answered them.  
ELABORATION  
The teacher explained to the parent that the child needed improvement in  
reading. The parent told the teacher that her son reads the “I Spy” book with her  
at home. The teacher asked the parent to bring the book to school so she can  
review it. The parent also told the teacher that her son’s performance may be  
AUTHORSHIP  
affected by the parent’s joint-custody arrangement. The child moves back and  
forth during the week to live with either parent. The teacher thanked the parent  
for confirming that information. The teacher also told the parent that she  
appreciated the parent’s discipline of the child. In addition, the teacher thanked  
the parent for ideas provided to her for running the lemonade stand this summer,  
so the children could practice money identification. The parent also told the  
teacher that she appreciated how well she worked with her son. The parent  
signed the evaluation form and left.

#### Post-conference interview parent 9

The parent seemed satisfied with the way the conference went and the information she obtained. When asked if the conference had proceeded as expected the parent stated, “Yes.”

The parent had opportunity to get her questions answered by the teacher, and have open discussion about her child’s transient home life. When asked if any surprises occurred the parent stated, “No.”

It appears that the parent and teacher enjoyed a successful conference. The parent had previously been reticent about informing the teacher of her joint-

custody arrangement; but the parent was relieved when she formally told the teacher about the child's home life. The parent stated the following when asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference:

I'm glad I talked to her, but I talk to her pretty often. I've always felt comfortable talking to [the teacher]. She's easy to talk to. I know she's concerned about what's going on with the children.

#### Parent 10

##### Pre-conference Interview

The parent has had a longstanding relationship with this preschool. She has participated in many parent-teacher conferences. But this is her second one with this teacher. When asked what she thought the teacher would say at the conference, she stated the following:

...to me [the teacher], she talks a lot. She does. She talks a lot... she's going to point out what she's doing well...what she needs to work on. I really don't know...she's been letting me know throughout what's been going on. I don't know other than what she's already told me-what she's done and what we're trying to get her to do....

The parent seems to imply that because the teacher talks a lot, she is probably already well informed about her child's progress. When asked what her objectives are for the conference, the parent responded in the following way:

...know where she stands at this point as far as her learning ... development. Where she should be...as opposed to where she is or in comparison...what I at home can do or maybe my husband can do to...bring her farther....

This parent seems to have a general agenda for the conferences. This is what she had to say when asked how she thought the process of the conference would proceed:

...letting me know what she's evaluated on...where she's at...  
how she did, where she should be...she'll be able to provide  
samples of...her work and how it was rated....

THEME

The parent responded in the following way when asked what she thought  
the outcome of the conference would be:

...I think it's going to be a good one...sometimes it's hard for  
me to hear things I don't want to hear...but...I know it's being  
said for the right reasons. I can see it as being a good thing.  
The specifics- I'm not sure. But you know it will be useful.

### Notes on the conference

The teacher invited the parent into the room. The lights were off and the  
children were sleeping. First they took a tour of the classroom and viewed some  
of the child's class work displayed on the wall. They also looked at some weather  
charts and other types of graphs. Then the teacher offered the parent a seat at a  
table to review the child's evaluation and work folder. They looked through the  
paperwork together. But the teacher read the narrative part of the evaluation to  
the parent. The teacher talked the majority of the time. She had some positive  
things to say about the child. The parent stated that she was surprised by the  
teacher comments about work the child had difficulty mastering that was in the  
area of manual operations. The parent expressed concern about the information  
because she was unaware that the child was being exposed to it at such a young  
age. The parent mentioned that the child was only 4 years old; actually this day  
was her 4<sup>th</sup> birthday. The teacher also told the parent that the child was easily  
distracted, discouraged easily, and was losing skills that she had already  
learned. She also stated that the child was not comfortable, escaped to the potty  
to avoid doing her work, and was not transitioning well to school. The parent  
asked the teacher if the child was experiencing normal behavior as other children

did, and if the child was recently exposed to new class work that she is still in the process of grasping, rather than not understanding it over an extended period of time. The parent was perplexed and asked for clarification. The teacher did not, specifically, address the parent's concern. But the teacher did offer the parent extra copies of homework which the parent accepted, in order to help the child at home. The teacher asked the parent to write comments on the evaluation form and to sign it. The parent did so, thanked the teacher, and ended the conference.

#### Post-conference interview parent 10

The teacher told the parent adverse information about the child during the conference. The parent seemed to accept what she learned, but reserved some doubt until she could obtain clarification from the teacher. The teacher gave the parent an indirect response via additional homework for the child. The parent conceded her point. When asked if the conference had proceeded as expected, the parent stated the following: "Yeah, it did. It went well."

The parent's response to the outcome of the conference seemed contrary to what she had learned about her child during the conference. This is what the parent said when asked if she had received any surprises during the conference:

...some of the things that she's doing that I didn't realize she was doing here, but other than that not a total surprise... more academic...when she doesn't understand, the way she avoids trying to do her work...I told her...you didn't tell me I'd  
AUTHORSHIP  
be more upset...I want to know and she was receptive...an exact time period wasn't discussed but she did say more lately ...my husband picked her up a lot lately...he doesn't always share. He'll forget...In the morning I'm usually in and out... sometimes we'll have a conversation....

The parent's attitude about the outcome of the conference seems to offer the teacher latitude in assessing the child's behavior and academic performance. The parent apparently took no offense to the teacher's perspective about the child, gave the teacher the benefit of the doubt, and respected the teacher's judgment. When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conference, the parent stated:

No...I think a couple different things came in...I was picking her up all the time but now with his new work schedule [my husband] was trying to help out a bit...I know with her too she doesn't point it out the first time it happens. She waits to see if there's a pattern...I understand that about her.

REVELATION

#### Teacher 1

##### Pre-conference Interview

This teacher has over 20 years of experience in the area of early childhood education. She has participated in numerous parent-teacher conferences during these years. This teacher facilitated the parent-teacher conferences involving the previously noted participants: parents 2, 3, 5, 7 and 9. When asked what she thought the parent(s) would say at the conference she stated the following:

...I've already been talking to them about...how their children are doing...they know that their child is learning...it will be a good report. It probably won't be a long thing because I send papers home every week...they get to see what their child is doing. Anytime they have questions, they can ask.

The teacher had indicated that she communicates with the parent (s) frequently, which suggests that questions from parents will probably be minimal. When asked what her objectives were for the conference(s), the teacher had the following to say:

...to give the parents...written information on what we've been working on and...answer any questions that they may have.

The teacher seems clear on what her agenda is for the meeting and what she thinks the parents may need or want to know. This is what she had to say when asked how she expected the conference to proceed:

...they'll come in...I'll greet them...ask...how their day...is...sometimes they're saying something about themselves...I already talk to them anyway so it's not like whatever's...said is...a shocker to them or anything like that...I will show them the evaluation form...ask...if they have any questions...some may have a few, but a lot of them don't...they already know about where their children are....

The teacher seems confident that her ongoing conversations with parents will yield positive results during the conferences, because she keeps the parents well-informed about their children. When asked what she thought the outcome of the conferences might be, the teacher stated:

...it will be fair and clear. If they...had any concerns...they will have voiced them...They'll know what they can do to help their child....

### Notes on the conference

As previously indicated, this teacher had conferences with parents 2, 3, 5, 7, and 9. The notes on those individual conferences included observation of the teacher's behavior. The teacher's description of what she thought those conferences would be like is in keeping with the way the five parents described them. For example, the teacher welcomed them with smiles, offered seats to them, and shared the child's class work that included journals, artwork, and special projects. However, the teacher did deviate from usual behavior with parent 3 when after greetings she became emotional over a personal matter. The

parent showed the teacher compassion and allowed her time to regain her composure. The teacher apologized for crying. The parent took no offense. Then the parent facilitated the start of the parent-teacher conference by asking the teacher about her child's performance. The teacher and parent talked about the child's overall assessment. The teacher had warm, friendly, child-centered conversations with all the parents and had positive things to say about the children. The teacher was respectful, considerate, and sensitive to parent concerns. There were mutual verbal expressions of appreciation that the parent(s) and teacher made to each other. Even in situations where there was room for improvement, the parent(s) and teacher worked cooperatively sharing ideas on how to help the children excel. The teacher listened and responded to parent questions about their children's social, emotional, and academic progress, and expectations for the next school year. All the conferences seemed to exhibit a degree of transparency as the participants revealed either personal information about family dynamics, or passionate feelings about the discipline and education of their children. At the end of the conferences, the teacher reassured the parents that their children were all doing well.

#### Post-conference interview teacher 1

The teacher appeared to have favorable conferences. The parents seemed happy with what they learned, satisfied with the process, and emotionally bonded with the teacher. When the teacher was asked if the conferences proceeded as expected she stated, "Yes."

The teacher seems easy-going and comfortable in her interactions with parents, and the positive relationships they have established. When asked if she had encountered any surprises during the conferences she stated, "No."

The teacher exhibits a quiet, disciplined spirit, and seems to invite respect, cooperation, and appreciation from parents. When asked if anything had changed as a result of the conferences she stated, "No."

### Teacher 2

#### Pre-conference Interview

This teacher has worked in the area of preschool education for a few years. She has participated in several parent-teacher conferences. However, these are approximately her second conferences with the previously noted parents: 1, 4, 6, 8, and 10. When asked what she thought the parents would say at the conferences, the teacher stated the following:

...they're very pleased with the way their child's education has grown...Because I work...hard...I can keep going. If it's not working for that particular child and their family, then I need to regroup....

The teacher seems confident that she will hear positive feedback from parents during the conferences, but reserves the possibility that she might have to adjust her teaching curriculum in order to satisfy parent requests. This is what the teacher said when asked what her objectives were for the conferences:

...I want them to...tell me which way they want me to take their child...what...you're expecting your child to learn from this point on...I want them to know that their child can do... a lot of things their parents say they can't do...I say oh, yes they can because here it goes right here...over here in this different way...And...we did it like this...when...I'm...pleased I let... parents know....

The teacher has expressed a clear agenda for what she hopes to accomplish during the parent-teacher conference. This is what she had to say when asked how she would expect the process of the conference to proceed:

Very smoothly, done in 15 minutes...We...made up our own... thick packet of work...child has done for 4 or 5 months...papers... they did last month...and...this month...we...go through the book ...pick out...things...we were doing...my packet is 19 pages long ...it's a checklist...broken down to math, science, verbal communication...say if...mastered, beginning to master it...there isn't anything...on...evaluation [the children] haven't done

When the teacher was asked what she thought the outcome(s) of the conferences might be, she stated the following:

...it will be very productive as to where our next step will be... a guideline to let me know, 'What are you expecting next year?'

#### Notes on the conference

As previously indicated, this teacher had conferences with parents 1, 4, 6, 8, and 10. The notes on those individual conferences included observation of the teacher's behavior. The teacher's description of what she thought those conferences would be like is somewhat contrary to the way at least 3 of the 5 parents described them. For example, even though the teacher welcomed them with smiles, offered seats to them, and shared the child's class work that included journals, artwork, and special projects, the parents were confronted with information or experiences that they had not anticipated. Information about their child's questionable behavior to lack of knowledge about new lesson plans, or what amounted to shared conferences with other parents, various interruptions, a teacher with a verbose disposition, and an unlighted setting all contributed to various concerns that parents expressed. The teacher and parent(s) talked

about the child's overall assessment. The teacher had child-centered conversations with the parents and had positive things to say about all the children. But the teacher did seem to posture a bit toward the researcher who repeatedly asked the teacher to ignore her. The teacher did generally answer parent questions, but failed to some extent to alleviate all parent concerns, particularly with parents 8 and 10. These parents seemed most confused by some curriculum items to which their specific questions were unsatisfactorily addressed by the teacher. These two conferences ended with unresolved issues. Conflict existed between parent 6 and the teacher that was wholly unresolved. The teacher seemed unrelenting in her approach towards this parent. The parent seemed to take great offense. The conference ended with the parent being quite unhappy. With parent 4 the teacher seemed to have a breakthrough in communication by learning helpful personal information about the parent that could serve to help the teacher better develop the child's social, emotional, and academic growth. All of the conferences ended with persistent effort by the teacher to have parents make written comments on the evaluation form along with their signatures. All the parents accommodated the teacher's request, except parent 6 who provided only a signature.

#### Post-conference interview teacher 2

The teacher seemed to have some challenges during the conferences. The teacher talked the majority of the time and sometimes did not directly respond to specific questions asked by parents. But when asked if the conferences went as expected the teacher said, "Yes."

Even though some of the conferences seemed to meet with a degree of tension, the teacher did not expect that conflict with one parent would escalate. Following is what the teacher had to say when asked if any surprises arose during the conferences:

I knew the one...was going to be a little intense...I didn't think ... she would act drastic...wanting to pull her child out of the center...That conference was no different than the one we had in January...there remains...no progress...I know that people don't really take preschool as serious as they should... they still see it as a babysitting service...it's not...people don't see us as people...that have the right credentials to give them ...information...I didn't show her the boards because that would have threw her off to see that he's progressing. That's manual... I want her to focus on exactly what I'm saying...it even took him longer than what I had anticipated to get those success...I didn't want to be the one to cause a loss of clientele to the facility...I immediately went and spoke with [the director] about that...for the...fact she say...I'm going to take him out of here...taking him out of here is not going to take that situation away...then someone somewhere else may not be as on it because they may do it just because it's a job...the conferences went well....

