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PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' FIGURED WORLDS OF THE
PARENT-TEACHER CONFERENCE: COLLABORATING
WITH, INSTRUCTING, AND IMPRESSING PARENTS

presented by

Mary M. Tomczyk

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Patricia G. Edwards
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CONFERENCE: COLLABORATING WITH, INSTRUCTING, AND IMPRESSING
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By

Mary M. Tomczyk

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ABSTRACT

PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS' FIGURED WORLDS OF THE PARENT-TEACHER
CONFERENCE: COLLABORATING WITH, INSTRUCTING, AND IMPRESSING
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The creation of productive home-school relationships has been recognized as
important in children's school success; however, in many teacher education programs,
parent-teacher conferences may be the primary – and sometimes only – interface
prospective teachers have with parents prior to graduation. This study considers how a
group of 22 prospective teachers from a highly regarded teacher preparation program
conceptualized their experiences leading parent-teacher conferences. Participants
participated in online surveys about their experiences, including questions about goals for
parent-teacher conferences, parent and teacher roles, artifacts used during conferences,
and the impact of these events on instructional practices. Eight participants were selected
for in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of how they perceived and
interpreted their interactions with parents during conferences. Data were analyzed using
thematic and discourse analysis and interpreted through Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner,
and Cain's (1998) construct of figured worlds and Goffman's (1959) construct of
impression management. My findings revealed that prospective teachers fell into one of
three distinct figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference, each of which entailed
particular kinds of impression management: a collaboration-centered figured world in
which prospective teachers sought to collaborate with parents, an instruction-centered

figured world in which prospective teachers sought to instruct parents, or an impression-centered figured world in which prospective teachers sought to impress parents. These distinctions offer a useful analytic for teacher educators, who can then better support prospective teachers in each group, and suggest additional research to explore how these figured worlds (and others) and the attendant impression management complicate existing understandings of the internship as a site of teacher preparation.

To my husband Fred –
whose patience and unwavering support have been considerable, and who has never
faltered in his belief in my dreams or in my ability to achieve them.

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I would also like to thank my committee members, Patricia Edwards, Suzanne Wilson, Mary Juzwik, Angela Calabrese-Barton, and Peter Youngs. Each has played an important role in guiding my research process. Pat, my advisor and friend over these past four years, has been a wise, thoughtful, and kind mentor. I have learned much from our experiences working together with teachers and parents, and our conversations about how teachers create connections with parents that I will carry with me into my new position. Suzanne has played an important role in shaping my thinking as a researcher by teaching me how to craft a carefully thought out study and to constantly challenge my own assumptions. Mary's class was one of the highlights of my time at MSU, and I have enjoyed our conversations and her thoughtful answers to my questions about discourse analysis. Angie's help was invaluable in helping me think through my theoretical framework, as were her insights on my data chapter. Additionally, her work has been seminal in how I think about home-school relationships. I have benefited greatly from Peter's thoughtful assistance with my practicum and in creating my survey and interview protocol, and I have appreciated his ongoing support throughout my time at MSU.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, new federal policies have been created to ensure that schools incorporate programs and practices to involve families in the education of their children in ways that support student school success (Epstein & Sanders, 2006). Additionally, family and community involvement goals have been set by federal legislation such as Goals 2000: Educate America Act (1994) and the No Child Left Behind Act (2002). Yet while these policies and mandates are placing increased emphasis on building strong home/school partnerships, it is up to individual teachers to craft these relationships at the classroom level. Teachers must draw upon their own understandings of how to facilitate relationships with parents in ways that benefit the students they teach.

For aspiring teachers, teacher education programs represent a logical place to begin constructing meanings and practices necessary to facilitate productive working relationships with parents (defined here as a child's primary caretakers). However, schools of education, pressured by a plethora of certification requirements (for both teacher education programs and the prospective teachers they serve) have had to focus attention in a number of other areas. Developing strong home/school relationships has more often been on the fringe of teacher education coursework – a chapter in a text, a conversation in class - rather than woven throughout (Edwards, 2004; Epstein, 1995). And for those teacher educators who do try to address the topic, there is little consensus on how best to help prospective teachers develop the understandings and dispositions necessary to build collaborative relationships and to work effectively with parents (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Graue & Brown, 2003). Underlying this problem is the fact that little is known about what these understandings

and dispositions include (Graue & Brown, 2003). Much more research on how to help prospective teachers to learn to facilitate productive home-school relationships is needed in order for teacher education programs to be able to address this topic in meaningful ways.

Currently, in many teacher education programs, parent-teacher conferences are the primary – and sometimes only – interface prospective teachers have with parents prior to earning their degree (Brown & Brown, 1992; Chavkin & Williams, 1988). For this reason, parent-teacher conferences may well be the primary space in which the issue of creating productive home-school partnerships is addressed. Thus, parent-teacher conferences become a critical site for teacher candidates to better understand how to create these collaborative relationships with parents. However, little is known about how prospective teachers conceptualize parent-teacher conference experiences.

The purpose of this study is to begin to explore this critical area in teacher education programs by considering the experiences of a group of prospective teachers who recently led parent-teacher conferences. This study was designed to explore the goals these prospective teachers had for these events, how they perceived and interpreted their interactions with parents, and how these experiences shape their thinking about collaborating with parents in their future classrooms.

This chapter describes the relevant literature pertaining to the importance of teacher-parent partnerships for children's school success, how prospective teachers are prepared to work with parents, and the importance of parent-teacher conferences as a site for learning to construct these relationships. It also describes the theoretical framework, incorporating Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) construct of figured

worlds and Goffman's (1959) construct of impression management that has informed my data analysis. Chapter 2 of this dissertation describes the methodology for this study in detail, including information about the site and participants, data sources, data collection and data analysis. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 offer findings, generated from data analysis, that present ways in which prospective teachers conceptualize their experiences leading parent-teacher conferences and how these events impact their understandings about creating productive relationships with parents. Chapter 6 provides an in-depth discussion of these findings, including limitations and possible directions for future research.

Review of the Literature

Effects of Parent Involvement on Children's School Success. As early as the 1920s, John Dewey recognized the importance of parent involvement in the education of children: "the family is not an isolated whole, but enters intimately into relationships with business groups, with schools, with all the agencies of culture" (Dewey, 2007, para. 4). Much of the recent research on parent involvement reaffirms Dewey's assertion: parents and schools are intimately tied together around children's school success. Yet, while teachers recognize the importance of having parents and families involved in the education of their children, they still struggle with how to create rich partnerships between home and school.

What constitutes parent involvement with schools? According to the U.S. Department of Education (2001), parent involvement includes the participation of parents in ongoing, two-way, meaningful communications that involve student's academic success. Yet, parent involvement is a much broader and deeper construct than this definition suggests. There are a host of ways parents participate to further the education

and growth of their children. These can include sharing resources from the home to support children's education, sharing knowledge of children with teachers, sharing expertise with a class, supporting children with schoolwork, helping out in the classroom, etc. Many of these interactions go far beyond simply communicating about academic learning. This participation can take place in the home, in the classroom, at school, and in the community. One well-known model delineates six categories of parent involvement: communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 1995).

One of the reasons parent involvement can be a powerful force for supporting children's learning has to do with the funds of knowledge parents bring to the experience. Funds of knowledge include important events, meaningful relationships, skills, talents, and experiences parents and children share prior to school entry and outside of the classroom that inform children's understandings of the world (Moll, 1994). When parents share these funds of knowledge with teachers, ties are made between home and school that not only can enrich the classroom environment, but also bridge cultural gaps between home and school, as well (Gonzales, Moll, & Amanti, 2005).

Calabrese-Barton, Drake, Perez, St. Louis, and George (2004) have extended this concept by positioning parents and teachers as partners in the education of children. Each brings three types of capital to their interactions: human, social and material. How parents and teachers activate this capital within a particular space – parent-teacher conferences, a chance meeting in the hallway, etc. - determines the richness of the interaction. In situations where parents are full partners with schools, parents are central – rather than peripheral –figures in the education of their children.

Research highlights the importance of parent involvement. Involving parents in the educational process has been found to positively impact children's academic performance (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Comer, 1988, 1991, 2005; Fan & Chen, 2001; Goodlad, 1984; Henderson, 1988; Hoover, Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Lareau, 1987, 2000) and has been associated with qualities conducive to success in school, including improved self-esteem, behavior, and motivation. Additional benefits include higher educational aspirations and a strong work orientation (Eccles & Harold, 1993; Haynes et al., 1989; Henderson, 1988; Zelman & Waterman, 1998). Parent involvement has also been tied to increased student attendance (Berger, 1991; Greenwood & Hickman, 1991; Henderson, 1988) and has been shown to have a positive effect on children's attitudes toward schooling (Henderson, Marburger, & Ooms, 1986) and parent satisfaction with teachers (Chen, 2001). In a study of 179 children, parents, and teachers in a nationally representative sample, Stevenson and Baker (1987) found that children of parents who are more involved in school activities do better than those whose parents are less involved. It is important to note that a review of research by Mattingly, Prislin, McKenzie, Rodriguez, and Kayzar (2002) suggests that, due to the methodological weakness of some studies on this topic, the benefits of parent involvement may be overstated. While these weaknesses need to be addressed, the majority of evidence suggests that parent-teacher collaboration benefits children in a number of important ways.

Children from low-income families constitute one group for whom these collaborations can be particularly significant. This group of over 73 million children and their parents often differ from mainstream school culture – populated largely by White

women (NCES, 2003) from middle-income backgrounds (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005) – by race and/or culture; 16.5 million of these children are either Black, Hispanic, or Asian, while 7 million come from immigrant families (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007). Fully 25% live with parents who have less than a high school education, while 52% live in single parent families (NCCP, 2007). These differences are additive, creating wide gulfs between home and school. Additionally, parents in lower socioeconomic brackets tend to be less actively involved in the schools than parents in middle- or upper income brackets (Anyon, 1981; Lareau, 1987, 2000).

Additionally, parent-school relationships are important because of the strong teaching role parents play in their children's lives. Research suggests, for example, that there are multiple ways that rich learning environments are created in the home, and that this environment forms the basis for early literacy development: Heath (1983) and others have highlighted parents' roles as their child's first and most intimate teachers in literacy learning. In a study of 295 early elementary students, the home literacy environment was found to have a greater predictive value than either maternal education or race on general knowledge performance (Griffin and Morrison, 1997). A number of researchers have demonstrated that children acquire their basic cognitive and linguistic skills within the context of the family (Li, 2006; Purcell-Gates, 1996; Potter, 1989; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). A critical question to ask is how do teachers learn to construct ties connecting home and school literacy environments for children from *all* families?

Research has demonstrated that teachers who view parents as partners – inviting them to share information about children's early experiences, their home culture, and

areas of expertise – stand to gain helpful information and support that can be used to build bridges between home and school knowledge (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). A meta-analysis of 41 quantitative studies on children from low-income families who attended urban schools found a significant relationship between parent involvement and student achievement (Jeynes, 2005). This suggests that increasing parent involvement may be one means of targeting the achievement gap between students from low-income families and their more affluent peers. With predicted increases in low-income, minority populations over the next several decades (USINFO, 2006), creating strong ties between these parents and schools at the earliest levels may be one way to help more young children make successful transitions into schools, offering them greater opportunities for success. Teachers who strive to create partnerships with parents are better prepared to support and scaffold all children's learning.

While the research illustrates a great variety of possibilities in ways parents might participate in children's education as well as potential benefits of this participation, what may be minimized in this scheme are the individual interactions between parents and teachers, which are largely unexplored. It is these smaller, more personal interactions that often shape the ways and extent to which parents wish to participate in their children's education. In facilitating parent involvement, these parent-teacher interactions are key. Teachers who view parents as partners in supporting children's academic success and invite their participation and input are much more likely to have higher parent involvement than those who do not send that message (Edwards et al., 1999; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). For this reason, teachers need to learn how to foster these relationships and partnerships.

For the purposes of this study, these parent-teacher relationships will be defined as those fostered by teachers for the purpose of benefiting children's academic success, built upon knowledge of family background, concepts of caring, and the framework of partnerships (Epstein, 1995). Among a number of factors impacting the facilitation of these types of relationships are teacher understandings about the roles played by parents, including teacher assumptions about what parents should do, what they are capable of doing, and what they would be willing to do. Another set of factors concerns teachers' goals for these relationships and what they know about how to facilitate them, as well as the degree to which they desire to interact with parents.

Preparing Teachers to Collaborate with Parents. As Edwards (2004) notes, "the responsibility for preparing teachers to work with families falls squarely on the shoulders of teacher educators" (p.1). Given the importance of home/school relationships, to what extent and in what ways are prospective teachers prepared to collaborate with parents? A persistent and troubling issue in teacher preparation programs is that parent involvement has remained a largely neglected area of study. This phenomenon seems to be common across schools of education; a number of research studies have observed that parent involvement is typically not an integral part of course or fieldwork, and is often incorporated in limited and uneven ways across teacher education programs. Indeed, in a survey of teacher educators from 384 elementary education programs, 76% agreed or strongly agreed that graduating prospective teachers are not educated about how to work effectively with parents (Brown & Brown, 1992). Similarly, 61.4% of administrators from 972 teacher preparation programs surveyed were dissatisfied with coverage of this topic (Young & Hite, 1994). This dissatisfaction with teacher preparation in parent

involvement is not surprising, considering the limited coverage of this topic in many

teacher education programs. In a 2002 survey of 41 teacher preparation programs, 37%

reported that they devoted only a single class period to parent involvement (Mattingly,

2002) Epstein and Sanders (2006) did a more thorough exploration of teacher preparation

in parent partnerships, finding that while 59.6% of the 161 colleges, schools, and

departments of education surveyed offered an entire course on parent partnership

strategies, half of these courses were targeted specifically for graduate students Thus,

while there were classes offered at many universities, these courses were not targeted to

beginning teachers. Epstein and Sanders also found that only 50% of the survey

responses indicated that parent partnership information was included as a part of at least

one general education course, with topics ranging from theory (74%) to organizing

volunteers (69%) to working with parents on school decision-making teams (55%).

Looking across these studies demonstrates that, while parent involvement is included in

some teacher education programs, the instruction is often limited.

One outcome is that, across the board, prospective teachers recognize and admit

to a lack of confidence in their ability to facilitate good working relationships with

parents of their future students. In a 1990 survey of 271 undergraduates, McBride

concluded that prospective teachers felt "minimally prepared" to work with parents

(1991, p 273). Other survey research supports these findings (Chavkin & Williams, 1988;

Foster & Loven, 1992; Graue, 2003; Tichenor, 1997, 1998). Thus, while teacher

education programs recognize that the ability to interact productively with families is

important, current preparation is not viewed as highly effective by either teacher

educators or prospective teachers. Survey data reveal that teachers believe they are poorly

prepared to involve parents in their children's education (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2002; Shartrand et al., 1997). Additional research also highlights practicing teachers' perceptions that they have had little to no preservice training in this area (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Foster & Loven, 1992; Lazar et al., 1999; McAffee, 1987). As Epstein (1995) summarizes, "most educators enter schools without an understanding of family background, concepts of caring, or the framework of partnerships ... most teachers and administrators are not prepared to understand, design, implement, and evaluate practices of partnerships with the families of their students" (p. 21).

Scant attention to parent-teacher relationships in teacher preparation research and programs may negatively impact teachers once they are in the field. While a study done by the National Education Association (NEA, 1981) revealed that over 90% of teachers at all grade levels wanted more interaction between home and school, knowledge of parent involvement among practicing educators is uneven, as demonstrated by their infrequent use of parent involvement strategies (Burns, 1993; Epstein, 1995; Henderson et al., 1986).

As the research suggests, prospective teachers need learning experiences that facilitate understandings and foster practices conducive to building good working relationships with parents of their future students. Knowledge of how to develop these productive relationships can enable prospective teachers to tap on parents' knowledge of children, gather information on home learning environments, and create close ties between home and school in ways that can both inform their instructional practice and support students' success.

Parent-Teacher Conferences as a Site for Learning about Parent-Teacher Relationships.

Little has been written about how teacher educators can find spaces and ways to incorporate parent involvement into their already tightly packed programs. A primary difficulty in addressing how to scaffold prospective teachers' knowledge in this area is the lack of opportunity in teacher education programs to work with parents (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Yet, in order to facilitate this learning, it is critical to find logical sites to engage prospective teachers in interactions with parents in ways that enhance rather than intrude upon the process (Chavkin & Williams, 1988; Tichenor, 1998). While there are a few instances of individual programs targeted at helping prospective teachers better understand the how to work with parents (Abrego et al., 2006; Jared, 1997; Pohan & Adams, 2007), each creates its own particular opportunities for prospective teachers to interact with parents, which are not widespread and are fairly contextual.

One of the few sites common to a large number of teacher education programs in which prospective teachers *do* interact with parents is the event of parent-teacher conferences. During their student teaching experience, many prospective teachers participate in parent conferences under the guidance of a cooperating teacher (Brown & Brown, 1992; Chavkin & Williams, 1988). Depending on the length of their internship, prospective teachers may even participate in this experience twice: once in the fall, and again in the spring. These parent-teacher conferences provide a natural opportunity for prospective teachers to learn how to work with parents.

An ongoing event in the educational process for over half a century (D'Evelyn, 1954), annual or bi-annual parent-teacher conferences are unique in the school calendar in that they offer the opportunity for focused, one-on-one meetings between parents and

teachers. Because parents and teachers, by the structure of the school calendar, come together for the purposes of supporting children's learning, these conferences can be pragmatic and powerful space. Parent-teacher conferences are the most common means of family-school communication and offer a building block for creating home-school partnerships (Jordan et al., 1998). With so few scheduled events to bring parents to schools to talk with teachers for the purpose of supporting their own child's learning, Rotter and Robinson (1982) state that parent-teacher conferences have "the potential to be the single most educationally valuable event for the student during the school year" (p.1). They may also, for a number of parents and teachers, be the only face-to-face interactions during the school year.

As teacher education research suggests, the purposes of parent-teacher conferences are many: to provide a forum in which teachers and parents can communicate about a student for the purpose of establishing an alliance (Darling, 1988), to gain information about the student (Wissbrun & Eckart, 1992), and to demonstrate openness and accountability of the educational system (Haberman, 1992). In part because of their infrequency, the stakes for conferences often feel high. A successful outcome, as defined by Bernick, Rutherford, and Elliott (1991), includes "helping to establish face–to-face relationships, providing families with opportunities for involvement, reinforcing the idea of parents and teachers working as a team, assuring student progress, celebrating successes, and solving problems that emerge" (p.2). The format for parent-teacher conferences can vary considerably from classroom to classroom based, in part, on the way in which individual teachers conceptualize parent involvement.

Typically, a conference consists of an individual meeting with a child's parents of approximately 15-20 minutes. Conferences have traditionally been teacher-directed (Brandt, 2003; Enoch, 1996; Jordan et al., 1998; Stevens & Tollafield, 2003). Teacher preparation for these events is stressed: it is recommended that teachers collect assessment data, information on peer relationships, and samples of student work and portfolios prior to the conference. Historically, teachers present samples of the child's work and assessment data, discuss progress and share goals that the teacher (and sometimes the child) previously set. Additional information deemed important may include student behavior in class, and teacher-set academic and behavioral goals for the student (Brandt, 2003; Enoch, 1996; Stevens & Tollafield, 2003). The last few minutes are often set aside for parent questions or concerns (Brandt, 2003; Enoch, 1996; Rockafellow, 2003; Wilford, 2004).

According to Minke and Anderson (2003), much of the literature on this event "consists of 'tips' for teachers, often based on the assumption that teachers and parents find these conferences problematic. Typically, teachers are encouraged to prepare, communicate effectively, and manage conflict well" (p. 50). Teachers are warned not to "manage" parents, but rather to include them as collaborators in their child's school success (McEwan, 1998). Positioning the teacher as "expert" places parents as passive receivers, limiting their opportunity for involvement – and thus their voice - in the education of their child (Brandt, 2003; Minke & Anderson, 2003; Rockafellow, 2003). Lightfoot (2003) describes the positioning of participants within this style of parent-teacher interaction:

Their relationship tends to be competitive and adversarial rather than peaceful and

productive...this relational enmity – most vividly ritualized and dramatized in the parent-teacher conference – reflects a territorial warfare, a clash of cultures between the two primary arenas of acculturation in our society. (p. xxi)

When teachers approach conferences in a competitive and adversarial manner, the opportunity for co-constructing the event as a partnership to benefit the child may fade into the background. Communication between parents and teachers can become superficial, and teachers may lose the opportunity to further a relationship with parents that can inform their instruction and help children to support children's success.

There is a growing recognition in research on parent-teacher conferencing that teachers and parents know each child in different ways, and a relationship based on their knowledge is most beneficial for the student. In this model, the teacher is not the expert knower and transmitter of information (Enoch, 1996; Minke & Anderson, 2003; Wilford, 2004). Rather, teachers are encouraged to focus on creating more reciprocal interactions with parents. These models of parent-teacher interaction sometimes involve the child as an active participant, as well (Austin, 1994; Bjorklund & Berger, 1987). The focus of this model is to create mutually agreed-upon goals and shared decision-making between the teacher, parents, and in some cases, the child (Swap, 1993; Vickers & Minke, 1997). This format is supported by research finding that the quality of parent-teacher contact is more important than the frequency of that contact in supporting children's success (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). In other words, teachers can reap benefits from goodwill generated by the development of these reciprocal positive relationships with parents that can last long after the conference is over.

This idea of a team approach, with parents as integral members as well as key resource people, focuses on sharing power and allowing parents to create spaces in which their knowledge is valued (Edwards et al., 1999; Calabrese-Barton et al., 2004). An example of this model redefines the initial fall parent-teacher conference as an "intake conference" to be held very early in the school year (Hoerr, 1997, p. 2). A key purpose of this event is to collect information from parents, including their own goals for their child for the school year, which then can be integrated into the teacher's educational plan. The goal is for parent-teacher conferences to become a key site for ongoing communication between home and school.

As both participants and observers in these events, prospective teachers' understandings of why and how to create productive relationships with parents are shaped by these conference experiences in which they participate during their teacher education program. These, in addition to prior experiences, provide contexts of meaning from which they draw to construct notions about future interactions with parents. Since these conferences may be, for many, the only interface in their teacher education program during which they will interact with parents of their students, these events take on added importance. For this reason, parent-teacher conferences are a critical site for exploring what prospective teachers learn from this experience.

This study examines how a group of prospective teachers conceptualize their experiences leading parent-teacher conferences, as well as how these events impact their understandings about creating productive relationships with parents. Studying the event of parent-teacher conferences through the eyes of prospective teachers can provide

insights into both the possibilities and challenges inherent in preparing them to facilitate these events in ways that are productive for children, parents, and teachers.

Theoretical Framework

Having explored the relevant research on this topic, in this section I will discuss elements of two of the major theoretical works that have influenced my understanding of how prospective teachers conceptualize parent-teacher conferences. I will draw upon the constructs of figured worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998) and impression management (Goffman, 1959) as the basis for the theoretical framework that informs my approach to this object of study.

Figured worlds. A useful construct for studying the complexity of prospective teachers' conceptualizations of their experiences leading parent-teacher conferences during the internship is Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) notion of the "figured world." They describe figured worlds as "socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others" (p. 52). Figured worlds differ from an individual's dispositions, defined by Benninga, Diez, Dottin, Feiman-Nemser, Murrell, and Socket (2008) as "tendencies, inclinations, and propensities to act in particular ways...expressed in the context of a demonstration of knowledge, skills, and commitments" (p. 5), in that they are collectively – rather than individually – constructed. Additionally, figured worlds are built upon the understandings co-constructed through interaction with others rather than on innate, individual temperament. Figured worlds incorporate a network of interpretations drawn from these interactions, and thus differ from beliefs, which may be discrete and are again based in

16

individual psychology. As socially organized and reproduced phenomena, figured worlds provide "a context of meaning and action in which social positions and social relationships are named and conducted" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 60). Parent-teacher conferences, as "socially and culturally constructed realm[s] of interpretation," represent figured worlds. These events take place within the figured worlds of a particular district, school, and classroom. They are culturally constructed, participants play socially ascribed roles, and particular artifacts are chosen to represent students' progress. Social positioning occurs between participants in these settings, and meanings are co-constructed. Prospective teachers, as participants in their internship classrooms, are immersed into these figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference.

Moreover, embedded within figured worlds are assumptions about power, control, and authority. These assumptions spring from "historical phenomena," which include personal experiences, cultural expectations, and prior participation in existing figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41) and which inform prospective teachers' ways of participating as they play the lead role in parent-teacher conferences for the first time. Given that prospective teachers may have observed or talked with their own parents about parent-teacher conferences as children and observed and discussed conferences in teacher education coursework, field placements, and internships prior to taking this lead role, they enter this social space with certain prior understandings of how teachers relate to parents during these events.

According to Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), while figured worlds are reproduced, providing a blueprint for relating to others in a given setting, individual

actors shape and re-shape both themselves and their figured world by the ways in which they choose to participate in an event. As Urrieta (2007) explains,

> Through participation in figured worlds people can reconceptualize who they are, or shift who they understand themselves to be, as individuals or members of collectives. Through this figuring, individuals also come to understand their ability to craft their future participation, or agency, in and across figured worlds. (p. 120)

In this manner, prospective teachers, through the experiences of leading parent-teacher conferences, create conceptualizations of who they are as *teacher* in these events and how they interact with parents.

While this study will explore choices made by prospective teachers as they author their roles as teachers leading parent-teacher conferences, it will not address their conscious deliberate drawing on of previous experiences to craft these choices. Rather, this is a study of the available figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference in which they participated that informed their decisions.

It is important to note that Holland, Skinner, Lachicotte, and Cain's (1998) use of this term tends to refer to figured worlds located at a single site – a site that people enter and become a part of. Some studies, for example, have drawn on this concept to study the figured world of the internship classroom (Grossman, Smagorinsky, & Valencia, 1999). This study, however, will examine the notion of multi-sited figured worlds that inform prospective teacher's experiences leading parent-teacher conferences. A prospective teacher's figured world of parent-teacher conferences may be based in multiple experiences, including their personal history with their own parents and teachers, work-

related experiences with parents and children, and experiences in teacher education coursework and their internship prior to leading parent-teacher conferences for the first time. These figured worlds provide a blueprint, derived from social interactions and understandings, which inform prospective teachers' enactments of the teacher in parent-teacher conferences.

Impression Management. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) concept of figured worlds allows us a view into prospective teachers' conceptions of parent-teacher conferences. While this provides an overarching picture of these experiences, Goffman's (1959) construct of impression management is useful in unpacking the microscopic, moment-to-moment interactions between prospective teachers and parents during these events. As the father of interactional sociolinguistics, Goffman's work explores ways in which sociocultural understandings are produced in both talk and physical interaction. These sociocultural understandings help individuals understand the purpose of an event and how they should present themselves accordingly. Goffman calls this self-representation *impression management.* Impression management includes "the ways in which [an individual] guides and controls the impression they form of him and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them" (p. xi). Impression management explores the ways in which individuals present themselves before others so as to maintain the impression they wish to portray.