Notwithstanding the intensity of at least one conference, the teacher was steadfast in her perspective that the conferences were successful. This position may have been due to the support of her assessments that the teacher received from the school's owner and administrator(s). But the teacher did feel that nothing had changed particularly in the relationship with the parent who threatened to withdraw her child from the school. When asked if the teacher felt that she was in command of the conferences and if they flowed and covered what she wanted she stated, "Yes, I did."

Unlike data from the first site, interview and observation data from Preschool 2 suggest a mix of respectful and adversarial relationships and

smooth-flowing interaction along with incongruent definitions of the situation.

These protocols included many more examples of relativity than those from Preschool 1. In some cases, these definitional difficulties were resolved through teacher explanations; in others, they devolved into anomie.

The report of findings at both Preschool site 1 and Preschool site 2 show many positive interactions between parents and teachers. Table 1 depicts the corresponding percentages that reflect the presence or absence of emergence

Table 1

*Instances of Emergence, Relativity and Anomie*

|                        | Preschool Site 1<br>Percentage |      | Preschool Site 2<br>Percentage |      |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|------|--------------------------------|------|
|                        | Percent                        | (N)* | Percent                        | (N)  |
| <b>Emergence</b>       |                                |      |                                |      |
| Theme                  | 38%                            | (24) | 30%                            | (27) |
| Elaboration            | 49%                            | (31) | 37%                            | (34) |
| Fit                    | 3%                             | (2)  | 5%                             | (4)  |
| Authorship             | 2%                             | (1)  | 9%                             | (8)  |
| Revelation             | 6%                             | (4)  | 3%                             | (3)  |
| Emergence Total        | 98%                            | (62) | 84%                            | (76) |
| <b>Relativity</b>      |                                |      |                                |      |
| Typicality             | 2%                             | (1)  | 3%                             | (3)  |
| Likelihood             | 0%                             | (0)  | 1%                             | (1)  |
| Causal texture         | 0%                             | (0)  | 0%                             | (0)  |
| Technical efficiency   | 0%                             | (0)  | 5%                             | (4)  |
| Moral requiredness     | 0%                             | (0)  | 2%                             | (2)  |
| Substantive congruency | 0%                             | (0)  | 3%                             | (3)  |
| Relativity Total       | 2%                             | (1)  | 14%                            | (13) |
| <b>Anomie</b>          |                                |      |                                |      |
| Meaninglessness        | 0%                             | (0)  | 1%                             | (1)  |
| Powerlessness          | 0%                             | (0)  | 1%                             | (1)  |
| Anomie Total           | 0%                             | (0)  | 2%                             | (2)  |
| <b>TOTAL</b>           | 100%                           | (63) | 100%                           | (91) |

\*The (N) equals number of occurrences.

and relativity in the respective categories (McHugh, 1968). The (N) equals number of occurrences from quotes appearing in this dissertation. As noted earlier, these quotes were selected as representative of the data through a process of peer debriefings. Emergence was present 98% of the time for Preschool site 1; Relativity 2%. As for Preschool site 2, Emergence was present 84% of the time; Relativity 14%. In addition, data from Preschool 2 included two instances of definitional breakdown, or anomie, which was present 2% of the time. These data suggest that the protocols from Preschool 1 were somewhat more orderly than those from Preschool 2.

### *Thematic Analysis*

Analysis of the data using McHugh's (1968) Emergence and Relativity categories focused on participant perspectives and behaviors before, during, and after parent-teacher conferences. However, inductive analysis of the data, which includes an interview of the school's director, was also done. Results revealed a pattern of themes that help to explain the dynamics of parent-teacher interactions at Preschool 1 and Preschool 2. The data overwhelmingly indicate that the following themes represent what participants feel can influence or impede effective parent-teacher relationships:

- Family and Faith
- Quality
- Parent-Teacher Relationship

## *Family and Faith*

This section offers participant perspective on what may encourage them to initiate, support, and sustain on-going parent-teacher relationships. Participants shared respective backgrounds and philosophies that helped to explain their choice of preschools. A significant issue that resonated with parents is the comfort and safety of the environment where they choose to leave their children. The sense of family and faith is an aspect of Preschool sites 1 and 2 that participants tout as a virtue in their preschool(s). The following examples show how participants collectively describe their feelings on this matter:

### Preschool site 1

[Director]...there's lots of freedom...a lot of love...Teachers go by first names...It's a family atmosphere...a three way partnership...parent, teacher and child...parents...teachers own the school, it's all ours together....

### Preschool site 2

[Director]...I'm a firm believer in God...you learn by example... children learn what they live...it...starts when they're young... First...you instill...a faith in God...teaching about self-esteem... character building...morals and values...education...a sense of who they are...how to be a good person...instilling the right things in them...it goes back to...I hate to steal from different-but it takes a village to raise a child. I mean how true can that be? I mean it's not just about what I believe and what I think... I've never asked...parents to do anything...I will not do...for my own child...You can't expect to get kids from point A to...B if you're not helping the parents....

The data suggest that participants share a common perspective about the familial/faith images of these preschools. Also indicative of the theme of family are the affective experiences that accompany these types of bonds. For example, emotional reactions, love, honesty and trust can further solidify parent-

teacher relationships. These are perhaps the most sensitive aspects of parent-teacher relationships. The presence or absence of warm feelings can critically impact how well parent-teacher partnerships are established and maintained. Expressions of feelings of this kind were frequently observed, as noted in data presented earlier.

### *Quality*

This theme represents the degree of effort made by participants or action believed necessary to impact the quality of parent-teacher relationships. For example, the data reveal what participants do to support the care and education of preschool children. Participants described what they did and had hoped others will do to foster good parent-teacher relationships, and shared some behavior to avoid that might hinder progress. The underlying focus rested on participant commitment. This theme also offers a perspective on the level of emphasis given by parents and teachers to the relevance of practical and professional experience in preschools. Also relevant are participant perspectives on what they believe their role to be in facilitating the education of children. The following quotes describe various actions needed, expected, and desired for children.

#### Preschool site 1

[Parent 5]...I would not have come here if [the teacher] was not credentialed...that alone... is not...sufficient. I...want to see... teacher had a rapport...genuine interest with this age...be... someone who's thoughtful...bright...the emotional well-being takes precedence....

[Parent 1] I'm as important as the teacher...my role is to guide my son...his learning...take the lead from the teacher...what they've done...to the next step....

### Preschool site 2

[Parent 3] I am not too concerned if anyone within that place has a 2...4-year...no degree...master's...that doesn't make her anymore valuable. Her love for children...care about children...appreciate their strong points, improve...weaknesses...ability to evaluate children...daily one on one experience...gives them...ability to be good instructors...I'm a big question asker...the more questions...I ask, the more answers...I'm going to get...a week's worth of work that comes home...I review it every Friday night...They got them for 8...or 7 hours a day, they're in charge...If you're not going to listen...pay the piper...like when you're with me on...days off school....

The data suggest that participants have a keen sense of what type of educational environment they want for their children. Parents seem to generally place more value on a teacher's practical experience but, to some extent, welcome academic knowledge and specifically teacher certification. Teachers, likewise, believe that for preschool children, practical experience should rule but be informed by academic accomplishments. The collective thinking is that a balance should exist that will envelop children in a holistic approach to education. Also of importance is the notion that parent-teacher roles are fluid. The parent prepares the child at home for preschool; then the teacher continues the nurture and care for the child as if at home, but also prepares the child with academic training; after school the parent not only retrieves a child perhaps more well exposed to learning various curricula, but also gets homework intended to encourage the parent to reinforce and expand the child's learning at home, and help facilitate progress.

### *Parent-Teacher Relationship*

This theme describes what participants feel does and does not invite them to fully engage in effective parent-teacher relationships. Participants want to be heard, observed, recognized, and understood so that their needs are appropriately met. The data show that empowerment can be achieved when requisite attention is given to participants or their concerns. An appropriate level of respect is also welcomed between parents and teachers. There are, likewise, important messages of consideration to convey when parents and teachers interact. If any of these efforts fail to satisfy the needs of participants, conflict can arise and stall progress in building strong parent-teacher alliances. The following data indicate what participants feel are important components to successful interaction between parents and teachers, and reveal what may interfere with establishment and maintenance of good parent-teacher partnerships:

#### Preschool site 1

[Parent 10]...showing that they're interested when you walk into the classroom with your child...Recognizing that you've showed up that morning....

[Parent 7]...what she tries to do is capitalize on the suggestions that we give and try to build them into the classroom....

[Teacher 2]...I'm pretty good at reading people and figuring out a way...I can talk to them...you're leaving your child with me—I got to talk to you...my focus is on them as well as the child... I am genuine, I ask questions. Did you have a good weekend? Oh, you cut your hair...I feel like if the parent doesn't feel comfortable with me, the child won't progress as far...he doesn't need an enemy in his child's teacher...so I lift up the good things....

## Preschool site 2

[Parent 3]...it's good for a teacher to feel comfortable talking to the parent...let a parent know if there's some issues...with the child without the parent getting defensive...able to hear things about...child without flipping out...teachers should be able to handle...constructive criticism or concerns...without being...defensive....

[Parent 8] No communication, no contact. If a child is lacking or failing in an area...Parents should be notified as soon as...awareness is there...If they're...resistant or reserved...That could be a problem...I need to be comfortable...discussing anything about my child...know...whatever's going on in the classroom is open to the public...Body language plays a part, just communication with the good mornings...welcoming me. If...quiet or shut down...children pick up...that's going to set the tone...all of that plays a role....

The data suggest that many variables and scenarios can potentially impact parent-teacher interactions. Elements of interaction such as empowerment, attentiveness, respect, and consideration are key aspects in parent-teacher communications, which, if done effectively, can ensure positive interactions between parents and teachers. There are also interactive processes that influence teamwork such as the sharing of information about the child, assuming responsibility, having a good attitude, and behaving in a consistent manner; these can all support home-school partnership efforts. The data also reveal that participants display cognitive meaning based on the way perceptions and expectations coincide.

Lastly, worthy of mention are four themes (i.e. empowerment, attitude, finances, consistency), which the data revealed about differences in perspectives held by participants at the respective preschool sites. The next chapter (Chapter

6) will explore why these differences in perspectives might exist in preschools. At Preschool site 1 empowerment and attitude were prevalent themes that resonated in their parent-teacher interactions.

### *Empowerment*

The feeling of empowerment may be evident when participants have voice in school policies, procedures and practices, or at least when it is shown that they are welcome and treated as a valued stakeholder. The following is a collective expression of what participants had to say:

[Parent 5]...there's lots of freedom...There's structure...I own this school. I feel comfortable. [My child] can walk throughout the... building and not be afraid...[The teacher]...sees that I'm included....

The teacher(s) pointed out how not only is effort made to empower parents and teachers, but students as well. She stated:

[Teacher 1]...it's exciting to see [the child] feel like whatever it is, that we're interested in it, we can build it into a really huge learning experience for everybody...we have that kind of power....

[Parent 4]...We as teachers in the public sector, outside of the private sector, have to play a game. It's always constantly on. We have to do it with parents; we have to do it with our colleagues.... we're constantly on a stage...it's not always about what we're teaching our kids...It's never about the true issue....

Parent 4 continued her comments about Preschool 1.

...it just doesn't feel like another brick in the wall...the freedom, the autonomy that the teachers are given here sets the tone....

### *Attitude*

The data from Preschool 1 indicate that parents want teachers to present themselves in a particular way in order to facilitate good parent-teacher interactions. This is what they had to say about respective attitudes:

[Parent 5]...You can see the way they talk to your child...give your child items, the way they interact with your kid is one of the biggest things. When they stop you and they actually talk to you...they're on their way out but they're willing to talk to you.

[Parent 6]...she's a very personable teacher...makes sure she knows what goes on in families...pays attention to...parents...kids ...knows what we do in our jobs...looks at the big picture of things.

The data also suggest that the following types of unfavorable teacher attitudes would discourage positive parent-teacher interactions. This is what parents think:

[Parent 8]...It would probably come out of the teacher's personality. Standoffish, disinterested, inaccessible....

Participants at Preschool 1 seem to enjoy the benefits of successful parent-teacher relationships. The sense of empowerment may influence the way parents and teachers interact with each other, their children and students and the way they approach preschool learning and their overall daily disposition.

At Preschool site 2, finances and consistency were prevalent themes that resonated in their parent-teacher interactions.

### *Finances*

This theme has to do with how finances impact participant decision-making on preschool choice and appropriate curricula for children. While some participants acknowledge that money for quality childcare and education is limited and often causes a financial burden, others believe the value received in terms of their child's safety and education is worth it. Participants at Preschool 2 stated the following:

[Director]...I hate to stereotype but I have to say it with the accuracy that it has happened...When I increased my prices

\$5...I had more problems with the parents who did not pay childcare or pay the co-pay—subsidized, as opposed to the parents that- paying out of pocket....

[Parent 4]...I have mentioned in the past if things were going to be tight for me and I was told not to worry about it...whether I have money or not, most of the time if I've addressed it with them, they've let me pay later...I am eligible for child care network... Money would certainly be subject if I wasn't getting a subsidy...I could never pay it myself with my income...sometimes I've had concerns about extra fieldtrips that they have. I think it's sort of hard for a child...if some parents have more money, other people don't and you have fieldtrips, and somebody can't go because their parent didn't have money...I've been able to scrape up the money most of the time. But I would hope that... they would take into consideration my thoughts about that....

[Parent 8] It's very important to me because I am a single parent ...but I'm not going to have her go somewhere because it's cheaper if they're not offering what I want her to have.

[Parent 6]...I was only late one time and I got charged for it, \$15 because I was 15 minutes late and they charge a dollar a minute ... I needed that \$15. I didn't want to give it up....

[Parent 10]...They're pretty much all the same across the board. They're expensive either way you look at it.

The data reveal financial dilemmas faced by participants charged with providing care and education for preschool children. For school directors, one of the challenges is to provide quality services while keeping prices affordable. Parents want the best for their children but have to consider financial constraints on the family. Teachers probably focus on curriculum resources.

### *Consistency*

This theme deals with participant behavior in terms of maintaining prescribed protocols. A pattern of good behavior fosters positive energy toward

parent-teacher relationships. The following statements from Preschool 2 represent what the participants generally had to say:

[Parent 4]...I think they're both very fair with the children. I think they both are consistent with the children...."

[Parent 9]...I do see on a regular basis that they are pretty consistent every day with how they interact with my son and I like how he develops on a weekly basis...that's one of the main reasons why he's still here.

Participants seem to respond to fair and consistent behavior that opens and even widens the door for regular and effective communication. This level of consistency conceivably promotes favorable parent-teacher interactions.

Although not a "theme," one clear instance of parent-teacher conflict occurred at Preschool 2. One parent and teacher commented about the parent's age in a way that suggested tension between them:

[Parent 6]...I think I'm the youngest mom. I think all the other moms are older. So they look at me different...I don't know if it's the stuff I wear. Like when it be hot I put on- it's this short (the parent put her hand to her leg to describe a mini-skirt) and they just look at me like- it's not that I'm dressing like that—It's just hot. Like when I came in yesterday [the teacher] looked at me like why you got that on...I just like laughed it off... Sometimes they think I'm a ghetto mom or something. I don't know...they just like take me as a joke. I guess it's just the way I am or whatever. I don't know...that's just the way I feel. Like if I'm late or something like that they look at me like (gasps) where is she at?...I'm trying. I'm trying. This is hard...It's good to have a relationship with your teacher. I would like to have a relationship with his teacher but I just don't like the negative outcomes of it....

When the parent was asked whose responsibility she thought it was to try and communicate with the teacher, she stated, "Mine. I think."

Teacher 2 made reference about the number of parent-teacher conflicts during conferences. "One. The young ones...."

In addition, Teacher 2 made the following statements during pre- and post-conference interviews about the challenges she has with the previously noted Parent 6. The teacher suggests that the parent's age contributes to their strained interactions.

...it's usually that I have it [frustration] happen to the younger mother's who feel they don't have shared responsibility. That I'm just trying to take over and it's not that at all...He been behind before I got here...because she wasn't doing anything. ...your child is not in an education realm and he's idle for a year... that mean if you didn't teach him for a whole year...you put him a year behind, actually. So now you wanna bring him back to school but the whole education realm has changed....

Teacher 2 expressed her own frustration with the questionable behavior sometimes exhibited by Parent 6 (which the parent previously commented on), and the seemingly lack of personal care that the parent presumably provides for her children. Following is what Teacher 2 said in regard to these two issues:

...when she comes in she's all open and [the director], she don't like that...you're coming to pick up so I will always ask her, 'Can you cover yourself up before you come in?'...she could have got herself a little, you know, but this is what's required when you come into this facility...She can't be all exposed out like that! She'll say, 'Well, I'm hot.' Okay, you're hot. But now you getting ready to walk up into a center with kids and you're hanging out and [the director] tell us to tell her you can't be walking up in here with no booty shorts...just like you can't be walking up in here all high or intoxicated. It's the same thing...if that's what you want, that's fine, but when you come to pick up your children all I'm saying is...be discreet...then she told me the other day 'Every time I come up in here I gotta be getting tortured.' Because every time you come in here, you hanging out so I'm going to tell you...her younger son. He got all his teeth pulled out yesterday...[this child] needs his bottom teeth pulled out too...it's just a lot of family issues that's going on- and it's trickling down....

The data indicate that both the parent and teacher acknowledge the influence of age as a potentially adverse contributor to their failed communications. Perhaps, the issue is more about maturity than age. Nevertheless, the parent seemed to experience hurt feelings, and the teacher seemed to express a level of frustration due to her inability to impress upon the parent the seriousness of the child's lagging educational progress. An impasse is clear between the parent and teacher, and anomie is present.

Both preschool sites have illuminated positive ways in which to view successful parent-teacher relationships, and an instance of conflict was revealed at Preschool 2. The differences in perspective between the preschools do not necessarily mean that the presence or absence of any particular theme or issue is problematic. But it might offer another lens through which to view a situation for the purpose of increasing effective parent-teacher communications. The next chapter will explore this possibility and discuss overall research results.

## CHAPTER SIX

### DISCUSSION

The last chapter outlined participants' pre- and post-conference views on their parent-teacher relationships and any changes in those perspectives based on what transpired during conferences. Chapter 5 also provided results of a thematic analysis that revealed other perspectives held by participants about building successful home-school partnerships. This chapter will be organized in two sections. First, the discussion will highlight emergence and relativity (McHugh, 1968) outcomes and relate findings back to the research questions (i.e. What are the pre-existing perceptions that mothers and teachers have of their relationship, and how do these definitions of the situation change in the course of interaction during parent-teacher conferences?; What is the nature of relationship between mutual understanding between parents and teachers and perceived quality and rated school quality?), literature review, and theoretical framework used to explore the phenomenon of parent-teacher interactions in preschools. Second, consideration of other factors possibly contributing to results will be explored. Subsequent to data analysis, it was evident that differences existed between the preschools. These differences will be discussed, along with their implications for the quality of parent-teacher interaction and of preschool education.

#### Pre-existing Definitions and Definitional Change

There were a total of 20 parent-teacher relationships (i.e.10 per preschool) under study. Evident in these relationships, mostly in a subtle way but in at least

one instance in a profound way, was professional dominance (Friedson, 1970). Parents at Preschool 1 were equal partners with teachers, but parents often accepted teacher recommendations. For example, Parent 4 grappled over teacher selection for her daughter's next school year, Parent 9 had concerns about the teacher's style of instruction, and Parent 10 disliked the teacher's "harried" behavior. But in each of these instances the parents deferred to Teacher 2's disposition(s). Yet teacher dominance was not an issue, since pre-conference interviews revealed parent feelings of freedom, inclusion, ownership, and voice. Therefore, it seems that parents did not expect teachers to dominate conferences, and given overwhelming levels of satisfaction post conferences, expectations were met. Parents stated that they felt a sense of empowerment because they were invited to participate in the school's administration and teacher classrooms, as it pertained to how and what their children would learn. The expectation of being an integral part of school programming was met, as parents had input on school policies, and were free to come and go inside classrooms at will; and children were allowed to have their requests for special interest subject matter (e.g. dinosaurs) incorporated into lesson plans. Both teachers and parents indicated that the other was valuable to the relationship and had an important role to play. The establishment of the school as a cooperative probably served this effort well.

Parents at Preschool 2 had different experiences, but generally had similar outcomes regarding teacher dominance in terms of fulfilled expectations. However, there were two distinct differences. Parent 6 had, in fact, expected

Teacher 2 to be dominant (given her pre-existing perception of their strained relationship that included what might be described as a teacher's condescending tone), which occurred. Parent 4 probably expected Teacher 2, as well, to exhibit dominance during the conference, given her pre-conference interview statements about Teacher 2's tendency to cross the lines of professionalism. For example, Parent 4 described Teacher 2's past criticism of her daughter's hair maintenance and other similar unsolicited comments, as lack of teacher professionalism and abuse of professional authority. But Parent 4 was surprised by the teacher's insight shown into her son's character during the conference; which resulted in the possible expectation of teacher dominance not having been met.

At Preschool site 1, teachers did exhibit universalism as they treated parents the same in terms of availability, feedback, and interactional style. Also pertaining to the nature of teacher roles was the presence of other pattern variables such as functional specificity, achievement, and affective neutrality (Friedson, 1970; Parsons, 1951), respectively. The teachers ensured that the educational services that they offered were in keeping with established protocols. They also informed parents of their professional status to reinforce the notion that parents made good preschool care and learning choices for their children. Teachers remained conscious of parent-teacher roles by not getting too personally involved with parents beyond the school walls. This general teacher behavior was acceptable to parents as exemplified by the overall positive parent-teacher interactions at Preschool 1.

However, the data also show another contributing factor, perhaps most important, to the positive parent-teacher interactions enjoyed at Preschool 1. Parent roles from the perspective of particularism, functional diffuseness, ascription and affectivity (Darling, 2000), respectively, characterized whether or not parent expectations were met. The data overwhelmingly indicate that parents were satisfied with the substance of their relationships. For example, even though parents may oftentimes assume a subordinate position to teachers and yield to their wills, teacher behaviors exhibited a more inclusive attitude than one of dominance. Unlike experiences at Preschool 2, parents at Preschool 1 did not encounter unsolicited criticism and condescending tones from any teacher. Parents were treated as valued partners. Parents were not only pleased with the special and individual attention their children received, but the teacher also gave parents undivided attention when needed. Parents also expressed how teachers showed understanding of their children's various dispositions that provided opportunity for holistic teaching, without prejudice. Lastly, parents were happy that teachers showed that they cared about them and their circumstances, by being friendly, attentive, loving (e.g. giving hugs), and consistently saying positive things about their children, and seeking to gain understanding about the entire family unit.

At Preschool site 2 teachers did, generally, exhibit universalism as they treated parents the same in terms of availability, feedback, and other interactional discourse. During conferences they did expect to engage in discussion with the teacher about their children's overall performance, and to

obtain recommendations for continued support of them at home. These expectations were fulfilled, with the exception of one parent-teacher relationship (i.e. Teacher 2/ Parent 6) that will be addressed shortly. Even though most parent-teacher interactions were favorable (e.g. all of Teacher 1's and most of Teacher 2's), the data did not indicate that empowerment was a factor important to parents. Parents gave much latitude to teacher expertise; but parents did acknowledge that they have an important role to play. When parents did have questions, teachers either answered them to the parent's satisfaction, the teacher's ability or willingness to appropriately address the issue, or not at all. In addition to dominance, other pattern variables related to teacher roles such as functional specificity, achievement, and affective neutrality (Friedson, 1970; Parsons, 1951) were at play. The teachers followed established protocols when providing services, they maintained a professional demeanor particularly in the way they dressed and approached their classroom agenda, and they to some extent (i.e. Teacher 2 more than Teacher 1) minimized personal relationships with parents. Parents basically responded to teacher dispositions well. But Parent 6, as previously suggested, had a contentious relationship with Teacher 2.

With regard to professional dominance, particularism, functional diffuseness, ascription, and affectivity regarding parent roles, the data indicate that Parent 6 did not get her expectations met. The parent clearly felt dominated by the teacher's position power and held a subservient role as indicated by her sense of powerlessness. She wanted her child to feel special but believed that

the teacher may have embarrassed her son in front of his peers, and also allowed him to be excluded from school field trips. Parent 6 also suggested that she was not offered special attention, perhaps due to her age and attire. Consequently, she did not get her needs for herself or her son, addressed in holistic fashion, possibly due to discrimination. In essence, Parent 6 did not feel as though Teacher 2 showed sensitivity or compassion toward her family. The majority of parents at Preschool 2 experienced just the opposite. They felt that their children were happy, and had their physical, emotional, creative, and developmental needs met without restriction. Parents also felt that their needs were, likewise, attended to. Parents were particularly partial to Teacher 1 who, as previously indicated, welcomed personal relationships. It was not uncommon for Teacher 1 to invite children to her home to watch movies, eat popcorn, play games, or get extra academic help. This and other acts of kindness, love, and educational support probably helped to foster good parent-teacher interactions.

Parents and teachers had pre-existing attitudes and expectations about their relationship prior to conferences. Most of these definitions did not change over the course of the conference. At Preschool 1, Parent 4 and Teacher 2 experienced positive change in their definitions of the situation. Parent 4, prior to the conference, debated the selection of a teacher for her daughter over the next school year. During the conference the teacher helped her to resolve that dilemma by adopting Teacher 2's recommendation. Teacher 2, prior to the conference, had anxiety over what she thought Parent 9's perspective was on the way she taught Parent 9's son. During the conference, the teacher learned

that her preconceived ideas about Parent 9 were wrong, and she was relieved that she could continue her existing teaching methods. As for Preschool 2, participants did not change their definition of the situation, except for one instance with Parent 8. Parent 8's definition of what was appropriate subject matter for her 4-year-old daughter was changed when she learned that the state guidelines mandated higher academic standards than she had imagined. However, the parent did state that as far as her pre-existing positive perception of the parent-teacher relationship nothing, in fact, had changed. Conversely, Parent 6 and Teacher 2 having had pre-existing negative perceptions of their relationship before the conference, likewise, in fact, remain unchanged.