Figured worlds entail certain kinds of impression management. Figured worlds are socially and culturally constructed realms; impression management explores the ways in which an individual presents him- or herself in response to a given social situation within those realms. Figured worlds include assumptions about power, authority, and

control; impression management explores ways in which individuals manage their interactions "in order to control the conduct of others, especially their responsive treatment of him" (Goffman, 1959, p. 3). For example, prospective teachers leading parent-teacher conferences for the first time may perceive that part of their role in leading parent-teacher conferences is to appear knowledgeable and professional. To accomplish this, they might organize particular artifacts in advance and rehearse what they wish to discuss with parents prior to conferences. In this manner, they "may...attempt to give the impression that their present poise and proficiency are something they have always had and that they have never had to fumble their way through a learning period" (Goffman, 1959, p. 47). In this manner, the figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference entail distinctive kinds of impression management on the part of the prospective teacher.

With the increasing diversity of our population, it behooves educators and those who prepare them to better understand how to create more seamless transitions between homes and schools to better support young children's school success. The figured world of parent-teacher conferences is one important venue in which these home-school relationships are crafted and thus is a critical area for study in teacher education programs. Figured worlds help us to explore how prospective teachers perform parent-teacher conferences and impression management can help us to view ways in which these figured worlds are enacted. Using this theoretical framework, the current study investigates how prospective teachers conceptualize parent-teacher conferences during the teacher-preparation internship.

Research Question. This study will address the following question:

How do prospective teachers conceptualize parent-teacher conferences?

Chapter 2: Methods

In this chapter, I provide a detailed description of this study's setting and participants, as well as a discussion of the methods of data collection and data analysis. The focus of this study was on how prospective early elementary teachers experienced the parent-teacher conferences conducted during their teacher preparation internship. The study participants, the timing selected for the study, and the study protocol were selected based upon this purpose.

Site Selection

This study took place at a highly regarded teacher preparation program at a large Midwestern university, which will be called Green Oaks University for the purposes of this dissertation, located on the outskirts of a city of approximately 120,000. Prospective students to the elementary education program must take initial teacher preparation coursework in their freshman and sophomore years of college before applying for admission into the education program. These candidates must meet particular criteria (e.g., apply early in the fall semester, have an overall grade point average of 2.75 or higher, have passed all three components of the state's Teacher Certification Basic Skills Test, and reach junior status by the end of the subsequent summer semester) in order to be accepted into the program. Once admitted, prospective teachers participate in varied field experiences, including two hours weekly in one junior level course, and four hours weekly for each of two senior level courses in conjunction with their coursework. One important feature of this program is that prospective teachers have four years of preparation prior to a fifth full year, during which they participate in a full-time internship in an elementary classroom along with supporting coursework. This is

important in that this extensive internship offers prospective teachers a variety of opportunities to engage in the figured worlds of elementary teacher preparation course and fieldwork and the attendant impression management. Prior to participating in this fifth-year internship, prospective teachers must have successfully passed all coursework, earned a bachelor's degree, and passed state certification tests in their chosen major and minor.

The elementary education program at this university is linked to standards, developed by faculty and collaborating teachers, representing understandings, skills, commitments, and dispositions deemed necessary for students to develop in order to be effective and responsible beginning teachers. Prospective teachers are expected to demonstrate proficiency in the following four standards prior to earning teacher certification: knowing subject matter and how to teach it, respecting and caring for all students in his/her charge, demonstrating the ability to create a safe, caring, productive community in the classroom, and demonstrating the ability to work well in a school community (Green Oaks University website). Opportunities for prospective teachers to acquire focal competencies based upon these standards are built into the curriculum through assignments, course readings, activities, and field experiences.

As noted previously, with the growing awareness of the increasingly diverse population of the United States (NCCP, 2007), preparing prospective teachers to work with families has taken on added importance and this is reflected in the standards for this program. From those listed above, two of the standards upon which the program is designed incorporate elements that pertain to knowledge of the importance of and ability to work with all families. The first of these standards focuses on prospective teachers'

ability to "work well as a teacher in a school community" (Green Oaks University website). This standard targets a prospective teacher's ability to interface with others in the school community in an open and respectful manner, seek opportunities for improvement, and be open to constructive feedback. An example of one way that prospective teachers are asked to demonstrate competency in this area is in demonstrating an ability to "work with parents and guardians in an open, civil, and constructive manner that treats them as partners in their child's education" (Green Oaks University website). The second standard having particular relevance for the purposes of this study reads: "The intern respects and cares for all students in his/her charge" (Green Oaks University website). In order to demonstrate proficiency in this standard, prospective teachers must demonstrate an interest in learning about each student as an individual and treating all students respectfully, which includes learning about "students' interests, strengths, and cultural backgrounds in order to connect class topics and activities to students' experiences and interact with them effectively" (Green Oaks University website). To gather this knowledge, particularly when teaching young students in the early elementary grades, it is likely that prospective teachers would need to communicate with parents, and one site in which this might occur during the internship is during parent-teacher conferences.

There are no courses specifically dedicated to forming partnerships with parents in this teacher preparation program, as previously shown to be the case in the majority of elementary teacher preparation programs across the country. Rather, threads incorporating working with families are interwoven through the elementary teacher preparation coursework through course readings, class discussions, activities, and field

experiences across different content areas. For example, there are required readings in both social studies and literacy methods courses during the senior and internship years on this topic. Because parent involvement was addressed in the standards and woven into this teacher preparation program in multiple ways, this was a logical site in which to study the prospective teacher's conceptualizations of parent-teacher conferences during the internship as teacher preparation.

Prospective teachers participating in this research interned in one of two large metropolitan areas or their surrounding suburbs. District A, located near the university, was comprised of approximately 15,000 students in grades K-12. Of these, approximately 46% are Black, 33% are White, 4% are Asian, and 7% are of other races, and a high percentage of the students (about 67%) are considered economically disadvantaged according to state guidelines (Center for Educational Performance, 2006-2007). District B, approximately fifty miles from the university, is somewhat larger, having approximately 115,000 students in grades K-12. Over 90% of the students are Black, 6% are Hispanic, and 2% are White, and a higher percentage (approximately 80%) of students are considered economically disadvantaged according to state guidelines (Center for Educational Performance, 2006-2007). It is important to note that surrounding suburban school districts in which prospective teachers taught differed from these urban districts in the degree of cultural and socioeconomic diversity. For these reasons, the internship experience at this teacher preparation program offered a range of potential experiences that could be brought to bear in studying figured worlds.

Participant Selection

Survey Participants. Prospective teachers participating in this research were all fifth-year interns in this teacher preparation program. The sample for this study was drawn from a cohort of 125 elementary interns teaching in grades 1 through 3 (out of a total of 214 prospective teachers applying for elementary certification in grades K-6). Although all were applying for an elementary education certification, they held a variety of majors and minors, including elementary education, language arts, child development, English, French, science, geography, history, TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) and social studies. As a result, these prospective teachers had a variety of interdisciplinary backgrounds. With their varied backgrounds and coursework, these prospective teachers had the opportunity to be socialized to a range of epistemologies that could possibly inform their parent-teacher conferencing practices.

During this internship experience, each prospective teacher was placed in a single early elementary classroom (grades K-3) for an entire school year. What is particularly noteworthy for the purposes of this study is that due to this year-long internship, prospective teachers in this teacher preparation program have two opportunities to participate in parent-teacher conferences: observing them in the fall and leading parent-teacher conferences in the spring. Given that my goal was to study prospective teachers' conceptualizations of parent-teacher conferences, this program was a good choice because of the fact that prospective teachers had two opportunities to participate in these events and this was a shared experience across the cohort.

Participants for the study were recruited through their field instructors, with whom they met weekly at their internship site. I sent an initial email to the elementary

field instructor team in mid-March, 2008, just prior to parent-teacher conferences, asking for their help in inviting prospective teachers in grades K-3 to participate in my research. Participation was limited to prospective teachers placed in grades K-3 because at these early grades, both parents and children may be relatively new to the experience of formal schooling, making these meetings particularly important spaces in which to co-construct home-school partnerships.

I provided a short summary of my study, informing potential participants that the goal of my research was to learn about their experiences conducting parent-teacher conferences, which field instructors were asked to read aloud at their weekly meetings. Potential participants were informed that, if they chose to participate, they would be asked to fill out an online survey, and that some of them would also be invited to participate in interviews. They were also informed that the survey and interview would take place early in the summer after they had graduated from the program, and that they would receive a gift certificate to a local bookstore for their time and participation in the survey and, if they were selected, an additional gift certificate for the interviews.

Field instructors shared this information with prospective teachers during the second week of March. This was a voluntary response sample in that prospective teachers who wished to participate were asked to forward their email addresses to me. A total of 26 prospective teachers responded. Of this group, one was not included because her placement was in a fourth grade classroom; I was unable to contact another due to an incorrect email address, leaving a total of 24 participants. Twenty-two of the 24 completed the survey; all of these were White women between the ages of 21 and 24. This level of response provided me with a range of potential focal participants from

which to draw in order to construct case studies of prospective teachers' experiences with parent-teacher conferences during the internship.

Focal Participants. I selected eight participants to interview from those who completed surveys based on two criteria: grade level and internship site. As noted previously, the focus of this study is on prospective teachers' construction of parent-teacher relationships in early elementary grades, so I chose to interview prospective teachers from four first- and four second-grade classrooms. I chose not to include prospective teachers interning in kindergarten because conference protocols can differ considerably from early elementary due to the differences in academic content and in the number of students. I also wanted to speak to prospective teachers representing both urban and suburban settings: in this case, four from each. This variety of placements offered a range of potential experiences, providing me with a rich data set for my study of prospective teachers' figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences and the impression management entailed by those figured worlds.

Data Sources

Surveys. Because my goal was to study patterns of sociocultural meanings in how prospective teachers conceived of parent-teacher conferences, I wanted to look across a group of prospective teachers, so I conducted a survey to elicit patterns from the group. But because I believe that psychohistorical experiences matter, I wanted to see how patterns are enacted in individuals, so I included interviews in my protocol. My initial data source was an online survey that I constructed based upon a pilot study I conducted the previous year on prospective teachers' experiences leading parent teacher conferences (2007). In my pilot study, I found evidence of impression management and recognized

that conferences are "social encounters in which participants' positions matter" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998, p. 52). Reflecting on these findings helped me to refine the design of the current survey so that I was able to gather more in-depth information about who these prospective teachers were as well as about their internship placements. I also was better able to construct short answer questions that I could use to explore ways these prospective teachers were conceptualizing this event. The revised survey incorporated a mix of Likert scales, short-answer, and multiple-choice questions.

Survey questions inquired about prospective teachers' ethnic backgrounds, placements, parents' education levels, ethnic backgrounds, prior work with children and parents, and experiences in teacher preparation coursework focusing on parent involvement and parent-teacher conferences. Short answer survey items included prospective teachers' goals for conferences, their roles and parents' roles during conferences, literacy artifacts shared with parents during conferences, and ways in which parent-teacher conferences shaped their instructional practice, if any (Appendix B). The goal of the survey was to get to the variables most salient to this research so that I was able to get a sense of who these prospective teachers were: to learn more about their mentor teachers, their placements, and teacher education experiences, and to begin to get a sense of the figured worlds which informed their performances during these events. Prior to using them with study participants, both instruments were piloted on several prospective teachers in May of 2009, and revised for clarity based upon feedback received.

Interviews. In order to study prospective teachers' conceptualizations of parent-teacher conferences, I chose to conduct interviews so that I could construct individual case

studies of the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences. Given that parent-teacher conferences are socially organized phenomena in which meaning is co-produced by parents and teachers, these cases enabled me to get at the meanings assigned by prospective teachers to interactions within parent-teacher conferences, as well as gain a deeper understanding of the impact of the settings in which they occurred. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) elaborate, case studies enable researchers to better understand "the meaning people make of their lives in very particular contexts" (p. 9) at both the level of everyday social interaction and within the wider societal context. These spring parent-teacher conferences were a particularly a rich venue to explore through case studies in that they represented a moment in each participant's experience in which she took control of an interaction with parents.

In order to unpack prospective teachers' experiences and meaning-making in these events, interview questions focused on their interactions with parents throughout the year, mentor teachers' roles in interacting with parents and conducting conferences, prospective teachers' own goals for conferences, roles they saw parents playing in the educational process, and what they learned about parent involvement from their own parents, among other topics (Appendix C). Prospective teachers were also asked questions targeted to elicit narratives about particular experiences leading conferences, rich sources of data from which to construct cases. As Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) proffer, "many of the elements of a [figured] world relate to one another in the form of a story or drama, a 'standard plot' against which narratives of unusual events are told" (p. 53). By using interview data to build cases, I was able to explore the figured

worlds in which prospective teachers participated and upon which they drew in more depth, fleshing out and extending data collected in the surveys.

Artifacts. Artifacts are a critical component of parent-teacher conferences; in fact, it is around artifacts that many of these meetings revolve. As such, the artifacts chosen by prospective teachers to represent children's progress to parents are integral pieces in constructing cases. For this reason, prospective teachers who were invited to participate in interviews were asked to bring an artifact of their choice – one that they found useful – during conferences. The choice of artifact, as well as the narrative(s) the prospective teacher shared about the artifact, was a rich source of data that provided insight into the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences in which prospective teachers participated. As Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) wrote, "Artifacts 'open up' figured worlds. They are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful" (p. 61). These artifacts were also useful in helping me to better understand how prospective teachers, using these tools, performed their role of teacher through impression management.

<center>*Data Collection Procedures*</center>

Timeframe. During the last week of May, an email was sent to the 24 prospective teachers who had expressed an interest in participating in the study, informing them of the date that the online survey would be available. My goal was to remind study participants of the upcoming survey, and also to get them thinking about their recent experiences leading parent-teacher conference. By this time, all participants had graduated, several had moved home, and most were in the process of interviewing for jobs. An email containing a link to the online survey went out the following week,

<center>30</center>

followed by a reminder email five days later sent to the few who had not yet accessed the link and filled out the survey. Once participants completed the survey, I asked them to send an email with their mailing address so they could receive a bookstore gift certificate for their time and participation. This provided me with an easy way to know who had completed the survey, as well as when it was completed. I was able to tell who filled out each survey, which was necessary to do follow-up interviews, but all identities were kept hidden (and all participants, as well as the schools in which they interned, have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity).

Interviews with the eight prospective teachers chosen from the surveys were scheduled and conducted during the last two weeks of June. In total, I spoke with eight prospective teachers. Six were available to be interviewed on two separate occasions, for approximately 40 to 45 minutes each time. I met with these participants in reserved rooms in libraries (three at the university library, and the rest in libraries near their homes). In one case, I was unable to reserve a room in the library, so we met in a relatively quiet back corner. One interviewee was only able to meet with me once. In one other instance, the entire interview was conducted by phone since the prospective teacher had moved too far away to meet in person. Fortunately, in both cases, I was able to complete all interview questions during these single longer sessions. At the end of each interview, prospective teachers received a bookstore gift card in appreciation for their time and participation.

Both survey and interview data collection took place between eight to twelve weeks after prospective teachers' conferencing experiences. This period was a unique moment in time in that it was situated immediately after their graduation and before they

took up the mantle of teacher in their own classrooms. Interviewing them at this time afforded prospective teachers the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, which may not have been possible had they still been immersed in coursework. According to Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), "persons do bring history to the present – an important aspect of which is usually an untidy compilation of perspectives" (p. 46). In this sense, history is ongoing, continuing to shape us after events have passed. For this reason, the time between the experience of conducting parent-teacher conferences and the data collection did not pose a problem. My focus is on the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences that prospective teachers had constructed, and how they utilized impression management in co-constructing relationships with parents through this particular event. Because of the interpretive nature of this study, it does not require nor rely on highly detailed responses about prospective teachers' conference experiences.

There were several other advantages to collecting both survey and interview data during the early summer, one of which was greater flexibility in prospective teachers' schedules since their university and student teaching obligations were completed. Additionally, none of them had acquired a teaching position at the time of the interviews, so there were no problems in regard to work schedules.

Data Analysis Procedures

We cannot live other people's lives, and it is a piece of bad faith to try. We cannot but listen to what…they say about their lives…Whatever sense we have of how things stand with someone else's inner life, we gain through their expressions, not through some magical intrusion into their consciousness. It's all a matter of scratching surfaces. (Geertz, 1986, p. 373)

It is important to note here the impact of my own figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference on my interpretation of the data. I came to this study with a background as a teacher who had worked with families of children with disabilities. My experiences with these families opened my eyes to some of the "behind the scene" struggles they had in advocating for their children in schools. Also, as a mother of four, I have sat on the other side of the desk at parent-teacher conferences, and know what it is to entrust a piece of my heart into a teacher's hands for safekeeping. Two things helped me to retain a sense of balance: the first was being honest with myself about my strong desire to advocate for teacher education programs to prepare prospective teachers to partner with parents, and using this recognition to moderate that desire. The second was the sincere interest in this topic evidenced by my participants. Each of these women demonstrated, through their thoughtful survey and interview answers, a strong desire to construct productive relationships with parents as a means of supporting students. My interactions with them also led me to recognize that, even had I collected data beyond the timeframe selected for this study, I would have struggled to represent the richness and complexity represented in their responses. While I have tried to represent their understandings honestly and carefully, I am aware that I cannot fully represent their commitments to children and parents that ran throughout the data I collected.

Though this was not a study of cases of individuals, but rather cases of sociocultural practices of figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences, I found the creation of cases a useful tool for making sense of the data I had collected. As Dyson and Genishi (2005) observed, "It is the messy complexity of human experience that leads

researchers to case studies in the qualitative or interpretive tradition" (p.3). To cut a path through this "messiness," I followed the protocol recommended by Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995), which includes open coding, writing initial memos, looking for themes that could help to answer my research question, doing focused coding, and writing integrative memos.

I began by analyzing survey data, making marginal notes on points of interest. Survey questions describing features of prospective teachers' placements helped me to better understand classroom experiences that may have impacted their figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences. Questions about university coursework and field experiences served as imperfect proxies for the impact of their teacher preparation program. Questions about conference goals and roles for parents and teachers in parent-teacher conferences revealed differences in preparation and experience that provided insights into prospective teachers' understandings of parent-teacher interactions. I also compiled demographic information about prospective teachers to create a representative picture of who they were. From this data, I wrote memos identifying patterns running across my sample.

My next step was to listen to and transcribe interview data. I initially used open coding as a means of connecting interview and survey data. After transcribing each interview, I wrote marginal notations to get a flavor for how each prospective teacher made sense of the figured world of parent-teacher conferences. To deepen my understanding, I did multiple readings and refined my coding to look for gaps in my understanding that might be answered through the interviews. This helped me to better understand who these prospective teachers were in terms of their educational preparation,

the settings in which they interned, and how they were positioning themselves and parents during parent-teacher conferences.

I applied thematic analysis to the data (Gee, 1991) using open coding to identify emerging themes. I noted questions I had, gaps in my understanding, and commonalities I discovered by writing integrative memos. As described by Bogdan and Biklin (2007), "the analysis...becomes more encompassing as new cases are presented," and "the developing theory usually becomes more refined" (p. 73). In order to answer my research question, I began by reading through prospective teachers' survey answers to questions about their goals for these events, as well as roles played by parents and teachers. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) state that "people can reconceptualize who they are or shift who they understand themselves to be" by their participation within figured worlds. Thus, a key to my understanding was finding out how prospective teachers authored themselves as they took on the role of teacher with this new audience, parents.

In looking across the surveys at goals for conferences, distinctions quickly emerged relative to who was being foregrounded in the conference: the child or the prospective teacher. Examples of answers in which children were foregrounded include: "develop the relationship between the child and parents," and "students share learning with parents." In contrast, answers in which the prospective teacher was foregrounded included: "to be viewed as a professional teacher," and "to communicate with parents the sources of my knowledge." This first distinction provided me with insight into two of three distinct figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference.

I next paid particular attention to the ways in which prospective teachers discussed participants' roles in this event, as well as the exchanges that were shared in interview narratives. As Berk-Seligson (1990) describes: "whether or not speakers are conscious of how they are framing a given event...languages have constructions that allow the choice between mentioning or not mentioning who is responsible for a given event or causal chain of events" (p. 29). I used discourse analysis to study passive and active positioning within each of these two groups in prospective teachers' constructions of participants roles. I found distinct differences emerging in how prospective teachers constructed the conferences they led, ranging from co-constructing the event with parents (through their use of words such as "shared" and "collaborated" with parents) to taking a directive stance with parents (using words such as "told" and "informed" to describe their actions relative to parents). I then looked at how parents were positioned in their answers, and found that parent roles fell across a continuum from "listeners" to "collaborators."

In order to tease out the emerging patterns, I knew from my pilot study that one key area on which to focus my attention was prospective teachers' interview narratives about their conference experiences. I wrote integrative memos, which helped me to uncover additional differences in the narratives prospective teachers shared about their procedures for conducting conferences. For example, some prospective teachers invited parents at the outset of conferences to provide input about what they wished to hear about or discuss. Others invited parents to ask questions only after they (the prospective teachers) had finished talking about what they wanted to present to parents. The distinctions drawn from interview data helped to solidify the three distinct figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference.

36

I applied discourse analysis (Gee, 1991) to the data, which allowed me to probe

survey and interview responses in order to build a thick description of each of these

figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences. By identifying similar themes running

through the interviews, I found that these patterns frequently converged with the patterns

uncovered in the survey data, reinforcing the three figured worlds and sharpening the

distinctions between them.

In order to test my initial hypothesis on these three figured worlds and to

crosscheck my groupings of prospective teachers, I wrote a list of descriptors for each

figured world. After removing names from all 22 surveys, I went back to the survey data,

and looked specifically at prospective teachers' answers to the following survey

questions (Appendix B):

1) What is your role, as teacher, in leading parent-teacher conferences? Please

specify if you participated in teacher- or student-led conferences.

2) What are parents' roles and responsibilities in participating in parent-teacher

conferences?

3) Did conducting parent-teacher conferences influence your instructional

practice? If so, how?

4) What were your primary goals for conferences?

I assigned each prospective teacher to the orientation that best matched her

answers. In checking their identities afterward, 21 of my 22 participants' answers fell into

the figured worlds I had previously assigned to them. I found that I had placed one

prospective teacher in a different orientation than I had originally assigned to her. For this

reason, I chose not to use her interview as one of the case studies for this work. As a final

37

check on the figured worlds to which each participant was assigned, I conducted this same crosschecking procedure two months later. Using a more refined set of criteria for each figured world, I again removed the names from the survey data, and sorted each prospective teacher into one of the three groups I had identified. In all cases, my results placed prospective teachers in the figured worlds to which I had assigned them earlier.

Within each interview, I took note of any places in which prospective teachers' responses referenced another figured world. I also found that one figured world of the parent-teacher conference was much more highly represented than either of the other two.

As Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) explain, figured worlds "gather us up and give us form as our lives intersect them" (p. 41). For these prospective teachers, exploring the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences in which they participated and the impression management that they entailed helped to give shape to their conceptualizations of these events. I constructed cases, based on my findings, to serve as representative examples of each of the three figured worlds. This method of data analysis aligned with my commitment in the literature review to study prospective teachers' concept formation formed through social interaction. Creating cases of prospective teachers' experiences leading parent-teacher conferences allowed me to study how they conceptualized the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences in which they participated and how they utilized impression management to enact their figured world.

Challenges

Because the participants in my survey sample are self-selected, (and in the case of interviews, selected by me) my results are not intended to be representative of all elementary teaching candidates. However, the fact that the teacher preparation program at

this particular university offers candidates a year-long prospective internship allowed me to probe prospective teachers' conceptualizations of their experiences leading parent-teacher conferences in depth, which helped to provide a sense of the "more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998, p. 40) and the impression management that entailed.

As noted above, the time between the surveys and interviews and the actual parent-teacher conferences that prospective teachers led was, on average, two months. While details of a particular event in parent-teacher conferences may have been fresher in their minds had the time frame between the experience and data collection been shorter, what was important for the purposes of this study was to explore prospective teachers' conceptualizations of parent-teacher conferences, and their "processes or traditions of apprehension" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998, p. 41). These "processes or traditions of apprehension" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, p. 41) are not dependent on any one moment in time, but rather provide a context for meaning and action, and offered a means for unpacking prospective teachers' conceptualizations of their conference experiences.

Chapter 3: The Parent-Teacher Conference as a Figured World in Which Teachers Collaborate With Parents

In this chapter, I will explore the experiences of a group of prospective teachers who share a *collaboration-centered* figured world of the parent-teacher conference. These young women's performances are informed by this particular figured world of the parent-teacher conference, which provides a context and meaning for their actions, and shapes the ways in which they interact with parents (Holland et al., 1998). Drawing on Goffman's (1959) metaphor of social interaction as theater, these parent-teacher conferences can be viewed as part of a theatrical production in which the figured world becomes a significant factor that informs the types of impression management prospective teachers incorporate into their performances. In this chapter, I will first identify and explore features of this collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference through a case study of Jenny, a prospective teacher who recently led these conferences as part of an internship experience in a prestigious teacher education program. I will then provide supporting examples of other prospective teachers sharing this collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference and look across their responses to further explore the commonalities shared by this group.

Jenny

Psychohistorical Context of Jenny's Figured World of the Parent-Teacher Conference.
As will be elaborated below, Jenny's experience with parent-teacher interactions prior to her teacher-preparation internship informed how she imagined the parent-teacher conference. These prior experiences informed her understandings, and as such are

valuable in helping to understand the construction of a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. It is important to note that although Jenny exhibited a figured world composed, among other possibilities, of her experiences with the activity settings discussed below, this is not to suggest that Jenny deliberately drew on these experiences and reflected on how these previous experiences might or might not relate to the current activity setting in which she was teaching.

Conference.

Personal history with parent involvement. When asked how her own parents had interacted with the schools when she was in elementary school, Jenny remembered thinking that her parents were more likely to "back the teacher than back me." While she admitted that "at the time I wasn't happy about it" and "didn't think it was fair," in retrospect, she thought her parents did the right thing. "For the parents to be able to point out why they did what they did, I think that's good to have that support behind the teacher, as much as I didn't like it at the time" (Interview 2, p. 13). Informed by this particular figured world in which she observed her parents' interactions with the schools, these memories of her parents "siding with" her teachers – rather than empathizing with her – played a part in Jenny's expectation that parent-teacher partnerships were a normal feature of these relationships.

Prior experience working with children and parents. Jenny described her experiences with children and parents prior to her internship year:

> Throughout college I spent three years working in a preschool. So I had a lot of experience when parents would pick up, you know, in talking with them about how their child's day was and anything that they needed to know, concerns or

good things that had happened that day. And so I did have prior experience with working with parents but that was really the only experience. (Interview 1, p. 1)

In her role as *teacher* in this setting, there was a natural and expected interface with parents as they dropped off and picked up their children. While Jenny seems to minimize this experience, these daily informal conversations gave her practice not only in talking with parents, but also in gathering information from them; it is important to note that she spoke "with" them, not "to" them, indicating a two-way interaction. These interactions with parents were cooperative, much like her memories of the supportive relationship between her own parents and teachers.