APPENDIX K, Human Cycle of Interactive Process, offer a visual aid to understanding how parents and teachers might approach the process of interaction. We know that everybody has a background of life experiences that has informed their thinking about any given situation (Hurst, 2004). They take that meaning with them as they encounter new situations (e.g. parent-teacher conferences). The meaning they have could dictate the role they play during the conference. When the parent and teacher interact during the conference they play out the respective roles. These roles could be superficial or sincere for purposes of surviving the encounter. In reflection, participants may choose to either change their perspective or not. This means that even though their background now includes a new experience, the meaning placed on that experience has potential to impact the role played in future parent-teacher interactions, or it may simply remain unchanged. The critical stage is role-taking.

If parents and teachers are able to understand each other's role, successful interactions can occur (Darling, 2000). Otherwise, anomie is possible. Reflection on the situation does not move them along the same path (McHugh, 1968). Following are three examples of what happened at Preschool 2 as a result of parent-teacher conferences, in order to illustrate further the cycle of human interaction.

Parent 6 had expected to learn at the conference what her son had been learning in school, his strengths and weaknesses, and whether or not he had been behaving himself. During the pre-conference interview the parent had also indicated that she did not have a good relationship with Teacher 2. This fact was evident during the conference. The parent had played the role of an adversary throughout the conference. The parent and teacher had disputes over homework, parent notifications, and teacher-child interactions. When the parent reflected on the conference, her attitude toward the teacher had not changed, despite recognizing that she contributed to her child's slow academic growth. She was incapable or unwilling to fully understand what the teacher tried to explain about her son's circumstances. As such, meaning had not changed, anomie occurred, and the parent continued to harbor feelings of inadequacy and resentment toward the teacher. Because new meaning was absent, the parent and teacher continued to perpetuate a failed relationship.

Parent 8 suspected that she would learn about her daughter's academic status during the conference. During the pre-conference interview Parent 8 indicated that she had a good relationship with Teacher 2. During the conference

she played the role of an otherwise informed parent with an expectation to learn more about her child's performance in school. She played the role subordinate to the teacher's, presumably since the teacher was providing her with the assessment. When the teacher enlightened the parent about the high academic standards her daughter was subjected to, she understood. During the post-conference interview the parent reflected on the conference and changed her perspective about how she thought the school's curriculum was too advanced. But the parent had failed to understand the process of the conference. She could not comprehend that her expectation of a private conference with the teacher did not happen. She could not make sense of this situation. Anomie resulted.

Parent 10 expected an update on her daughter's overall school performance. She played the role of a fairly informed parent due to ongoing communication with Teacher 2. During the conference, unfavorable aspects of her child's assessment ranging from behavioral issues to diminished learning capacity surprised the parent. The parent seemingly went through a rigorous process to absorb all that she had learned. She had played the role subordinate to the teacher's role. Even though the parent questioned some of what the teacher had to say, she gave the teacher ample consideration based on her preconceived positive impression of their relationship. Upon reflection, the parent understood all of the teacher's comments, changed her perspective about the portion of the assessment she had previously questioned, and ended this

interaction with a good experience to add to her background. The conference facilitated meaning that has potential to enhance future parent-teacher interactions.

All but two of the conferences at Preschool 2 and all of the conferences at Preschool 1 served to confirm pre-existing ideas. Table 1 showed a detailed account of findings based on McHugh's (1968) "emergence and relativity" data analysis technique. Reported parent-teacher interactions at Preschool 1 generated 63 occurrences of various components used by McHugh to determine participant's definition of the situation. A total of 62 occurrences showed that emergence was present 98% of the time. This means that parents and teachers showed great success at effective communication. Relativity was present 2% of the time. The one occurrence accounting for this was a search for meaning by Parent 4 when expectation for a more substantive conference fell short. Ultimately, this redefining of the situation served to maintain an already positive relationship the parent had with the teacher.

As indicated in the previous examples of parent thought processes during interactions, anomie was present twice at Preschool 2, which accounts for 2% of the 91 total occurrences. Parent 8 experienced meaninglessness, as she could not make sense of the lack of privacy at the conference. Parent 6 experienced powerlessness possibly due to an inability to overcome the teacher's power and authority. The former is a situation that can easily be rectified in future conferences. The latter is more problematic and would require a radical redefining of the situation by both Parent 6 and Teacher 2 in order that a positive

parent-teacher relationship can emerge. However, emergence was present 84% of the time accounting for 76 of total occurrences at Preschool 2; relativity arose 14% with 13 occurrences. Overall, Table 1 showed that, at both preschools, orderly protocols prevailed and anomie was rare.

### *Similarities and Differences between Preschools*

Results pertaining to determination of sense-making revealed that parent-teacher interactions at both preschools basically ran smoothly. Most parents were satisfied with the outcome. Thematic analysis revealed that participants shared similar reasons for satisfaction at respective preschools. The influence of family and faith (creating a familiar, comfortable atmosphere), quality of engagement, and the nature of the parent-teacher relationship were all cited as important measures of good will.

Although in many ways the two preschools were more alike than different, some differences did emerge from the thematic analysis. While participants at both preschools indicated that an atmosphere of familial warmth sustained them in their home-school relationships, differences did exist. At Preschool site 1, parents indicated a desire for continuity between home and school. They wanted their children to feel safe, loved and nurtured with care as closely representative of home as possible. This would include a sense of freedom within the boundaries of gentle, yet supportive discipline.

At Preschool site 2 these same familial ties were welcome, but family values via faith resonated as well. The school's philosophy was predicated upon children's development of character, morals, and respect for education. Parents

at Preschool 1 generally required that teachers be credentialed. But parents at Preschool 2 were primarily concerned with whether or not their children were appropriately cared for, loved, and meeting educational benchmarks. Other differences pertained to types of contacts between parents and teachers. Parents at Preschool 1 seemed to enjoy concerted effort by teachers in their lives, whereas parents at Preschool 2, though regularly cordial, experienced more reserved teacher inquiries into their lives. The parent-teacher conversations were more of a generic nature. Also parent empowerment was inherent at Preschool 1, but at Preschool 2 parents deferred to teacher expertise, provided that teacher behavior was fair and consistent.

As previously indicated, Preschool 1 was established as a cooperative. Given this organizational structure, parents are equal partners. Parents have voice in school matters. They are empowered. Teachers are empowered. Children are empowered. Although parents at Preschool 2 generally reported good experiences in various aspects of school culture, conflict does sometimes exist. This is not to say that Preschool 1 is conflict free, but only that results revealed the occurrence of a significantly strained parent-teacher relationship between Parent 6 and Teacher 2. This tension centered on values as it pertained to parent and teacher behaviors. Parent 6 thought that the teacher may have unfairly judged her because of her youth, and the way she dressed. The teacher stated that her perspective about the parent was caused by what she thought was poor parenting by Parent 6, and what was essentially inappropriate attire for a mother who frequented a facility that espoused higher moral standards. The

parent, on the other hand, found the teacher's judgment harsh and unfounded. The parent, although she did not label certain problems as moral issues, seemed to value respect for her and her child as something that the teacher did not provide. This was evident when the parent expressed concern about embarrassment, exclusion, and dismissive tone from the teacher. As noted earlier, this parent was included in the study because the administrator believed she would benefit from participation. She may not be representative of other parents at this site.

What might be at play here is a consequence of socioeconomic status (SES) and the injection of power dynamics. APPENDIX J indicates that one parent at Preschool 2 does not hold a college degree—Parent 6. Even though most parents have college degrees, the large percentage of single parents and expressed concerns over finances suggest that, overall, SES at Preschool 2 was lower than at Preschool 1. Professional dominance is probably greater when there is an actual or perceived SES difference between teacher and parent, resulting in teachers' being more judgmental. This condition was not present at Preschool 1. But one parent at Preschool 1, (who mentioned but did not dwell on the issue of limited finances), was the beneficiary of grant money provided by the school to subsidize the cost of her child's tuition. On the other hand, one parent at Preschool 2, who holds a master's degree and receives state childcare subsidies to help pay her child's preschool expenses, still struggles in making other financial commitments.

A clear demographic difference between the preschools is race. The families served by Preschool 1 are mostly European American, whereas those served by Preschool 2 are mostly African American. Should I have expected that a STAR 1 school would be comprised predominantly of African Americans not of high SES and a STAR 4 school would be comprised of predominantly European Americans with high SES? If so, given the division of resources that might typically be available to such designated schools, it would be plausible that race and SES be among the factors contributing to research outcomes. The literature on child development suggests that some differences in styles of child rearing may exist between different SES and racial groups. For example, the literature suggests that black parents may be more likely to be authoritarian with their children and more focused on learning and educational outcomes, as opposed to white parents who might be more permissive and interested in the development of the “whole child” (Baumrind, 1972; Hallinan, 2001). Although some parents in this study support the differences reported in the literature, considerable diversity exists. For example, the attitudes of Parents 3, 4 and 9 at Preschool 2 range from authoritarian (Parent 3, who is white) to more permissive (Parent 9, who is black). Parent 4 (white) was more focused on learning outcomes. Social class may be the overriding factor, particularly due to the nature of conflict experienced at Preschool 2 between Parent 6 and Teacher 2 who both are African American.

It is curious that the parent-teacher relationships that required much redefining of the situation before conceptualization took place and yet still resulted in two instances of anomie, all involved Teacher 2 at Preschool 2. The

data also revealed that more within-site diversity existed than between-site diversity, particularly at Preschool 2. Teacher 1 at Preschool 2 seemed to take a more personable approach when dealing with parents and their children than Teacher 2, and was apparently more effective than Teacher 2. This difference is perhaps attributable to the fact that Teacher 2 was younger and less experienced than Teacher 1. Parent 3 described Teacher 1's disposition in the following way:

I will tell you that [Teacher 1] is very special...She is recovering breast cancer...and she's currently going through chemotherapy and although she looks a little tired, she's still the same ole [teacher]...So she gets special kudos from me, just the fact that she's...showing up for work everyday...This past weekend [Teacher 1] invited not only [my three children] over to her house with [two siblings] and [another child] to watch King Kong (All 6 children are students of Teacher 1).

Coincidentally, at Preschool 1 Teacher 1 was, likewise, faced with a shorter path to conceptualization with parents than Teacher 2. But generally, observed parent-teacher relationships at both sites were surprisingly better than expected.

Given the emotional bonds these mothers have with their children I had expected that micromanaging and elevated demands might be imposed upon teachers. But this was not the case, as most parent-teacher relationships were well established and very positive. Perhaps the nature of these relationships helped participants be as relaxed in their behaviors and candid in their responses as they were. Although the literature review and my experiences suggested that I would find much conflict in these interactions, in fact, I found very little. This finding may reflect the way the sample of parents was selected (by the staff), or, perhaps, these relationships are in fact not as problematic as my expectations led me to believe.

My initial interest was never in SES or race. However, these emerged as possible explanatory variables during data analysis. There is a possibility that the administrator at Preschool 2 and the teachers at Preschool 1 targeted parent participation based on cultural factors. For example, the administrator at Preschool 2 solicited Parent 6 in hopes that she would embrace her parental responsibilities and do a better job in support of her child's education. Teachers at Preschool 1 appear to have solicited parent participation based on *idiosyncratic credit* (Chemers, 1997). Chemers (1997) might argue that teachers at Preschool 1 have gained so much trust from parents that parents will agree to participation in projects even if teachers alone validated its importance. Several participants at Preschool 1 expressed willingness to do whatever necessary to support their child's teacher. Further, at a Keystone STARS 4 school, staff may be more concerned with "self presentation" and may select parents to interact with an outside researcher who are known to have a favorable view of their facility. At the lower-rated preschool, impression management may not be a priority. This difference may or may not reflect race- or SES-based values.

Lareau (2003) and others have shown that parenting practices differ by social class, regardless of race. Whereas middle-class parents typically practice "concerted cultivation," lower- and working-class parents work to facilitate the accomplishment of "natural growth." The results of this study do suggest that at least some parents in Preschool 1 see the school experience as important in shaping their child's social as well as academic skills. At Preschool 2, with so

many parents working (and single), the school may function simply as a childcare facility for some. Parent 2 made the following statement that seems to validate this possibility:

...I don't want to know everything unless- now, if I take off work- I always tell her before I leave, do not call me unless they are bleeding or unconscious. Because they would call me for every little thing...that defeats the whole purpose of me being off. I don't want to get the telephone calls...Because I don't care. I'm off....

However, many parents at Preschool 2 were concerned about instrumental goals like school readiness. The single parents were also concerned about having a consistent male figure in the lives of their children. Perhaps a unique aspect of both preschools was that male administrators participated in their early childhood programs. Parents at Preschool 2, in particular, were grateful to have a male role model who in some ways acted as a surrogate father for their children. Parent 2 expressed it this way:

I am so appreciative of that [male role model] because their father is not...I really like them having a male figure in their life, somebody who they can see this is what it is to be a man. This is how a responsible adult man behaves. Please don't use your father as your role model because he does not behave like a man should behave. This is who I want you to emulate. This is who I want you to look up to. This is how I want you to turn out...I just wish there were more of them [male role models].