Jenny further elaborated on some of the interactions with parents at the preschool, saying that sometimes it was her job to tell parents that their son or daughter "didn't have such a great day" (Interview 1, p.1) a task that was difficult for her. She admitted, however, that being in this position helped her to practice learning how to deliver negative news:

> you want to kinda try and put it in a semi positive light or you know, focus on
>
> how we can make it better. But it's difficult to do, and I think that having that
>
> experience prior helped me in my internship dealing with, you know, if I had to
>
> talk with the parent about behavior issues or whatever the case was. (Interview 1,
>
> p. 1)

When problems arose, Jenny's focus was on how she and the parent might help the child to "make it better," indicating that prior to entering her teacher education program, she was already attuned to the value of partnering with parents. As Jenny authored her identity as teacher in this setting, informed by her personal history and these

experiences, she was forging a figured world of the parent-teacher conference in which teachers collaborate with parents.

Experiences in teacher education coursework. An elementary education major and language arts minor, when asked on her survey to identify courses in teacher education providing opportunities to study, talk about, or participate in field experiences pertaining to parent involvement, Jenny indicated that this topic had been included in seven out of ten possible courses, most often through class conversations (including courses in special education and family and child ecology). When asked this same question about parent-teacher conferences, she marked seven courses that included information on the topic, again primarily through class conversations. Parent involvement and parent-teacher conferences were definitely of interest to Jenny prior to her internship, as evidenced in her attention to these topics in her teacher education coursework.

The resource that Jenny found the most helpful in preparing to conduct parent-teacher conferences was a book assigned as a reading for a social methods studies class in her teacher education program. She commented that the book, Difficult Conversations (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 1999), helped her to think about the importance of finding shared goals with parents. In the case of parent-teacher conferences, as Jenny pointed out, "that's the child" (Interview 2, p. 9). So one of her goals for these events was to "put aside whatever differences there are between you and the parent and just to focus on what you know is important to them as well as to you" (Interview 2, p. 9). She remarked that this framework proved helpful when she found herself disagreeing with parents, particularly during the one conference (discussed below) that she considered her most challenging. What she took away from Difficult Conversations added to the figured worlds of her

personal history and work experience to further inform the picture she was constructing of parent-teacher relationships as collaborations.

Internship experience: Observed interactions with parents in the overall school context. Jenny spent her internship in a first grade classroom at Hillcrest Elementary School. Hillcrest is a suburban school serving a fairly affluent community. There is a fairly low level of diversity in terms of the racial and cultural composition of the school and the number of students qualifying for free and reduced-price lunch (11%) is far below the state average (see Appendix A). The school met AYP for 2007. There are, on average, sixteen students per full-time teacher. Jenny described parent involvement at her school as "huge" (Interview 1, p. 2), with a strong PTO presence that put together activities like a Family Fun Night, and various fundraisers. Parents also volunteered to help out in the lunchroom, and were generally "always around" (Interview 1, p. 2).

Internship experience: Observed interactions with parents facilitated by mentor. Nested within this welcoming and open activity setting, the classroom culture in Jenny's classroom followed a similar pattern. Jenny perceived that her mentor teacher (who had taught between six to nine years) had excellent relationships with parents. In our conversation, she painted a picture of parent volunteers participating in the classroom on a daily basis throughout the year, helping with centers, reading groups, and stuffing Friday folders. This constant presence initially posed a problem for Jenny

> It was something I had to get used to at first, because I get nervous when people are watching me teach...I don't really like being observed, which is something I'm sure I'll get over with time, with principals observing and that kind of stuff. But there's still part of me that's shy and gets nervous about that. (Interview 1, p. 4)

A benefit of this constant parent presence is that it also enabled Jenny to have much more practice interacting with parents on a regular basis. Observing high levels of parent involvement in her internship school and interacting regularly with parents in her mentor's classroom further supported her experiences in teacher education coursework, job-related experiences with parents and children, and her own personal history. *Psychohistorical Context for a Figured World in which Teachers Collaborate with Parents.* The figured world of her internship classroom and the figured worlds that informed Jenny also shaped the way in which she interacted with parents during parent-teacher conferences in her internship. The following section provides a description of how Jenny prepared for and performed parent-teacher conferences.

Parents.

Staging the physical setting. Parent-teacher conferences were carefully staged by Jenny and her mentor, who went on maternity leave just prior to the event. Jenny spoke proudly of her idea to create a slideshow (with music) created from pictures of her students engaging in classroom activities. She found out how to make the slideshow run in a continuous loop on her laptop, which she set up on a table right outside of the classroom. Also on the table were note pads and pencils so parents could write a "Warm-Fuzzy Gram" (Interview 1, p. 6) to their child while waiting, which would be delivered the next day at school. Goffman (1959) states, "Regardless of the particular objective which the individual has in mind and of his motive for having this objective, it will be in his interests to control the conduct of the others, especially their responsive treatment of him" (p. 3). Jenny's use of the mediating devices of the slideshow and the "Warm-Fuzzy Gram" set the tone for a warm and positive encounter before parents ever entered the

classroom. This was a type of impression management in that, in creating and using these artifacts with parents, she was, in effect, guiding parents' impressions of her by helping them to feel welcome.

In the classroom, Jenny decided that she would sit next to parents around the outside of a rainbow-shaped table. Since her mentor was out on leave, the long-term substitute sat off to the side. Jenny very deliberately chose not to sit at the "teacher's position" at the center of the table across from parents because

> it would be a little bit more maybe intimidating... if you're sitting around the table it's more, we're gonna talk together, we're gonna focus on your child and want to work together instead of this is what you need to do and this is what your child's doing wrong. (Interview 1, p. 7)

This comment demonstrates Jenny's awareness of the historical and cultural significance that parents may attach to sitting *across from* (an evaluative position) as opposed to sitting *next to* (a collaborative position). Her overall design of the setting helped to advance the production of a figured world of the parent-teacher conference in which the goal was to further collaborative partnership with parents focused on the success of the child.

Staging the artifacts associated with parent-teacher conferences. Hillcrest was fairly unusual among the group of schools in which study participants interned in that report cards were not handed out at spring conferences, which took place mid-semester. Rather, other artifacts from each subject were chosen to represent children's progress. Prior to conferences, Jenny created a portfolio of each student's work, including writing samples, to showcase their growth over course of the year. Work from other subjects –

including assessments from math, science and social studies – was also collected to show parents how their child was progressing and what they were learning. Jenny also noted "if their [*sic*] were any concerns to express...I would try to pull extra work as evidence of my concerns." This focus on providing artifacts to support claims about report card marks was common across all prospective teachers interviewed; however, in Jenny's case, with no report card, she needed to make her claims based on student work and assessments, which also served as evidence of those claims.

Jenny set up a protocol for leading each conference that immediately invited parent input:

> I would fill out a sheet for each student and - before the conference, and so on the sheet it was kind of the guidelines of how the conference would be run. And so at the top of it was, you know, parent questions or concerns. So that would be the opening, you know, 'do you have anything that you would like to address, that you would like to bring up that either questions, concerns regarding your child?' So we would open it up to the parents first. (Interview 1, p. 5)

As Jenny credited her mentor as being her most helpful resource in preparing to lead conferences, the use of this artifact was very possibly one that had been modeled for her; nevertheless, it was another way in which she conveyed the impression of caring about what parents wanted to talk about during parent-teacher conferences. Jenny obviously respected her mentor, and may also have adapted this format for conferencing in part because it matched up with her own psychohistorical understandings. It is noteworthy that, in describing her experiences in planning and leading the conferences, Jenny used "we" (referring to her mentor teacher and herself) far more frequently than

"I" (31 times as compared to 4 times, respectively), even though her mentor was not physically present at these events. This strong affiliation is indicative of one manner of approaching the work that must be done by prospective teachers coming into the figured world of teaching, who "are appropriating the identity of a particular kind of teacher, one that reflects their personal history, their programmatic emphases, their historical context" (Graue, 2005, p. 161).

It is noteworthy that Jenny's is the only case (out of the eight interviewees) in which parent questions or concerns were addressed *first* during the conference. This enabled her to respond to parents' needs by being flexible within the time frame and boundaries set for each conference. Yet, opening the conference by asking for parent questions or concerns must have been a somewhat frightening space, especially considering that her mentor was not present during conferences to guide her if a discussion went amiss. This may have been a palatable position for Jenny in part because of the frequency of parent-teacher interactions throughout the year. It is likely that most of the parents were "known quantities," unlikely to throw something unexpected at Jenny during the parent-teacher conferences. Based on the figured worlds of her personal history, work experiences, teacher education coursework, and internship placement, it makes sense that Jenny was willing to perform parent-teacher conferences as a space in which parents are invited, right from the outset, to participate in setting the agenda.

Goals for parent-teacher conferences. On her survey, Jenny wrote that her goal for parent-teacher conferences was "to let parents know their child's growth as well as any concerns I had that could interfere with the students' success" (Survey, q. 11). Jenny commented that she made it a point to tell parents at the start of the conference to "stop

me whenever, as I'm going through this and ask me questions or you know, make comments or whatever" (Interview 1, p. 7). According to Jenny, about half of the parents would "interject or say things, which was good because I wanted it to be more of a conversation than just, you know, me talking at them" (Interview 1, p. 8).

Once parents had offered their comments and concerns, Jenny focused on students' strengths before moving on to progress in reading, writing, and math. In discussing these academic pieces, she would "go through each of those three, what we thought that they, you know, excelled in and what they needed to work on" (Interview 1, p. 5). She also made certain to address student behavior, followed by "the areas of focus throughout the whole conference that we think out of everything that this is really what your child needs to work on" (Interview 1, p. 5). Through these more directive statements, Jenny again utilized impression management, in which "a person takes on the responsibility of standing guard over the flow of events as they pass before him. He must ensure that a particular expressive order is sustained...so that anything that appears to be expressed by them will be consistent with his face" (Goffman, 1967, p. 9). While inviting parent collaboration, Jenny performed her role in parent-teacher conferences by positioning herself as leader and facilitator of the event. Finally, in closing the conference, Jenny asked parents questions about students' "home habits" (Interview 2, p. 7) and other things that could help her to better understand their behavior at school, a move that also marks her willingness to learn from parents. These moves positioned her as a teacher constructing a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference.

Teacher roles. When asked about teacher roles during conferences on her survey,

49

Jenny wrote that, as facilitator of the event, she "made sure the parents had the floor first to express any thoughts or concerns and then...started by discussing the child's strengths followed by any possible concerns" (Survey, q. 13). Jenny thought it was important to have a conversation about "how can we, me as the teacher and you as the parent, work together to...make sure that your child is excelling and is where they need to be" (Interview 1, p. 16). Her words positioned Jenny as one who viewed her role as constructing a relationship with parents to find ways to support children, which is the basis of a figured world of the parent-teacher conference in which teachers collaborate with parents.

Parent roles. In answer to the question, "What are parents' roles and responsibilities in participating in parent-teacher conferences, Jenny wrote:

I believe a child's learning should be a coolaboration [*sic*] between the student, the teacher and the parents. It is important that the parents are fully aware of how the student is doing in school as they are a key player in the student's success (Survey, q. 14).

This statement positions parents as having considerable agency in helping their children to be successful in school. One means of employing this agency, according to Jenny, was for parents to participate in their child's school experience by coming into the classroom to work with students or help the teacher in other ways. Jenny also suggested that parents share information that could help teachers to be more effective in working with students:

I think it's always helpful to be able to understand the child better and...see where the child's [*sic*] coming from as to why they do certain things that they

50

do…having that home to school connection can do nothing but help you understand why they don't like to do certain – like math or something (Interview 2, p. 8).

Here Jenny portrayed parents as a source of information and knowledge, having useful insights that can help her to better understand her students. A third role Jenny saw for each parent is as "a key player in the student's success" (Survey, q. 14). She commented that parents can help their child to "see the bigger picture" (Interview, p. 14) so they could become responsible for and excited about their own learning.

Through her answer, Jenny indicated that her expectations for parents were high. She did not simply expect parents to attend conferences, sit passively and listen. Based in part on the figured world she co-constructed with parents in this event and her experiences participating in other figured worlds of parent-teacher interactions, she envisioned parent roles as interacting with teachers and their child over the course of the entire school year. This long-term focus is a feature of the figured world of the parent-teacher conference in which teachers collaborate with parents; conferences are not simply one performance, but rather one piece of an ongoing relationship constructed by teacher, parents, and child.

Talking about literacy. As a means of preparing to discuss literacy during parent-teacher conferences, Jenny and her mentor put together a chronological portfolio of all pieces of each child's writing throughout the year, laid out month by month, so parents could see how their children's writing had improved. When I asked Jenny to describe one literacy artifact that she used in conducting parent-teacher conferences, she chose to share a one-page guide that described primary reading stages, defining terms like *emergent,*

51

moderately fluent, and *fluent,* etc. for parents. She viewed this artifact as important in that it corresponded to DRA (Directed Reading Assessment) levels, the school measure of literacy progress for first-graders, in a way that made the scores more transparent to parents:

> We wouldn't just rattle off DRA scores and how many words they could get because that, to most parents that doesn't mean anything...we could show them, this is where your student's at and this is where we want them to be. (Interview 1, p. 12)

This choice of artifact is in keeping with Jenny's collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference in that it exhibits a willingness to empower parents by giving them a key to unlock the meaning of numerical DRA scores. This allowed them to participate more fully in a conversation about their child's literacy progress.

After reviewing this with parents, Jenny moved to a discussion of children's fluency and general interest in reading. While Jenny did not mention whether this was created by herself or her mentor, an additional handout they provided for parents offered ways to make writing enjoyable at home, including ideas for journaling, writing grocery lists, etc. While this artifact was, in a sense, prescriptive in that it focused on specific ways for parents to increase children's opportunities for writing at home, it was given to all parents (not just those whose children struggled with writing) and offered a number of ideas that parents could choose from. In this manner, it empowered parents by giving them choices for creating time with their children around academics, tying back to her perception of parents as key players in the students' success.

Narratives: Most productive conference. When asked about her most productive conference, Jenny related a story about one of her students who entered first grade not recognizing letters and sounds, and was, in fact, on a retention list. His parents, who were separated, disagreed on how best to support him; one asked Jenny and her mentor to refer him for resource room help, while the other disagreed:

> And so the first conferences were kind of - we left not really sure what to do because of that split in what they wanted. So we actually ended up seeing a major improvement throughout the year with him. And I know that, I think that kind of - the first conference had really made dad realize we need to really work with him. And so his dad was really working with him at home and - I mean I don't know if mom was either, but I know that he was being worked with at home.

> And so then spring conferences, we had just wonderful things to tell them about how much he had improved. And I think that that was one of my best conferences that I've sat in or even been a part of because it was good news to tell them, you know, and they were just so relieved to hear all the positive things to say about his improvement. And that kind of squashed the whole argument about what to do with him, too. (Interview 2, p. 1-2)

Not only was Jenny excited about the child's success and the father's delight in his son's progress; she admitted that one strong emotion running through her was relief. Jenny recognized that parent-teacher conferences are sites for confrontation and disagreement as well as collaboration. The divergent perspectives of parents and teachers, each knowing a child in different ways, guarantees that they will not always be "on the same page." This may lead to conflict: conferences may not run smoothly, nor will the

end result necessarily be agreement on all sides. Even experienced teachers working toward creating collaborative relationships with parents may sometimes experience fear in speaking with them (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2003). In fact, one reason that this particular conference may have been so memorable to Jenny is because of the perception of a high-stakes "axe" of a possible special education evaluation and placement hanging over the heads of all participants. This example is also instructive in that the "wonderful things" Jenny was able to share with the parents were not due solely to the effort put in by herself and her mentor; rather, it was an effort on all sides (although not a co-constructed plan) including parent (in this case, the father), teachers, and child – that made for a successful outcome in Jenny's eyes, reinforcing for her a figured world of the parent-teacher conference in which teachers collaborate with parents.

Narratives: Most challenging conference. In contrast, when asked about her most challenging conference, Jenny immediately mentioned a conference with parents of a young girl who had a speech problem: "We had one conference where this family – this mom and this dad – we just kind of always seemed like we were working against each other" (Interview 2, p. 3). The problem, according to Jenny, revolved around the fact that the girl "had a hard time getting her words out and she would repeat words over and over again" (Interview 2, p. 3). As a result, the girl was receiving assistance from the school's speech therapist. At the fall conference led by her mentor, Jenny remembered the mother reporting that

> she was just very concerned about our classroom atmosphere affecting her
> daughter's speech, saying that it wasn't structured and that made her nervous and
> made her stutter more, and that - our classroom, we had 14 boys and 7 girls. So it

was a lot of boys...it was a very high-energy classroom, and she thought that that was - this was all working against her speech and that it was making it worse. (Interview 2, p. 4)

Jenny remembered hearing her mentor reassure the mother that all of the children responded well to the structure of the classroom. However, at the time, Jenny was uncomfortable because "it was kind of like bashing my collaborating teacher and how she ran the classroom" (Interview 2, p. 6). Additionally, the mother would often stop in when she dropped her daughter off in the morning and make comments to Jenny about how disappointed she was with the school. On numerous occasions, she negatively compared Hillcrest with their prior school in another state, which Jenny stated "made her nervous" (Interview 2, p. 6). One reason for this may be that the mother's comments positioned her between the parent and her mentor. While Jenny did not talk about how she responded to the parent when this occurred, these comments were uncomfortable for Jenny to hear given her strong identification with her mentor and her desire to collaborate with parents. However, as Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) explain, "figured worlds are socially organized and reproduced...they divide and relate participants (almost as roles), and they depend upon the interaction and intersubjectivity for perpetuation" (p. 52). These particular parents seemed to be reading from a different script: they did not behave as though they shared the same social and cultural understandings about how parents and teachers interact to support children that Jenny and her mentor held. While their perceived criticisms and negative comments may simply have been their means of expressing concern for their daughter, they served to distance these parents from Jenny and her mentor.

Little wonder that Jenny was glad this conference took place within an annual IEP meeting the month prior to regularly scheduled conferences. This also meant that Jenny's mentor, the speech therapist, and reading consultant were also on hand for the meeting. These other school personnel had "a lot of input," for which Jenny was grateful, sharing that "it wasn't all me having to, you know, let her know about the progress." And yet, giving her own input at the IEP still felt like a treacherous space for Jenny, one she described as "nerve-wracking":

> That one was probably my most uncomfortable conference, because - just because I had known how they had reacted in the past and they just - it was just hard to - you know, I was nervous if they were not liking what I was saying or not liking what I was doing. And just past experience had made me a little nervous about that conference. (Interview 2, p. 5)

Negotiating her role in the conference with these parents may have been difficult in part because of the element of unpredictability. Based on the mother's comments about her mentor, Jenny's perception was that in speaking with these parents, she opened herself up to possible criticism or even an attack, an uncomfortable space for even experienced educators. Lawrence-Lightfoot describes parent-teacher conferences as "a ritualized and dramatized space" in which both parents and teachers may feel "competitive, exposed, and defensive" (2003, p. xxi). This describes the tenor of this conference, which is a far cry from the parent-teacher relationships Jenny described previously from her own childhood, as well as her experiences with parents at the preschool at which she worked.

An added layer in this interaction is Jenny's desire to be perceived as *teacher* in this situation, a professional position in which she has previously received respect. Jenny was rightly uncertain about garnering this level of respect from these parents, who had been so critical of her mentor previously. The history with this particular parent did not fit comfortably into Jenny's schema for these relationships in that she perceived a challenge to the authority she had appropriated in her role as teacher. Based on the mother's previous behavior, she was afraid these parents might challenge this authority, choosing not to fit into her picture of the way parents and teachers cooperate.

Jenny was exposed here to a different "figured world of teaching, a world with already existing antagonisms between schools and home" (Graue, 2005, p. 160). These parents provided evidence of those antagonisms, and demonstrated a disregard for the authority of her mentor teacher, and therefore, for Jenny. This was unfamiliar territory for her based on the fact that her experiences with parents to that point had been primarily positive.

Impact of conferences on instructional practices. Jenny was clear about the importance of parent-teacher conferences on her instructional practice. She stated that parents "often have some insight into why a student behaves in a certain way" (Survey, q. 15), so she felt comfortable tapping on them for advice to help her in working with their child. She wrote, "meeting with the parents helped me to better understand the student and why they do the things they do" (Survey, q. 15). Their insights, as she noted earlier, provided her with information that she found helpful not only for getting to know her students better, but also in understanding how to motivate them. Parents' willingness to share their insights with her when problems arose may have contributed to her

willingness to open the conference with parents' comments and concerns.

Other Group Members. In addition to Jenny, four other prospective teachers responded to survey questions in ways that indicated that they shared the figured world of the parent-teacher conference in which teachers collaborate with parents. While I did not collect psychohistorical data on these group members, I did gather data on their goals for parent-teacher conferences, understandings of teacher and parent roles in these events, how literacy was discussed, and the impact of conferences on their instructional practices. In this section, I will demonstrate that whereas these are unique individuals, the figured world they share is not unique.

Background. Becky, Kayla, Jasmine, and Sam are four other members of this particular group sharing a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. Sam had one parent who was a college graduate and another who had done post-graduate work. She majored in elementary education and had a language arts minor. She recalled learning about parent involvement in nine of her teacher education courses, and parent-teacher conferences in four.

Becky's parents were both high school graduates. She had a major in elementary education, and a social studies minor. She recalled learning about parent involvement in eight of her teacher education courses, and parent-teacher conferences in three.

Kayla's parents had both earned college degrees. Her major was elementary education and her minor was language arts. She learned about parent involvement in ten of her teacher education courses (including one course in special education and another in child development). Parent-teacher conferences were a part of four teacher education courses.

Jasmine's parents were both college graduates and her father had done post-graduate work. Jasmine stood out in this group in that she had earned a degree in Family and Community Services prior to her teacher education degree. She was a child development major having a language arts minor. She noted that parent involvement was studied, talked about, or experienced in nine of ten courses in her teacher education and family and child ecology courses. Parent-teacher conferences were mentioned in class conversations in four of her teacher education courses. In particular, Jasmine wrote, "in the last few courses before the internship...we talked about how to lead them and in (Ms. X's) social studies course, she gave us ways to incorporate the students to be part of that. I tried this and it seemed to be a big hit with the families" (Survey, q. 10).

Internship experience. Becky, Jasmine, and Kayla interned in urban schools having highly diverse populations, while Sam taught in a suburban school in which almost 90% of students were White. However, unlike Jenny's internship placement, in all four cases, the schools had a much higher proportion of students qualifying for a free or reduced-price lunch than the state average of 37% (Appendix A). These parents earning low incomes are "often parents of color or newly arrived immigrants, who feel uncomfortable coming to school...who have no idea how to negotiate the institutional bureaucracy, and who tend to see the teacher as the ultimate authority and rarely question her judgment" (Lightfoot, 2003, p. 109). Many of these parents may be intimidated by schools and not feel comfortable on school turf. This group of parents may also be working more than one job to make ends meet, causing them to be less available during school hours. This poses an additional challenge to teachers wishing to collaborate with parents.

Both Sam, (who taught in a first-grade classroom) and Becky, (who taught in a second-grade classroom) interned with mentors having nine or more years of experience whom they rated as having excellent relationships with parents. Kayla interned in a third-grade classroom with a mentor who also had over nine years of teaching experience, who she rated as good, the second highest category. Jasmine interned in a second grade classroom taught by a mentor having between six and nine years of experience. When asked to rate her mentor's relationships with parents, out of five choices (excellent, good, fair, poor, or don't know) she rated her as "fair," the second to lowest category. When asked why, Jasmine blamed her mentor for not working at developing good relationships with parents at the outset:

> It just seemed like at the beginning either it wasn't really important for her to initialize those relationships and really work towards those...And especially in a lower income area where there's things that...the parents can really bring into your classroom as far as diversity is concerned in a lot of different ways...So I noticed that she didn't really try very hard at the very beginning of the year. (Interview 1, p. 4)

Her use of the word "initialize" was interesting in this context. To initialize something is to set a starting value or to begin. Jasmine's construction of these relationships was that it is a teacher's responsibility to initiate and promote them, and she perceived that her mentor did not make that effort.

Conference goals. Becky's primary goal for parent-teacher conferences was to give parents "a feel for what their students were doing in class" by "having students become the teachers and having them lead activities with their parents to share their

learning" (Survey, q. 11). Other goals she listed were to let parents know where their child was academically and to share tools with parents to help the child be successful. Kayla's primary goals for conferences included helping parents "gain a better understanding of where their children were at" as well as to discuss "any problems or concerns that I or they might have about their child and what we can do to work on or fix the problem" (Survey, q. 11).

Sam had a number of goals for conferences that centered around two ideas, both of which are elements of a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. She wrote:

I wanted to continue a positive relationship and keep open lines of communication with the parents. I wanted to give the parents and [sic] opportunity to voice their concerns. I wanted to point out strengths and opportunities with their individual students. I wanted to share growth, celebrate their child's progress, and voice concerns and collaborate to form solutions to problems. (Survey, q. 11)

The first of idea in her answer is to use conferences as a piece of an ongoing relationship with parents; the second is supporting the relationship between parents and children around learning. In her answer, Sam positioned herself as a partner with both parent and child through her use of words like "share," "celebrate," and "collaborate." She expressed an interest in what parents had to say, and indicated throughout her answer that communication was key to her goals for parent-teacher conferences.

Jasmine's goals for leading parent-teacher conferences illustrate her willingness to let parents and children take the spotlight to further the child's learning:

My primary goal was to develop the relationship between the child and the parent

and having that child have ownership of their work over the course of the year. (Interview 1, p. 15)

On her survey, she added her role in furthering her goals:

I also saw this as a time to discuss concerns from either end. I felt that the report card was only a guide for all of the things that we could discuss or show to the parents about what we were doing in the classroom. (Survey, q. 11)

Jasmine's goals for parent-teacher conferences were quite broad. Her plan for these student-led conferences was for parents to "get to experience their child and what they have to show them. I also feel that this is a good time for them to ask questions about my teaching, their student's progress or behaviors as well as what kinds of things we do in the classroom" (Survey, q. 14). She viewed conferences as "a time to discuss concerns from either end" (Survey, q. 11), indicating a willingness to be open to parent input about what she might do to help their child. In their answers, there is evidence that these four prospective teachers figure the conference space as one in which they hold conversations with parents and, in some cases, students, about students' progress and how best to support them.

Teacher roles and responsibilities. In constructing a format for student-led conferences, Becky created four activity stations – math, reading, science, and social studies - for students to lead their parents through. After completing the activities at each station, they joined Becky and she reviewed the report card with both parents and child. She shared any concerns she had and listened to "parent concerns about their child or the classroom in general" (Survey, q. 13). If concerns were voiced, "we came up with a plan or made arrangements to meet again" (Survey, q. 13) indicating a long-term view of these

62

relationships. She was prepared with "a folder with some of the resources that parents might need to help their student in their weak areas...I discussed these resources and how to use them" (Survey, q. 13). In this construction of conferences, Becky's eye (like Jasmine's) was on developing the relationship between parent and child (in her creation of stations), and on supporting both the family (in her collection of resources) and the child (in creating a plan) for the balance of the year.

Kayla wrote that her role in conferences was to "let the parents know how their individual child was coming along in the school year" (Survey, q. 13). She commented, however, on the fact that many students "were absent or had no input," and wrote that in the future, she would "be more than interested in conducting student-led parent conferences. I think that this would allow the students to take more responsibility for their work and have pride in it as well" (Survey, q. 13). While the primary role Kayla noted for conferences is one in which she informed parents, I do not have information that would indicate whether this protocol was her own construction or if she was in a position in which she needed to follow the conference format set by her mentor. As guests in their mentor teacher's classroom, prospective teachers must play the role of student in that the mentor evaluates their performance as *teacher* for the students in the classroom. This becomes even more complicated during parent-teacher conferences, when they also perform their role as teacher for another audience: parents.

Sam wrote, "As a teacher, I am in a partnership with the parents and my role is to discuss parent concerns, give an honest picture of their progress, and instigate conversations that center around the students and their continued growth" (Survey, q. 13). It is telling that the first piece of her role she addressed was the importance of partnering

with parents, using conferences as a mechanism to further this goal. She exhibited a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference in her choice to lead conversations focusing on students and their "continued growth" as opposed to conversations that solely inform parents of students' progress. Talking about students' growth indicates a future orientation; talking only about students' progress orients the focus on past performance. This future orientation is a feature of a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. In looking at this event as one moment in an ongoing relationship, teachers' eyes are not only on past and current performance, but also on exploring future avenues to promote student success.

In speaking about her own role in parent-teacher conferences, Jasmine clearly stated that she was the facilitator of the conference, but that both parents and children played important parts, as well:

> I think that I need to lead discussion to get things started, but I want the child and their parent to use this opportunity to create a better bond about academics. I also think that there are some subjects and assessments that I need to talk about, but I think that I need to give concrete examples and have the documentation to back it up. If I do things right, this will not be the only time I converse with the parents about their child, either good or bad. (Survey, q. 13)

In figuring herself as a teacher, Jasmine created an agenda for conferences that may have been informed both by her child development background and teacher education. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) might refer to the creative way in which she merged these two disciplines, one in which Jasmine exercised agency in utilizing the cultural tools at her disposal in creative ways, as *improvisations* (p. 18).

Parent roles and responsibilities. Becky viewed parents' roles and responsibilities as centering on furthering the relationship between parent and child. She wrote that they should "come willing to participate and learn from their child because the students really seem to enjoy sharing their learning with their parents" (Survey, q. 14). In this statement, Becky minimized her own presence and committed to furthering the parent-child relationship around the child's school experiences.

While Kayla noted that parents first "will likely want to listen to what the teacher has to say about their student" (Survey, q. 14), her view of conferencing also empowered parents: "the parents should feel more than comfortable to confront the teacher with any questions, comments or concerns" (Survey, q. 14). By using the word "confront," Kayla figured herself as a teacher who recognizes that, in choosing to advocate for their child, parents may figuratively place themselves across from, rather than next to, teachers. Few other prospective teachers wrote or spoke about this possibility; the fact that she considered it says much about her willingness to accede that parents may have strong views about what is good for their child, even if they may disagree with her in her role as teacher.

Sam held high expectations for parents: "Parents should be open and honest with the teacher and be willing to do whatever needs to be done to help their child be successful at home and school" (Survey, q. 14). Like the other prospective teachers who share a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference, Sam viewed parents as knowledgeable and capable, and looked to them to advocate for their own child. She listed some specific ways that they could accomplish this, which included voicing concerns, sharing stories of success, and being open to new ideas, "keeping the

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best interests of their child in mind" (Survey, q. 14). Sam, like Kayla, did not seem to feel threatened by talking with parents who advocated for their children.

Jasmine envisioned parents playing an important role in the conferences, and enjoying their child's progress:

> They get to experience their child and what they have to show them. I also feel that this is a good time for them to ask questions about my teaching, their students' progress or behaviors as well as what kinds of things we do in the classroom. (Survey, q. 14)

Her description of parents' roles was fairly open-ended; she viewed parents as having considerable agency in the conference and wanted to encourage them to participate fully, treating her like a partner.

Talking about literacy. One survey question focused on literacy: "What literacy artifacts did you share with parents during conferences? Why did you choose these particular artifacts?" Since literacy is arguably the most important subject matter in the early elementary grades, it must be noted that while prospective teachers seemed to have had some input into the choice of artifacts, those used for the literacy piece of the conference may have been chosen, suggested, or constricted by mentor teachers. However, prospective teachers' interpretations about why these artifacts were chosen can be useful in revealing more about the figured world of the parent-teacher conference in which they participated.

Each of these four prospective teachers showcased children's literacy development in slightly different ways. When asked about literacy artifacts used during the conferences, Becky chose students' response journals because they wrote in them

three times each week, so it allowed parents "to see the growth that their child had over the course of the year" (Survey, q. 12). She also believed that "parents would like to see the ideas that their students had" (Survey, q. 12). Her focus here was on artifacts that showcased students' growth. Kayla's approach to choosing literacy artifacts was unique in that she chose different artifacts to represent each student's work. Her goal was to choose pieces "that the parent could be proud of. So, while for one student I might have chosen a poster/artistic book project we had done, I might have chosen a unique writing sample for another student" (Survey, q. 12). She also shared artifacts that highlighted areas of concern. In this way, she used particular pieces of each student's work to help her tell a story about that student's progress.

In discussing literacy with parents, Sam's goal was to provide a "balanced view of their child's literacy abilities" (Survey, q. 12). To accomplish this, she used multiple artifacts, including a prompted writing activity used as an assessment piece, handwriting samples, formal and informal reading assessments, and writing samples from writing workshops. Additionally, she shared notes and observations she had made, as well as photographs of children interacting around literacy in the classroom. These last pieces helped her to explain the contexts of the other artifacts, which she used as prompts to "discuss strengths, concerns, and opportunities for growth" (Survey, q. 12).

In keeping with her desire to have the child be the focus of the conference, Jasmine invited each child to read stories they had written and published aloud to their parents: "it was really cool to watch the kids read their stories and have ownership of their work and they were really proud of it... And to watch them kind of, you know, say

'this is my story'" (Interview 1, p. 8). Jasmine was obviously proud of her students and enjoyed watching them read and "have ownership" over their work.

In their answers, each of these prospective teachers showcases students' growth with multiple artifacts. Becky accomplished this through student journals, Kayla chose different artifacts for each student, Sam relied on multiple work samples and photographs, and Jasmine invited students to read their stories aloud. These artifacts were ones that could set the stage for conversations about literacy progress and goals. Again, in this way, conferences were not fixed solely on what children had accomplished up to that point; rather, they become a space to discuss opportunities for growth, which is a feature of a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference.

The impact of conferences instructional practices. Consistent themes running through Becky's answers to previous questions are the importance of fostering the parent-child relationship around learning, and a partnership mindset for problem-solving involving herself, parents, and children. Yet, she wrote that she did not find herself changing any instructional practices as a result of parent-teacher conferences. So, to some degree, it would seem that Becky did not utilize parent knowledge as a resource. However, in her other responses, the ways in which she worked to foster parent-child relationships during conferences indicate that she viewed conferences as one piece of an ongoing relationship with parents centered on supporting children. It is possible that she was moving across the collaboration-centered and instructive-centered figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference.

Kayla wrote that parent-teacher conferences *did* have an influence on her instructional practice. In an example she shared, a particular student struggled to focus on

trying to complete his work, but was having difficulties. After Kayla expressed her concerns during conferences, the boy's mother made some suggestions that she and her mentor implemented. The result was that the student's productivity increased significantly. She learned from this experience that parents can "really provide you with insight to how their student might be thinking or feeling about certain things. They can provide the teacher with new strategies to help their child cope" (Survey, q. 15).

Sam also provided several specific examples of ways in which conducting parent-teacher conferences influenced her instructional practices. She wrote about parents who "voiced concerns and shared best practices they had found when working with their child at home" (Survey, q. 15), practices that she was able to implement in the classroom to help those students. She also wrote:

> A parent expressed frustration with working with her child at home, so we found an older student to tutor her child in school. Two parents discussed that their children were having trouble hearing the lesson, so I introduced technology to amplify my voice. I provided more embedded assessments into my instruction so I would be able to include more artifacts to share with parents in the future. (Survey, q. 15)

These examples demonstrate a responsiveness that exemplifies Sam's desire to collaborate with parents. In these two examples, Kayla and Sam demonstrate a recognition that parents can be an important source of helpful information, which may have contributed to their construction of a collaborative-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference.

Jasmine, also, said that parent-teacher conferences influenced her instructional practice. Although she did not collect any information from most parents, Jasmine felt that conferences helped her to know the families better in that she learned more about what parents thought was important. She also used conferences to modifying her teaching practice in the following ways:

> I will make sure to start the student portfolios at the beginning as well as make sure that I do a variety of assessments so the parents can clearly see where their student may need extra support. I will continue to send home ideas to how parents can work with their child about each topic we are covering, but I also want to make sure that the parents are somewhat held accountable at home, too…in a non-invasive way. (Survey, q. 15)

This last phrase is interesting in that it modifies the conference agenda to become a space in which parents are "held accountable… too" albeit in a "non-invasive way," for their child's progress or lack thereof. While there is an element of evaluation embedded in this comment, her desire to hold them accountable is in keeping with the agency Jasmine attributed to parents during the conference experience. She expected parents to ask questions about her teaching, and in return, placed expectations on them.

Summary. All five of these prospective teachers – Jenny, Becky, Kayla, Sam, and Jasmine –constructed a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. They were informed, by all of the figured worlds of their own histories and the classrooms and settings in which they worked with parents and children, to figure themselves as teachers who wish to create collaborative relationships with parents across the school year as a means of supporting student success (although, again, there is no

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evidence that this is a deliberate process). On average, Jenny and the other four women in this group indicated that they had studied, talked about, or had experiences with parent involvement in 8.6 of their teacher education courses (including courses in child development and special education) and parent-teacher conferences in 4.4 courses on average over the span of their teacher education program. These averages were higher than those of either of the other two groups (see Chapters 4 and 5). This group of women, then, displayed a higher degree of awareness of these two topics than did the other prospective teachers who participated in this study. Additionally, interview data from Jenny and Jasmine revealed that both had extensive experiences working with parents and children prior to their internship.

The prospective teachers in this group viewed parent-teacher conferences as one piece of an ongoing conversation with parents that extending across the entire school year. This long-range view mediated the experience of conducting conferences. Stretching the goal of creating these collaborative relationships with parents over the course of a year allowed room for mistakes and for growth; focusing on creating these relationships in the span of 15-20 minutes twice yearly would have created a much more intimidating and unlikely scenario.

It is interesting that all of these teachers (with the exception of Jenny) interned in settings in which the majority of parents differed from them in terms of race, culture, socioeconomic status, or some combination of these. This did not seem to dampen their enthusiasm for developing collaborative relationships with parents. A benefit of viewing conferences as one important piece of an ongoing conversation with parents is that it may have lowered the stakes a bit for these events, potentially enabling prospective teachers to

be more resilient in their reactions to conflict and less focused on perceived mistakes. This does not mean that these events were unproblematic: one area in which problems arose was when parents did not share the same collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference, as evidenced in Jenny's narrative of her most challenging conference.

In co-constructing collaborative relationships with parents during conferences, these prospective teachers perceived parents as having considerable agency and power to affect positive changes for children. In Jenny's narrative of her most productive conference, for example, she remarked on the fact that the boy's improvements were a result of efforts on the part of the child's father as well as herself and her mentor. While these prospective teachers did inform parents of children's progress during this event, it was not, then, the sole (or even primary) focus of the conversation. In each case, these prospective teachers and parents discussed future actions to be taken to support children.

During parent-teacher conferences, these prospective teachers looked beyond the classroom, viewing the home as a site that plays a very important part in a child's life. This can be seen in their interest in promoting conversations between parents and children around academics, as Jasmine did. There is additional evidence of this in the ways in which they chose to co-construct conversations about children's progress. In order to accomplish this, they "share growth," "celebrate" children's progress, "voice concerns" and "collaborate," "let parents know," and "instigate conversations," among other actions. In these ways, they presented themselves as teachers who invited conversations with parents not only about children's successes, but also about their struggles.

This data also reveals evidence of these prospective teachers' willingness to discuss children's progress in their choices of artifacts used to discuss literacy. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) wrote, "Artifacts 'open up' figured worlds. They are the means by which figured worlds are evoked, collectively developed, individually learned, and made socially and personally powerful" (p. 61). Each of these prospective teachers chose a rich assortment of children's work and assessments – even, in Kayla's case, personalizing the artifacts chosen for each student – rather than simply presenting parents with a report card or a battery of test scores. Collecting and presenting parents with an assortment of literacy artifacts above and beyond the report card or scores is indicative of a particular type of impression management positioning prospective teachers to have an open conversation about progress and next steps with parents.

These five prospective teachers acted within a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. These teachers considered parent knowledge as an important tool for better understanding the children in their classes; all but one of these prospective teachers recognized that parents had information that was beneficial to their instructional practice. This group expressed the expectation that it is reasonable to co-construct the conference space with parents, a position which imbued parents with agency to participate as full members of the ensemble in supporting children as learners. While there is little evidence to indicate or to refute that these prospective teachers consciously drew upon their backgrounds to inform these decisions, these prospective teachers enacted parent-teacher conferences as a space in which they could further develop collaborative relationships with parents for the purposes of supporting children in overcoming challenges and building on successes. Recalling Goffman's theater

metaphor (1959), it is as though the women in this collaboration-centered figured world of parent-teacher conferences are actors in a brightly lit theater (their classroom) and can see the audience (including parents) clearly. They fashion a performance in which they reach out to bring audience members up on stage so that parents, too, become part of the ensemble.

Chapter 4: The Parent-Teacher Conference as a Figured World in Which Teachers Instruct Parents

In this chapter, I will explore the experiences of a group of prospective teachers who share an instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. These young women's performances are informed by this particular figured world of the parent-teacher conference, which provides a context and meaning for their actions, and shapes the ways in which they interact with parents (Holland et al., 1998). Again drawing on Goffman's (1959) metaphor of social interaction as theater, these parent-teacher conferences can be viewed as part of a theatrical production in which the figured world becomes a significant factor that informs the types of impression management prospective teachers incorporate into their performances. In this chapter, I will first identify and explore features of this figured world of parent-teacher conferences through a case study of Liz, another prospective teacher who recently led conferences as part of her internship experience in this same teacher education program. I will then provide supporting examples of other prospective teachers sharing this instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference and look across their responses to further explore the commonalities (as well as some differences) shared by this group.

<div align="center">

Liz

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Psychohistorical Context of Liz' Figured World of the Parent-Teacher Conference. As will be elaborated below, Liz' experience with parent-teacher interactions prior to her teacher-preparation internship informed how she imagined the parent-teacher conference. These prior experiences informed her understandings, and as such are valuable in helping to understand the construction of the instruction-centered figured world of the parent-

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teacher conference. It is important to note that although Liz exhibited a figured world composed, among other possibilities, of her experiences with the activity settings discussed below, this is not to suggest that Liz deliberately drew on these experiences and reflected on how her previous experiences might or might not relate to the current activity setting in which she was teaching.

Conference

Personal history with parent involvement. Liz said that while she knew that her parents supported her in school, their interactions with the schools were rare. Her father, a high school graduate, was not available to come to her school often. Her mother, a college graduate, ran a daycare out of their home, so she rarely came into Liz's classroom. The one event Liz remembered her parents attending was parent-teacher conferences. However, by the time her younger siblings started school, Liz's mother had changed careers and become a realtor. Because of this, she was able to set her own schedule and spend time in their classrooms, and Liz admitted to feeling jealous. Liz did recall that her mother supported her by helping with homework and "pushing me to read by buying lots of books." While she did not appreciate this at the time, she certainly does now, calling herself "the biggest reader ever" (Interview 2, p. 5).

Prior experience working with children and parents. The only experience Liz mentioned in which she worked with children prior to her internship took place during her time at the university. She tutored in an after-school program for minority students in grades K-3. Children were bussed directly from schools to the tutoring program at the end of the school day, and were fed a snack. As a volunteer, Liz helped with homework and played games with the children. Liz stated, "we really didn't see the parents until

they picked them up, so…it wasn't much parent involvement there" (Interview 1, p. 1).

Experiences in teacher education coursework. Liz graduated from the university with an elementary education major and math and geography minor. She recalls that parent involvement was discussed in conversations in four of her teacher education courses, and as a part of field experiences in two others. Parent-teacher conferences came up as a topic during field instruction in one course and again in conversations in two others.

From several of her teacher education courses prior to her internship, Liz learned about different ways of "gathering information about her students" (Interview 2, p. 3). In particular, Liz talked about a math methods course in which she learned to create "smartness charts" (Interview 2, p. 4) built from a collection of student assessments, which could help her to identify students' strengths. As she said,

> knowing *how* to assess, and knowing I needed artifacts helped to prepare me for conferences 'cause then I could *use* these in conferences to relay the information to the parents. So I mean the TE classes were helpful…they didn't necessarily say you *need* to do this for conferences, but they connected to conferences. (Interview 2, p. 4-5)

Liz recognized the practical application of this type of tool in helping to create a portrait of students that she could share with parents. From her comments, we see that Liz displayed an understanding of parent-teacher conferences as opportunities to relate information to parents.

Internship experience: Observed interactions with parents in the overall school context. Liz interned in a second grade classroom at Winter Elementary, an urban school

serving students in pre-kindergarten through grade five. Located in the heart of a city of approximately 120,000, Winter Elementary has a diverse population in terms of both race and socioeconomic status. Approximately three-quarters of the student body were eligible for the free and reduced-price lunch program, far above the state average of 37 percent. A school of approximately 300 students, Winter Elementary made AYP for 2007, the latest year for which scores were reported (See Appendix A). Class sizes at this elementary school averaged eighteen students per full-time teacher, compared to the state average of twenty-two.

Liz remarked that parents were not often visible at her school. When I asked about school-wide parent participation, her only observation was that the mother of one of the students in her classroom was the president of the PTA. She knew this mother participated in different fundraisers like the school carnival.

Internship experience: Observed interactions with parents facilitated by mentor. Liz' mentor had over nine years of experience, and Liz rated her mentor's relationships with parents as "good," the second highest rating out of four. In spite of this rating, however, Liz reported that

> there wasn't a lot of parent involvement; like, they're not there every day, but the
>
> students know each other's parents 'cause when we have holiday parties, like
>
> Halloween and stuff, the parents come in and sit next to their kids and so the kids
>
> get used to the parents and talk to them and they're all friendly. (Interview 1, p. 2)

Liz said, for example, that although they tried to schedule field trips, "my teacher had a problem getting enough parents" (Interview 1, p. 1). As she commented, Liz did get to know a few parents "pretty well" because they dropped off and picked up their child.

She specifically mentioned one parent in particular who was new to the school; her child had joined the class in January. This particular parent called Liz to ask questions about the schedule and schoolwork. Liz also spoke with parents on a couple of occasions "because of behavior issues...the parents would come in and meet with me" (Interview 1, p. 4). She commented that a few other parents called with questions or concerns. Based on her remembrances of her own parents' infrequent interactions with the schools, this may not have been unusual to her. Liz expressed pride in the high attendance for parent-teacher conferences, "sometimes it's hard, because a lot of them come from the different backgrounds and they work a lot...but during conferences, we usually had, except for the last one, 100%, which is really nice" (Interview 1, p.1). From this information, we can see that parents did participate in her internship classroom, perhaps not as much as Liz would have liked, but enough for children to recognize each other's parents.

Psychohistorical Context for a Figured World in which Teachers Instruct Parents. The figured world of her internship classroom and the figured worlds that informed Liz also shaped the way in which Liz interacted with parents during parent-teacher conferences in her internship. The following section provides a description of how Liz prepared for and performed parent-teacher conferences.

Staging the physical setting. Liz said little about preparing the conference setting, other than noting that conferences took place around a rainbow-shaped table. During the fall conferences, Liz sat off to the side while her mentor sat at the table with the parents. Since Liz led the spring conferences, she sat in the center of the table across from the parents, and her mentor sat off to the side. Everyone sat in what she called "kiddie chairs" (Interview 1, p. 3). Conferences were scheduled for 15 minutes each, which she noted

was not a lot of time to review all of the material she had prepared. Although her conferences were teacher-led, Liz mentioned that her students were present at about half of the conferences.

Staging the artifacts associated with parent-teacher conferences. Liz prepared for parent-teacher conferences by compiling a stack of students' report cards and collecting stories students had written during writing workshop and putting them into a basket. She and her mentor had also pulled two writing samples for each student: one modeled from a template they had created for the class and the other a sample of a free-write on an assigned topic. Liz set aside students' most recent math tests as artifacts she could use in case parents had questions about their child's math grade. Writing samples and math assessments were put together in a separate folder for each child. Liz took time and care preparing the artifacts to highlight student performance and achievement for conferences, which was in line with her purpose of instructing parents. She displayed a low level of interest in preparing the setting for conferences. This makes sense, since, unlike artifacts, the setting is not as important for accomplishing her purpose of instructing parents.

Goals for parent-teacher conferences. Liz' primary goals for conference centered on "informing parents of how students were doing in school and with the content material and to address any concerns I had or the parents had" (Survey, q. 11). In order to do this, she would

> talk with the parents, let them know how things in the classroom were going... let
> them know if there were things that needed to be worked on, what they could do
> at home to help their students. You know, kinda, just let them know how their
> student was doing...in the classroom, and also to find out, like, if there was any

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concerns that the parents had, or if they had any questions about what they were

learning or how they could help them, you know, we, we addressed those.

(Interview 1, p. 7)

It was also important to her to make the parents feel "comfortable with the whole

process" (Interview 1, p. 7). In each part of this answer, the focus of the conference is on

imparting information about the child and about how parents can help the child at home.

Liz' goal of informing parents for the purposes of helping children to be successful

caused the conversation to be primarily one-way – from Liz as the teacher to her

audience, the parents. Parents could ask questions about what their children were learning

or how they might help them, both of which showcased Liz in the role of an authority,

and enabling her to present the type of impression she desired. Without an awareness of

who these parents were and about the home cultures of students in her classroom, the fact

that this group of parents were not often present at school may have further reinforced

Liz' understanding that they needed her guidance.

An example of how Liz presented information to parents was in a narrative about

a social studies unit on economics that she taught. Liz was particularly proud of the unit

she created, saying that one of the parents told her "my kid keeps coming home and

telling me about all this stuff and I have NO idea what they're really talking about"

(Interview 1, p. 2-3). An artifact she shared with me was the assessment for her unit,

which functioned as both a pre- and post-test, and included a list of key terms she wanted

students to know. She commented that "in the beginning one [pre-test], they kind of all

freaked out because they didn't know what any of them meant…at the end, pretty much

everybody had something for *everything*, even if it was wrong…which was good for me

to see they were at least… trying, and at least they had *some* ideas" (Interview 1, p. 4-5). She was excited to share these pre- and post-test results with parents because she was able to demonstrate that students had learned a lot of the vocabulary, like "opportunity costs" and "natural resources" (Interview 1, p. 5). Liz obviously enjoyed showing parents these pieces of evidence showcasing how much students learned. In addition to the fact that she had designed the unit, the students overall did very well on the assessments. Moreover, quantifiable evidence (like pre- and post-tests) made it relatively easy to demonstrate children's progress. In this case, Liz was delighted because the parents were not only willing to be informed, but also to be impressed.

Teacher roles. Liz was very specific about her role in leading parent-teacher conferences: "My role was to inform the parents of their student's progress in the classroom and to let them know what they can do to help their student outside the classroom" (Interview1, p.7). To accomplish this, Liz had a very tight agenda for the conferences she led. Parents were invited to walk into the room "when it was their time" (Interview1, p. 2) and join Liz and her mentor at the table. Liz opened the conference by handing parents the report card and letting them look it over while she went through the basket to find their child's story and pull out their work folder. While the parents reviewed the work folder, Liz would "start going through the report card, starting on one side and just going down the columns. Pretty much it was just starting, like, can they follow rules and everything" (Interview1, p.2). Using the report card to drive the agenda enabled Liz to keep a fairly tight rein on the limited conference time as well as on the flow of the conversation.

One piece informing the instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher

conference in which Liz participated was her opportunity to observe her mentor run

conferences in the fall and see "how she interacted with parents, so I kinda knew how to

interact with the parents" (Interview 2, p. 3). As conferences approached and she started

to "freak out" (Interview 2, p. 3), her mentor told her, "It's all right here in front of you.

They're not gonna be – they're not scared of you. They just want to find out where their

student is" (Interview 2, p. 3). This comment helps to shed light on the way in which Liz

presents information to parents. She worked hard to help parents find out "where their

student is" (Interview 2, p. 3) academically. This recognition that they are not frequent

participants in the school further positions the conference as a space to inform (rather

than partner) with parents in order to help children be successful.

In the following anecdote, we see evidence of how Liz uses student work as a tool

to accomplish her goal of informing parents. If a child's work had changed in some way,

she explained how she would show parents why their child received a lower grade by

going through the tests and work:

> we'd go through the test together. Like 'this is why... you can see that he's doing
>
> this or she's doing that and that's kind of reflected here.' That way, the parents
>
> could see and at the same time they could ask questions...I could kinda say, that
>
> 'in general, we've seen the class is kind of struggling with this part so we've
>
> given them some extra practice.' And then I'd tell them ... 'the students really
>
> enjoyed flash cards with money and time 'cause those are two big things in
>
> second grade.' And then we just talked about how they could practice it at home;
>
> 'give 'em some coins and have them count the money out to you' and stuff like

that. (Interview 1, p. 2)

In this example, Liz confidently provided evidence of her claim that a particular

child's scores had dropped, answered parent questions (if any), and prescribed activities

to help the student to be more successful. This clinical type of approach (evaluate, assess,

diagnose, and prescribe) is a form of impression management running through Liz'

discussions, that helps her to perform her role in parent-teacher conferences as a teacher

who instructs parents.

Parent roles. Observing her mentor lead conferences in the fall also was an

important factor in shaping the roles Liz envisioned for parents. In answer to the

question, "What are parents' roles and responsibilities in participating in parent-teacher

conferences?", parents' roles are distinct and unambiguous:

> The parents need to ask any questions or concerns they have pertaining to their
>
> student and his or her learning. They also need to be open to suggestions from the
>
> teacher on how to help or assist their student at home. They need to inform
>
> teachers of issues that may be affecting the student's learning. The parent and the
>
> teacher need to communicate during this time. (Survey, q. 14)

In her answer, Liz expressed her understanding that parents *need to* accomplish a

particular set of tasks during parent-teacher conferences: ask questions, express concerns,

be "open to suggestions" about helping their child at home, and inform the teacher about

issues impacting student learning. It is in the very last statement that we see one word,

"communicate," that indicates a partnering stance, yet even this is positioned as a

directive, as something parents "need to" do. The picture of parents' roles that Liz

painted is one of limited agency. Parents were to act primarily to align with the goals of teacher.