Results suggest that differences found at respective preschools might reflect class or cultural differences more than differences in preschool quality. It appears that both schools enjoy a degree of success in the quality of parent-teacher interactions regardless of differences in state quality assessments (i.e. Keystone STARS ratings). The aspect of good parent-teacher interactions may

possibly be a significant factor influencing how well other programming unfolds. It is clear that both preschools, although they seem to travel somewhat different paths, ultimately have the same goals—to produce a well-rounded student in terms of social-emotional development, creative explorations, and academic successes.

Preschool 1 early in its curriculum instills empowerment in the children. One example of this is the latitude given to children to address adult staff by their first names. It has been my experience in African American families that children address adults with “sur” titles (e.g. Mr. & Mrs.) to show respect. Part of Preschool 2’s philosophy is to instill a foundation of spiritual awareness in the children. Also, Preschool 1 seems to approach learning in a more organic fashion; but Preschool 2 takes a more structured approach to learning. Maybe the philosophies adopted by the leadership in both schools are influenced by some of these cultural differences. These and perhaps other differences do not necessarily mean that one preschool is of better quality than the other. It seems that parents and teachers in this study would concur, as they cited overwhelming satisfaction. Even Parent 6 at Preschool 2, who had the most contentious and adversarial relationship with Teacher 2, apparently never left the school (according to the school’s director when I made participant payments months later) as she had many times threatened to do. Perhaps, post-interview, her redefining of the situation continued in a productive way. The data suggest that

both preschools have potential to offer positive ways to educate children toward long-term gain. Critical in this effort is the strength of the parent-teacher relationship.

What, then, do the Keystone STARS ratings mean? A review of the criteria (APPENDIX H) used to rate preschools shows an emphasis on credentials and training rather than on observed teacher effectiveness and parent satisfaction, and on outcomes relating to financial plans and staff benefits that might be difficult for less well-off schools to achieve. These criteria reflect the kind of “professionalism” that middle-class raters would tend to value but that may not reflect parent satisfaction based on cultural compatibility.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Summary

A wealth of information is available within these two groups of stakeholders (i.e., parents and teachers) that relates to the education of children. This study sought to gather data for addition to the literature that already exists, and to enhance understanding of what prevents effective parent-teacher collaboration.

The literature is clear that children benefit from positive parent-teacher alliances (Derman-Sparks, 1989; Diamond & Hopson, 1998; Johnson, 1981; Sandy & Boardman, 2000). A qualitative comparative case study methodological approach for understanding hindrances to parent-teacher collaboration was undertaken. Great care was taken to ensure that participants were given full opportunity to contribute their own specific experiences and perspectives on the subject matter. Accurate gathering of data, subsequent interpretation, and reporting of findings were attempted.

Symbolic interactionism offers a micro lens through which to view the interactions between individuals. Symbolic interactionism details the process through which meaning of the world is formed and changes as social interactions occur (Lyman, 1988). This sociological perspective can be used to gain some understanding of what happens in parent-teacher relationships. The sociological concept of defining the situation is useful to show how the process of role-taking and role-playing occurs during parent-teacher interactions (Darling, 2000).

The strength of relationships between parents and teachers can be influenced by *process* quality (e.g. teacher-student relations; activities) within preschools (Espinosa, 2002). It would be helpful to parent-teacher relationships for teachers to learn how to effectively engage parents, and for parents to receive such efforts as sincere gestures of good faith. Parental involvement programs will not succeed unless parents and teachers communicate (Dwyer & Hecht, 1992). We know from the literature that parents and teachers both have issues of efficacy that can impact the degree of power wielded (Katz & Bauch, 1999). As a consequence, successful parent-teacher partnerships can be stalled. However, when parents and teachers truly connect, the overall benefits for children in gaining academic and life skills greatly increase (WestEd, 2002)

The research questions used to probe the dynamics of parent-teacher interactions and possible educational gains for children are as follows:

- What are the pre-existing perceptions that mothers and teachers have of their relationship, and how do these *definitions of the situation* change in the course of interaction during parent-teacher conferences?
- What is the nature of relationship between mutual understanding between parents and teachers and rated school quality?

Because I hoped that this research project would reveal deep personal feelings of participants, a comparative case study method (Yin, 1994) was used. Data obtained from participants at two preschool sites were subjected to inductive analysis. There were a total of 26 female participants equally divided between

the two research sites. Two directors, 4 teachers, and 20 parents volunteered for face to face interviews with the researcher, and with the exception of school directors, submitted to observation of their parent-teacher conferences. Pre-conference interviews were done to learn parent and teacher dispositions before conferences took place, and what the interaction process might uncover about changing viewpoints. Post conference interviews disclosed parent and teacher levels of satisfaction with interactions.

As previously indicated, an interpretive approach was taken to understand exactly what participants were thinking during parent-teacher interactions (Mertens, 1998). Data were first analyzed using McHugh's (1968) concepts of emergence and relativity that helped to identify when, if, and to what degree, parents and teachers actually connected in their perceptions of the parent-teacher situation, or whether anomie occurred. Sharing the same definition of the situation suggests that parents and teachers were successful in taking the role of the other, represented by the behavior they exhibited, i.e. role-playing. Further analysis was done via a thematic process whereby data were sorted into like groups, coded, and examined over various iterations, in search of behaviors that gave rise to a vivid description of parent-teacher dynamics. Results show that 100% of Preschool site 1 parents and teachers have enjoyed consensus on definitions of various issues at high levels. The result at Preschool site 2 show that 98% of parents and teachers have enjoyed shared perspectives on different topics.

## *Conclusions*

Definitional divergence between parents and teachers is wider at Preschool 2 than at Preschool 1. But overall findings suggest that positive parent-teacher relationships resonate as an agenda important to school administrators, parents, and teachers at these venues. What is significant is that the similarities between preschool programs seem to reflect long held beliefs (as the review of literature suggests) that family values, spiritual guidance, empowerment, social-emotional development, and a well-founded academic program, may all contribute to the possibility that children can become mentally sound, well-educated, enterprising, and productive citizens. Perhaps, as the findings in this study suggest, a dialogue that restores common courtesies and dignity to interactions might help to solve staggering setbacks in education.

## *Recommendations*

It is clear from the literature and the findings in this study that parents and teachers must interact with each other when children are enrolled in preschool. Perhaps, making it easier for parents and teachers to come together can increase the possibility for children to succeed in school. An ombudsman, a neutral person available to help navigate parent-teacher relationships could make a difference diffusing problems or serve to prevent them at all.

Aside from intervention by an ombudsman parents and teachers might try to work cooperatively together on a regular basis to meet and discuss current issues, how to resolve them, and plan for better interactions in the future. This

could also include individual and combined parent and teacher trainings on varied subject matter that is important to either group. But for teachers in particular, cultural diversity training and training in Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee, 2002) could help to provide teachers with communication techniques that would encourage sensitivity to parent dispositions in order to promote better interactions. The literature review and data indicate that miscommunications can occur when people (i.e., parents and teachers) have difficulty in understanding each other because definitions are sometimes different. These differences may oftentimes be embedded early in life due to the culture or environment a person is raised in. Consequently, these ascribed roles may not change until interaction occurs, reflexivity happens, and new roles are adopted to effectively redefine a person's background in order to improve communications (APPENDIX K). In particular, training in diversity based on SES seems warranted. The one clear instance of conflict based on different definitions of the situation that occurred in this research seemed rooted in deeply held values related to lifestyle differences in different social classes.

Goleman, Boyatzis, and McKee (2002) contend that people more often than not, misconceive that with intelligence alone comes an ability to generate the goodwill of others and guide them along a path of success in any given domain. Research indicates that intelligence comes in different forms via separate parts of the brain, the most ignored of which is that part of the brain (i.e. *limbic system*) when nurtured and stimulated, is the catalyst for healthy emotional development of compassion in people. People at an early age begin to learn how

to not only express emotion, but are receptive of it in others and openly and willingly connect with various individuals for means of better communication. The ability to connect with people in a meaningful way is an on-going process of individual learning. In an effort for parents and school staff to get to know each other in a more personal, but general way, APPENDIX L, Student/Family Biographical Form, and APPENDIX M, Teacher/Principal Biographical Form, could be completed and exchanged during the first days of the school year. The hope is that some initial stereotypes might be dispelled, similar interests identified, and insecurities diminished for the purpose of inviting more frequent and better communications; all toward support of the presumed common goal, which is to successfully provide quality care and education to children. Lastly, also important to facilitating and maintaining effective home-school partnerships is opportunity for structured voice via APPENDIX N, Parent Opinion Form, and APPENDIX O, Teacher Opinion Form. Answers to questions outlined could serve school administrators in the conduct of overall academic programming and related services offered.

#### *Study Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research*

Preschools can run the gamut of services from a daycare to a learning center. Incorporation status, philosophies, personnel, clientele, and quality can vary as well. These differences and others were evident in this study. However, both schools had similarly small class sizes that placed limitations on the parent-teacher sample pool; which in either case did not include any men. Therefore, opportunity for greater diversity in results may have been lost.

Another limitation of the study is the “contamination” of the effect of different school quality ratings by the fact that, in these cases, the ratings seemed to be associated with race and SES differences. Further research might use samples that were homogeneous with respect to race and SES but varied in Keystone STARS ratings—or homogeneous in ratings but different in race and SES.

Year-end, rather than mid-year, parent-teacher conferences were the focus of this study. Perhaps, observation of mid-year conferences would have revealed a more in-depth view of parent-teacher interactions and afforded participants an extended period of time during the school year to redefine and implement changes to their parent-teacher relationships, as needed.

Further research is needed to address some of these issues:

- More in-depth exploration of the nature of relationship between mutual understanding between parents and teachers and perceived quality and rated school quality.
- Conducting parent-teacher interaction studies during mid-year conferences.
- Conducting parent-teacher interaction studies to include men.
- Controlling for quality ratings, race, and SES.
- Expansion of this study to include public school.

Despite its limitations, this study has raised important questions about ratings’ systems like Keystone STARS. These systems seem to be designed to address criteria based on the literature about “best practices” in the field of early

childhood education. This literature itself is based on a particular worldview or “definition of the situation,” namely that held by “experts” in the field. In fact this worldview may be very different from that of families who send their children to these facilities, particularly those families of lower SES or of different cultural backgrounds. “Quality” may not be able to be determined in a completely objective way, especially in its qualitative components.

Although further research is needed, this study has made some contributions to the literature. The first contribution is methodological. McHugh’s method for analyzing the development and maintenance of the definition of the situation had not been previously applied to parent-teacher interactions. This study suggests that the method can be fruitful for understanding how meaning develops in this situation. The more substantive contribution made by the study relates to the interactions among demographic variables, preschool type, and parent expectations and satisfaction. The research suggests a relationship between parents’ values and satisfaction with school processes that needs to be explored more fully in the future.

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## APPENDICES

## APPENDIX A

### Supplemental Questions for Pre-conference Interview

1. What do you think is more important, a teacher's academic training or practical experience?
2. How do you feel a teacher might use position power?
3. What do you think about having male leadership in an early childhood environment?
4. What is your normal mode of communication with the teacher?
5. Can you describe any overt behaviors that would tell you the child is benefiting from a good parent-teacher relationship?
6. Have you seen evidence of anything that surfaced in your conferences that has actually been implemented later on?
7. Have you made any specific requests of the parent/teacher in the past that were honored?
8. Do you feel the teacher values both you and your child's opinion?
9. Do you feel school should be an extension of home?

## APPENDIX B

### Observation Guide

Temperature:

Eye contact:

Room sound:

Room description:

Entrance/Exits:

Snacks:

Colors:

Room location:

Educational Material:

Seating:

Note taking:

Lighting:

Gestures:

Volume of voices:

Supplies:

Physical contact:

#### Sensitizing Concepts:

1. Communication/Interaction:
2. Competition/Cooperation:
3. Interest/Attentiveness:
4. Mutual Respect:
5. Genuineness:
6. Organization:

## APPENDIX C

### Post-conference Interview Questions with Supplement

1. Did the conference proceed as expected?
2. Did anything change as a result of the conference?

#### Supplemental Questions:

1. Any differences between the previous conference and this one?
2. Do you perceive the year-end conference as being equally important or more so over the mid-year one?
3. Do you have any ideas or suggestions to change or enhance the parent-teacher conference process?
4. What do you hope to see happen during your next conference?
5. What factors do you attribute to the rapport established with parents/teachers?
6. How often do you feel about opportunity to gain knowledge from a parent/teacher?

APPENDIX D

Receipt of Payment Form

Research Project: Parent and Teacher Interaction in Preschools

Researcher Name: Gail Marie Noel

Researcher University Affiliation: Indiana University of Pennsylvania

Date of Payment:

Participant Number:

Participant Name:

Location of Payment:

Type of Payment: Cash

Amount of Payment Received by Participant: \$25.00

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Payment Received From: Gail Marie Noel

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E

### McHugh's (1968) Components of the Definition of the Situation

**Emergence** (p. 25): Things or events occur in the chronological past, present, or future.

Theme (p. 69) – Actors assume that a pattern of meaning is to be discovered in the events they observe.

Elaboration (pp. 69-70) – The discovered theme is compounded and elaborated throughout a series of discrete events, accommodating to each event insofar as is necessary to maintain the theme.

Fit (p. 70) – The signal relation between an event and the assumed underlying theme is vague enough so that events which call the theme into question will be resolved as alternative, rather than refutory, in their implications for the underlying theme.

Authorship (p. 71) – A positive search for thematic homologues occurs throughout variations in the environment.

Revelation (p. 72) – When the actor observes an event, he assumes there is a referent, and the referent chosen is the one corresponding to formerly discovered homologous themes.

**Relativity** (p. 28): Is spatial and characterizes an event in its relationship to other events across the boundaries of space...indicates the absence of an ultimate reality.

Typicality (p. 72) – When a person observes others, he is interested in whether or not others' behavior is representative of some referent group, category, or behavior. He treats behavior as an instance of a class of behaviors.

Likelihood (p. 72) – Persons assess the probability of the behaviors they observe..

Causal texture (p. 73) – Persons point to phenomena as the causal agents of other phenomena, as the conditions under which an event occurs.

Technical efficiency (p. 73) – Persons assess the instrumental efficacy of behavior in terms of a stated goal.

Moral requiredness (p. 73) – Persons assert the ontological necessity of some behavior, a necessity they treat as independent of circumstances or the desires of themselves and others.

Substantive congruency (p. 74) – Persons assess other's behavior in terms of its empirical accuracy, independently of moral judgments.

**Anomie** (p. 63): – Emergence and relativity absent.

Powerlessness (p. 74) – The expectation that one's own behavior cannot determine the outcome he seeks.

Meaninglessness (p. 74) – The inability to interpret environmental events, to apply norms to observations.

Innovation (p. 75) – The expectation that socially unapproved behaviors are most efficacious in attaining desired outcomes.

McHugh, P. (1968 p. 25, p. 28, p.63, pp. 69-75). *Defining the situation: The organization of meaning in social interaction*. Indianapolis, IN: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.

APPENDIX F

Lunch Money Reminder Sticker



APPENDIX G  
Data Analysis Guide

| <u>Emergence Outlined:</u>   | <u>YES</u> | <u>NO</u> | <u>If yes.</u> |
|--|------------|-----------|----------------|
| Was a <b>Theme</b> established?<br>(Past influences expected outcome)                    |            |           | Describe:      |
| Did <b>Elaboration</b> exist?<br>(String of correct assumptions)                         |            |           | Examples:      |
| Is <b>Fit</b> evident?<br>(Within scope)   |            |           |                |
| Did <b>Authorship</b> occur?<br>(Agreement on meeting content)                           |            |           | Specify:       |
| Was there <b>Revelation</b> ?<br>(Process understood)                                    |            |           | Describe:      |
| <u>Relativity Outlined:</u>  |            |           |                |
| Did <b>Typicality</b> occur?<br>(Behaviors like others in past)                          |            |           | How:           |
| Was <b>Likelihood</b> evident?<br>(Usual behavior)                                       |            |           | Describe:      |
| Did <b>Causal texture</b> exist?<br>(Clear behavior re: cause & effect)                  |            |           | Specify:       |
| Was there a level of <b>Technical efficiency</b> ?<br>(Information useful towards goals) |            |           | Rate:          |
| Was <b>Moral requiredness</b> clear?<br>(Individual values considered)                   |            |           | How:           |
| Was there <b>Substantive congruency</b> ?<br>(Dispute over facts analyzed & resolved)    |            |           | Examples:      |
| <u>Anomie Outlined:</u>  |            |           |                |
| Was <b>Powerlessness</b> present?<br>(Without control)                                   |            |           | Describe:      |
| Did <b>Meaninglessness</b> exist?<br>(Lack of understanding)                             |            |           | Explain:       |
| Was there <b>Innovation</b> ?<br>(Indifference)  |            |           | How:           |

APPENDIX H

Keystone STARS Rating Criteria



**KEYSTONE STARS:  
CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT  
FOR LEARNING PROGRAMS**

**Center Performance Standards for FY 2007-2008**  
(Issued 8/7/2007)

**KEYSTONE STARS: CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT FOR LEARNING PROGRAMS  
Center Performance Standards for FY 2007-2008**

**Preamble**

**Keystone STARS: Reaching Higher for Quality Early Learning**

The Keystone STARS program was initiated in 2002 as a multifaceted approach to improving programs that serve young children in Pennsylvania. Research-based Performance Standards form the bedrock of this quality improvement program. The standards are guided by the principle that quality early learning is a foundation for children's success, and investment in the early care and education of Pennsylvania's children is an investment in the future. Therefore, the Keystone STARS Performance Standards reflect research-based indicators to improve outcomes for children. The standards are organized into four STAR levels that build upon each other in order to support continuous quality improvement. When a program meets the Performance Standards for a STAR level, they receive the mark of quality, a STAR designation. A Keystone STARS designation informs parents that the director and staff are committed to enhancing quality for the children and families in their program.

**Pennsylvania Early Learning Keys to Quality Vision and Mission**

**Vision:** All Pennsylvania families will have access to high quality care and education for their children, fostering successful futures in school and in life.

**Mission:** To create a comprehensive quality improvement system in which all early learning programs and practitioners are encouraged and supported to improve child outcomes. Improvements in programming are designed to increase the capacity to support children's learning and development; increase educational attainment among practitioners; enhance professional skills and competencies in support of children's learning and development.

**Acknowledgements**

The Pennsylvania Departments of Public Welfare and Education, Office of Child Development & Early Learning, would like to thank the diverse group of programs, practitioners, Regional Keys staff and partners, and early learning stakeholders from across the State who continue to share their vision and constructive ideas in crafting an indicator based quality improvement system to improve care and education for children in Pennsylvania. Their honest discussion of how the PA Early Learning Keys to Quality is working locally and their constructive feedback to proposed improvements continues to be invaluable to this process.

**KEYSTONE STARS: CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT FOR LEARNING PROGRAMS**  
**Center Performance Standards for FY 2007-2008**

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**How to Interpret the Performance Standards Grid**

Each STAR level builds on the previous level. Unless otherwise specified, each successive level includes all items in the previous level. Please note that there is important information housed in the footnotes throughout the document and in the STARS Worksheets. For copies of the STARS Worksheets, please contact your Regional Key.

**Start with STARS – Enrollment in the Keystone STARS program**

Facilities that do not meet the STAR 1 Performance Standards, yet wish to begin the process of continuous quality improvement may enroll in Keystone STARS as a Start with STARS participant. Start with STARS affords access to resources to assist facilities in working toward a STAR level in Keystone STARS.

To enroll as a Start with STARS participant, a facility must meet the following STARS Performance Standards:  
Facility holds and posts a current DPW Certificate of Compliance.  
Complete the Keystone STARS Site Environment Checklist.

**STAFF QUALIFICATIONS & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

| PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR CENTERS          | <p align="center"><b>STAR 1</b></p> <p align="center"><b>Performance Standards</b></p>      | <p align="center"><b>STAR 2</b></p> <p align="center"><b>Performance Standards</b></p>  | <p align="center"><b>STAR 3</b></p> <p align="center"><b>Performance Standards</b></p>  | <p align="center"><b>STAR 4</b></p> <p align="center"><b>Performance Standards, or NAEYC/NAA/NECPA Accreditation<sup>1</sup></b></p>   |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| <b>General</b>                             | Must maintain Regular Certificate of Compliance and/or meet program standards. <sup>2</sup> | Must meet all standards for STAR 1 and maintain Regular Certificate of Compliance.  | Must meet all standards for STAR 1 and 2 and maintain Regular Certificate of Compliance.  | Must meet all standards for STAR 1, 2, and 3 and maintain Regular Certificate of Compliance.   |
| <b>Director Qualifications<sup>3</sup></b> |   | 1. Complete the Keystone STARS Core Professional Development Series.<br>2. Attend child abuse mandated reporter professional development that reflects the most current laws in Pennsylvania.   | Level V or above on the Career Lattice. <sup>4</sup> (effective 7/1/2008)   | Level VI or above on the Career Lattice*. <sup>5</sup> (effective 7/1/2010)  |
| <b>Director Development<sup>6</sup></b>    |   | 1. Annual professional development plan is developed based on needs identified in the Professional Development Record (PDR). <sup>7</sup><br>2. Annually participate in 1 professional growth and development activity. <sup>5</sup><br>3. 15 annual clock hours of professional development based on the PDR, including the Director's section. <sup>6</sup> | 1. Annually participate in 2 professional growth and development activities. <sup>5</sup><br>2. 21 annual clock hours of professional development based on the PDR, including the Director's section. <sup>6</sup><br>3. Enrolled in <sup>8</sup> the PA Director's Credential. | 1. <b>Annually participate in 3 professional growth and development activities.<sup>5</sup></b><br>2. <b>27 annual clock hours of professional development based on the PDR, including the Director's section.<sup>6</sup></b> |

<sup>1</sup> In order to be designated a STAR 4, accredited sites also need to complete the bold/italicized Performance Standards.

<sup>2</sup> Facilities must maintain DPW Regulations and/or Head Start Performance Standards according to whichever apply to the site.

<sup>3</sup> Refer to the Career Lattice in the appendix.

<sup>4</sup> For the fiscal year ending 6/30/08, the previous standard (Associate's or Bachelor's degree in ECE or related field) continues to be in effect. To assist a facility in meeting STAR 3, this Director's Career Lattice Standard may be extended to 7/1/2010 if the director develops a Detailed Staff Qualifications Action Plan (SQAP). Please refer to your Regional Key for further information.

<sup>5</sup> Until this standard becomes effective on 7/1/2010, the previous standard (Bachelor's degree in ECE or related field) continues to be in effect.

<sup>6</sup> Refer to the STARS Worksheets for additional information on professional growth and development activities, as well as annual clock hours.

<sup>7</sup> Head Start sites may use a comparable tool in place of the Professional Development Record (PDR).

<sup>8</sup> Effective 7/1/2008, the requirement will change to "complete" rather than "enrolled in" the Director's Credential for STAR 3 designation.

**STAFF QUALIFICATIONS & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

| PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR CENTERS       | STAR 1<br>Performance Standards  | STAR 2<br>Performance Standards   | STAR 3<br>Performance Standards  | STAR 4<br>1. Performance Standards, or<br>2. NAEYC/NAA/NECPA Accreditation <sup>1</sup>  |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| <b>Staff Qualifications<sup>9</sup></b> | <p>Performance Standards</p> <p>1. New Staff Orientation<sup>10</sup> completed by all aides and new staff within 90 days of start of employment.</p> <p>2. 50% of Teachers/Group Supervisors (GS) at Level V or above on Career Lattice; 50% of Assistant Teachers/Assistant Group Supervisors (AGS) at Level II or above on Career Lattice; and 100% of Aides at Level I or above on Career Lattice.<sup>11</sup> (effective 7/1/08)</p> | <p>Performance Standards</p> <p>100% of Teachers/Group Supervisors (GS) at Level V or above on Career Lattice; 75% of Assistant Teachers/Assistant Group Supervisors (AGS) at Level III or above and 25% of Assistant Teachers/Assistant Group Supervisors (AGS) at Level IV or above on Career Lattice; and 25% of Aides at Level II or above on Career Lattice.<sup>12</sup> (effective 7/1/08)</p> | <p>Performance Standards</p> <p>100% of Teachers/Group Supervisors (GS) at Level V or above and 25% of Teachers/Group Supervisors (GS) at Level VI or above on Career Lattice<sup>13</sup>; 50% of Assistant Teachers/Assistant Group Supervisors (AGS) at Level IV or above and 25% of Assistant Teachers/Assistant Group Supervisors (AGS) at Level V or above on Career Lattice; and 50% of Aides at Level II or above on Career Lattice.<sup>14</sup> (effective 7/1/08)</p> | <p>1. Performance Standards, or<br/>2. NAEYC/NAA/NECPA Accreditation<sup>1</sup></p> <p>100% of Teachers/Group Supervisors (GS) at Level V or above and 25% of Teachers/Group Supervisors (GS) at Level VI or above on Career Lattice<sup>13</sup>; 50% of Assistant Teachers/Assistant Group Supervisors (AGS) at Level IV or above and 25% of Assistant Teachers/Assistant Group Supervisors (AGS) at Level V or above on Career Lattice; and 50% of Aides at Level II or above on Career Lattice.<sup>14</sup> (effective 7/1/08)</p> |

<sup>9</sup> Refer to the Career Lattice in the appendix. To assist a facility in meeting the STAR level, the Career Lattice Standard may be extended to 7/1/2010 as long as the staff member develops a Detailed Staff Qualifications Action Plan (SQAP). Please refer to your Regional Key for further information. Refer to the STARS Worksheets for School Age (SACC) for clarifications regarding the SACC requirements.

<sup>10</sup> New Staff Orientation can be provided using the OCDEL-approved Better Kid Care video series or 15 hours of documented topics outlined by *Caring for Our Children 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Section 1.023, p. 188*. If the Better Kid Care videos offered are not utilized, documentation is required of PQAS approved professional development (including course title, hours, and instructor name/signature) that has been cross-walked to the *Caring for Our Children* topic areas.

<sup>11</sup> For the fiscal year ending 6/30/08, the previous standard (33% of full time staff have enrolled in or completed a CDA/CCP, AA, or above in ECE or related field) continues to be in effect.