There is, again, an almost clinical precision in Liz' performance, both in this answer and others. She consistently referred to children as students, the role they played in her classroom. Parents do not have *children*; they have *students*. This is a theme running through all of her answers. In fact, looking across the entire text of both interviews (approximately 90 minutes of talk), Liz only used the word "child" in response to one question, even though the word "child" or "children" was used in nine of the interview questions. While it is in their role as "students" that Liz interacted with children, locking them into that role may have caused her to figure them as less complex and multi-faceted than they are. In this manner, her continuous use of the term "student" may have limited what she saw when she looked at them. From her answer above, it may also be the case that she has a similarly restrictive view of parents – or at least this group of parents – one in which their role is to listen to and learn from teachers.

Further evidence of this can be seen in the way Liz described her interactions with parents. When asked if she asked questions of the parents, her primary questions were whether parents had any questions or if they understood what she was telling them. Liz also sometimes asked, "'Are you doing anything at home with them [your student]?' just to find out what's happening outside the classroom or to help the parents with the student in their learning" (Interview 2, p. 3). If the parent said they were not, Liz told them, "well, you need to because they're struggling in school, so if they have extra practice at home it'll help them" (Interview 2, p. 2). This directive way of talking to parents sounds somewhat like a scolding, but Liz seemed unaware of this. She did not view parents as

having information that might be useful in helping her to educate their children. She was not aware of the fact that she could draw considerable information from them that might be useful to her instruction by modifying her question slightly. Rather than "*Are* you doing anything with your child?" she might have drawn richer responses by asking "*What* are you doing with your child?"

Given the limited interaction she remembered between home and school from her childhood and her scarce experience with parents prior to her internship, Liz may have simply perceived that she was being helpful to this group of diverse parents who she positioned as having less knowledge and experience in educational matters than she. It is not clear if she would have perceived all parents in the same manner; however, she perceives this particular group of parents as an audience in need of the direction she, as *teacher*, could provide.

Talking about literacy. During conferences, Liz reviewed reading and writing with parents using students' DRA (Directed Reading Assessment) levels and writing samples. The DRA levels on the report cards – represented by a particular color – pinpointed students' reading levels. She talked about showing parents which color represented the level their child was reading at. She felt that using colors rather than DRA scores was easier for parents to understand, but did not explain why that might be the case.

Liz noted that a few parents challenged the fact that their child was still reading at the same color level in the spring conference as they had been in the fall. Having scores from the DRA assessments enabled her to say "that's not bad, because they're reading at third grade level…you can see from their fluency score right here that they're getting

99%, but their comprehension down here is a little bit lower so that's what we want to work on" (Interview 1, p. 6). Liz told me that this helped parents to see why their child was "at" a particular color. She told me that parents with whom she did this responded with, "Oh, they're not understanding what they're reading. They're reading very well. They can READ it, but they can't UNDERSTAND it" (Interview 1, p. 6). Liz shared that at that point, she sometimes asked if students were reading at home, and if so, what they were reading. Then she would recommend things parents could do at home to help, like asking children questions about what they read. She was concerned that her students spent too much time watching TV – which may have been another reason she offered recommendations – but again positions this group of parents as needing instruction in how to guide their children toward success in success in school. She manages her impression as a teacher who relates to parents by instructing them.

Liz used the two writing pieces mentioned earlier to talk about the progress students were making in writing. The first sample was created from a template. In this writing piece, students incorporated their own ideas by filling in the blanks. The second was a free-write piece. Comparing the two writing samples allowed Liz to make the case with parents that a particular child was or was not utilizing the format she had taught. She had to tell some parents "when we're doing it together, he can do this or this, but on his own, he struggles with this and this... it was nice 'cause the parents were like, 'Oh, I see'" (Interview 1, p.2). Again, Liz uses evidence to support her claims and show parents, in very concrete and quantifiable ways, what their children knew about writing. Informed by her experiences as a child, work experiences with parents and children, teacher

education coursework and experiences, and her internship experiences, she again

performs her role as *teacher* as one in which she informs parents.

At this time, if children were present during these teacher-led conferences, Liz

would ask them to read stories they authored aloud and then show their parents around

the classroom. If the child was not present, Liz let the parents read through their child's

story. She mentioned no discussion about the ideas the child had written about or

represented; the purpose of using this artifact seemed to be to demonstrate children's

writing proficiency and understandings of punctuation and grammar.

When asked specifically about what questions she asked to learn about children's

home literacy practices, Liz asked two questions. The first was whether parents read with

their child at home, requiring only a "yes" or "no" answer and putting parents in a

position of being accountable to her. The second was *what* they read, although she did

not mention making use of this information. Information in this conference, in which Liz

constructed a figured world in which teachers inform parents, flowed primarily

unidirectionally, from school to home.

Narratives: Most productive conference. According to Liz, her most productive

conference involved a second-grade boy identified by her mentor (not by a doctor) at the

beginning of the year as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactive disorder). Liz did not

comment on how her mentor came to this conclusion, and did not seem to see any

problem with the fact that her mentor offered a diagnosis; in fact, her comments below

indicate that she agreed with her mentor's opinion. When this topic was brought up at the

fall conferences led by her mentor, the boy's father admitted to having been diagnosed as

having ADHD himself, and he said that he would get the his son tested. However, he did

not follow through. As the school year progressed, Liz admitted that the boy "had a tendency to be out of his seat, or just doing his own thing." Liz admitted that the child "tried to defy me a little bit," so prior to conferences she had spoken with both his mother and stepmother about his behavior.

> Both mom and stepmom showed up and they got right into it? They talked to me… about what he's doing, how he's doing, and they were ready to get him tested and get him going. They were just preparing me for what…paperwork I would have to fill out from the doctor and things like that. So it was very nice for them to come in, at these conferences, and he was there too, so he could sort of, ya know, 'why do you think you're doing this?' and so it's, everybody got involved. So it was a very productive conference cause then he DID get tested, he did get put on meds and his behavior changed radically. (Interview 2, p. 1)

> Liz was obviously relieved that the mother and stepmother were supportive of her (and her mentor's) suggestion to have the child assessed, and felt the conference went well because everyone, including the child, "got involved." What may also have contributed to her good feelings about the conference was the fact that the mother and stepmother followed the suggestions made by her and her mentor, positioning them as accepting her instruction. She had expected them to be more resistant:

> I thought it was going to be more difficult than what it was… I mean, but actually it went really well. I did expect it to be difficult, but they were SO open and understanding about what was going on. I mean, they were talking to me about what was going on, about things they were trying to do at home, like, at one point we had him on daily progress reports…when he came home with a frown on his

daily progress report, he'd end up writing sentences, and he'd bring those sentences in to me so I could see that his mom was trying to make him have consequences at home, too, for his behavior at school so it was really nice that we all got the chance to communicate and get it solved. (Interview 2, p. 1-2)

While she was obviously happy with the outcome of this conference, what she missed, was the importance of the outreach made by the mother and stepmother (who were supporting her by giving the boy negative consequences when he received a negative progress report). In the instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference, the focus is one of talking *at,* rather than *with,* parents. Liz' narrative points to little two-way communication throughout the school year: even though she had spoken with the parents earlier about the boy's behavior, Liz seemed not to be aware that they were following through at home for what happened during the school day. Had there been more ongoing communication between home and school, the boy might have experienced less frustration (and less acting out) earlier in the school year.

Moreover, with little experience to inform a knowledge of how to talk with and create ongoing working relationships with parents from either her own personal history, her work with children and parents, and teacher education coursework, Liz did not recognize the potential for a partnership that she could build upon to continue to support the child. What she *did* see and express was that the conference was "very productive" because the parents followed through on what she and her mentor had suggested: the boy was tested and put on medication, and his behavior in the classroom improved.

Narratives: Most challenging conference. According to Liz, her most challenging conference was one involving a student who worked with a special education teacher for

reading and several other subjects. There was apparently a mix-up in the scheduling for conferences, and the special education teacher did not show up at the time assigned for this conference. After waiting for a few minutes, Liz began the conference and handed the mother the report card. However, since the special education teacher marked several sections of the card, including the literacy section, Liz wasn't sure what to do next. Liz told the mother, "Well, you can look at the report card here. If you have any questions, you can stop by her room and see if she's there, or she'll contact you if she has anything important" (Interview 2, p. 1). As Liz noted, "it was just kind of weird, because we just kind of waited" (Interview 2, p. 1).

With no real agenda, since the special education teacher was to have led the conference, Liz did not know what to do. She specifically mentioned the fact that she felt that she could not address any questions the mother might have on those parts of the report card. When I asked her what made this so difficult, she said that it was being left with an "'oh, I don't know what we're doing now!' type of feeling" (Interview 2, p. 2). This situation was difficult for Liz on a number of levels. Liz expressed embarrassment: perceiving herself as a knowledgeable teacher whose role is to inform parents, she had to face the fact that she could not address questions or concerns for this parent. She was not able to manage this parent's impression of her as she so carefully had with the others. Without the information from the special education teacher, Liz had no point of reference for the act that she was to perform. Missing that information, Liz found herself in the uncomfortable position of not being knowledgeable enough to conduct this particular conference as confidently as she had the others.

Impact of conferences on instructional practices. Liz wrote that her instructional

practices did change "in a way" (Survey, q. 15) as a result of leading parent-teacher conferences. She learned of the importance of having "artifacts and evidence of what the student is learning and you want to make sure you have work that supports what is written in report cards and what the teacher has to say" (Survey, q. 15). This procedural focus serves several purposes. First, sharing artifacts with parents helps them to construct a better understanding of what is going on in school and how their child is progressing, and can provide logic for report card marks. Having evidence that supports report card marks and teacher claims provides a measure of protection for the teacher, who can use this if challenged by parents. Liz did not express an awareness that an artifact may serve different purposes and may be used to showcase different things. A writing sample, for example, can be used to showcase a child's knowledge of a particular subject, grammatical ability, creativity, an understanding of genre, etc. In the an instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference, Liz primarily spoke about artifacts as tools for the teacher to demonstrate to parents discrete skills children have or have not mastered.

Liz also wrote that parent-teacher conferences offer teachers "the opportunity to explain the significance of the work to the parents" (Survey, q. 15). The pieces she focused on and used for parent-teacher conferences (for example, the "smartness charts" from her teacher education coursework) were those that helped her to more successfully manage the conference and further her purpose of informing parents. She emulated a clinical model in which she assessed and evaluated student work in order to come with a diagnosis, which led to a prescription of what parents could do at home to help. With this being the case, the impact of parent-teacher conferences on Liz' instructional practices

had little to do with what she might have learned about children and parents, and much to do with what parents needed to learn about, from artifacts to the significance of student work. She displayed little awareness of the benefits of forming ongoing relationships with parents throughout the year and, therefore, little interest in follow-up after the event.

Other Group Members. In addition to Liz, twelve other prospective teachers responded to survey questions in ways that indicated that they shared the figured world of the parent-teacher conference in which teachers instruct parents. While I did not collect psychohistorical data on these group members, I did gather data on their goals for parent-teacher conferences, understandings of teacher and parent roles in these events, how literacy was discussed, and the impact of conferences on their instructional practices. In this section, I will demonstrate that whereas these are unique individuals, the figured world they share is not unique.

Background. Because of the size of this group, it is easier to get a feel for who they are by looking across the group. Ten of these teachers majored in elementary education, while one majored in language arts, and another double-majored in both. Five chose language arts as a minor, while one chose integrated sciences, another math and history, and a final prospective teacher chose math and TESOL (teaching English to students of other languages). In looking across the group, seven of their mothers were high school graduates, three were college graduates, and two had done post-graduate work. Looking across their fathers' education, four had fathers who were high school graduates, five had fathers who graduated from college, and three had fathers who had continued into post-graduate work.

When asked about parent involvement in their teacher education coursework, on average, they noted conversations, readings, or field experiences on average in 5.76 of their courses. Parent-teacher conferences were a part of teacher education coursework or experiences in an average of 3.64 courses. In both cases, this is less than the averages from the collaborative group. It is possible that these prospective teachers actually took fewer courses in which these topics were mentioned, or perhaps the topics may have been mentioned in non-memorable ways. It could be the case that these topics were not of enough interest to these prospective teachers be noticed or remembered.

Internship experience. The majority of these prospective teachers were placed in urban schools having a diverse population in terms of race, culture, and socioeconomic status (See Appendix A). Eleven of the twelve had experienced mentors who had over nine years of teaching experience. One prospective teacher who interned with a teacher having between six and nine years of experience rated her as having excellent relations with parents. Of these, eight rated their mentors as having excellent relations with parents, two rated their mentors as having good relations with parents (the second category from the top), and one rated her mentor as having poor relations with parents, the lowest category. The twelfth prospective teacher, who interned with a teacher having between six and nine years of experience, rated her mentor as having excellent relations with parents.

Conference goals. This group of prospective teachers – Lilly, Janet, Chloe, Marie, Anna, Gail, Wendy, Linda, Renee, Betsy, Hannah, and Lindsey – listed a variety of primary goals for conferences (Survey question 11). Both Lilly and Anna wrote that their primary goal was to inform parents about student progress, and Lilly added that she tried

to "express to them behavior and participation of their child in class," as well as "show

the parents examples of work" and "tell them what would be coming up next...and to

allow time for questions." Janet wanted to show parents "their child's accomplishments

in school." She also included her desire to "have pleasant and meaningful conversations,

set goals for education at home and school...and gave suggestions for further growth

when necessary." It was not clear from her answer if parents participated in goal-setting

for their child; this seems to have been one place where they had the opportunity to

provide input. Lindsey hoped to "communicate effectively to the parents of my

students...[my school] has a high ELL population – therefore my biggest goal was to

make sure the parents understood me." Significant in her response is the fact that she

wishes to communicate *to* parents, not *with* them, indicating a one-way conversation.

Chloe's goals were to

denote students' progress in grade level expectations and standards as well as

their holistic development. Answer questions and concerns of parents. Encourage

a feeling of being on a team for the student, which I think is important for parents

of young students just starting their relationship with school as a parent.

However, she, as well as Janet, did not write about how parents are encouraged to

feel like they are on a team when she was the one supplying all of the information and

answers. Both Renee and Hannah wanted to share strengths and concerns about the

students with their parents, and Hannah "tried to put a positive spin on them...rather than

conducting the conversation with a negative tone."

Janet and Betsy focused on their own growth in answering this question. In

addition to her answer above, Janet's goal was to "make connections with parents – show

95

parent/guardians that I really know their child and genuinely care about their child's success – be comfortable yet professional." Her answer focused on parents' perceptions of herself. Betsy's goal was to "gain the experience of conducting conferences and to build relationships with parents and families of the children in our room. To begin to understand the dynamics between parents and teachers and how that link works together or against each other." While part of Betsy's answer focused on creating partnerships with parents, it would appear that these were not in place prior to conferences. In Janet's and Betsy's cases, these prospective teachers focus on their own acquisition of knowledge as a primary goal for conferences, which may be a reasonable stance if they had little prior opportunity to interact with parents. Linda's answer was unique in this group. She began her answer by noting that her goals were to address questions or comments, "allow" parents to visit the classroom, give scores to parents and share upcoming topics. She then wrote,

> I do not necessarily 'believe in' parent teacher conferences. I think all the above needs to be given to parents starting at the beginning of the year and continue til [sic] the last day of school. Report cards should never be a shock to parents. Setting one day after each report card does not make any sense and is opposite of what parents and teachers should do: communicate when bad grades are seen and behavior is a problem.

Her answer offers a picture of parent-teacher interactions as ongoing throughout the school year; however, these ongoing relationships only occur when children experience problems in school. While frequent and ongoing interaction in this case is

very important, for the remainder of the year, and for all children who do not experience problems with grades or behavior, Linda does not seem to see a need for ongoing contact.

Teacher roles and responsibilities. Prospective teachers' responses to Survey question 13, "How do you see your role as a teacher in leading parent teacher conferences", were similar in some important ways. All of them had to do with providing information about student progress to parents. Prospective teachers would "tell," "explain," "show," "walk parents through marks on report cards," "inform," "effectively communicate," "added any additional information," "make parents aware," "guide parents through," and "talk with parents about their child's behavior, things the child had accomplished, and what they still needed to work on." In each case, the primary role of teachers was to inform parents of children's progress, behavior, and what they were currently working on.

Some of these prospective teachers added additional roles for themselves. Janet added that she was "open to any conversation about the student during class activities, and how to help their child at home." Lilly, Hannah, and Anna wrote about answering parent questions. After informing parents of students' progress, Lindsey wrote that it was her role to "voice any concerns I have for their child socially or academically," and added that it was also her role "to be a listener and hear what the parents have to say."

Two prospective teachers included working *with* in addition to informing parents. Gail noted that she wanted to "work together with them to ensure the student's success," while Marie wished to "facilitate a conversation in which the parent as well as child's concerns are addressed." Marie then added, "How can I better meet the needs of both parent and child?" These answers are atypical for teachers who share an instruction-

centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference, and indicate that she may, to some degree, in a collaboration-centered world of the parent-teacher conference.

Parent roles and responsibilities. In looking across the answers to Survey question 14, "What are parents' roles and responsibilities in participating in parent-teacher conferences," several themes emerge. Seven of the prospective teachers mentioned that important roles for parents are to show up and listen. Wendy and Chloe both stated that parents must first be physically present at conferences. According to Lilly, it was important for parents to listen "in order to become informed of the son/daughter's progress in class." Anna suggested that parents should "go to conferences with an open mind, ready to hear what the teacher may have to say and respond in a constructive way." Gail and Lindsey also stressed the importance of parents listening with an open mind, with Lindsay adding that it is "their responsibility to use suggestions and ideas presented by the teacher to help their child succeed." Betsy and Hannah recommended that parents listen in order to understand children's progress. Serving as an audience for the teacher is a theme running through both Liz' and Nita's answers, as well. In each of these cases, parents' roles are primarily passive in that the goal is to learn about their child's progress and be supportive of the teacher. Only one prospective teacher wrote about the fact that parents may choose to respond: Anna noted that after listening to the teacher, parents should "respond in a constructive way that will be in the best interests of the child." She does not write, however, who would be the best judge of that; one may assume, from her initial comment, that parents "should go to conferences with an open mind," that the teacher's opinion would be of higher value than that of parents.

Four prospective teachers –Wendy, Lilly, and Linda, and Renee – wrote that another important role for parents is to ask questions. Renee wrote that parents could "ask any questions about the curriculum and what the students were doing at school," while Linda recommended that parents "ask questions when they do not understand, and follow up with advice given by the teacher." These young women positioned teachers as being more knowledgeable and having greater expertise than parents about children's progress. In this case, parents' roles were to be accepting of and tap on this knowledge. In this manner, parents were positioned primarily as receivers, rather than producers or co-producers, of knowledge, and this is in line with the instruction-centered figured world of the parent teacher conference.

Wendy's answer was more general: "I also think that questions are very important and if they have any they should ask." Lilly's answer differed from these in her willingness to listen to and talk with, rather than at, parents: "parents should express any concerns they may have or ask any questions they need to ask the teacher. The parents and teacher should work together and feel comfortable with one another to discuss any problems or successes." Lilly perceived parents' roles as more of a partnership, yet even she is very definite, using the word "should" in describing ways for parents to participate. Her answer leads one to believe that she saw a "right" and "wrong" way for parents to participate. Gail, also, constructed parents' roles as a partnership with teachers: "parents need to be willing to work together with the teacher in order to do what is in the child's best interest." Again, we see that there is a "right" and "wrong" way to participate, based on the teacher's definition of the child's best interest.

Several answers specifically addressed parents' roles at home. Betsy wrote that the parents' role is "to understand the progress of their children to facilitate activities at home to boost their children's skills in order to succeed either in the current grade, next grade, or both." Marie also wrote about the importance of parents learning about what parents "need to do at home to help their child succeed in school." Linda wanted to see parents "follow up with advice given by the teacher," a highly directive view of parent-teacher interactions in which parents respond to teachers' perceived expertise. These answers again highlight a prescriptive approach in which the parent comes to conferences for the purpose of getting the teachers' evaluation of their child along with a prescription of how to repair any problems. Chloe was the only prospective teacher who seemed interested in creating a partnership. She wrote that parents' roles include "joining in on the discussion of the student's progress and helping to develop a plan for improvement," an indication that she was willing to not only listen to parents, but also to partner with them in creating such a plan to benefit their child. Overall, in their answers to this particular question, parents' roles were primarily to listen, ask questions if clarification was necessary, and find out how to help their child to be successful in school by deferring to teachers' expertise and knowledge.

Talking about literacy. The responses from prospective teachers to Survey question 12, "What literacy artifacts did you share with parents during conferences?" and "Why did you choose these particular artifacts?" garnered a wide range of answers. A number of different types of assessments were shared with parents. These included standardized assessments like DRA, the Developmental Writing Assessment, and practice MEAP scores as well as informal measures like running records, pre-assessments

for a particular unit, a concepts of print assessment, and literacy assessments from a particular text series. Marie wrote that assessments "showed parents where their child was as far as the benchmarks for second grade. It was also a specific way to explain to parents the pieces of reading that we focus on "comprehension, fluency and accuracy." Betsy noted, "assessments were chosen as they are the core concepts of the general curriculum." A number of these assessments are ones that would require explanations, enabling prospective teachers to again create the impression of themselves as teachers who instruct parents.

Other pieces used to show literacy progress included letters to pen pals, literacy and math journals, student-produced books, and worksheets. Renee chose a combination of assessments and student work so that "if they were having trouble, the assessments and student work were proof for the parents to see." Several prospective teachers used work that showcased students' progress in literacy over the course of the year. Hannah, for example, shared students' journals with parents so they could see "how far their writing and content had advanced throughout the school year." Gail used "published writing" samples "to show progression throughout the year." Janet used running records, taken three times over the span of the year, to showcase student progress. Hannah shared two reasons for going through students' poetry books: "it was a great item to show parents because all students were creative in their writing and it was something I worked hard to plan." While this artifact was useful in showing parents something about their child, it is interesting that Hannah also used it to draw attention to her own work. This desire for recognition from parents is more typical of teachers sharing a third figured world (which

will be described in the next chapter). However, the rest of Hannah's answers positioned her in this group sharing a figured world in which teachers instruct parents.

In addition to other artifacts, Lindsey wrote "for specific students (those that made outstanding progress in reading and writing), I chose to show parents their portfolios which contained evidence of their growth since the beginning of the year." What is interesting is that she did not choose to do this for *all* of the parents, who may have appreciated seeing their child's progress, even if were not "outstanding." Janet wrote about creating portfolios for each of her students including work from thematic units taught throughout the year, assessments, and pictures of students reading and writing. She noted, "All of these artifacts show progression in a kindergarten classroom." Chloe, also, was very deliberate in selecting artifacts to share with parents. While her mentor chose the writing samples to be shared with parents, she "added a few others for certain students as I felt was necessary…because the sample didn't adequately reflect the student's ability." Another artifact her mentor chose was a "lucky book" in which the students copied "I feel (un)lucky when…" She wrote "this was helpful because it was standardized and provided easy comparison." This degree of personalization was unique among prospective teachers in this group. Generally, with the exception of Janet and Chloe, the artifacts used by this group of teachers enabled them to make or back up claims they wished to make with parents (in terms of grades or comments).

Impact of conferences on instructional practices. While only two prospective teachers said that leading parent-teacher conferences had not impacted her instructional practice (Survey question 16), three others offered "procedural" pieces that they learned as a result of these experiences. Hannah learned about the importance of timing units in

order to complete them before parent-teacher conferences. She ran into a problem in that a math unit she was teaching had not been completed, so she gave students a grade of "incomplete" for the unit. When parents expressed concerns, she had to spend time reassuring them that the grade represented that children had not yet learned the skills, not that they had not mastered the content. Anna recognized a need to collect "data on an everyday basis" as a result of parent-teacher conferences, but did not provide a reason why this was necessary. Chloe learned about procedural changes she would make. She recognized that she needed "to save time just before conferences to acquire up-to-date work samples." Betsy learned about the importance of assessment, writing that it "influences the way in which you assess all children's work to hold them and yourself accountable in order to communicate their progress to parents during conferences."

Two others learned about the importance of communicating with parents. Linda recognized "how important it was to communicate with parents before the conferences." She stated that "A teacher needs to prevent the conversations which could happen at conferences instead of have to explain them," suggesting that she may have had to deal with parents who may have been upset over their child's grades or lack of progress. She also learned "how involved and uninvolved some parents can be in their child's life." For these reasons, she recognized that she wanted to communicate more frequently with parents in a variety of ways. Wendy learned about taking care in speaking to parents. As she wrote, "the way I talk to parents is very important because they are all different and you have to handle each a different way. Especially if it is concerning a particular issue about a disability or possible retention." We might gather from her comments that she, also, may have had unpleasant experiences with parents, who may have felt blindsided if

they had not had previous interactions with her or her mentor about emotionally charged issues like possible retention prior to conferences. Renee found that conducting parent-teacher conferences changed her instructional practice in that she chose to begin sending papers home more often "to show parents what we were working on. I really wanted to keep them involved in the classroom and the learning of their child." For those sharing an instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference, their eye is on this particular one performance. While, like Renee, they may have considered sending work home as a way of informing parents, it is not highly likely that they would give much thought to the idea of meeting with parents prior to this event.

As a result of the conferences they conducted, a final group gave answers that suggest an understanding of the importance of parental input. Lilly noted that the conferences

> allowed me to take the feedback from my parents and what they had to say about my teaching to put or keep in practice. It is important to do so because parents know different aspects of their son/daughter that you may not know as a teacher and you need to be open to what parents have to say.

Marie recognized "the importance of home-school communication. I was able to better understand each child as well as their home life that they brought to the classroom. This helped me individualize instruction for my students to better meet their needs." These comments position these two prospective teachers as listeners during the conference. Additionally, they did not only wish to listen to parents; they also wanted to incorporate what they learned from parents to better understand and instruct their students. Janet stated that parent-teacher conferences influenced her instructional practice

by "showing me what parents expect from their children. Students should be given high, achievable expectations." While it is not clear what she means by this, her answer does indicate that she, too, listened to parents. These prospective teachers' answers to this question do not fit neatly within the boundaries of this particular figured world; perhaps these particular interns are moving between collaborative and instructive figured worlds.

Summary. These thirteen prospective teachers all share an instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. Examples of ways they enacted this goal include denoting students' progress, showing examples of student work and children's accomplishments, and sharing strengths and concerns about students. While most responses had a strong instructional flavor, some wished for these meetings to include "pleasant and meaningful conversations" with two examples including making connections with parents and putting a positive spin on children's progress. Running through their answers are assumptions that teachers have important information to share, and that parents can benefit by their guidance and suggestions. A number of these prospective teachers recognize that parents or children may have questions and concerns, and see it as their duty to provide information to help them, as evidenced in Liz' directions to parents.

This group of prospective teachers shares a common understanding of the roles for parents and teachers. Parents, as audience, were most often assigned the part of receivers rather than as producers or co-producers of knowledge. Their primary roles included showing up and listening, coming to conferences with an open mind, and using teacher suggestions and ideas to help their child succeed. While their answers demonstrated that these prospective teachers credited parents with agency and believed

105

they could be effective in helping their children, few in this group mentioned a desire to partner or co-construct a plan with parents to help children to be successful in school. As Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) explain, "figured worlds distribute 'us,' not only by relating actors to landscapes of action...but also by giving the landscape human voice and tone (p. 52). In the case of prospective teachers having an instruction-centered figured world, they view themselves as though they were positioned across from, rather than next to, parents. Perhaps in part because of cultural and socioeconomic differences between themselves and parents, most of these prospective teachers perceived that parents needed guidance in knowing how to help their children, both academically and socially. Without perceiving a need to examine their own possible biases or beliefs about parents who differ from them, these prospective teachers seem to have perceived that guiding and instructing are part of a teacher's role, positioning parents as subordinates.

While a few in this group of teachers did gather information from parents, it was collected to address problems in the classroom rather than as a means of getting to know the parents and better understanding the home learning environment. Some sought to make parents comfortable (by starting conferences with a positive comment before addressing concerns). Several indicated that they looked beyond academics in viewing the child, but only Betsy expressed a wish to build relationships with parents, one very important way to accomplish this goal. So, while it is obvious that these young women wished to have good relationships with parents, they knew of limited ways to act in order to create this. Liz' example of her mentor telling her not to worry, that parents would not be afraid of her at what was almost the end of the school year is indicative of a lack of

home/school interaction throughout the school year. This limited interaction may interfere with her good intentions to develop good working relationships with parents.

These thirteen prospective teachers acted within an instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. This group expressed the expectation that it is reasonable to co-construct the conference space with parents by shring what they knew with parents to help parents better support their children as learners. While there is little evidence to indicate or to refute that these prospective teachers consciously drew upon their backgrounds to inform these decisions, their answers and narratives above share a focus on an instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference and the impression management it entails: providing information to and teaching parents in order to support student learning. Recalling Goffman's (1959) theater metaphor, it is as though the women in this instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference are actors on a stage that is relatively close to the audience, so they are able to see the audience, but not clearly. From their vantage point, the audience looks homogeneous, so they tailor their performance to a single particular type. These prospective teachers view their entire audience as desiring to attend a performance that will be instructive, so they play their role in a way that will inform their audience of how to support student learning.

Chapter 5: The Parent-Teacher Conference as a Figured World in which Teachers
Impress Parents

In this chapter, I will explore the experiences of a group of prospective teachers
who share an *impression-centered* figured world of the parent-teacher conference. These
young women's performances in these events are informed by this particular figured
world of the parent-teacher conference, which provides a context and meaning for their
actions, and shapes the ways in which they interact with parents (Holland et al., 1998).
Drawing on Goffman's (1959) metaphor of social interaction as theater, the impression-
centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference can be viewed as part of a
theatrical production in which the figured world becomes a significant factor that informs
the types of impression management prospective teachers incorporate into their
performances. In this chapter, I will first identify and explore features of this figured
world of parent-teacher conferences through a case study of Abby, another prospective
teacher who recently led these conferences as part of an internship experience in this
same teacher education program. I will then provide supporting examples of other
prospective teachers sharing this impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher
conference and look across their responses to further explore the commonalities (as well
as some of the differences) shared by this group.

Abby

Psychohistorical Context of Abby's Figured World of the Parent-Teacher Conference. As
will be elaborated below, Abby's experience with parent-teacher interactions prior to her
teacher-preparation internship informed how she imagined the parent-teacher conference.
These prior experiences informed her understandings, and as such are valuable in helping

108

to understand the construction of the instruction-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. It is important to note that although Abby exhibited a figured world composed, among other possibilities, of her experiences with the activity settings discussed below, this is not to suggest that Abby deliberately drew on these experiences and reflected on how her previous experiences might or might not relate to the current activity setting in which she was teaching.

Personal history with parent involvement. Abby's parents, both high school graduates, divorced when she was five years old. While she does not remember her father ever interacting with or coming to her elementary school, she does remember that her mother worked at a job that allowed her to be present for all of her class field trips up through sixth grade. Abby also remembered her mother's attendance at parent-teacher conferences, and she spoke fondly about her mother baking treats for class parties. As a high school student, Abby was proud of the fact that her mother took time off of work to go with her class on their senior trip.

Because both of her parents talked with her about the importance of attending college and expected her to go, Abby assumed that they placed a high value on getting an education. As she said, "there really wasn't much choice. It had always been something that was important" (Interview 2, p. 6). While Abby definitely felt her parents' influence in her education, she had little experience seeing her parents interacting in the schools in direct ways. Her father had no interaction of any sort with the schools. Her mother's direct interactions with the school were fairly infrequent, since both field trips and conferences occurred no more than twice in a given school year.

Prior experience working with children and parents. Abby claimed that she

"didn't really have any background" (Interview 1, p. 1) in working with children and parents prior to her internship. When pressed for more information, Abby told me that her first experience working with children prior to her internship took place during her senior year of high school. During this apprenticeship, she was given the opportunity to work with children in a K-1 classroom for two hours each weekday. Once at the university, her work with children was more sporadic; she spent one month at a child development center as a requirement for one of her early teacher education courses, and then worked with students in a second grade classroom during a junior-level course. Abby remarked that she had no interactions with parents in any of these settings.

Experiences in teacher education coursework. On her survey, Abby marked that parent involvement was studied, talked about, or experienced in six courses over the course of her teacher education program: in two, through class conversations, two in readings in textbooks, and two in field experiences. When asked about parent-teacher conferences, Abby noted that the topic was discussed in class conversations in two of her teacher education courses, and in field instruction in two others. In the class conversations in one of these courses, Abby remembered that they talked about how to "word conversations" (Interview 2, p. 4) what to do in difficult situations, and practical considerations like how to quickly end a conference if time ran short. She said that she found this information helpful in leading parent-teacher conferences. From the history she provided, we can see that Abby had relatively little experience working with children and little, if any, access to parents prior to and during her time in the teacher education program at the university up to her internship experience. Thus, her focus up to this point had been on playing the role of teacher with students in the classroom. Although she was

informed by the figured worlds of her own personal history, the figured world in which Abby had been immersed prior to her internship provided limited opportunities that would enable her to begin constructing her teacher face, "an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes" (Goffman, 1967, p. 5) relative to her image of parents.

To lead parent-teacher conferences with this new audience (parents), Abby drew upon her remembered store of discrete information from conversations in one of her teacher education courses. She shared the following:

We just talked about difficult situations and what you might do and how you might want to word conversations and what to do if you realize your time is cutting short. How do you get the parents out of there and just different things like that. (Interview 2, p. 4)

The information she recalled targeted how to look and sound good (how to word conversations, handle difficult situations, how to end a conference); all of which are impression management tactics for performing her teacher role for her students' parents. In foregrounding the information she wished to share this audience, her goal was to come across as *teacher* – and is therefore on her own performance – rather than on forging relationships. Given her few observations of her own parents' interactions, her limited experience in working with children and parents, and the knowledge she gleaned from teacher education coursework, Abby had little direct experience with parent-teacher interactions that could inform her imaginings of the parent-teacher conference.

Internship experience: Observed interactions with parents in the overall school context. Abby's year-long internship took place at Winter Elementary, the same school at

which Liz interned (See Appendix A). Located in a city of approximately 120,000, Winter Elementary, with a population of approximately 300 students, has a highly diverse student body in terms of both race and socioeconomic status. A very high percentage of the students at this school, approximately three-quarters, were eligible for the free and reduced-price lunch program. As noted previously, Winter Elementary made AYP for 2007). Class sizes at Winter Elementary averaged eighteen students, compared to the state average of twenty-two (Appendix A).

Abby noticed little school-wide interaction between parents and school staff at Winter Elementary. Abby seemed to feel that there was little attempt made by the school to engage parents:

> I know parents worked during the day and stuff and like that, but just making them feel welcome that if they wanted to come in and spend an hour and see what their kids are learning or what they're doing...just to let them know that that's an option and they're *more* than welcome to come. (Interview 1, p. 3-4)

The only involvement she did see was "PTA-type things...basically that was it. If you needed help on a field trip, you would get volunteers for that, but I don't know of any parents just coming in to help do something for an hour academically" (Interview 1, p. 3). So when parents *did* participate, the avenues in which she observed them participating were ways in which her own mother had participated when Abby was a child. So while she observed that parents were not made to feel welcome, she may not have given much thought as to *why* this was the case, since her own parent participated in a similar manner.

Internship experience: Observed interactions with parents facilitated by mentor. Abby interned in a second-grade classroom within this particular figured world of her

internship school in which past history led to expectations that parents were either invisible or only peripherally present. On her survey, Abby rated her mentor teacher, who had over nine years of classroom experience, as having only "fair" relationships with parents (the third lowest of four categories). Abby described what she observed in her mentor's relationships with the parents of students in her classroom:

> There just really wasn't any interaction except for... we had an open house at the beginning of the year and there was only like four of our students' parents that showed up. And then there was [sic] conferences and that was really all except for the parents who did come in and then volunteer at our parties and things like that. It just didn't seem like she went out of her way to make contact. (Interview 1, p. 3)

Abby was put in charge of creating a monthly newsletter, which, she noted, was the only other interaction with parents. The newsletter included information about what students were learning in each academic subject, information on "specials" (art, gym class, class parties), and requests for donations. It was Abby's idea to include photos of the classroom activities students were engaged in "so the parents could get a glimpse of things that they normally wouldn't be able to see" (Interview 1, p. 2). This thoughtful move showed a desire on Abby's part to reach out to parents and give them the opportunity to actually see their child in the classroom through the photos; however, it was also a "safe" way to reach out in that the interaction is one-way – from school to home (although parents could respond to requests for donations, if they chose to). Abby did not notice any increased communication with parents as a result of her newsletter.

With little personal or school-related experience to inform her understandings, Abby was unsure of how to begin a dialogue with parents. It seemed that she had hoped that the newsletter, her initial attempt to reach out and into which she lavished much time and attention, would impress them, and help to build a bridge between her and parents. Abby did not have a figured world that supported sustained parent-teacher interactions, nor did she have the resources or experiences that might have helped her to be willing to take risks to change the nature of teacher-parent interactions in her internship classroom.

The only other interaction Abby had with parents was to call them to reschedule conferences if they missed coming at their assigned time. While Abby saw a need for more phone calls home for the purposes of talking to parents about behavioral issues, she admitted that there was not that level of interaction with parents on either her or her mentor's part. She also mentioned that she wanted to "extend an invitation for the parents to come in for an hour...just to see how things went or see how things work," because she thought that "parents feel that the teacher doesn't really want them in there" (Interview 2, p. 5). However, she had no real sense of how to invite this type of interaction, either from her prior experiences, her teacher education coursework, or her mentor.

While her desire was to make connections with parents, Abby's sparse experience and knowledge about who these parents were or how to reach them was put her at a disadvantage; as Goffman explains, the knowledge individual actors have about fellow participants is crucial, because "it is on the basis of this initial information that the individual starts to define the situation and starts to build up lines of responsive action" (1959, p. 10). In Abby's case, the few interactions she observed between her own parent

and teachers, sparse work experiences in which she interacted with parents, her teacher

education coursework, and infrequent interactions between parents and teachers in both

her internship school and classroom had not supported a figured world in which she

observed or participated in sustained teacher-parent interaction.

Psychohistorical Context for a Figured World in which Teachers Impress Parents. The

figured world of her internship classroom and the figured worlds that informed Abby

shaped the way in which she interacted with parents during parent-teacher conferences in

her internship. The following section provides a description of how Abby prepared for

and performed parent-teacher conferences.

Staging the physical setting. Unlike other prospective teachers, Abby did not

mention preparing the setting for conferences in any way prior to the event, even though

she recognized that coming into the classroom might be intimidating for some parents.

Abby was aware that "you always hear about the parents who don't want to come to

conferences because when they grew up their conferences were bad. I guess having it in

the classroom might make those people even more uncomfortable" (Interview 1, p. 5). In

her case, conferences were held in the classroom with parents and teachers seated at a

rainbow-shaped table. Abby told me that she chose to sit next to, rather than across from,

parents so they would feel more at ease. While she recognized how the setting could be

problematic for some parents, other than this one accommodation, the figured worlds that

informed her offered little in terms of ways to create a more inviting setting. This also

may not have been an area in which her mentor teacher was able to provide scaffolding.

Staging the artifacts associated with parent-teacher conferences. At Winter

Elementary, parents were given their child's report card at parent-teacher conferences, a

fact which troubled Abby because of how they were used by her mentor. During the first

semester when she observed her mentor leading conferences, Abby reported feeling

disappointed because her mentor simply "went over the report card in depth talking about

each specific mark, which I thought was pretty redundant and the parents can read"

(Interview 1, p. 4), a comment indicating her respect for parents. Although there may

have been other artifacts her mentor shared with parents during conferences, Abby did

not mention them. She noted that while giving out the report card was mandatory, she at

least wanted to give parents "an overview of each section and then to show examples…so

I could back up what I was talking about" (Interview 1, p. 4). So that this evidence

would be readily available, Abby pulled together artifacts that she felt demonstrated

students' learning in different subject areas prior to conferences. These included a math

assessment that highlighted skills students were currently working on and a writing

assignment that was tied to a social studies unit she had developed (and of which she was

very proud). For literacy, she used student's DRA scores and booklets students wrote.

While Abby *did* review report cards at conferences, she purposefully pushed

against emulating her mentor's procedure not only because she thought it disrespectful of

parents, but also, perhaps, because (as noted in her ranking of her mentor's relationships

with parents) she viewed her mentor as not being highly successful with them. She began

each conference with report cards and "tried to go over the ones [grades] that were a little

more difficult to understand" (Interview 1, p. 4), but primarily just wanted to give parents

an overview of each section. She spent the majority of her time showing parents

examples pulled from the student work she had collected. Informed by the figured worlds

of parent-teacher interactions in which she had previously acted as a child, a teacher's

116

apprentice, and a teacher preparation student, Abby was developing a conferencing

protocol that diverged from that of her mentor in order to figure herself as a teacher who

impressed parents. In this manner, Abby was developing her own "authorial stance"

(Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, p. 183, 1998). However, it must be noted that

there is no evidence that she purposively drew upon her own background to inform her

decision to craft this revised protocol.

In preparing for conferences, Abby stated that the most helpful resource was a

book owned by her mentor had that offered ways to word comments on report cards. As

Abby said, "it gave the characteristics," and "then it gave you examples of how to word

it" (Interview 2, p. 3). She found the book particularly helpful when she wanted to write

about a problem she saw with a student because it offered "really nice ways of saying

certain things without sounding rude" (Interview 2, p. 4). As she authored her teaching

identity, she used this book as a tool to help her to write in a more professional and

"teacher-like" manner, another form of impression management. As Abby stated, this

book also offered ways to deliver potentially negative news in a non-confrontational way,

which was important not only because she cared about her students' parents (as

evidenced by her expressed purposes for improvising the way in which she used the

report card), but also because it enabled her to look and sound like a professional, better

positioning her to impress parents.

Goals for parent-teacher conferences. An important goal for conducting parent-

teacher conferences for Abby was the opportunity to be perceived enacting the role of

teacher. She was happy with conferences overall because they

enabled the parents to see me as an actual teacher figure...because basically

conferences were the only time they saw me and if their kids didn't go home and talk about school, then they wouldn't really know that I was doing stuff that was so good. (Interview 1, p. 5)

In constructing her professional teaching identity, Abby was interested in showing parents the time and effort she put into her teaching. She compared her own teaching to that of her mentor, stating that *her* teaching was more interesting and exciting for students than her mentor's, a fact which she thought made parents more comfortable with her. Abby's desire was to impress parents; her focus was on how she herself was being perceived in the moment-to-moment interactions during conferences.

This focus on her performance as *teacher* was again evident when she told me about talking with parents about students who were not making adequate progress: "It's not so much the parent you're worried about...you're more worried about yourself and how you're going to come across when you're trying to tell them" (Interview 1, p. 6). Here again, Abby's focus is on how well she performs the role of teacher with this new (and perceived as difficult-to-please) audience: parents. This makes sense in light of her inexperience with parents: unsure of other ways to relate to them, at least she can impress them with her face as a teaching professional. Additionally, the facework she enacts here may also help to deflect criticism; if she did a good job of impressing parents, they might be less likely to challenge her observations and conclusions, hence her desire to master discrete bits of knowledge, like how to "word things."

An added layer of this interaction was the fact that she had a second audience: her mentor teacher, for whom she was performing. This is also a high-stakes interaction, in that her mentor's task was not only to support, but also to evaluate her performance

during each conference. Goffman (1959) states, "Performers often feel uneasy in the presence of a trainer...Trainers tend to evoke for the performer a vivid image of himself that he had repressed, a self-image of someone engaged in the clumsy and embarrassing process of becoming" (p. 158). Even with her expressed lack of respect for her mentor's skills in interacting with parents, this must have placed additional pressure on Abby as she worked to successfully manage the impression of competence and confidence she wished to portray to these two audiences.

Another goal Abby mentioned was "to just get through the report card and make sure that they didn't have any questions" (Interview 1, p. 8). She expressed concerned that parents might think that "I was just picking a check or plus or whatever based on what had been done before" (Interview 1, p. 8). For this reason, it was important to Abby to provide evidence for the report card marks, another move that dissociated her from her mentor. Abby reiterated several times that she "wanted to have the artifacts there to back up my thinking" so that "parents could actually see it and not just have to take my word for it" (Interview 1, p. 8). The artifacts, then, served multiple purposes: as a reference and springboard from which she could discuss student progress with parents, as support and evidence for her claims (report card marks), and to show parents that she was "being fair." Using these artifacts, Abby is "producing, from the cultural resources available, understandings" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998, p. 4) that are not only *about* herself (she uses artifacts as a tool), but also *for* herself (teachers, as professionals, use artifacts for the purposes stated above), as well as for parents. In collecting and presenting artifacts to support her claims, Abby portrayed herself as a professional, again managing the impression she gave to parents.

This air of professionalism may also have been particularly important to Abby in part because of the scant interaction she had with this group of parents throughout the year. This lack of familiarity and experience with her students' parents, as well as her belief that they may have had "bad experiences" with schooling in the past, may well have caused her to regard them with some degree of trepidation. While she recognized that parents' history might cause stress or problems for them, she did not know what to do with this information. The figured worlds which informed Abby did not offer her many alternatives or directions upon which she could tap to help her make sense of, or know what to do, in this situation. In this case, having evidence to support report card marks - an evaluation of their children - provided a measure of security for Abby. Her use of artifacts as proof may, in her mind, have served to deflect unwanted confrontation or complaints from this group of unknown (and thus, unpredictable) parents. As noted earlier, an important goal for her was "to just get through the report card" " (Interview 1, p. 8). Her prior experience as a child, child-related work experience, and teacher preparation did not provide her with a big picture view of conferences as a piece of an ongoing relationship with parents that focused on helping children to be successful; it makes sense that Abby's eye would be on how best to manage moment-to-moment interactions within the event, which her use of artifacts helped her to do.

Teacher roles. In defining her role as teacher, Abby again referenced her understandings about her students' parents:

> My role was to keep the conference moving forward and to also make the parents
>
> feel comfortable and that they were not being judged or criticized. I also had to
>
> convey the kinds of activities their students were participating in and also what

they were being held responsible for as second graders. (Survey, q. 13)

Abby's vision of her role was to "convey" information to parents about their children, including what children were "being held responsible for." In this manner, she informed parents, rather than invited a conversation or collaboration. Yet, at the same time, Abby again expressed an awareness of the gulf between these parents and the school, and seemed to want to mitigate the "bad experiences" these parents had previously by being welcoming and nonjudgmental. Urrieta (2007) states, "Figured worlds function as contexts of meaning in which social encounters have significance and people's positions matter" (p. 108). Again, while Abby wished to reach out, she had a strong need to be recognized and appreciated as *teacher*.

Parent roles. On her survey, Abby wrote:

Parents should come to conferences expecting to learn about their child's progress. They do not need to be defensive, because hopefully the teacher is not putting them under attack. They should be listening for ideas as to how they can help their child to succeed in school, whether it is by making behavioral changes or by studying something more at home. The biggest thing parents need to do is come with questions and concerns and if they are not answered by the teacher ask. (Survey, q. 14)

Based on what she has observed in her very limited experience with parents both prior to and during her internship, Abby saw a limited number of ways parents can participate in their child's school experience. One role she saw for parents, from prior answers, was to come in to the classroom and help the teacher. In the above statement, she directed parents to "come to conferences expecting to learn;" to do this, they "should

be listening for ideas as to how they can help their child to succeed in school." Her evaluations of parents and her concern with how they perceive her may have prevented Abby from seeing them as full members in the ensemble of parent-teacher conferences, and may have prevent her from seeing particular parents in anything other than an adversarial role. Yet we see evidence of Abby's thoughtfulness in providing pictures of children in the newsletters she created for parents, and we hear her recognizing that schools may not be a very comfortable place to be for some parents. She "hopes" that "teachers are not putting them under attack," indicating her awareness of their vulnerability – their lesser power –in this setting. She advocated for parents in her statement, suggesting that if they wish to know something that the teacher has not discussed, they needed to ask. However, when meeting with these parents in person during parent-teacher conferences, her focus again shifted to the moment-to-moment interactions between players in this bounded event – and in particular, to the success of her own performance as measured by the audiences' (parents') willingness to accept her evaluations of their children (carefully substantiated with evidence), rather than on using the opportunity to create and/or further cement any ongoing relationship focused on children's success.

When I asked Abby about her overall experiences leading conferences, she said that for the most part, they ran as she assumed they would. She was surprised however, by the "lack of interest" (Interview 1, p. 5) some parents showed and the fact that they would commit to help their child with school work at home, but "had said the same thing in the fall and had never really done any of that stuff" (Interview 1, p. 5). She viewed parents of her "higher students" as being "attentive and just interested in ways to help"

while parents of struggling students "just basically confirmed the frustration they were having with their child but yet they didn't really ask what they could be doing to help" (Interview 1, p. 6). In her comments, Abby positioned these parents of struggling students as passive in that she viewed them as not being willing to learn how to help their child. These, for her, were difficult conferences, more because she worried about how she would "come across" when she was trying to tell them about their child's problems, and less because of the impact of the information on the student or parents. She admitted to being fearful about "how the parent responds." Abby was unable to draw upon prior experiences that may have helped her to construct a more complex picture of parents, rather than seeing them as either parents of "higher" or "struggling" students, leaving her unable to appreciate the conference experience from the parents' point of view.

While Abby seemed comfortable with her evaluations of each child – evaluations based on the evidence she had collected –she *was* aware of the possibly surprising nature of the information she would be sharing with some parents, and the potential for them to be upset. Having little prior interaction with these parents, there was an increased chance of confrontation or disagreement, so her performance during these particular conferences took on much higher stakes, requiring her to build her case carefully – which she did by incorporating multiple artifacts. While she stated that she wished to have good relationships with parents, the figured worlds of parent-teacher interaction which informed Abby did not equip her with the tools to bridge the gulf between home and school with particular parents.

Talking about literacy. To showcase literacy progress, Abby used students' DRA scores so she could say, "'okay, your child is at grade level,' or 'your child is above grade

123

level or below'" (Interview 1, p. 7). As she noted, "it was kind of a visual for them" (Interview 1, p. 7). She did not recognize that terms like "DRA scores" have a "socially charged life" (Bakhtin, 1935/1981, p. 293) in that they are nested in the jargon of teachers and may well be largely unavailable to parents. DRA scores are part of teacher "lingo" and as such, may need to be explained to parents, again invoking differences in status and social position within the conference setting (a situation which may cause an inexperienced prospective teacher feel more "teacher-like"). More accessible literacy artifacts Abby used included running records and booklets written by students. The topic of the booklet was differences in genres; some students had problems creating these summaries, which she then used as evidence demonstrating problems comprehending the material.

Abby also used a writing assignment given to students as part of a social studies unit she had designed to showcase student writing. In the unit, students had the opportunity to create and work on assembly lines to make tacos. Each worker was given a different job on the assembly line, and as a closing activity for the unit, Abby asked students to write a few sentences to answer the question, "If we did this again, what job would you want?" (Interview 1, p. 7). Students included two to three reasons why they would want that particular job. She shared this sample with parents because it indicated if they were "using punctuation frequently…whether they were using periods, capital letters where needed" (Interview 1, p. 7). It also showed whether or not they were able to write in complete sentences, and whether they were able to offer reasons to back up their job choice. She liked sharing this with parents because it was "an everyday writing sample

from them without them really being aware of what I was going to do with it" (Interview 1, p. 7).

When it came to learning about children's literacy practices at home, Abby said that she had "a ton" of things she wanted to ask, but "it was hard to formulate them into a few questions" (Interview 1, p. 8). The end result was that she did not ask the parents anything. She stated that she really did not have any goals for learning about this area of her students' lives, but would in the future. With so little interface with parents prior to conferences and little mediation or support from her mentor in this area, Abby seemed to have struggled with wanting to know more about what was going on at home and not knowing how to formulate questions or open the kinds of conversations with parents that may have helped to inform her instruction. This avoidance is a type of facework, enabling Abby to "stand guard over the flow of events" as they pass before her (Goffman, 1959, p. 301). Not knowing how to start or what to ask, it would seem that she decided that in order to maintain the impression of professionalism and competence, her safest position was to avoid asking anything.

Narratives: Most productive conference. The conference Abby chose to share as her most productive was one in which a young boy was struggling in school. The child, whose parents were divorced, had a twin sister in another classroom that had been diagnosed with and put on medication for ADD (attention deficit disorder) against her father's wishes. However, he was not present at the conference:

> The father didn't really agree with the daughter being on medication so we knew
>
> it was going to be kind of a touchy subject. The mom came in and we were able
>
> to show, 'Well here's some work we gave him. He was able to do these two

problems. It took five minutes. It took him 10 minutes to do this next problem.'

We just broke down one assignment and how long it actually him because he

would be either daydreaming or foolin' around on his chair, just different things.

Also how many recesses he had lost because he wasn't getting his work done. So

we were able to show the mom that he needed to be tested, as well. It was

productive because she agreed with us. (Interview 2, p. 1)

We see in this narrative that Abby's and her mentor's goal for this conference was

to convince the boy's mother to agree to have the child tested for possible ADD. Abby

admitted to being nervous about approaching such a "touchy subject," and she admitted

that both she and her mentor were nervous about how the mother might react. At her

mentor's suggestion, Abby broke down one assignment to show the mother how little he

was accomplishing at school. The end result was that the mother agreed to have the boy

tested, and Abby was pleased with this outcome.