<sup>12</sup> For the fiscal year ending 6/30/08, the previous standard (50% of full time staff are enrolled in or completed a CDA/CCP, AA, or above in ECE or related field) continues to be in effect.

<sup>13</sup> Effective 7/1/2010, the STAR 4 requirement will be "50% of Teachers at Level VI or above on the Career Lattice."

<sup>14</sup> For the fiscal year ending 6/30/08, the previous standards (66% of full time staff are enrolled in or completed a CDA/CCP, AA, or above in ECE or related field. One half of the 66% have completed a CDA/CCP, AA, or above in ECE or related field) continue to be in effect.

**STAFF QUALIFICATIONS & PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

| PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR CENTERS     | STAR 1<br>Performance Standards   | STAR 2<br>Performance Standards   | STAR 3<br>Performance Standards   | STAR 4<br>Performance Standards, or NAEYC/NAA/NECPA Accreditation <sup>1</sup> |
|---------------------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Staff Development<sup>15</sup></b> | <p>1. Annual professional development plan is developed for each staff member based on needs identified in the Professional Development Record (PDR) and documented on the Professional Development plan in the PDR.</p> <p>2. 12 annual clock hours of professional development, based on PDR, taken by each staff member.<sup>16</sup></p> <p>3. One staff member from each classroom must have current pediatric first aid certification.</p> <p>4. All staff must have two hours of health and safety professional development annually.<sup>17</sup></p> <p>5. All staff must attend professional development annually on child observation, inclusive practices, and/or ERS.<sup>18</sup></p> | <p>1. For each Teacher/Assistant Teacher<sup>19</sup>, 18 annual clock hours of professional development based on PDR<sup>20</sup>; each Aide 12 total hours based on PDR.</p> <p>2. Annually, all staff involved in 1 professional growth and development activity.<sup>15</sup></p> <p>3. All staff must have current pediatric first aid certification.</p> <p>4. Teachers/Assistant Teachers<sup>19</sup> must attend professional development annually on curriculum, program or child assessment, and/or the age-appropriate Learning Standards.<sup>18</sup></p> | <p>1. Performance Standards, or NAEYC/NAA/NECPA Accreditation<sup>1</sup></p> <p>2. <b>1. For each Teacher/Assistant Teacher<sup>19</sup>, 24 annual clock hours of professional development based on PDR<sup>21</sup>; each Aide 15 clock hours based on PDR.</b></p> <p>3. <b>2. Annually, all staff involved in 2 professional growth and development activities.<sup>15</sup></b></p> |  |

<sup>15</sup> Refer to the STARS Worksheets for additional information on professional growth and development activities, as well as annual clock hours  
<sup>16</sup> Staff working less than 500 hours per year and volunteers/substitutes working more than 500 hours per year must take 6 annual clock hours.  
<sup>17</sup> Refer to the STARS Worksheets for courses that are acceptable.  
<sup>18</sup> Refer to the STARS Worksheets for more information on selecting appropriate professional development opportunity.  
<sup>19</sup> The terms "Teacher" and "Assistant Teacher" are equivalent to "Group Supervisor (GS)" and "Assistant Group Supervisor (AGS)," respectively.  
<sup>20</sup> Staff working less than 500 hours per year and volunteers/substitutes working more than 500 hours per year must take 9 annual clock hours.  
<sup>21</sup> Staff working less than 500 hours per year and volunteers/substitutes working more than 500 hours per year must take 12 annual clock hours.

**LEARNING PROGRAM**

| PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR CENTERS                       | <p><b>STAR 1</b><br/>Performance Standards</p>   | <p><b>STAR 2</b><br/>Performance Standards</p>  | <p><b>STAR 3</b><br/>Performance Standards</p>   | <p><b>STAR 4</b><br/>Performance Standards, or<br/>NAEYC/NAA/NECPA Accreditation</p>   |
|---|--|---|--|--|
| <p><b>Child Observation/ Curriculum/ Assessment</b></p> | <p>Site obtains and maintains copies of the appropriate Learning Standards for all age groups in the program</p> | <p>1. Observation of child is completed and shared with parents within 45 days<sup>22</sup> of program entry and once yearly after that.<br/>2. Learning Standards are used as a resource for staff in classroom planning and documentation of children's learning.</p>                     | <p>1. Observation of child is completed and shared with parents within 45 days of program entry. Observation of the child must be conducted a total of three times<sup>23</sup> during the year; once in the beginning, once in the middle, and once towards the end.<br/>2. Results from observations are used for curriculum, individual child planning, and referral to community resources.<br/>3. Implement a learning curriculum that incorporates the Learning Standards.</p> | <p>1. Assessment of the child is completed and shared with parents twice per year<sup>24</sup> utilizing appropriate observation techniques, and results are used for curriculum and individual child planning and referral to community resources.<br/>2. Program crosswalks curriculum and assessment tools to the Learning Standards.</p> |
| <p><b>Environment Rating</b></p>                        | <p>Complete the Learning Environment Checklist.</p>  | <p>1. ERS Self-assessment of every classroom/age group must be completed annually by the director or a staff member who has completed approved ERS professional development.<sup>25</sup><br/>2. A written Improvement Plan is developed to address any ERS subscale score below a 3.0.</p> | <p>1. The average facility score of all sampled classrooms/age groups assessed by a STARS ERS assessor must be 4.25.<br/>2. Each individual sampled classroom/age group must have an ERS score no less than 3.50.<br/>3. A written Improvement Plan is developed to address any ERS subscale score below a 3.50.</p>   | <p>1. The average facility score of all sampled classrooms/ age groups assessed by a STARS ERS assessor must be a 5.25.<br/>2. Each individual sampled classroom/age group must have an ERS score no less than 4.25.<br/>3. A written Improvement Plan is developed to address any ERS subscale score below a 4.25.</p>                      |

<sup>22</sup> For SACC only programs, the observation should be done within 90 days of program entry.  
<sup>23</sup> After the initial observation, SACC programs will need to conduct another observation once during the calendar year.  
<sup>24</sup> For SACC only programs, the assessment should be completed and shared with parents once per year.  
<sup>25</sup> Refer to the STARS Worksheets for more information.

**PARTNERSHIPS WITH FAMILY & COMMUNITY**

| PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR CENTERS                  | <br><b>STAR 1</b><br>Performance Standards   | <br><b>STAR 2</b><br>Performance Standards   | <br><b>STAR 3</b><br>Performance Standards   | <br><b>STAR 4</b><br>Performance Standards, or<br>2. NAEYC/NAA/NECPA Accreditation  |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Community Resources/<br/>Family Involvement</b> | 1. At enrollment, families are provided with information regarding public, social and community services. <sup>26</sup><br>2. A "Getting to Know You" meeting with parents is offered within 60 days of enrollment. | 1. At least once per year, written information on topics including health and human services, wellness, nutrition and fitness, and/or child development is given and explained to parents and staff.<br>2. If applicable to the child, provider requests from parents copies of child's IEP or IFSP, written plans, and/or special needs assessments completed by professionals to inform classroom practice.<br>3. Individual child information is shared in written form with parents on a daily basis for infants and toddlers, and there is a format and procedure for use on an as needed basis for other age groups.<br>4. Specific group or classroom information is shared with parents daily using a visual communication format.<br>5. One parent conference is offered per year to discuss the child's progress and behavioral, social and physical needs. | 1. A plan is written and implemented describing procedures to refer parents to appropriate social, mental health, educational, wellness, and medical services.<br>2. Coordinate at least one annual group activity to involve parents in meeting program learning goals. <sup>27</sup><br>3. At least two parent conferences are offered per year to discuss the child's progress and behavioral, social and physical needs. A written report of the child's progress is provided during at least one of these conferences. | 1. If applicable to the child, provider, in conjunction with parents and service providers from public social and community service organizations, implements activities appropriate to meet IEP or IFSP goals and/or special needs plans and objectives.<br>2. Program has policies that demonstrate engagement and partnership with parents in program planning and decision making. |

<sup>26</sup> Organizations include Early Intervention, Children and Youth Services, Mental Health and Mental Retardation Services, County Assistance Office (CAO), and Child Care Information Services (CCIS).

<sup>27</sup> Refer to the STARS Worksheets for suggested activities.

| PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR CENTERS  | <br><b>STAR 1</b><br><b>Performance Standards</b>  | <br><b>STAR 2</b><br><b>Performance Standards</b>  | <br><b>STAR 3</b><br><b>Performance Standards</b>  | <br><b>STAR 4</b><br><b>Performance Standards, or Accreditation</b> |
|--|---|---|---|--|
| <b>Transition</b><br>Program provides general information to parents regarding transitioning <sup>28</sup> children to another classroom or educational setting.   | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Program transfers child records, at the request of the parent, when the child transitions to another educational setting.</li> <li>2. Program creates, with input from parents, a list of community/ school stakeholders regarding child transition.</li> <li>3. Program includes age-appropriate activities for children to prepare for transition.</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Parents are offered a group meeting to provide information regarding a child's transition to another classroom or higher educational setting and to encourage parents and their children to connect to the school setting by visiting.</li> <li>2. Program sends letter of introduction to appropriate community/school stakeholders outlining goal to partner in child transitioning efforts from childcare to school setting.</li> <li>3. Program participates in community/school transition activities as available.</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Program offers parents an individual meeting to share specific information regarding the child's transition to another classroom or educational setting and to give parents written information about the child's developmental progress.</li> <li>2. Program develops and shares a written plan for child transition with parents and community/school stakeholders.</li> </ol>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Performance Standards, or Accreditation</li> </ol>   |
| <b>LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT</b>   |   |   |   |  |
| <b>Business Practices</b><br><ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. During the one year period prior to applying for initial STAR Designation, the facility holds a Regular DPW Certificate of Compliance.</li> <li>2. Program develops and distributes a Parent Handbook.</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Program creates a projected one-year operating budget, including a statement of income and expenditures.</li> <li>2. A financial record keeping system for revenue and expenses is in place.</li> <li>3. Organizational structure and job descriptions<sup>29</sup> are included in a personnel policy manual that is shared with staff.</li> </ol>             | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. A policy and procedure manual<sup>30</sup> is developed and available to the staff at all times.</li> <li>2. A financial system with quarterly comparisons of expenses to revenue is implemented.</li> <li>3. The program creates a mission statement</li> </ol>  | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Annual operational business plan to address organizational stability and to implement quarterly reconciliation.</li> <li>2. Program establishes a written code for professional conduct of staff.</li> <li>3. Annual independent financial review by a CPA is conducted.</li> <li>4. Risk management plan<sup>31</sup> is written and developed that identifies potential operational risks and specifies ways to reduce or eliminate risks.</li> </ol> |  |

<sup>28</sup> Refer to the STARS Worksheets for School Age Child Care for additional clarification on transitioning for SACC programs.

<sup>29</sup> An organizational chart should be accompanied by a written description of the duties and responsibilities of each staff position and the lines of authority and responsibility within the center.

<sup>30</sup> Manual includes personnel policies and written health policies covering topics found in *Caring for Our Children 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, a published Model Child Care Health Policy booklet (ECELS/NAEYC/AAP), and/or other appropriate Business Practices tools.

<sup>31</sup> Risk Management Plan is reviewed at least annually and updated as deemed necessary.

| PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR CENTERS      | STAR 1<br>Performance Standards  | STAR 2<br>Performance Standards   | STAR 3<br>Performance Standards   | STAR 4<br>Performance Standards, or<br>1. NAEYC/NAA/NECPA Accreditation  |
|--|--|---|---|--|
| <b>Continuous Quality Improvement</b>  | <p>1. Annual site-based professional development plan completed.</p> <p>2. Program uses documents for tracking illnesses and injuries, including plans of action to prevent further occurrences.</p>   | <p>1. Complete and provide an annual Facility Professional Development (FPD) Plan (or equivalent).</p> <p>2. System of site safety review and corresponding plan of action are instituted.</p>  | <p><b>Provider conducts annual evaluation/review of program using multiple sources<sup>32</sup> and develops an annual improvement plan.<sup>33</sup></b></p>   | <p><b>A Strategic Plan is aligned with the program's mission statement and put in place.</b></p>   |
| <b>Staff Communication and Support</b> | <p>1. Program provides documentation of a staff meeting held within the last six months.</p> <p>2. Director develops plan for sharing information about Keystone STARS, continuous quality improvement, and professional development with staff members.</p> | <p>1. Each staff person must participate in a staff meeting at least once per month. Staff meeting must include discussions of quality and its impact on the Learning Program.</p> <p>2. Director meets with each staff member using the plan developed in STAR 1. For new staff, this meeting is held within 90 days of start of employment.</p> | <p>1. Teachers and Assistant Teachers are provided paid curriculum and lesson planning/preparation time away from children monthly.</p> <p>2. Annually, at least two classroom observations<sup>34</sup> are conducted and feedback regarding job performance is provided to the staff member.</p> <p>3. Annual performance evaluation provided in written format to employee.<sup>35</sup></p> | <p>1. Teachers and Assistant Teachers are provided paid weekly curriculum and lesson planning/preparation time away from children.</p> <p>2. Staff members are offered a minimum of 15 minutes with no program responsibilities for each 4 hour period worked.</p> |
| <b>Employee Compensation</b>           | <p>1. List of all staff by positions, salary, and tenure.</p> <p>2. At least 2 employee benefits given to staff.<sup>36</sup></p>  | <p>1. A salary scale based on level of education/training and years of ECE experience is documented.</p> <p>2. At least 3 employee benefits given to staff<sup>36</sup> and explained in the Policy and Procedure Manual.</p>   |   | <p>At least 4 employee benefits given to staff<sup>36</sup> and explained in the Policy and Procedure Manual.</p>  |

<sup>32</sup> Sources of information include surveys of parents, staff and/or school-aged children, ERS, LIS, audits, FPD plan, etc.