While it seemed obvious to her that the child needed medication, Abby (as did

Liz) displayed no understanding of possible ramifications of having the boy diagnosed as

having ADD. Rather, Abby commented that out of all the conferences she had led, it was

"probably the most productive because it was actually going to be resulting in a change"

(Interview 2, p. 1). With the boy's mother also noticing that her son was having similar

problems at home, it wasn't just "a school thing" (Interview 2, p. 1), a realization that

may have taken some of the burden off Abby and her mentor. In the social landscape of

her figured world, it was appropriate for a teacher to recommend a child to be tested for a

particular diagnosis. Moreover, Abby did not express any concern with medicating the

child; rather, she was quite definitive in her statements that the medication would help

him. In this, both she and her mentor made weighty assumptions about what was best for this child, and seemed use the authority in being *teacher* to advocate for their position.

Another important point to note in this narrative is that by the time this conference too place, much of the school year had been lost – time that might have been used to explore other approaches to help this boy. Abby made her case for testing by showing the parents unfinished work; had conversations about this situation taken place months before, it is possible that interventions could have been put in place between home and school that may have had a positive impact on the child's school performance. It is noteworthy that Abby stated that there were seldom phone calls home to parents; in other words, no attempts to speak with them to inform, or to enlist their support, suggestions, or to help (other than unfinished schoolwork being sent home). While we do not know what transpired during the first conference with this mother (other than the fact that the father must have been present and expressed his dislike of considering medicating his son for ADD), by the spring conference, this young boy had gone through a substantial portion of the school year without completing his work. The pattern that had been set in motion by this breakdown in communication is one Lightfoot (2003) describes as "defined by a lack of empathy, a disrespect for the other's role and perspective, and an imbalance of knowledge, authority, and power" (p. 49). In this case, the Abby's and her mentor's unease over contacting parents led to a prolonged period of school failure that may have proved very costly for the child.

This narrative portrays several features of an impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. The first is a focus on interactions between prospective teachers and parents that may (and in this case, did) overshadow the focus on the student.

Her perception of the productiveness of the conference focused more on winning the mother's agreement than on talking about all possible options. Other than this agreement, there was no discussion of ways to help the child to complete work at school, and no mention of continued contact between home and school for the purposes of supporting his academic progress. The second feature has to do with the temporal focus of the event which focuses only on moment-to-moment interactions within the conference – in this case, on whether the parent would be angry or accepting of the teachers' judgment of what the child needed in order to be successful in school. The possible short- and long-range results of such a move, or even how the child would be monitored from this point on whether medication were indicated or not, were not a part of the conversation.

Narratives: Most challenging conference. When asked about her most challenging conference, Abby described a conference focused on a "higher level" girl who had "problems with treating others kindly" (Interview 2, p. 2).

> She's always calling people names and teasing them, but it's nothing that – she'd only been caught I think one or two times actually calling somebody a name to where we were able to hear and not just go through hearsay. We had – I had talked about that to the mom and the stepfather at conferences and the mom, as we were going over the behavior part of the report card, the mom just kind of brushes it off and says, "Oh yeah, that's my daughter. That's how she acts," things like that and wasn't really taking how serious of an issue it was because it had started to make some of the other girls act mean towards other people...the lady herself was pretty immature. She was laughing at some of the stuff when it's not really a laughing matter. We were honestly concerned about this girl's

behavior. You could see her immaturity level and so then the fact that she's raising this child kind of tied it all together. (Interview 2, p. 2)

Abby's interpretation was that the mother minimized her observations, while Abby felt that the girl's behavior was a fairly serious problem in that it had created a toxic climate in the classroom. Abby was offended when the mother laughed at her daughter's behavior, telling me "the lady herself was pretty immature" (Interview 2, p. 3). With little experience in relating to parents to fall back on, Abby was unable to perceive the possible embarrassment or defensiveness that may have prompted the mother's reactions. Lawrence-Lightfoot (2003) suggests that an awareness of self may help with this problem: "If teachers are to learn to respond to the ghosts that parents bring with them into the classroom, they too have to learn to recognize the autobiographical and ancestral roots that run through their own school lives" (p. 7). Abby demonstrated little awareness of the how this mother's prior history with school may have led to her comments. Rather, she summarized the conference as "a joke" (Interview 2, p. 3) and referenced her observations of the mother's immature behavior on a class field trip. Abby stated that she needed to "watch *her* more than the actual kids she had" (Interview 2, p. 3). She interpreted the mother's comments as dismissive, undercutting what Abby perceived as important information she was trying to impart.

Abby's comments in both of these narratives indicate a concern that parents demonstrate an appreciation for her in her role as teacher, and that in this role, parents should be impressed with the work she has done for their child. However, there is little reciprocal awareness of some parents' situations, contributions, and/or support. In this particular case, the mother's flippant (as perceived by Abby) replies to her concerns

indicated a lack of respect for Abby as a teacher, and a lack of recognition that she, Abby, had the girl's best interests at heart. Abby's comments about the girls' mother are another example of impression management. In this case, by belittling the mother, Abby minimized the importance of her response to Abby's concerns about her daughter. Perhaps Abby may have also drawn on memories of her own parents' interactions with the schools – which she described as positive and supportive – in contrast to this mother, who may have suffered by comparison.

Impact of conferences on instructional practices. When asked what information she collected from parents, Abby responded that she did not ask any questions of parents. She reasoned that it "just wasn't the tone in my classroom" (Interview 2, p. 3) plus she could not think of any questions to ask (other than if parents had any questions). Abby did not know what to *ask*; rather, she knew how to *tell*. While she spoke earlier about her desire to have parents feel that they could ask questions of her, here, Abby positioned parents as passive respondents rather than active participants in the education of their children. In the impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference, parents' primary responsibilities in conference experience appear to be to listen to the teacher, the voice of authority – in this case, Abby. Abby's background had not provided her with understanding of why this co-construction might be beneficial or of how it might occur.

Other Group Members. In addition to Abby, three other prospective teachers responded to survey questions in ways that indicated that they shared the figured world of the parent-teacher conference in which teachers instruct parents. While I did not collect psychohistorical data on these group members, I did gather data on their goals for parent-

teacher conferences, understandings of teacher and parent roles in these events, how literacy was discussed, and the impact of conferences on their instructional practices. In this section, I will demonstrate that whereas these are unique individuals, the figured world they share is not unique.

Background. Ellie, Cassie, and Megan are the three other members of this particular group sharing an impressive-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. Ellie came from a family in which her mother had earned a post-graduate degree and her father was a high school graduate. A child development major, Ellie recalled receiving information on parent involvement in many of her teacher education and child development courses (including a theater course in which she rehearsed demonstrating lessons for parents).

Cassie's parents had both earned college degrees. Her major was elementary education. She learned about parent involvement in six of her teacher education courses (including one course in child development). Cassie did not remember parent-teacher conferences in any of her teacher education coursework; rather, this topic was a part of the field experiences in one course in family and child ecology.

Megan, an English major, came from a family in which her father had a college degree and her mother had graduated from high school. During her teacher education program, she recalled conversations about parent involvement in four of her courses and during two field experiences, while parent- teacher conferences were mentioned in two courses and one field experience. On average, these prospective teachers recalled parent involvement as a topic in 6.5 courses, and parent-teacher conferences in 3.25 courses.

Internship experience. Ellie, and Cassie interned in schools located in the same

city of 120,000 (see Appendix A). Cassie taught in a school in with a large number of ESL students. Her school differed from others in this group in that the highest percentage of the population was comprised of Asian students. Megan taught in an area located about 50 miles away from where Abby, Cassie, and Ellie interned. The elementary school she was placed at was located in a suburb of another economically depressed large city (see Appendix A). Ellie, Cassie and Megan all interned with mentor teachers having nine or more years of experience. Each of these prospective teachers viewed her mentor as having excellent relations with parents.

Conference goals. A common theme running through Megan, Ellie, and Cassie's answers to the question, "What were your primary goals for conferences?" was the desire to be respected by parents. According to Megan,

> My primary goals were to honestly provide the parents with information regarding their child's conduct and achievements in the classroom. I always wanted to start positively, regardless. I wanted the parents to know that though I am not a seasoned teacher I was an active participant in their child's classroom day, and I had their best interests at mind. (Survey, q. 11)

In the first half of her answer, Megan's focus was on informing parents of children's progress, beginning with good news. While her use of the word "honestly" suggests that she would have liked to give parents the unvarnished truth, she amended that with the word "regardless," indicating that she may have needed to be less than honest in some cases. In the second half of her answer, Megan stated her desire to be recognized and appreciated by parents in her role of teacher. She made the case that she merited this respect, even with her lack of experience, because of the efforts she made in

teaching their children. She strengthened her case by noting that she looked out for the best interests of the parents (or perhaps children).

Cassie and Ellie both highlighted the importance of showing themselves as professionals. Cassie wrote: ""to be viewed as a professional teacher and relay information regarding student progress as well as future goals" (Survey, q. 11). Her stated primary goal for conferences was to have parents view her as a teaching professional; informing parents about their children's progress is positioned secondarily. Ellie's primary goals for conferences were

> to communicate with my parents the sources of knowledge I had gained from my year-long internship. I wanted to showcase my growth as a professional and share my philosophies towards learning and teaching. As well, I wanted them to play a very active role in receiving the information. (Survey, q. 11)

This answer also highlights also a strong desire to be recognized as a teaching professional. Ellie's focus ws on showcasing her own growth; there was no mention of students, although they are the reason for the performance. Her expectations for parents were, in contrast to her words, to play a very *passive* role: they were there to receive information. Moreover, the information she wished to impart was about *her*, not about their children. In the venue of parent-teacher conferences, she carefully constructed her image as a professional by sharing her philosophies with parents.

Running across all three of these prospective teachers' goals for parent-teacher conferences was the desire to impress parents with the hard work they did throughout their internship year, and also to be appreciated for the professionalism they believed they earned in their role as teacher. A feature of this impression-centered figured world of the

parent-teacher conference that is evident across their answers was that their desire to be appreciated positioned parents as passive observers. Looking across their answers, we see that parents "are provided with information," "have information relayed to them," and are asked "to play a very active role in receiving… information." Urrieta (2007) explains that, "Because figured worlds are peopled by characters from collective imaginings (e.g., of class, race, gender, nationality), people's identity and agency is formed dialectically and dialogically in them" (p. 109). Each of the settings in which these prospective teachers interned was populated largely by families of diverse races and lower socioeconomic status. With little stated personal experience with diverse populations to inform them from their work with children and parents and teacher education coursework prior to their internship, Ellie, Megan and Cassie may not have been aware of what these parents might contribute to the conversation, and so positioned them as receivers, not constructors, of knowledge about educating their children.

Teacher roles and responsibilities. In answer to the question, "What is your role, as a teacher, in leading parent-teacher conferences?" Megan wrote, "As a teacher, it is integral that you act as the professional and educated middle between the parent and the child. It is also important to show that you care about your students' success and provide parents with ways they can help their child improve where needed or maintain success" (Survey, q. 13). Her answer again referenced her performance as teacher: you "*show* you care" about the students, perhaps so parents would be more willing to buy into the performance. Also, "you *act* as the professional and educated middle," indicating an assumption that parents (or at least, this particular group of parents) may have needed her intervention in supporting their children's academic growth. It was up to Megan to

"provide parents with ways" to support student success. There was little room to create partnerships in these relationships.

Ellie wrote that her role in leading parent-teacher conferences, was to "have an organized setting, clear expectations for the time I have for each student, a designated area where parents can communicate with me comfortably, and prepared work and knowledge on the student's year" (Survey, q. 13). Her response focused on discrete, procedural pieces a teacher would take care of prior to and while leading conferences: organizing and preparing the setting, having student work available and knowledge of her students, and controlling the time. While these indicated her concern for being well prepared for each conference and keeping it on track, what was missing from her answer was any mention of interacting with parents about children's progress or growth. The tasks she mentioned may be compared to setting the stage prior to a performance: the setting and preparation are important pieces that enable the audience to "buy in" to the reality that the actors wish to portray. Ellie obviously gave a lot of thought to "staging" a successful performance in these events.

In answer to this same question, Cassie wrote, "It was my role to share information regarding academic and social growth as well as answer any questions parents might have" (Survey, q. 13). Cassie's focus was on "sharing" information, indicating a willingness to have a two-way conversation with parents. Her desire to "answer *any* questions" also indicated a willingness to be more flexible then Megan, Ellie and Abby. However, Cassie viewed her role as one of informing parents, which did not indicate a desire to solicit information from them. Still, this answer positioned her as more open to an exchange of information with parents as the other members of this

group, and indicates that she may have been, in some areas, positioned between figured words of the parent-teacher conference.

Parent roles and responsibilities. Another question on the survey invited prospective teachers to look at conferences from a parent's point of view: What are parents' roles and responsibilities in participating in parent-teacher conferences? According to Megan,

> Parents [sic] roles and responsibilities are to be avid and open listeners. They are obviously there with their child's best interest in mind, and it is their role to listen to what the teacher has to say and learn how they can best assist the teacher. (Survey, q. 14)

Cassie wrote that parents' responsibilities are "showing interest in their child's education by monitoring progress and assisting at home based on what the teacher suggests if need be." In both of these answers, there is an underlying assumption that teachers are more knowledgeable about educating children than parents, who then would be wise to be mindful of teachers' suggestions. Megan recognized that parents have a strong interest in doing what is best for their child, which they could demonstrate by assisting at home based on teacher direction. Cassie, also, recommended that parents "assist" (a secondary role) at home, again based on suggestions from the teacher. There is also see the idea of a performance in her answer, this time on the part of parents, who are to "show" interest in specified ways.

> Ellie's answer offered more detail:
>
> Parents' roles and responsibilities are to come prepared with questions and ideas. They should be able to use their child as a source for understanding what was

136

learned during the year, what may need to be worked on, and what interests and strengths were developed. Parents are expected to utilize their time well by being prepared. (Survey, q. 14)

Ellie's comment that parents use their child as a "source for understanding" what was learned, areas for improvement, and areas of strength, suggested a figured world (like Abby's) in which there was scant interaction between parents and teachers in her classroom throughout the year. She was not clear about why these understandings may be useful to acquire prior to conferences, although it seemed that one important reason may have been to prevent time-wasting during conferences. Her implication was that the teacher's time is valuable, and that she may have been evaluating how well parents were prepared for this event. Across all three sets of answers, parents' roles were to come prepared with knowledge of their child's school performance, and during the conference, listen, learn from, and be willing to assist the teacher. Abby, Cassie, Ellie, and Megan saw a distinct divide between parents' and teachers' roles in this figured world; as Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) note, "figured worlds, like activities, are social encounters in which participants' positions matter" (p. 41).

Talking about literacy. In answer to the question, "What literacy artifacts did you share with parents during conferences? Why did you choose these particular artifacts?", Cassie shared portfolios of work containing samples of writing. She wanted to show parents "a variety of work that had been completed throughout the semester as well as to show improvements each child made by comparing work from the beginning of the year to the end" (Survey, q. 12). Megan shared the results of a "theme test to show where their child was at in Reading and Writing" (Survey, q. 12). Cassie and Megan offered parents

137

different venues through which to see children's literacy development: Cassie incorporated artifacts to showcase children's progress throughout the year, while Megan provided parents with a "snapshot" view from a current assessment. It could be argued that Cassie's choice of a portfolio to represent literacy progress offered a more holistic representation of a child's development in that parents were able to see progress over a period of time. Megan's choice of current assessments may or may not have been representative of a young child's typical work since a particular score or grade represented what the child knew at one particular moment in time.

Ellie created centers to showcase student's literacy progress during conferences. She wrote:

> I setup my conference to include a checklist with rotating centers....This included taking a gallery walk filled with artifacts and photos collected and constructed for my unit. Also, my parents participated in a Child Need's Checklist Worksheet, a brainstorming of community resources for the unit, a presentation on balancing in teaching a discussion on the importance of mentors, and a photo opportunity to document the occasion. I chose to conduct the conference in this manner to keep my parents and myself engaged and focused on my progression throughout the year. (Survey, q. 12)

While there is no way to be certain of the purpose of the "checklist worksheet," it would seem that Ellie attempted to engage parents in collecting community resources for the unit she taught. These are the only pieces focused even tangentially on literacy. The other centers had little to do with either literacy or the students; as Ellie noted, she wished to keep the focus (both her own and the parents) on her personal progress. There is,

again, a focus on theater; the careful setting of the stage to create the impression of professionalism that Ellie wished to put forward to impress parents.

The impact of conferences on instructional practices. Megan and Ellie both answered that parent-teacher conferences gave them ideas for procedural changes they might like to institute in future conferences. Megan stated that she wanted to create a portfolio consisting of student work throughout the year. She wrote "that way, there will be many evidences of their child's learning for them to see and look through" (Survey, q. 15). Ellie had changed the format from teacher-led to student-led conferences (presumably, her mentor had run teacher-led conferences). She felt that students "should be invested in their learning and feel powerful enough to document and demonstrate their understandings about the world" (Survey, q. 15). This is particularly interesting in that her other answers suggest that her primary goal was to impress parents by having them focus on her own teaching and expertise; having only survey data from her, I was not able to explore this answer in greater depth. She, also, may have, in some areas, been positioned between figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences.

Cassie, on the other hand, wrote that parent-teacher conferences did *not* influence her instructional practices. "However," she wrote, "it gave me a better insight into the children by knowing their parents, history and needs. It also made me feel like more of a professional, by having the parents view me as their child's teacher, not just as an intern" (Survey, q. 15). It would appear that Cassie also had little interaction with parents in her internship, since she talked about just getting to know children on a deeper level through spring conferences. While Cassie recognized the importance of an increased awareness of children's backgrounds, which may have made her more sensitive to the needs of her

students, this did not translate into information she perceived as useful in guiding her instructional practice. A strong theme in her answer was tied to impression management: the importance of how parents rated her performance as *teacher* - "not just as an intern" – in this event.

Summary. All four of these prospective teachers – Abby, Ellie, Cassie, and Megan – share an impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. To accomplish this, they "communicate," "showcase," show," and "provide parents with ways they can help their child." While the verbs in each answer vary, in performing their role, these prospective teachers say and write that they tell, check up on, and educate parents. In each exchange, the prospective teacher was the person having important information to share. She was the one who took authoritative action; parents, as the audience, were to listen, gain information, become informed, and understand: all behaviors taken in response to information provided by prospective teachers. These prospective teachers, for the most part, did not mention that parents or children may have had concerns or questions that they would have liked to have had addressed; the teacher's concerns about children were primary.

In this impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference, parents, as audience, were assigned the part of receivers, rather than as producers, of knowledge. There was little drive, then, to partner or co-construct a plan with them to help children to be successful in school. In general, these prospective teachers perceived that parents needed guidance in knowing how to help their child, both academically and socially. Although this is a feature of this figured world, this may also be, in part, because many of the parents at these particular schools came from cultures and socioeconomic

groups that did not match those of prospective teachers, perhaps appearing to these prospective teachers not well-educated or well-spoken. Without perceiving a need to examine their own possible biases or beliefs about parents who differ from them, Abby, Cassie, Ellie, and Megan seem to have perceived that highlighting their own agenda for children and guiding parents are part of a teacher's role, positioning parents as subordinates.

In this "socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation" (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain, 1998, p. 52) the line being enacted in their answers supporting the face that is *teacher* is that they had more expertise than parents in the arena of school. There was a divide between home and school, and on this turf, the balance of power leaned toward them. In their construction of their teaching identity in this venue of parent conferences, this group of prospective teachers generally seemed to place themselves across a divide from parents. Only Cassie, who had not only her teacher education coursework but also some child development coursework, used verbs like "share", "ask", "co-construct", and "listen" when talking about relating to parents during conferences.

None of these prospective teachers indicated that they viewed parent-teacher conferences as a venue through which they might learn from or co-construct a plan to support children with parents, although both Abby and Cassie expressed a greater understanding of some of their students as a result of meeting with parents. They did not seem to be aware that parents may be a rich source of information for informing their instructional practice or that they might have gained considerable knowledge about children from asking questions of and listening to parents. In order to collaborate, there

must be a willingness to share information and time. The figured worlds in which these prospective teachers interacted may not have provided them with models from which they might see these features enacted.

There is no question that these four prospective teachers wished to have good relationships with parents, although they might have perceived this as having parents listen and agree with them during parent-teacher conferences. It may well be that their strong desire to be viewed as professional and knowledgeable hid a fear of being caught not knowing the answer, or a fear of being blamed if a student did not make adequate progress. An example of this was Abby's desire to have ready access to proof (evidence) so parents would not attack. In this manner, parent-teacher conferences – particularly in schools in which parents come from diverse backgrounds, may be infrequent visitors, and where home-school interaction is limited – can become high-stakes events in which impressing parents and getting them to buy into the professionalism of these prospective teachers may be one way to circumvent being challenged. This group of prospective teachers sharing an impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference had their eyes on the moment-to-moment interactions between parents and self: the conference was a series of moments in which they had a single opportunity to impress parents. For prospective teachers like Abby, Cassie, Ellie, and Megan, informing parents about the child's progress and/or needs coexisted alongside a desire to impress parents in this 15-20 minute time period.

Yet even though these themes ran through most of the conversations and text from these four prospective teachers, it was not so across the board. There is, in Abby's comments, empathy for her students as well as concern for parents who may not have

been comfortable coming into schools. Cassie, also, wrote about being more aware of the needs of her students through what she learned at conferences. However, these prospective teachers struggled with how to capitalize on this information both during this particular event and in using it to inform their instructional practices afterward. Informed by experience garnered from prior interactions with parents and perhaps with little help from mentors who may not have been aware of their needs or how to help (even if they themselves had "excellent" relationships with parents), these prospective teachers may not have been aware of how to act upon this information.

These four prospective teachers acted within an impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference. These teachers gauged their own success during a parent-teacher conference through their ability to impress parents. These teachers tended to focus on showcasing their professional qualifications during conferences, focusing on offering advice to parents and preparing specific conference artifacts and procedures that would demonstrate their own competence and knowledge. As noted previously, while there is little evidence to indicate or refute that these prospective teachers consciously drew upon their backgrounds to inform these decisions, their answers and narratives above share a focus on an impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference and the impression management it entails. Recalling Goffman's theater metaphor (1959), is it as though the women in this impressive-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference are actors in the spotlight while their audience (including parents) is in the dark and at a great distance from the stage. These teachers exaggerate their performance to be certain that their audience, who is relatively unfamiliar to them, can better appreciate their performance.

Chapter 6: Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which a group of 22

prospective teachers conceptualized parent-teacher conferences. Their personal histories,

experiences with children and parents, teacher preparation coursework, and field

placements informed the ways in which these prospective teachers conceptualized the

parent-teacher conferences that they conducted during their teacher-preparation

internship. In this chapter, I will first discuss what these prospective teachers' three

figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference – the collaboration-centered conference,

the instruction-centered conference, and the impression-centered conference – suggest

about Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) notion of "figured world" and

about parent-teacher conferences as a site of teacher preparation. I will then outline

implications for future elementary teacher education research and practice.

Discussion

Contributions of the dissertation. One contribution of this dissertation is that it extends

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) research on figured worlds to suggest

that multiple figured worlds may be enacted in a single activity setting. As Chapters 3-5

demonstrate, one of at least three different figured worlds of the parent-teacher

conference may be enacted by teacher interns during the parent-teacher conference: a

collaboration-centered figured world in which teachers seek to partner with parents in the

education of children; an instruction-centered figured world in which teachers attempt to

teach parents how to improve children's academic success; and an impression-centered

figured world in which teachers strive to convey their knowledge and authority to

parents. In Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) example of the figured world

of an Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meeting, there is a one-to-one correspondence between the figured world and the activity setting. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) have argued that everyone who enters an AA meeting participates in this activity setting according to the social conventions associated with that particular figured world (p. 66).

My dissertation extends knowledge of the interactions between teachers and parents within parent-teacher conferences, and offers evidence that at least three different figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference were enacted in this single activity setting. These three figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference – collaboration-centered, instruction-centered, and impression-centered – can be further illuminated through Goffman's (1959) performance lens. We can envision prospective elementary teachers enacting each of these three figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference as actors on a stage. Those teacher-actors performing a collaboration-centered figured world act as though they are in a brightly lit theater and can see the audience clearly. They fashion a performance in which they reach out to bring audience members up on stage so that parents, too, become part of the ensemble. Those teacher-actors performing an instruction-centered figured world find themselves on a stage that is relatively close to the audience, so they are able to see the audience, but not clearly. From their vantage point, the audience looks homogeneous, so they tailor their performance to a single particular type who desire to attend a performance that will be instructive, so they play their role in a way that will inform their audience of how to support student learning.

Finally, those teacher-actors performing an impression-centered figured world are in the spotlight while their audience is in the dark and at a great distance from the stage.

They exaggerate their performance to be certain that their audience can better appreciate it. In each of these performances, the figured world of parent-teacher conferences represents patterns of cultural meaning-making based on experiences in these activity settings. In each of these performances, there is evidence that prospective teachers sharing a particular figured world informed by prior experiences valued different things in their interactions with parents in these activity settings.

While the sample for this study was small, it is possible to look for patterns across the three groups. The following table provides a snapshot of factors explored in this research broken out by group, followed by a discussion of the possible impact of each on prospective teachers' figure worlds of the parent-teacher conference.

Table 1. Psychohistorical Context of Figured Worlds of the Parent-Teacher Conference

	Collaboration-Centered World	Instruction-Centered World	Impression-Centered World
Parents' Education – Highest degree earned	Mothers - 1 High school, 3 College, 1 Post-graduate Fathers - 1 High school, 3 College, 1 Post-graduate	Mothers – 7 High school, 4 College, 2 Post-graduate Fathers – 5 High school, 5 College, 3 Post-graduate	Mothers – 2 High school, 1 College, 1Post-graduate Fathers- 2 High school, 2 College
Experience working with children and parents prior to internship (aInterviews only)	Two interviewees each spent over two years working in settings with parents and children	Two interviewees each spent over two years working in settings with parents and children; one spent between one and two years	One interviewee: No experience
Average number of Teacher Preparation courses including parent involvement and parent-teacher conferences remembered	Averages number of courses: PI^a – 8.6 PTC^b – 4.4 1 interviewee had a prior degree in Family Ecology	Averages number of courses: PI – 5.76 PTC – 3.64	Averages number of courses: PI – 6.5 PTC – 3.25
Internship School Population Internship School	Diversity^c: 3 High, 2 Low FRPL^d: 4 High, 1 Low	Diversity: 6 High, 3 Medium, 4 Low FRPL: 7 High, 2 Medium, 4 Low	Diversity: 3 High, 1 Medium FRPL: 3 High, 1 Medium
Mentor Experience	Experience 9+ years: 3 6-9 years: 2	Experience 9+ years: 12 6-9 years: 1	Experience 9+ years: 3 6-9 years: 1
Mentor's ability to relate to parents	Excellent: 3 Good: 1 Fair: 1	Excellent: 9 Good: 3 Poor: 1	Excellent: 3 Fair: 1

^{a}PI represents parent involvement. ^{b}PTC represents parent-teacher conferences. ^{c}High Div. represents school populations having no more than 60% of any one race or culture; Medium Div. represents school populations having no more than 75% of any one race or culture; Low Div. represents school populations having over 75% of any one race or

culture (NCES, 2007). [d]FRPL represents free and reduced-price lunch eligible which reflect the percentage of enrolled students who qualified for free or reduced-price lunch (NCES, 2007). High FRPL are schools in which over 50% of students are eligible; Medium FRPL are schools in which 30 – 49% of students are eligible; Low FRPL are schools in which 29% or fewer students are eligible.

The first factor considered, parents' highest level of education, is highly varied both within and between groups, indicating that this has a weak influence on prospective teachers' figured worlds. However, an important piece of information captured in the interviews (but not in the survey data) included prospective teachers' remembrances of how their parents talked about schooling and teachers. The impact of these remembrances seems to have influenced how some prospective teachers constructed their understandings about how parents and teachers relate. Interview data reveal, for example, that those in the collaboration-centered group came from families in which parents actively sought to partner with and support teachers, while the single interviewee from the impression-centered world had parents who interacted infrequently with her teachers.

In the second category, higher levels of experience working with children and parents prior to their internship (over two years) was found in interviewees' answers in the collaboration-centered and instruction-centered groups. While, given the limited time frame of my study, I can neither confirm or deny that there is a developmental trajectory to prospective teachers' figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference, it may be worth considering that prospective teachers having early and frequent experiences working with both parents and children may be more likely to see multiple ways in which parents can participate in the education of their children.

Also, those having a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference recalled more teacher preparation coursework related to parent involvement

and parent-teacher conferences than those in either of the other groups. For those sharing a collaboration-centered figured world, both of these topics seem to have been more noteworthy or memorable than they were to those in either of the other groups. Across both survey and interview data, there were few instances in which prospective teachers noted specific books, activities, or conversations from their teacher preparation coursework and experiences, indicating that their teacher preparation program may have had a fairly weak impact on their figured world of the parent-teacher conference. However, it is possible that their teacher preparation program impacted their understanding of how to work with parents in ways they did not acknowledge or were not aware of. For this reason, it is important for future research to explore teacher preparation as a site in which prospective teachers learn to work with parents.

The majority of internship placements across all three groups took place in schools having highly diverse populations with high levels of students receiving free and reduced-price lunches. In the interview data, some prospective teachers wrestled with trying to understand diverse groups of parents and students. For example, one prospective teacher noted, "I don't know how it is having five kids and two jobs...I don't know what that's like so I can't pretend to understand the other side of it" (Jasmine, Interview 2, p. 8). Having a way to debrief their experiences may have proven helpful in better understanding families and cultures different from their own.

Within each group, the majority of prospective teachers taught in classrooms with teachers having nine or more years of experience. As well, within each group, the majority of prospective teachers also viewed their mentors' relationships with parents as excellent, although four rated their mentors' relationships as good, two as fair, and one as

poor. While these two variables seem to demonstrate little diversity across groups, they may be important to explore in that interview data showed that some of the prospective teachers in this study actively pushed against their mentor's practices on the basis of these perceptions (Abby and Jasmine), while others tried to emulate their mentors (Jenny). In effect, in naming and positioning their mentor's relationships with parents, prospective teachers were authoring themselves relative to their mentor.

While, for each participant in my dissertation study but one, there was enough evidence in the data to place prospective teachers into one of the three figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences, it is important to note that the 22 prospective teachers in this study did not fall neatly and completely into a particular figured world of parent-teacher conferences. Their prior experiences, expressed goals for parent-teacher conferences, expressed roles for parents and teachers, and narratives sometimes cut across groups. While Jasmine, for example, was positioned strongly in the collaboration-centered figured world through her survey responses and much of her interview, comments she made during her interview about working with particular parents also positioned her in both information-centered and impression-centered figured worlds. These findings suggest the possibility that these figured worlds are in flux as prospective teachers gain additional experiences that further inform their conceptions of the parent-teacher conference, or that boundaries between figured words, as conceptualized here, are permeable.

Another contribution of my dissertation is its evidence that the figured world of the parent-teacher conference exhibited by a prospective teacher may be markedly different from the figured world exhibited by his or her mentor teacher, a finding which

complicates Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) AA model in which the figured world is shared by all members. As Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain wrote,

AA has constructed a particular interpretation of what it means to be an alcoholic, what typical alcoholics are like, and what kinds of incidents mark a typical alcoholic's life. This cultural knowledge about alcoholism and the alcoholic shared by members of AA differs both from the cultural knowledge of alcoholism shared by those outside of AA and from the self-understanding of most potential members before they enter AA. (p. 66)

In other words, members of this group, regardless of length of membership or any other defining variables, accept an identity and way of thinking about alcoholism that is defined by the culture of AA. Members accept and share a way of thinking about their disease and its effect on their life. In my dissertation, there is evidence that there is not this level of shared understanding in the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences: Jasmine, for example, who displayed a collaboration-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference, represented her mentor as having relationships with parents that positioned her in a different figured world of conferencing, one that involved little desire to partner with parents. Additionally, while Abby's narratives and understandings exhibited an impression-centered figured world of parent-teacher conferences, she represented her mentor teacher as having "little interaction" with parents (Interview 1, p. 3) and as treating parents with little respect. These distinctions drawn by Jasmine and Abby indicate that neither perceived that they shared the same figured world of parent-teacher conferences as their mentor teachers.

My dissertation also extends Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) work by offering evidence of how figured worlds can entail distinctive kinds of impression management. We see, for example, that in the collaboration-centered figured world of conferencing in which Jenny participated, she used impression management to set the stage for this figured world by creating a warm and inviting atmosphere for parents prior to entering the classroom. To generate this impression, she put together a slideshow of students engaged in class activities for parents to watch and provided pencils and paper so parents could write a "Warm-Fuzzy-Gram" to their child while waiting for their conference to begin (Interview 1, p. 6). Liz, performing in an instruction-centered figured world of parent-teacher conferences, used impression management in giving parents specific tasks to do at home with children to further their school success (Interview 2, p. 3). It is important to note, however, that this dissertation presents little evidence either suggesting or contesting that prospective teachers consciously drew upon impression management to accomplish their purposes for the figured world in which they participated.

Finally, my dissertation elaborates upon Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) research on figured worlds in providing evidence that individuals' experiences in multiple activity settings (e.g., prospective teachers' childhood homes, child-related workplaces, and teacher education courses) inform the figured world that they enact in a particular activity setting (e.g., the parent-teacher conferences conducted by prospective teachers during the teacher-preparation internship). In this manner, figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference exist as a constellation of several activity settings; they are not just situated in a particular classroom, but, rather, in a network of locations that

152

contribute to the formation of each figured world. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) example of the figured world of the AA meeting is one in which participants' conduct in a particular activity setting (i.e., the AA meeting) is responsive to the social conventions of the figured world associated with that activity setting alone. AA members' use of poker chips, for example, to mark their days of sobriety is not informed by their experiences with playing poker. My research suggests that while the parent-teacher conference is a single activity setting, the ways in which prospective teachers imagine the parent-teacher conference and the ways in which they perform their role as teacher in this setting are informed by their previous participation in a number of other activity settings. While this dissertation does not suggest that they explicitly drew on previous experience to fashion these practices, this framework does provide a starting point for addressing prospective teachers' figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference.

Limitations of the dissertation. This research was not a longitudinal study; I only surveyed prospective teachers once and interviewed the smaller group twice during this short time frame. For this reason, this dissertation does not claim either that the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences are stable or enduring; rather, my data indicate that these worlds are fragile and changing. In this sense, they may be developmental, impacted by these and future interactions with parents, and perhaps by prospective teachers' own possible future roles as parents. Perhaps teachers' own experiences as parents shape their approaches to parent-teacher conferences.

Additionally, while these three figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference were in evidence at the time of the surveys and interviews, it is possible that if I had

153

interviewed or surveyed these prospective teachers at another time, their figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference would have been more developed or more in crisis, depending on the prospective teachers' accumulation of experiences. There was evidence in Jasmine's case, for example, that she was working in a context in which she was exposed to circumstances that were throwing her figured world into crisis. In her interviews, she remarked on several occasions on how particular parents were not willing to partner with her (Interview 1, p. 3). Jasmine viewed them as uninvolved and expressed difficulty with understanding what she perceived as these parents' reluctance to help their child, which pushed against the collaboration-centered figured world that had informed her parent-teacher conferences.

Even in instances like the example above in which Jasmine expressed frustration with parents, each of these women demonstrated a desire to construct good relationships with parents, although this construction was defined and recognized in different ways. Each demonstrated a desire to share students' progress with parents, although how this was defined and mobilized varied across the figured-world groups. Each of them wished to look good in front of parents. For each of them, conducting parent-teacher conferences was risky; all mentioned parents with whom they felt uncomfortable or by whom they were intimidated.

Since this study took place over a limited time frame, it offers little evidence of how these figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference are composed, although my findings suggest, in keeping with Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain's (1998) research, that they may emerge in part as a result of psychohistorical experiences. Nor do I claim that all of these prior experiences are equally important in making up a figured

world of parent-teacher conferences. While this study does provide some evidence toward an eventual study, it offers little evidence of how the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences change. Also, there was little evidence to indicate or to refute how aware prospective teachers were of these figured worlds or how deliberately they drew upon prior figured worlds to inform their enactments of parent-teacher conferences. While this dissertation assumes, along with Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998), that the 22 prospective teachers' performances during parent-teacher conferences were informed by their previous interactions with parents, it does not argue that a given prospective teacher's figured world of the parent-teacher conference may be predicted from his or her previous experiences. This inference would require evidence not presented in this dissertation.

It is also important to note my assumption that there are a number of ways for parents to be a presence in their children's schooling without being physically present in the schools or even at parent-teacher conferences. However, the focus of this dissertation is on ways that this group of prospective teachers viewed parents participating in their internship settings, particularly during parent-teacher conferences. So while this dissertation draws only on these experiences, there may be other parent-teacher interactions within the internship that informed the 22 prospective teachers' figured worlds of the parent-teacher conferences. Having little evidence on which to base such recommendations, I make no claims that a particular type of interaction with parents is more essential than another, nor do I claim that the figured world of parent-teacher conferences exhibited by each prospective teacher necessarily imposed itself on other interactions within the classroom.

This dissertation does not present all of the data collected for this study. In particular, the interview protocol contained a question about future interactions with parents: *When you have your own classroom, what types of interactions do you plan to have with parents? What would you like to do? What types of roles would you like them to play?* The data generated in response to this question fell outside the scope of this study, which examines how prospective teachers conceptualized their recent experiences with parents during parent-teacher conferences. Since Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) focus on psychohistorical experiences rather than future projections, I found that this question was not consistent with my theoretical framework. It would have been more helpful to ask for more detail about the ways in which prospective teachers' mentors impacted the format and artifacts they used in parent-teacher conferences, the degree to which these pieces were co-constructed, and which elements prospective teachers had control over.

A final limitation of this study is that all of the participants in this study shared particular characteristics: all were between 21 and 25 years of age, female, and White. This homogeneity within my sample may have limited the number and/or types of figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference that I was able to uncover.

Implications

Implications for Teacher Education Research. As noted above, the prospective teachers in this study – regardless of the figured world of parent-teacher conferences in which they participated – shared some common characteristics. For this reason, an important focus for future inquiry is the exploration of possible figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference subscribed to by other prospective teachers – for example, both male and

female prospective teachers from a variety of cultural backgrounds, and also a variety of ages. It is possible, since these figured worlds are socially constructed, that there may be other figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference that may arise. Each of the women who participated in this study demonstrated well-developed notions of interactions between their own parents and teachers, child-related work experiences with parents prior to their internship, teacher education coursework, the school and classroom contexts of the internship, and the mentor teacher with whom they collaborated during the internship year. However, other experiences – which may or may not be common – may have informed the prospective teachers' figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference. As well, there are most likely teachers having other kinds of experiences with parent-school relationships prior to, during, and after parent-teacher conferences that are different from the experiences of this group of prospective teachers. Future research might seek to identify these other influences.

Another interesting possibility for research is to explore other figured worlds related to elementary teaching. These other figured worlds adopted by prospective teachers may also have an impact on their thinking. They might include, for example, figured worlds relating to how children learn, and figured worlds relating to working with diverse populations, both of which may also be informed by personal history, experiences with children and parents, and teacher education experiences. A related line of inquiry would include the kinds of negotiations that go on between the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences and these other figured worlds of teacher preparation. Do they intersect? How do they relate? Future research might explore if and how prospective teachers' figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference change during teacher

preparation programs and, after graduation, with "solo" experiences with parent-teacher conferences. Similar research could be done to examine how "solo" experiences impact other figured worlds related to teaching.

This dissertation demonstrates that prospective teachers' figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference, and the kinds of impression management that they entail, are mobilized during the teacher-preparation internship. An important question for research is how these figured worlds and attendant impression management complicate existing understandings of the internship as a site of teacher preparation. In this dissertation, I suggest that each figured world of the parent-teacher conference requires particular interventions. It would be important to consider not only the figured worlds of parent-teacher conferences, but also the types of impression management they entail in order for an intervention to be successful. By way of example, a prospective teacher having a figured world in which teachers impress parents may be more accepting of a conferencing strategy that showed her to be well-organized and professional in addition to functioning as a means of supporting parents. This type of tool may not be as important to a prospective teacher having a figured world in which teachers instruct parents.

Additionally, this dissertation provides no evidence of how exactly prospective teachers composed or approved their existing figured worlds to adapt to their internship setting. For example, what happens when the figured world of parent-teacher conferences of the mentor teacher differs from that of the prospective teacher and what types of negotiations might this involve? Prospective teachers, as noted previously, are in a difficult position in a mentor teacher's classroom: they are there to gain experience in and

take on responsibility for all aspects of teaching (including working with families), but are also in the position of being evaluated by mentors. In cases where there is a mismatch between the prospective teacher's and the mentor teacher's figured world of the parent-teacher conference, a question for teacher educators to explore is the impact of changes in teacher preparation coursework (for example, the implementation of parent interviews) prior to and during the internship. A related question concerns whether there a possibility that one figured world might yield to another in a different internship placement. Parents, as well, may have come to the conferences informed by figured worlds that differed from those of prospective teachers. By way of example, the parent in Jenny's narrative of her most challenging conference did not appear to share her collaboration-centered figured world, and while Jenny's interactions with her sprang from this model, their interaction seems to have been a hybrid informed by the figured worlds of both. This minor finding of the dissertation might be supported with other evidence generated in future research.

Another fruitful line of inquiry for further research is the impact of individual and collective agency on the development of prospective teachers' figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference, which is touched on only briefly in this study. Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) write about how individuals (and groups) continually (re)form, figure and refigure themselves through interactions with each other and cultural materials (p. 18). Future research on how this refiguring occurs in regards to figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference, and how activities, artifacts, and interactions with others may stimulate or suppress it would be an important and interesting topic for study.

Implications for Teacher Education Practice Interventions. This study looks at three

different figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference, each of which informs different

kinds of relationships with parents. The figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference

discussed in this dissertation – collaboration-centered, instruction-centered, and

impression-centered – do not differ in terms of degree; they are distinctly different

approaches to relating to parents in this event. The distinctions drawn in this dissertation

may be a useful analytic for elementary teacher educators. Looking across a class of

prospective teachers, my study demonstrates that it is possible to characterize prospective

elementary teachers' figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference. This information

may be gleaned (at least in part) by exploring each teacher's goals for conferences, and

understandings of parents' and teacher's roles, perhaps by administering a survey at the

beginning of the semester like the one provided in Appendix B.

Reflecting back to the metaphor of a theatrical performance, we can draw

implications not only for each group, but also across the entire group. Those who are

members of a collaboration-centered figured world of conferences hope to draw audience

members onto the stage as fellow actors; however, not all parents may wish to join them

on stage. These prospective teachers have a need to better understand how to negotiate

collaborations with parents who may not wish to share this power with them. They can

benefit from deeper understandings of these parents who do not share their figured world.

Activities like interviewing parents, reading, and participating in activities that will help

them to understand different perspectives could benefit this group. Those sharing an

instruction-centered figure world of conferences perform for a homogeneous audience

and so may also benefit from having the lights turned up so they can see and appreciate

the variety of parents in their audience. To broaden their view of the diversity within their audience, a similar array of opportunities could be provided. Those performing an impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference tend to exaggerate their performance to win approval from a distant audience. One implication for this group, then, is for teacher educators to bring the audience for these performances up close. Providing prospective teachers sharing this figured world with opportunities to better see and know their audience through activities about and with parents – particularly parents who differ from them – can broaden their vistas of who they are performing for. Pedagogical interventions could include activities like role-playing the part of parents at a conference, interviewing, reading and journaling about parents, and working with children and parents. Because prospective elementary teachers sharing an impression-centered figured world of the parent-teacher conference wish to have their audience appreciate their performance, teacher education might present impression management strategies to this group: for example, ways of drawing parents into the conversation and ways of eliciting information from parents. Prospective teachers enacting the three figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference discussed in this dissertation might benefit from knowledge of additional ways in which parent-teacher interactions can take place outside of conferences. By offering each group this type of additional support, it is possible for members of all groups to hold productive conferences and craft productive ongoing relationships with parents.

Elementary teacher educators might enlist prospective teachers from one figured world to help those from another. For example, Liz and Abby may have been able to offer Jenny suggestions for conducting her "most challenging conference" with the

mother who did not share her collaboration-centered orientation. One of these other two figured worlds may have more closely matched this particular parent's conceptualization of parent-teacher conferences, and adapting modifications from either of the other two figured worlds may have allowed that particular conference to be more productive for all concerned. It is important to note that while my dissertation suggests that the above possibilities may be worth trying out and exploring further, it offers only preliminary evidence toward such a project.

This dissertation identifies and describes three figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference and explored some of the distinctive kinds of impression management that they entailed. It also offers preliminary findings toward a theory of the constitution of these figured worlds. However, this dissertation does not provide a fine-grained analysis of the mechanisms contributing to these particular figured worlds, nor does it provide evidence regarding the relative effectiveness of different pedagogical strategies for intervening to shape prospective teachers' figured worlds of the parent-teacher conference in a teacher preparation program: these are future lines of inquiry. What this study indicates is a need for future research and questioning on the part of teacher educators relative to their teaching practices as they prepare prospective teachers to play the role of teacher in parent-teacher conferences. Because prospective teachers typically have limited exposure to working with parents in teacher education programs, it is important that teacher educators actively seek to expand prospective teachers' awareness and understanding of a wide range of parents, exposing prospective teachers to possibilities – "as if" worlds –for constructing relationships with parents that can benefit the children they teach.

Appendix A: Prospective Teachers' Internship School Data

Prospective teacher	Elementary school	Total students*	American Indian/ Alaskan Native*	Asian/ Pacific Islander*	Hispanic*	Black, non-Hispanic*	White, non-Hispanic*	Free and reduced-price lunch eligible*	Met AYP for 2007-2008 school year
Linda	Oakwood	583	1.9%	0.2%	0.2%	97.1%	0.7%	67.8%	Yes
Betsy									
Jenny	Hillcrest	349	0.0%	13.8%	1.1%	5.4%	79.7%	0.0%	Yes
Jasmine	Lindon	298	3.4%	6.0%	24.5%	31.9%	34.2%	84.6%	Yes
Sam	Willow	293	0.7%	1.7%	1.4%	8.9%	87.4%	62.8%	Yes
Wendy	Summer	274	2.2%	3.6%	13.9%	45.3%	35.0%	64.2%	Yes
Lindsey									
Lily									
Nita	Sunset	464	1.3%	17.7%	0.0%	9.9%	71.1%	10.1%	Yes
Marie	Baxter	322	0.0%	3.4%	3.1%	5.6%	87.9%	23.6%	Yes
Hannah	Ashford Magnet	511	1.0%	4.7%	10.8%	54.6%	29.0%	60.9%	Yes
Becky									
Chloe									
Ellie	Holly	327	0.9%	2.8%	26.9%	22.0%	47.4%	69.7%	Yes
Cassie									
Janet	Riverton	217	0.0%	39.6%	10.1%	18.9%	31.3%	36.9%	Yes
Megan									
Gail	Shamrock	449	0.7%	1.1%	1.8%	42.8%	53.7%	71.5%	Yes
Abby									
Liz									
Kayla	Winter	296	0.7%	1.4%	19.6%	12.5%	65.9%	71.6%	Yes
Anna									
Renee	Pine Bluff	324	0.0%	6.2%	3.1%	75.0%	15.7%	53.1%	Yes

*(Source: CCD Public school data 2006-2007 school year)

Interview 1:

1. Could you tell me about your background in working with children and parents prior to your internship in 2007-08? How have you drawn upon these experiences in your internship?

2. How did parents participate in your internship classroom? In the school? Describe several instances and what you learned from that.

3. Describe a typical parent-teacher conference. Was it student- or teacher-led? Where was it held and how did that matter? What happened? What's good about it? How does it matter who the parents are? Who the child is? Are some conferences easier or more difficult than others?

4. Could you describe the artifact that you brought with you? How did you use it during parent-teacher conferences?

5. How did you discuss children's literacy progress with the parents during conferences? What artifacts did you use and why? Did you have goals for learning more about the child's literacy practices? If so, what were they?

6. What were your primary goals for the parent conferences that you recently conducted?

Interview 2:

1. Tell me about your most productive conference. What made it most successful?

2. Tell me about your most challenging conference. What made it that way?

3. While conducting conferences, did you ask questions of the parents? If so, what type of information did you collect, and why? How helpful was that information?

4. What has been the most helpful resource (including your personal history, TE or other coursework, field experiences, activities, texts, your mentor teacher, course instructors, cohort members, etc.) in preparing you to conduct parent-teacher conferences?

5. When you have your own classroom, what types of interactions do you plan to have with parents? What would you *like* to do? What types of roles would you like them to play?

6. Tell me about your experience with schooling prior to coming to the university. What do you remember about how your parents interacted with your teachers? How did they participate in other school events?

7. What do you think are the most effective ways for parents to help their children to be successful in school? Why? Please provide an example. What are some ways that you might help parents to be involved in this way?

Building Bridges with Parents: Parent Conferences   Survey Data
Summer, 2008

This survey is part of a dissertation study on interns' experiences conducting parent-teacher conferences.

We want you to know that:

1. We are asking you these questions to better understand pre-service teachers' approaches to parent-teacher conferences and working with parents.
2. Your name, the name of your school, the name of your district, and your responses to the questions in this survey will be kept strictly confidential among members of the research team.
3. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer; however, we hope that you will answer as many questions as you can.

Please put your full name on this line: _____
Please return the completed survey by _____ to Mary Tomczyk
at _____. If you have any questions about the survey, please contact Mary
at XXX-XXXX.

Questions A1-A4 ask about your internship placement and your focus of study.

A1. In what school and district did you do your internship in 2007-08?

School _____
District _____

A2. At what grade level(s) did you teach during your internship?

Mark all that apply			
Pre-K	O	Grade 2	O
Kindergarten	O	Grade 3	O
Grade 1	O	Grade 4	O
Other *(please specify):* _____			

A3. Please indicate your undergraduate major and minor:

Major _____
Minor _____

A4. From the list below, select the areas in which you have applied for certification or plan to apply in the immediate future, and list the specific certification, if applicable.

Mark only one		
General Education	O	
Bilingual Education	O	
Early Childhood	O	
Special Education	O	*please specify:*_____
A specific subject	O	*please specify:*_____
Other	O	*please specify:*_____

Questions B1-B2 ask about features of your placement.

B1. How long has your mentor teacher taught?

Mark only one	
1-3 years	O
4-6 years	O
6-9 years	O
9 years or more	O
Don't know	O

B2. Overall, how would you rate relations between your mentor teacher and parents at your school?

Mark only one	
Excellent	O
Good	O
Fair	O
Poor	O
Don't know	O

167

Questions C1-C2 ask about university coursework and experiences outside your internship placement.

C1. **Please describe courses or experiences at the university in which you studied, talked about, or had experiences pertaining to *parent involvement*.**

Mark all that apply	Texts	Field Instruction	Class Conversations	Other *(please list below)*
TE 150	O	O	O	
TE 240/250	O	O	O	
TE 301	O	O	O	
TE 348	O	O	O	
TE 401/402	O	O	O	
TE 501/502	O	O	O	
TE 801/802	O	O	O	
TE 803/804	O	O	O	
CEP Course Number(s):	O	O	O	
FCE Course Number(s):	O	O	O	

C2. **Please describe courses or experiences at the university in which you studied, talked about, or had experiences pertaining to *parent-teacher conferences*?**

Mark all that apply	Texts	Field Instruction	Class Conversations	Other *(please list below)*
TE 150	O	O	O	
TE 240/250	O	O	O	
TE 301	O	O	O	
TE 348	O	O	O	
TE 401/402	O	O	O	
TE 501/502	O	O	O	
TE 801/802	O	O	O	
TE 803/804	O	O	O	
CEP Course Number(s):	O	O	O	
FCE Course Number(s):	O	O	O	

Questions D1-D8 ask about your experiences in leading parent-teacher conferences.

D1. **What were your primary goals for conferences?**

_____

_____

_____

D2. What literacy artifacts did you share with parents during conferences? (in this context, artifacts are assessments, work samples, photographs of class projects, etc.) Why did you choose these particular artifacts?

_____

_____

_____

D3. What is your role, as a teacher, in leading parent-teacher conferences?

_____

_____

_____

D4. What are parents' roles and responsibilities in participating in parent-teacher conferences?

_____

_____

_____

D5. Did conducting parent-teacher conferences influence your instructional practice? If so, how?

_____

_____

_____

D6. Please indicate which of the following best describes general *parent interest* in the conferences you recently conducted?

Please choose the answer that best fits	Very interested	Fairly interested	Mildly interested	Not at all interested
General parent interest in recent conferences	O	O	O	O

D7. Please indicate which of the following best describes *your interest* in the conferences you recently conducted?

Please choose the answer that best fits	Very interested	Fairly interested	Mildly interested	Not at all interested
My general interest in recent conferences	O	O	O	O

D8. Please indicate which of the following best describes *your knowledge* about conducting parent-teacher conferences?

Mark only one	
Extremely knowledgeable	O
Mostly knowledgeable	O
Somewhat knowledgeable	O
Not at all knowledgeable	O

Questions F1-F6 ask about your background.

F1. Are you male or female?

Male	O
Female	O

F2. What is your ethnic background?

Hispanic/Latino	O
Not Hispanic/Latino	O

F3. Mark the box or boxes that best describes your race.

American Indian or Alaska Native	O
Asian	O
Black or African American	O
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	O
White	O

F4. What is your marital status?

Single	O
Married	O
Committed Relationship, But Not	O
Other *(please specify)*: _____	O

F5. Do you have children?

No	O
Yes	O

F6. What is your age?

21-25 years	O
26-30 years	O
31-35 years	O
36-40 years	O
41-45 years	O
45 + years	O

F7. Mark the box that best describes your mother's highest level of education.

High School	O
High School Graduate	O
College	O
College Graduate	O
Graduate Degree	O

F8. Mark the box that best describes your father's highest level of education.

High School	O
High School Graduate	O
College	O
College Graduate	O
Graduate Degree	O

Thank you for your time. If you have any questions about the survey, please contact Mary Tomczyk at the email address above.

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