<sup>33</sup> Effective 7/1/2008, this standard will be modified to state "Provider develops a Continuous Quality Improvement Plan using multiple sources."

<sup>34</sup> At least one observation is completed by the staff member's direct supervisor.

<sup>35</sup> Performance evaluation is based on direct supervisor's classroom observations, criteria established in advance (i.e. job description), and an employee self-assessment.

<sup>36</sup> Refer to the STARS Worksheets for a list of acceptable employee benefits and for an explanation of prorating for part-time employees.



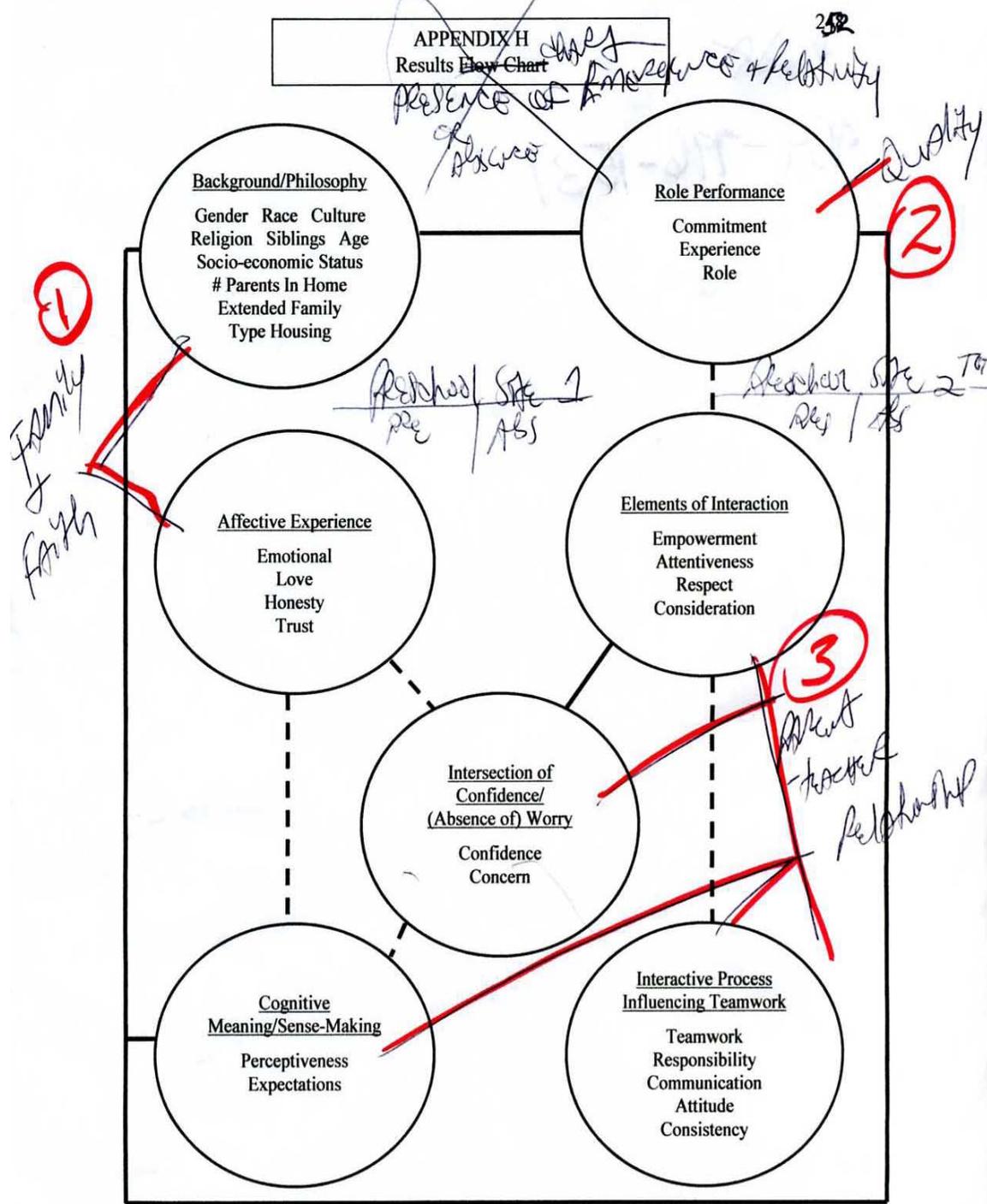


Audrey Team ~~STEP 2~~

ITERATIONS

- ||| ○ PERCEPTIVENESS 21
- ||| ○ ROLE 21
- ||| ○ LOVE 21
- ||| ○ EMOTIONAL 20
- ||| ○ RESPECT 20
- ||| ~~○ RESPECT~~
- ||| ○ EXPECTATIONS 20
- ||| ○ TRUST 21
- ||| ○ PHILOSOPHY 21
- ||| ○ EXPERIENCE 21
- ||| ○ COMMUNICATION 21
- ||| ○ TEAMWORK 21
- ||| ○ COMPETENCE 21
- ||| ○ COMMITMENT 21
- ||| ○ FINANCES 21
- ||| ○ CONSIDERATION 21
- ||| ○ HONESTY 21
- ||| ○ ATTENTIVENESS 21
- ||| ○ RESPONSIBILITY 21
- ||| ○ BACKGROUND 21
- ||| ○ CONNECTION 21
- ||| ○ CONSISTENCY 21
- ||| ○ AGE 21

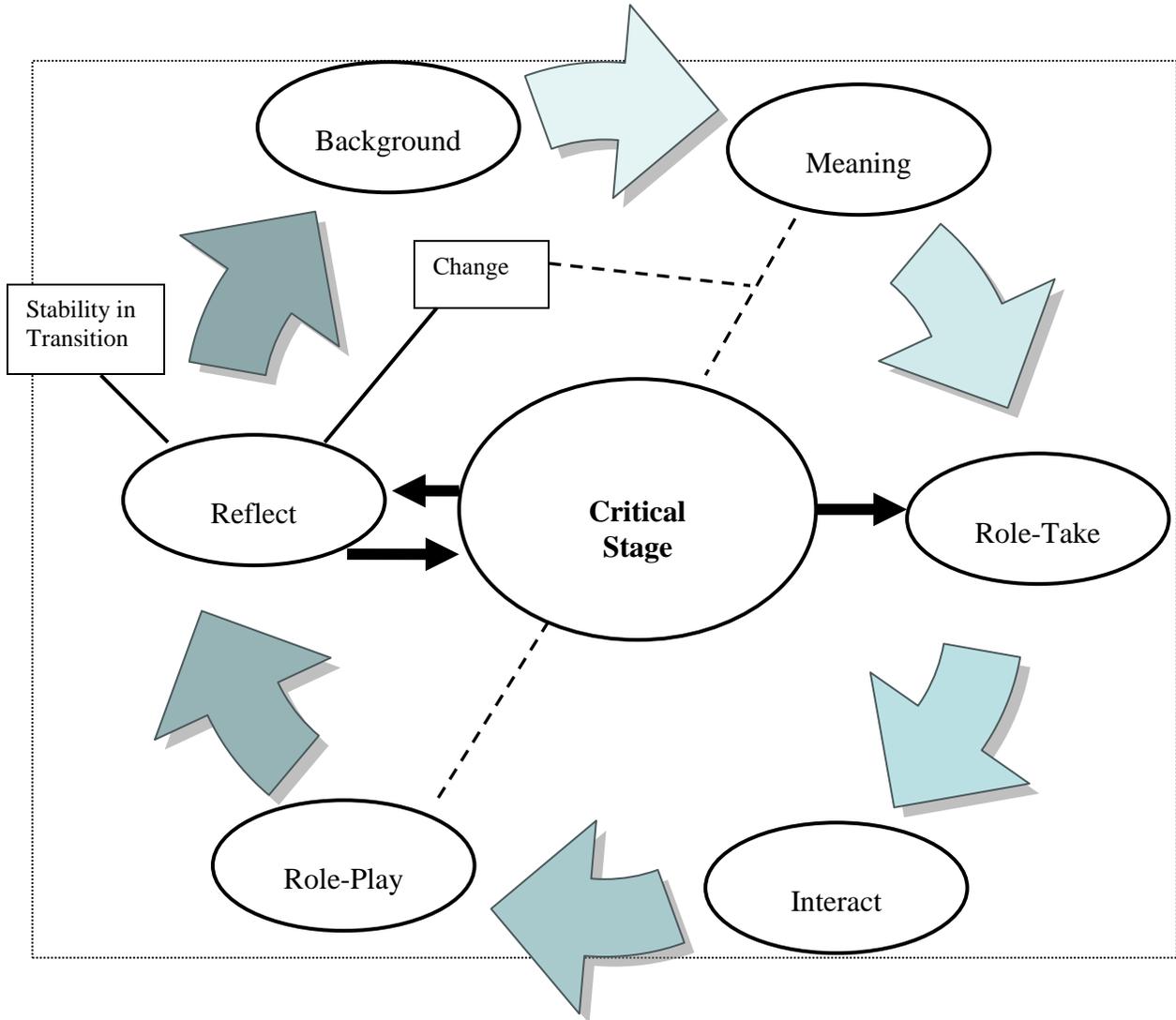
APPENDIX H  
Results Flow Chart





APPENDIX K

Human Cycle of Interactive Process



APPENDIX L

Student/Family Biographical Form

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Nickname: \_\_\_\_\_

Birth date: \_\_\_\_\_ Grade enrolled: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent(s)/Guardian Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Best Day/Time to Call: \_\_\_\_\_

Prefer progress reports? Check one: Yes\_\_\_ No\_\_\_ How often? \_\_\_\_\_

Type: Circle choices: Telephone, letter, in-person, E-mail \_\_\_\_\_

Special Talents: \_\_\_\_\_ Volunteer Availability: \_\_\_\_\_

Associations/Memberships: \_\_\_\_\_

Student Background:

Personality/Disposition: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite Color: \_\_\_\_\_ Pets: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite Food: \_\_\_\_\_ Eating Habits: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite Activity: \_\_\_\_\_ Best Talent: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite Book: \_\_\_\_\_ Favorite Song: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite Family Outing: \_\_\_\_\_

What Makes Student Happy: \_\_\_\_\_

What Makes Student Sad: \_\_\_\_\_

Best Discipline Strategy: \_\_\_\_\_

Associations/Memberships: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX M

Teacher/Principal Biographical Form

Teacher/Principal Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Room Location: \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number: \_\_\_\_\_ Best Day/Time to Call \_\_\_\_\_

E-mail Address: \_\_\_\_\_

College Degrees: \_\_\_\_\_

Teacher Certifications: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of Years in Profession: \_\_\_\_\_ Number of Years in Current Job: \_\_\_\_\_

Associations/Memberships: \_\_\_\_\_

Day and Month of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Personality/Disposition: \_\_\_\_\_

What Makes Teacher Happy: \_\_\_\_\_

What Makes Teacher Sad: \_\_\_\_\_

Discipline Procedure: \_\_\_\_\_

Favorite Color: \_\_\_\_\_ Favorite Activity: \_\_\_\_\_

Pets: \_\_\_\_\_ Favorite Family Outing: \_\_\_\_\_

Best Talent: \_\_\_\_\_ Volunteer Duties: \_\_\_\_\_

Extra Curricular Activities: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX N

### Parent Opinion Form

1. Did rapport exist between you and the teacher? Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_
2. What supported/negated the outcome in the proceeding question? (Circle)
  - Conferences/meetings
  - Parent/teacher Attitude
  - Student disposition
  - Volunteerism
  - Other (Explain)
3. What impressed you about the teacher? (Circle)
  - Relationship with child
  - Openness
  - Compassion
  - Availability
  - Teaching skills
  - Other (Explain)
4. What can the teacher improve upon?
  - Feedback
  - Listening skills
  - Friendliness
  - Tolerance
  - Knowledge
  - Other (Explain)
5. What can administrators do to support the parent-teacher relationship?

## APPENDIX O

### Teacher Opinion Form

1. Did rapport exist between you and parents? Yes\_\_\_\_\_ No\_\_\_\_\_
2. What supported/negated the outcome in the proceeding question? (Circle)
  - Conferences/meetings
  - Parent/teacher Attitude
  - Student disposition
  - Volunteerism
  - Other (Explain)
3. What impressed you about parents? (Circle)
  - Relationship with child
  - Openness
  - Compassion
  - Availability
  - Classroom support
  - Other (Explain)
4. What can parents improve upon?
  - Feedback
  - Listening skills
  - Friendliness
  - Tolerance
  - Participation
  - Other (Explain)
5. What can administrators do to support the parent-teacher relationship?